Governance Training Materials

Module 6
Strategy and educational character

For suggestions on how to get the most out of these self-study materials, see the booklet on 'Using the materials'.

Preface to Governance Training Materials

At the time of writing the Governance Training Modules, the **Education Act 2011** had been implemented. It abolished the Young People's Learning Agency, with funding for colleges now being administered by either the Education Funding Agency and / or the Skills Funding Agency. It significantly reduced the complexity of colleges' Instrument and Articles of Government, giving them greater flexibility to run their own affairs. The details are included in Schedule 12 of the Act which makes a number of amendments to prior legislation. Section 29b of Schedule 12 states that "the governing body of the institution may modify or replace its instrument of government and articles of government". These must however comply with certain requirements set out in Part 2 of Schedule 4, thereby retaining some of the key responsibilities previously enshrined in legislation. In some cases, the statutory provision for sixth form colleges differs from that of general further education (GFE) colleges with the **Department for Education (DfE)** overseeing the former and the **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)** the latter; however all colleges will now be actively considering the changes that affect them and all governors will need to be aware of the implications for their own organisation. At the same time as the Education Act 2011 was passed into law, the Association of Colleges published **The English Colleges' Foundation Code of Governance.**

This voluntary code of practice was developed by the sector following extensive consultation and all GFE colleges have been encouraged formally to adopt it. It has the full support of the government and is seen as "an important milestone in making colleges more locally accountable and in freeing them to respond more effectively to local learners, employers and community partners".

The government's reform plan for the further education and skills system was set out in **New Challenges, New Chances** published on 1 December 2011 and further refined in **Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills** published in April 2013. A **summary of NCNC** is available from LSIS. In November 2011 the final report of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities, **A Dynamic Nucleus**, was published. Alongside New Challenges, New Chances, these two documents establish the foundation for the future development of the further education and skills sector.

The 2013 version of the Governance Training materials incorporate these significant changes to the operation of further education but all governors are recommended to familiarise themselves with and take account of the key documents referred to in this preface. The materials enshrine the six principles set out in the Good Governance Standard for Public Services by the Independent Commission on **Good Governance in Public Services** (2005), to which all governing bodies are referred.

The **Association of Colleges** has also compiled a **Governance Resource Library** which provides a wide range of online resources for governors and which will usefully complement these materials.

The **Learning and Skills Improvement Service** which has produced these updated and much valued governance training modules will cease to exist after August 2013. It is hoped the essential updating of these resources will be regularly carried out by other existing organisations or newly-emerging ones.

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Introduction

The overall character of a college – what courses it offers, which students it caters for, what sort of learning environment it provides – is referred to as its **educational character**. This concept is equally applicable to any organisation involved in delivering further education. A key responsibility of governors is to ensure that their organisation's educational character, and hence the type, range and accessibility of its courses, meets the needs of the community it serves.

Another key responsibility of governors is to ensure that the **mission** – the statement of the fundamental aims and purposes of the organisation – both reflects the needs of the community it serves and informs and directs every aspect of its activities.

A third key area of governor responsibility is the **ethos or values of the organisation** – the principles and beliefs that determine how the college or other sector organisation's community interacts at a human level in achieving its objectives. How does it respond to diversity, what is its commitment to quality and the morale of its staff, what does it do to enable innovation?

These fundamental responsibilities of governance are often referred to as the **mission, vision and values** of the organisation – why the organisation exists, what its community believes in, how it will behave and what the organisation wants to be.

This module gives you the opportunity to explore these areas in relation to your own college or sector organisation, and to develop a better understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of governors for strategy and educational character.

Aims

By the end of this module you should be able to:

- explain the purpose of your organisation's strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment;
- describe how your organisation's mission and values inform its strategy;
- describe your organisation's vision;
- explain the distinction between the mission, vision and values of your organisation and the link with strategy and the strategic plan;
- explain how the educational character of your organisation reflects its mission, values and strategy;
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your organisation;
- discuss ways of effectively monitoring your organisation's strategic plan;
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team;
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the organisation; and
- discuss proposals for the review of the current structure and processes of your governing body.

Contents

Mark the sections you want to study and tick them off as you complete them.

To do   **Done**

Working on the self-study activities

These materials have been designed for flexible use and to complement the resources for governor development provided by your own organisation or other web-based resources. You can work through them with other governors in training and development sessions. You can also work through sections and activities in your own time and at your own pace if you find it difficult to attend organised training sessions. Governors who have used these materials point out how valuable it is to work on at least some of the suggested activities together with another governor or group of governors, as there is significant potential to learn from each other's experience. For suggestions on how to organise this kind of support for yourself, see the booklet on 'Using the materials'.

