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Striving for Diversity of Leadership: Governance in UK Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Diversity of membership on boards and governance bodies in a range of sectors have been shown to be a key element in successful boards and effectively lead, monitor and advise their executive. Much progress has been made on improving gender balance on boards, including in universities and higher education institutions (HEI). However, the (scant) literature on HEI boards highlights that higher education or university boards in the UK need to do more to tackle all the other forms of under-representation where limited progress has been made on diversity, other than gender. This paper thus has two main aims, the first to locate the work on developing the diversity of UK university boards within the wider (corporate) theory and literature in this field. This is because the literature in the corporate sector is better established and therefore there is something to learn from practice in this area. The second aim is to develop a practical toolkit to expedite board diversity in higher education to bring it in line with other sectors to enable them to reflect what the OECD believe should be the role of universities: which is to be at the cutting edge of leading societal change. This paper reports on quantitative and qualitative data collected and analysed in order to develop a practical Board Diversity Toolkit - the first national scheme of its kind. Data were collected from 44 HEIs, representing a third of the UK's HEIs and 104 governors to inform the development of the Toolkit. The paper discusses the issues raised in the data that might be a key barrier to achieving diversity and addressing chronic under-representation in UK Boards. This centred around deep-seated attitudes on how diversity may compromise the skills needed on Boards and importantly how to unseat these ingrained (often unconscious) attitudes if we are to achieve genuine change at Board levels. The Board Diversity Toolkit, designed as an output of work, could play a key role in changing such attitudes and develop the UK HEI sector in terms of conducting board business better, as well as meeting the need to be representative of staff and student bodies.

Keywords: Education, Diversity, Governance, Leadership, Higher education

Introduction

The influence of power, politics and the inequality of opportunity in society is seen across the stratum of society and Boards (Councils or Trustees) of Universities as institutions reflect this same imbalance. In order to foster true and sustainable change so that education institutions can claim to be the generators of new knowledge and to forge society forward, one of the first places to effect and reflect this change has to be at the very top of higher education governance (OECD, 2016). Fortunately, there is much work being conducted across sectors on equality, diversity and inclusion within the context of the Equalities Act (2010) which introduced a public sector equality duty on HE institutions in England, Wales and Scotland. However, the responsibilities have been brought this into sharper focus, since, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement providing a catalyst of existing initiatives such as decolonising the curriculum and improving diversity at all levels of staffing and leadership (Pimblott, 2020).

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There has been much work on addressing under-representation and equality to help achieve the goal of inclusivity through diversity. Importantly though, it is a time of proactive action and change, debate is now simply not enough. A focus on the UK context is pertinent because this paper reports on the data collected to inform the development of a Board Diversity Toolkit for the UK context - the first national scheme of its kind. Further because the data has led to new insights about key barriers to enabling the true benefits diversity can bring to leadership and governance. This was especially important as the insights fed into the development of the Board Diversity Toolkit, which was commissioned by Advance HE which is a member-led charity of and for the HE sector working with partners across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society overall. The Toolkit is an online interactive document which provides practical advice, guidance, resources and other tools to address the lack of diversity in UK university boards and can be accessed via the Advance HE website within the member area.

About Universities and University Boards

In the UK context, the governing body of a university is the senior group ultimately responsible for all activities within the institution (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017). This includes academic identity and the oversight of quality and standards as well as corporate functions relating to finance, human resources, etc. Independence and institutional autonomy are critical to the operating context of universities in the UK and protecting these attributes is one of the core purposes of a board. While the actual size and composition of a board will vary, they are usually between 10 and 40 members (Schofield, 2009). Boards themselves are largely free to operate in the way which they feel best promotes the success of the institutions they lead, but are subject to the oversight of the Office for Students (in England) and their key regulatory objectives (OfS, 2018). Boards also normally refer to the good practice produced by the Committee of University Chairs: the voluntary representative body for the Chairs of UK university boards (CuC, 2020).

Universities in the UK are also diverse in range and character, spanning ancient institutions (such as Oxford or St Andrews) to modern institutions achieving university status in the past few years and from small universities with a few thousand students to those several tens of thousands. The majority of universities receive public funding, so the private (or independent) sector in the UK is comparatively small. There are many ways to categorise or group UK universities. Examples including mission groups, which are self-selecting groups of institutions that share common interests. The most prominent example is the Russell Group, where research excellence is a mutual interest. Another common categorisation is 'pre-92', which refers to institutions that gained university title prior to the Higher Education Act in 1992 which converted polytechnics into universities, and 'post-92', which refers to institutions which gained their title either because of or subsequent to this Act (Crozier et al, 2008). There are increasing differences between the regulation and funding of universities across the constituent countries of the UK. Whether a university is based in England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland is also, therefore, of increasing relevance.

Literature Review

Earlier literature on diversity on boards had focused on gender (Khatib, et al, 2021) which has led the way and contributed to strengthening the case for ethnicity, age, sexuality and other forms of diversity on boards (Bear, Rahman & Post (2010). Much of the research is focused within the corporate sector, however as universities (at least in the UK) operate within a largely market-driven context (Tight, 2019), it is possible to draw parallels. Boards or council members in the HE Sector are appointed by universities themselves and are both free and responsible for the makeup of their Boards to best suit their institutional needs (CUC, 2020). It also means the responsibility of having a board that is diverse and reflective of their student and staff body as well as their geographical context falls upon the Boards, much like in the corporate sector. Hence this paper draws on the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and often associated theoretical frameworks of resource dependency theory and agency theory as a way towards effective boards in HE.

Playing Catch-Up

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is an extensively researched and rapidly changing landscape which has developed at different paces in different sectors (Kirton & Green, 2021). In the HE governance and leadership area, much of the diversity knowledge base is in the grey literature, for example, the Advance HE Diversity of Governors in Higher Education Report (2020) was the first report published on HE Board Diversity and a first step in understanding the context of this work. The report drew on HESA¹ data and outlines the most significant trends in HE Board diversity. A further report published in 2021 examined UK-wide Board diversity and highlighted the lack of inclusion on Boards, manifested as under-representation and resulted in a lack of diversity. Figures from this report showed that 47% of UK companies polled stated that whilst there is some diversity, more could be done to improve this, and only 6% felt that diversity and inclusion was very well represented across their Board (Odgers Berndtson and BoardEx, 2021). This historic and societal problem, which has been prevalent over the past century, according to research by Shattock (2017), is still ongoing. The education sector is not alone with lack of inclusion of diverse members on Boards despite a willingness for improving on inclusion (Fredette and Bernstein, 2019; Inclusive Boards, 2018; Shattock, 2017).

Whilst this may feel like something of a reprieve: that all Boards are together in this, it is not an opportunity to sit back and do nothing (Fredette and Bernstein, 2019; Shattock, 2017). The lack of diversity and inclusion extends into the HE sector despite the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) suggesting that education by its very nature, must be at the cutting edge of innovation in ideas and thinking. Yet, the education sector is, in some areas, playing catch up and not at the forefront of change as the OECD (2016) suggests, even for gender equality. The charity sector has developed a set of guidelines on how to obtain and retain inclusive boards (Kasumu, 2018; Charity Governance code, 2017) and was implemented in 2018 by the Charities Commission, who provided the resource to enable inclusive practices in Board recruitment and retention (Gov.uk, 2018). HE has only just embarked on the (similar) board diversity practice project, three years after the charity sector released a similar set of guidelines and this research is the basis of that initiated by Advance HE and Perrett Laver.

Gender on Boards

Gender quotas were introduced by a number of countries across the world to address the lack of women on corporate boards (Terjesen, Aguilera, & Lorenz, 2015), e.g. Norway introduced quota of 40% women on Boards in 2003, Spain in 2005 and many others followed.. These initiatives led to a dramatic increase in women representation on boards. A recent review by Reddy & Jadhav (2019) explored the impact of gender quotas and found that the benefits of such an approach are mixed, depending on the ‘success measure’ being used and they cite a number of studies which explore reasons for this. Such quotas have not been formally introduced for other forms of diversity and other studies emphasise a critical mass in terms of gender or other diversity as being important for making an impact, challenging the notion of tokenism (Bear, Rehman & Post, 2010). This knowledge contributes to the understanding of emphasising that a ‘tick-box exercise’ will not be successful.

“Skills vs Diversity” Debate

How HE Boards attempt to address under-representation and achieve diversity can be a challenge. A key issue has been the perception of a disparity between applicants with relevant skills, and those with protected characteristics.² However, research undertaken in the US by Taylor and De Lourdes (2008) exhort the value of diversity in HE Boards, as do Jayne & Dipboye (2004) and Litvin (2006) who make the business case for board diversity. Taylor & De Lourdes’ (2008) research suggests that often non-diverse publicly appointed Board members may have other relevant experience but no higher education experience and so these Board members may also not serve the interest of the institution. In contrast publicly appointed Board members from a variety of different backgrounds, including those with protected characteristics, are more representative of not only the higher education institution but also of

¹ HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency

² Protected characteristics are those which are protected under UK law. There are nine protected characteristics in the UK which include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

the student body itself (Fredette, Bradshaw and Kreuse, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). In 2014, a pilot scheme highlighted the value of diverse Board members as bringing a plethora of different qualities, experiences, and outlooks (Valeur, 2018; Wilson, 2016), which resonated with prior research undertaken by Bourne, (2009). Further research by Pimblott (2019), considers that by “decolonising the curriculum” those from diverse backgrounds can add a critical voice on Boards and ensure that all individuals are represented at an institutional level. This is important to consider more widely, as lived experience and diverse backgrounds are necessary on Boards because students are pushing not just to decolonise the curriculum, but universities themselves. Diverse skills are needed to achieve this.

