Governing Quality: Positioning Student Learning as a Core Objective of Institutional and System-Level Governance

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Abstract
How do we govern quality in higher education? "Governance" and "quality" are wicked problems in higher education policy, and there is frequently a disconnect between the formal governance structures and decision-making processes of the university, and the discussion of quality in terms of student learning. Drawing on recent studies of university governance in Canada (and elsewhere), the author argues that institutional governance arrangements often avoid issues of quality in teaching and learning. The author argues that student learning must be positioned as a core objective within institutional and system-level governance arrangements, and that it is only through in-depth institutional and system-level engagement in the discussion of educational quality that sustained and broadly-based quality improvement can take place. Enhancing quality must be a key objective of governance reform.

Introduction

"Governance" and "quality" are both recurring issues in higher education, and both have been the subject of major institutional and system-level reforms throughout the world in the last two decades. Both are recurring issues in part because the core questions underscoring these challenges—Who decides what? How do we understand, measure and improve the quality of higher

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education?—are central to every element of what institutions of higher education do, and yet we have been unable to find perfect solutions or policy approaches.

   They are also recurring policy issues because they are both wonderful examples of what Rittel and Webber referred to as 'Wicked Problems' in their classic article published some forty years ago.[2] Wicked problems are not evil, they are wicked in the sense that they are almost impossible to resolve. Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that wicked problems can be defined in terms of a number of characteristics, including the following:

- The stakeholders associated with the problem have different worldviews and different frameworks for understanding the problem.
- The solution to the problem depends on how the problem is framed, and how the problem is framed depends on the solution.
- Solutions to the problem are not right or wrong, but good or bad.
- There is no stopping rule (no mechanism for determining whether to continue or stop working on a solution).
- The problem is never solved definitively.[3]

Problems of university governance, for example, are usually understood quite differently by different stakeholders. Government, university administrators, professors, students, and industry leaders may have very different ways of defining both the problem and solution of university governance. There is no "right" answer, in fact every solution usually leads to new kinds of problems that are, of course, framed quite differently by different stakeholders, and this means that the process of defining and redefining both the problem and the solution is ongoing.

   These characteristics of wicked problems can provide a foundation for exploring some of the recent reforms to higher education governance and to system and institution-level approaches to issues of quality. My objective is this paper is to review some of the more recent reforms to governance and policy approaches concerning quality, especially the most dramatic reforms that have been associated with continental Europe (associated primarily with the Bologna process), Japan, and some countries within Southeast Asia, and

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   [2] Horst W. J. Rittel, and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Science* 4 (1973): 155-169.

   [3] Rittel and Webber, "Dilemmas," 160-166. Rittel and Webber discuss ten characteristics of wicked problems but I have provided a much more simplified list for the purposes of this paper.

then look at the intersection of these issues and the question of how we govern quality in higher education. Drawing on the findings of a recent study of academic governance in Canadian universities, the paper will then argue that we need to reconnect issues of quality and academic governance and ensure that improving student learning becomes a core objective of our institutional and system-level governance arrangements.

Reforms to University Governance

While there are clearly limits to the degree to which one can generalize about reforms to university governance in a wide range of jurisdictions, there are a number of common themes that seem to have underscored many of these changes over the last few decades.[4] One common theme has been a repositioning of the role of the state in university governance through a transition from direct government control (such as the central planning approach that previously characterized higher education governance in China and Sweden, or the direct control of universities as state institutions associated with many countries within continental Europe) towards more autonomous self-governing universities working within a policy framework determined by government. These system-level reforms were designed to address the failures of central planning and the problems associated with bureaucratic, inflexible, centralized control. The solution in many systems was to provide universities with greater authority to govern themselves with the understanding that institutions were in a better position to decide how to address the needs of students, communities and industry than a central government. Neo-liberalism clearly played a role in both defining the problem (big inefficient government) and the solution (smaller government with a greater emphasis on market forces), and new forms of accountability, often with an emphasis on issues of quality, began to emerge within these systems. In the case of continental Europe, national governments moved to create institution and program accreditation

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[4] Alberto Amaral, Glen A. Jones and Berit Karseth, "Governing Higher Education: Comparing National Perspectives," in *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance*, ed. Alberto Amaral, Glen A. Jones and Berit Karseth (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 279-298. Glen A. Jones, "Governanda la educación superior: temas y problemas actuales (Governing Higher Education: Current Trends and Issues)," *Revista International Magisterio* (in Spanish) 45 (2010): 40-45.

mechanisms as a way of ensuring that appropriate quality standards were maintained.[5]

With the emergence of world university rankings at the turn of the twenty-first century, observers noted that the vast majority of leading universities were from Anglo-Saxon countries where there was a strong tradition of institutional autonomy and academic self-governance.[6] Governance reforms, especially those modeled on the American research university, became part of the solution to the problem of how to define and create "world class universities." The top-ranked universities had high levels of university autonomy, governing boards and academic senates that played key roles in institutional decision-making, and a strong management cadre. There was a balance of power and authority (sometimes called shared governance) between board stewardship, academic self-governance represented by the senate, and the academic administration.