What you will need

To complete the activities in this module you will need to get hold of the following documents from the clerk:

- your local regional economic strategy;
- your organisation's mission, vision and values statements; and
- your organisation's strategic plan.

Where you need to make notes in response to activity questions, we suggest you do this in a notebook or on separate sheets of loose-leaf paper, and store the information you compile, along with the module, for future reference.

Section 1

Introduction to strategy and educational character

Your role as a governor is to be responsible for the mission, educational character, quality and solvency of your organisation. You should also keep the overall strategy of your organisation– the key objectives and how they are to be achieved – under review to ensure that it matches the wider educational environment. Governors need to assure themselves that their organisation provides the services required by the community it serves.

In understanding the role of governors it is helpful to contrast it with that of the principal and the organisation's management team. The principal is responsible for:

- developing and proposing the educational character and mission of the organisation for approval by the governing body; and
- developing and managing services and curricular activities.

Broadly, governance in the further education (FE) and skills sector is primarily concerned with formulating long-term vision and approving and monitoring medium- and long-term strategy, whilst the principal working with the senior management team are concerned with the implementation of those strategies.

Governors bring a broad range of experience to their task. You may have local or national business interests, be employed by other key local agencies such as the local education or unitary authority, or come from community or voluntary sector organisations. You may be a student at the college or other learning organisation or a staff member. This wide experience should be drawn on when reviewing such things as the organisation's proposals for programmes of learning, major investments of assets, merger, collaboration or partnership and medium- and long- term strategies.

Governors have a critical role as the custodians of the mission, ethos, values, vision and educational character of the organisation on behalf of the wider stakeholder community. In one sense, governors 'own' the organisation on behalf of the community. This means that you are responsible for checking that strategic decisions comply with the agreed statements about mission, vision, values and educational character. You will need to be aware of local and national priorities for the provision of further and higher education. It is your responsibility to identify any substantial drift from the organisation's mission and these priorities.

How can the role of governors and management be distinguished?

The fictitious scenario that follows embodies several issues relating to the governors' role in shaping strategy and educational character.

What next at Bluewater College?
Bluewater College's principal has been in post for 18 months. The principal has undertaken a successful restructuring of the college and has begun to establish a strong quality culture. Not everyone signs up to the new focus on standards rather than seeking the latest business opportunity, but there is growing acceptance within the college that quality matters. Some governors regret the loss of some very good and influential business governors.

The board agenda includes: an update on a meeting between the local Skills Funding Agency and the senior management team; discussion of proposals for the reshaping of the curriculum offer by the deputy principal; discussion of proposals for increased collaboration with neighbouring colleges;

and a review of the college staff profile (age, industrial experience, staff development activity, sickness and absence, shortages, etc.).

The art and design department faces a number of challenges, given recent poor levels of industrial experience, success rates below national standards and the very high reputation of nearby Goodpractice College. Possible options include: closure of the department; partnership arrangements with the art and design department of Goodpractice College; or growth of a niche market department of retail fashion which would require investment in staff and equipment.

The board papers about the curriculum and the staff profile have already prompted a number of approaches to the Chair and principal. Three governors have a long-term commitment to the art and design department; one governor works within the media industry; another is matched with the department and has been approached by staff members anxious about its future; the third is a head teacher from one of the main local schools concerned about reduced choice for school leavers.

Governors have recently met with colleagues from Goodpractice College and have noted some differences in approach between the colleges. The vice chair is keen that managers at Bluewater learn from their opposite numbers at the other college. Some governors were very impressed by the art and design department at Goodpractice College which was judged as 'outstanding' in a recent Ofsted inspection report.

Activity

What should the governors' approach be in the meeting?

Imagine that you were one of the Bluewater College governors. Note down three questions that you would want to explore at the meeting of the full governing body.

Viewpoint

Governors need to be very careful that they do not get diverted into discussing the detail of the proposals, rather than reviewing their impact on the educational character, ethos and mission of the college. There will be a degree of tension between governors who have a special interest in issues relating to the art and design department, and governors and senior managers who have a broader interest. Some of the questions you might have considered are:

- What is the pattern of the local curriculum offer in the areas under discussion? How might each of the proposed options affect this?
- What impact would each of the proposals have on the educational character and values of the college?
- What are the resource implications of each of the options? What impact would they have on the medium- and long-term financial stability of the college? What impact would they have on the staffing profile of the college?
- Would there be any differential impact on specific groups in the local area from any of the options? How do any proposals affect 'travel to study' patterns? What would be the impact on the local skills base for each of the options?
- Is there a reasonable expectation that there will be jobs available locally in the proposed area for development?

