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Impact of university councils on the core academic values of Polish universities: limited but benign

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ABSTRACT
This article explores rectors' perceptions of the changes to university governance in Poland, especially the impact of lay members on university councils. We investigate whether these new governing bodies make Polish universities more relevant to the needs of the economy and society. Empirical data from a large-scale national survey of Polish public universities, carried out with the support of the Rectors' Conference (KRASP), provide a mixed picture of how the university councils have been adopted and used in the governance process. On reflection, rectors regard university councils as benign, with respect to key values of Polish universities (institutional autonomy and self-governance) but largely ineffective in contributing to the decision-making process. Overall, the university councils represent an important but only symbolic change in the governance of Polish universities.

Introduction

Over the last decades, reforms aimed at enhancing the societal and economic relevance and productivity of universities have been implemented all over Europe (Amaral et al., 2012, 2013; de Boer & File, 2009; Donina et al., 2015; Huisman, 2009; Paradeise et al., 2009). These reforms were inspired by New Public Management (NPM) ideas (Bleiklie, 1998; Enders et al., 2013), which are considered the global reform script for the public sector (Capano et al., 2022), including higher education (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Donina & Paleari, 2019; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014; Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014). NPM rhetoric supports the idea of 'strong leadership at the central levels of the organisation' (Huisman et al., 2006, p. 228) to enhance the responsive capacities and efficiency of the organization. Accordingly, NPM-inspired reforms introduced institutional culture, structures, and practices from the business sector into the public realm, and implied changes in higher education governance, namely in the institutional arrangements that allocate decision-making power at universities (Facchini & Fia, 2021; Hirsch & Weber, 2001). NPM reforms intended to develop 'more executive intra-

university governance structures' (Gornitzka et al., 2017, p. 274), foster a vertical decision-making process and dismantle the collegial and bureaucratic models of governance, substituting it with an entrepreneurial and post-bureaucratic one (Santiago et al., 2015). A more executive governance structure is intended to turn universities into organizational actors, autonomous, entrepreneurial, and competitive, with strategic capability and actorhood (Amaral, 2008; Clark, 1998; de Boer et al., 2010a; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meier, 2009).

Yet, the complex nature of higher educational organizations makes it extremely difficult to identify the causal relationship between changes in the structural arrangement and organizational performance and/or relevance to societal and economic needs because the latter are affected by a wide range of interrelated and intertwined factors. This study rests on the assumption that as university governance is socially constructed and interpreted, '*factors beyond the legal framework can have a decisive impact on its practice*' (Meister-Scheytt, 2007, p. 60). Thus, the best way to evaluate the impact of the councils on universities is to explore the perception of those personally responsible for university institutional management and directly involved with the new institutional governance arrangements.

Previous higher education studies explored how the strengthening of managerial core (Donina & Paleari, 2019; Gornitzka et al., 2017; Kretek et al., 2013) and the re-conceptualization of universities into more 'complete organizations' (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000; Seeber et al., 2015) affect university governance and how the governance changes fit into the local academic traditions (e.g. Christensen et al., 2014; Donina & Paleari, 2019). However, there is a paucity of studies exploring how structural reforms are being perceived by universities and members of academia. A few exceptions are Huisman et al. (2006), Donina et al. (2022), Facchini and Fia (2021), Magalhães (2018), who explored the rector's perception of higher education reforms. Rectors are indeed crucial actors in university governance and share their authority with the newly established governance bodies, including the external members. The current study aims to explore how the modernization of the university governance structures affects their decision-making process. We have limited knowledge about how the new structural arrangements affect the managerial practice of academic institutions, which is mostly confined to the perception of external members. The governing process of a university involves several institutional actors and requires cooperation, particularly from rectors (presidents) who perform a central role in managing universities and bear almost final responsibility for their performance. Not only do they have the opportunity to monitor the works of other actors but they are also fully entitled to make a good assessment of their contribution.

The context of analysis is Poland. Despite a long communist rule, the Humboldtian tradition and academic self-governance are well-institutionalized in the governance model of universities (Donina et al., 2022; Hladchenko et al., 2017; Kwiek, 2015; Urbanek, 2020). Until 2018, the institutional power was balanced at the central level, between the rector and academic senate, and, on the faculty level, between the dean and faculty councils (Dobbins, 2015). Higher education reform (Law 2.0) revised the institutional power balance at the central level, firstly, strengthening the rectors' executive powers at the expense of senates and secondly, weakening academic self-governance by

establishing a new governing body-the university council (*rada uczelni*)-with monitoring and supervisory powers. However, for the university reforms to achieve the intended outcomes, they must not only be formally incorporated, but also practically involved in the governing process. Therefore, this paper investigates the recent Polish reform of university governance through the lens of university rectors, assuming that structural changes, to be successfully implemented, require openness, trust, and cooperation from other key institutional actors. In the process, this article examines the rector's perception of the new university governance structure, paying special attention to their perspective on university councils (*rada uczelni*) with whom they share responsibilities for institutional management. Data for this study emanated from a large-scale national survey among all rectors at Polish public higher education institutions carried out with the support of the Polish Rectors' Conference (KRASP).

