



## Strategic advisory boards – the emergence of shadow governance in universities?

Bjørn Stensaker, Jens Jungblut & Georgiana Mihut

To cite this article: Bjørn Stensaker, Jens Jungblut & Georgiana Mihut (2021): Strategic advisory boards – the emergence of shadow governance in universities?, International Journal of Leadership in Education, DOI: [10.1080/13603124.2021.1913237](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1913237)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1913237>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 19 Apr 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 481



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Strategic advisory boards – the emergence of shadow governance in universities?

Bjørn Stensaker<sup>a</sup>, Jens Jungblut <sup>b</sup> and Georgiana Mihut<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; <sup>c</sup>Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland

### ABSTRACT

Numerous universities throughout the world have established top-level advisory boards – informal bodies and councils that the institutional leadership may consult on issues perceived as important. Through a series of qualitative interviews with members of such entities as well as representatives of the institutions appointing them, the article sheds light on how strategic advisory bodies function, and how these entities frame and interact with the institutional leadership. We observe that strategic advisory boards represent a hybrid form of governance installing mutual dependencies between representatives of the boards and the institutional leadership – what we label as a kind of controlled collegiality. While university leadership acts as a gatekeeper controlling access to these boards, once members are nominated the power relations between the actors, become more equal. The study highlights the importance of strategic advisory boards as new elements in higher education governance – working in the shadow of more formal governance arrangements. Here, we argue that the establishment of these boards can be interpreted as a re-introduction of a collegial element in universities exposed to a number of reforms resulting in more streamlined and managerial governance structures.

### Introduction

Establishing advisory boards has become a trend among universities in a range of countries. Members of such boards are often characterized by their broad international leadership experience, an international research profile, and/or societal influence, and their mandate is normally to advise the institution on issues perceived of strategic importance – although such councils and boards rarely are part of the formal governance structure of the university in question (Altbach et al., 2016). Altbach et al. (2016) have argued that the establishment of such boards can be seen as a way to internationalize the governance of universities – labeling them international advisory councils due to their predominantly international membership and focus – although they acknowledge that such boards may also have other functions.

**CONTACT** Jens Jungblut  [jungblut@stv.uio.no](mailto:jungblut@stv.uio.no)  Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Postboks 1097 Blindern, Oslo 0317, Norway

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The current paper explores this issue further, and argues that the establishment of advisory boards can also be related to other strategic matters, not least as a response to the many reforms universities have been exposed to domestically, and how they – as a consequence – have become more rationalized as organizations and influenced by management (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez, 2006). In the remainder of this paper, advisory boards will thus be labeled as ‘strategic advisory boards’ – hinting to their possible diverse intended functions at their host institutions. However, while the emergence of advisory boards can certainly be seen as yet another example of this managerial turn, it can also be argued that such boards are a way for universities to reinvent more traditional modes of governance which have been eliminated in the recent reforms and streamlining of university steering. An important point in this respect is also the reduction of the number of collegial bodies in university governance as a result of various reform processes, and how this has affected the traditional modes of shared governance in higher education (Capano, 2011; Dill, 2012; Seeber et al., 2015; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013; Teelken, 2015). As such, it can be observed that while many universities have eliminated one set of *internal* consultative bodies, they are at the same time building up a new set of *external* bodies – also having consultative functions.

The current paper explores how and in what way strategic advisory boards affect university governance, and the issues and perspectives these bodies bring to university governance. Based on the concept of shadow organizing – informal organizing that is not part of formal governance arrangements (Gherardi et al., 2017) – theoretical assumptions related to the possible roles and functions of strategic advisory boards are developed, and used as point of departure for empirical exploration.

The study is a qualitative exploratory study based on interviews with institutional representatives and members of more than 25 strategic advisory bodies in universities located in 20 different countries throughout the world – although with an overrepresentation of Western European countries.

In the following section, we will introduce the theoretical framework of the study based on recent governance reforms and the concept of shadow organizations. This is followed by an overview of the data and methods used and the presentation of the results of the study. In the final section, we discuss our findings in the light of higher education governance and organizational studies literature.

## Changes in university governance – a theoretical framework

### *Trends in university governance*

During the last two decades a number of studies have observed strengthened hierarchical governance within universities, including more centralized decision-making, and the appearance of a more formalized and rationalized organization (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Capano, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Maassen et al., 2017; Ramirez, 2006). While this trend is perhaps most visible in Europe, there are also a number of studies from other regions of the world hinting that universities are becoming more managerial and governed (Christensen et al., 2019; Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013).

As part of this trend, it is also possible to observe strengthened executive boards and a much more prominent role of the institutional leadership in many universities

(De Boer et al., 2007; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). University boards are – in many countries – containing a higher share of stakeholders and representatives of industry and private interests, and the role of the rector or president is becoming more professionalized in the sense that it has become a career path for an increasing number of people (Frølich et al., 2018; Teelken, 2015). A similar professionalization can also be observed within the university administration, where dramatic changes can be identified in the educational background of the administration, in the tasks they perform and in new functions emerging in the university (Christensen et al., 2019; Enders et al., 2013; Gornitzka et al., 2017; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). In addition, universities are increasingly using professional consultants from outside, which may further drive the transformation of the university into a ‘normal’ organization (Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019).