Issues about the broad nature of a niche offer could be viewed as borderline between the responsibilities of governance and management. The way in which the agreed proposal is implemented is clearly a management decision – for example, how to gain the necessary staff skills profile, or the precise nature of the partnership between the colleges.

Two further points:

- Questions about which staff and courses should be protected in any restructuring would not be appropriate governance. However, governors may wish to seek clarification or reassurance about the implications of any changes for the relationship with the local Skills Funding Agency or in relation to legal obligations surrounding any redundancies.
- The precise nature of any agreement or partnership with a neighbouring college is a management issue, but the principle of collaboration and the intended outcomes is a matter of policy and a key responsibility of governance.

This case study illustrates the need for governors to test management proposals against the college's mission and local and national strategic priorities, and to examine their impact on the educational character and ethos of the college. We now take a closer look at the issue of mission and corporate objectives.

Why should governors think about mission and corporate strategic objectives?

Mission statement and corporate objectives

Key questions that governors should ask about their organisation are: "What is it for?" and "Why do we exist?" The answers should be contained in the mission statement of the organisation. Governors should ensure that the mission statement and the associated corporate strategic objectives identify the organisation's core purpose and the ends that the organisation should achieve. The mission statement also provides the acid test against which current and proposed activities should be monitored and evaluated.

Role of community interests

Governors play a vital role in representing the beneficiaries of the organisation– the community it serves. Governors' judgements about strategy and educational character should always be measured against the question, "What benefit does this bring to the community the organisation serves?"

Governance and management

> "In order to be obsessive about ends, the board has got to get a lot of clutter that currently consumes its time out of the way...board members do have legitimate worries about how things are being practised (so) the board must be sure it is getting the monitoring data that keeps its worrying down."
>
> *John Carver and Miriam Mayhew (1994) A new vision of board leadership Washington: Association of Community College Trustees*

This quote from John Carver highlights one aspect of his 'policy governance model' which has been widely discussed in further education and which has been implemented in various degrees by some colleges. This model enables governing bodies to concentrate their attention on strategic leadership.

Approaches to policy governance

Governors should focus on ends rather than means. Their task is not to work out what has to be done to achieve the desired outcomes – these are means and should be left to management to determine. Governing bodies must be about setting ambition and expectations and then monitoring their

achievement.

The policy governance model aims at empowering governing bodies to become more visionary. They become less immersed in detail and more concerned in what Carver calls "making a difference" in deciding about the organisation's effect "on the world outside". Mission statements and identifying priorities are about ends and are the responsibility of governing bodies. The design and execution of means, or strategies to achieve those ends, are the responsibility of management.

One of the usual outcomes of adopting the policy governance model is to reconstitute the governing body by reducing the number of committees and dealing with formal matters in full board meetings. In colleges that have moved to this model, meetings take place on average once every two months. Agendas are carefully organised to identify strategic matters for decision and other matters for information or note. Where this approach has been successfully implemented, colleges identify increased ownership by all members, a clearer focus on strategy and vision, less duplication and more effective monitoring.

The contribution that a mission statement makes to governing body business:

- It provides a clear sense of purpose and direction to the organisation.
- It directly influences the strategic objectives of the organisation.
- It provides the broad parameters for management decision-making.
- It aids evaluation – by generating the benchmark or quality standard against which the organisation can measure its achievements.

Activity

Assessing the quality of governing body contributions

Look at the quote below which indicates a particular governor's approach to an issue in a governing body meeting. Consider this approach and say to what extent you think it would help the governing body as a whole to discharge its duties.

> "I am extremely concerned about the proposal to close our construction department. As you are aware I run a local construction company and I rely on a pool of local youngsters who have been appropriately trained. I am also the link governor for this programme area and I am extremely concerned about the future of the staff there if this goes ahead. Surely there must be other ways of saving money? We said nothing about this in our strategic plan."

Think of three examples in recent governing body meetings where you or other governors took a similar approach.

Viewpoint

In this typical scenario, rather than taking a strategic view, the governor has diverted the meeting into a too detailed consideration because this is what the governor knows and understands. Closing a department may well be precipitated by competition, poor standards and subsequent failure to attract Skills Funding Agency funding. As a governor, you should try not to lose sight of the bigger picture.

In this particular example, there is also an unacceptable element of self-interest. Governors need to retain focus on the needs of the community as a whole.

A further question:

How might this governor more appropriately and effectively make his/her view known?

Activity

Picturing the vision for your organisation

In a group, take your organisation's mission and values statements and describe how you would like the organisation to be in ten years' time – a shorter period than this will lead to less ambitious and imaginative discussion. This activity is best done as part of an informal development day and works best when staff and students are also involved. The final description should be no more than a short paragraph. Drawing pictures of the future is a very good way of freeing the imagination.

