

Diversity of governors in higher education

What we know, and what we still need to learn about the
diversity of governors in higher education

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Foreword

The goal of good governance is to deliver assurance and confidence for all stakeholders that the organisation is responsible, accountable, fair and transparent in fulfilling its obligations.

In this report, Advance HE offers evidence that diverse and inclusive governing bodies which comprise different opinions, experiences and insights can better support strategic decision-making which address the needs, interests and expectations (NIEs) of all stakeholders.

The report builds on and develops the ideas and arguments presented in 'Diversity of Governors in Higher Education' published in 2020 and provides a number of new analyses. It draws on the enhanced HESA records for the academic years 2018-19 to 2020-21 and for the first time:

- + compares Board diversity data with data about academic staff, offering a unique analysis of Board diversity in the context of higher education institutions, and;
- + explores the characteristics of governors, providing an intersectional analysis of diversity that illuminates the range and depth of diversity across UK HE Boards.

Working with our members – which now number more than 400 higher education providers from around the world – and other partners in the sector, Advance HE draws on and shares insights into good practice and 'what works' in a number of key themes including governance and leadership, teaching and equality, diversity and inclusion. In terms of effective governance, our insights and expert subject experience show the value of diversity in our Boards; and the importance of ongoing efforts by the sector to make even more progress in this regard is reinforced through the evidence of this report.

Kim Ansell, Assistant Director Governance (Interim)

1. Findings at a glance

- + The proportion of women on governing bodies increased by just 0.2% to 42.4%, a slowing of the positive trend recorded over the past decade.
- + 77 of the 202 institutions in the 2020/21 return (38.1%) approached parity across sex¹.
- + Smaller governing bodies, typically of small and specialist institutions, were significantly less diverse with regard to sex, with women poorly represented on governing bodies despite making up the majority of academic staff.
- + Nearly a third of institutions (31.9%) had no international staff on their governing bodies, including institutions where over 2 in 10 of their academic staff were internationally domiciled.
- + As the collection of non-academic staff data is no longer mandatory, this has reduced the availability of a robust picture of the whole staff body, particularly for smaller institutions.
- + A quarter of institutions had no governors from a minority ethnic group on their board despite, on average, 11.6% of their academic staff being from minority ethnic groups; conversely, nearly two-fifths (39.1%) of institutions had a higher proportion of their governing body from minority ethnic groups than amongst the body of academic staff.
- + 5.8% of governors disclosed a disability, though there was significant variation within different groups
- + Across institutions, as the proportion of academic staff disclosing a disability, being from outside the UK, or identifying as being a member of a minority ethnic group increased, so did their representation on governing bodies.
- + Over half (54.0%) of governors were aged 56 or over, with this being the least diverse age group, though still contributing significantly to the diversity of the governor population as a whole.
- + Whilst governors aged 25 or under made up 6.5% of the total governor population, they constituted over a fifth (21.1%) of governors who disclosed a disability and 16.7% of governors from two or more intersecting minority groups.
- + Every single governing body reporting their data had some level of diversity, yet the influence of this diversity cannot be fully evaluated, and whilst more data would inform this picture, other studies are needed to evidence the culture and processes that determine the day-to-day incorporation of diversity into governing bodies.

¹ This was defined as being within at least one person of an even 50:50 split between men and women.

2. Governing bodies in UK higher education

In higher education, governing bodies (also referred to as the Council, Board of Governors, Board of Directors, Board of Trustees and the Court) are specifically responsible for the institution's policies, strategic direction, and oversight of performance, compliance and regulation. They consider the recommendations from senior management in carrying out this work, as well as holding the senior management team to account (Advance HE 2018).

Governors in higher education institutions (HEIs) consist of external and internal members, along with at least one student member (usually the President of the Students' Union). External governors were typically in post for three to four years and draw from the private, public and voluntary sector. Internal governors include the senior leadership and staff elected to the position. The most recent study available found that the majority of governors (66%) were external members, 27% were internal members, and 7% were students (Jarboe, 2018). Chairs and vice-chairs oversee the running of the governing body, ensuring they were working effectively to lead the strategic direction of the organisation. They can also play an instrumental role in the recruitment of senior staff at the HEI, including the vice-chancellor. Governors may therefore come with very different experiences, be part of the governing body for short or long timescales, and be in positions of relative power.

It is important that institutions ensure everyone has equal opportunity to be appointed to the governing body regardless of characteristics like sex, ethnicity or disability status. Governing bodies with greater diversity may not only improve the running and effectiveness of the board (see Buse et al 2016, Hunt et al 2018), but also promote more challenging discussions and shine a light on alternative perspectives and experiences. Governing bodies that reflect the characteristics of an institution's staff and student body are better placed to represent the needs and concerns of those staff and students. Overall, a greater diversity in governing bodies will lead to more inclusive and better-informed decision making.

Equal representation of people from different backgrounds, and with different identities, has been a longstanding issue in HE leadership positions. Compared to other areas of employment, tenure on governing bodies was typically a shorter-term responsibility, offering the opportunity to address diversity concerns relatively quickly. However, since people recruited to governing bodies were often from senior leadership positions they remain likely to have faced barriers to entry to these positions earlier on in their career. Other barriers might include the decision not to pay board members, restricting the applicant pool to people who were able to take on unpaid work (Wheaton 2019). There was broad consensus in the sector that increasing the diversity of governing bodies in UK HE would be a positive step, but questions remain about how effectively this was put into practice.

Advance HE regularly publishes guidance and convenes discussions on increasing board diversity, including the Board Diversification Project (Tester 2018, Tester et al 2019) and the Board Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit (Shafi et al 2021). The HE Code of Governance (The

Committee of University Chairs, 2020), written to support effective governance within UK HEIs, makes multiple references to diversity throughout. For example:

'The governing body must promote equality and diversity throughout the institution, including in relation to its own operation.'

