"You're in the wrong seat": Exploring perceptions of power dynamics among student governors

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Agenda

- How did we get where we are?
- Scope of study
- Key findings
    - Power is core to decision-making
    - Play by the rules to succeed in the game
    - Who you know is as important as what you know
- Recommendations for future practice
- Conclusion

How did we get where we are?

12th Century

Medieval universities establish student involvement in governance

1960s/70s

Student revolts across Europe lead the charge for more democratic approaches to governance

2001

Student participation established within the Prague Communiqué two years after the Bologna Declaration

Present

Student participation written into the governance of most UK and Irish higher education institutions

Klemencic, 2012

Contemporary challenges in student engagement

- Move towards a managerial approach to governance as part of the neoliberalisation of higher education (Boland, 2005; Klemencic, 2012; Shattock, 2012)
- Deeper engagement of students requires the acknowledgment and shifting of power (Planas et al., 2013)
- Limited understanding of student governor role (Ireland et al., 2021)
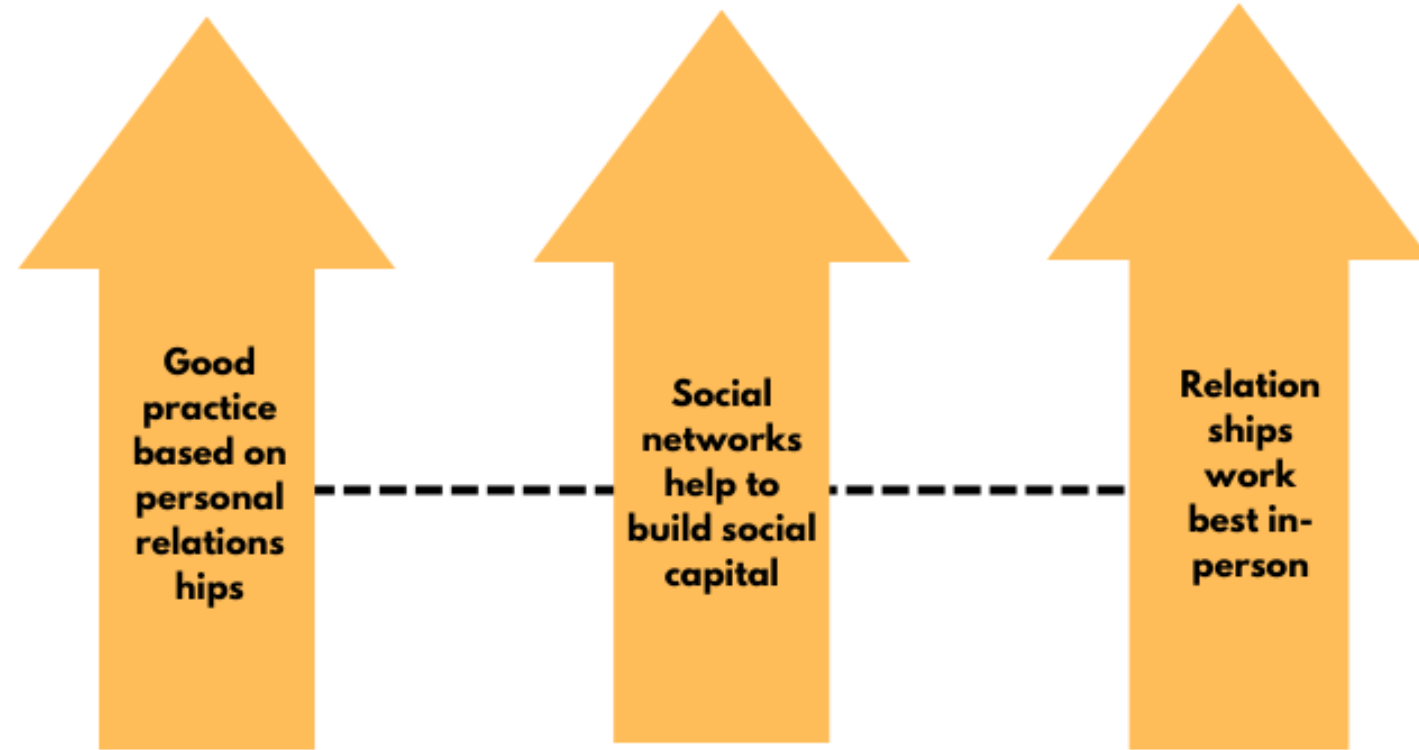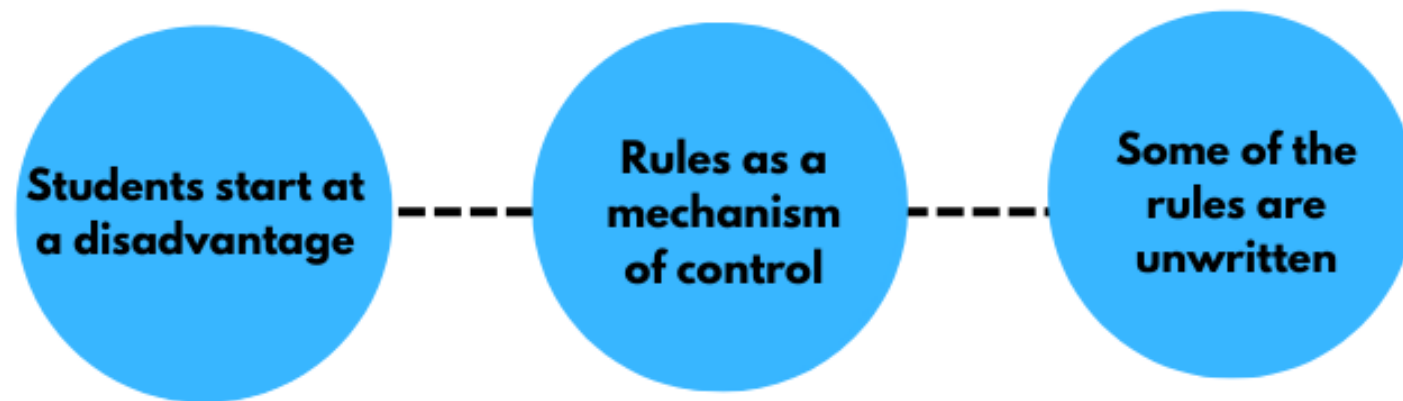- Move to online decision-making (Hazelkorne & Locke, 2020)