NPM-inspired reforms of university governance

Higher education governance reforms have been influenced by the NPM discourse (Amaral et al., 2013). The European Commission (European Commission [EC], 2006) announced an agenda for the modernization of university governance to improve their strategic capacity, by strengthening institutional leadership (Gornitzka et al., 2017; Olsen, 2007). NPM-inspired reforms introduced the concept of performance to the realm of higher education with a wide range of indicators measuring how (public) resources have been used and to what effect (Trow, 1996, p. 310). Such a policy shift has far-reaching consequences, introducing the concept of managerial accountability for institutional performance (Romzek, 2000, p. 22). The modernization reforms implied the establishment of rationalized university governance structures in which concentration of powers, hierarchy, transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness (Huisman et al., 2006), as well as operational practices, are of primary importance (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). These are considered pivotal factors for universities' success in addressing the challenges of the knowledge society (Carvalho, 2021). The establishment of professional leadership, institutional hierarchy, and centralization of the decision-making processes have been the underlying principles of higher education (HE) reforms since the late 1990s (Christensen, 2012; Donina & Hasanefendic, 2019; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Maassen & Stensaker, 2019; Maassen et al., 2017). It was accompanied by declining powers of academic collegial bodies whose role was confined to academic matters (Sahlin, 2012). Thus, in many countries, the traditional models of self-governance, 'republic of science' (Polanyi, 1962), 'republic of scholars' (Brubacher, 1967), 'organized anarchies' (Cohen et al., 1972) and 'loosely coupled systems' (Weick, 1976) have been replaced by vertical decision-making processes, featuring a system of appointments and transformation of universities into so-called 'complete organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000).

The hallmark of the modernization of university governance is the new governing bodies with the mandatory participation of external members. They were introduced – in various forms and shapes – in most European countries (de Boer et al., 2010; Donina & Paleari 2019; Gornitzka et al., 2017; Kretek et al., 2013; Musselin & Teixeira, 2014; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Austria, Finland, Russia, Norway, and Portugal established new entities in public universities, while other countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Italy reformed existing ones by equipping

them with additional powers. The protagonists of these councils assert outcomes by way of increasing the social accountability of universities (Jorge & Peña, 2017; Doniana et al., 2019), transparency in decision-making and university performance (de Boer et al., 1998) though the impact on performance is difficult to assess, as universities are complex organizations, with a wide range of interrelated factors influencing them.

Inherently, the new (modernized) university governing bodies involve external members with expertise to exercise trusteeship. Yet, there is a plurality of approaches to the structure of university governing bodies. Some state regulations provide specific or minimum quotas for external members, as in most German Landers, Italy, Portugal, France, Denmark, Finland, and Norway (Christensen et al., 2014; Dobbins, 2017; Domina et al. 2019; Gornitzka et al., 2017; Kretek et al., 2013), while in the UK and Estonia, universities are free to decide whether or not they wish to include external members in the university council (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). In some HE systems, external members became not only mandatory but also formed the majority in the main governing body of universities (Gornitzka et al., 2017; Kretek et al., 2013; Musselin & Teixeira, 2014), and there are even countries (i.e. Netherlands and Austria) (de Boer et al., 2010) that stipulate university governing bodies are composed exclusively of external members. Typically, external members include representatives of public bodies (local, regional, or national), chambers of commerce, the business sector in general, and members of other research and higher education institutions (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

The new governing bodies are involved in strategic planning and budgetary allocation, and – in some governance configurations – in the selection, appointment, and supervision of the university leadership. The degree of power over these tasks varies among countries, including the right to formulate an opinion on the proposals made by the rector or academic senate to veto power. In some governance configurations (e.g. Norway), the council is also involved in the appointment of the faculty deans (Gornitzka et al., 2017). Depending on the national legislation, there are differences not only in the scope of powers but also in proportions, methods of appointment, and roles performed by external members, as well as accountability arrangements (Magalhães et al., 2018). The introduction of new governing bodies with a salient role for external members sparked controversies and political tensions and even triggered an academic backlash in some countries (Antonowicz, 2015; Pechar, 2005; Poutanen et al., 2022), which, however, fell short of blocking the reforms (de Boer et al., 2010a).

The new university governing bodies ultimately attracted considerable research attention. However, most research endeavors focused on the legal and structural aspects of the new (or overhauled) governance model, whilst the success or failure of the new governing model depends on how organizational innovations are implemented as actual practices. This paper thus takes a cultural approach that puts *the spotlight on university actors and how these actors construct the social reality of their daily organizational existence* (see: Austin & Jones, 2016). We build upon the study carried out by Magalhães et al. (2018) on the rectors' perception of external members across Europe, which revealed that most rectors recognize that external members bring skills and experiences largely unavailable among academic staff. However, at the same time, the study found that rectors expect

external members to keep a distance and retain the status of 'non-interfering allies' (Magalhães et al., 2018, p. 746).

Context of analysis

Earlier unsuccessful attempts to overhaul Polish University governance

Poland is a post-communist country that joined the European Union in 2004. Shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Poland enforced laws to restore the legal foundations for universities, driven by the principles of self-governance and strong collegial control by professors (Dobbins & Knill, 2009). The restoration of universities as autonomous and self-governing institutions was rather ephemeral because of inadequate financial resources and poor infrastructure. Universities are doomed to fail in addressing largely unrealistic social expectations that lead to multiple critical voices (e.g. Jajszczyk, 2008; Szczepański, 2001 Żylicz, 2009). These mainly pointed to the lack of social responsiveness and social accountability, as well as the deficit of professional management at universities (Thieme, 2009). The initial attempts to reform university governance, dating back to the 1990s, were quickly abandoned due to a lack of resources and political capacity. This period has been described as *policy-of-non-policy* (Antonowicz, 2015; Kwiek, 2008). The criticism intensified after the turn of the millennium highlighting uncontrolled HE expansion (Antonowicz et al., 2017; Donina et al., 2022; Duczmal, 2006), dramatic fall in quality standards, de-institutionalization of the university research mission (Kwiek, 2012) and simply poor management (Thieme, 2009). Thus, a new law relating to HE (MNSW, 2005) was approved. It was announced as a major system overhaul but did not introduce any significant change in HE governance. It only extended the term of office of the rectors from 3 to 4 years. Yet, pressures to revisit the governance mode were mounting because of political dissatisfaction with the poor standings in international rankings of Polish universities and failure to attract European research funding. Transnational organizations (OECD, 2006; World Bank, 2004) also expressed concerns about the university governance model. Despite criticism expressed by most policy actors, the academic community openly opposed major changes, torpedoing any reform attempt. KRASP was especially and overtly against the modernization of university governance, seeing it as unduly political interference in university affairs. It blocked reforms as long as it could and substantially moderated the government reform agenda in 2010/2011 (*Kudrycka Reforms*). *Kudrycka Reforms* were the first serious political attempt to challenge the *status quo*. It aimed at replacing the rectors' election from the university assembly with open calls for candidates. The governmental proposals met with a huge backlash from the academic community and were doomed to fail. The government managed to secure such a possibility only as an optional solution, which all public HEIs ignored: the two oldest and most prestigious universities (Warsaw and Cracow) demonstratively forbade in their statutes any reference to the possibility of open calls for a rector's position.

