Fife College

Externally Facilitated Effectiveness Review November 2020

Final Report

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges, dated 2016, (the Code) sets out the principles of good governance for colleges in Scotland.

1.2 All colleges that receive funding from the Scottish Funding Council or a regional strategic body must comply with the Code as a condition of grant. Each governing board must state its adoption of the Code in its corporate governance statement contained within its annual financial statement.

1.3 The five principles set out in the Code provide a framework within which colleges are expected to develop their own policies and procedures.

1.4 The Code states that the college governing board must have in place a robust self-evaluation process. Para D. 23 states '*The Board must keep its effectiveness under annual review and have in place a robust self-evaluation process. There should also be an externally facilitated evaluation of its effectiveness at least every three years'.* This externally facilitated governance review was established to meet this expectation.

1.5 'The Guide for Board Members in the College Sector' and the 'Board Development Framework' provide additional guidance for college board members and college board secretaries.

Methodology

1.6 This governance effectiveness review included various approaches aimed at building up an overview of the governing board's effectiveness. The components of the review process were:

o   Initial meeting with the chair, principal and board secretary to agree the scope of the review and the overall project plan (9 September 2020)
o   Observation[1] of board meeting (30 September 2020) and audit committee (10 September 2020)
o   Desk review of core governance documentation, including agendas and reports and minutes.
o   Interviews with the chair, chair of audit and risk committee, principal, board secretary, (3 – 5 November 2020)
o   Board survey to seek members' views of governing processes (completed 5 November 2020)
o   On-line event with board members to test review conclusions and recommendations (completed 27 November 2020)

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[1] It should be noted that at the time of Covid-19 pandemic, governing board and committee meetings were taking place 'on-line'. Thus, reference to the observation of meetings should be understood as observation of on-line college governance meetings. Such meetings are obviously different from the dynamic of face-to-face governing meetings. However, given the circumstances, it is the effectiveness of on-line governing which is being commented on in this review.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The following positive aspects of the governing of Fife College have been identified:

2.1.1   An expert and confident chair of the governing board

2.1.2   Clear and imaginative governance advice and efficient governance organisation from the board secretary

2.1.3   A supportive and open principal who wishes to facilitate governing

2.1.4   Significant impact from the governing board such as local/community knowledge, labour market knowledge, learner awareness, ambition;

2.1.5   The culture of challenge, testing and querying from board members which gain wider understanding and board confidence and assurance

2.1.6   A clear understanding of strategic college governance matters and priorities from board members (as evidenced by detailed responses to the board member survey)

2.2 In summary, this is a strong position for the governance of Fife College.

2.3 It is possible to improve upon current performance and this effectiveness review should be considered in this context. The effectiveness review has highlighted several areas where improvements could lead to better decision making in the achievement of the governing board's responsibilities. In summary these improvements are considered to be:

- Improvements to the nature of reporting to the board and its committees, especially in relation to business reporting/operational plan progress
- Improving the focus on learners and learning in governing processes
- Widening the use of the 'governance space' to include more creative time for board members to explore significant strategic questions and opportunities

3 EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW AGAINST THE CODE FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

3.1 Leadership and Strategy

3.1.1   The board membership is a strong mix of experienced and newly appointed board members. Responses to a board effectiveness questionnaire and observation of board and audit committee meetings suggest an engaged and committed membership of the governing board. This is a diverse governing board with a relevant and considered combination of skills and experience.

3.1.2   The governing board has established a clear and ambitious vision and strategy for Fife College.

3.1.3   The governing board regularly receives a business report to monitor the progress of the strategic objectives for Fife College. This report is broadly useful but could be improved to enable more informed engagement from board members.

3.1.4   Reports to the governing board in general are useful, but are inconsistent in format and intention. All governing board reports would benefit from clear and well-constructed recommendations beyond 'to approve or to note'. In addition, all reports would be strengthened by 'learner and learning implications' and 'financial health implications'.

3.1.5   The governing board has appointed a senior independent member who acts in accordance with expectations established in the Code of Good Governance.

3.1.6   The governing board has established an equality and diversity plan to provide leadership of this responsibility. The progress towards implementing the action plan could be reported to the board on a six monthly cycle. The governing board could consider the identification of a nominated board member for equality and diversity to link the governing board to management actions.