The extent that governors and senior leadership teams reflect the diversity of their organisations, and the communities they serve, is not just a concern for the HE sector. With varying degrees of success, the public, private and voluntary sectors have aimed to collect and analyse data about the identity characteristics of governors. These developments are often linked to initiatives that intend to bring about positive change, such as improved parity across sex (see HM Government 2019, Parker 2022). However, without exception, governing bodies across sectors have more to do to reflect the wider population.

This appears to be particularly the case for ethnicity across all sectors, including primary and secondary education, but also sex across the NHS, private and voluntary sectors (Lee et al 2017, NHS Improvement 2018, Spencer Stuart 2021). For school governing bodies, it was notable that women form a clear majority of governors, partly reflecting the predominance of teaching staff who were women in the primary sector (Kettlewell et al 2020). This report sets out the challenge for the HE sector, and explores how governing bodies in HEIs reflect, or fail to reflect, the staff within them.

2.1 Governing body data and this report

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data was the primary source of information about the diversity of staff and students in UK HE. HESA data presents an annual diversity snapshot of the staff and student populations, analysis of which is published in Advance HE's statistical reports (Advance HE 2022a, 2022b). HESA started collecting data on governors in the academic year 2018/19, with the Diversity of Governors report 2020 providing a view of this data (Codioli McMaster 2020). This systematically collected data on governors reveals a wealth of information that represents a clear step forward for the sector.

The data for the analysis presented in this report was drawn from data collected for the academic years 2018/19, 2019/20, and 2020/21². The number of governors included in this data was 3,456, 3,563 and 3,915 from across 160, 186 and 202 institutions respectively³. The analysis in this report will mainly focus on the results for 2020/21, but will use trend analysis across the three years where appropriate.

The 2020/21 dataset provides the most comprehensive snapshot so far available on the composition of governing bodies. However, a lack of specific data around the governor role limits the potential for understanding the state of governance in UK HE. The different collection regimes in place across different sectors point to possible improvement in practice for higher education. The NHS collect data that includes six of the nine protected

² Data provided by HESA (2021, 2022) in 2021 and 2022. The data for academic year 2019/20 provided in 2022 was used in this report.

³ Figures in tables may not add up to 3460 where there were missing data for particular fields (e.g. ethnicity returned as 'unknown').

characteristics in the Equality Act (2010). For schools, data collected includes the length of time the governor has served on the board, which enables shifts in sector recruitment to governing bodies to be tracked more easily. For the HE sector, having information on whether a governor was an external, internal or student appointee would enable a more nuanced understanding of diversity. An indicator on whether the governor was the chair or vice-chair would enable greater understanding around diversity in leadership and the interaction of those in leadership positions with the governing body⁴. Collecting data on the length of tenure would enable critical reflection on the balance between experience and more dynamic membership, and enable trend data to more reliably identify shifts in recruitment. A more consistent and more extensive data collection would give the academic community evidence that their decision making was inclusive and build the credibility of the sector with clear and transparent information about our progress on this important issue. The data HESA provides was greatly illuminating, but it also serves to highlight the remaining gaps in our knowledge.

The Advance HE (2022a) staff report includes detailed definitions of the terms used in this report. It should be noted that figures for the academic staff profile use the Full Time Equivalent for institutions that had reported data on governors only. This was in contrast to the Advance HE staff report, which reports Full Person Equivalent figures for the whole sector. The figures used in this report enable a comparison of the governing body to the everyday profile of those working in the HEIs they have responsibility for. The comparison was primarily made with academic staff, as mandatory collection of information ceased for non-academic staff in England and Wales in 2019/20. This has particularly affected returns from smaller institutions. Whilst only one of the 203 HEIs included in this report did not have accompanying data for academic staff, 39 did not report information for non-academic staff, making conclusions on differences harder to interpret.

The terms 'female' and 'male' were used in the HESA data, but 'women' and 'men' are referred to for ease of reading in the text. The category 'Other' was used by HESA to include international staff who may have had a legal sex that was not female or male, with this clarified in the 2020/21 collection. Responses may refer to gender prior to 2020/21, and may also be present in the 2020/21 data given the question used to collect this data was not prescribed by HESA. The question is referred to here as sex in this report given its purpose to collect data on legal sex. Given the small number of staff in this population (and the heterogeneity within this group), the report mainly limits the contrasts discussed in text to consideration of female and male staff, but presents results on the 'Other' group for completion.

⁴ This was particularly in relation to the impact of diversity with regard to voluntary disclosure (see Elmagrhi et al 2021, Ntim et al 2017), suggesting a need for further research around factors such the relationship of ordinary governors to chairs and vice-chairs, and of internal governors and often relatively homogeneous senior management teams to diverse governing bodies.

3. Diversity in UK HE Governing bodies

3.1 Size of UK HEI boards

The average governing body in the UK had 21 governors, though they ranged in size from three to 34 governors. The majority (78%) of institutions had between 15 and 29 governors (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, as shown in Figure 2, there was a close relationship between the size of governing bodies and the size of institutions. Small governing bodies might have had oversight over institutions with less than 100 academic staff, whilst the largest governing bodies had oversight of institutions with thousands of academic staff.