The development has raised concerns that the collegial influence in university decision-making may be reduced as a consequence (Dill, 2012; Sahlin, 2012). Elimination of collegial councils and bodies or the reduction of their influence in decision-making are typical examples mentioned in this respect (Stensaker & Vabø, 2013).

However, a more recent trend is also the establishment of new high-profile strategic advisory boards at institutional level in a number of universities in Europe and Asia (Altbach et al., 2016). These boards are normally established outside – or in parallel to – the formal governance arrangements and closely linked to the institutional leadership. According to Altbach et al. (2016, p. 13) these boards and councils may be categorized as both symbolic and transformative, but regardless of categorization, they tend to be populated by distinguished academics and/or former leaders of prestigious universities – often from abroad. Although their functions may vary, Altbach et al. (2016, p. 14) suggest that an important role of these boards is to support strategic internationalization attempts, and that they could be interpreted as an example of how internationalization even shapes institutional governance. Such an interpretation may echo developments in many other organizational sectors globally (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Djelic & Quack, 2018).

### *Emerging shadow structures*

However, the emergence of strategic advisory boards may be related to other drivers than internationalization and globalization. It is, as such, possible to argue that the establishment of strategic advisory boards is a reaction to the elimination of other collegial bodies and councils in the university, a way to reintroduce a collegial element in a more rationalized and formalized organization, and to access knowledge and seek advice after the dissolution of collegial bodies. As such, strategic advisory boards share an important characteristic with traditional collegial bodies and councils: they may add legitimacy to decisions or decision-making processes.

Of course, strategic advisory boards also differ from collegial bodies in a number of ways as their members have employment in other – often foreign – universities, and that their members are academics often having broad leadership experience, for example, as rectors or presidents, or leaders of distinguished research centers (Altbach et al., 2016). It should therefore be underlined that strategic advisory boards are not typical collegial structures.

How then can strategic advisory boards be conceptualized? We propose that they can be seen as a form of shadow governance in universities. This concept is based on the recent theorization of shadow organizing as a useful metaphor in organizational studies (Gherardi et al., 2017), as a way to handle knowledge overflow (Jensen, 2018), or facilitate stakeholder collaboration in higher education (Jensen et al., 2020). These studies are inspired by observations on how shadow education is often found in educational systems (Nordhaug, 1991) describing informal teaching and learning activities which are taking place in the shadow of formal education. The shadow metaphor can be interpreted in several ways (Gherardi et al., 2017) – both as an activity that is imitating formal structures, providing an important supplement to what is formally recognized, and as an activity lacking legitimacy and recognition – which consequently has to be performed outside the spotlight. Regardless, the outcome may be increased organizational complexity (Kraatz & Block, 2008).

The metaphor of the shadow may also be conceptualized in relation to more traditional forms of governance in higher education. While collegial forms of governance often are associated with an understanding that academic staff in general is involved in decision-making in a shared way with other stakeholders (Chapman, 1983; Clark, 1983; Dill, 2012; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013), historical examples can also be found of how individual powerful academics used their position to influence decisions in the university – in ways that were not always to the liking of their colleagues (De Boer & Stensaker, 2007). In relation to the latter, recent research has also suggested that influential academics – controlling prestigious funding or having a high status – still have considerable impact on decision-making in the modern university (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2017).

Shadow governance can, thus, be understood in two different ways: either as a return of the elite academic in the governing of the modern university, or as a return to more universal collegial forms of governance in a university which has become too managerial. While the two forms of shadow governance share some characteristics, they are also distinct in several dimensions. Traditional collegial governance forms tend to be characterized by the election of representatives, having relatively open agendas as to what issues these governance bodies may discuss, by a high degree of consensus in decision-making and by adding legitimacy to the governing process (De Boer & Stensaker, 2007). Historically, elite academic governance arrangements have been described differently, as rather targeted and politicized arenas where inclusion in these processes is a matter of selection (Lobkowitz, 1983). Daalder and Shils (1982) have also underlined that historically elite academic governance arrangements were processes more characterized by conflict than consensus, focusing more on the struggle for specific resources than legitimacy in general. Table 1 summarizes the main differences between the two perspectives.

**Table 1.** Two perspectives on the characteristics of strategic advisory boards.

	Elite academic	Collegial
Appointment	Selected	Elected
Agendas	Targeted	Open
Decision-making	Conflict	Consensus
Purpose	Distribution of resources	Legitimacy

The two perspectives should not be interpreted as necessarily mutually exclusive, and they may both be interpreted as typical examples of increased organizational complexity in knowledge organizations (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Following from this it may also be argued that strategic advisory bodies may be tools to tackle uncertainty concerning future strategic directions and priorities (Fumasoli et al., 2015), as a means to manage academic culture (Dill, 2012), or as a translation of how older forms of governance can fit in with expectations of how modern management should look like (Sahlin, 2012).