Viewpoint

The vision for an organisation is a picture or description of what it will look like in the future, assuming that the mission is secure, values are being lived and strategic objectives met. It should be ambitious and stretching as with the vision to put someone on the moon. An organisation might aspire to be the best in the world. If it results in someone saying "We could never achieve that", it probably means you are on the right track.

Section 2

The educational environment

The educational environment has undergone a series of changes since incorporation in 1993 and there is no sign of any lessening in the pace of change. Since 2011 and the passing of the Education Act 2011, funding responsibility rests with the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency (EFA). Governing bodies now have significantly more freedom under the new legislation and there is an assumption that they will be at the centre of their local communities. Colleges are also being encouraged to examine the potential of new models of delivery, including federations and the use of companies limited by guarantee. See **Thinking Outside the College** for a practical approach to addressing the new accountabilities expected of colleges.

Government responsibility for further education and skills rests with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). The Department for Education (DfE) has responsibility for education and children's services including academies and free schools and some 16-19 activities. From April 2010, sixth form college corporations were formed as a separate legal entity from FE colleges.

From 2015, the Education and Skills Act 2008 will oblige young people to continue in either full-time education or training until they attain either the age of 18 or a Level 3 qualification. The Education Act 2011 makes a number of further changes to college governance. In addition, broader factors affecting the college, such as globalisation, economic recession and the move to a high skill, knowledge-based economy, all have profound effects on the future direction and character of your organisation. Governors need to review periodically the broad political, economic, social and technological environment and assess whether the organisation's mission, vision and objectives need to be reviewed in the light of changes.

Why keeping an eye on the broader educational environment is important

Issues in the broader environment, such as the knowledge-based economy, the importance of skills, developments in information and communications technology, and changes in working patterns will require your organisation to change the way it delivers key curriculum and business support activities in the future. The type of programmes, staffing requirements, skill requirements, buildings provision and investment patterns of the organisation may all need to be reconfigured to accommodate future developments. These changes continue to have a significant impact on colleges, adult and community learning and sixth form colleges as well as work-based learning providers.

The last major reform of the A level curriculum took place in 2000. The intention was to make study broader and more flexible for people over the age of 16. It introduced AS-level and Key Skills examinations and allowed for a much greater degree of modularisation. There have been ongoing changes to syllabi and assessment schemes, the latest being the introduction of an A* grade to help universities identify the most able for admission. The current Secretary of State has announced his intention to consult on a major reform of A levels, including the abolition of the AS level and the removal of modular examinations.

The main emphasis of recent years has been on vocational qualification reform with attempts being made to raise their status and make them accessible to all. 14-19 has been identified as a key learning transition phase bringing the national curriculum directly in touch with the post-16 phase. Vocational GCSEs and 14-16 Young Apprenticeships have been introduced and the Tomlinson report in 2008 recommended the introduction of a 14-19 Diploma. This was intended as an overarching framework incorporating both vocational and academic programmes. The Diploma has not been

without its implementation problems and is a good example why governors need to take a long-term view on the impact of the curriculum on their learners.

Following the election of a coalition government in 2010, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, announced the **Wolf Report** with a brief to review and make recommendations on all aspects of the vocational curriculum. The report was produced in March 2011 and a **summary of the Wolf recommendations** is available on the DfE website.

In 2006 Train to Gain was introduced to support skills' acquisition in adult learners. Funding for this programme was withdrawn in 2010; however additional resources have been allocated to the apprenticeship scheme to encourage employer involvement and work-based learning for both 16-19 and adult apprenticeships, including those at higher education level. In November 2011, the Minister announced a doubling of the functional skills funding rates in English and mathematics when used in the workplace.

Following changes to the machinery of government in 2010, funding responsibility has passed to the Skills Funding Agency and Education Funding Agency (EFA). Funding, in the form of commissioning, will continue to be influenced by the quality of provision, with encouragement being given to greater partnership and collaboration between post-16 providers, schools and academies.

As a governor, you can add value to the strategic planning processes of your organisation by reviewing its curriculum offer, educational character, mission and organisational capacity in the light of changes in the environment. To do this effectively you need to keep up to date with developments within and beyond education. As the brief descriptions above attest, this is no small challenge!

Activity

How can governors keep up to date with trends in the educational environment?

Note three ways in which governors can keep up to date with issues that emerge in the educational environment.