Figure 1 Number of UK HEIs by size of governing bodies

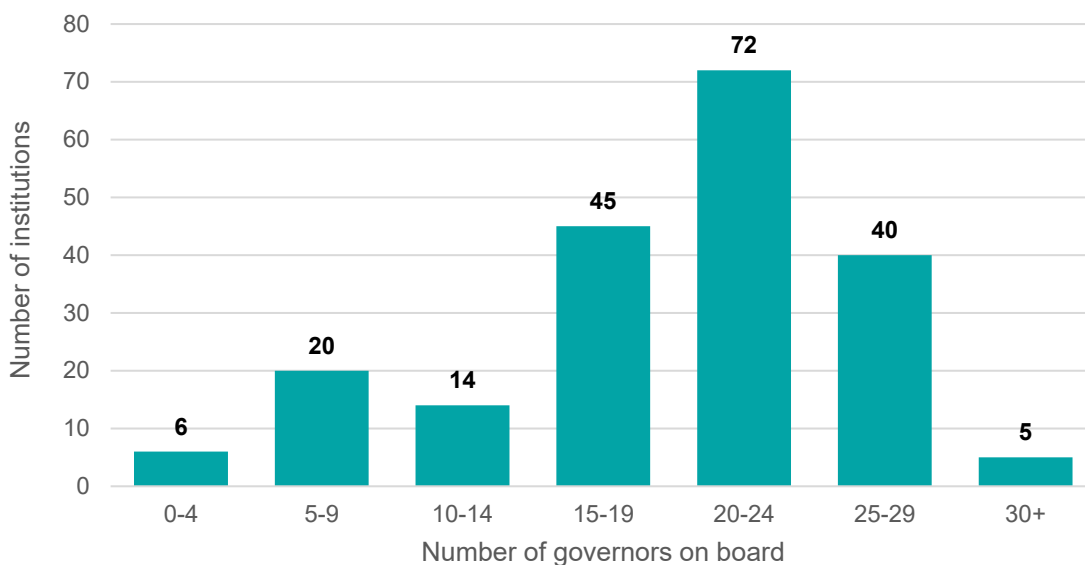
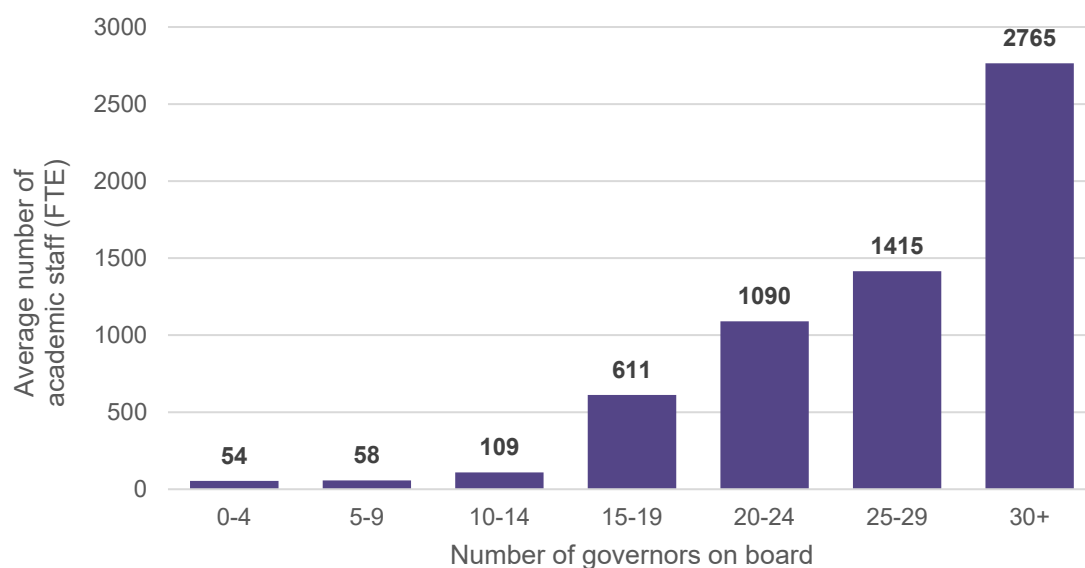


Figure 2 Average number of academic staff by size of governing bodies (FTE)



3.2 Sex

In 2013 the WomenCount report found that across 160 institutions, 32% of governing body or board members were women, with this increasing to 38% in 2016 and 40% in 2018. In 2018/19 the HESA return, collecting from slightly fewer institutions than WomenCount, indicated that the proportion of women on governing bodies was 41.8%. Data from the 2020/21 HESA returns showed that 42.4% of governing body members were women, just a 0.1 percentage point increase on the 2019/20 academic year (see Figure 3). Whilst there does appear to have been a positive trend towards parity across sex over the past decade, this progress has slowed considerably.

The proportion of women on governing bodies (42.4%) was over three percentage points below the proportion of academic staff who were women in these institutions (45.7%). The gap across sex was far larger for non-academic staff, who form a majority of those who work in HE. As governing bodies represent both professional and academic staff, the gap of 18.0 percentage points between the proportion of women in non-academic roles and the proportion of governors who were women should be considered as significant. However, as the HESA data collection was no longer mandatory for non-academic staff, a more detailed analysis is not presented here. The Advance HE (2022a) staff report has more detail on the characteristics of professional and support staff.

Figure 3 Governors and all staff by sex

	Female	Male	Other	Total
Governors				
2018/19	41.8%	57.9%	0.4%	3,460
2019/20	42.3%	57.0%	0.6%	3,565
2020/21	42.4%	56.8%	0.8%	3,915
All staff by role				
Non-academic	60.4%	39.4%	0.1%	163,530
Academic	45.7%	54.2%	0.1%	177,930

Over a third (34%) of institutions had a governing body where between 45% and 55% of governors were women (see Figure 4). Of the remainder, women were in a clear majority (>55%) on just 15% of governing bodies. As Figure 5 sets out, 77 of the 202 institutions (38%) in the 2020/21 return approach parity across sex⁵. Therefore, over half of institutions fall short of their governing bodies ensuring parity for women.

There was a significant relationship between the number of governors on a governing body and the proportion of women represented on that body, with this particularly evident for

⁵ This was defined as being within at least one person of a 50:50 balance between men and women on the board.

