

From taking decisions to receiving information: Changes in board meeting minutes at Swedish universities

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Abstract

This study investigates the praxis of university boards by analysing minutes from Swedish universities before and after an autonomy reform that, among other things, changed the board compositions in favour of external members. To ultimately improve higher education policy and paint a more complete picture of the operational side of governance arrangements at Swedish universities, we analyse how institutional management has changed over time. The study identifies orientations and allocations enacted in university board work and communicated in minutes from 2008 and 2018, separated by the autonomy reform of 2011. Results show a shift over time from taking decisions to receiving information, accompanied by a shift in the orientation of decisions regarding education and research to decisions on operation and interaction with society. During this period, external board members became increasingly dominant. Comparing board meeting attendance showed that external members were absent from more meetings than members that represented academic staff and students. The changing function and composition of university boards, combined with strong line management and decollegialisation, raises questions of whether and how the experience of academic core activities, peer quality management, and critical thinking contribute to shaping the policy, praxis, and institutional management of higher education.

Keywords: educational leadership; governance; higher education; institutional management; university boards

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Introduction

Having been part of governing structures of higher education for many years has raised our concerns about the role of higher education in society and how its rooted values influence and orient higher education leadership. Theoretical perspectives on leadership are undergoing critique and change. One major concern is that the

connection between higher education institutions (HEI) and other societal fields and interests is often weak. The situation is complicated further by an overly universal and generic theory building on leadership in educational institutions, which cannot capture and problematise HEI's significant nature and societal role (Elo & Uljens, 2023).

Changes in university governing

Higher education (HE), globally, shares significant values associated with higher order thinking skills, and moral and democratic actions that are hopefully constitutive for its institutions and, thereby, their governing processes. But to what extent is that characteristic of the leadership of HEI? Changes in relationships to state and society, combined with a growing recognition of universities' importance for the knowledge society, have raised concerns about the standards of internal university governance (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023; de Boer et al., 2010). Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) account for substantial evidence for an ideological and policy change expressed by higher education leaders and policymakers, coinciding with a change in dominant ideals about organisation and governance (Christensen, 2011). In Sweden, university governance is represented by academic boards, as the highest executive power that supervises the educational leadership of HEI, followed by a second and third level representing faculty and departments (Figure 1). These internal relationships and organisations have also experienced fundamental changes in roles, functions, decision-making processes, and steering practices in the past decades (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023).

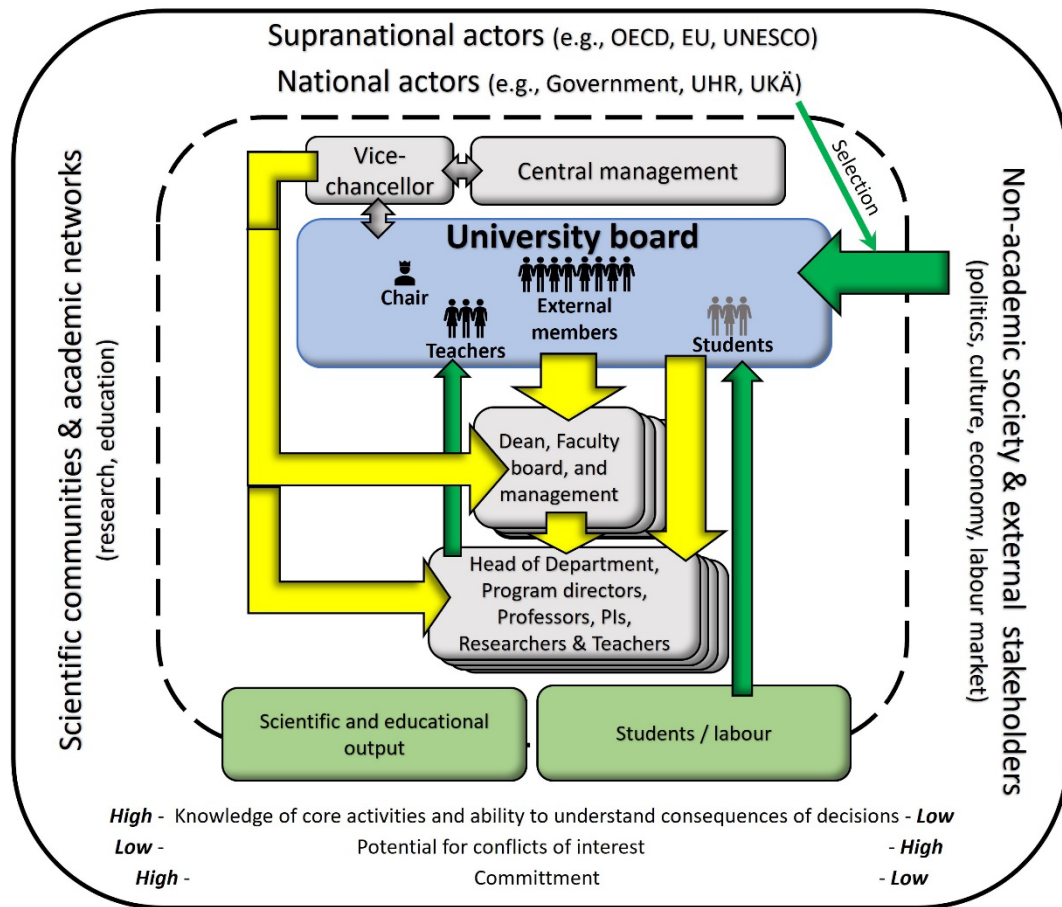


Figure 1. Simplified schematic overview of the ecological setting and organisational structure of universities in Sweden.

Note. The figure illustrates how management, decision making, and activities are shaped by a combination of internal actors (within the hatched line) and external influences (outside the hatched line), mediated by various supranational and national actors plus societal stakeholders. Green arrows indicate potential for indirect influence on decision making on the university board (blue box) by faculty, students, and societal interests and external stakeholders mediated via representation (i.e., via voting teacher, student, and external board members). The vice-chancellor is a member of the board and can also exercise power directly, via directives, and through central management to lower hierarchical organisational levels. Yellow arrows indicate influence mediated via decisions, concerning, for example, resource allocation, economic incitements and constraints, and local rules and regulations. These decisions set the framework for activities at the second and third hierarchical levels of organisation (different faculties and departments) responsible for executing core activities and generating deliverables (green boxes). The deliverables come in the form of scientific and educational output, knowledge, understanding, students, and labour, for the benefit of the external national and international scientific community and for society at large. UHR=Universitets- och högskolerådet (Swedish Council for Higher Education); UKÄ=Universitetskanslerämbetet (the Swedish Higher Education Authority).

