

Dominik Antonowicz
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9115-2987>
<https://doi.org/10.35765/slowniki.583en>

University boards

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: This section defines the concept of the university board and describes the specific features of these collegial bodies: their structure, composition, and modes of member selection. It also discusses the main functions performed by university boards in European higher education.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM: In this section, particular attention is given to the emergence of a stakeholder society, which profoundly reshaped university governance. Originally conceived as a corporation of professors, the university evolved into a quasi-democratic institution, and ultimately into the entrepreneurial university.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: This section shows that university boards are closely connected to the introduction of New Public Management – specifically, the adaptation of organisational and managerial practices drawn from market institutions. This has meant prioritising openness to external expectations, the professionalisation of management, and social accountability.

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: In this section, university boards are situated within the broader context of ongoing transformations in higher education. Special attention is paid to Poland, where the poorly defined role of boards prevents them from fulfilling their intended functions.

Keywords: university, higher education, autonomy, New Public Management

Definition of the term

The focus of this article is university boards (also referred to as supervisory boards), that is, collegial bodies operating within higher education institutions whose role is to provide strategic oversight, support executive leadership, and build institutional bridges with external stakeholders. University boards have a tradition spanning more than a century, with their origins in the Anglo-Saxon world. Since the second half of the 20th century, they have also been established in other parts of Europe, particularly in the Nordic countries. Their institutional position, relationships with other university governing bodies (the senate and the rector), and scope of authority differ across countries, reflecting the diversity of academic traditions.

In Europe, the role of university boards is defined primarily by national (regional or cantonal) law. A closer examination of legislative frameworks makes it possible to distinguish two principal approaches to conceptualising their institutional role. The first involves a precise delineation of board competencies through a closed catalogue set out in legislation, thereby establishing uniform legal standards for all higher education institutions. The second approach provides only general legislative parameters for the functioning of boards while leaving individual institutions relatively broad discretion in specifying the detailed solutions to be adopted. This allows universities to determine the functions, size, and structure of their boards in line with their own profiles. The solution adopted in Polish law lies somewhere between these two models: the Act on Higher Education and Science contains a closed catalogue of powers vested in the board (Article 18), while also permitting the performance of additional tasks defined in the university's statutes. In practice, however, the conferral of additional competencies upon Polish university boards remains relatively uncommon.

University boards are collegial bodies distinguished from other elements of academic governance by the mandatory inclusion of external members, though this requirement is also the primary source of criticism within the academic community. In certain countries, such as Austria and Finland, the law obliges universities to include external members and ensure that they constitute a majority of the board. Notably, in countries such as the Netherlands, university boards are composed exclusively

of members from outside the academic community. A similar diversity applies to the mechanisms for selecting board members: while no single dominant procedure exists, three main models can be identified. The first involves appointment by the government or other external actors (e.g., the Netherlands and Norway). The second model vests the right of nomination in university bodies, most often the senate (e.g. Finland and Poland). The third model represents a hybrid approach, combining different modes of selection and allowing for co-optation (e.g., Austria and Portugal). The size and internal structure of university boards vary by country and institution but most comprise between 5 and 25 members – a range recommended by the OECD, which actively promotes university boards as a mechanism linking higher education institutions with their external environment.

Despite structural differences, it is possible to identify a set of functions most commonly associated with university boards which distinguish them from other academic bodies. These include (1) participation in decision-making concerning strategic planning; (2) budget planning or approval of budget implementation; and (3) the selection and supervision of university leadership (Kretek, Dragšić, and Kehm, 2011). Interestingly, these competencies do not extend to the dismissal of the rector or members of the rector's team. University boards lack formal authority over key personnel and promotion decisions, including professorial appointments, despite the fact that such appointments typically carry significant financial implications. Similarly, boards exert little influence over admissions policy or the creation and closure of study programmes. They also have virtually no formal (or even informal) jurisdiction over the determination of research priorities.

Historical analysis of the term

In European higher education, university boards are not a new phenomenon, but they are only firmly embedded in the institutional order in selected countries (e.g., the Netherlands and Sweden), while in others – including Poland – they are a relatively recent development. A review of the literature reveals that the spread of university boards across European systems has been closely tied to modernisation reforms in

higher education, particularly in Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Poland, and Italy. The organisational form of university boards has evolved from numerous and diverse collegial bodies serving mainly as discussion forums into smaller, more coherent supervisory organs modelled on corporate governance. It is therefore unsurprising that their introduction into university governance took place as part of broader reforms inspired by the concept of New Public Management (NPM). This model rested on the normative conviction that universities must become more coherent, outward-looking, and entrepreneurial in order to remain competitive and more effectively engage with their social and economic environments.