3.2 Quality of the Student Experience

3.2.1 From meeting observation, interviews and questionnaire responses, the quality of the student experience is central to the operation of the governing board. The student voice, as demonstrated by the contribution to the board meeting, is well-presented and received. The board receives a written report from Fife College Students' Association Report (e.g. 15 October 2020) which is comprehensive and very informative. Like all reports to the governing board, the report would benefit from 'impact' i.e. going beyond description.

3.2.2 The governing board could facilitate and encourage the learner voice further by formally establishing a learner voice framework which explains and describes the ways in which students are able to contribute their opinions and ideas to the leadership of Fife College. By defining such systems and methods, the governing board will be able to ensure the learner voice is operating as effectively as intended.

3.2.3 The governing board considers key performance indicators for student performance at each board meeting. There is also an academic quality committee which focuses on all aspects of the student experience. This reporting could be improved by less description and more professional insight in relation to student data compared with e.g. targets, timescales and benchmarks.

3.2.4 To further assist governing members with appreciation of the student experience, para 3.1.4 above proposes the use of a required section in all governing board and committee reports headed 'learner and learning implications'.

3.2.5 Responses to the board member survey suggests that there could be more awareness of learner safeguarding/child protection at the board level. Thus, an annual review of the board's safeguarding policy and procedures together with an action plan for six monthly monitoring could improve support and assistance for students. A nominated board member for safeguarding may assist board engagement and decision making.

3.3 Board Accountability

3.3.1 The governing board has established the following committees to provide scrutiny and specialist consideration:
- o Audit and Risk Committee
- o Academic Quality Committee
- o Finance, Commercial and Estates Committee
- o Health and Safety and Human Resources Committee
- o Chair's Committee (Search, Remuneration)

In addition, a New Campus Dunfermline Project Board has been formed by the governing board to have oversight of the project.

There is scope for reviewing the number and focus of standing committees e.g. join the 'finance and estates' committee and 'human resources' committee to form a finance and resources committee.

The audit and risk committee was observed and considered to be well-chaired and very effective in its deliberations. The oversight of risk, assurance, significant college systems and controls was undertaken proficiently. There is some scope for a more learner-focused audit and risk committee, by reviewing systems and controls connected with learner-facing themes.

3.3.2 In general board and committee meetings (from evidence provided, observation and interview) are well-organised, purposeful and achieve impact by the governing board. board members are very positive in the board member survey about the contribution of written reports to effective governing processes. *'The strong improvement seen in the college performance over the past couple of years has been partly due to the improvements we have seen in the reporting information…'*

3.3.3 There is scope for further contribution by the governing board/committee by refinements to senior staff reports as follows:
- o Revising the business report to show objective, target, progress, management intervention (if required), timescale/outcome.
- o Improve report recommendations – from approve/note to clearer connection with the subject of the report.
- o Evolve report content from positive news to actual account with professional insight.
- o Restrict senior staff talking through reports and thus using up governing board member time for discussion.
- o Every effort should be taken to achieve higher quality / low density reporting.

3.3.4 There is confidence in the membership and work of committees of the governing board. To gain maximum benefit from committees, the governing board should regularly review communications between committees and the board to ensure that all board members familiar with the decisions taken by committees on behalf of the governing board.

3.3.5 It is useful practice to review meetings at their conclusion. For this item to be beneficial, the questions posed for board members to answer could be 'what impact

for learners has this meeting achieved? and 'what impact for college staff has this meeting achieved?'

3.3.6 The governance section of the college website is current, well-presented and informative. Perhaps a higher profile could be given to encouraging interest in becoming a new college board member, including the positive aspects of serving as a board member.

3.4 Board Effectiveness

3.4.1 This is an effective governing board which achieves impact through technical knowledge support, community understanding, ambition, pace, governing culture, and procedural decision making.

3.4.2 Board members appreciate 'collective responsibility' in decision making. Board members provide constructive challenge and support at governance meetings, holding the senior college staff to account.

3.4.3 The governing board participates in strategic development events. There is scope for more 'creative time' for board members to explore educational themes and options for college and its communities.

3.4.4 The chair is effective and promotes a board culture of openness, discussion and decision-making. He is inclusive and proactive in performance of his role.

3.4.5 The board secretary is highly expert, appreciated and respected in the performance of her role. The positive influence of the board secretary in governing processes and practices is recognised.