With time, university boards have become arenas of intersection between executive management and academia. Reforms with the intention to increase the

influence of different societal stakeholders are represented in multiple and changing roles of universities. In research, a possible changing influence on university operations is lively debated (Barbato, 2023; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Bosetti & Walker, 2010; de Boer et al., 2010; Geschwind, 2019; Rowland, 2013). Rowland (2018) uses comparative empirical data from England, the US, and Australia on academic boards. They show how shifting power relations manifest as a diminution of academic voice and call for more nuanced understanding and analyses of academic governance. ‘Unfortunately, academic boards risk becoming the ‘straw man’ by providing intellectual credibility to these externally driven exercises, whilst not controlling either their means or outcome’ (Rowland, 2013, p. 1286; see also Figure 1). Christensen (2011) presents what he calls a *paradox* related to university reforms globally, in that modern university reforms have changed HEI from having low formal autonomy and high real autonomy, to a situation of high formal autonomy and low actual autonomy. Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) describe a similar transition from the ‘republic of scholars’ ideal towards the ‘stakeholder university’ and ask for more research into actual structures and behaviours at various levels within HEI.

Summing up, a series of reforms during the past three decades have reorganised HEIs in Sweden into more corporate-like actors (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023; Edlund & Sahlin, 2022; Geschwind, 2019). There are proposed asymmetries associated with representations in governing structures (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Edlund & Sahlin, 2022) as well as paradoxes of actual outcomes of reforms (Christensen, 2011) influencing decision-making processes (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023) and potentially hindering successful governance of universities (Figure 1). We therefore direct the interest of this study towards the leadership activities of academic boards and have chosen to investigate one aspect of this leadership; focussing on what kind of questions are addressed in the boardrooms of Swedish universities and looking for any possible impact of reforms and their intended democratisation and embedment of universities in society. We also suggest that more studies are necessary to identify whether and how these introduced multifarious voices have coloured discussions and maybe contributed to better informed decisions and governing of HE. Results from Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg (2023) challenge these intentions. External board members’ limited experience of university core activities and often prominent professional roles also spur the question of whether external board members are as committed as the academic members to the responsibilities associated with board membership. On a related note, the increasing representation by external board members potentially comes with an elevated risk of decisions being influenced by conflicting interests, unless the member(s) concerned refrain from voting to safeguard against this.

A background of university boards in Sweden

Research on university boards tends to offer insights into the structure and composition throughout history, with relatively limited focus on how boards operate (Rall et al., 2022). In Sweden, there are recurring debates on the role and mandate of academic boards. Fundamental objectives and conditions for activities of state universities and university colleges are regulated by law, including the tasks and the composition of university boards. However, following a proposition (Government Bill, 2009/10:149), the Swedish government implemented the autonomy reform in 2011, which was a legislative change including substantial deregulations that authorised HEI themselves to manage and frame their administration, internal organisation and faculty appointments, meaning that the boards enact their decisions and responsibilities through different organisations (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2022). The autonomy reform of 2011 abolished the requirement for faculty boards, starting a debate on collegiality at the risk of elimination at Swedish universities. After the autonomy reform, the linear organization form became dominant, with vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors, deans, and heads of department constituting the line of operation. The concept of collegiality as a governing principle with a historical trajectory has transformed from collective expert governance into procedures whereby governance is based on consulting employees by management (Boberg, 2022). According to Boberg (2022), the deregulation of decision-making structures in universities has resulted in a growing differentiation in governance structures and forms, in what has previously been regarded as a unitary system of Swedish higher education. Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg (2023) call attention to escalating line management in the appointment of academic leaders, a diluted role for collegial expertise, and a loss of decision-making authority for collegial bodies. The new, intended democratic governing was based on the explicit idea of letting different interest groups and opinions meet in the governing process. According to Boberg (2022), what was intended as democratisation slowly started changing in line with new political rhetorics, resulting in a general management culture with little or no interest in or recognition of the specific character and needs of higher education (c.f. Elo & Uljens, 2023). The autonomy reform of 2011 was followed by result-oriented governing from the state, with a strong imperative and means to exercise influence and control over HEI by introducing control systems. The traditional forms of collegiality, with faculty boards and boards of departments, were now often regarded as too small and not effective (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2022).

University boards in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that universities can fulfil their obligations regarding education and research. Fundamental objectives and conditions for activities of state universities and colleges are regulated by law in Sweden. Board composition and how the members of the board

are appointed are stated both in the Higher Education Act (SFS, 192:1432) and in the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS, 1993:100). In general, teacher and student representatives of the board are nominated and elected via internal election processes within the respective groups, while the external board members, including the chair, are appointed by the government, after nominations submitted by the respective universities. The vice-chancellor is also a member of the board. The board has the responsibility to orchestrate the process of selecting and advocating candidates for vice-chancellor (officially decided by the government). Additional responsibilities of the board concern the overall direction of the business and organisation of the university, annual reports, interim reports, budget documents, as well as ensuring that the university is functioning in a satisfactory manner, has internal governance and control, a working admission procedure, responsibility committees, working orders including regulations about the university's overall organisation, and delegation of decision-making rights.

Reforms concerning university boards

Several reforms in Sweden have specifically addressed the representation and appointment of university board members. In 1988, students and faculty went from holding a majority of seats on boards to a minority with an expansion of external board members, to finally increasing the authority for universities to decide themselves upon additional external members in 2006 (Government Bill, 2006/07:43). The autonomy reform of 2011 transformed regulative responsibilities from the government to university vice-chancellors, with the intention of depoliticizing universities' and university college's boards (Ekman et al., 2018).

Board members consist of three groups with the right to vote: 1) faculty-appointed members, 2) students, and 3) members appointed by the government (here external) (Figure 1). In short, since 1992, external members have constituted a majority on public HEI boards at the expense of the power of the unions and employees (Edlund & Sahlin, 2022). At the same time, vice-chancellors had to step down from leading boards in favour of external chairpersons appointed by the government. The change was expected to incorporate experiences from the world of business, public services, and other society stakeholders. Edlund and Sahlin (2022) chose to describe this in a reversed way, as an embedding of HEIs in society. The changes were embedded in packages of changes to the overall governing of HE and did not attract much attention at the time (Edlund & Sahlin, 2022). As a consequence of these reforms, external board members mainly comprise directors, professors, and politicians from the public sector; executives from private organisations; and presidents from the civil sector (Edlund & Sahlin, 2022). Given the key roles that universities play in society, it is important to ask how, if at all, the above changes have influenced the governance practice and institutional

management of universities in Sweden in general, and the distribution, nature and orientation of board meeting agenda items and decisions in particular.

Theories framing the governance of universities

The nature of academic ecosystems could be expected to generate studies and insights into board work, taking an interest in rigour, acted values, and methodological approaches beyond the structure and composition of boards. This is not the case according to a study by Rall et al. (2022) who explored the reasons for under-investigated board work in the US. Boards are meant to manage HEIs in the interest of the public and account for actions taken, continuously developing what constitutes good scientific practice for it to shape research, education, and collaborative matters. Rall et al. (2022) question how the governing of critical institutions in society, as a field, is more opinionated than informed by knowledge; and then—what knowledge is neglected?