Overall, the period 1990–2018 was marked by rapid and inconsistent changes that revolutionized almost the entire higher education system (Białecki & Dąbrowa-Szefler, 2009; Krawczyk et al., 2023; Kwiek, 2009) with the sole exception of university

governance. As Dobbins pointed out: '*despite a myriad of change-promoting forces, Polish public HE governance has been relatively change-resistant [. . .] and characterised more by the steadfastness of historical institutions than policy change*' (Dobbins, 2015, p. 19). As a result, Polish universities are one of the few higher education institutions in Europe with a broad scope of academic self-governance and a strong notion of the university as a self-governing community of scholars (Kwiek, 2015).

Law 2.0

There are several rationales for the recent HE reform in Poland (EU, 2017; Urbanek, 2020). The first is the heavy-bottom and dysfunctional university governance with weak organizational leadership that gave rectors a strong, direct influence only over university administration. Thus, the introduction of professional leadership and strengthening of the position of the rector were required. Second, Polish universities were loosely coupled organizations consisting of largely autonomous faculties whose leaders (deans) were accountable to faculty councils. Third, strong and broad power was devolved to collegial decision-making bodies – the senate and faculty councils (Kwiek, 2015). Collegiality is an important feature of academic institutions that allows the engagement of the representatives of employees and students, but when it is reduced to the democratization of the decision-making process at every organizational level, it results in conservative institutional strategies, ineffectiveness, and cumbersome decision-making processes. Lastly, Polish universities were built on the Humboldtian foundation, which prioritized academic self-governance and shielded universities from external interference (except the state) (Neave, 2002). The emergence of the knowledge society caused a rethinking of the role of the university in society and its relationship with the external environment.

In short, there was the perception that Polish universities were unable to connect with the changing society and economy (EC, 2017, p. 61). Therefore, it was deemed necessary to transform them from loosely coupled organizations into tightly knit ones (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000) by increasing organizational autonomy, strengthening the role of academic leadership, shifting from a horizontal to a vertical decision-making process and limiting the role of academic collegial councils (senate, faculty council). The reform thus aims to make universities more accountable through the involvement of external stakeholders in governance. They are intended to ensure societal and economic relevance and bring an external perspective, as well as professionalize university management (Antonowicz et al., 2020; Urbanek, 2021).

Despite some policy initiatives and growing political concern over the (non)performance of higher education, universities showed considerable resistance against any institutional governance modernization. Therefore, to make it work, the government i) engaged the academic community' representative organizations in a long participative process of reforms (see: Antonowicz et al., 2020; Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2017; Urbanek, 2020); ii) commissioned three independent teams of Polish think-tanks to set the agenda for reforms (Izdebski, 2017; Kwiek et al., 2016; Radwan, 2017) and iii) sought a report from international HE experts affiliated to the European Commission (EC) to gain professional legitimacy for unpopular reforms.

The reports of three Polish think tanks, as well as the review prepared by international experts, suggested the modernization of university governance, though it stayed largely at

odds with the ideas of Polish academia, who even requested the minister Jarosław Gowin[1] to abandon the reform attempts. The international panel of experts remarked on the hermetic university culture, deficits in professional management as well as lack of social accountability. Additionally, it postulated establishing new university governing bodies with external stakeholders to address the abovementioned weaknesses (EC, 2017, p. 61).

After a long policy process, the government succeeded in passing Law 2.0, which strengthened the role of the rectors at the expense of the university senate. The hallmark of the reform was the 'university council' (*Rada Uczelni*) with external members, which became symbols of new thinking about universities' role in society. They were presented as a structural overhaul of university governance. The councils (Art 19.1) consist of six or eight members elected by the university senate. Among them, at least half must come from outside the university, including the council chairperson. They cannot be active politicians and employees of public administration by law to avoid the risk of politicization, which may compromise academic freedom. In addition, a representative of the students' union sits on the council. Universities are free to determine the council size (seven or nine members), the exact number of external members, and pre-election procedures, even involving search committees and public hearings.