Theoretical Frameworks

In recent years, the push for diverse Boards has led to greater discussions around the subject, and the argument that higher education institutions have a greater level of social responsibility over financial gain (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Fredette et al, 2016; Rao and Tilt, 2015). This may be seen as parallel to the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) defined by Barnett (2007) as the allocation of resources for improving social welfare and which also helps to enhance relationships with stakeholders. HEIs are by their nature contributing to a social good, not just by how many students are awarded qualifications but in terms of how they work with local communities and contribute to society and developing citizens (Collini, 2012). Research by Hakovirta, Denuwara, Bharathi. et al (2020) has shown that greater racial diversity not only increases social responsibility, but also Board performance and innovation so that it can effectively manage resources.

Whilst universities do not seek to make profit as in the corporate sector, effective governance based on for example, the resource dependency theory is still relevant. This theory refers to a Boards advisory role in advising the organisation in resources acquisition or management to maintain a competitive advantage and achieve its business objectives (Khatib et al 2021). Racial and ethnic diversity contributes significantly to diversity in thought and decision-making and the most innovative companies are considered to be 27% more ethnically diverse than their competitors (Hakovirta, Denuwara, Bharathi. et al. 2020). As discussed previously, UK university boards are responsible for how resources are used with a duty equivalent to CSR.

The multiple responsibilities of university Boards mean that often multiple theoretical perspectives can provide a useful lens (Khatib et al, 2021) to aid and explain understanding and to improve their effectiveness. Agency theory refers to a board’s monitoring role in holding the organisation’s executive/management to account is another such theory. As HEIs are spending public money which funds students, there is a duty towards staff, students and the local community and thus agency theory is a useful framework to draw upon when considering their monitoring role.

The Challenges

It has become apparent is that in order to achieve diversity, Boards need to walk a fine line between overcompensating and not doing enough (Fredette et al, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). A dearth of Board candidates with potential protected characteristics is not the only issue faced by those looking to recruit more diverse candidates onto their Board. Care needs to be taken when recruiting governors in order not to fall into a trap of tokenism or positive discrimination (Fredette et al, 2016). Diversity is considered to be complicated according to Fredette et al (2015), this is especially when it comes to the issue of skills and diversity. An issue that frequently arises is the fact that candidates with protected characteristics are not perceived to have the requisite skills for the role, as mentioned earlier.

In terms of diversity versus skills, it has to be recognised that the debate contains a false dichotomy because through improving Boards generally and widening views you get more forward thinking HE Boards (NGA, 2020; Creary, McDonnell, Ghai and Scuggs, 2019). This is where a more practical toolkit can guide and provide support in recruiting Board members with protected characteristics, whilst making sure that tokenism is avoided and there are steps in place to nurture candidates to develop relevant skills, if they do not have them (Fredette et al, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008).

There is a tendency for the assumption that HE Boards are seen as ‘old fashioned’ or traditional and contain mostly older career males reaching the end of their careers. Unfortunately, in some cases this is the reality of HE Boards, which then discourages those with protected characteristics to apply (Wheaton, 2019; Shattock, 2017).

Yet, it is not only the way Boards are viewed and considered to be made up of a certain demographic, which hinders those with protected characteristics to apply, but further exacerbations occur within the board itself. Often, those on the recruitment and interview panel unconsciously seek to recruit similar minded members to themselves or are ‘isomorphic’ (Wheaton, 2019). Additional difficulties can arise if an institution is located within a certain community, which may lack individuals with protected characteristics (Fredette, Bradshaw and Kreuse, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). These are real challenges and support is required to find innovative ways to address them.

A Call to Greater Action

In order to enable the recruitment of diverse Board members in universities it is necessary to consider how the process will be incorporated into the structure of university Boards (Pimblott, 2019; Fredette et al, 2016). As Taylor and De Lourdes (2008) stated, it is essential to have a university Board that is representative of the student and staff community, which must be reflected in the university mission statement. Through proper definition and execution, and embedding plans for diversification of university governing Boards, changes can be made (Fredette et al, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). This is, however, not a straightforward process as Pimblott (2019, p.211) states with regards to decolonisation (for which diversity is also needed):

“The call to decolonise the university is not new and has roots in a number of earlier social and cultural movements whose participants shared in a determination to confront the ideological apparatus of white supremacy and colonialism.”

There are challenges to the ongoing processes of encouraging inclusion in university governing Boards, yet as the research has shown, there are distinct advantages of a diverse governing Board. The individuality of diverse thinkers complements other Board members and adds further dimensions that will go beyond the auspices of the governing Board and out into the university (Fredette et al, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Bourne, 2009; Taylor and Lourdes, 2008).

Moving Forward

This research is situated within its own unique and important cultural context. Wider social movements, such as Black Lives Matter are providing new insights, energy, and enthusiasm into the thinking on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Within education, efforts to decolonise the curriculum are also underway with a determined focus, but these efforts have not gone unchallenged, a recent HEPI³ report suggests that 31% of the public disagree on decolonising the curriculum, 33% neither agree or disagree and only 23% of the public support it (HEPI, 2021). The debate around this issue changes however, when the implications are explained properly with greater context and understanding; support for change increases to 67% approval to 4% disapproval. This highlights the importance of proper context and explanation in any meaningful work on diversity and is the basis of this Toolkit.

This research builds on prior work conducted by Advance HE. The Diversity Principles Framework (2017) sought recruitment industry perspectives to motivate the HE sector to apply inclusion principles effectively. The framework has helped to provide a foundation for this research and provides a baseline for the challenging definitions, terminologies and nuances found in any meaningful discussion about diversity and inclusion. The research aimed to explore the challenges of diversifying boards from the perspectives of key stakeholders; identify areas of good practice and what needed improving and to establish what support HE institutions need in order to diversify their boards. All this was designed to inform the development of a Board Diversity Toolkit.

³ HEPI - Higher Education Policy Institute

Methodology

A mixed methods research design was employed where quantitative and qualitative data gathering was necessary in order to capture the experiences of multiple stakeholders across the sector. Surveys were followed up with interviews targeting clerks, board members/governors, executive search firms and researchers with EDI specialisms. In this way there was greater opportunity to assess the problem through multiple critical lenses and gain as much perspective as possible. (Harrison and Murray, 2012)

Surveys

Survey One was sent out to university secretaries and clerks across the HE sector who are responsible for leading and managing university administration and compliance and play a key role in supporting and recruiting university boards. The survey was primarily concerned with capturing the current state of board diversity, best practice and the strategic needs of board decision makers. The questions in this survey centred around board composition, the state of the board’s current diversity, potential challenges to diversification and the types of resources that may aid the process.

The survey was completed by 44 institutions, which is roughly one third of the universities registered in the UK or 10.5% of the HEIs registered by the Office for Students as of June 2020 (Office for Students OfS, 2020). Out of these 44 HEIs, 35 provided their names and 21 provided further contact details.

The make-up of these universities was representative of most sector bodies and mission groups, with 8 out of 24 Russell Group universities (exactly one-third), 3 out of 12 University Alliance members (one-quarter), 5 out of 15 Cathedral’s Group Universities (one-third). Some areas for sample improvement would be Guild HE members (10 out of 54) Million plus (4 out of 23) and UK Conservatoires (2 out of 11). We have also captured the views of several Independent HEIs.

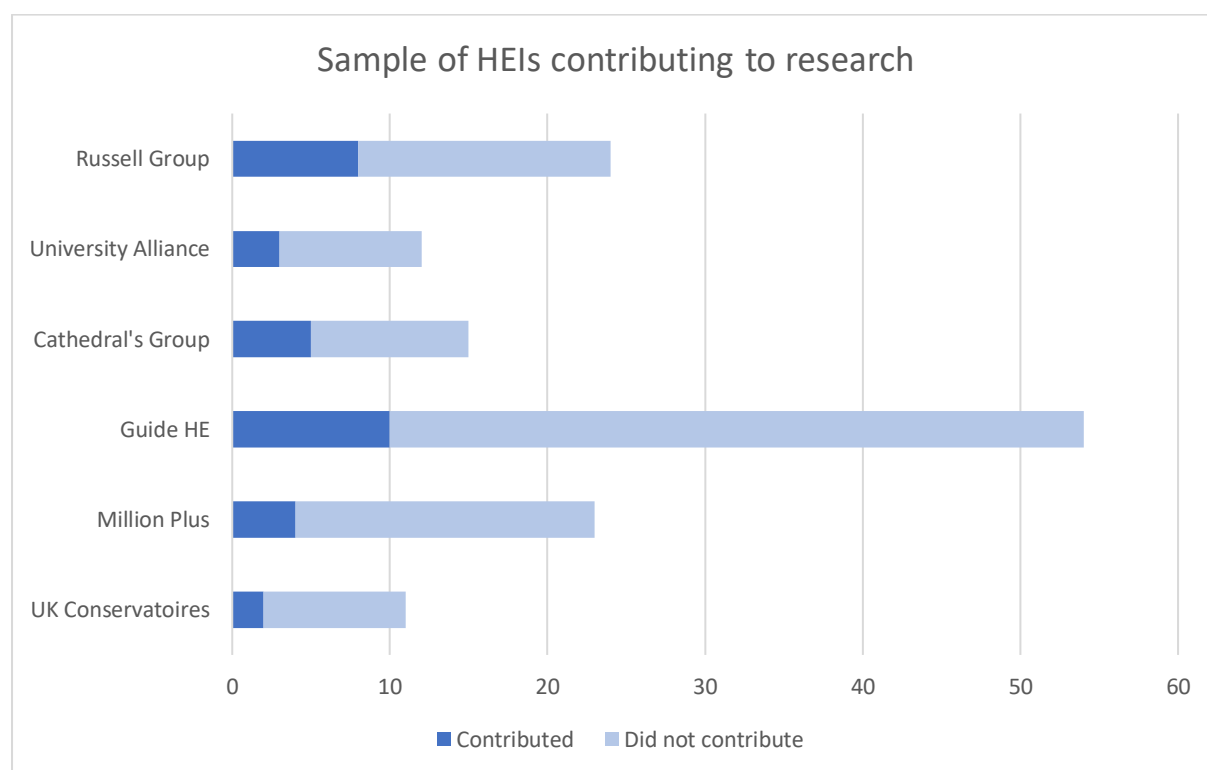


Figure 1. Sample of HEIs contributing to research

The survey includes responses from all devolved nations, with more than a third of HEIs in Wales and Northern Ireland represented. The response rate in Scotland however was lower (2 out of 19). Respondents supported a wide range of student populations with 65% of HEIs serving less than 15,000 students and 35% serving higher numbers.