Theories used to study practices of academia to understand university leadership come from a variety of theoretical approaches (Alvesson, 2020; Elo & Uljens, 2023; Rall et al., 2022). Theories with a generalist perspective often generate descriptive and prescriptive studies and fail to capture the essence and complexity of HE and its intersection with power to influence governing and cultures. They are also largely borrowed from business and for-profit literature (Rall et al., 2022). Elo and Uljens (2023) develop a threefold criticism of this educational leadership research, concluding:

- 1) research regards leadership without context, separated from external practices and disregarding its internal object;
- 2) research often fails to approach the multilevel complexity in a coherent representation; and
- 3) research seldom considers the pedagogical interaction and influence.

Elo and Uljens (2023) argue that this creates a challenge in defining leadership as an influencing process at the same time as it lacks theory on this claimed influence.

As outlined above, there is an identified leaderist discourse in Swedish government texts on empowered professional vice-chancellors—forcefully advocated but not elaborated on—as the solution to the problems that the HE sector is facing (Ekman et al., 2018). Simplistic assumptions on the primacy of individual leadership are suggested as influencing well-informed and powerful groupings of actors (Ekman et al., 2018) but leaving out the context.

According to Goodall and Bäker (2015), expert and core knowledge of a business or organisation is identified as a critical component of management success, necessary to effectively navigate the complex and dynamic environment in which they operate (see Figure 1). Furthermore, Goodall (2009) show in a

longitudinal study that research performance improved the most in HEI led by highly cited scholars. However, over the last two decades, there has been a move towards hiring generalists for management at universities rather than experts in many areas (c.f. Barbato, 2023). Altogether, a development with growing generalist influences, combined with leaderism, risks instrumentalising HE and HE leadership serving external interests rather than independent academic research, potentially endangering the education of students towards autonomy as politically and ethically reflecting subjects (Elo & Uljens, 2023).

Overall aim and specific questions

The series of reforms in the governance of universities in Sweden triggered the question of whether and how these changes have actually influenced and affected the leadership of universities. We have therefore chosen to investigate one aspect of this leadership:

What questions are addressed in the boardrooms of Swedish universities, and what are the consequences of the recent reforms on university governance, manifesting as shifts in the composition of agenda items?

To investigate this, we categorised and compared the distribution of agenda items addressed at board meetings from two years, before (2008) and after (2018) the reform of 2011 aimed to enhance the autonomy of universities. Between these years, there was also a revision of the Higher Education Act on the composition of the boards to accommodate societal interests (Government Bill, 2015/16:131). This approach enables us to identify and discuss a sort of corpus of actions governing universities during this period, and whether and how this has changed over time. As such, this resembles the analytical approach previously used to characterise and identify drivers of variation and change in governance of historical commons (Forsman et al., 2021).

Guiding the analysis of board meeting minutes are the following questions:

- What is the distribution among the function of agenda issues (decision, information, announcement, discussions, and other) of the years 2008 and 2018?
- How has the distribution and orientation of different agenda issues changed over time, as might be expected given the various reforms and increased number of external board members that represent societal interests?
- Has the distribution of different agenda issues become more diversified between universities?

- Has the incidence of vice-chancellor decisions (information and announcement agenda issues) increased at the expense of board decision items, as might be expected in view of the current leaderism trend?
- How has the relative frequency of discussions as recorded minute items changed over time?
- How do board compositions (i.e., number of voting teacher, student, and external members) compare between universities during the period?
- How does board meeting attendance differ between groups of politically appointed external members, academic staff representatives, and student representatives?

Methods

The praxis in focus in this study is the governing praxis of university board meetings, and board meeting minutes is the chosen form of data. We are aware of problems associated with this data, which can vary with traditions and personal preferences in taking minutes, for instance regarding the level of resolution and what is represented. But, since there are also important questions regarding the transparency of board work, how board work is communicated to stakeholders including the state, taxpayers, and employees, the state of the art of the minutes are part of the steering process and therefore of interest.

University boards are challenging to study due to limitations of access and difficulty in establishing influence and co-variation (de Boer et al., 2010; Rall et al., 2022). This study therefore makes use of written records from board meetings as the institutions chosen representation of educational leadership. To be able to study variation between universities and changes over time, minutes were collected from nine Swedish universities (Gothenburg University, Linköping University, Luleå University of Technology, Lund University, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (henceforth SLU), Stockholm University, Umeå University, Uppsala University, and Örebro University) for the years 2008 and 2018. Sweden has a uniform system for HE with similar legislation, regardless of provider. The nine universities included in the minute analysis are all established, state-funded, public sector universities representing major disciplines, and all existed before and after the autonomy reform of 2011 (Government Bill, 2009/10:149). Missing from this group are university colleges, universities established after 2008, and universities with a special profile as medical or technological institutions, which would narrow the representations of disciplines.

For the analysis of variation in meeting attendance, we also included data from three additional Swedish universities to increase inference space. These universities were established after 2008 and prior to 2018 (Karlstad University,

Linnaeus University, and Mid Sweden University). For some universities, minutes were published on the university website, but for the majority, the respective university registrar was contacted to obtain the documents. No policies or statements for representing minutes could be found in connection to protocols. Information on the total number of board meeting minutes and minute items analysed in each year is provided below (see Results). Here, the minutes are regarded as communicative actions enacting the formal steering of a university. By studying what is acted out as the allotment or apportioning of paragraphs in board meeting minutes, seeming orientations and patterns of the steering process are identified.

Coding

Table 1 includes a key to the coding and characterisation of the response variables that we used. The overall category of *functions* followed minute procedures (*information, announcements, decisions, discussion, and other*). These different categories were then sub-categorised as *orientations*, based on the nature of the associated action (*core activities, steering, collaboration, other, or no information*). The orientations then had sub-categories with a higher resolution in terms of *areas* involved (*all areas, education & research, research and development, research, economy, material management, organisation, trademark, other, or no information*). The final sub-category covered the *focus* of the areas (*quality, quantity, economy, other, or no information*). Documented discussions, regardless of function, were noted, and their content qualitatively analysed. As an example, a vice-chancellor’s decision on allocating money for career moves for researchers was coded as 1) information 2) steering 1) education & research 3) economy and 0) no discussion. Attendance (presence/absence) at board meetings was recorded separately for each meeting and member category.

Table 1.