The initial reform proposal was to equip university councils with both strategic and supervisory powers. However, their role was severely diluted during the legislative process in parliament. The jurisdiction of the university councils is rather modest, compared to both the initial reform proposal and other European countries (see: de Boer et al., 2010a; Donina & Hasanefendic 2019; Kretek et al., 2013). The council has mainly deliberative power and can ask rectors tough questions but also obstruct institutional management. From a legal perspective, the power of university councils can be summarized as (a) monitoring university management, financial and real estate affairs, (b) expressing opinions and tabling motions and (c) proposing candidates for the rector's election and (d) giving non-binding opinions about budget plans and approving or rejecting its implementation. In other areas, the council exerts only soft powers, by expressing its stance on institutional strategies and monitoring their implementation. University councils are weak in comparison to university rectors, whose position was enhanced as organizational executives. The rector is responsible for preparing the draft of the statute and strategy, reports on the implementation of the strategy, appoints and dismisses middle management, and is responsible for financial issues. The third major actor – the university senate – is the academic representative body and consists of academic staff, technical-administrative staff, and students. It approves program curricula, evaluates the functioning of the HEI, and formulates recommendations for the council and rector. It is also responsible for awarding scientific degrees and verification of learning outcomes. Its major powers are the approval of university statutes and strategies and the election of the members of the university council (Domina et al. 2022).

This paper explores how new governing bodies have been adapted and integrated into the existing governance and management practices of Polish universities. The implementation of the new governance model prompted a serious backlash from the academic community, mostly because the university councils were seen as alien or even hostile to the Polish academic tradition. Previous studies demonstrated that Polish universities stand out for their embeddedness in the Humboldtian tradition (Dobbins, 2015), with the unfading power of collegiality (Kwiek, 2015) and the distinctive role of the

professoriate (Shaw, 2019). Said so, it raises the research question of how these new governing bodies fit into the university governance structures and contribute to institutional management. To test this hypothesis and understand how the new governing bodies have been integrated into governance and managerial practices, this paper examines the perception of academic leaders (rectors) relating to university councils. Rectors are not only the most important university actors whose views on university governance resonate with the academic community but also have first-hand knowledge of the functioning of the newly established university councils and their cooperation with other governing bodies (Donina et al., 2022). It is the rectors who observe them unfolding in practice but are also able to evaluate the consequences for higher education institutions.

Methodology

The data are from an extensive online national survey with 34 standardized responses (single- and multiple-choice) covering the overall assessment of higher education reforms (Law 2.0). The survey was designed by an international team of researchers based at Nicolas Copernicus University with a particular focus on issues prior identified in policy debates around the reforms in Poland. Major attention was given to formal and informal aspects of the university councils which are analyzed in the study. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee at the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences at Nicolaus Copernicus University and endorsed by Rector's Conference (KRASP). In order to encourage rectors to participate in the study, we also made a public appeal to rectors during the (on-line) plenary assembly of KRASP.

The small pilot of the survey was carried and discussed with two former vice-rectors and based on their feedback only minor linguistic changes were introduced. The study was conducted on the entire population of rectors of public institutions because the university councils were implemented in the public realm only. It was carried out between May and June 2021. The invitation to all rectors was delivered individually via e-mail with a short description of the study, link to the questionnaire (Qualtrics Software) and the endorsement letter from KRASP. The initial invitation was followed by a gentle reminder. The survey was delivered to the entire population of (123) public HEIs registered in the national dataset (POLON). Overall, we received 68 responses which accounted for 55,3% of all institutions. Not all the surveys were completed, but those 68 had at least half of the questions answered. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the responses were fully confidential and anonymous. It is acknowledged that studying an elite group such as university rectors is always a challenging endeavor amid limited access to them, as well as their busy agendas.

Findings

The survey – with 34 questions – covers a broad scope of problems related to institutional governance that were modified by higher education reforms. For the purpose of the study, we use only a part of the questionnaire (namely, 10 questions) to address the problem under the study. The selection of the questions for this analysis was purposively designed to address the research problem related role of
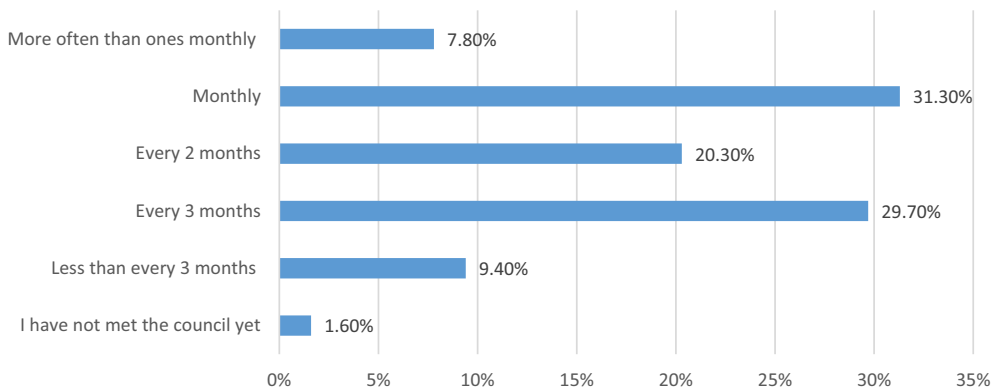
Figure 1. How often do you meet with the university council? (*N* = 64).

new governing bodies. Some of the remaining questions were discussed earlier (Donina et al. 2022) and will contribute to serve as a foundation for the more systematic account of the work of the university councils. It is worth noting that the response rate was relatively high considering difficult circumstances. In Poland, the governance and management of higher educational institutions have been politically sensitive topics for historical reasons. In addition, around the time of the survey, a few government officials threatened universities over their 'leftist ideological agenda', which raised concerns about governmental attempts to have a bigger impact on university governance.