Viewpoint

You may only have time to make use of one or two of the following, and may only manage to use them sporadically, but all these are potentially useful sources of information on current issues:

- the principal's regular report – which should cover trends in the wider environment, not just within the organisation;
- the education press (**Times Educational Supplement**, **Times Higher Education Supplement**, education supplements of the daily newspapers, **FE News**);
- websites for government departments (e.g. DfE, BIS, Department for Work and Pensions);
- **LSIS policy updates** – downloadable from the website and providing monthly digests of all key education policy developments;
- conferences; and
- talking with staff.

For many governors, the principal's report can be the most convenient way of getting to grips with what is going on in the FE and skills sector, but reviewing some of the education press periodically or accessing one of the websites mentioned above will help you develop your own feel for the latest trends. Before your next governing body meeting try to access one of these sites.

Activity

What are the current key issues in the educational environment?

Over a couple of weeks, get hold of two or three newspapers or journals devoted to educational issues, such as the Times Educational Supplement, or the education supplements of the Guardian or Independent. Look at the websites mentioned above and download one or two of the recent LSIS policy updates.

1 Make a note of three issues in the educational environment that are featured in the press or on the websites.
2 For each issue, make notes on the ways it is likely to affect your organisation. Ask yourself what the issue means for your organisation. Is this issue a challenge or risk for the organisation or is it something you can feel confident about?
3 Compare your ideas with those of other governors. What are the three most important issues for your organisation at the moment? Which are likely to be passing challenges and which are more long-term?
4 How will you monitor their medium- and long-term importance for your organisation?

Viewpoint

1 You may have identified a number of issues, for example concerns about changes to the inspection regime, school sixth-forms, a report on a possible merger of neighbouring colleges, the outcome of the Wolf review of vocational qualifications, the new apprenticeship scheme, the demise of Train to Gain, university tuition fees, new visa requirements for international students, reductions in funding for adult learning, leadership development for senior and middle management.
2 This activity may have helped you identify an issue that will have a significant impact on your organisation. To develop the governing body's responsiveness to this kind of issue, governors can ask a number of further questions, such as:
   - what additional information do I need to be sure my organisation is ready to meet this issue?
   - what changes, if any, do we need to make?
   - what resources will this require?
3 It is important to make sure that the organisation doesn't get out of step with its environment. Keep monitoring developments – those that don't seem particularly significant for your organisation now may prove to be so later.
4 It is clearly too much for individual governors to keep track of all the developments affecting the organisation, but you might agree areas of special interest, or responsibility for one particular source of information.

What should governors do?

Review the press and selected websites as often as possible so that you are alert to issues likely to affect your organisation in the current or approaching year. Having identified the issues, you should be prepared to raise them in the appropriate committees or governing body meetings and to question the principal on them. You may wish to ask the principal to report on current issues in the environment on a regular basis, receiving reports as part of the regular meetings of the full governing body or outside meetings using email, twitter or blogs.

Section 3

Educational character and ethos

As part of the new freedoms being given to colleges, The Education Act 2011 has made provision for governing bodies to draw up new Instrument and Articles of Government. Colleges may opt to continue with their current Instrument and Articles which specify the key responsibilities of governors, the chief executive and the clerk. The law requires only two board responsibilities to be included: "the determination and periodic review of the educational character and mission of the institution and the oversight of its activities" and "the effective and efficient use of resources, the solvency of the institution and the safeguarding of the organisation's assets".

The principal's role stated in the Articles of Association as having a responsibility "for making proposals to the corporation about the educational character and mission of the organisation, and for implementing the decisions of the corporation".

Your role, then, is periodically to consider proposals on the mission and character of the organisation, and to check whether these are appropriate for the environment in which the organisation finds itself.

A new governor may well ask: "What is meant by educational character?" Educational character is perhaps not an easy concept to take hold of at first. It is how the organisation delivers its mission – the kind of organisation it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides, its approach to teaching and learning, the quality of its partnerships with other agencies. It may also include the values to which the organisation's community subscribes and how they underwrite the behaviours to which they aspire.

Why think about educational character?

Educational character and ethos are fundamental to your organisation. In recent years there has been a refocusing of the role of colleges and other sector organisations towards continuous improvement, widening participation, equality of access, development of a local skills base and partnership and collaboration between providers. This has placed demands on senior staff and governors, but also provided new opportunities for innovation. Financial pressures remain however, and particularly so as we emerge from a deep economic downturn and the consequent pressures on public sector funding. The sector has been very successful in meeting targets for improved success rates, investing in new infrastructure and professional development for staff. However, pockets of underachievement still remain, leading to some poor inspection reports and formal notices to improve from the Skills Funding Agency.

The pace of change in the external environment requires constant vigilance on the part of governors to ensure that they set high ambitions for themselves and for the organisation as a whole. Governors and senior staff will need to shape the educational character and ethos of the organisation to meet the new national and local political environment.