## Methodology

The data the current article builds upon was originally collected and analyzed for a study on how internationalization of higher education impacts the field of governance (Altbach et al., 2016), especially focusing on how international advisory councils have developed and function at universities in different countries. The study was conducted using grounded theory. Of the interviews undertaken, the main bulk of informants were members of various international advisory councils and boards (77%), although a small number of those interviewed were also institutional representatives responsible for appointing and organizing such entities (23%). For the current study, additional interviews with institutional representatives, including members of university leaderships and former university presidents/rectors, were undertaken to get a richer and more elaborate picture of the institutional motives for setting up strategic advisory boards.

## Instrument design

The semi-structured interview protocols used as part of this research were initially designed in close consultation with two members of strategic advisory bodies (the interview protocols employed are included in Altbach et al., 2016, pp. 21–22). However, consistent with a grounded theory instrument design and data collection approach (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000) the interview protocols were refined as new themes emerged as part of previous interviews – in line with the exploratory ambition of the current article.

## Data collection

Members of strategic advisory boards and representatives of institutions hosting them were initially identified from the information available online on the webpages of several universities that host such bodies. The set of strategic advisory boards identified initially was located in distinct countries and world regions. Individuals who were members of multiple strategic boards were first invited to participate in an interview. Additional participants were recruited through what is known as a snowball data collection method (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) – where existing informants are used to identify other informants. As the first two methods for participant recruitment resulted in an over-representation of male respondents from Western contexts, an additional search of female members of strategic boards as well as board members who originated from non-Western contexts was conducted. Recruitment of participants continued until data saturation was reached through interviews. About 70% of individuals invited to participate in this study

agreed to be interviewed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, via e-mail, through skype and other electronic media. In total, 28 interviews have been undertaken where the informants cover more than 25 unique boards at universities located in Russia, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and South America.

### ***Sample and participants***

Recruited informants matched the profile of members listed on available webpages of strategic boards, consistent with a purposive sampling approach, often employed in grounded theory studies (Morse, 2010). Most of the informants were male (72%), aged above 50 (84%), and with a significant over-representation from Western Europe and the US (72%). Their profile was a result of the fact that accomplished academics, Nobel Prize laureates and former university leaders – often from prestigious universities and retired – were recruited to serve on strategic boards. Because the population of strategic boards is unknown, it is not possible to assess how representative the sample of interviewees included in this study is. However, the sample of interviewees included in this study is reflective of documented gender, regional, and reputational disparities in higher education (Altbach et al., 2009). In order to preserve the anonymity of respondents, additional demographic information cannot be provided.

### ***Data analysis***

Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this process, after conducting a grounded theory initial coding process, the researchers identified several emerging themes from the data, using the framework of shadow governance, and conducted subsequent reviews to ensure the themes represent patterns strongly visible in the data.

### ***Researcher positionality***

Bjørn Stensaker and Georgiana Mihut were responsible for collecting and analyzing interview data. Thus, it is mainly their positionality that is relevant for the analytic approach of this study. Bjørn Stensaker is an established professor at a research-intensive European university, who has significant international experience both regarding research but also being involved in evaluations, boards, etc. This was helpful in gaining access to respondents. Georgiana Mihut was a PhD student at the time of data collection and thus somewhat of an outsider to both elite and collegial university governance processes. However, due to the affiliation of the study by Altbach et al. (2016) with the World Bank and the Boston College Center for International Higher Education, the study was able to attract a wide range of qualified participants who shared their experiences openly.

### ***Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability***

Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability are criteria commonly used to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Cope, 2014). In order to ensure

credibility, research findings have been shared with study participants in advance of publication to ensure that their views and experiences are reflected in the written findings. In addition, findings based on this data have been shared at an international gathering of university leaders and international experts to gather additional feedback. This study includes data collected at two points in time, using different participants. Findings from the two cohorts of interviewees were similar, indicating the dependability and transferability of the study. This paper uses rich quotes from participants to support key findings, thus ensuring the confirmability of the study.

### **Limitations**

Snowball recruitment techniques (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) have both strengths and weaknesses. As a strength, informants share similar experiences and the procedure represents a triangulation of observations of the same phenomenon. Its weaknesses are related to the potential selection skewness of informants. Qualitative approaches cannot support generalizable conclusions. As little research has been undertaken on the functioning of strategic advisory boards, qualitative approaches that employ snowball recruitment techniques are appropriate, despite their limitations.

## **Results**

### **Appointment**

For most of the strategic advisory boards examined in the current study, the appointment procedure is somewhat diffuse. Most members of the board have little exact knowledge of why they were appointed – although they acknowledge that their reputation and experience are key explanations (see also Altbach et al., 2016).