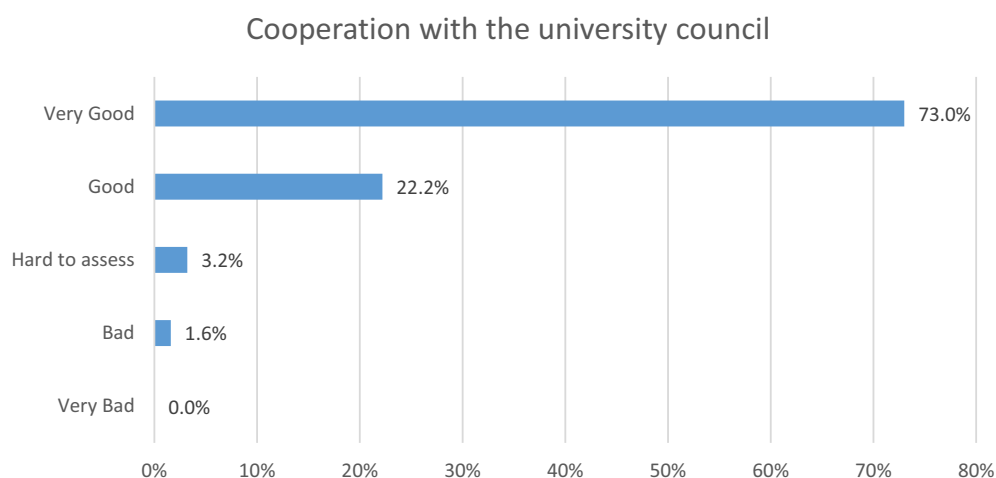## Rectors' perception of the university council

Overall, rectors are no strangers to university councils with whom they meet regularly. The frequency of meetings (Figure 1) varies between institutions. The majority 57 of 64 (88.7%) of the surveyed rectors meet the council at least once every 3 months and are regularly in contact with them. The percentage of rectors who do not have contact with the university council is very small (1.6%), which represents a single institution. It is thus reasonable to assume that rectors are able to make a fair assessment of their role and contribution to governance practices.

The rectors were asked about the legal basis of the concept of university council since the latter are completely new bodies in the university governing structure. Their legal position and jurisdiction has sparked some concerns among the academic community. The respondents expressed confidence (Figure 2) in the structural aspects, as the overwhelming majority 52 out of 64 rectors (81.3%) admit that the role of the council within the university governing structure is well or very well defined. The rectors are thus satisfied with how councils are integrated into university governance.

Structural arrangements are an important facilitator for good university governance, as they lay the foundation for building productive cooperation between different actors (Figure 3). Good functioning of university governance requires not only well-defined structural arrangements, but also good personal relations (Meister-Scheytt, 2007). Thus,

Definition of the role of the university council
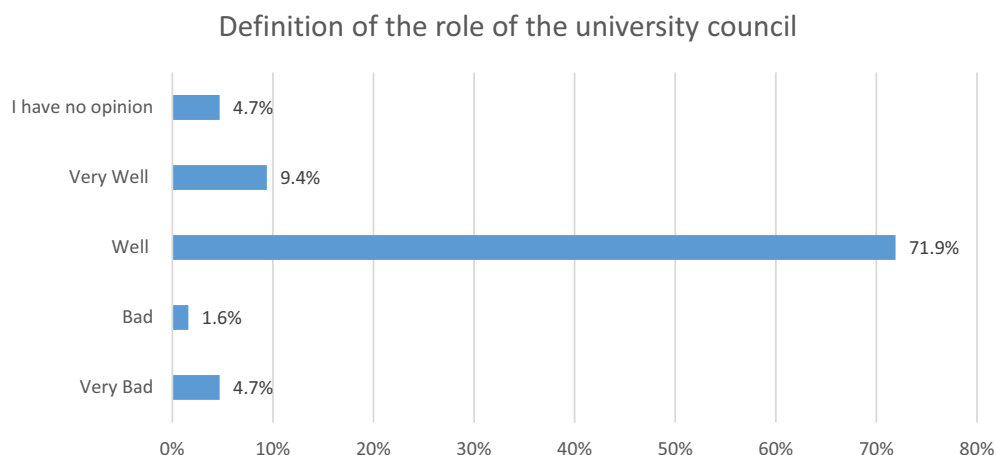
Figure 2. How do you assess the defining of the role of the university council? (*N* = 64).

Cooperation with the university council

Figure 3. How do you assess your cooperation with the university council? (*N* = 64).

we investigated the current cooperation between rectors and university councils. The overwhelming majority of 47 out 64 (73.0%) rectors assessed it as very positive or 14 out 64 (22.2%) positive. Such a positive attitude indicates that rectors and councils have begun their relationship on the right foot.

Impact of the university council

Among the major concerns expressed by the Polish academic community related to the introduction of the university council was the impact they have on university autonomy and self-governance (Figure 4). Thus, a major argument against them was their negative influence on institutional autonomy and self-governance, which are critical for Polish academia (Dobbins, 2015; Kwiek, 2015). The results of the survey do not support these

Impact on university autonomy
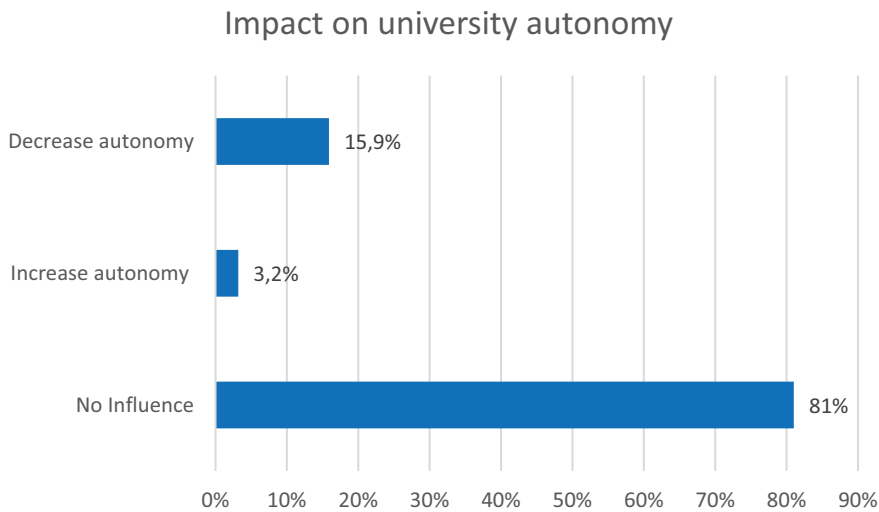
Figure 4. Impact on university autonomy (*N* = 63).