3.4.6 The Principal is open and facilitative towards governing and engages with the governing board in a constructive manner.

3.4.7. From the 18 board member skills matrix, there is evidence of a sufficient range of skills, expertise and diversity recruited to board membership, with the possible exception of themes listed as 'vocational education and training' and 'strategic leadership'. It is accepted that the skills matrix is only an approximate indicator of the capacity and capability of board membership.

3.4.8 Board members' attendance at governing board meetings is recorded at 79% in the college year 2018/19. This figure is good but could be higher with a target in the range 85% - 90%. Actions to improve attendance could be considered including consideration of timing of meetings, conduct of meetings, use of technology etc.

3.4.9 Seven 'new' board members responded to the board member survey[2]. The responses highlighted the positive contribution of induction to their confidence and clarity of role. The board member survey also makes reference to the operation of board member

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[2] 16 questionnaire responses were received in total.

mentoring, which is explained as a very useful method for supporting new and newly experienced board members.

3.4.10 The governing board has undertaken a useful and positive review of the Code of Good Governance. The governing board should consider stretch targets for the Code to build upon its declared basic compliance.

3.5 Relationships and Collaboration

3.5.1 The governing board understands the importance of collaborative working, and benefits from having a broad representation from stakeholder organisations amongst their members. There is a recent example of a board member providing a strategic lead to a board development event addressing local and regional vocational education and training priorities.

3.5.2 The presentation of external contacts and membership by senior college staff looks organised, relevant and appropriate. The pattern and impact of stakeholder relationships could be reviewed on a regular basis by stakeholder mapping as a development exercise with the governing board to ensure senior staff time and energy is spent in the most effective ways in relation to accountabilities and strategic intentions.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

	Note : Each recommendation presented is 'desirable'; there are no recommendations which are 'action critical'.
1	Review the format of the business report to include progress to date, target & variance, risk rating, management intervention (if required), outcome, timescale
2	Review 'recommendations' on all governance reports to make clear to board members the intended outcome from the report To assist the development of recommendations, report writers should consider board 'impact' from decision making
3	Review governing report format to include 'learner and learning implications' and 'financial health implications'
4	Review the expectations and contribution of senior staff to governing processes to develop confidence, openness and professional insight
5	Review the centrality of promoting equality and diversity through planning and monitoring of action plan implementation Consideration could be given to a nominated member for equality and diversity to act as a champion
6	Consider the development, approval and monitoring of a learner voice framework
7	Consider the ways in which learner safeguarding and support is reported to the governing board and, importantly, there is assurance that the college's procedures and practices are effective. Consideration could be given to a nominated member for learner safeguarding to act as a champion
8	Review the standing committees of the governing board – for contribution to the achieving the board's responsibilities and to release time for more creative governing processes
9	Consider ways to evolve the audit and risk committee agenda to include the operation and usefulness of direct learner-facing systems and controls
10	Review the communication of committee deliberations to the governing board to ensure all governing board members are taking account of the work of committees on behalf of the board

11	Reviewing the effectiveness of each board and committee meeting can identify aspects for continuous improvement in agenda formation, reporting, decision making, member engagement
12	Aim to develop stretch targets for a higher level of compliance with the Code of Good Governance
13	Consider a regular (annual) stakeholder mapping exercise for the board and senior staff to appreciate and develop relevant and productive stakeholder engagement, communication and accountability

5   ANNEX 1

5.1   Document Review

i.   Committee terms of reference
ii.   Financial statements 2018/19 (and draft 2019/20)
iii.   Board agenda and papers (30 September 2020)
iv.   Published Board minutes 2020
v.   Audit and Risk Committee agenda and papers (15 September 2020)
vi.   Board member skills matrix
vii.   Board member profile
viii.   Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2018/19
ix.   External Effectiveness Review Jan 2017
x.   Board Development Plan March 2017
xi.   Register of training for board members
xii.   Governance meeting calendar 2020/21
xiii.   Review against revised Code of Good Governance Aug 2020
xiv.   New Campus Dunfermline Project Board
xv.   Board member role description
xvi.   Fife College Strategic Plan 2018-23

Footnote

The reviewer would like to thank the board members, principal and board secretary for their assistance and insight with this external effectiveness review.