Although some of the strategic boards also had members with a business and policy background, the vast majority of members seem to have an academic background from the university sector. As underlined by one of the informants commenting about the background of fellow members of the board:

Well, it's a very mixed background. They were all, without exception they were all academics, presumably they were all distinguished in their fields.

This emphasis on having people with a strong academic background as members of the strategic advisory boards seems to be a deliberate strategy for many institutions. The argument is as one representative of a university with an established strategic advisory board explains:

Because we wanted to have people that are knowledgeable about higher education, and corporate normally know about corporate, and they bring a very valuable perspective, but in more detail strategic discussion we found that is often difficult to get a good assessment of what universities are all about, how they function, their markets, things like that. What you often get from corporate is some employment perceptions, a lot of corporate needs and basically the use of analogies between the corporate world and the higher education sector, and we did not want that.

The members of the strategic boards are as a general trend also not elected – they are selected by the university leadership, and appointed through a personal invitation, often directly coming from the rector/president of the university. When asked about how they as individuals have been found suitable for serving on the strategic advisory board, many informants acknowledge that their names have been put forward by existing members of the boards, or through existing academic networks they are part of. Key selection mechanisms for being appointed to a strategic advisory board thus include a strong CV, being a reputed academic, or belonging to the right academic networks.

For universities in smaller countries, the fact that many of the strategic advisory boards have a strong international presence seems to be due to a lack of expertise and independence by domestic researchers. As pointed out by an institutional representative from a European university:

... You do not want (name of citizens from the host country) on the board, you need international (presence) when you are in a small country.

To sum up, most of the strategic advisory boards examined in the current study can be characterized by their high degree of academic expertise and reputation, their deliberate selection, and their international background. The fact that most of the boards examined are not paying members any fees or honorarium suggests a strong collegial logic embedding these boards (Daalder & Shils, 1982).

### **Agendas**

When asked about what issues are on the agenda of the strategic advisory boards, most informants underline the heterogeneity of items discussed. As an informant serving on strategic advisory boards of several universities comments about issues on the agenda of board meetings:

Well, ... that was a wide range, but in general, in all cases it was the long term development and plans for each of the universities. Universities submitted their plans to the board and the board gave advice. In some instances there was advice sought on particular issues and projects that were important to the university.

Many informants suggest that they were often included in planning processes, especially concerning the development of strategic plans, and that the boards were far from discussing only internationalization issues – although having a high international profile. Several informants also suggest that the strategic advisory boards quite often raise their own agenda and have substantial influence on what issues are on the table. As one member of an advisory board in an East-European university points out, the board provided:

... Some advice that we thought it's important, not that they necessarily asked us for. And we talked among ourselves about how best to operate the committee. Unfortunately the committee has a weak chair. And for the purpose of the committee that is something to keep in mind, that the Chair of the committee is very important for the success of the committee. And the person that runs the committee from the university side is also very important and neither of them have been very effective.

Another member of a strategic advisory board also has rather critical perceptions of the ways agendas are identified and carried out in practice:

... In my experience, mostly you come to the meetings, you get your reports for the meeting before the meeting, you discuss at the meeting, and then you wait until the next round, which I found as very ineffective.

The statements above hints to some classical characteristics of collegial processes, where poor or absent leadership, loose agendas and poor internal discipline and structure for the discussions undertaken are not uncommon (Clark, 1983; De Boer & Stensaker, 2007).

However, in most cases reported upon, the agenda of the strategic advisory boards seems to be laid as in an interactive fashion, where there are `negotiations` taking place about what issues should be discussed at what length. Several members of the boards examined suggest that this loosely organized process is important for the universities as well because the discussions:

... Serves as an independent piece of evidence. The president will never come in and say `I need your help to fight the Ministry`, but when we agree, they can use that. Sometimes they can also use that internally in changes.

Hence, as underlined by this experienced board member, the strategic advisory boards enjoy some `independence` despite ambitions the institutional leadership may have to use the board in a more instrumental fashion. This may be a reason why discussions within the boards may be unstructured and somewhat fragmented. The boards seem to be given the space to end up with their own conclusions – without these conclusions being spelled out in detail beforehand.

### **Decision-making**

The collegial characteristics of the strategic advisory boards tend to characterize also the decision-making processes in the boards. The normal approach is that decisions on what advice to give are taken in consensus by all members. None of the informants actually mentions any conflicts that have arisen inside the boards even if they not always meet for a very long time. As one of the informants having several experiences as board member recalls:

I do not remember any conflict on either board. Usually there was a consensus reached very easily. Even in difficult problems.

Other informants with broad board experience have similar views:

People tend to agree and not really having intensive conflict in discussions in advisory boards. That is also because there is no clear decision to be made. It's the university reporting on issues and then ask for opinions, and then you get a free flow of ideas. It's not a very decision making process, it's more of an exchange of views.

The latter quote may explain why strategic advisory boards may rather easily reach agreement – they are not ultimately responsible for the consequences of any decision taken, which rests with the formalized governance structure of the universities they are serving. At the same time may board consensus also be triggered by the underlying values, norms and attitudes held among board members? As one informant suggests:

I think that (name of board) carries a certain number of values that I feel very committed to and so that is also the reason why I want to take part.