Impact on university self-governance
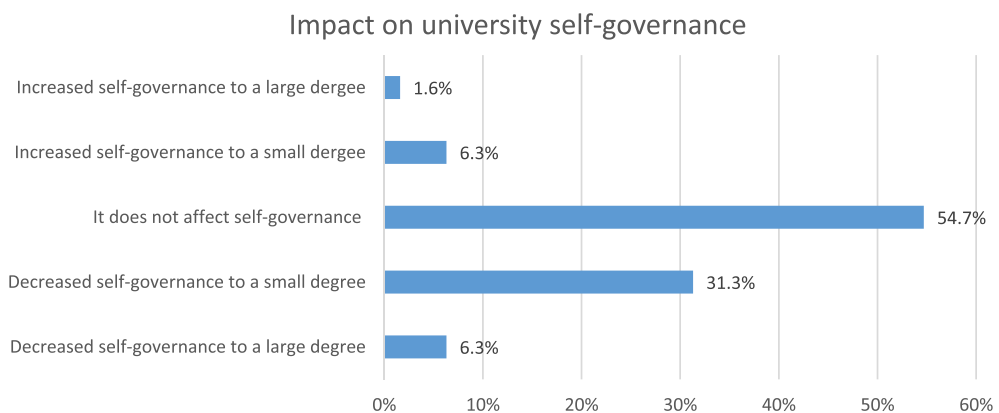
Figure 5. Impact on academic self-governance (*N* = 64).

big concerns and rectors – who are elected by the representatives of the academic community – do not see the councils as constraining institutional autonomy. Not only did 51 out 63 of the rectors (81.0%) indicated that university councils did not affect university autonomy but 10 of 63 (15.9%) of the respondents claimed that university councils strengthened it.

The response to the question about the impact of the councils on university self-governance (Figure 5) shows that 35 out of 64 (54.7%) of the respondents did not see the councils as limiting the scope of self-governance, though 20 out 64 (31.3%) of the surveyed rectors admitted that it slightly reduced academic self-governance.

While the opponents of the university councils indicated that they might negatively affect university autonomy and self-governance, the supporters asserted that councils would positively impact university performance. Therefore, the best way to evaluate the impact of the councils on the universities performance is through the opinion of those

Impact on quality of university managment
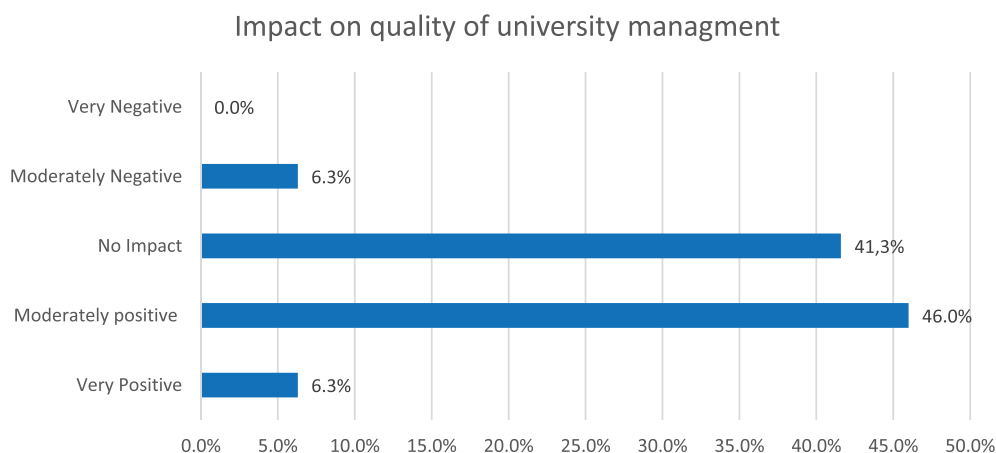
Figure 6. Impact on the quality of management (*N* = 63).

who are directly and personally responsible for institutional management. The study demonstrates that 26 out of 63 (41.3%) rectors asserted that the university councils have no influence but as many as 29 out of 63 (46%) pointed out that they moderately improved the quality of management. Only 4 out of 63 surveyed rectors (6.3%) admitted that the university councils have a very positive impact on the quality of university management (Figure 6).

Another rationale legitimizing the introduction of university councils was that they increase the transparency of the university's decision-making process. The surveyed rectors demonstrated rather mixed evidence about it. For the rectors' the university councils contribute to the transparency of the decision-making process and 23 out of 61 (37.7%) rectors acknowledged a positive or very positive influence, whilst 35 out of 61 (57.4%) of them did not notice any influence (Figure 7). But only 3 out 61 rectors (4.9%)