Based on our sample the mean average board size of a UK HEI is 18, with approximately 67% of these being external appointments. Board sizes range from 6 members to 27 members. The rest of the membership comprises of students, staff, executive staff and "other". This matches prior research undertaken by UCL which is available from Advance HE (UCL, 2019).

Survey Two was sent out to currently serving HE board members/governors in order to capture demographic data, lived experience and views on board diversity. The questions in this survey were centred around the respondent's diversity indicators, their perceptions of board diversity through their career, their own recruitment and induction experiences and their views on a range of assistive resources. The governors who responded were mostly in their first term, having served in post for less than three years (65%) of the remaining, 12% have served for more than 6 years. In line with the 1.1 sample, 80% of respondents were England-based but the makeup of devolved nations is slightly different, with 10% coming from Scotland, 7% from Northern Ireland and 4% from Wales.

Interviews

The qualitative phase of the research consisted of four sets of interviews, each with a different selection of stakeholders in the recruitment of HE governors. The process for each set is recorded in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Interview methodology table

Set Phase	Sampling
1	University Secretaries and Clerks Stratified sample of 10 based on nation of origin and university type drawn from those survey respondents who agreed to participate. Gender of interviewee also considered to add greater breadth of views. No clerks from BAME backgrounds volunteered for interview process.
2	Existing HE Governors Stratified sample of 10, based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability status drawn from the survey respondents who agreed to participate. Due to limited voluntary participation from survey 2 respondents, the interview pool was expanded to meet the sample requirements.
3	Recruitment consultants Sample of 3, gathered from an identified list of diversity-specialist recruiters who have worked with HE governing boards.
4	Researchers and professionals Sample of 3, chosen for their prior research knowledge and expertise in the field of HE governing board diversity.

Although the interview phases had different phrasing and emphases for different stakeholders, the broad themes covered in the analysis are the same. These themes were arrived at through an inductive process during initial analysis and formed the basis for coding the interviews, acting as meta-codes from which further, more detailed codes were generated (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

Results & Discussion

Survey for Secretaries and Clerks

The trends in this data in Table 2 indicate good development in gender diversity, but significantly less improvement in terms of ethnic, age and disability-based diversity. These trends are consistent with the latest data from HESA (2020) and research carried out by UCL (Wheaton, 2021).

However, qualitative data from female governors highlighted that whilst they may now have a seat at the table, equality in terms of opportunity to influence is not as apparent as appear in the statistics.

"It's not helped, that I am young, and insist on bringing lots of different perspectives to the table. And that I'm pretty outspoken. I've been corrected by other board members around financial facts when I was in fact, right. I have, you know, had questions that I've asked but have been dismissed in ways that other governors would not be." Interview 2.9

This suggests that simply sitting on a board in number is not enough and that changes in board culture is required in order for all members to have a voice. It also reinforces the point made by Bear, Rehman & Post (2010) regarding the need for critical mass in order to have genuine impact.

Table 2. Trends in governing body membership diversity

Category	Trend*
Age	57% of boards have 7 or more governors over the age of 56 No university has more than 4 governors under 35 61% of boards have no members aged 26-35
Disability Status	43.5% of boards have no governors with declared disability status
Ethnicity	98% of boards have 7 or more white board members (one board has 6 members) 37% of boards have no black members 22% have no Asian members 47% have no mixed-race members 30% of boards report having 3-4 Black or Asian members
Nationality	Boards have a high amount of UK nations, with 97% declaring 7 or more UK governors (one board has 6 members) 65% of board respondents have at least 11 EU member 57% of board respondents have at least 1 non-EU member
Gender/Sex	73% of boards report at least 7 women on their board, which reflects current trends 27% of boards still report less than 7 women in governing posts
Sexual Orientation	Due to differences in policy between HEIs on collecting these data, it is difficult to make concrete assumptions based on figures.
Religion	79% of HEIs report at least 7 Christian governors on their boards No board has more than 2 representatives of any other religion on their board 38% of HEI's have 7 or more governors identifying as "not religious" High amount of missing data, likely due to policy differences in collecting this information *Numbers based on an average board size of 18 across the data set

Changing Board compositions

Out of the governors surveyed, 66% were appointed within the previous three-year period and 89% of boards indicated that they either have, or are developing, a long-term strategy to diversify their boards. This suggests that board diversification and reorganization is a high priority for a number of HEIs. Many boards are currently engaged in a range of strategies, with 20% of boards surveyed employing 2 or more of these identified actions. As can be seen in Fig 1, a considerable number of boards are at some point of the "review" but appear to be lacking in specific tools and strategies to increase their board diversity.

The data also showed (Figure 1) that HEIs have employed a number of strategies to increase board diversity which further lends itself to the desire for change perhaps premised on the ideas of Fredette & Bernstein (2019) that diversity makes for good business or whether it is because of other 'isomorphic influences' (Wheaton, 2019). Despite these multiple strategies, change is yet to be fully reflected in the Boards.

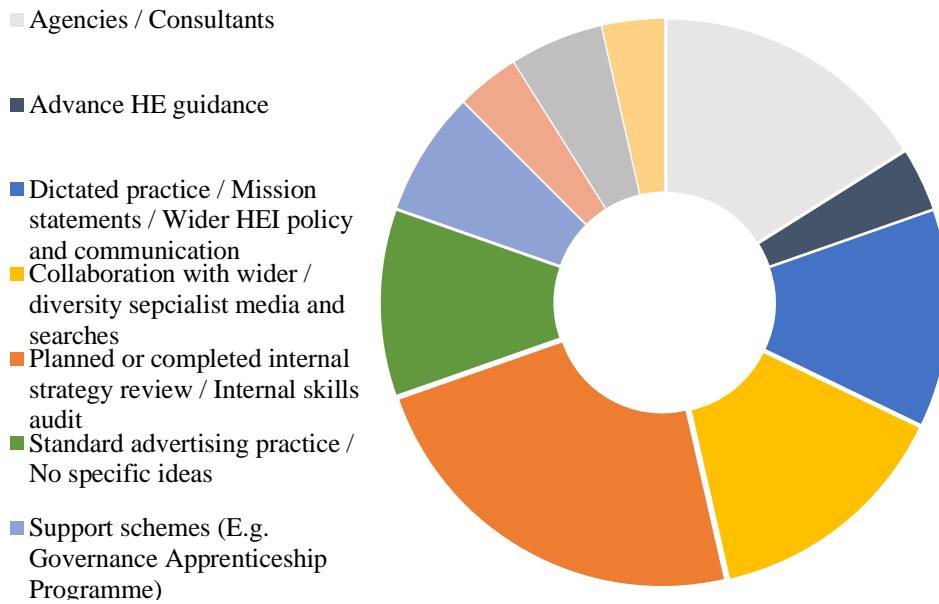


Figure 2. Strategies employed by HEIs to increase board diversity

This lends itself to the notion that more deliberate and proactive steps are needed rather than ‘wait’ for it to happen organically. A toolkit, therefore, seems an essential form of support, in line with what has happened in the other sector and which has led to considerable progress (Kasumu, 2015).

Figure 2 supports this, indicating that the overall perception of positive practice is mixed with no particular strategy considered an example of best practice. Some universities provided up to four examples from the list provided in the survey, citing the need for multiple strategies. Other universities however believe that the intent to diversify alone forms the basis of positive practice.

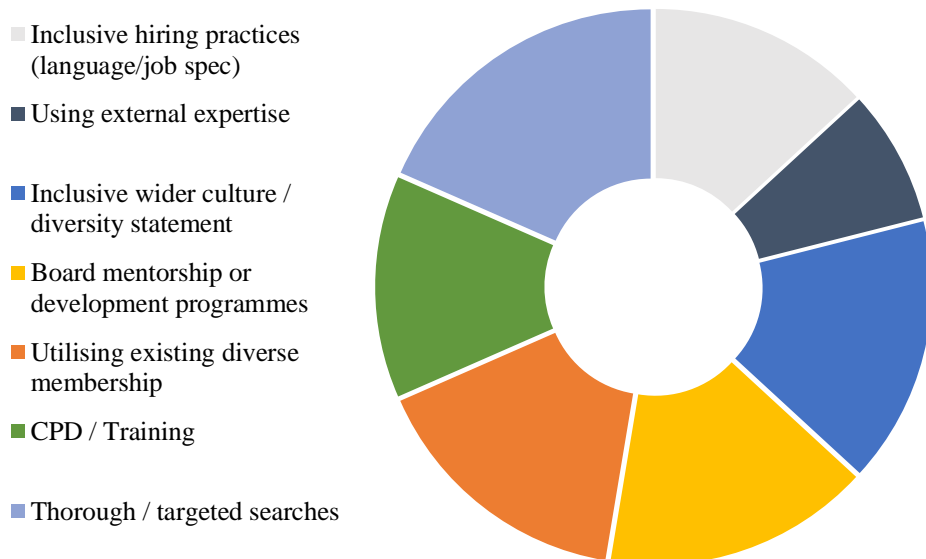


Figure 3. Perceptions of positive practice

Challenges to Board Diversification

The majority of boards consider matching the local talent pool to the skills they require to be their greatest challenge. This seems to relate specifically to ethnic diversity, as many boards cite their predominantly white demographic bases to be the confounding factor in their mission to diversify. Time constraints and the lack of a remuneration system also factors in here, and is also the greatest barrier to age diversity, as many skilled candidates under 50 are unavailable due to career and family

commitments. The data reflects the debates on skills versus diversity within the literature and that of the data on diversity itself which seem focused largely on ethnic diversity – hence the geographic issue cited as a key challenge. However, again, this somewhat reflects the need to further develop an understanding of diversity as highlighted by Fredette, Bradshaw and Kreuse (2016).