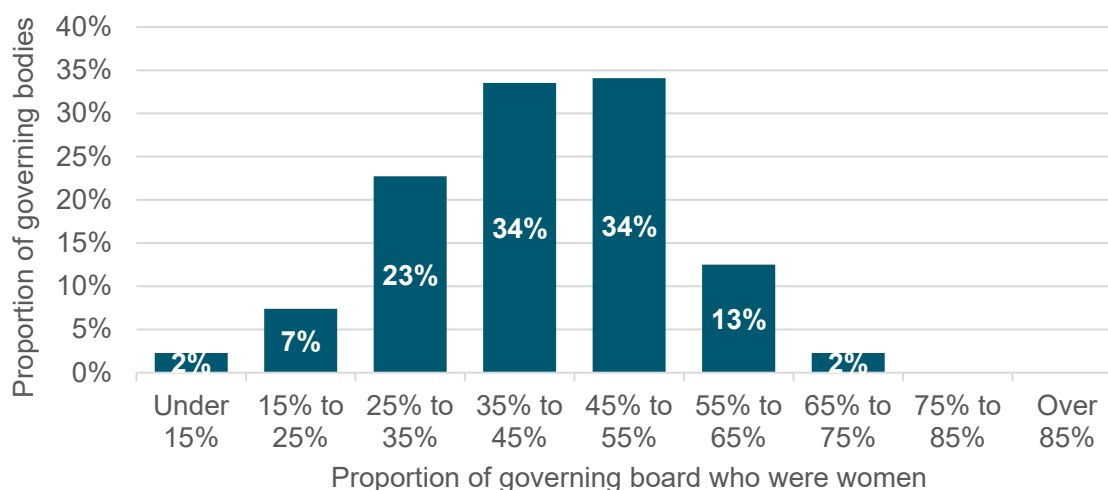
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those with 14 members or less⁶. For the very smallest governing bodies, just 24% were women, rising to 36% for those with 10 to 14 governors. Generally, these were governing bodies of highly specialist smaller institutions. Only 24% of governors on the very smallest governing bodies, those with less than 5 governors, were women; however, this was only just below the proportion of staff who were women in these institutions, being just 27%. The small size of these governing bodies also means that three quarters of them achieve sex parity – where the board was within one member of even sex representation.

The exceptional nature of these smallest governing boards and institutions was not reflected for other small governing bodies. For governing bodies up to 14 governors, the representation gap increases significantly. The proportion of women on governing bodies with 5-9 governors was 29.7%, whilst women make up 52.6% of academic staff at those institutions. Just 25% of institutions with governing bodies of between 5 to 9 governors achieved parity across sex. There was therefore a large gap between the composition of smaller governing bodies across sex and the profile of academic staff at these institutions, with parity also not being achieved. Whilst there should be challenge to all institutions with regard to their representation of women, the difference was most marked for smaller and specialist institutions.

Figure 4 Proportion of governing bodies by the proportion of women on the governing body



⁶ Difference was significant ($\chi^2 (1,3886) = 0.0, p < 0.01$) comparing boards with less than 15 members ($n=40$) to those with 15 and over members ($n=162$).

Figure 5 Sex by number of governors on governing body

Number on governing body	Average composition of governing body			Proportion reaching sex parity	Academic staff who were women	Sex representation gap	Count of HEIs
	Female	Male	Other				
30+	39.3%	51.8%	8.9%	40%	42.5%	3%	5
25-29	45.0%	54%	1.0%	43%	45.2%	0%	40
20-24	42.5%	57.3%	0.2%	36%	46.1%	4%	72
15-19	43.5%	56.5%	0.0%	38%	47.0%	4%	45
10-14	36.3%	63.1%	0.6%	43%	51.1%	16%	14
5-9	29.7%	70.3%	0.0%	25%	52.6%	21%	20
0-4	23.6%	76.4%	0.0%	67%	26.6%	3%	6
All	42.5%	56.8%	0.7%	38%	51.9%	3%	202

3.3 Nationality

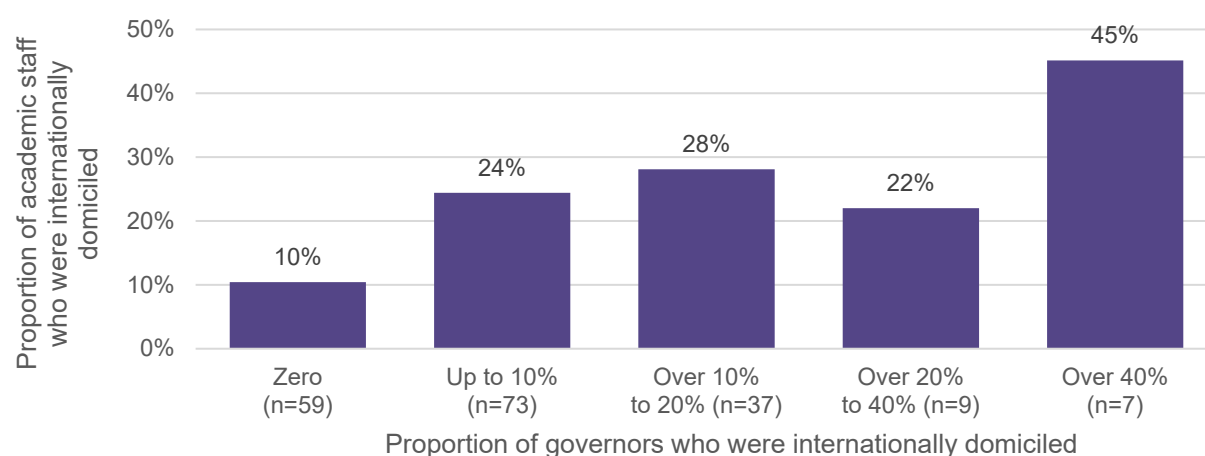
The proportion of international governors has marginally increased over the past three years, with the proportion of non-EU governors a percentage point higher in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. Over nine in ten (91.9%) governors were UK nationals. This was far more than the proportion of academic staff who were UK nationals (66.8%), and a little more than the proportion of professional and support staff (88.9%). Broadly, there was little variation in the profile of governors by sex across nationality.