It should be underlined, however, that the written statements and summaries after board meetings are normally delegated to a secretariat, or to the chairman of the board, and that having a limited number of people to formulate any decisions taken or advice given may be easier when relatively few are involved.

### **Purpose**

While a number of informants suggest that strategic advisory boards may have been established for branding/profiling purposes, not least toward external stakeholders and in a more international perspective, the fact that many boards are involved in commenting and advising on the development of strategic plans in various universities may suggest that their purpose is quite broad – ranging from quality assurance, to research priorities, to hiring policies. However, the underlying logic – as suggested by one informant is often to add internal legitimacy to whatever issue that is on the agenda:

... They are also working on the new strategic plan, so our contribution was to give input on that. In (name of country) last time (the meeting) was about digitization policy of the university, a year before it was about multi-disciplinary research.

It is very rare that boards are created for a single purpose, although an example can be identified in our sample of a university establishing a strategic advisory board for examining an existing strategic plan and dissolving the board after the job was done. However, even in this case the purpose of the board was not related to branding or profiling, but to provide internal legitimacy to what the university considered to be an important process.

The internal purposes of strategic advisory boards may be different though, in different cultural contexts. For example, a number of European universities seem to prefer using the boards more instrumentally in their internal governance process as clearly indicated by the following quote:

It helps the decision making of the leadership if the leadership can say that the advisory board has advised us to do this, that or the other thing, so it is in a sense a legitimating operation.

At the same time, might universities in other parts of the world, perhaps with few Western European university traditions, want to use strategic advisory boards to introduce a more collegial style of governance – as suggested by another informant having experience from strategic advisory boards in various regions in the world:

In both cases (names of boards) is particularly helpful in making individuals understand what high quality academic governance is. There are really two key issues: one is the lack of academic freedom and the other is no real conception of shared governance.

To sum up, there is a rather unified agreement among the informants that strategic advisory boards are important, and that – if they are established – tend to crave attention and to be taken seriously. One of the informants – a president of an Asian

university – thus argued that this was the main reason why he has not chosen to establish a strategic advisory board at his own university:

Several years ago I was talking to my senior management, because I serve on these other ones, so we debated this. Frankly, we decided the following. The first reason is this: it takes a lot of work. It's not just that they come once a year for two days: you have to prepare for them, you have to organize the travel - that is actually easy - the staff can do that. When you ask for their advice, you'd better listen to some of it, otherwise they would not come. It sort of ties you, so you have to be ready, to be prepared to receive advice . . . (otherwise) . . . they will say 'why waste my time'.

Interestingly, the latter quote also hints toward a reciprocal relationship between the strategic advisory boards and the universities that establish them. While the universities may create them and organize much of their work, they still have considerable autonomy and significance – even with limited formal powers.

## Discussion

The aim of the current paper is to explore and provide knowledge as to how we could interpret the emergence of strategic advisory bodies in universities in a number of countries. While it indeed is possible to label this development as a sort of internationalization of governance (Altbach et al., 2016), the current paper argued that their establishment could also be interpreted as a re-introduction of a collegial element in universities exposed to a number of reforms resulting in more streamlined and managerial governance structures (Ramirez, 2006).

In this, the two sets of ideal expectations that have been developed in the conceptual section of this paper were not identified in the empirical material, but instead we observed a hybrid of the two. Thus, our findings suggest that current practices are a mix between more historical elite academic governance and newer more collegial governance structures (Daalder & Shils, 1982; De Boer & Stensaker, 2007) – see Table 2.

Our findings clearly indicate that membership of these boards is not open to everyone, and that there is a closely monitored selection process handled by the institutional leadership. Key selection criteria seem to be related to managerial experience (academic and/or administrative), reputation and international standing. This selection process may fit well with the ideas of universities becoming more rationalized and where the managerial influence is becoming stronger (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Seeber et al., 2015). In this perspective, historical elite governance arrangements are being used as a form of coping mechanism by the institutional leadership (cf. Teelken, 2015). In a way, having more control over the composition of the strategic advisory boards further strengthens

**Table 2.** Central themes emerging from the interviews.

	Themes emerging from the interviews
Appointment	Pro-active approaches, looking for 'excellence', international expertise in high demand
Agendas	Open agendas, possibility for individual initiatives, examples of both unstructured discussions and focused work
Decision-making	Low level of conflict, joint values among members, agreement on the role of the strategic advisory board
Purpose	Balancing strategic ambitions, trust, and support of academic staff; 'cultural negotiators'

the university leadership and thus fits well into a rationalized organization that is governed by strong leaders instead of collegial bottom-up processes (Ramirez, 2006). Moreover, having control over the selection process allows the leadership of universities to compose the advisory board in a way that provides sufficient external prestige due to the status of the members, while at the same time preventing a composition that could act too much in opposition to the leadership.