Key to the five response variables, statistical analyses, and results

| Dependent variable | Categories | Statistical test | Effect of University | Effect of Year |
|--------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Function | Information, Announcement, Decision, Discussion, Other | GLIMMIX, maximum likelihood, method Laplace, multinomial distribution, generalized logit link function (order =freq ref=first) | $F_{30,180}=1.09$, $p=0.35$ | $F_{4,864}=2.72$, $p=0.029$ |
| Orientation | Core issues, Steering and governance, Cooperation and interaction with | GLIMMIX, maximum likelihood, method Laplace, multinomial distribution, generalized logit link | $F_{24,1036}=3.04$, $p<0.0001$ | $F_{3,1036}=6.54$, $p=0.0002$ |

| | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Area/Activity | society, and Others All, Education & research, Education, Research & research training, Research, Economy, Material management, Organisation, Branding, Other | function (order =freq ref=first) GLIMMIX, maximum likelihood, method Laplace, multinomial distribution, generalized logit link function (order =freq ref=first) | $F_{71,405}=2.27,$ $p<0.0001$ | $F_{2,589}=0.63,$ $p=0.53$ |
| Focus | Quality, Quantity, Economy, Other, Not specified | GLIMMIX, maximum likelihood, method Laplace, multinomial distribution, generalized logit link function (order =freq ref=first) | $F_{32,180}=2.40,$ $p=0.0002$ | $F_{4,863}=9.93,$ $p<0.0001$ |
| Discussion | Yes or No | GLIMMIX, maximum likelihood, binomial distribution, logit link function | $F_{8,201}=3.30,$ $p=0.0014$ | $F_{1,859}=8.66,$ $p=0.0033$ |

Note. The categories within each response variable, and results of the statistical generalized linear mixed models used to analyse whether the distribution of minute items among categories within response variables, varied between universities and years. The results are based on analyses of data from a total of 103 separate board meetings representing nine Swedish universities and two different years (2008 and 2018). Meeting nested within university was included as a random effect in all models (see Methods).

Statistical analyses

To evaluate whether the distribution of board meeting minute items into different categories was independent of or varied between universities and years, we analysed data with generalized linear mixed models. The models were implemented with procedure GLIMMIX (Bolker et al., 2009; Littell et al., 2006) in SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., 2010). We modelled four of the response variables (function, orientation, area, and focus) in separate models, as multinomial response variables with a general logit link function. We included the statement (order=freq ref=first) to order the response variables and comparisons. We included meeting nested within university as a random factor in all four models to account for non-independence of observations and a greater similarity of minute items among meetings within universities. We used the Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel stratified test statistic to test whether there was a shift in the orientation of decision items between years while controlling for university. To model the fifth response variable and test whether the relative frequency of minute items recorded as an active discussion occurred, varied between the different universities, or differed

between years, we used procedure GLIMMIX, with maximum likelihood, with a binomial distribution of the response variable (yes or no), and a logit link function. As in the previous models, meeting nested within university was included as a random factor. The paired Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to test whether the number of external board members changed between 2008 and 2018. To evaluate whether board meeting attendance varied significantly depending on member category (teacher, student, or external representative) and year, we used procedure GLIMMIX to model attendance with a binomial response distribution (present/absent) and a logit link function, and university was included as a random factor.

Results

Most of the results reported below are based on the analysis of information of a total of 1089 minute items from 103 board meetings representing nine universities and two years. The number of board meetings ranged from four to seven in 2008, and from four to six in 2018. The average number of minute items per board meeting, university, and year was 10.6. This was exclusive of standard item categories (e.g., opening of the meeting, last meeting minutes, approval of proposed agenda, and ending the meeting) that were present in the minutes of all board meetings but not included in any of our analyses. For the analysis of variation in meeting attendance, we also included data from an additional 14 board meetings held in 2018 at the three Swedish universities that were established between 2008 and 2018 (see Methods), to increase inference space.

From taking decisions to receiving information

The relative frequency of items with different functions (Information, Announcement, Decision, Discussion, Other) on the board meeting minutes did not differ markedly between different universities, but changed significantly over time (Table 1, Figure 2). On average, the temporal shift in the main function of minute items was mainly attributed to the decrease in percentage of decision items from 49.4% in 2008 to 41.4% in 2018, whereas the percentage of information items increased from 44% in 2008 to 53.4 % in 2018 (Figure 2). Decision items also decreased in absolute numbers, from 256 in 2008 (28.4 per university and year) to 235 in 2018 (26.1 per university and year).

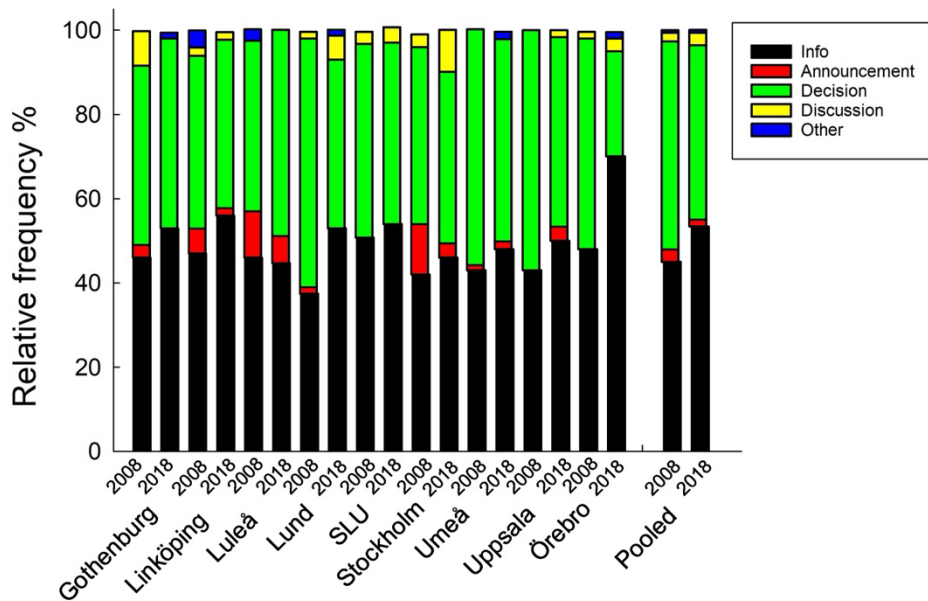


Figure 2. Variation in distribution (relative frequency) of board meeting minute items with different function (Information, Announcements, Decisions, Discussions, and Others) between nine Swedish universities and two years.

From education & research to steering, governance, cooperation, and interaction with society

The decrease in percentage of minute decision items at board meetings over time in favour of information items was accompanied by a temporal shift in the orientation of decision items (Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel Statistic stratified by university, test for general association: $\chi^2=17.2$, $df=3$, $p=0.0006$). Specifically, the percentage of university board minute decision items that concerned core issues (i.e., education and research) declined from 16% (41 of 256) in 2008 to only 5% (13 of 235) in 2018. This threefold decline in frequency of minute decision items concerning university core issues between 2008 and 2018 was not paralleled by a matching increase in the frequency of information and announcement minute items about core issues (21% in 2008 versus 15% in 2018). During the same time interval, minute decision items concerning steering and governance increased from 66% to 74%, and decision items concerning cooperation and interaction with society more than doubled, from 7% to 17%. The decrease in attention allocated to core issues was not restricted to decision items; a similar trend was also apparent when all item functions were analysed together, as reported below.