Across institutions, 59 (31.9%) had no international governors (see Figure 7), with international staff making up an average of 10.4% of the academic staff body in these institutions. There were no international governors on the governing bodies of six institutions that had an academic staff body with 20% or more international staff. In general, there was a relationship ($r = 0.32$) between the number of international staff on governing bodies and the proportion of international academic staff. The underrepresentation of international staff on governing bodies was strongly connected with age, which is covered further in section 3.6.

Figure 6 Governors and all staff by nationality

	UK	All	International		Total
			EU	Non-EU	
Governors					
2018/19	93.2%	6.8%	3.4%	3.4%	3,000
2019/20	92.9%	7.1%	3.4%	3.6%	3,155
2020/21	91.9%	8.1%	3.6%	4.5%	3,510
All staff					
Academic staff	66.9%	33.1%	17.2%	15.9%	178,500
Non-academic staff	88.9%	11.1%	7.2%	4.0%	164,970
Governors by sex					
Female	91.3%	8.6%	4.1%	4.5%	1,500
Male	92.4%	7.6%	3.2%	4.4%	1,995
Other	-	-	-	-	30
All academic staff by sex					
Female	67.7%	32.3%	18.1%	14.2%	80,250
Male	66.2%	33.8%	16.5%	17.4%	95,200
Other	71.4%	28.6%	19.0%	9.5%	210

Figure 7 Average proportion of international staff within an institution by proportion of internationally domiciled governors on the governing body (n = count of institutions)



3.4 Ethnicity

There has been a small but positive trend with regard to the proportion of governors who disclosed themselves as from Asian, Black, or other minority ethnic groups over the past three years. The proportion of UK domiciled governors from a White ethnic group fell from 90.9% in 2018/19 to 87.8% in 2020/21 (see Figure 8). This was almost identical to the proportion of UK domiciled academic staff in these institutions from a White ethnic group (87.9%) and very similar to the profile of non-academic staff. Whilst the profile differed slightly across ethnic groups, no difference was over one percentage point.

Women of minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to be governors than men of minority ethnic backgrounds, with women from Black ethnic groups twice as likely as men from Black ethnic groups to be governors (4.3% to 2.0% respectively). This was not the case for UK academic staff, where there was little difference in profile across ethnic groups by sex.

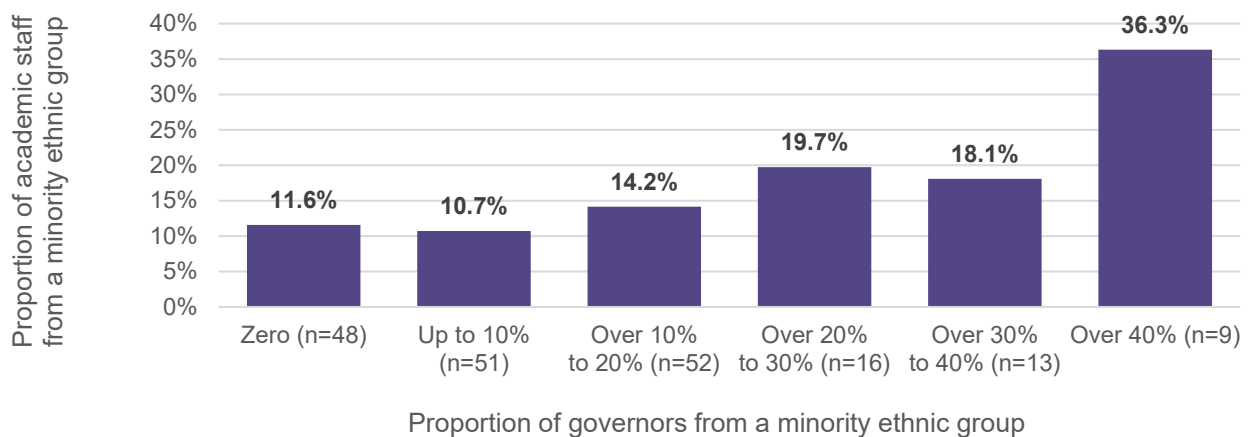
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Figure 8 Governors and all staff by ethnicity (UK domiciled only)

	Asian	Black	Mixed	Other	White	Total
UK domiciled governors						
2018/19	4.1%	2.2%	2.0%	0.8%	90.9%	2585
2019/20	5.0%	2.1%	2.0%	1.0%	89.9%	2735
2020/21	5.7%	3.0%	2.5%	1.0%	87.8%	3025
UK domiciled staff						
Academic	6.4%	2.0%	2.2%	1.4%	87.9%	111,690
Non-academic	5.7%	2.8%	2.1%	0.6%	88.8%	139,395
Governors by sex						
Female	6.1%	4.3%	3.2%	1.0%	85.4%	1295
Male	5.5%	2.0%	2.0%	1.0%	89.6%	1725
Other	-	-	-	-	-	5
All UK academic staff by sex						
Female	6.1%	1.9%	2.5%	1.3%	88.2%	52,055
Male	6.6%	1.9%	1.9%	1.5%	88.0%	59,300
Other	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	93.8%	80

Figure 9 Average proportion of staff within an institution from minority ethnic groups by proportion of governors on the governing body from minority ethnic groups (n = count of institutions)