The idea of university boards is also closely connected to the emergence of a stakeholder society. Historically, universities were autonomous and self-governing institutions, with internal structures designed to balance the interests of different faculty groups. For much of the 20th century, they remained inward-looking, focused primarily on serving the needs and expectations of internal stakeholders. This was understandable, as faculty and student representatives elected university authorities, sat in the senate, and held rectors accountable. Yet such accountability was largely symbolic as universities were complex and fragmented institutions in which rectors exercised only limited influence over daily operations.

The Humboldtian model of the university was thus deliberately designed to avoid any external relations as the state was assumed to act as its sole representative. This reinforced the ties between the state and universities (or, more precisely, the academic oligarchy), amounting in practice to an unwritten pact. The state guaranteed universities autonomy but simultaneously set the legal framework for their operation and reserved for itself the exclusive right to articulate expectations regarding elite formation and nation-building. In this conception, the state was to serve as the guardian of the public interest, mediating between universities and their environment and shielding them from external pressures that might otherwise threaten academic freedom in teaching and research.

Universities were therefore expected to educate for the needs of the state and to train national elites, with the state assuming financial responsibility. This model persisted until the late 1960s, when the

massification of higher education transformed the sector into a key supplier of skilled labour for both the economy and the public sector. As growing numbers of graduates entered the labour market, interest in educational outcomes increased among prospective employers – actors who previously had little reason to articulate demands in this regard.

Massification primarily affected university governance and internal dynamics. The surge in student numbers was accompanied by a rise (though proportionally smaller) in junior academics and administrative staff, who were assigned only auxiliary roles due to their low status. These groups had little voice in governance, which produced political and social tensions within Western European universities. This marked a first and crucial step toward the reconfiguration of the academic profession and the emergence of distinct groups of internal stakeholders: students, junior academics, and administrative employees. Their status, needs, expectations, and interests diverged significantly from those of the academic oligarchy. The Humboldtian ‘university of professors’ gradually gave way to more democratic universities, in which diverse internal stakeholders were guaranteed participation in co-governance through representation in collegial bodies. Although universities remained largely under professorial control, the influence of the professoriate over day-to-day operations was curtailed in favour of other staff groups and students. The result was a reconfiguration of power and the introduction of participatory democracy, granting junior academics and students a role in governance and shared responsibility for the institution.

University governance has continued to evolve under the influence of broader societal processes. The first phase brought internal differentiation of the academic community and recognition of the groups that composed it. The second phase saw the rise of a stakeholder society, which gradually undermined the state’s role as the embodiment of the ‘public interest’ and as the intermediary between universities and their environment. This shift coincided with the state’s withdrawal from areas it had traditionally financed, in favour of market actors, quasi-autonomous agencies funded with public resources, and non-governmental organisations. At the level of public policy, higher-education governance became more complex as multiple actors came to influence its direction, implementation, and evaluation. As a result, universities were compelled to redefine their external relations, which could no longer be reduced

to interactions with central government. In other words, the public interest became increasingly fragmented and diversified, no longer defined solely by the state, which was unable to accommodate the needs of all stakeholders in a knowledge-driven economy where success depends heavily on innovation.

This policy shift made it necessary to free higher-education institutions from detailed state control and grant them the broadest possible autonomy in defining their own structures. Whereas massification had democratised university governance by recognising the presence and rights of new internal stakeholders, the system still operated according to the logic of internal accountability. As Kwiek observes, this involved

a reformulation, and in some respects even a questioning of the traditional modern social roles of the university, especially those rooted in the European context, which were later disseminated worldwide (notably the Humboldtian model originating in Germany and the Napoleonic model originating in France in the early 19th century) (Kwiek, 2010, p. 10).

The institutional perspective on universities thus shifted: from a self-referential model in which the academic community defined its own goals, to an instrumental one in which universities became organisations pursuing objectives set by external actors. This reflected the rise of the post-industrial economy, in which knowledge replaced capital and labour as the primary source of competitive advantage and the most strategic resource.

In this context, university boards emerged as an institutional response to the changing environment of higher education. The reforms that established them signified a fundamental transformation in the relationship between the state and universities, which gained greater organisational and financial autonomy, but without sufficient public funding and with heightened demands for social accountability. In this sense, university boards both symbolised broader changes in thinking about higher education and served as key organs of modern university governance, with the central function of strengthening ties to the social environment. Their introduction was frequently accompanied by political controversy and academic protest, especially in systems where universities had long operated on the assumption that the state was their sole external partner.