Impact on transparency of decision-making process
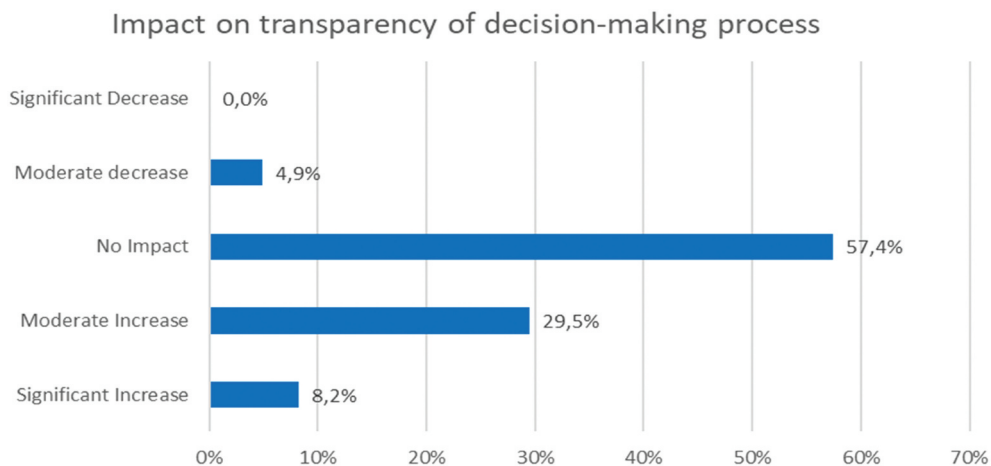
Figure 7. Impact on transparency of decision-making process (*N* = 61).

Impact on university social accountability
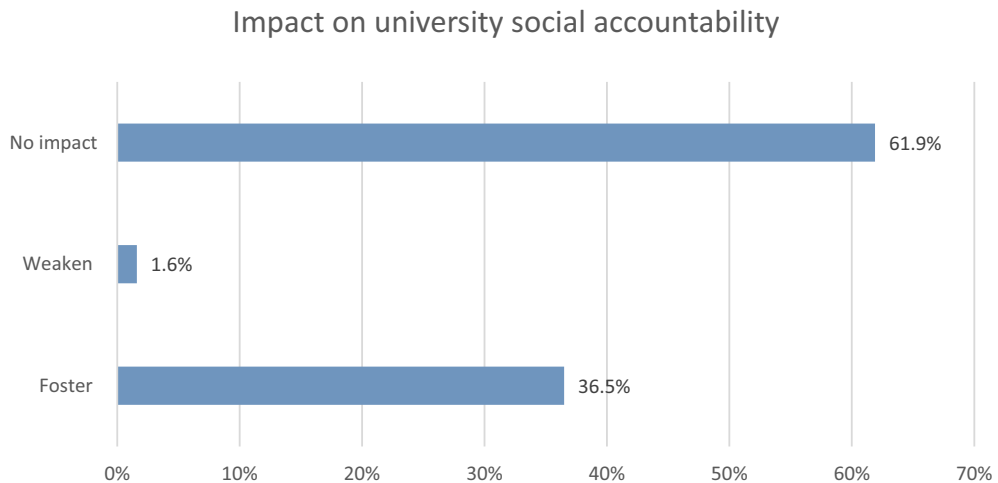
**Figure 8.** Impact on social accountability (*N* = 63).

declared that the university councils had a negative effect on transparency of the decision-making process.

Lastly, one of the reasons for establishing the university councils was the social accountability of universities. In the Humboldtian tradition, social accountability of academic institutions was never a priority due to their social contract with nation states. Yet, due to the changing role of higher education in the knowledge society, new governing bodies with external members were designed to address those deficits and improve social accountability. Again, the survey presents a mixed picture with 23 out of 63 (36.5%) of the rectors declared that the university councils increased the social accountability of universities, with only one rector (1.6%) claiming the opposite. However, as many as 39 out of 63 (61.9%) of the respondents claimed that the councils had no impact on the university's social accountability (Figure 8).

Presence of external members

A major concern regarding the university council was linked to the mandatory presence of external members (at least 50% of the members elected by the university senate). Due to the Polish academic tradition of self-governance, the engagement of external members was highly controversial, occasioning a huge backlash from the academic community. The survey indicates that the rectors did not express any serious concern after the election for their first full term (Figure 9).

The rectors' views on the university being in danger of politicization due to the introduction of the university councils are consistent. Although Law 2.0 explicitly forbade active politicians and employees of public administration from membership of the council, there is the danger of the senate electing partisan activists under different formal hats, which may interfere with the university's affairs and compromise academic freedom. The overwhelming majority 51 out of 64 (79.7%) of rectors stated that the university councils did not cause a politicization of universities (Figure 10).

Concerns related to external members in the university council
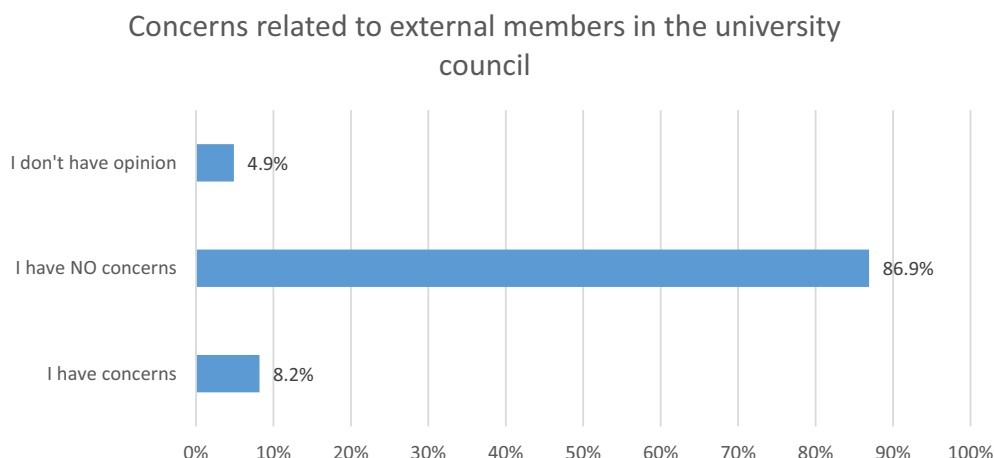
Figure 9. Concerns related to external members in the university council ($N = 61$).