However, in a number of other dimensions, more collegial characteristics come to the fore (see Table 3); the strategic advisory bodies tend to have quite negotiated agendas regarding the issues discussed. While some boards had targeted agendas, informants suggested that new issues and items could be introduced as well. Furthermore, strategic advisory boards are mainly characterized by consensus in their decision-making, and legitimacy seems to be a key purpose. Hence, while the members of the strategic advisory boards may indeed be hand-picked by the institutional leadership, these bodies seem to enjoy and/or gain some autonomy in their operations – suggesting that they are not purely instrumental tools easily manipulated by the institutional leadership (cf. Chapman, 1983). This highlights the interdependent relationship between the leadership and the strategic advisory boards. As the leadership depends on the legitimacy and prestige provided through the members of the board, they cannot totally ignore their advice and thus once board members have been selected they can exert a certain amount of pressure on the leadership without having formal competences or power. This relation is similar to debates about the living autonomy of universities in which the difference between formal autonomy from state bodies and day-to-day experienced autonomy is highlighted as an important analytical lens to understand the functioning of governance arrangements beyond their structural embedding (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2017).

The latter point brings us back to the metaphor of the shadow (Gherardi et al., 2017), and how we should understand shadow governance. Apparently, as many universities are more than willing and even eager to showcase their strategic advisory boards, their existence is far from hidden from the rest of the university or the environment. To the contrary, given the legitimacy and prestige that well-staffed advisory boards can provide, universities are more likely to openly advocate these structures even though they are not part of their formal governance arrangements. Most of our informants also underline that their decisions/advice provided to the universities are used extensively for legitimizing formal decisions made by the university leadership. Still, while the decisions are on public display, the deliberations within strategic boards, similar to the selection processes and criteria of its members, seem far less transparent and thus more in the shadows. The fact that strategic advisory bodies seem to enjoy certain autonomy also suggests that they might have an important function as a provider of important knowledge and advice in a formalized governance structure besides the legitimacy and prestige

**Table 3.** The positioning of strategic advisory boards (SABs) related to the theoretical expectations.

	Elite academic	Collegial	SABs
Appointment	Selected	Elected	Selected
Agendas	Targeted	Open	Mixed
Decision-making	Conflict	Consensus	Consensus
Purpose	Distribution of resources	Legitimacy	Legitimacy

that they offer. In a world characterized by uncertainty, having handpicked, experienced and expert knowledge to draw upon may provide the institutional leadership with ideas of both how and what to prioritize (cf. Fumasoli et al., 2015). Moreover, as strategic advisory boards do not have to consider the implementation of their suggestions, they are in a position to make bolder propositions to the leadership, which in turn can provide the leadership with the legitimacy to embark on more far-reaching reforms. Similar dynamics have been observed in studies that investigated how universities use consultants, which highlighted the role of these actors in providing legitimacy to decision or helping to cope with uncertainties (Seidenschneur & Krücken, 2019).

In addition, while strategic advisory boards share many of the characteristics linked to collegial bodies, the way their members are selected prevents them from making rationalized university governance more democratic as this would demand that the members are elected from the different groups within the university and not handpicked by the leadership (Olsen, 2007). At the same time, these bodies can provide more internal legitimacy to leadership decisions as the leadership can claim that they consulted with highly ranked academics. This might also explain why strategic advisory boards are used in less democratic environments as a tool to not only gather the legitimacy and prestige of world-renowned experts but also create the allure of democratic decision-making without having real democratic governance arrangements.

Therefore, one could label the form of governance introduced through advisory boards as a sort of *controlled collegiality* – having a number of policy implications. While the leadership acts as a gatekeeper controlling access to the board, once members are nominated the power relation becomes more equal, especially since the agenda-setting is happening in an open way and the university as well as the leadership depend on the legitimacy that the board provides. Given that academic prestige is still a key factor in nominating members to these boards, the leadership cannot simply push members aside, resulting in more classical forms of academic collegial governance interactions. A possible implication is that the institutional governance of higher education institutions could become more complex if strategic advisory boards are established.

As such, the metaphor of shadow governance could have two opposite meanings. First, strategic advisory boards may be interpreted as older historical governance forms infusing the modernized university, although not in a formalized fashion – only in the shadow of existing governance arrangements. In this sense, one could argue that strategic advisory bodies are examples of a translation between the old and new governance models in higher education (Sahlin, 2012), and as a reinvention of older forms of ‘managing the academic culture’ (Dill, 2012). Second, in an era where ‘excellence’ and ‘competition’ is at the forefront of policy agendas in many countries, strategic advisory boards could also be interpreted as an example of how the formalized university is increasingly impacting informal governance structures where ‘elitist’ governance arrangements are developing in the shadow of formalized stakeholder governance arrangements. Interestingly, such ‘elitist’ governance structures were one of the key issues paving the way for the representative democracy movement in universities in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapman, 1983; De Boer & Stensaker, 2007), hinting at how modernization of governance is also historically embedded.