University boards and councils that included stakeholder representation, and a strengthened management capacity, often accomplished by repositioning the president or rector as the chief executive officer of the institution, became components of many national reforms, in some cases leading to a reduced role for traditional academic councils and senates.[7] Universities in many jurisdictions were given greater autonomy to determine how best to fulfill their mandate, operating within government frameworks and accountability mechanisms. Reforms in Japan and Thailand, for example, changed the legal position of universities which now became separate entities and were no longer component parts of government. Reforms in the Netherlands assigned strong management authority to the senior administrative officers of the university, operating under the supervision of a small council. Throughout Europe, increasing the institutional autonomy of universities became embedded within the broad reforms of Bologna, and the European University Association published a "scorecard" of the level of autonomy associated with different decision

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[5] Bjorn Stensaker and Lee Harvey, "Old Wine in New Bottles? A Comparison of Public and Private Accreditation Schemes in Higher Education," *Higher Education Policy* 19, no.1 (2006): 65-85.

[6] Philippe Aghion, Mathias Dewatripont, Christine M. Hoxby, Andreu Mas-Colell and Andre Sapir, "*The governance and performance of research universities: Evidence from Europe and the U.S*" (NBER Working Paper, No. 14851, 2009), http://www.nber.org/papers/w14851.pdf?new_window=1.

[7] Amaral, Jones and Karseth, "Governing," 279-298.

types or categories within each jurisdiction based on the assumption that higher levels of autonomy will allow universities to respond to new demands.[8]

There were certainly major changes in governance associated with the abandonment of detailed system-level planning in China, and there have been discussions of further possible reforms including references to increased institutional autonomy and the development of some form of governing boards in the most recent (2010-2020) plan for higher education, and some conversations on the notion of developing institutional charters that might frame the strategic direction of the university, but to-date Chinese universities continue to be governed by a strong administrative cadre with direct relationships to the party. Given the changes taking place elsewhere, the Chinese approach to governance is becoming increasingly distinct, especially among institutions aspiring to world-class university status. One positive exception has been the development and publication of draft regulations related to the creation of academic councils with authority over specific academic policy matters, signalling the possible development of academic senates within Chinese university governance. If approved, these reforms would be a major step towards the development of a limited form of academic self-governance within Chinese universities.

While reforms in many jurisdictions emphasized autonomy, changes in the Anglo-Saxon systems, where there had been a long historical tradition of university autonomy, moved in the opposite direction. Influenced by neo-liberalism (and New Public Management) and market ideology, governments established new competitive funding mechanisms (including performance funding) and new approaches to accountability, many of which focused on issues of quality assurance, a point that I will return to later. These reforms served to decrease institutional autonomy by increasing the role of market-like forces, increasing regulation and developing new forms of institutional accountability related to issues of performance and quality.[9] Recent discussions in Australia seem to involve a growing recognition that these governance reforms have gone too far and that public universities must be "free to flourish" in that institutions need to have the autonomy necessary to make innovative, strategic decisions.[10]

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[8] Detailed information on the autonomy scorecard can be found on the website of the European University Association (www.eua.be).

[9] Amaral, Jones and Karseth, "Governing," 279-298.

[10] John Ross, "Backing Off on Higher Ed Regulation," *Inside Higher Education*, August 9, 2013, http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/08/09/australia-signals-plan-curtail-higher-education-regulation.

There are clearly common themes that emerge from all of these reforms. The relationship between universities and government has changed in many jurisdictions, and there seems to be a growing consensus associated with these reforms that universities need to be able to make independent decisions in order to address their growing roles within society and modern economies. The second is that universities need to be able to govern themselves, and this has frequently led to redesigned formal governance structures, such as government boards, academic senates, and a strengthened management structure (frequently discussed in terms of managerialism). The third theme is that as governments have stepped back from direct control, they have become increasingly interested in issues of accountability, especially accountability for quality.