Impact of university council on politicization of university
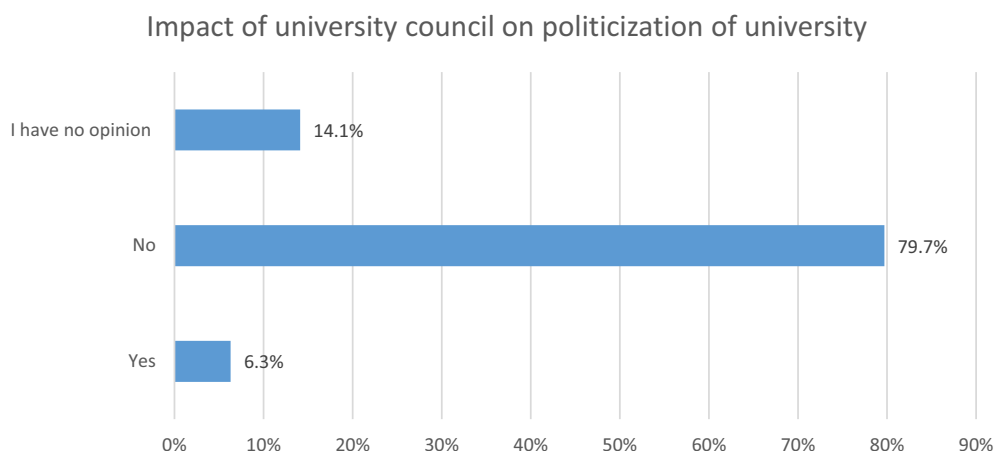
Figure 10. Impact of university council on politicization of university ($N = 64$).

Discussion and conclusions

This study evaluated the rectors' perception of the changes to Polish university govern-ance structures. It pays special attention to whether the newly established university councils have been able to enhance the societal relevance of universities. Overall, the paper offers a rather inconclusive picture of how the university councils are being adopted and used in the governing process. The rectors regard them as being almost neutral to the key values of Polish universities but also somehow ineffective in making substantial contribution to the institutional governance. Hence, the university councils represent mostly a cosmetic change in the governance of Polish universities.

First, university councils have been relatively easily integrated into the overall university governance model, with frequent contact and cooperation with rectors. This contradicts our expectation that in the rather conservative Polish academic

culture, the university councils would have been marginalized. The study provides evidence that rectors do not question the role of the university councils in the overall governing process. In addition, their relationship with the newly established governance bodies started on the right foot, which is undoubtedly instrumental to building a culture of trust between key organizational actors. Moreover, the rectors contribute to the legitimization of the new university governing bodies through routine managerial practices such as regular meetings. Arguably, an important factor affecting the smooth adoption of the university councils is the selection of the council members by the academic senates, which calmed down the initial hesitation or even distrust toward the university councils and specifically toward the involvement of external members in university governance. The elected individuals follow organizational roles, respect the university as a social institution, and are committed to their duties.

Second, the impact of the university councils on the quality and transparency of university management is far less than what NPM literature suggests, and the government hoped for. At least from the rector's perspective, university councils do not deliver the outcomes we would expect based on the high hopes of the reformers. Several reasons could be responsible for what are generally perceived as shortcomings of the university councils. Among them are the soft powers and limited jurisdiction of the university councils. While these soft powers given to university councils have been crucial for the academic community to accept them, the initial proposal assigned them also the authority to approve the institutional strategy and the university budget and to make a shortlist of candidates for the rectors' office. Without these powers, the councils fall short of making a meaningful impact on universities' performance.

Third, the survey shows that the rectors consider university councils as exerting a benign influence on the key values of Polish universities, viz., institutional autonomy and self-governance. The new governing bodies with external members took little power away from the other actors and the engagement of external members slightly disturbed the blissful university peace. It offsets concerns that the mandatory presence of external members in the university councils has opened the doors to politicization or transforming the universities into corporate organizations. These concerns have turned out to be baseless fears.

However, an open question is what will be the long-term impact of the introduction of the university councils with representatives of external stakeholders. They were presented by the government and perceived by the Polish academic community as an overhaul of the Humboldtian self-governance model of Polish universities. The long parliamentary legislative process for the first time shed light on the issue of social accountability of public universities. It was relatively new to the Polish academic community, deeply embedded in the 'republic of scholars' with the ideal of the exclusive role of academic self-governance and institutional autonomy. Although the university councils are not equipped with any hard powers and do not significantly change the university's internal decision-making process, their introduction will be seen primarily in the Polish historical context as a symbolic shift that may pave the way for further managerial changes in the future. Thus, the university councils could be the first in a series of progressive incremental changes (Lindblom, 1979), which may prove to be an effective strategy for changing the *status quo* and comprehensively reforming the Polish higher education system. However, the reverse process is also possible because the rectors

see university councils as harmless but largely unproductive bodies, as they do not bring the managerial benefits associated with NPM rhetoric. As the survey was conducted only 2 years after their introduction, the current period may still be transitional and their practical impact as well as the full spectrum of university council contributions may be evident in a long run. In addition, the understanding of university councils' contributions (and limits) would benefit from surveys targeting other governance actors such as the council members. Therefore, future studies may address these issues.

Note

1. A letter signed by 145 professors was sent to minister Gowin http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1107125,list-145-naukowcow-reforma-gowina-zawiera-grozne-rozwiazania.html

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