For those in the realm of policy-making, the current study may highlight both problems and potentials. The problem relates to the fact that shadow governance

arrangements such as strategic advisory boards may develop into arenas of institutional resistance and resilience toward external reform attempts imposed at universities (see also Teelken, 2015). Institutional strategic advisory boards offer high-level interpretations of challenges and recommendations that may or may not be in line with current national and institutional policies. The potential relates to the fact that such strategic advisory boards are challenging to control even by the institutional leadership, making them into an opportunity for external influence. The fact that strategic advisory boards have a membership consisting not only of reputed academics, but also people having managerial and leadership experience from various settings, could offer possibilities for cooptation also from the outside (Bleiklie et al., 2015). As such, policy-makers could take an active stance toward strategic advisory boards encourage their initiation while also suggesting criteria for membership and expertise to be represented. In this way, many strategic advisory bodies become instruments for a softer and more legitimate introduction of external demands and expectations into the core of higher education institutions.

Obviously, this study has limitations making it impossible to provide answers to the scenarios suggested above. Still, the scenarios do suggest that strategic advisory boards are an interesting phenomenon requiring further studies. While this article offers a first conceptualization of the role of advisory boards as well as an initial empirical snapshot of the way they operate, follow up research that maps advisory boards and their use by university leaderships around the world in a more encompassing fashion, e.g., through a larger survey, would be possible avenues to pursue. This would also allow an investigation into potential interactions between this new instrument for governance and local governance arrangements or politico-administrative systems (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2013), which might be the root for regional variations.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Prof. Philip Altbach and Dr. Jamil Salmi and the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College for allowing data access and enabling the current study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Dr. Bjørn Stensaker* is a Professor of Higher Education at the University of Oslo. He has a special interest in studies of governance, reform and organizational change in higher education, and has published widely on these issues in a range of international journals.

*Dr. Jens Jungblut* is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo. His main research interests include party politics, policy-making, and public governance in the knowledge policy domain (higher education & research), organizational change in higher education, and the role of (academic) expertise in policy advice.

*Dr. Georgiana Mihut* is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Economic and Social Research Institute, Ireland. Her research has been published by Studies in Higher Education, Teachers

College Record, and the International Journal of Inclusive Education. She held appointments with multiple organizations, including the Boston College Centre for International Higher Education, the World Bank, and the American Council on Education.