Scope of Research

Semi-structured interviews with 14 current and former student governors:

- **Location:**
  - **Ireland - 8**
  - **UK - 6**
- **Institution type:**
  - **Ancient - 3**
  - **Multi-Campus - 4**
  - **Research Intensive -3**
  - **Small/Specialist - 4**
- **Meeting mode:**
  - **6 In-Person**
  - **3 online**
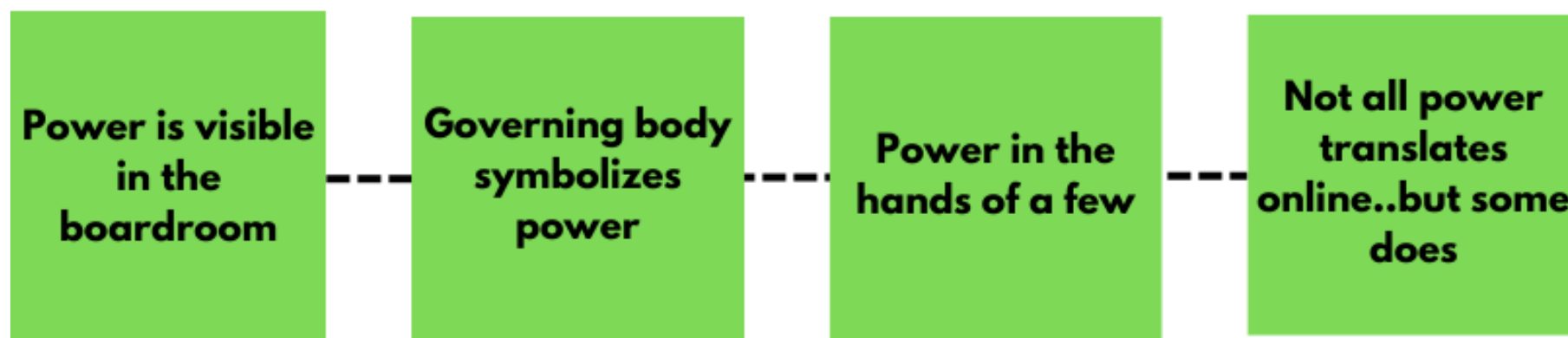 - **5 both**
- **Interviews conducted in June 2022 via MS Teams**

Key Findings

Good practice based on personal relationships

Social networks help to build social capital

Relationships work best in-person

Who you know is as important as what you know

Students start at a disadvantage

Rules as a mechanism of control

Some of the rules are unwritten

Play by the rules to succeed in the game

Power is visible in the boardroom

Governing body symbolizes power

Power in the hands of a few

Not all power translates online..but some does

Power is core to decision making

Power is core to decision-making

- Power is central to governance and determines who holds influence within the governing body (Bourdieu, 1986 and 2005).
- Greater influence is exerted by those whose experience is better aligned to the corporate environment :

> *"You sit around the table with all these corporate people and you're just a new graduate and they're all talking about different things and money and all sorts of carry on. And you know you can say so much and then you could be outvoted anyway"*

Power in the hands of a few

- The chair holds significant power and influences the power exerted by others (Bourdieu, 1986; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995).
- Senior management also hold considerable sway within governing body (Boland, 2005; Shattock, 2012).

"We would have believed, anyways, that the floor or the priority should be given to the student voice to talk about a particular topic. That wasn't always the case."

- Student relationships with the chair and senior management determines how the student voice is heard within meetings (Ireland et al., 2021).

Governing body as symbol of power

- Students are afforded symbolic capital from their membership of governing body:

"I have this level of authority and I think I gained a level of respect from internals".

- The ability to influence huge decisions that can benefit their peers empowers student governors (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009)
- Governing body however can be tokenistic (Carey, 2018) and can feel removed from the lived reality of students.