The Issue of Quality

Quality has always been an issue in higher education, but for most of the history of universities issues of quality were left in the hands of the professoriate, either individually or collectively. Issues of quality evolved as governments began to pay more attention to higher education as an area of public policy (and public expenditure) and, of course, the transition to mass higher education underscored major changes in public policy and massive public expenditures. The creation of a small number of accreditation organizations in the United States in the late nineteenth century may represent one of the first system-level quality initiatives in higher education, but it was really only in the 1980s that quality became a major issue of public policy within American states. The first wave of quality policies, according to Ewell, involved the development of state-mandated institution-based quality assessment mechanisms where universities developed a quality assessment plan, collected evidence, and then publicly reported on evidence of quality or quality improvement under the framework of the assessment plan. This approach had been adopted by almost two-thirds of the American states by 1990.[11]

One of the challenges of institution-focused assessment mechanisms from the perspectives of government and other external stakeholders is that there are no common, system-level standards. By the mid-1990s many American states attempted to "solve" this problem by mandating the use of performance

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[11] Peter Ewel, "The 'Quality Game': External Review and Institutional Reaction Over Three Decades in the United States," in *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation*, ed. Don F. Westerheijden, Bjorn Stensaker and Maria Joao Rosa (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 123-126.

indicators, sometimes accompanied by performance based funding systems. Governments would identify common indicators focusing on aspects of institutional quality and/or performance and institutions were required to publicly report on these indicators. More recently, quality assessment in the United States has come to focus on a strengthened accreditation system, involving new approaches to the assessment of quality including, in some cases, learning outcomes.[12]

Formal quality assessment mechanisms began to emerge in Europe in the mid-1980s, and quality, as a policy issue, generally increased in importance in parallel with the transition from elite to mass systems of higher education, and, in the new century, with the reforms associated with Bologna. The history of this complex evolution has been the subject of numerous books and articles,[13] but the currently landing spot has been the development of a network of national institutional and program accreditation processes that are designed to ensure that institutions of higher education, and their programs, meet appropriate standards. The networked nature of these relationships has become important because of the issue of student mobility that underscores so many of the Bologna reforms, from common degree structures, to the adoption of qualification frameworks based on learning outcomes.

System and institutional mechanisms designed to address issues of quality in higher education can now be found in almost every jurisdictions. As in the United States and Europe, quality has become a policy issue in part because higher education itself has become a key policy issue as countries expand and invest in higher education. One could argue that issues of quality have always been embedded in institutions of higher education, and that this is one of the reasons that they are "higher," but the interest in quality has expanded far beyond the boundaries of the institution as universities become positioned as key institutions given their role in the development of highly skilled human resources, and as knowledge creators within the context of national knowledge and innovation systems.

However, returning to the notion of quality as a wicked problem, we can also see how the nature of the problem has frequently been defined by the solution, and vice versa. Over the last few decades, the major "quality problem"

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[12] Ewell, "The 'Quality Game,'" 128-132.

[13] A number of very useful observations on these transitions can be found in Bjorn Stensaker, Maria Joao Rosa, and Don F. Westerheijden, "Conclusions and Further Challenges," in *Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, ed. Don F. Westerheijden, Bjorn Stensaker and Maria Joao Rosa (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 247-262.

has been defined in terms of external accountability for quality. Accreditation mechanisms become a solution because these processes are under the control of external bodies and are designed to assure governments and other important stakeholders (such as students, parents, employers, taxpayers) that appropriate standards are being maintained. The university and its programs have met the grade.

   Solutions to the problem of accountability for quality (quality assurance), however, seldom also address the problem of quality improvement. One of the common concerns emerging from higher education scholarship in this area is that external quality assessment mechanisms have not been particularly good at encouraging or stimulating quality improvement within the institution.[14] The emergence of international ranking systems have simply exacerbated the problem since international rankings of universities and the discussion of "world-class universities" have increasingly focused on research, rather than teaching, Even when these rankings attempt to include teaching, the emphasis is on resource inputs and reputation. The problem of quality, according to many experts in this field, is about how to encourage and stimulate its improvement. Much of the discussion of quality takes place outside the institution and is in the hands of quality agencies, accreditation bodies, and the growing ranking "industry," and yet we know that perhaps the most important questions related to quality (How do we understand, measure and improve the quality of higher education?) requires a sense of agency inside the university.