From core issues to cooperation and interaction with society

The relative frequency of board minute items with different orientation (Core issues, Steering and governance, Cooperation and interaction with society, and Others) varied between different universities and changed significantly over time

(Table 1, Figure 3). The most striking difference between universities was that the percentage of items concerning cooperation and interaction with society ranged from 0% and 7% of the minutes in Stockholm in 2008 and 2018, to as much as 31% and 33% of the minutes in Linköping in 2008 and 2018, respectively. Steering and governance items dominated the minutes in both 2008 (58%) and 2018 (56%). The temporal shift was mainly attributable to that, on average, items concerning core issues (i.e., education & research) decreased in relative frequency from 18% in 2008 to 11% in 2018, while items concerning cooperation and interaction with society increased from 15% to 22% during this period (Figure 3). In absolute numbers, items concerning core issues decreased by one-third (from 96 to 61) from 2008 to 2018. By contrast, items concerning cooperation and interaction with society nearly doubled, from 77 (8.6 per university and year) in 2008 to 126 (14 per university and year) in 2018.

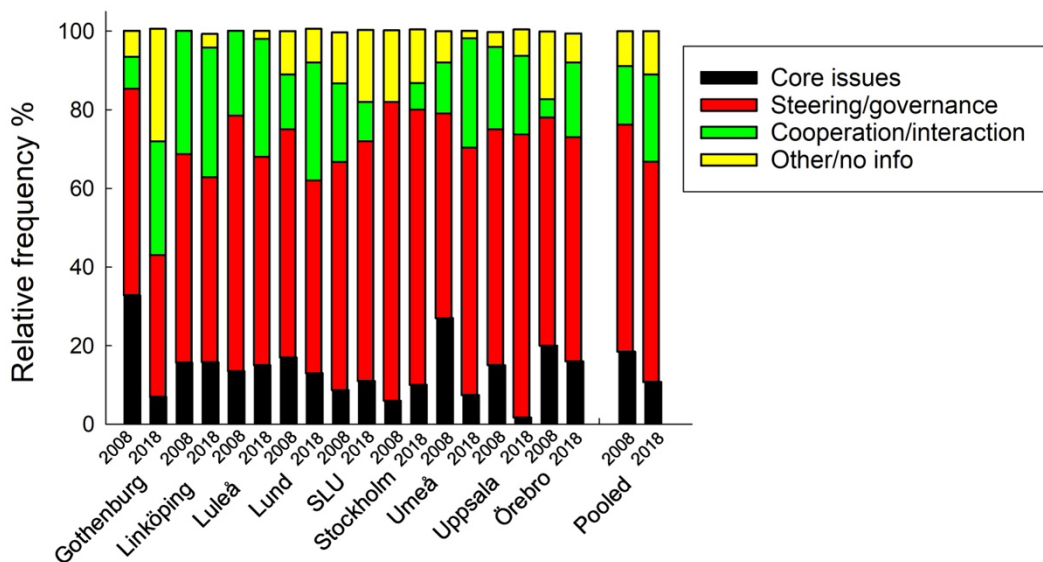


Figure 3. Variation in distribution (relative frequency) of board meeting minute items with different orientations (Core issues, Steering and governance, Cooperation and interaction with society, and Others) between nine Swedish universities and two years.

Items concerning economy and organisation dominated over education and research

The relative frequency of board meeting minute items concerning different areas (All, Education & research, Education, Research & research training, Research, Economy, Material management, Organisation, Branding, Other) varied significantly between the different universities but did not change significantly over time (Table 1, Figure 4). Overall, aspects specifically pertaining to economy and organisation comprised more than half of the items on the minutes, albeit with some

differences between universities. For example, economic aspects comprised 42% of the minute items in Stockholm in 2008 and 11% of the minute items in Gothenburg in 2018. Items specifically concerning aspects of education at the graduate or advanced level, research training, or research comprised 20% and 12% of the minutes on average in 2008 and 2018, respectively (Figure 4).

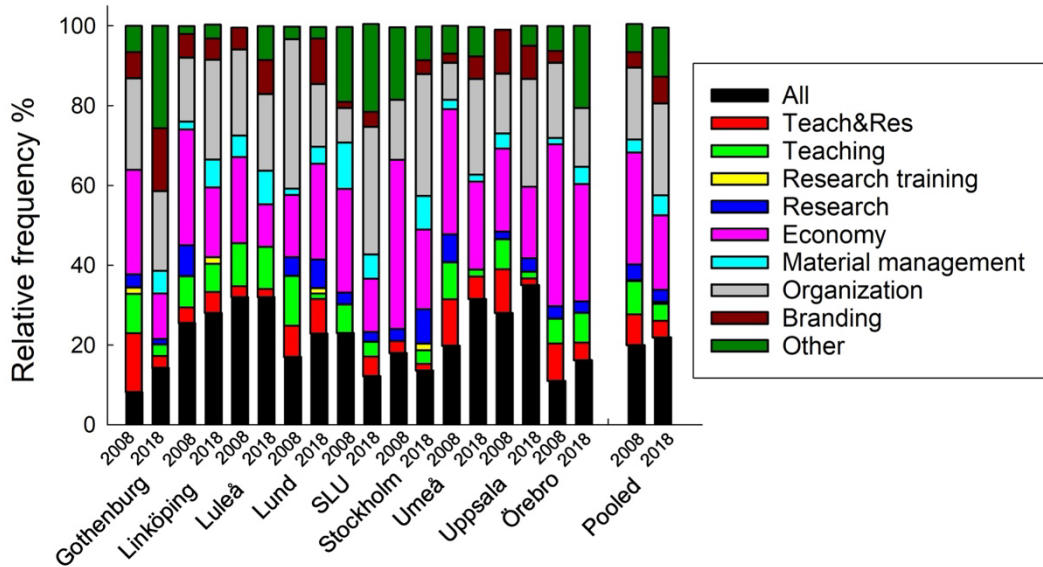


Figure 4. Variation in distribution (relative frequency) of board meeting minute items concerning different areas (All, Education & research, Education, Research & research training, Research, Economy, Material management, Organisation, Branding, and Others) between nine Swedish universities and two years.

Quality was given more consideration than quantity, but less than economic aspects
 The relative frequency of board meeting minute items with different focus (Quality, Quantity, Economy, Other, Not specified) varied significantly between the universities and changed significantly over time (Table 1, Figure 5). In general, items with a focus on economic aspects were about as frequent in the minutes as questions that focused on the quality or quantity of core activities. Also, questions focussing on quality invariably outnumbered questions focussing on quantity.