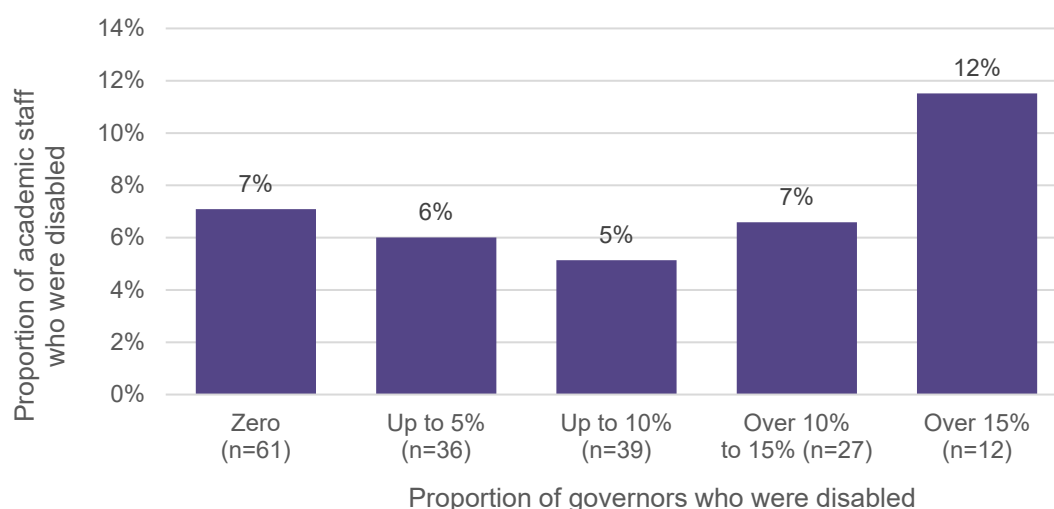
The underrepresentation of staff from minority ethnic groups on governing bodies was evident when considering within institutions. For example, the 56 institutions with no governor from a minority ethnic group had, on average, 11.6% of academic staff from a minority ethnic group (see Figure 9). Six of these institutions had over 15% of their academic staff from minority ethnic groups. Whilst this kind of descriptive representation might not be necessary to represent the interests of minority ethnic staff, it places a question of why diversity was not present when a significant proportion of academic staff were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The broader picture was positive. Nearly two-fifths (39.1%) of governing bodies were more ethnically diverse than the academic staff body, though the extent of ethnic diversity within governing bodies was strongly correlated with that of academic staff ($r=0.72$). Internal appointees typically account for only a third of the governing body, which suggests that this correlation might not be solely due to the constitution of the academic staff body, but could reflect the wider mission and ethos of the institution in the appointment of internal and external governors. However, without information on which governors were internal or external, this is not clear.

3.5 Disability

There was a slight but positive trend to the proportion of governors who disclosed a disability on governing bodies, increasing from 5.4% in 2018/19 to 5.8% in 2020/21, perhaps reflecting an increase in the proportion of all academic staff who disclosed a disability (see Figure 12). There was little difference between the proportion of governors who disclosed a disability and the proportion amongst academic staff. A third (32.8%) of institutions had one governor who disclosed a disability, with a further 16.1% having two, 12.1% having three, and 4.0% having more. The remaining 35% had no governor who disclosed a disability, despite 7% of academic staff at these institutions declaring a disability (see Figure 10). There were three institutions where over 15% of academic staff disclosed a disability but where no governor had a disclosed disability. There was very little relationship between the proportion of governors who disclosed a disability and the proportion of staff at the institution. The institutions with the highest proportion of governors who disclosed a disability had a higher proportion of staff who disclosed a disability on average; however, this appears to be due to a couple of outlier institutions rather than a particular trend.

Figure 10 Average proportion of staff who disclosed a disability within an institution by proportion of governors on the governing body who disclosed a disability (n = count of institutions)



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Regarding type of disability, 1.4% of governors reported a long standing illness or medical condition and 0.9% a specific learning condition such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. 0.6% of governors reported having 2 or more impairments or disabling conditions. The pattern of types of disability was broadly similar between governors and all academic staff (see Figure 11).

As Figure 12 sets out, the proportion of female governors (6.8%) who disclosed as disabled was slightly greater than that of male governors (5.0%), reflecting a similar trend for all academic staff (4.2% to 5.0%). The proportion of governors who were UK nationals disclosing as disabled (6.6%) was similar to that present amongst all UK academic staff (6.7%). In contrast, the proportion of governors of EU nationality who disclosed a disability (5.6%) was substantially higher than for all academic staff (2.9%). The extent to which governors of minority ethnicity disclosed a disability was much higher than for all academic staff. For example, 13.3% of governors from a Black ethnic group disclosed a disability, compared to 4.1% of the academic staff from a Black ethnic group.

As with nationality and ethnicity, where diversity was missing, and even where it was present but perhaps not explicitly expressed or heavily in the minority, then the diversity of experiences of staff and students may have been un-heard. With regard to disability, this was perhaps the most challenging of the protected characteristics considered in this report, given just around one in 20 staff disclosed a disability. As with other characteristics, it might be considered whether the experiences of staff and students who were disabled needs to be explicitly included on governing bodies, either through descriptive representation or other mechanisms.

Figure 11 Kinds of disclosed disability across governors and staff

	Governors	Academic staff	Professional and support staff
No known disability	94.2%	95.2%	93.2%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	0.7%	0.6%	0.8%
A long standing illness or health condition	1.4%	1.1%	1.6%
A mental health condition	0.7%	0.6%	1.2%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	0.7%	0.4%	0.4%
A social/communication impairment	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
A specific learning difficulty	0.9%	1.2%	1.4%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	0.5%	0.2%	0.3%
General learning disability	-	-	0.0%
Two or more conditions	0.7%	0.5%	0.8%
Total	3915	179670	165585