Governing Quality in Canadian Universities

Higher education in Canada is highly decentralized. While the federal government plays a major role in funding university research and is involved in a range of policy areas that have a direct impact on universities (such as a national student loans program), the Canadian constitution assigns responsibility for education to the provinces. There is no national ministry of education or higher education, and no national higher education legislation. Each province has created a somewhat unique higher education arrangement and there are major differences between provinces in how higher education is regulated

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[14] For example see Lee Harvey and James Williams, "Fifteen Years of *Quality in Higher Education*," *Quality in Higher Education* 16, no.1 (2010): 3-36.

and funded. Instead of a single system, higher education in Canada is best understood as a network of thirteen provincial and territorial systems.[15]

Given this decentralized approach to higher education policy, there is no national system of accreditation or quality framework. Each individual province has its own policies related to quality and accountability, though there are national conversations about quality facilitated by the work of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (an intergovernmental agency composed of the ministers of each province with responsibilities for education and higher education), and there is a national degree qualifications framework. There is also a national network of quality councils that facilitates the sharing of information on provincial quality assessment practices.

While there are provincial policies and mechanism associated with the issue of quality, the Canadian provinces have generally not focused the same kind of attention on quality as a policy issue as governments in many other jurisdictions. Canadian provinces do not have the same institution or program level accreditation mechanisms that are commonly found in the United States or Europe.

This may in part be explained by the fact that Canadian universities continue to have high levels of autonomy, and there is a general assumption within the system that the universities themselves must play a major role in quality assurance. In Ontario, for example, the quality framework was created by the universities as a collective initiative through the work of a committee of academic vice-presidents with representatives from each institution. Each university has created a quality assurance process involving the periodic assessment of all academic programs. These processes operate within the provincial framework created by the universities and are grounded in undergraduate and graduate degree expectations. Each university has assumed responsibility for periodically reviewing all of its degree programs, and these processes can be periodically audited by a council, created by the universities, designed to ensure that universities are following their own policies.

University self-government processes become extremely important given the high level of institutional autonomy and the general assumption that the universities themselves should play a major role in terms of issues of quality and standards. Most universities have been created as separate corporations

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15 Glen A. Jones, "Canada," in *International Handbook of Higher Education*, ed. James J. F. Forest and Philip G. Altbach (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 627-645.

under unique charters approved by their respective provincial government.[16] These legislative charters describe the governance structure of the university, and for almost all Canadian universities, this structure involves a bicameral arrangement involving a governing board and an academic senate. Governing boards appoint the president of the university (usually on the advice of a search committee that includes representation from different universities constituencies) and oversee administrative and financial issues. Most members of governing boards are from outside the university and represent broader interests, though all boards also include faculty and students. Senates have responsibility for academic policy, such as decisions related to admission, programs and curriculum, and are largely composed of internal members, such as faculty, students and academic administrators.[17] While the university is governed through this bicameral arrangement, the day-to-day leadership of the institution is the responsibility of the university administration, led by a president or rector. The president is expected to lead the institution forward, but working within the checks and balances of authority associated with the board and senate.

Given this overview of university governance in Canada, one might assume that the responsibility for governing quality in Canadian higher education is shared between the provinces, which clearly have a responsibility to establish policies and procedures related to accountability as quality assurance, and the institutions which have been given considerable autonomy from government over academic decision-making. One would therefore further assume that the academic senates of each university would play a major role in the discussion of quality and performance given their formal responsibilities for academic policy within the institution.

A recent national study of academic senates in Canadian universities raises a number of interesting questions about how quality is governed within Canadian higher education.[18] This study collected data in two phases: the first phase

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[16] There are no universities in the three Canadian territories, though Yukon College has received the authority to award degrees from the Territorial Legislature.

[17] Glen A. Jones, "The Structure of University Governance in Canada: A Policy Network Approach," in *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance*, ed. Alberto Amaral, Glen A. Jones and Berit Karseth (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 2002), 213-234.

[18] Lea Pennock, Glen A. Jones, Jeff M. Leclerc and Sharon S. Li, "Academic Senates and University Governance in Canada: Changes in Structure and Perceptions of Senate Members" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, Belgrade, Serbia, September 10-12, 2012).

Table 1: Comparison between Canadian university senate member respondents agreeing ("agree" and "strongly agree") with statements on the role a senate *should* play and the role it *does* play.[19]

Statement	Agree "Should"	Agree "Does"
Periodically review its own performance	94%	26%
Regularly review the performance of the university in academic areas	93%	48%
Defend and protect the autonomy of the university.	93%	49%
Play a role in establishing research policies and strategic research directions	72%	37%
Be the final authority for approving major academic policies	92%	66%

involved a survey of senate secretaries, the administrative officer responsible for coordinating and facilitating the work of the senate, in terms of the structure and operation of the senate, and their perspectives of key issues facing the senate; the second phase involved a survey of senate members at participating universities in order to obtain their perceptions of the work, role and performance of the senate. The study was conducted, in 2011 and 2012. Forty-one of the 84 members of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada participated in the first phase of the study (a 49% response rate), and 20 institutions agreed to participate in the second phase. Questionnaire responses were received from 373 senate members (a 23% response rate).

