**Governance in UK Students’ Unions: A Stewardship Perspective**

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**Introduction:**

Against a backdrop of legislative and regulatory change in the mid 2000’s and a focus of the media on negative tales of no-platforming, poor leadership and toxic environments, the good governance of students’ unions is of great importance. With a lack of research into students’ unions generally and even fewer studies focused specifically on their governance, this research investigates the roles of trustee board members within students’ unions, as registered charities. The research uncovers a unique governance structure, related to other types of charities, with an intertwined set of reliance relationships between trustees themselves and with their senior staff members, to enable trustees to perform their roles.

Despite the inclusion of students’ unions within almost all higher education institutions in the UK, there is a lack of understanding of them from an academic research point of view, particularly regarding their role and structure (Day and Dickinson, 2018). Changes in students’ union status, structure and subsequent governance requirements, from exempt bodies to full charities following the Charities Act (2006), heighten the focus on and importance of good governance of students’ unions.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the roles of trustee board members within students’ unions and the relationships between actors within their organisational structures. The research objectives are:

RO1: To analyse the prescribed role of trustee board members.

RO2: To evaluate the perceived role of board trustees and their colleagues.

RO3: To compare the prescribed and perceived or actual roles of trustees to role performance.

RO4: To assess the relationships between the actors associated with students’ union governance, interpreting whether SU governance is an individual or collective activity.

**Background Information:**

Although the UK Further and Higher Education systems comprise over 700 students’ unions, of which approximately 160 of them are in HE institutions (NUS, 2021), relatively little is known in relation to them from a research context. Day and Dickinson (2018), Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015) and Scorah (2021) all attest there is scant research available, despite the importance placed on students’ unions and their role in providing students in UK institutions with an impartial voice (HEFCCW, 2014; QAA, 2018).

Furthermore, within the wider charitable sector, various authors have noted the lack of research into specific types of charitable organisations (Velayutham, 2013); the specific roles of charity trustees (Cumberland et al, 2015); the lack inductive, qualitative research within non-profit governance literature (Tacon, Waters and Cornforth, 2017); and a deficiency of charity research utilising Stewardship Theory as a theoretical lens (Nordberg, 2021; Rouault and Albertini, 2022).

The authors previously mentioned affirm the importance of good governance practices within non-profit organisations, to avoid issues and ensure the transparent and accountable practices of non-profits in delivering effective support and services to their users and beneficiaries. In addressing these calls, the inductive, qualitative research conducted within this paper seeks to fill the gap in research and literature.

Extant literature related to non-profit and charity governance indicates multiple roles required of boards and their trustees (for example, leadership, accountability, compliance, representation and managerial roles), in addition to various challenges and conflicts prevalent in the organisations (such as lack of understand of role or skills to perform said roles, multiple priorities, approval role, time commitment and staff/trustee tensions). These multiple roles and related challenges can lead to poor governance and ineffective or inefficient organisations. Often, the prescribed roles required by legislation or internal constitutions are not those performed by trustees.

In seeking to address these tensions and challenges, Cornforth (2015) proposed the ‘Eternal Triangle’ relationship model between the CEO, board chair and board members of non-profit organisations. In this model, it is fundamentally the relationship between the CEO and board chair in building mutual trust relationships between the two and subsequently between board members and these two actors, which ensure good governance. The research within this paper addresses the roles, challenges and relationships within the context of students’ unions, building a stewardship model of governance.

**Research Approach:**

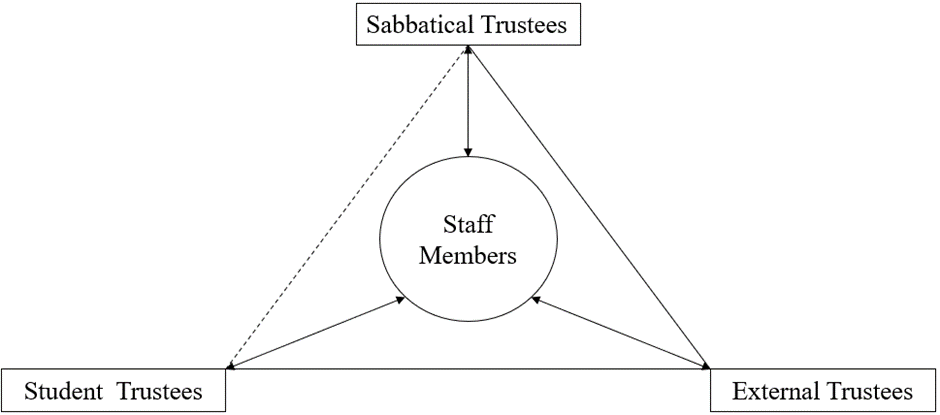
Adopting a multiple case study approach, this inductive, qualitative investigation uses documentary analysis, along with semi-structured interviews and focus groups with three different categories of trustee board members and their senior staff members within the three case study students’ unions based in higher education institutions across Wales.

Documentary analysis of regulatory and legislative literature, along with internal articles of association of each organisation provided the prescribed roles of trustee board members, with interviews and focus groups uncovering the perceived roles of actors, in addition to the relationships between them.

**Discussion:**

Students’ union governance and their structures are unique within non-profit organisations. Requirements of the Education Act (1994) mean that sabbatical officers of SU’s (who are also trustees of them) are only able to serve a one-year term of office before having to be re-elected and can only stand for a maximum of two years. Additionally, student trustees can only sit as board members whilst being a student at their institutions, meaning the majority of trustee board members of SU’s are serving a short tenure on their boards, unlike other non-profits.

The short tenure, coupled with a lack of experience or knowledge of their roles can create problems within governance. Within the participating organisations, to ensure that governance activities are performed, the senior staff member of each organisation is heavily involved in support, advisory and ‘safety-net’ functions to the board trustees. In contrast to wider non-profit research, this involvement and relationship with the board is seen as an overwhelmingly positive interjection which is crucial to the good operation and governance of the SU’s. In relation to Cornforth’s (2015) model of the ‘Eternal Triangle’, this research developed the model to provide a Framework of Dynamic Students’ Union Governance (see below) which puts the senior staff member in the centre of the relationship between different categories of trustees.



The central staff members roles increase or decrease, depending on the skills, knowledge and experience of the trustees. The different categories of trustee are also reliant on each other for various aspects of their board role. The model indicates a ‘Stewardship’ relationship between actors, with shared goals and objectives.

**Conclusions/Implications:**

The findings of this research show a unique structure of non-profit governance which is reliant on the involvement of staff members to ensure good governance and effective operation of the organisations. Due to the limited tenure of the majority of students’ union trustees, coupled with their lack of experience and knowledge of the roles, positive relationships between trustees and the staff members are essential. In contrast to previous research, which outlined conflict between staff and trustees, this research showed staff members are welcomed in their involvement and crucial to operational effectiveness.

Applying a stewardship approach to governance, with all actors working collectively to shared goals and objectives can help to alleviate problems and tensions within boards and between boards and staff members. The research indicates that staff members roles are dynamic, dependent on the experience and knowledge of board members, with their role expanding or contracting as the needs of the board arise. This positive, successful approach within students’ union governance is one that could be adopted by other charities to enhance performance and improve the services provided to users and beneficiaries.

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