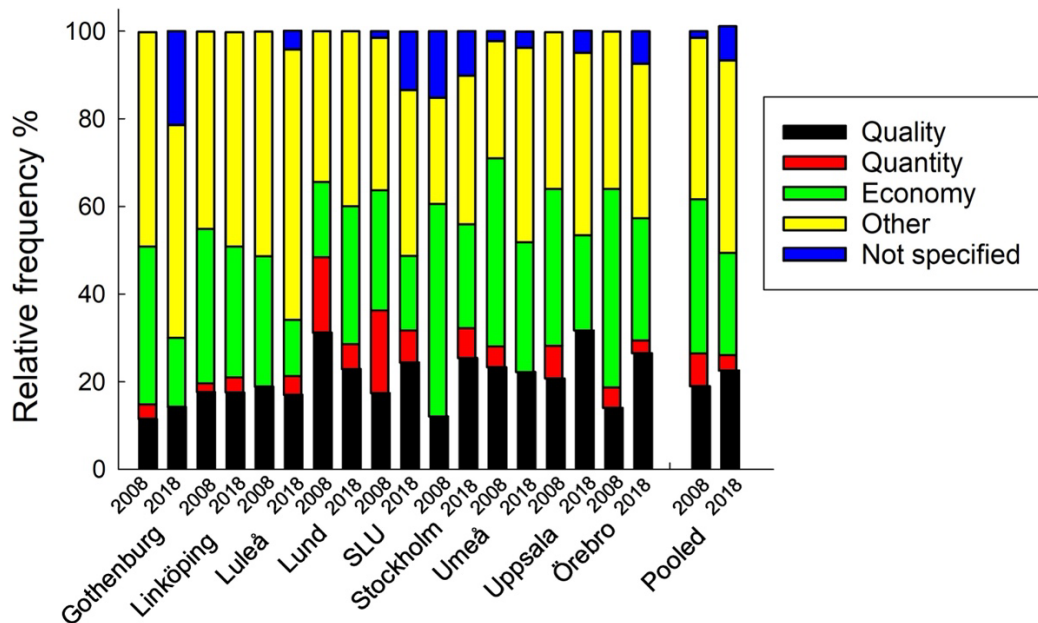


Figure 5. Variation in distribution (relative frequency) of board meeting minute items with different focus (Quality, Quantity, Economy, Other, Not specified) between nine Swedish universities and two years.

Documented discussions have become rarer

Results showed that over time discussions have become increasingly rare in protocols. For two universities, there were no minute items categorised as discussions (as main function category). Discussions were also poorly documented, if at all, throughout item functions. There were notes that discussions occurred for decision items, but these discussions are rarely accounted for. The relative frequency of active discussions recorded in the minutes (regardless of initial function categorisation) varied between the different universities and declined significantly over time (Table 1, Figure 6). That a discussion occurred was mentioned for only ca. 5% of the minute items in Linköping in 2008 and 2018, in contrast to a high of 66% in Stockholm in 2008. On average, the mention of discussions declined from 20% in 2008 to 14% in 2018 (Figure 6). Looking at the information given in minutes for items categorised as discussions (28 items over two years and 9 universities), they spread over different areas but showed some local tendencies for discussions on widened participation and branding. Comparisons with other universities over government propositions occurred at some institutions. Only one university (one item over the years) documents having discussed the recruitment of a new vice-chancellor. However, the years studied here were not particularly active periods in Sweden for recruiting vice-chancellors.

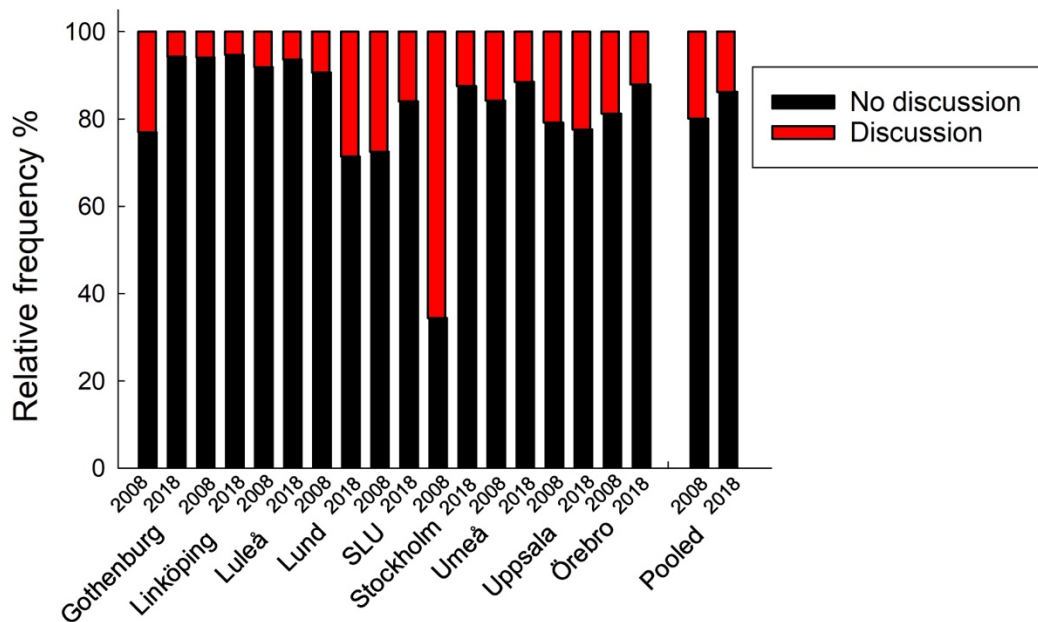


Figure 6. Variation between universities and years in the distribution (relative frequency) of minute items for which it was specifically recorded in the minutes that an active discussion occurred during the board meeting.

External board members became more numerous but were more often absent from meetings

The composition of university boards analysed here invariably comprised three internal teacher representatives, three internal student representatives, and either six or seven external members meant to represent societal interests at large. The average number of external board members increased significantly between 2008 and 2018 from 6.3 to 7 (paired signed-rank test, $S=10.5$, $p=0.031$, $n=9$).

Board meeting attendance varied significantly depending on member category (teacher, student, or external representative) but was independent of year (GLIMMIX, binomial distribution, logit link function: effect of member category: $F_{2,59} = 32.40$, $p < 0.0001$; effect of year: $F_{1,59} = 2.82$, $p = 0.094$). The covariance parameter estimate associated with the random factor (0.043 ± 0.058) indicated that attendance was independent of university. The variation in attendance among member categories was reflective of external, politically appointed members exhibiting a three times higher tendency to be absent from board meetings (absence rate 22%) compared with teacher (6%) and student (7%) representatives (Figure 7). Among external members, those on the board of Lund University were least likely to be absent (7%, 2018) whereas those on the Linnaeus University board were most likely to be absent from board meetings (42%, 2018). Among internal members, variation in university board meeting attendance by student representatives was

independent of attendance by teacher representatives, both in 2008 and 2018 (Figure 8).

Attempts to safeguard against conflicts of interest were rare. Among the 1089 minute items from the 103 board meetings of the nine universities that we analysed, there was only one notification of conflict of interest by an external board member.