Case study: Educational character at Bluewater College

Over the last two years, Bluewater College has refocused its mission on responsiveness to its local community and delivery of flexible, high quality programmes to a diverse community, including school leavers and employers. Its mission statement reflects this educational character and ethos.

It struggles to achieve some aspects of this mission. The standards of retention and achievement are excellent in some areas, but some are proving slow to improve, despite the concerted efforts of senior managers and staff teams. Work with employers is slow to develop and currently making a loss.

Whilst there has been some good investment in buildings and the fabric of the college, a major rebuilding programme initially approved for 2012 has been withdrawn through lack of central funding, leaving the ten-year investment plan in some disarray. Partnerships with other local providers have been developing but there is growing anxiety on the part of staff that a forced merger may result from reduced revenue funding in the near future.

The new principal has made a significant impact on the culture of the college and has appointed a new and strong senior leadership team. There is a growing focus on standards with sights firmly set on 'outstanding' provision. Staff have responded well and have welcomed the additional support provided through the professional development programme. The growth in international students is making an increasing contribution to the organisation's income. However, concerns about funding have increased markedly since the economic downturn and there is talk of increased teaching contact hours and redundancies amongst staff. Two local schools have achieved academy status and others are planning to introduce sixth-form provision. The removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance is likely to affect retention in the future. The provision of adult and community learning is under financial pressure. Partnership and collaboration are being seen as the first step to merger.

Governors are still not happy with their levels of interaction with staff and students.

The educational character and ethos of the college has begun to change significantly. Core values held by the senior team and governing body are now about quality and access for both students and staff, but efficiency is still a guiding principle. An increasing number of students are living locally, but the college is still dependent on a considerable number of out of area learners migrating from the city centre. The college will need to take account of the significant changes in funding over the next four years. Money is required to invest in infrastructure, equipment and staff – but in what direction?

The educational character and ethos of the college has moved increasingly in line with the changed educational environment. The college has responded to the political environment and is making strong commitments to meeting the demands of the new agendas. However, the pace of change has recently quickened and the environment, both nationally and locally has become more rather than less uncertain. It is more important than ever for governors to review the educational character of the college in relation to the political environment and the needs of the local community.

A checklist for determining the educational character of your organisation

1. Who are the potential and actual students in your organisation? Has this changed? How does this relate to the organisation's mission? Is the pattern consistent across all programme areas and course levels? Are any changes proposed for the future? If so, what is the rationale for this change? What impact will any changes have on the educational character of the organisation?

2. Is the organisation ensuring access to all elements of the local community? Is it responding to the needs of the national and local economy?

3. What kind of learning environment is there in the organisation? What kind of technical facilities are there, including access to information technology? What are the social facilities for students?

4. What kind of teaching and learning approaches are used? How much teaching is done through lectures? How much self-study, resource-based learning do students

undertake? What do learners say about the teaching and learning approaches?

5.   What student support or pastoral care is offered? How effective are the safeguarding measures? Are students satisfied with this provision?

6.   What are the levels and quality of career advice and guidance? What proportion of students progress into work or higher education? How widespread and effective is employer engagement?

7.   Which other agencies does the organisation work with? What kind of partnerships does the organisation have?

Activity

Describe the educational character of your organisation

To do this activity you will need to ask your clerk for a copy of your organisation's strategic plan (sometimes referred to as a development plan) and about the organisation's student and learner cohort.

Read through the checklist above and note down your responses to each question. Write two or three lines on each. Compare your ideas with those below.

Viewpoint

Data about your student cohort should include information on numbers of students:

- under 19
- over 19
- male / female
- studying full-time / part-time
- work-based learning
- with learning difficulties
- with a disability such as partial sight or mobility problems
- in different ethnic groups
- employed / unemployed
- from particular postcodes.

You may also have information on students' prior qualifications, previous school and destinations. The organisation's strategic plan should include information on patterns of need within the local community. The plan should indicate if there are proposals to increase or decrease certain categories of student.

You should be aware both of the physical condition of the organisation's buildings, including any satellite sites – their state of repair and sustainability – and any plans the organisation has to deal with depreciation of the building stock. You should also be aware of the learning aids and resources available to students and staff, where deficiencies lie and what programmes are in place to address these deficiencies.

Teaching may be classroom-based or much more individualised, with varying degrees of computer-based learning. This may vary across programme areas.

Your organisation will offer personal guidance and support (for example to those with housing, immigration or financial difficulties), counselling or high levels of pastoral care. Learning support

may be offered in specialist centres or within the core curriculum. This may cover aspects such as functional skills, dyslexia support, or equipment for those with partial sight or mobility problems.

