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Abstract

This article reviews changes in British university governance over a period of nearly a century. During this time there have been considerable changes in the way universities have distributed authority in governance although the legal frameworks, statutory and legislative, have remained largely unchanged. The article shows that there were distinct phases in the internal balances within governance structures and relates these to external pressures, mostly state driven. Critics of current trends in university governance tend to look back to a utopian traditional model but the evidence suggests that the internal balances were always to a considerable extent contingent on external conditions and fluctuated accordingly. There is no evidence that while the state applied pressure for change in various aspects of governance it substantially intervened to impose constitutional changes except in respect to the Higher Education corporation (HEC) structure for the former polytechnics in 1988 and that, in its most managerial details, was in response to demands from the polytechnic directors themselves. The changes in how authority is distributed were therefore decided by the

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institutions themselves albeit in response to external pressures. But the article suggests that institutions' responses were variable and that where a strong research culture existed the accumulation of social capital was such that radical changes in the distribution of authority were resisted. One consequence is that there is now much greater diversity in institutional governance structures with some pre-1992 universities leaning much more towards HEC models, some HECs edging towards more traditional models and some institutions preserving significant elements of authority which others would regard as utopian. In Britain, reputation, research success and brand image are closely associated with the latter. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)