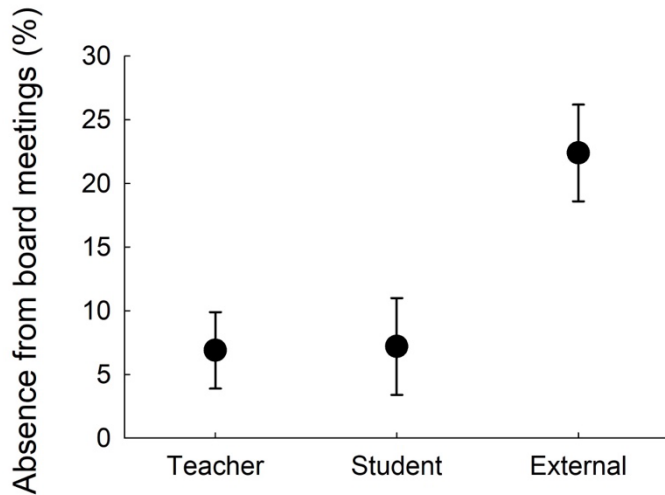


Figure 7. Variation in meeting attendance (percent absence) among teacher, student, and external board member representatives.

Note. Values represent least-squares means \pm 95% confidence intervals obtained from a three-way ANOVA of percent absence data with university, year, and board member category as explanatory factors ($F_{14,48}=3.84, p=0.0002$).

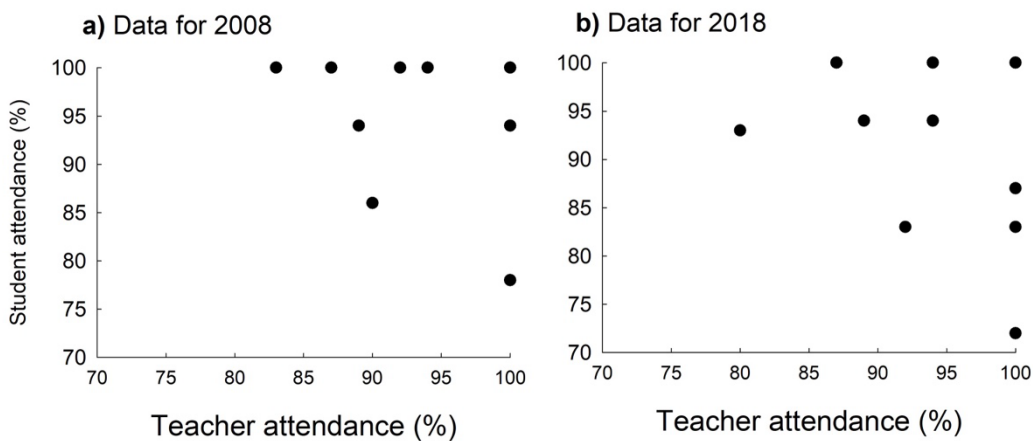


Figure 8. Variation in university board meeting attendance by student representatives was independent of the attendance by teacher representatives in both 2008 and 2018.

Note. Each data point represents data for one university board in 2008 (a) and 2018 (b).

Discussion

HEIs are dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, research, and the advancement of society through the dissemination of new ideas and discoveries. It is, however, important that its governing praxis recognises and maintains a space and capacity for autonomous action (Elo & Uljens, 2023). HEIs exist in a space of diverse competing discourses and values of excellence, academic capitalism, and New Public Management. Being an actor of and for public good, these spaces for autonomous action are the target of many influences not necessarily debating and trying the HE praxis in relation to the influence and connection to other societal fields (Elo & Uljens, 2023) (Figure 1). Delanty (2001) ascribes to HE the role of representing institutionalised dissensus in spaces for public debate, where the institutions should act to provide the structures for this public debate between expert and lay cultures. Fair documentation, openness, an orientation on core issues, and the competence and dedication to handle open and critical debates should thereby be significant in board work. This means that board work, the highest level of the university's decision-making body, acts as a role model for all other delegated institutional processes, recognising its horizontal and hierarchical respective influences, and representing its core task and values in board agendas.

Consequences of a declining and shifting influence of academic scholars

Whereas we here report on a study of aspects of educational leadership as board agendas, Edlund and Sahlin (2022) instead investigated the aspect of embedding HE organisations in society expressed through board nominations and compositions. According to them, the Swedish government has

placed particular emphasis on board nominations and compositions, motivating the associated changes with an alleged need for new influences and perspectives that should be gained by increasing and deepening the connections between HEOs and a changing society. (Edlund & Sahlin, 2022, p. 1552)

It is noteworthy that the changes in function, orientation, area, focus, and incidence of documented discussions in the minute items between 2008 and 2018 coincided with a change in the composition of the university boards. What could be disputed, though, is the 'deepened connections' with the changing society and what that implies for an educational organisation. When regulating the dimension of academic staff as a minority of university boards, the opportunity for academic staff representatives to impact decisions was further diminished. As we have seen, the concrete collegial influence on decisions regarding core issues has also been actively reduced by a shift, in both absolute and relative terms, from decision items in favour of information and announcement items (i.e., mainly vice-chancellor decisions). The results also show a threefold decline in the frequency of decision

items concerning university core issues (education and research), whereas decision items concerning cooperation and interaction with society more than doubled during this time. It may be concluded that these changes imply that some of the intentions of the reforms have been fulfilled; for example, that HEI should prioritise activities that meet the demands of society as identified by certain stakeholders. Regarding meeting the demands of society, there is little coverage of the diversity of the majority group of external members in previous research. In what ways and to what extent do they contribute a range of perspectives, experiences, and interests representing society at large? That the frequency of documented discussions in agenda items decreased between 2008 and 2018, from a low original level, argues against a governance strategy seeking to use the broad and complementary areas of expertise provided by external board members as a way towards better-informed decision making. If collegial processes are phased out, reducing the influence of disciplinary knowledge, how well are universities prepared to meet the many challenges in a complex and global environment? And, how well can they advocate strategic priorities through its board?

It could be argued that the results reported here in part reflect variation and change in minute-taking procedures. However, as open societal institutions promoting democracy, open science, and education, critical debate and providing the public space for it, minute-taking cultures at this level of decision making should be addressed, discussed, and agreed upon to reflect these aims. We struggle to see this represented in the data.

Variation among universities

In addition to the temporal shift in focus and corpus of action of Swedish university boards between 2008 and 2018 discussed above, our results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the universities in nearly all (seven out of eight) response variables that we investigated, the single exception being the highest order of classification (viz., the different functions: Announcement, Decision, Discussion, Other). Some of the more striking differences were that agenda items concerning cooperation and interaction with society ranged from a low of 0% and ca. 5% in Stockholm in 2008 and 2018 to a high of >30% in Linköping in both years; documented discussions were recorded for 66% and 5% of the agenda items in Stockholm and Linköping, respectively in 2008; and absence from board meetings of external members ranged from 7% at Lund University to 42% at Linnaeus university in 2018. It remains to be determined whether differences such as these translate into more or less informed decisions being taken by boards of the different universities. However, we did not find that the frequency distribution of board meeting agenda items had changed independently or become markedly more diversified among universities over time (see Figures 2-6), contrary to expectations from the autonomy reform (Government Bill, 2009/10:149).