The organisation may have partnerships such as agreements on 14-19 programmes with local schools, with other colleges or sector organisations, employers, voluntary sector organisations, local authority department, etc.

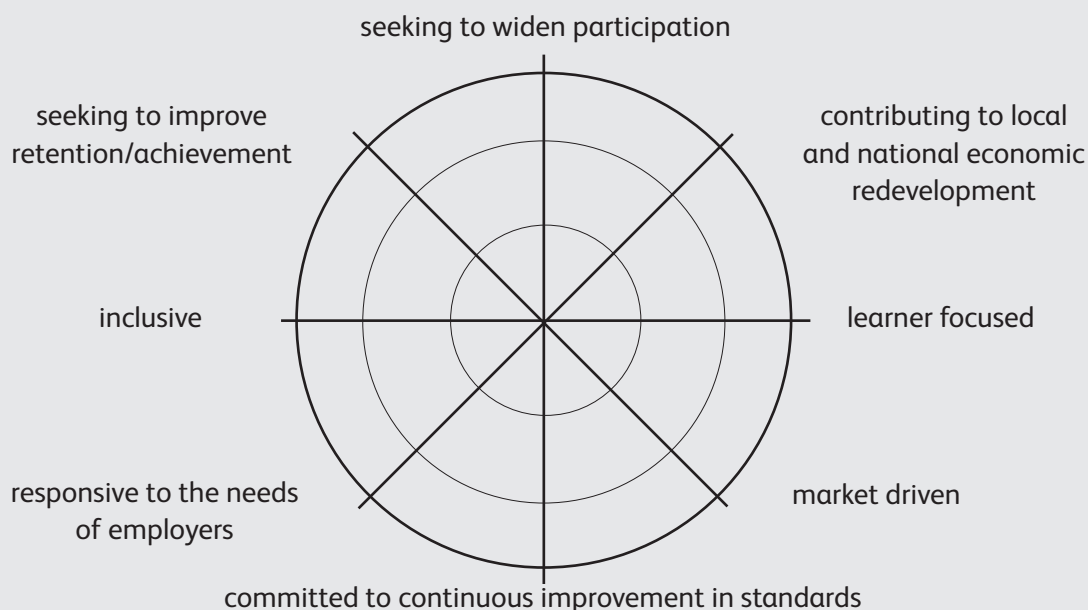## What part does the ethos of an organisation play?

A critical aspect of the educational character of an organisation is its predominant ethos. In many ways this is about the core values that underpin the organisation. These include:

- equality of opportunity for students and staff;
- approaches to diversity;
- levels of empowerment of staff and students;
- relationships with the local community;
- employer engagement;
- approach to risk;
- commitment to high standards and continuous improvement;
- support for innovation and creativity;
- leadership and management style;
- commitment to partnership and collaborative approaches; and
- approaches to human resource management.

Activity
What are the key elements of your organisation's ethos in relation to students?

1   Consider the current ethos of your organisation in relation to the students and community it serves.
2   Map this on the spokes of the wheel below. Place a dot towards the outside circle if you consider that your organisation strongly shows this characteristic; place your dot towards the centre if you think this characteristic is less visible in your organisation's ethos. Join up the pattern of dots when you have thought about all the characteristics.
3   Compare your pattern to that produce by your fellow governors or other groups within the organisation. Identify any differences.
4   Does this pattern meet the needs of the student cohort? Identify any areas of the organisation's ethos that you believe need to change. List these in order of priority.

seeking to widen participation

seeking to improve retention/achievement

contributing to local and national economic redevelopment

inclusive

learner focused

responsive to the needs of employers

market driven

committed to continuous improvement in standards

Viewpoint

Your pattern of joined-up dots is likely to indicate some scores nearer to the outside edge than others. Each organisation will have a different pattern, depending on its location, local industry and levels of employment, etc. There are dangers if the organisation's values are out of step with the environment. For example, there has been a significant focus in recent years on standards and success rates, leading to increased specialisation in vocational qualifications on the part of some FE colleges, together with a pressure to widen participation and engage employers more effectively. You will need to review your core values against the current policy themes locally and nationally and decide whether they need realigning so that the organisation is better able to respond to external changes.

It will also be important to establish whether the pattern of values held is consistent between governors, the principal, senior managers and the staff. If there are areas of mismatch between the governors' vision of the ethos of the organisation and the view of senior management, this will need to be explored.

The organisation's ethos may need to change over time in response to competing demands – although it is difficult and contentious to try to change or impose new values where these have been well-established and widely shared by the organisation's community. Where the demands are pressing and unavoidable, you will need to prioritise in order to determine the direction of change. You might want to find out about the ethos and values of an organisation which achieves and sustains excellence, identified by the achievement of Ofsted Grade 1 inspection outcomes for all areas of activity.

