

## University Governance in Canada: Navigating Complexity

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# BOOK REVIEW

## UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE IN CANADA: NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY

REVIEWED BY

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Eastman, J., Jones, G., Trottier, C., and Bégin-Caouette, O. (2022). *University Governance in Canada: Navigating Complexity*. McGill-Queen's University Press. Pages: 422. Price: CDN 44.95 (paperback).

*University Governance in Canada: Navigating Complexity* is a compendium of four inter-related studies, each with its own perspective on university governance, primarily but not exclusively in Canada. Each can stand and be read on its own. They are different, not only topically but also in scholarly approach.

The first is exactly what it says it is: an historical summary of the current state of university education with a focus on governance. Most of the historical facts will not be new to any reader already familiar with higher education in Canada. For readers without that familiarity, it will serve as an excellent summary that judiciously separates wheat from chaff, which is too often not the case in histories of higher education. This study explains the book's subtitle—*Navigating Complexity*—a theme that continues throughout the book. "Governance" does not mean solely the roles and activities of "governing boards." Why "complexity"? What the book provides here is an anatomical paradigm of academic decision making writ large to encompass faculty senates, student governments, presidents, deans, vice-presidents, faculty and staff associations—all in addition to governors *per se*. Curiously, in light of the evidence provided throughout the rest of the book, little attention is paid here to the role and influence of civil government, not so much as actors in decision making as in setting the parameters of university decision making. The final section about the "university community" adds a realistic reminder about the organizationally invisible but ineluctable force of scholastic culture, which Woodrow Wilson, speaking as President of Princeton

University, once described as akin to the inertia of a cemetery. There are decisions that are beyond the sway of university governance by any definition. The book could have said the same and more about market forces.

The second study is a series of case studies and qualitative analyses, including data, of governance at six "remarkable" Canadian universities, where nearly 70 interviews were conducted. "Remarkable" is not explained. The case studies were conducted at five "medical doctoral" universities and one "comprehensive" university, as classified by a controversial survey conducted by a Canadian monthly news magazine since 1994. Each was also an urban university, although that seems to have been more by coincidence than design. Findings were then organized into several themes, for example changes in governance over time and the reasons for them. The research breaks new ground and without question is worthy of careful reading and even re-reading, not only as a rich and critical source of information about university governance in Canada but also as a definition and methodology for assessing governance in other jurisdictions, albeit with more appropriate institutional classifications.

Each case study is interesting in its own right, and, as the book points out, generalization across them is limited. Here are a few fascinating examples of what a reader can find in the case studies. As the book notes several times, intrusions of government regulation on university governance rises and falls inversely with government subsidies. That is not news. It is a manifest but unacknowledged sus-

picion that public universities have held for many years. What is exceptional is, in an interview, a government official in Ontario admitting that the trade-off between funding and regulation is conscious public policy. A non-disclosure agreement about a sex scandal at the University of British Columbia in 2015 was so extensively reported and investigated that it too was no longer news that needed to be repeated. What is particularly insightful in the book's recounting of the episode is the conceptual presentation of "leadership" as a mobile concept shifting tenuously back and forth between the role of the university president and board chair. University governance, thus, is sometimes not only complex. It can be downright messy and, in the case of leadership, organizationally undefinable. Between 2014 and 2016 student militance triggered by cut-backs in provincial funding disrupted l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) to the point of paralysis, threatened the university's self-governance, and led to a combative relationship between students and the professoriate. Like the challenges to governance at UBC, the breakdown at UQAM was widely reported and investigated by external consultants. There was a back-story, reported by the case study, that raised serious questions about the extent to which the university could, within the autonomy given to it by the province, delegate budgetary autonomy to schools and faculties. A compromise was finally reached without clear resolution. But the fundamental question remains about how much room governance in complex universities should allow for decentralization through the delegation of autonomy.

The third study compares university governance in Canada to governance in five other jurisdictions: the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, France, and China, the first four apparently because they share colonial histories in the evolution of university education. The addition of China is unexplained, but is useful for measuring university autonomy in terms of the extent to which universities are agents of the state. As each case study is well worth reading in its own right, so is each national summary. What can we conclude from the comparisons? Despite many similarities in higher education past and present between Canada and the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and France, governance does not seem to be one of them. Nor in terms of policy diffusion does it seem that Canadian governance practices have been borrowed from them. The role of government in the funding and control of research, and in turn its effects on university governance, is an area of policy and historical dissonance. Canada seems to be consciously different, although, as the authors point out, not

necessarily better than governing practices elsewhere. This may be because research as an instrument of public policy is post-colonial or, in the case of China, never was colonial. Including China leaves a question hanging about the omission of Germany, where universities in the 19th century and well into the 20th were in some significant ways as integral to the state as in China today.

The book ends with a summary of "reflections and advice." In the preface to the summary there is a legalistic disclaimer that the "views expressed are not necessarily shared" among the authors. This may be because many of the views taken do not relate directly to governance or to evidence presented elsewhere in the book. That, however, makes the final discussion all the more stimulating as in this example. Will more state control—either federal provincial—succeed? The book's speculative but reasonable answer is no, because of "mutual incomprehension." Is that also an argument for less state investment? Some of the interviews of government officials suggest that they would admit incomprehension sooner than university faculty and leaders would.

Like any good book, this one leaves some questions for further thought and research. For example, what about the periphery of university governance: joint boards, university foundations, and federations? As governments rely on regulation more than funding to influence university conduct will the role of governance shift from leadership to compliance? What would governance in an entrepreneurial university look like?