Potential PhD Research Topic
Boardroom Decision-Making and Global Grand Challenges

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The board of directors plays a central decision-making role in the governance of the public corporation. They generally add value through the (i) monitoring of management, (ii) provision of advice and access to critical resources, and (iii) setting of the long-term strategy of companies. Diligently fulfilling these tasks is becoming more challenging as sustainability has emerged as a critical and multifaceted concern in boardrooms, with boards facing increased stakeholder demands and pressures around societal issues such as climate change, slavery and human rights, gender equality, and depleting natural resources. This shift is underpinned by the growing consensus that boards must play a more active role in aligning corporate strategy with environmental and social sustainability objectives, as a core component of social responsibility. Intensified stakeholder oversight, coupled with evolving regulatory frameworks, has compelled organisations to reassess conventional business models and incorporate sustainable practices into their strategic agendas. Accordingly, boards are increasingly expected to facilitate long-term value creation by embedding sustainability concerns into high-level decision-making processes. This paradigm shift not only reinforces corporate legitimacy but also contributes to risk mitigation and drives innovation, thereby enhancing the organisation's long-term competitiveness and resilience.

This issues takes boards into unfamiliar territories with limited lessons from the past being able to guide them. This raises important questions: (i) how do boards acquire the right knowledge and skills to engage with today's grand challenges? (ii) what barriers hinder board understanding of sustainability issues, and how can corporate governance and policy reforms strengthen their capacity to address them? (iii) how should boards effectively integrate these issues into their strategic decision-making? and (iv) what kind of support is needed to assist boards in dealing with these new challenges?

Further details about this PhD project are available here.

For decades scholars and practitioners have attempted to understand what makes boards effective in their decision-making. The starting point of many conversations and efforts has been to put the right board structures (i.e., appointing independent directors, promoting gender diversity, splitting the role of the CEO and board chair, establishing board sub-committees etc.) and policies in place to improve board performance. However, despite these optimal board structures, many boards are still struggling to engage fully with contemporary societal challenges and sustainability. What often is being missed or not fully acknowledged is the human dimension: boards are generally composed of well-intended people that need to work together in a complex, ambiguous, high-stakes context that often involves time-pressure. This growing recognition of boards as dynamic, social systems is starting to change the governance field, yet a lot more work is needed to academically open the black back of the boardroom and practically assist boards in improving the human-side of their processes, dynamics and ultimately their performance.

Methodologically, exploring this human dimension requires different ways of researching boards and their members. Instead of relying on typical database/archival studies that form the foundation of the current corporate governance debate, there is a need to explore and embrace the realities of what happens in the boardroom. An emerging stream of research is tackling this issue head-on by relying

on qualitative research techniques, involving boardroom observations, director interviews and longitudinal case studies. One of the big advantages of these qualitative approaches is that they allow to factor in 'time' more comprehensively, i.e., how do boards develop across time and how does the past shape current approaches to contemporary grand challenges.

This growing behavioural governance/boards space provides a fertile ground for future PhD students with a keen interest to bridge the significant divide between theory and practice in governance and sustainability. Some possible research questions could be:

1. How do boards of directors acquire the knowledge and capabilities that are needed to meet growing societal expectations in the area of sustainability? How do boards integrate this knowledge and capabilities into their strategic decision-making?
2. How do boards of directors develop and maintain the flexibility needed to continuously and actively respond to an environment that is changing in complexity? Do the current approaches to board governance and existing boardroom routines enable boards to adequately respond to what it is needed anno 2025?
3. How could current technological developments (e.g., artificial intelligence) assist boards of directors in improving their decision-making around sustainability? Does this technology engagement require cross-board collaborations? What changes would be the needed to board design and director training?
4. How can individual board members bring in their specific expertise in an effective way in what can be a socially challenging group context? What is the role of the board chair in building a psychological safe boardroom climate that allows directors to speak up and contribute?

These are just some examples of interesting research questions that could be asked in this emerging research area. We are keen though to push the boundaries in this space and open to further discussing what may particularly interest you at the crossroads of behavioral governance and sustainability. Possible journal articles to build an understanding of the field include the following. A number of the papers are by the lead supervisor to allow candidates to understand his background work in this field.

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- Bezemer, P., Pugliese, A., Nicholson, G., Zattoni, A. (2023). Toward a synthesis of the board-strategy relationship: A literature review and future research agenda. *Corporate Governance (Oxford): an international review*, 31(1), 178-197. https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12481.
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- Pernelet, H. R., & Brennan, N. M. (2023). Challenge in the boardroom: Director–manager question-and-answer interactions at board meetings. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*. 31(4), 544-562.. https://doi/full/10.1111/corg.12492.
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- Sajjad, A., Eweje, G., and Raziq, M. M. (2024). Sustainability leadership: An integrative review and conceptual synthesis. *Business Strategy and the Environment*. 33, 2849-2867. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.3631
- Tilbury, L., & Sealy, R. (2024). Seen and not heard: A comparative case study of women on boards and process loss beyond critical mass. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 32(2), 190-204.. https://doi/full/10.1111/corg.12524
- Veltrop, D**,** Bezemer, P.**,** Nicholson, G., Pugliese, A. (2021). Too unsafe to monitor? How board–CEO cognitive conflict and chair leadership shape outside director monitoring. *Academy of Management Journal*, 64(1), 207–234. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2017.1256.
- Zaman, R., Jain, T., Samara, G., & Jamali, D. (2022). Corporate governance meets corporate social responsibility: Mapping the interface. *Business & Society*, 61(3), 690-752. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650320973415.