Figure 12 Disclosed disability across governors and academic staff

	Governors			Academic staff		
	Disclosed disability %	No disclosed disability %	Total count	Disclosed disability %	No disclosed disability %	Total count
Year						
2018/19	5.4%	94.6%	3455	4.2%	95.8%	173,225
2019/20	5.7%	94.3%	3565	4.5%	95.5%	177,955
2020/21	5.8%	94.2%	3915	5.0%	95.0%	180,055
Sex						
Female	6.8%	95.0%	1660	5.8%	94.2%	82,215
Male	5.0%	93.2%	2225	4.3%	95.7%	97,540
Other	13.8%	86.2%	30	8.9%	91.1%	225
Nationality						
UK	6.6%	93.4%	3225	6.3%	93.7%	119,370
EU	5.6%	94.4%	125	2.7%	97.3%	30,760
Non-EU	3.2%	96.8%	160	2.3%	97.7%	28,365
Ethnicity (UK Domiciled only)						
Asian	5.8%	94.2%	175	2.6%	97.4%	7,145
Black	13.3%	86.7%	90	4.0%	96.0%	2,135
Mixed	15.8%	84.2%	75	5.3%	94.7%	2,365
Other	10.0%	90.0%	30	2.6%	97.4%	1,555
White	6.4%	93.6%	2655	6.7%	93.3%	98,200

3.6 Age

The protected characteristics that have been considered so far in this report have focussed on aspects that should not have any relation to the competence and experience of governors. However, age was a particular and complex exception to this. Age was related to seniority and experience, and given many governors were drawn from senior staff, those staff were inevitably older than average. External appointees would be expected to have sufficient experience that would enable them to contribute to the governance process, again favouring older governors. It was therefore of little surprise that the profile of governors by age differs markedly from that of staff. As Figure 13 shows, 6.5% of governors were aged 25 or under in 2020/21, compared to just 2.1% of academics, though the proportion of professional and support staff in this age range was similar (6.7%). Just over one in ten governors (11.6%) were aged between 26 and 45, yet well over half (55.6%) of academic staff were in this age range. The proportion of governors aged 66 and over was 19.6%, far more than the 2.3% of academic staff. Perhaps the clearest trend also belongs to this age group, with the proportion of governors aged 66 years or above falling by over four percentage points (24% to 19.6%) from 2018/19 to 2020/21.

Figure 14 demonstrates that the youngest governors make up a far higher proportion of diverse characteristics than would be expected from the overall age profile or staff population. For example, whilst governors aged 25 or under make up 6.5% of the total governor population, they constitute over a fifth (21.1%) of governors who disclosed a disability. Similar differences were observed within nationality, most minority ethnic groups, and for women and those of 'other' sex. The youngest governors were expected to be student governors and the diversity of governing bodies was to some extent dependent on their presence within it. However, without indication of which governors were in fact student representatives on the HESA dataset, this has to remain partly conjecture.

Over half of those groups in the majority on governing bodies – men, those from White ethnic groups, UK domiciled and those with no disclosed disability – were aged 56 and over (see Figure 14). This was strikingly different to groups that were typically in the minority on governing bodies. For example, 55% of governors who were UK nationals were aged 56 or over, compared to just 27% of governors who were EU nationals. 59% of governors from a White ethnic group were aged 56 or over, compared to just 28% of those from an Asian ethnic group.

To some extent the difference in profile across characteristics reflects the profile of academic staff. For example, 7% of academic staff who were non-UK nationals were 56 years or older, compared to 22% of UK nationals. However, this was only a partial reason for the difference. The proportion of academic staff from an Asian ethnic group who were 56 or older was only four percentage points lower (19%) than the proportion from a White ethnic group (23%). Therefore, the difference in profile across age does not reflect the 31 percentage point difference in profile for governors of this age between these ethnic groups.

The profile of governors would be expected to reflect barriers to progression that were evidenced in the HE sector (for example, Macfarlane and Burg 2018, Singh and Kwhali 2015). Governors aged 66 years or older might be expected to be external appointees, and the recruitment of external appointees might enable greater diversity. However, this group appears no more diverse than the broader group aged 56 and over. Without indication of who were external appointees it remains conjecture as to whether the lack of diversity in this older aged group reflects senior HE leadership and/or external appointees to the governing body.

Figure 13 Age of governors by year, and all academic staff for 2020/21

	Age						Total count
	25 and under	26 to 35	36 to 45	46 to 55	56 to 65	66 and over	
Year							
2018/19	6.5%	2.8%	8.8%	24.4%	33.5%	24.0%	3,455
2019/20	6.2%	2.9%	9.2%	24.4%	34.2%	23.0%	3,565
2020/21	6.5%	3.9%	9.9%	25.7%	34.4%	19.6%	3,915
All staff							
Academic staff	2.1%	25.8%	29.8%	24.9%	15.0%	2.3%	179,945
Non-academic staff	6.7%	25.1%	26.9%	25.2%	15.0%	1.1%	165,870

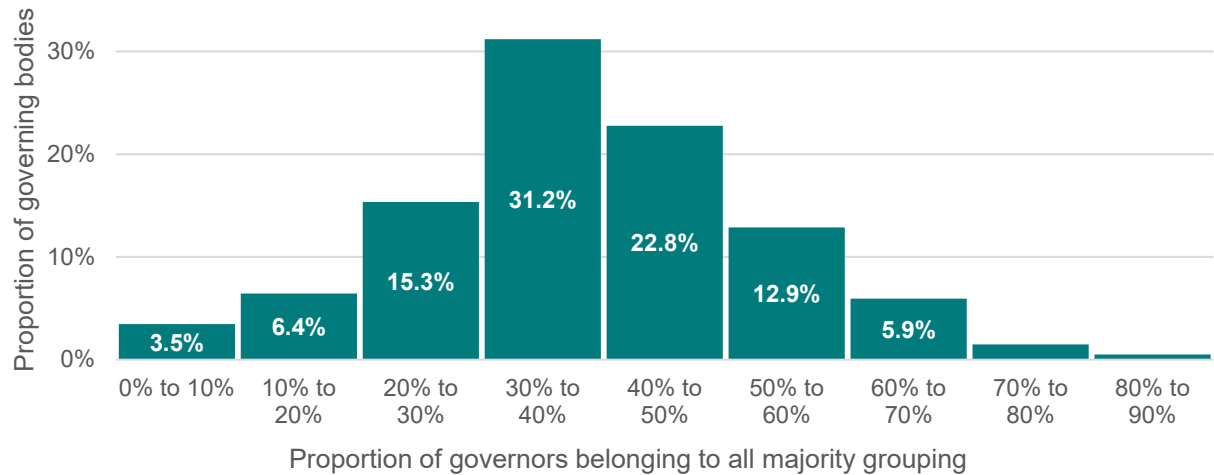
Figure 14 Age of governors and academic staff by year and demographic profile