Power is visible in the boardroom

- Boardrooms often reflect the importance of meetings through their physical features - this can be exclusionary for those from marginalised groups (Betts, 2006):

"I'm not sure whether that would be the case for somebody, who, you know wasn't a straight white CIS man".

- The formality of the space limits breakout conversations and increases competition to be heard.
- It also disadvantages students who haven't previously experienced formal environments (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995).

Not all forms of power translate online...but some do

- The shift to online meetings (Spataro, 2020) would have been expected to disrupt existing power dynamics and it did remove the physical aspect of power.

"I felt like I was way better as a representative, like even regards to giving presentations all the time on the student voice. If that was in person, I wouldn't have delivered as strong".

- Access to additional information and meeting chat helped to empower student reps (Punchera, 2021)
- Online meetings re-emphasised turn-taking behaviour which made it harder to judge when to come in.

Play by the rules to succeed in the game

- Governing body functions like a game where all governors are competing for influence (Pettigrew and McNulty, 1995).
- An individual's feel for the game and understanding of the rules is driven by their background (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001; Corsun & Costen, 2001)
- Training offers an opportunity to address the knowledge deficit of students but approaches vary:

    "There was no induction, there was no training. At the board away day, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor took pity on me and drew a very nice diagram of who everyone in the room was and I kept it until the day I left"

Some of the rules are unwritten

- Students are often not supported to understand and adapt to the rules (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013)
- Students with previous rep experience rely heavily on this experience (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005).
- The student rep role is rarely define so student governors see success as conforming to the formal behaviour they observe other governors exhibiting:

"I wouldn't struggle as much with the language because I would kind of use formal language anyway".

- Many students were never taught how to add things to the agenda

Rules as a mechanism of control

- The emphasis on unwritten rules raises questions about whether this is intentional to control the influence students can exert (Canning, 2017; Carey, 2018)
- One student participant unwittingly approved a fee increase due to the misleading way it had been presented in the papers.
- Others presented examples of how their ideas for enhancing student engagement in governing body were dismissed:

"I had a list of ideas I wanted to do, and I went and sat down with the board clerk and he basically just ran through and told me how each of them wasn't achievable"

Students start at a disadvantage

- Many students felt that their voices were 'nice to have' but not as fundamental as their lay peers: *"I think there was an element of these are all the creme de la creme or the most important people and that the student input was nice"*

- This suggests that governing body failed to recognise the expertise of students (Hunt, 2021) or places greater value on lay expertise (Shattock, 2012)
- The use of technical language and focus on high-level financial discussions further stifles student input.
- Term limits further disadvantage students.

Who you know is as important as what you know

- Decision-making doesn't always take place in the governing body itself - it's a mixture of formal and informal engagement (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999)
- The interactions governors have outside of the formal meeting often drive the decisions they make within the meeting (Mirivel & Tracey, 2005).
- This places an onus for students to develop meaningful relationships with their fellow governors.

Building networks is the key to success

- Students who successfully build allies within the governing body are able to lend upon their support within meetings:

"You will always have your allies and there were always people who would have been sympathetic to the students...their voices were loud and heard".

- It made a difference when students developed relationships with more prominent voices (Mathisen et al., 2013). Students often held more in common with others in the lower end of the hierarchy.

- Building relationships out of meetings was often akin to 'making deals' to get what they wanted.

Experience dependent on personal relationships

- A student's experience on governing body often depended on their ability to build relationships with the fellow governors, and the institution:

  "We were lucky that they [the College Secretary] got on well with the Students' Union...they were the gateway to the Vice-Chancellor anyway."

- There is an overreliance on personal relationships to underpin good practice, which is threatened by the high turnover of students (Hunt, 2021).
- A change in governing body chair can influence how students are heard within meetings - indicating lack of institution-wide strategy.

Relationships work better in-person

- In-person meetings more naturally support relationship building through coffee breaks and pre/post meeting lunches (Mirivel & Tracey, 2010; Punchera, 2021).
- By contrast, those who only attended online felt they never got to know their fellow governors:

"I never had the one-on-one informal conversations that you would have before a meeting or if I didn't understand something, I didn't have the opportunity to catch a staff member one on one which I think is much easier in-person."

- Some students describe online meetings as more formal, lessening the opportunity to build networks and alliances.
- Body language is tricker to read online.

Recommendations for future practice

Further Study:

- The disproportionate impact of power on marginalised students

Practice:

- Reframing expertise within the boardroom - training, practice.
- Training for students - sector-wide and institutional.
- Drawing social capital through mentoring.
- Governing body as one element of institution-wide student engagement strategy.
- Critically examine existing practice with a focus on manifestation of power

Conclusion

- Power is largely implicit within governance structures but there is a need to acknowledge its existence and aim to better distribute that power.
- Power is not unique to online or in-person meetings but is perceived differently dependent on the format of the meeting.
- In order to get the most out of student governors, there is a need to explictly recognise the strengths and unique expertise that they bring and seek to emphasise this rather than any perceived deficits.

"Who better to design the university of tomorrow than the students of today?"

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