Discussion of the term

Composition of university boards

University boards are often associated with the neoliberal turn in higher education which, at the level of governance, has primarily manifested itself in the adoption of organisational and managerial practices typical of market-oriented institutions. However, the idea of university boards predates neoliberal reforms. It is nonetheless evident that in many European countries their introduction formed part of reforms inspired by the principles of New Public Management (NPM). NPM is based on the assumption that introducing quasi-market mechanisms into public sector organisations would not only increase their economic efficiency but also enable them to function more effectively under competitive conditions. Reforms carried out under this framework were characterised by (a) greater organisational autonomy for universities, (b) a concentration of authority within executive leadership, and (c) the inclusion of external stakeholders in governance. In higher education, the presence of such external actors was expected to focus attention on the external environment and introduce professional management practices from outside academia.

The new model of the university – often referred to as ‘the entrepreneurial university’ – was conceived as an internally coherent organisation with clearly defined objectives and operating on the basis of economic rationality. This was difficult to achieve in traditionally structured universities, which functioned as ‘loosely coupled systems’ where key decisions were often inconsistent, ad hoc, and therefore irrational. One of the main criticisms of traditional universities was thus their organisational unmanageability and lack of professional administration. As the role of higher education expanded, calls grew for transforming universities into organizational actors with clearly articulated goals, internal structures responsible for their realisation, and bodies that would oversee their functioning on behalf of society.

University boards bring individuals into academic governance from outside the university community, thereby allowing their knowledge, expertise, and experience to be used in steering higher education institutions. This is particularly important in the context of the growing internal

complexity of universities, where the rector manages multi-million budgets, oversees extensive assets, and is often the largest employer in the region. Boards are therefore intended as institutional mechanisms for opening universities to external oversight and supporting the management of complex organisations. At the same time, assigning them formal powers has generated significant concern within the academic community.

Social accountability of universities

University boards thus embody the principles of NPM. Their introduction into academic governance and the granting of significant managerial authority were meant to symbolise the opening of higher education to the needs of its external environment. In this conception, universities became actors freed from a tightly regulated order in which relations with other actors were mediated and defined by the state. They became autonomous institutions, but only in their choice of instruments, not in the selection of institutional goals. Consequently, boards are inextricably linked with the idea of social accountability of the higher education, understood as the fulfilment of tasks entrusted to universities. The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that universities have traditionally been decentralised organisations, operating under historically shaped norms and without clearly defined objectives. Their elite nature and special mission rested on an informal social contract with the state: universities trained elites and cultivated national culture in exchange for state support, while the state refrained from interfering in internal affairs, particularly rectorial elections. This autonomy was central to the academic order, and the academic community was unwilling to relinquish or share it with external actors. For this reason, the introduction of university boards provoked resistance as academics were compelled to cede part of the authority they had long exercised by tradition. The driving forces behind governance reforms were not only the need for managerial professionalisation but also the introduction of mechanisms of social accountability. Institutional autonomy and internal responsibility were thus supplanted by social and economic accountability, i.e., responsibility to the external environment.

While boards are intended as expressions of social accountability, their own accountability has remained largely undefined. This poses a significant legislative and managerial challenge, since, formally, it is the actors who appoint board members who have the right and duty to hold them accountable for their performance and, in extreme cases, to remove them. In practice, however, the accountability of boards has been largely symbolic, occurring in a legal vacuum, which reflects the traditionally strong role of customary norms in higher education. For the academic community, only appeals, petitions, and media pressure remain as possible (but not always effective) means of influence.

The loss of academic agency

A third area of contention surrounding the introduction of university boards in European higher education concerns the loss of agency within the academic community. Put simply, boards are seen as part of a broader shift in the university paradigm: from a (professional) corporation to an institution with significant implications for the position of academics and their role in governance. Historically, universities were corporations of scholars, but after the transformations of the 1960s they became corporations of academics and students. Symbolically, these groups exercised institutional power, though in practice the professoriate held the dominant role and ultimate responsibility. Over time, however, this arrangement gradually shifted, with managerial and administrative actors taking the place of the academic seniority. In the international literature, this process has been described as 'boardism' (Magalhães et al., 2016), since boards occupy the top of the institutional hierarchy. Although boards themselves played only a limited role in the erosion of academic agency, their introduction came to symbolise the broader overhauling of university governance. This entailed a profound redefinition of internal power relations, marked by the growing importance of managerial hierarchies and leadership roles within the university.