The study reveals a number of important problems and issues associated with Canadian university senates, but, most important for this discussion, it illuminates important differences in what senate members believe the role of the senate should be, and what the senate actually does. Senate members were asked a series of "should" and "does" questions related to the role of the universities and asked to respond using a 5-point likert-type scale. Responses to some of these questions are presented in Table 1.

The study clearly suggests that there are significant differences in what university senate members believe the academic senate "should" do and what they believe that it "does" do. The smallest difference, though still quite interesting,

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[19] This table is derived from Pennock et al., 2012.

relates to the role of the senate as the final authority for approving major academic policies where the majority of respondents believe that the senate should and does fulfill this function. The majority of senate members in this study believe that the senate should play a role in establishing research policies and strategic research directions, defending and protecting the autonomy of the university, and periodically reviewing the performance of the senate, but a minority of senate members believe that the senate is actually fulfilling this role. Most importantly for this discussion, the vast majority of senate members (93%) believe that the senate should regularly reviewing the performance of the university in academic areas, but only 48% believe that this is taking place.

This study raises serious questions about the relationship between governance and quality. The governance structure of most Canadian universities assigns the senate overall responsibility for issues of academic policy, and it is difficult to argue that this responsibility does not include oversight of issues of quality and performance. The fact that most senate members responding to this study do not believe that the senate is reviewing the academic performance of the university suggests a problem in the intersection between governance and quality. How can academic self-governance exclude issues of performance and quality? How can this problem be addressed if, as the study suggests, most respondents do not believe that the senate reviews its own performance as a governing body.

Governance, Quality and Student Learning

Viewing issues of governance and quality as wicked problems provides a useful lens for understanding the tremendous complexity of these recurring issues in higher education. These are challenging issues because they involve multiple stakeholders, and they involve problems that are in many ways defined and framed by possible solutions. The fact that there are no definitive solutions to wicked problems also provides an important insight into our objectives in attempting to address these issues—that the perfect solution (the perfect governance structure or quality mechanism) simply cannot be achieved. There is no perfect solution to these problems, and so our objective is to not find the panacea, but rather to find ways of improving the current state.

In the case of university governance, recent reforms are clearly based on an understanding that greater institutional autonomy represents an improvement over central control. In the case of quality reforms, the movement towards greater institutional autonomy has led to a greater emphasis on system-level

mechanisms of quality assurance, frequently through the development of institutional and program accreditation mechanisms. However, as the Canadian case illustrates, institutional governance and quality may have become disconnected. The problem of quality has frequently been defined in terms of accountability, and these approaches have done little to encourage sustained quality improvement. The "solution" to governance has been to shift greater authority and responsibility towards the institutions, while the "solution" to quality has been to shift greater authority and responsibility for quality assessment outside the institution.

I believe that we need to reconnect these two wicked problems in higher education. The internal governance arrangements of the university must view quality and quality improvement as key institutional objectives. Universities need to develop mechanisms to govern quality, to review and analyze the ongoing performance and quality of the institution and be assured that the institution is not just maintaining the appropriate standards, but also has put in place mechanisms designed to support and encourage quality improvement.

A logical starting point for this discussion is to focus on quality in terms of student learning, an approach that is taking on increasing importance within accreditation mechanisms and underscores many of the current initiatives associated with improving learning outcomes. Student learning is the key objective of our educational activities, and yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to student learning within quality assessment mechanisms until quite recently, in part because of the methodological challenges associated with defining and measuring learning.

If we view student learning as a core goal of the university, then it is quite logical to conclude that university governance processes should place considerable emphasis on monitoring the university's performance in terms of student learning, and, equally important, ensuring that the university is taking steps to improve student learning. We need to position student learning as a core objective of the institution within institutional governance mechanisms, just as student learning outcomes are increasingly viewed as an important component of system-level accountability and quality assurance mechanisms.

This "solution" is extraordinarily complex and it is far from definitive, but I would argue that it would represent a valuable step forward, and that is, after all, the best that we can do with wicked problems. If quality in terms of student learning became widely recognized as a core goal of the university within our academic self-governance arrangements, then it would lay the foundation for an essential discussion of how the university governs quality. How does the university monitor quality in terms of student learning and development? How

do academic policies support student learning? How can the performance of the university in meeting this core goal be improved?

These are challenging questions, but I would argue that governing quality requires a sustained conversation of these issues in the context of academic self-governance. We will never find the perfect solution, but identifying student learning as a core objective of the university, and developing institutional governance processes and structures designed to ensure that the university is addressing this core goal, may be a productive way forward.

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