## ORCID

Jens Jungblut  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8231-5361>

## References

- Altbach, P., Mihut, G., Salmi, J. (2016). *Sage advice: International advisory councils at tertiary education institutions*. Center for International Higher Education and World Bank. [https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cihe/pubs/CIHE%20Perspective/CIHE\\_Perspectives\\_No1.pdf](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cihe/pubs/CIHE%20Perspective/CIHE_Perspectives_No1.pdf)
- Altbach, P., Reisberg, L., & Rumbley, L. (2009). *Trends in global higher education. Tracking an academic revolution*. UNESCO.
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social Research Update*, 33, 1–4. <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.PDF>
- Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., & Leppori, B. (2015). Organizations as penetrated hierarchies: Environmental pressures and control in professional organizations. *Organization Studies*, 36(7), 873–896. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840615571960>
- Bleiklie, I., & Michelsen, S. (2013). Comparing HE policies in Europe. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9584-6>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brunsson, N., & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (2000). Constructing organizations: The example of public sector reform. *Organization Studies*, 21(4), 721–746. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840600214003>
- Capano, G. (2011). Government continues to do its job. A comparative study of governance shifts in the higher education sector. *Public Administration*, 89(4), 1622–1642. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2011.01936.x>
- Chapman, J. W. (ed.). (1983). *The western university on trial*. University of California press.
- Christensen, T. (2011). University governance reforms: Potential problems of more autonomy? *Higher Education*, 62(4), 503–517. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9401-z>
- Christensen, T., Gornitzka, Å., & Ramirez, F. O. (2019). *Universities as agencies. Reputation and professionalization*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. University of California Press.
- Cope, D. G. (2014). Methods and meanings: Credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41(1), 89–91. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.89-91>
- Daalder, H., & Shils, E. (eds.). (1982). *Universities, politicians, and bureaucrats: Europe and the United States*. Cambridge University Press.
- De Boer, H., Enders, J., & Leisyte, L. (2007). Public sector reform in Dutch higher education: The organizational transformation of the university. *Public Administration*, 85(1), 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2007.00632.x>
- de Boer, H., & Stensaker, B. (2007). An internal representative system: The democratic vision. In P. Maassen & J. P. Olsen (Eds.), *University Dynamics and European Integration* (pp. 99–118). Springer.
- Dill, D. D. (2012). The management of academic culture revisited: Integrating universities in an entrepreneurial age. In B. Stensaker, J. Välimaa, & C. Sarrico (Eds.), *Managing reform in universities. The dynamics of culture, identity and organizational change* (pp. 222–237). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Djelic, M.-L., & Quack, S. (2018). Globalization and business regulation. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 44(1), 123–143. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053532>
- Djelic, M.-L., & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (Eds.). (2006). *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Enders, J., De Boer, H., & Weyer, E. (2013). Regulatory autonomy and performance: The reform of higher education re-visited. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9578-4>
- Frølich, N., Christensen, T., & Stensaker, B. (2018). Strengthening the strategic capacity of public universities: The role of internal governance models. *Public Policy and Administration*, 34(4), 475–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076718762041>
- Fumasoli, T., Pinheiro, R., & Stensaker, B. (2015). Handling uncertainty of strategic ambitions. The use of organizational identity as a risk-reducing device. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 38(13–14), 1030–1040. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2014.988868>
- Fumasoli, T., & Stensaker, B. (2013). Organizational studies in higher education: A reflection on historical themes and prospective trends. *Higher Education Policy*, 26(4), 479–496. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2013.25>
- Gherardi, S., Jensen, K., & Nerland, M. (2017). Shadow organizing: A metaphor to explore organizing as intra-relating. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 12(1), 2–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-06-2016-1385>
- Gornitzka, Å., & Maassen, P. (2017). European Flagship universities: Autonomy and change. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 231–238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12130>
- Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & De Boer, H. (2017). Change in university governance structures in continental Europe. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 274–289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12127>
- Jensen, K. (2018). The role of shadow organizing in dealing with knowledge overflows and tensions. In P. Maassen, M. Nerland, & L. Yates (Eds.), *Reconfiguring knowledge and knowledge policies for the purpose of higher education* (pp. 97–111). Springer.
- Jensen, K., Fumasoli, T., & Stensaker, B. (2020). Shadow organising: Emerging stakeholder collaboration in higher education to enhance quality. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(3), 365–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1541975>
- Kraatz, M. S., & Block, E. S. (2008). Organizational implications of institutional pluralism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 243–276). Sage Publications.
- Krücken, G., & Meier, F. (2006). Turning the university into an organizational actor. In G. Drori, J. Meyer, & H. Hwang (Eds.), *Globalization and organization: World society and organizational change* (pp. 241–257). Oxford University Press.
- Lobkowitz, N. (1983). Man, pursuit of truth, and the university. In J. W. Chapman (Ed.), *The western university on trial* (pp. 27–38). University of California press.
- Maassen, P., Gornitzka, Å., & Fumasoli, T. (2017). University reform and institutional autonomy: A framework for analysing the living autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 239–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12129>
- Maassen, P., & Stensaker, B. (2011). The knowledge triangle, European higher education policy logics and policy implications. *Higher Education*, 61(6), 757–769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9360-4>
- Morse, J. M. (2010). Sampling in grounded theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 229–244). Sage.
- Nordhaug, O. (1991). *The shadow education system. Adult resource development*. Norwegian University Press.
- Olsen, J. P. (2007). The Institutional Dynamics of the European University. In P. Maassen & J. P. Olsen (Eds.), *University Dynamics and European Integration* (Vol. 19, pp. 25–54). Springer.
- Ramirez, F. O. (2006). The rationalization of the university. In M.-L. Djelic & K. Sahlin-Andersson (Eds.), *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation* (pp. 225–246). Cambridge University Press.

- Ramirez, F. O., & Christensen, T. (2013). The formalization of the university: Rules, roots, and route. *Higher Education*, 65(6), 695–708. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9571-y>
- Sahlin, K. (2012). The interplay of organizational models in higher education: What room is there for collegiality in universities characterized by bounded autonomy? In B. Stensaker, J. Välimaa, & C. Sarrico (Eds.), *Managing reform in universities. The dynamics of culture, identity and organizational change* (pp. 198–221). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Seeber, M., Lepori, B., Montauti, M., Enders, J., De Boer, H., Weyer, E., Bleiklie, I., Hope, K., Michelsen, S., Mathisen, G. N., Frølich, N., Scordato, L., Stensaker, B., Waagene, E., Dragsic, Z., Kretek, P., Krücken, G., Magalhães, A., Ribeiro, F. M., Sousa, S., . . . Reale, E. (2015). European Universities as complete organizations? Understanding identity, hierarchy and rationality in public organizations. *Public Management Review*, 17(10), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2014.943268>
- Seidenschnur, T., & Krücken, G. (2019). Constructing the consultant as a legitimate actor: The role of active clients in universities. In H. Hwang, J. Colyvas, & G. Drori (Eds.), *Agents, actors, actorhood: Institutional perspectives on the nature of agency, action, and authority* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 58, pp. 111–133). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Stensaker, B., & Vabø, A. (2013). Re-inventing shared governance: Implications for organisational culture and institutional leadership. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 67(3), 256–274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12019>
- Teelken, C. (2015). Hybridity, coping mechanisms, and academic performance management: Comparing three countries. *Public Administration*, 93(2), 307–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12138>
- Wimpenny, P., & Gass, J. (2000). Interviewing in phenomenology and grounded theory: Is there a difference? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31(6), 1485–1492. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01431.x>