



Seminar on

**Governing bodies of higher education institutions:  
Roles and responsibilities**

**Response to the Key Note Address of Allan Larsson**

*by*

Miriam Hederman O'Brien

The keynote address of Dr Allan Larsson, to which I have the honour of responding, has defined and refined the concept of “university governance” and has contributed a broad sweep of ideas to inform the discussion over the next two days.

My first reaction to the theme of this seminar was to enquire why governing bodies are seen to be important and why opinion is so divided as to their proper function and powers. *Governance* encompasses the structures, arrangements and processes through which policies for higher education institutions are formulated, implemented and reviewed. It is different from *leadership* and *management*.

The title of the seminar indicates that the subject is wider than the specific issue of university governance. There is an extensive range of institutes, academies, research and training bodies in our countries that are properly classified as “higher education” but are not universities. With the indulgence of the audience I will assume that the *principles* of the debate about governance in university education apply equally to all higher education institutions. The practicalities will vary.

Tension between the concepts of intellectual freedom and proper/public accountability is inevitable in any exploration of the role and function of the university. This is not a new development.

The Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999, states that “to meet the needs of the world around it, research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power”. Virtually all academics will subscribe to the thesis that *freedom in research and teaching is the fundamental principle of university life*. Yet the Bologna Magna Carta itself has required changes in the organisation of university affairs that are proving contentious in some institutions – and in some countries. At the same time, national exchequers are making it clear in most

European countries that the freedom of every university to research and teach in every subject selected by its academics will not be funded unless and until certain criteria are met. Privately funded research support is even less accommodating to arbitrary academic choice.

The need for *accountability* is acknowledged in principle but the extent to which it should extend and the manner in which it should be exercised may be disputed in practice. Accountability is required not only in the use of resources but in the quality and comparability of courses and degrees.

Some of issues to be discussed at this gathering arise from changes that are taking place in the university system. For example, what are the consequences of strengthened executive authorities? Universities that have had strong executive authorities for a long time have learned how to handle such structures. It is when universities have to change from a collegiate, diffused authority to a more concentrated executive system that the flaws in each system appear.

Such change is taking place at a time when the administrative load on the institution of the university and its academics has increased enormously and it is not surprising that the expanded administrative and other burdens are associated with the new system of management. At the same time there are external calls for “transparency” and “responsibility” on the part of the universities as well as political exhortations that they should solve the economic and social needs of the nation.

Fears are sometimes expressed that government or political forces will intervene directly to influence the *content* as well as the extent of academic activity. In democracies this is relatively unlikely. What is much more probable is that funding will be ever more closely linked to the aims and objectives of the providers of finance and that this may have an adverse effect on some activity which is crucial to the best operation of a university. In these circumstances the extern members of governing bodies can be very powerful “champions” for their institutions.

Ideally, the Governing Body (in whatever name it exists) is the forum in which both the intellectual freedom and the public accountability of the university can be ensured. Free societies need the disinterested pursuit and dissemination of knowledge that universities, functioning at their best, can provide. The operation of a transparent system of funding of the universities and all higher education institutions should, in theory, reassure the citizens of a democracy that their money is being well spent, and thereby contributes towards the continuation and increase of such funding.

In practice, Governing Bodies provide a bridge between University management, academics and the “outside world”. The bridge can get a little overcrowded.

It is interesting to see how often and to what extent the “extern members” become passionate advocates of the interests of the University in the areas of power to which they have access. It is obvious that the better the relationship between the management and the academics of the university the more likely it is that its academic aspirations will be supported by the Governing Body. But even when there is significant tension between academic management and staff, the Governing Body ought to have members with sufficient experience and judgement to help to reconcile differences and, where appropriate, to arbitrate between the parties. Where universities have strong executives they need good Governing Bodies. Where the executives are weak, the universities will rapidly find themselves in trouble – and will need an effective Governing Body to rectify the situation.

Why should the concept of a strong governing body, with significant extern membership be regarded with suspicion by some eminent academics? Perhaps because they feel threatened. Perhaps it is that they are happy with a different model. Perhaps it is that the model is accompanied by undue criticism of other models, particularly the one in which they currently operate. Perhaps it is that they can point to some unhappy examples of the model. The argument against effective corporate governance often assumes that such governance will favour a utilitarian rather than idealistic approach. Research on examples of governance will reveal many things but not the extent to which

people are guided by idealistic or mercenary motives. Empirical evidence, however, would indicate that most members of governing bodies try to rise to the challenge and contribute energy and enthusiasm to invigorate the university that they serve.

In this forum I would refer to a report by the OECD on the system of higher education in Ireland published three years ago. It covered much more than the management and status of the universities and it made certain specific recommendations on the composition and operation of governing bodies of higher level educational institutions:

*“That university governing bodies be reduced in size to a maximum of 20, including student members, to improve their effectiveness and that lay members be required to constitute a substantial majority;*

*That each university or institute governing body should create a nominations committee made up primarily of lay members, to provide replacements for vacancies among lay members against a template of skills and expertise required on the board to be determined by the governing body;*

*That university or institute governing bodies should elect their own chairs;*

*That the post of university president or institute director should be publicly advertised and external candidates encouraged to apply. Appointments should be made by governing bodies through appointing machinery they should devise”.*

The report was not universally praised, although the four recommendations listed above were not the main source of disagreement. Its recommendations to liberalise the institutes of higher education (which had been severely limited by legislation) so that they could have more effective Governing Bodies and allow their directors to manage the institutions, without constant referral to a government department, were widely welcomed and are being implemented.

Speaking from my limited experience of chairing a University Governing Body of 36 members I would, in principle, favour a somewhat smaller body. However, the Governing Body in question worked well and a vigorous committee system ensured a high standard of response to some of the difficult issues facing the university. Were I asked to accept a board of 20 my first, personal, private question, would have been, which twenty?

Dr. Larsson deals with the EU Commission’s recommendations for the “modernisation” of the universities and quotes its four main recommendations. Of these I would query only that which calls on the universities to “**overcome their fragmentation** into faculties, departments, laboratories and administrative units and to target their efforts collectively on institutional priorities for research, teaching and services”. The call to “overcome fragmentation” is correct but it is not the number or title of the component parts of the university that is important but the way in which they operate.

European universities are being exhorted both to collaborate and to be competitive. They compete, nationally and internationally, for students, staff, funding and prestige. They co-operate when it appears to be in their interest to do so. They have to decide to what extent they should follow what appear to be conflicting signals. The arguments adduced by Dr. Larsson for the use of Boards to strengthen the universities seem to offer the means whereby “external” and “internal” members can combine to ensure that the dilemma is solved for the benefit of the “clients” i.e. the students and the communities in which they will function after their time at university.

Dr. Larsson is wise to remind us of the diversity of the university system both within and outside Europe. A “One Size” governance solution will not fit all. But a seminar such as this provides an opportunity for thinking minds to adopt and adapt some of the best ideas from the changes that are taking place in many of our institutions of higher education.