Commitment to the university

This study identifies a significantly lower attendance by external board members compared to the other groups. It is generally believed that external board members may not have the same level of commitment to the university. Internal members, such as faculty, staff, and students, are more closely connected to the university, and may have a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for its success. This is not to say that external board members are not committed to the university or do not want to see it succeed, but rather that their level of commitment may be different than that of internal members (Figure 1). In terms of presence, our results support this general view. Low attendance of external board representatives also risks continuity and stability in the board, as external members may come and go more frequently than internal members. Lack of continuity may result in incoherent decision making and puts certain demands on documenting previous board work. Our findings emphasise that any evaluation of the adequacy of changing the composition of the university board should take into consideration the level of commitment and dedication shown by the board members, as this jeopardises the ability of university boards to arrive at informed decisions in general, and to arrive at decisions that meet societal challenges in particular.

Based on the information at hand, we cannot identify the reason(s) for low attendance by external members relative to academic scholars. Attendance was independent of university, which might indicate that the threefold higher absence rate among external board members reflects that they do not find the meetings particularly meaningful and thus prioritise other tasks. It seems unlikely that their low attendance merely reflects high workloads and full agendas, as the working conditions of academics are likely similar in that regard. Given that decisions are rarely justified, and that arguments and conclusions of discussions are typically not documented in the meeting minutes, being absent from board meetings is not without consequences.

In academia, there is a long and strong tradition amongst scholars in decision-making bodies at organisational levels below the university board (such as faculty boards) that board members who may be immediately affected by a certain decision should leave the room and not take part in that specific decision. According to our results, this is a tradition that is upheld in cases of internal appointments. However, in the extensive data of board meetings from nine universities that we analysed, only one conflict of interest was noted involving an external board member, despite their larger representation.

Conclusions and future directions

We agree with Elo and Uljens (2023) that the pedagogical dimension of HE leadership is important for understanding the object of HE leadership. This pedagogical dimension highlights the responsibility to uphold and develop the organisation with a societal intention, by creating favourable conditions, either directly or indirectly, for professional learning, growth, and the development of all staff. If not considered and problematised, HE leadership will risk being treated as a closed system, not addressing its critical role in society. A non-critical perspective, according to Elo & Uljens (2023), risks subordinating HE and its leadership to political interest, non-debated norms, or short-sighted societal interests.

We provide evidence here of a shift in content and occupational matters in university board agendas, which raises more questions than our results answer. Based on the change from being concerned with the traditional task of a university as a critic conscience of a society to steering and governance issues, and collaborating with society, there's a need to revitalise the academic and collegial contribution to the governing processes. If university boards mainly occupy themselves with managerial tasks, then how does that affect the content—i.e., the production and distribution of knowledge—when this is done by generalists? And where are the discussions and decisions that are missing from the university board agendas taken, discussed, and processed? By concentrating autonomy at an institutional level and removing the power of faculty boards and the constitutional support for collegial steering, research processes and educational matters have been undermined. As Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg (2023) conclude based on analyses of formal documents, decision-making powers related to core activities in HEI have shifted in balance over the past decades towards empowering line-managers (vice-chancellors, deans, and heads of department). This decollegialisation is supported by our finding of an increased number of agenda items where the board was merely informed about previous vice-chancellor decisions. Whether university boards will have a real say on university governance in the future remains to be seen, but meanwhile, the internal and external representatives have an increasingly important role and responsibility to change the current trends. To successfully take on this challenge and contribute to informed decisions requires substantial experience; national and international networks; a thorough understanding of how the praxis of science production shapes research, education and collaborations; as well as the courage to speak and the ability to speak with authority.

It is unclear how qualitative aspects of university core responsibilities are handled at universities in Sweden today. One way towards answering this last question would be to apply the analytical approach that we have used here to analyse and compare how institutional management at the next hierarchical level of governance organisation at Swedish universities—the faculty boards—has changed over time. Unlike university boards, the composition of faculty boards is dominated

by academic staff. But favouring a leaderist approach, a discursive picture of unwanted cultures of inefficiency, wanting professionalism, and self-led weak academics is painted (Ekman et al., 2018). But what do we know of what goes on at the faculty level? An additional and complementary way to characterise and further understand the evolution of governance that defines the conditions for research and HEI is to conduct interviews and to select/include informants such that decision making taking place outside the board rooms can also be illuminated (Rowland, 2018). Are there vibrant arenas for the open debate on research and educational matters of contemporary society? Have the agendas of the faculty boards developed in contrasting directions and shifted in focus to compensate for changes at the higher level? What would a more detailed picture of their agendas reveal? What role do management theories disregarding context and task, relations to other social practices, professional cultures of commitment, competition and motivation contribute to an educational institution? There is a need for more insight into how certain ideologies in society impact decisions, priorities, orientation and, in the long run, the conditions for producing research.

An important point of departure is seeing the relation between education and other societal domains as non-hierarchical. This allows asking to what degree and in what ways the relations between societal domains such as politics, economy, or religion allow HE an autonomous space to recognize the interests directed at HE, but not affirm them, thereby allowing HE to fulfil its task in a democracy (Elo & Uljens, 2023, p.1295).

Besides the possibility that the growing majority of external board members has influenced the corpus of board meeting agendas and the coherency of decisions, there is also a potential for conflicting interests to affect actual decisions. There are examples of state-funded university boards with representatives of large contributors to the universities' funding. Role conflicts easily arise when boards are expected to carry out both control and service tasks (de Boer et al., 2010), and this needs to be addressed in future research.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates changes in the function of university boards that coincide with shifts in board composition, implementation of strong line management and the dismantling of collegial influence. This calls for future investigations of where and how solid experience of academic core activities, peer quality management and critical thinking contribute to shaping the policy, praxis, and institutional management of HE issues at universities. We hope that the outcome of any such investigation will falsify the hypothesis that the time for collegial influence has come to an end.

Author biographies

Linda Reneland-Forsman is an Associate Professor of Pedagogy, leading the Higher Education Development organization at Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden. She has almost 25 years of employment experience in HE, including some 10 years in management. She has studied the influence of academic disciplinary discourse for integrating ICT in HE and the intrinsic relationship between digital exclusion and social exclusion among the elderly and is continuing her research on student meaning-making and scholarly challenges in teaching in HE.

Anders Forsman is a full Professor of Evolutionary Ecology at Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden, since 2002. His research aims at understanding how spatiotemporal environmental variation and change impact fundamental ecological and evolutionary processes that, in turn, shape biological diversity at different hierarchical levels of organization. He is responsible for the doctorate training program in Ecology at Linnaeus University, a former member of the Linnaeus University Board (2016-2021), and member of the Linnaeus University Research Education Council (since 2022). His research includes investigations into patterns, causes, and consequences of variation among individuals, populations, species, and communities.

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