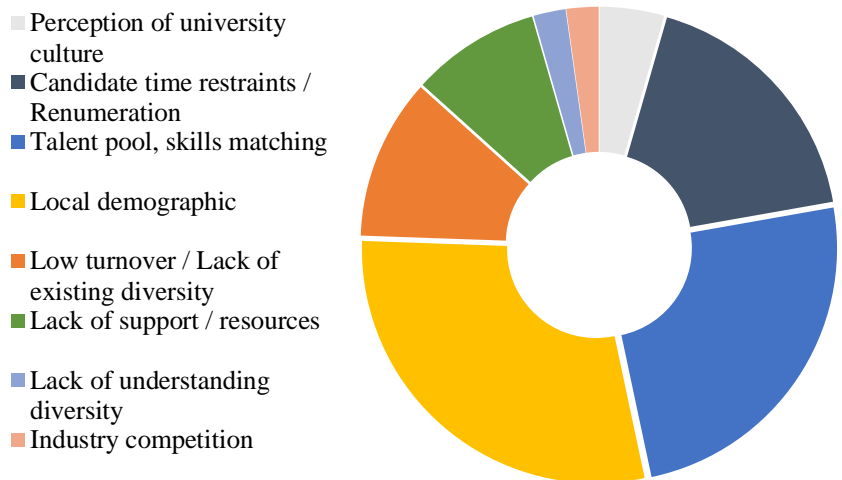


Figure 4. Perceived challenges to board diversity

The data suggests that there is a need for support in supporting diverse governors but there was little clarity on the sort of support needed.

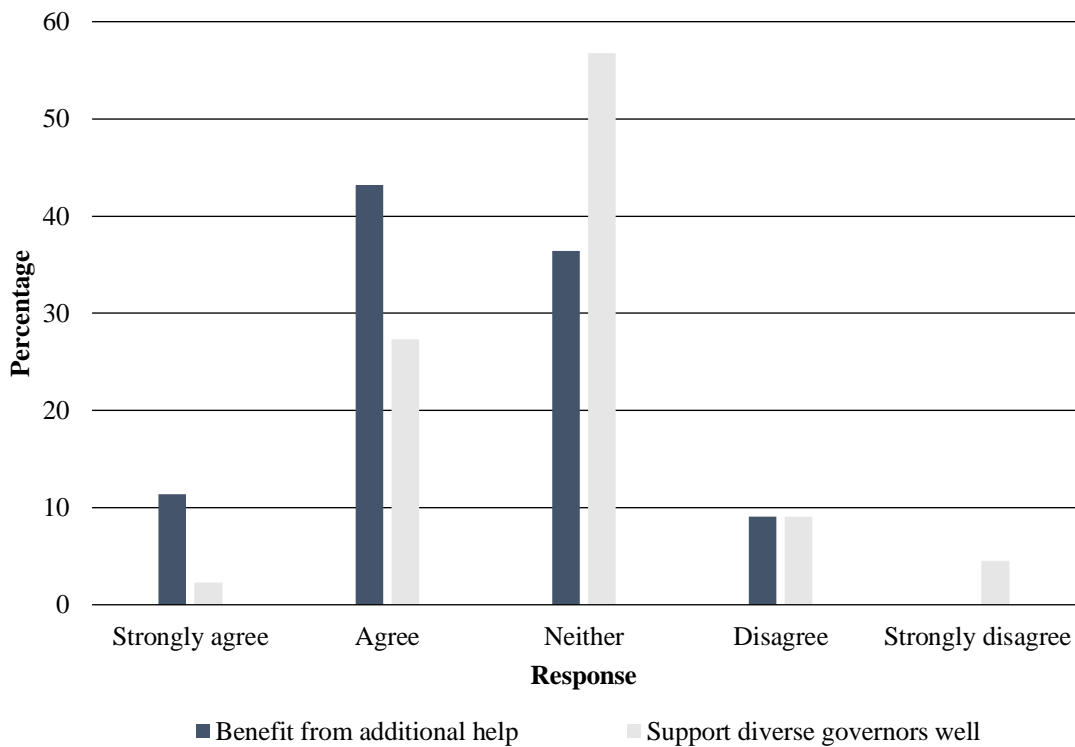


Figure 5. Additional help to support diverse governors

84% of respondents disagree with the statement “our organisational culture does not lend itself well to diversity” with only 4.6% of respondents agreeing with this statement. In comparison the responses to convincing people that diversity required is difficult, provided a similar outlook with 79.6% of respondents stating they do not find it difficult to promote the required diversity within their

organisation. Consequently, suggesting that the majority of respondents feel that their institution is open to diversity but needs help in supporting it. However, data in Figure 4 contradicts this whereby convincing boards that diversity is required is seen as a key challenge – largely connected to the tensions highlighted by a skills vs diversity dichotomy. This falls behind the curve in relation to the other sectors where the business case for diversity is considerably well-rehearsed as outlined in the works of Fredette and Bernstein (2019) and the ‘convincing’ argument is perhaps less of an issue. In this way, this data could be said to be reinforcing the view that HE boards are ‘old-fashioned’ (Wheaton, 2019) and that the understanding of diversity is perhaps sitting at a superficial level – hence the issue of skills and diversity somehow being in tension. This is further reinforced in the data.

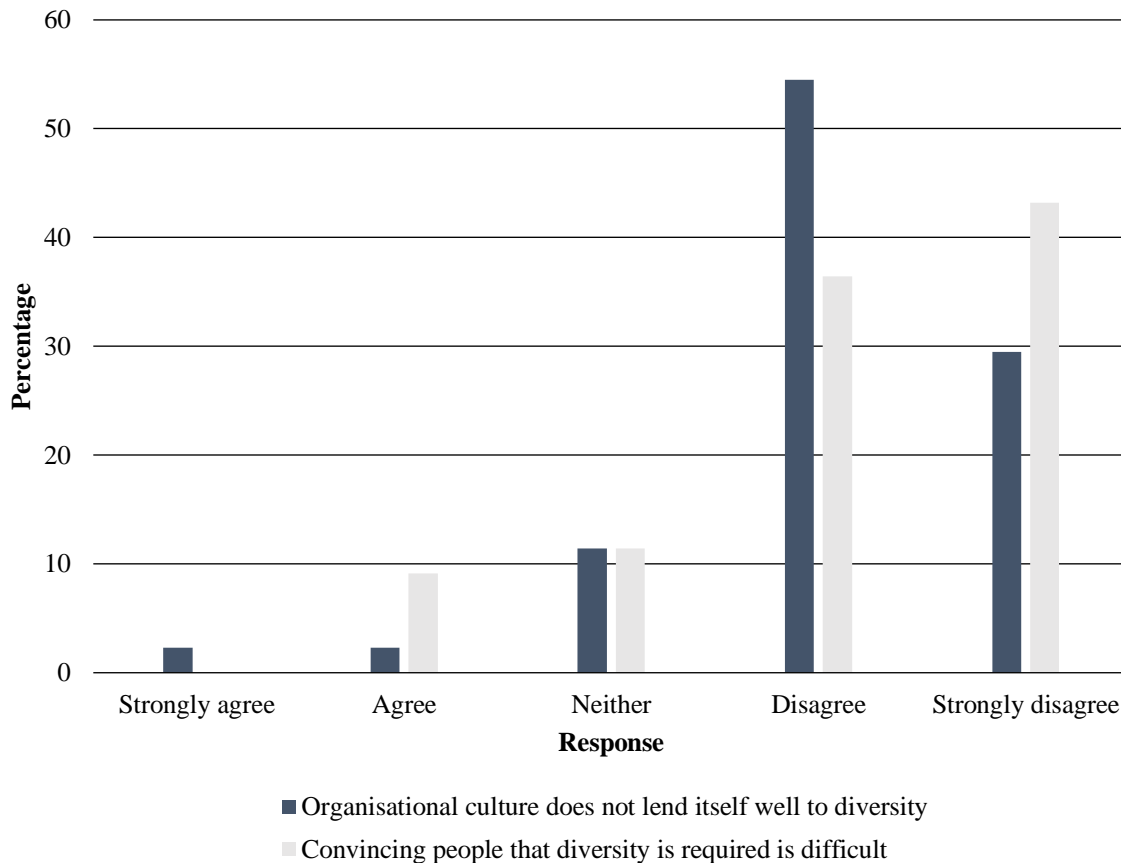


Figure 6. Organisational culture does not lend itself well to diversity and convincing people the diversity is required is difficult

Skills vs Diversity

The key points raised on questions relating to skills and diversity indicated that 60% of respondents agreed that targeted role specifications for diverse governors is important. However, the data indicated that recruiting governors from diverse backgrounds is less important than recruiting those with the right skills, with 22.8% of respondents agreeing with that statement. This may suggest that whilst configuring a specification for diverse candidates is seen as important, when it comes to the recruitment of governors, skills and experience are more important. Potentially meaning if a diverse candidate does not have the requisite skills they may not be recruited.