	Governors				All academic staff			
	25 and under	26 to 55	56 and over	Total	25 and under	26 to 55	56 and over	Total
2020/21	6.5%	39.5%	54.0%	1662	2.1%	80.5%	17.4%	178,065
Sex								
Female	9.3%	42.8%	47.9%	1662	2.4%	82.6%	14.9%	81325
Male	4.2%	37.0%	58.8%	2224	1.8%	78.9%	19.3%	96370
Other	13.8%	44.8%	41.4%	29	3.2%	80.6%	16.1%	155
Nationality								
UK	5.6%	39.1%	55.3%	3223	2.0%	75.5%	22.5%	119,220
EU	15.9%	57.1%	27.0%	126	2.3%	90.7%	7.0%	30,440
Non-EU	14.6%	56.3%	29.1%	158	1.9%	91.5%	6.5%	28,100
Ethnicity (UK domiciled only)								
Asian	6.4%	65.3%	28.3%	173	1.5%	79.9%	18.6%	6,885
Black	8.9%	60.0%	31.1%	90	1.2%	79.9%	18.9%	1,690
Mixed	17.1%	55.3%	27.6%	76	2.5%	87.8%	9.7%	2,015
Other	10.0%	40.0%	50.0%	30	0.9%	82.3%	16.8%	1,130
White	4.8%	36.4%	58.8%	2654	1.7%	75.1%	23.1%	97,770
Disability								
Disclosed disability	21.1%	36.4%	42.5%	228	2.0%	78.7%	19.3%	7,115
No known disability	5.6%	39.7%	54.7%	3687	1.9%	75.5%	22.6%	111,725

3.7 Intersectionality and diversity

The analysis over the previous pages has covered aspects of intersectionality. Yet, as noted in the previous section, there appears to be some commonality regarding the groups that were typically in a majority on governing bodies. This intersectional majority group – male, UK domiciled, White, with no disclosed disability – constitutes 43.2% of governors. Over a fifth (20.8%) of governing bodies had a majority of this group (see Figure 15). A positive note from this analysis was that every single governing body had some level of diversity.

Figure 15 Proportion of governing bodies by proportion of governors belonging to the intersectional majority group



Governors within the youngest age group were important for diversity, making up 16.7% of those from two or more intersecting minority groups, far more than would be expected (see Figure 16). However, as the number of younger governors was relatively small, it was governors aged 46 to 55 who made up 30.6% of those from two or more intersecting minority groups. Although older governors tended to be less diverse, they still brought a great deal of diversity to governing boards.

Figure 16 Age of governors within intersecting minority ethnic groups

Number of minority ethnic groups governor was a member of	Age						Total
	25 and under	26 to 35	36 to 45	46 to 55	56 to 65	66 and over	
0	2.5%	2.3%	7.0%	24.2%	40.6%	23.4%	1458
1	6.1%	3.1%	11.6%	28.2%	35.2%	15.8%	1271
2 or more	16.7%	5.6%	16.0%	30.6%	22.9%	8.3%	288

What this analysis does not capture was the positions of people within minority ethnic groups on the governing body. In particular, information regarding the length of tenure on the board, whether the person was chair or deputy, and what kind of appointee they were, was not included in the HESA records. This report calls for a wider collection of data, but it should be noted that there were many particular positions and experiences beyond what could be captured through data collection. The quantitative measures that can be gathered will always be limited, with many intersections of positionality and experience potentially offering distinctive and valuable insight. Perhaps the most important factor not evidenced here was whether the practices and processes of governing bodies, the culture and orientation of everyday meetings and communication, supported the articulation of diversity to inform governance.

4. Summary and concluding remarks

The extent to which we can say that governance in UK HE was diverse depends upon how it was measured. Certainly, if judging by the broader academic staff body or the general population within which our universities and HE providers sit, governing bodies do not reflect that diversity.

The positive trends around greater representation of women had slowed well short of parity. Whilst the career paths of international staff might be different, their underrepresentation on governing bodies was the most marked across the dimensions of diversity measured here. The extent of diversity across institutions does reflect in part the diversity present in the academic staff body, but there were institutions that fell short in having their governing body be a reflection of the diversity present amongst their academic staff. In particular, smaller institutions need to address the lack of equitable representation of women on their governing boards. Some institutions wholly fail to represent the ethnic diversity that exists within their staff body.

Despite these concerns, there were many institutions where diversity was very present in governing bodies and trends across the sector were positive. Diversity was present in every age group and every governing body, sometimes to a greater extent than present in the staff body. Yet, this inevitably leads to the question of what impact that diversity has. It remains unclear whether governors from groups typically within a minority on governing bodies hold the same level of power and influence as the majority. It was not clear whether diversity was mainly present through internal or external appointees, or the contribution of student representatives on governing bodies. The lack of information on length of tenure of governors reduced our ability to gauge how the shape of governance was changing. The data collection of governor data was a great step forward in advancing our understanding of governors in the UK. However, data specific to the governor role would make this understanding more robust.

There are many resources and methods of support available that can enable good governance, including around recruitment and retention of governors. The Board Diversification Project (Tester et al 2019) and the Board Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit (Shafi et al 2021) are just two of these, and are part of ongoing work by Advance HE. This report aims to contribute to the continued reflection and action on increasing the diversity of governing bodies. It is hoped that the evidence presented in this report will prompt engagement with the issue where it is needed, and support the focus on best practice where it is ongoing.

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