The emergence of boards as new governance bodies meant that existing collegial organs lost some of their competencies (and authority). Yet the strongest resistance was not to this reduction but to the diminished role of academics in decision-making. Boards symbolised a shift

away from professional collegiality toward organisational hierarchy in which managerial and administrative roles – once secondary or auxiliary – became central. This is perceived as a gradual and systematic erosion of the agency of academics and students, and, consequently, as a redefinition of the very idea of the university. Inevitably, the university loses its communal character: no longer a fellowship of scholars devoted to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, it increasingly takes on the features of an organisation focused on teaching students and conducting research.

Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

University boards are part of the broader transformations taking place in higher education, stemming from the evolving role of universities in society and the economy. They are primarily the result of changes in the relationship between the state and universities as well as the gradual emergence of a stakeholder society.

Historically, universities were elite, insular institutions funded by the state. Over time, they became mass open institutions increasingly dependent on external actors. Today they require ever greater public and private investment due to the rising costs of education and, above all, research. This has significantly reshaped the external conditions of the functioning of higher education. Structurally, it has meant empowering external stakeholders by incorporating them into the key decision-making processes of higher-education institutions. Although in many European countries such reforms provoked academic controversy and even protests, it is hard to conceive of this process being reversed or even halted. The mythical vision of the university as an ‘ivory tower’ survives only as a rhetorical figure, nostalgically evoked on ceremonial occasions. Contemporary universities have become dependent on cooperation with external actors, while at the same time acquiring the character of highly complex enterprises. They can no longer be effectively governed solely by balancing the influence of internal groups and faculty constituencies.

University boards represent an institutional, political, and managerial response to changes occurring beyond the university walls. For

many, they also embody new ways of thinking about higher education. They should not, however, be seen as political mechanisms restricting university autonomy, but rather as instruments that open up universities to their external environment. Their role is to build trust in higher education institutions, which – in the context of a financially weakened state – must increasingly demonstrate their social relevance.

Poland is a country where university boards were introduced relatively late (2018). Owing to numerous political compromises, their role has remained largely superficial, making it necessary to redefine their place within university governance. Moreover, university boards must establish credibility not only within the academic community but also among external stakeholders. That is why it is crucial that their functioning is transparent and that they are held accountable for the outcomes of their work. Equally important is a strong commitment to ethical standards, including full transparency in their relations with university authorities and the avoidance of any suspicion of conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

- Antonowicz, D. (2005). *Uniwersytet przyszłości. Wyzwania i modele polityki*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.
- Antonowicz, D. (2015). *Między siłą globalnych procesów a lokalną tradycją. Polskie szkolnictwo wyższe w dobie przemian*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK.
- Boer, H. de, Enders, J., & Schimank, U. (2007). On the Way towards New Public Management? The Governance of University Systems in England, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany. In: D. Jansen (ed.), *New Forms of Governance in Research Organizations* (pp. 137–152). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Boer, H.D., Denters, B., & Goedegebuure, L. (1998). On boards and councils; shaky balances considered. The governance of Dutch universities. *Higher Education Policy* 11(2–3), 153–164.
- Clark, B.R. (1998). *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities. Organizational Pathways of Transformation*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Donina, D., & Jaworska, M. (2024). Higher education governance in Poland. Reform pathway from the Communist regime to Law 2.0. *Higher Education Policy*, 37(1), 40–58.

- Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & de Boer, H. (2017). Change in university governance structures in continental Europe. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 274–289.
- Huisman, J., & Currie, J. (2004). Accountability in higher education: Bridge over troubled water? *Higher Education*, 48(4), 529–551.
- Jabłocka, J. (1993). Jaka autonomia? *Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe*, 1, 5–7.
- Kretek, P.M., Dragšić, Ž., & Kehm, B.M. (2013). Transformation of university governance. On the role of university board members. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 39–58.
- Kwiek, M. (2010). *Transformacje uniwersytetu*. Poznań: UAM
- Magalhães, A., Veiga, A., & Amaral, A. (2018). The changing role of external stakeholders: from imaginary friends to effective actors or non-interfering friends. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(4), 737–753.
- Magalhães, A., Veiga, A., Amaral, A., Sousa, S., & Ribeiro, F. (2013). Governance of Governance in Higher Education: Practices and lessons drawn from the Portuguese case. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 67(3), 295–311.
- Magalhães, António, Veiga, A., & Amaral, A. (2016). The changing role of external stakeholders. From imaginary friends to effective actors or non-interfering friends. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(4), 737–753.
- Neave, G. (2003). Perspektywa interesariuszy w ujęciu historycznym. *Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe*, 21(1), 19–39.
- Woźnicki, J. (ed.) (2021). *Rady uczelni. Regulacje i dobre praktyki*. Toruń: UMK.