In relation to whether it is more important to recruit diverse governors or those with the right skills and experiences, the “neither” response is the highest at 45%. In contrast, whether recruiting governors with the right skills is more difficult, does not allay with the figures recruiting governors from diverse backgrounds as being more important than recruiting candidates with the right skills. Suggesting that respondents want to be able support diverse candidates in applying for roles on their university

board. Whereas, according to these figures more weight is put on recruiting governors with the right skills and experiences, further emphasising the tension between skills and diversity.

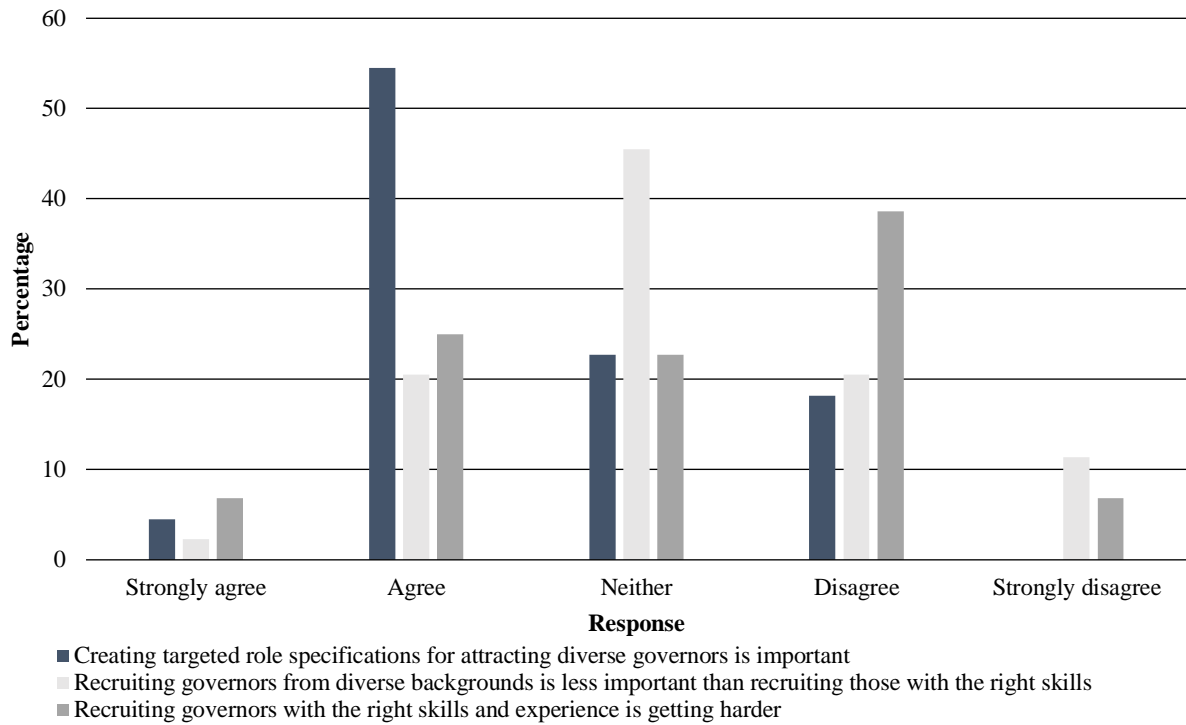


Figure 7. Recruiting skilled and diverse governors

With regards to finding diverse candidates and how to balance the skills required for a board member and the diversity of the member, 84.1% of respondents agreed that it was a challenge to attract a suitable number of candidates with diverse characteristics, with 56.9% respondents agreeing that there is concern when balancing diverse board members and the skills required for the role. This again reinforces how the data from this research indicates that both the recruitment of diverse candidates, and the recruitment of candidates with the requisite skills are separate to each other, and difficult to combine - as figures 7 and 8 suggest.

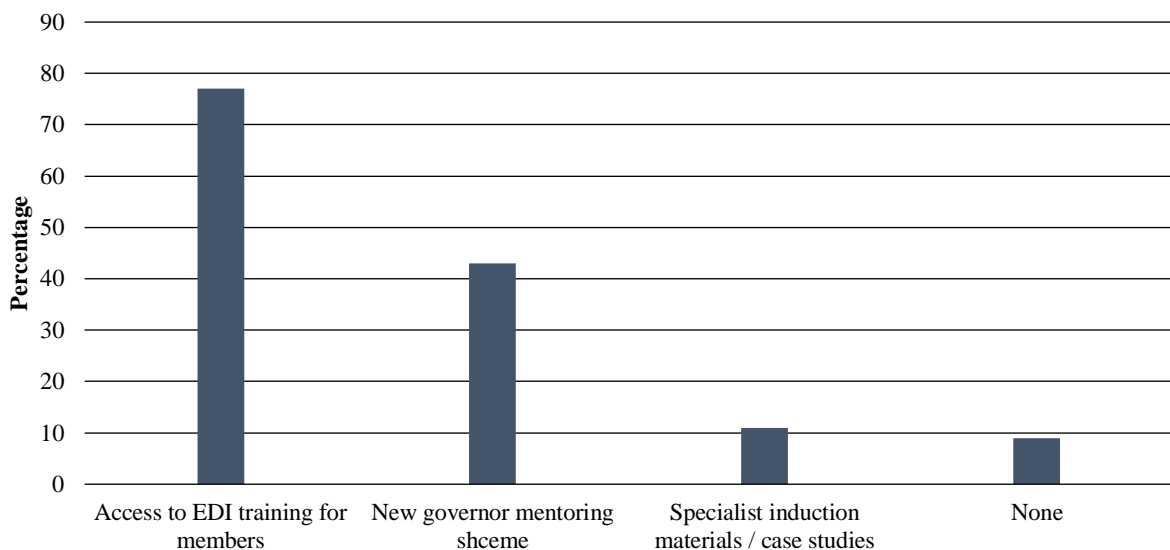


Figure 8. Resources currently available to new HEI governors

The Figure below indicates the resources respondents could make use of from a list of possible resources designed to support governors:

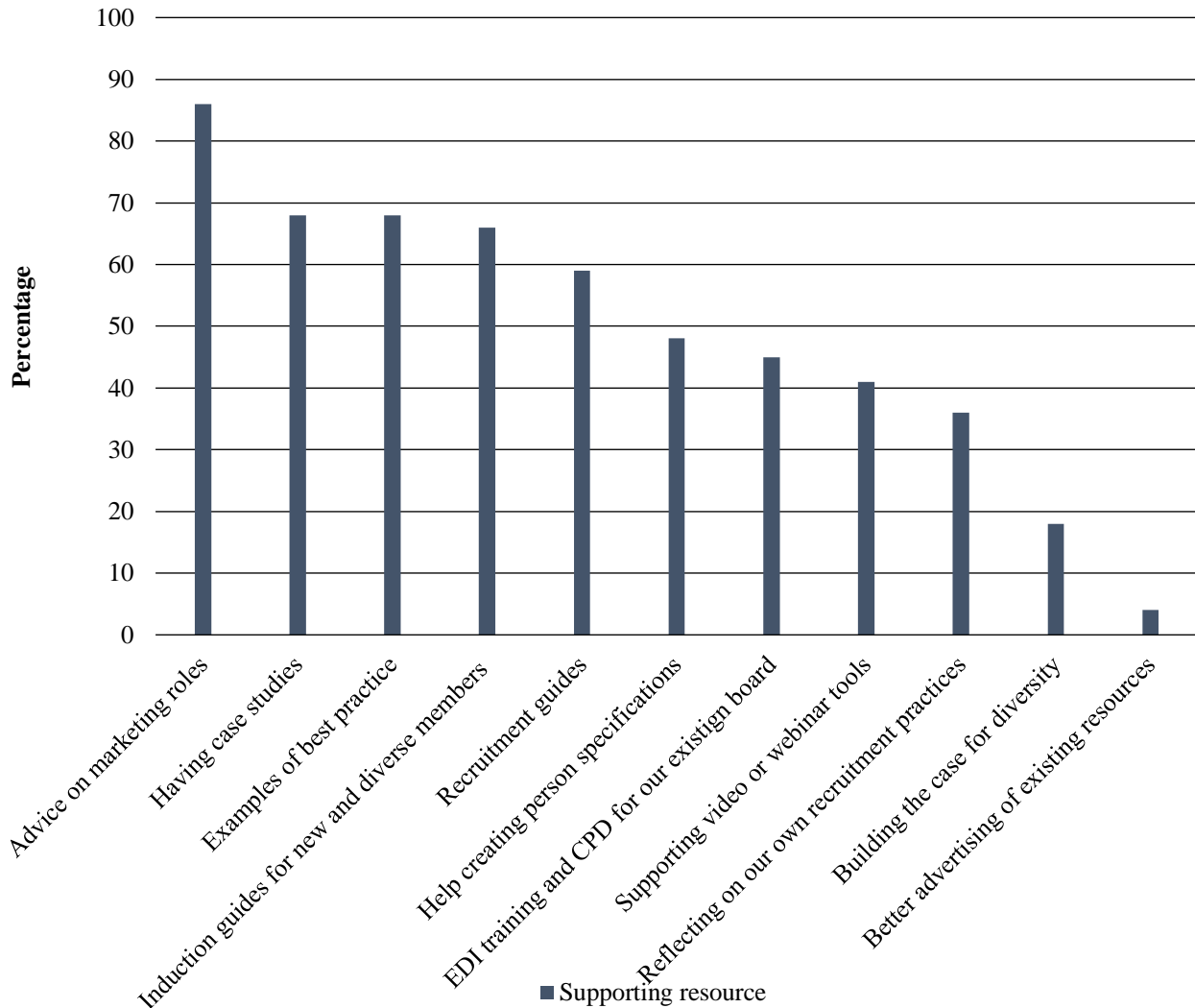


Figure 9. Resources desired by HEIs to aid effective diversification.

