

'Who runs your university'? Governance, democracy and business influence in higher education

A report of a UCU workshop, held at the University of East London on Friday 6 March

Introduction

The workshop was attended by 35 reps from across the union, including representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Plenary session

Phil Marfleet, Docklands Branch Secretary, briefly outlined the situation at UEL regarding the suspension of the vice-chancellor. Although Martin Everett was not a UCU member, the union branch had been the only source of critical and informed discussion at the university. Phil then went on to outline the key themes of the UCU workshop (to explore the reduction in staff influence and growing business involvement in university governing bodies). The fact that the Government are drawing up proposals to make it easier for post-1992 universities to reduce the size of their governing bodies illustrated the timeliness of the event. Above all, the main aim of the workshop was to develop a number of practical recommendations.

In the first presentation Alastair Hunter (UCU President Elect) outlined the changes in university governance since the early 1980s, particularly as it has affected the pre-1992 sector. The growth of managerialism was a key factor in facilitating the shift towards a more business-focused structure, which included a reduction in the representativeness and autonomy of Senates and Academic Boards. Above all, Alastair stressed the importance of developing practical proposals on governance:

"To work effectively we need a set of achievable goals: realistic proposals for the size of courts, workable numbers of staff and student representation, proper guidelines for their election, and guidelines as to what they can do, can have access to, and can share with their constituencies."

In the second presentation Mike Rustin (UEL) outlined both the central role of universities in UK society and the key function of the union in establishing a 'democratic community' on campus. Mike sketched out a number of different university models, including 'radical' and 'stakeholder' versions, and argued that the current crisis in the financial system offered a real opportunity to explore new forms of regulation and constitutional reform,

including for university governance. Mike argued that UCU has a vital role in this debate in partnership with other interested parties.

In response, participants made the following key points.

- The 'Oxbridge' model (a community of 'self-governing scholars') was looking increasingly threadbare.
- The existence of a 'two tier' governance structure was widespread, i.e. staff reps are excluded from key committees such as finance.
- Student governors tend to be highly supportive of managerial initiatives.
- There are continuing differences between pre and post 1992 governance structures. However, there is no simple dichotomy (e.g. Kingston is very different from London Metropolitan).
- Given the diversity across the sector there is no single model of university governance that UCU should be promoting. Instead, we should draw on a variety of models (including European Works Councils) in developing alternative proposals.

Workshop sessions

In the afternoon participants were split into three different groups and asked to examine a number of key issues. As well as highlighting the complexity of structures across the sector, participants made a number of specific recommendations.

- There is a need for UCU to gather evidence on 'good' and 'bad' practice in HE governance. This could take the form of a branch survey and should cover academic governance structures (senates/academic boards) as well as governing bodies/councils.
- There was widespread support for the establishment of a network of UCU HE staff governors (e.g. to share information, provide support etc). Initial contacts could be drawn from attendees of the UCU workshop.
- In high-profile disputes union legal support for staff governors can be crucial (for example, in offering advice on whistleblowing). UCU legal advice on day to day governor issues (for example, on the exclusion of staff governors from particular committees and meetings) would also be useful.
- UCU should update and disseminate its campaign materials on governance (e.g. 2002 NATFHE manifesto on 'open governance') and publicise the 1997 UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel: see www.ucu.org.uk/hegovernance

In both the plenary and workshop sessions a number of general points were made about campaigning and political lobbying on governance issues.

- Alliance building: UCU branches should look to work with other trade unions and student organisations.

- Future work on governance needs to plug into wider union activity, in particular, the anti-marketisation campaign.
- Mobilising members on governance is easier when it is linked to core professional and employment matters (e.g. management attempts to 'deprofessionalise' academic and academic-related staff).
- Principles of governance should feature prominently in the HEC's plan to develop an 'alternative vision for higher education'.
- UCU should continue to lobby relevant organisations such as government departments, the higher education funding councils, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Committee of University Chairs (CUC).
- Political work: where there are concerns about governance structures, it can be useful to contact local MPs and politicians.