

Chapter 8

“Research and Innovation” as an Integral Part of Strategic University Governance: The Case of VUB – A Subtle Power Game in a Complex Academic Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

The chapter sketches some governance features of a medium-sized, comprehensive, urban, public university that are essential to ensure the delicate equilibrium between structured, efficient management and openness towards the changing society, exceptional personalities and breakthrough thinking. Features of university governance are analyzed at all levels, from rectorate to schools (faculties), departments, and research groups. “Research” and “innovation and valorization with societal impact” are situated in relation to three other main academic pillars, namely education, student affairs, and institution-wide internationalization. Building blocks are described and assembled in a coherent governance structure. Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) case is taken as an example. Generalization of the discussed concepts should be done with care because choices are dependent on the university’s vision, strategic plan, and road map, and one single best governance structure that is appropriate for all contexts does not exist.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter sketches some of the features of *public university* governance that are essential to ensure the delicate equilibrium between structured, efficient management and openness towards the changing society, exceptional personalities, and breakthrough thinking. The processes analyzed are strongly influenced by the VUB model that is used to describe them more explicitly. Not all aspects of university governance are covered, because the paper considers only five important *academic pillars* as well as their interactions, namely *research, education, student affairs, innovation & valorization with societal impact*

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and *institution-wide internationalization*. Features of university governance are analyzed at *all levels*, from rectorate to schools (faculties), departments and research groups. Institutional accreditation¹ of the university by an external body requires the central university governance to be in control of the main *quality processes* throughout the whole university, and hence special attention will be given to *internal communication*. The emphasis of governmental agencies on output performance, usually assessed through key performance indicators (KPIs), must be accommodated in a harmonious model of internal operation supporting *responsibilities and ensuring autonomy*. The answer to the question “What works, what fails, what is work in progress?” inevitably depends on the context in which the university operates. Hence some chapter-wide assumptions have been made: the generic models are described with a *medium-sized comprehensive European university* in mind that has a strong structural international embedding. This is the case of VUB and hence *to a large extent it is the VUB model that is described in this chapter*. Generalization of the discussed concepts should be done with care because choices are dependent on the university’s vision, strategic plan and road map and one single best governance structure that is appropriate for all contexts does not exist. *The current chapter focuses on strategies and management for two of the five mentioned academic pillars, namely “research” and “innovation & valorization”*. These cannot, however, be analyzed without considering the global university’s central governance and the synergy with education, student affairs, and internationalization, which will be discussed whenever necessary. The following topics will be addressed: governance models, research, innovation, valorization, PhD school, R&D management, transdisciplinarity, university networks, internationalization policy, leadership styles, internal and external communication, outreach, technology transfer, entrepreneurship, innovation platforms, university venture capital fund, and university networks.

Strategic governance of the university’s ecosystem has some similarities with *power gaming* although *gravitas* and *dignity* remain essential academic characteristics inherited from the past, different individuals or groups - internal and external to the university - are competing to achieve their specific (often well-intentioned) goals by gaining power, authority, and influence.

The one-sided perception of the university as an ivory tower has been abandoned. Recent economic impact studies reveal that in 2016 - through their core activities, students, research, commercialization and graduates - the 23 LERU² Universities contributed €99.8 billion GVA³ and 1.3 million jobs to the European economy (BIGGAR Economics, 2017a). Each €1 of subsidies generates almost €7 GVA to the European economy, and every job directly created by the LERU Universities supports almost 6 other jobs. For the 5 Flemish universities (BIGGAR Economics, 2017b), a similar study reveals a combined contribution of € 12.0 billion GVA and 121,800 jobs throughout Europe. The ratio of core government funding to impact is estimated at €1:€10 in Flanders. For each person directly employed by the 5 Flemish Universities almost three additional jobs are supported in Flanders. Also, knowledge transfer becomes visible to the public at large, through its increasing scale and impact. It contributes to transformation processes in industry and society, and it generates new economic activities. The university is recognized for its increasingly prominent role in society. This central societal position, going far beyond the primary missions of education and research, makes the university attractive to the private and public sectors, the ideal stage for a power game, the battlefield of autonomy versus dominance by several *external interest groups*. Government might be the most threatening one because it provides the main source of funding, increasingly accompanied by regulations interfering with internal university functioning and governance.

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