The results also indicate that the diversity conversation has moved away from “why” and into “how”, this was an expected development prior to the research which has been confirmed in the data. The slightly lower uptake for EDI training and help with internal reflection is an indication of where most universities are in their diversification journey and is reflected in the qualitative data.

In the light of the key issue highlighted in the data regarding skills vs diversity, an important question would have been to ask if there was any support, training or guidance for the existing board on the genuine and evidenced benefits of diversity and the changes or disruptions this may cause in making a better board. This revelation in the data has emphasised the need for boards to self-reflect and better understand their board and its understanding of diversity as a key to the other external issues.

Survey for Governors

A total of 104 governors responded, representing a much lower proportion than the number of university secretaries and clerks. The Table below presents the characteristics of the respondents which are especially diverse.

Table 3. Trends in governing body membership diversity

Identification Category	Trend
Age	37% of respondents were under 56 at time of study The highest proportion were between 56 and 65 (37%)
Disability Status	94% governors record no disability
Ethnicity	9% of respondents identify as “non-white” with 91% recording a form of white ethnicity. Many ethnic backgrounds are completely unrepresented including East Asian and mixed-race heritages 90% of non-white respondents are of a South Asian background
Nationality	93% of respondents were UK nationals 5% identified as non-placed categories likely connected to non-UK British Isles identities such as “Scottish”
Gender/Sex	Responses from Males (51%) and Female (49%) identities were almost exactly half. No participant identified as any other gender
Sexual Orientation	88% of participants reported heterosexual 7% confirmed as either homosexual or bisexual No participants report a transgender history
Religion	The largest group of respondents (46%) reported having “no religion” At 42% Christianity is still the most represented religion on the list

Perspectives on Diversity

A number of questions focused on governor opinions about diversity within their boards. As most of the respondents fall into the “not diverse” categorisations, except gender, the impact of these are limited. Many are also Chairpersons and may view their board practices more positively.

Whilst there was a good number of women on the governing boards, no boards had members assigned a different gender to the one at birth, to their knowledge. However, 63.3% of boards had seven or more members who indicated they did not know if there were any differences. This may suggest that discussing gender assignment is not something that boards are accustomed to. The most represented religious group was reported as Christianity, with seven or more board members affiliating themselves with Christianity. The largest group of respondents (46%) reported having “no religion”, which departs somewhat from the perceptions of chairs and clerks in whom indicated a stronger trend among governors towards Christianity.

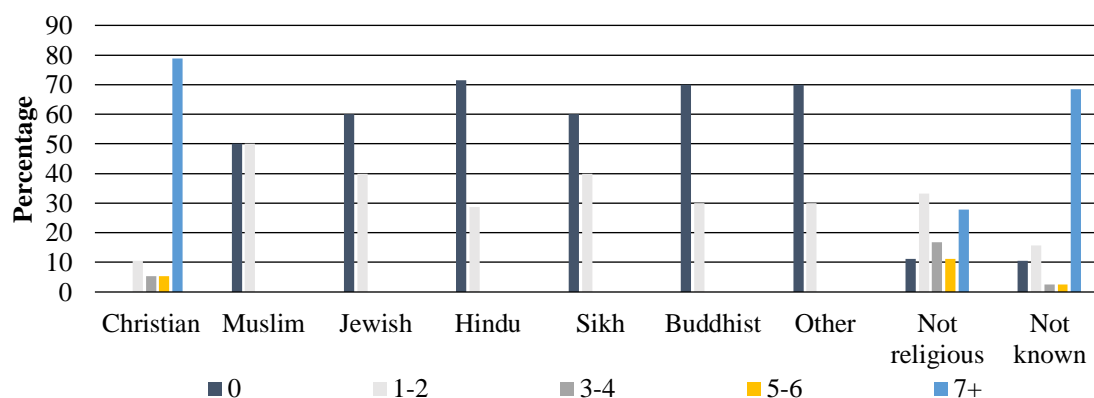


Figure 10. Religious belief or affiliation

With regards to how representative of the staff and student body governors felt their board was, the “not very” response aligns with the “could be improved” response. With ethnicity, 61.4%, and age, 47.7%, it was considered it “could be improved”. Disability status ranked highly with 36.4% of institutions responding, “could be improved” and 36.4% of respondents not feeling that disability was very well represented. Gender was said to be well represented.

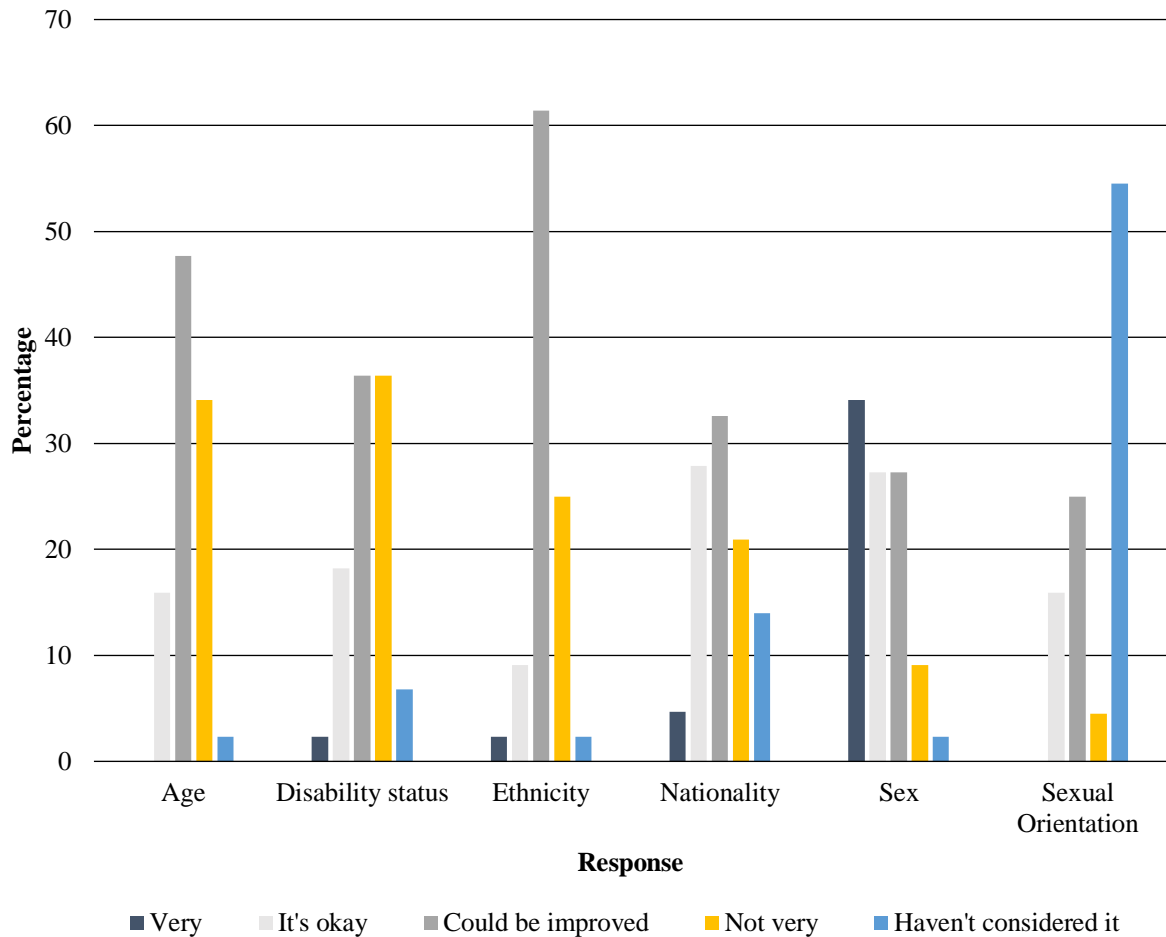


Figure 11. How representative of staff and student bodies is your board?

One of the most interesting points rising from this set of questions was that a high percentage of participants had responded with “have not considered it” in terms of sexual orientation. It is difficult to know from this data whether this response is good because the process of acceptance is more automatic, or the cultural trend tends to overlook this particular area. The data provided in this section is encouraging as it suggests that the respondents recognise that their boards need greater diversity.

Experiences of Recruitment

Governors were asked about their recruitment process and a considerable section of respondents reported a lack of information prior to applying to have been their biggest challenge (35%). This is important when considering diversity, as if this sample (which is not very diverse) experiences this, then reaching out and targeting diverse candidates with the right information is likely to be a problem when recruiting.

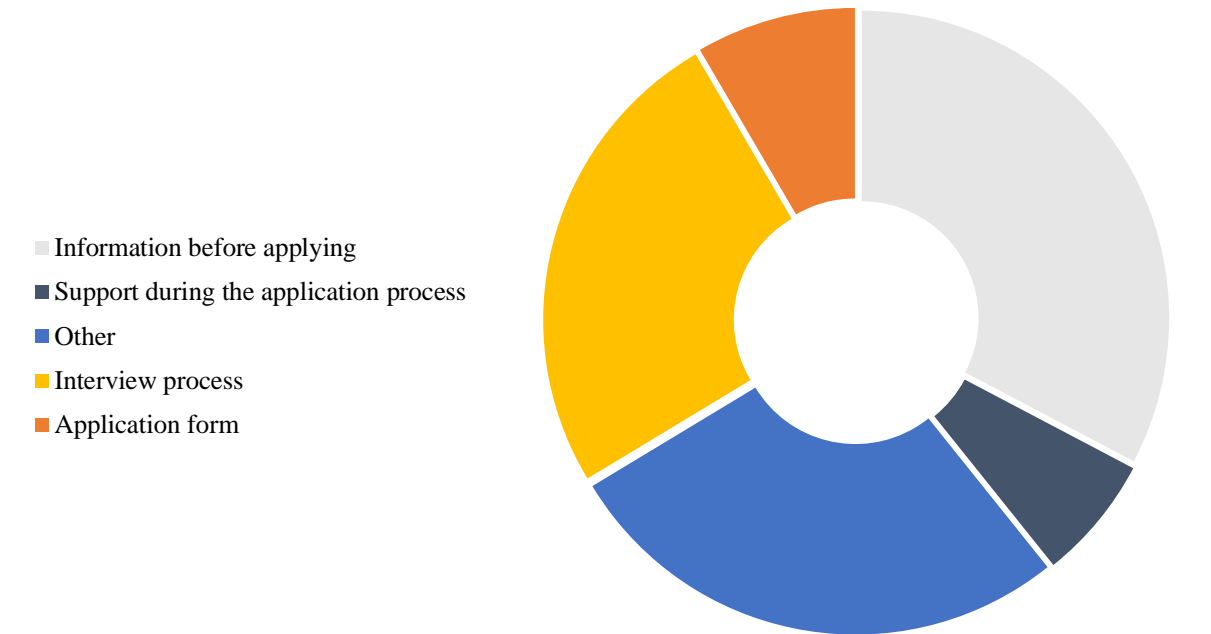


Figure 12. Challenges during recruitment process

An interesting comment listed in “other” related to feelings of discomfort from a university setting as the respondent did not go to university themselves. When targeting diverse candidates this could also be a barrier. Having said that a large percentage (70%) of governors reported having access to training around their role though slightly fewer (63%) reported having access to diversity-specific materials and guides. Far fewer reported interactive or hands-on methods of training, with no more than 25% of governors reporting access to buddy schemes, multimedia materials, direct CPD on EDI matters or webinars. It suggests that an understanding of matters of diversity are perhaps something acquired organically rather than as a form of development.

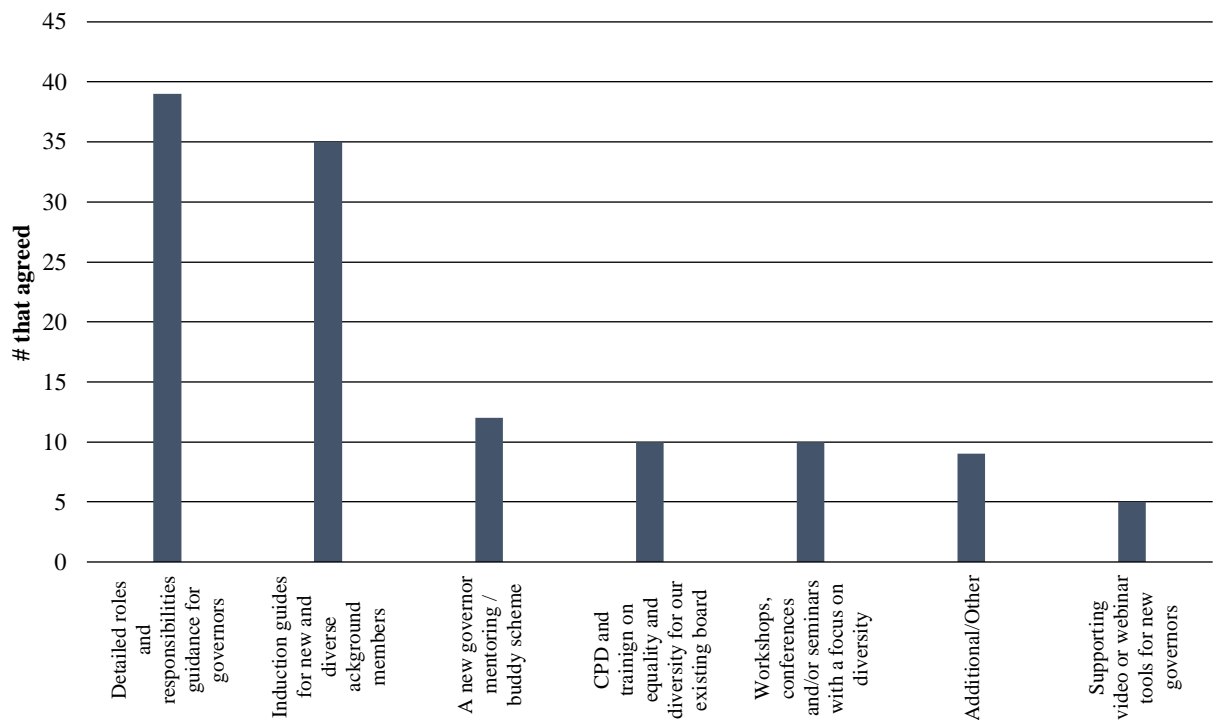


Figure 13. Challenges during recruitment process

The final question of the survey looked at the types of resources governors would like to have had access to at their recruitment. The data shows a strong desire among governors for a more hands on system of buddy/mentorship for new members (51%). This could have the impact in terms of both both-readiness but also inclusivity. Communicating that such support is available during a recruitment campaign could well be helpful to diverse or non-traditional candidates. Figure 14 indicates what governors feel would be helpful for new governors, given their experiences.

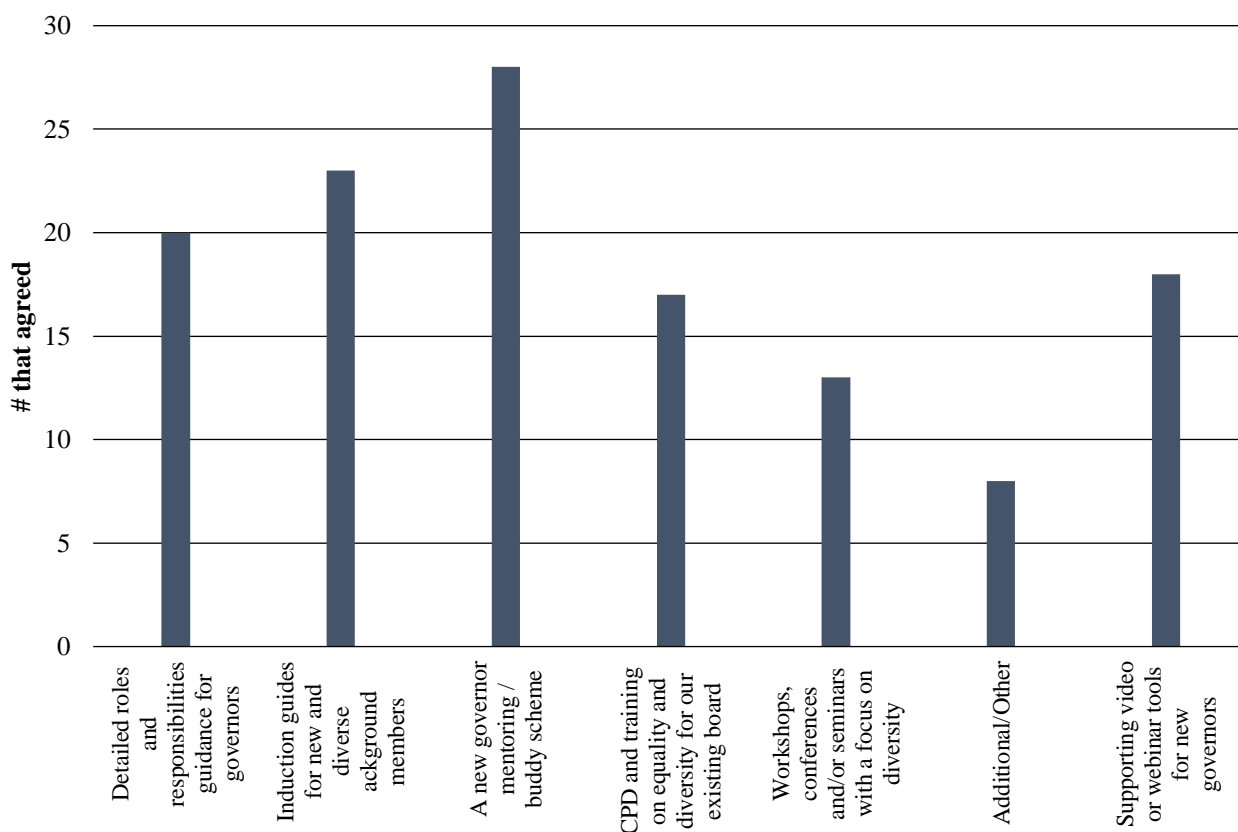


Figure 14. Resources that may be helpful to new governors in the future

Interviews

Due to the low level of diversity recorded in the survey sample, the interview process relied first on a stratified sample and then a directly targeted one. The qualitative phase of the research consisted of four sets of interviews.

Table 4. Interviewee roles

Set	Sampling
1	University Secretaries and Clerks: Stratified sample of 10 based on nation of origin and university type drawn from those survey respondents who agreed to participate. Gender of interviewee also considered to add greater breadth of views. No clerks from BAME backgrounds volunteered for interview process.
2	Existing HE Governors: Stratified sample of 10, based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability status drawn from the survey respondents who agreed to participate. Due to limited voluntary participation from survey 2 respondents, the interview pool was expanded to meet the sample requirements.
3	Recruitment consultants: Sample of 3, gathered from an identified list of diversity-specialist recruiters working with HE governing boards.
4	Researchers and professionals: Sample of 3, chosen for prior research knowledge and expertise in the field

Although the interview phases had different phrasing and emphases for different stakeholders, the broad themes covered in the analysis were the same. These themes formed the meta-analysis for the coding process and deductive coding was carried out within these categorisations. The following main themes emerged and largely emerged from sets 1, 3 and 4 of the interviews:

- Diversity trends in HE Governance
- Barriers and challenges to diversification
- Positive practice
- Practice requiring improvement
- Strategies and resources to help

Diversity Trends in HE Governance

All University clerks emphasised the need to increase black and minority ethnic representation on their boards, though varied from basic compliance to a sincere desire to be more reflective of the student population the university served.

“A University is a representative body of a particular demographic in which the board is usually woefully underrepresented in terms of (wider diversity)”. Interview 2.9

There was evidence of attempts to capture the experiences, skills and cognitive diversity of black and minority ethnic people, as well as a genuine belief that it will improve boards. A number of those interviewed highlighted the shift in sociocultural views on ethnic diversity as a motivating force to change their recruitment policy and universities are willing to inject the most resources here. This could be connected to the notion of ‘isomorphic influences’ highlighted by Wheaton (2019).

“There is recognition by many institutions that they talked about race, but progress hadn't been fast enough”. Interview 4.2

Interviews with experts indicated that LGBTQ+ and disabled representation was more periphery to ethnic diversity. One of the reasons was that these require self-declaration and boards feel uncomfortable seeking and recording this information. The same is true of religion, especially in secular universities where religion is a much lower priority. However, the socioeconomic background of new governors appeared to be a growing area of interest.

“There is a significant minority in the university that comes from an underprivileged background. And we universities are doing very well in terms of widening participation and those sorts of things. But that is not reflected in the board's makeup”. Interview 2.6

Barriers and Challenges to Diversification

This theme presented a sense of *what* kinds of issues most urgently need to be addressed whereas the other themes deal with the *how*. Coding of the interviews resulted in the following list of significant barriers, listed with the most challenging ones at the top:

1. Developing networks and pipelines of diverse candidates
 - i. Getting skilled/board ready black and minority ethnic governors to join boards located in primarily white areas.
 - ii. Enlisting younger but highly skilled governors but who are still focussed on their careers and families.
 - iii. Staying ahead of social trends in relation to other protected characteristics (Disability/LGBTQ+)
 - iv. Utilising university networks more effectively
2. Access to supporting resources/shared platforms to optimise recruitment
3. Developing the existing board to effectively cultivate diversity and diverse thinking
4. Fiscal/ideological challenges to remuneration

Many of these challenges could be positioned at sector level, for instance, local demographics and building sustainable candidate pipelines are difficult, long-term challenges with many boards seeing this as out of their control. However, a key area which related to developing the existing board is a key area of development that can be undertaken at institutional level.

Positive Practice

Some universities have made inroads diversifying beyond the long-standing homogeneity of HE boards. Where there are positive practices there is still some frustration in terms of progress, specifically with challenging mindset, and this is where many participants suggested that a toolkit would help to guide and facilitate improvement. The most prominent themes to arise in terms of positive practice were:

- ❖ Monitoring diversity and inclusion on the board through active conversations about how to improve diversity. Using governance reviews and action plans to enable the recruitment of diverse members.
- ❖ Altering the way recruitment of governors is conferred by wording advertisements for board members in a more open and inclusive way to encourage a range of individuals to apply. Offering apprenticeship schemes to diverse candidates, who may not have the relevant experience, in order to allow them to develop the requisite skills.
- ❖ Support new governors who are new to university boards through providing buddy systems and mentoring to support their induction into the board. Providing opportunities for new governors to spend time with buddies and mentors to develop their knowledge about how the board works.
- ❖ Overviewing the board to ensure board effectiveness through using questionnaires so members can feed back what is going well and what is not, team building and training, such as unconscious bias.

External experts have been shown throughout the data to have been positive in successfully appointing diverse candidates however, their limitations have been noted.

“Board roles are kind of unadvertised, no one really knows how it's not a transparent process, a lot of people wouldn't necessarily know what we know who got who on our board...and how did they get there. So, it's sort of seen as a bit of a dark art. And I think you know that the search firms don't really help with that. They're sort of tapping people on shoulders and getting people through the door without actively advertising and that sort of perpetuates that little black book environment as well.” Interview 4.1

Practice Requiring Improvement

The data indicated that many of the resistive cultural arguments pertaining to diversity have improved and few universities question the importance of diversity, however, many much of the debate falls into the ‘skills vs diversity’ argument. Although at face-level, this false dichotomy is acknowledged by almost all of the Clerks and Secretaries interviewed, the practicalities of acquiring diversity and skill still seems to confound.

“I feel like there's this dissonance between higher education, at the top of the university saying we want diversity, but then struggling with the implications of that diversity for having to change how business is done.” Interview 2.9

Much problematic practice stems from a poor understanding of what is required to diversify in an effective and inclusive way. This lack of a consistent understanding can be present at board level, institutional level, or both. In either case, the research suggests that proactive, engaged leadership has a big part to play in facilitating improvement. This further reiterates the points on the skills vs diversity debates highlighted by e.g., Fredette et al (2015) and others. In some ways the Clerks and recruiters identified that “cognitive diversity” is gained through the different life experiences of diverse people but were not convinced that boards yet understood that.

“I think diversity will broaden out from protected characteristics to thinking about cognitive diversity, diversity of thought, because the question is how the different lived experiences and how the different perspectives contribute to our decision making.” Interview 4.1

Strategies and Resources to Facilitate

This theme yielded a rich vein of suggestions for strategies and resources that can facilitate diversity on HE boards. These ranged from example job specifications and interview techniques to long term strategic planning documents. Many of the problems facing board architects have been related to

organisation; knowing where to start and how to proceed as well as the notion of diversity itself. All these needed deliberate and proactive support.

Conclusions

The data has confirmed many of the trends, barriers and attitudes impacting diversity in HE governing board recruitment. As per other sectors, gender diversity at board level has improved though all other protected characteristics are still underrepresented. Boards are interested in ethnic and age diversity though many are still operating under definitions of diversity that lack nuance or deep understanding - there was, however, interest in socioeconomic status as a form of diversity. The data are clear that university boards (in line with those in the corporate sector) recognise the need to meet their (corporate) social responsibility with most boards utilizing multiple methods to improve diversity, though many are doing so with external help. The richer data from the interview phase shed more light on the challenges.

Many of the barriers identified to successfully diversifying by governors were positioned as external to the organisation, such as demographics and location and which are well documented in the literature (Fredette, Bradshaw and Kreuse, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Taylor and De Lourdes, 2008). However, the data also revealed how key barriers were internal and these were particularly related to a limited understanding of diversity within the Boards themselves. This stunts the diversification of their Board and thereby impacts on their potential performance. Based on the resource dependency (advisory role) (Bear, Rehman & Post, 2021), the more diverse the Board, the better able they are to advise the executive. Greater diversity also enables a Board to better monitor (agency theory) the executive and hold them to account on behalf of stakeholders. Wider diversity means the monitoring 'radar' spans more widely and challenges the executive more.

Existing practices within the overall landscape has meant that diversity is an issue that is high on the agenda as is discussed in the literature (Fredette et al, 2016; Rao and Tilt, 2015). However, the conceptual and practical developments are an area which requires work, and the data has contributed to the development of the Board Diversity Toolkit which aims to address these important areas. The data showed a recognition and identification of a need for better support and guidance to enable universities to attract and carry appointments through from recruitment to retention with a desire for events and platforms to share best practice in order to perform the monitoring and advisory roles better. A core theme emerging from both the literature and the data gathered as part of this project, was that sustainable change in Board diversity can only be accomplished through a change in thinking and culture. With these changes made, a diversified Board would become self-sustaining and as the corporate sector has already discovered the financial benefits would be self-evident alongside the improvements in ethical leadership and culture.

The Board Diversity Toolkit

The data from this research informed the development of the Board Diversity Toolkit. The Toolkit is available online to members of Advance HE and is an interactive set of practical tools, activities, advice, guidance and other resources to support Boards to diversify their membership, organised in four key sections. In particular, the Toolkit identifies a need to focus on fostering a deeper understanding of diversity by suggesting activities and resources on how to do this. It is encased within the need for HEI boards to reflect on themselves as a key initial phase in any recruitment process. This has been alluded to in the literature (e.g. Creary et al 2019), however, is not as explicit as appeared in this data, and could perhaps explain why HEIs that participated were not yet successful in diversifying their boards, instead citing the issue of skills versus diversity as the key challenge. This needs to be addressed as the data do suggest that boards themselves and their subsequent recruitment processes have been the barriers to successfully reaching the candidates that add the value that is brought with diversity. Furthermore, boards need some development in understanding that a diverse board will lead to heterogeneity in thought and understand that conversations which can lead to disruption and take longer to lead to decisions, as suggested by Fredette, Bradshaw and Kreuse (2016). Rather than see these as problems, boards need to recognise that within these lie the effective board. This can only come when boards are

ready themselves and the first two sections entitled *I Understanding Board Diversity and Inclusion* and *II Constructing an effective and inclusive Board*.

Once a board has developed the culture and context which embraces the disruption and change that diversity leads to, they are more likely to express this in recruitment materials that then demonstrates its openness to change and diversity and is explored in *III Maximising your Recruitment Potential*. This can then help any internal or external recruitment support to reach out to further diverse candidates which was suggested by Wheaton (2019) and Shattock (2017) and importantly to retain them and ensure they can contribute to their full potential through *IV Supporting Governors: from Induction to Retention*. The toolkit is designed to also support Boards on the practical elements of devising a recruitment campaign and provides bespoke tools and wider resources, including a range of bespoke videos from key stakeholders in the sector and beyond.

This is the first national toolkit of its kind and has yielded over a thousand downloads at the time of writing, suggesting that this is a much-needed resource. Future areas of research would be to explore the impact of such tools on the changing composition of the HE boards and, if we are on the journey to more diverse boards, is essential for HEIs in addressing some of the complex local, global and political landscapes that impact on HEIs.

The Toolkit can be accessed by universities via the Advance HE member area <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/higher-education-board-diversity-and-inclusion-toolkit>

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---o---o---o--- **Article Notes** ---o---o---o---

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