Activity

How does your organisation's management style relate to the organisation's ethos?

1   Consider the fit between your organisation's ethos and the way in which its managers operate. Map the management style of your organisation along the scale of leadership and management values set out below. For example, if you think the style of senior management is strongly collaborative, put a mark at the far right end of the line. If you think the style is neither strongly collaborative nor strongly competitive, put a mark in the middle of the line, and so on. Do this for each set of values.

2   If you can, compare your pattern with those produced by other governors.

competitive .... collaborative

risk-seeking .... risk-averse

innovative .... stability-focused

market-driven .... policy-driven

hierarchical .... distributed leadership

autocratic .... democratic

Viewpoint

There is no 'right' answer; you need to identify the current management and leadership ethos and relate it to the policy environment. For example, if you have identified that the organisation is risk-averse, then seeking rapidly to develop new provision to respond to a policy or funding initiative may throw up difficulties because this approach is out of step with the management ethos. Here, new provision may require more careful planning and staff development than in an organisation where management is already geared to rapid change.

The ethos in an organisation may become out of step with the environment. Many organisations are finding that the turbulence of the environment and the speed of change demand different leadership and management approaches.

Educational character and decision-making

The effect on the educational character of the organisation should be borne in mind whenever you make decisions. For example, when considering the financial forecast for the next year, you need to assess whether the current educational character can be sustained if wide scale rationalisation of provision is being proposed.

Activity

Consider educational character when making key decisions

Read through the situations below and consider them as if they applied to your own organisation. Note down the implications for the educational character of your organisation.

1   The senior management team is proposing that A-levels should be dropped from the curriculum. Success rates have been poor and there is stiff competition from other local providers.
2   A college is concerned to deliver better work-based learning provision and specifically to establish a high quality apprenticeship scheme. A local training provider has approached the college suggesting a formal collaboration.
3   One of the organisation's outreach centres is under-performing in comparison with others. The senior manager responsible has produced a report suggesting the centre be closed.
4   The Chair has reported enthusiastically on a conversation with the Chairs of two local secondary schools that are currently in special measures following failed inspection reports. They have informally discussed the possibility of working towards academy status and setting up a trust to establish a federation of 14-19 providers.
5   Following a visit from the area relationship director of the Skills Funding Agency, a college has been asked to give serious consideration to a formal collaboration with two local colleges, one of which has traditionally been regarded as a competitor.

Viewpoint

1   Some organisations struggle to achieve national benchmark success rates with their A-level provision. This can compromise inspection report outcomes and be at variance with a mission that is committed to high standards. However, many students with moderate GCSE grades remain attracted to A-levels as a route to higher education. Governors will need to consider the impact on choice and widening participation of the proposal as well as the financial implications. What programmes

are being proposed as replacements? What are the implications for staff? How will the 'new' curriculum impact on the educational character and ethos of the organisation? What alternative strategies might there be to retain A-levels?

2   Working in partnership with a local training provider could have many benefits. There will need to be careful consideration of the nature of the agreement, the costs and staffing implications. How will the quality of provision be assured and what will be the management arrangements? There will need to be a robust risk assessment of the proposal.

3   Why is the centre underperforming and what steps has management taken to improve quality? Closing a centre – possibly an adult education provision that no longer attracts funding – could have a significant impact on the local community as well as the staff. Evening provision is seldom profitable but often greatly valued by local residents. Proposed closure could significantly affect the reputation of the organisation as well as the educational character. What steps are being proposed for consultation?

4   New types of schools are being introduced through legislation, including academies, free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges (the brainchild of former Education Secretary Kenneth Baker, based on the Real Schule technical schools in Germany).

5   These providers can be viewed as either competitors or partners and governors have a significant role to play in assessing the options. A formal federation could be an innovative way of working collaboratively in a local area, but there are obvious implications and risks that need to be assessed. How should governors handle the Chair's suggestion?

6   There have been many mergers and acquisitions in the sector, which is now much smaller (in terms of numbers of institutions) than it was in 1993. The former Learning and Skills Council set up formal mechanisms to facilitate mergers which could either be by agreement or by takeover. There have been numerous reports about the relative success or otherwise of mergers. There are no easy wins and the lesson is clear that very careful pre-consideration and planning has to be undertaken if the plans are to succeed. The pressure on senior managers is very considerable and the process can lead to significant staff disruption and reduction in standards. However, in some cases, governors may come to the conclusion that there is no independent future for their organisation, in which case some kind of merger becomes a strategic necessity. There is an argument that all governing bodies should from time to time consider the future organisational structure of their organisation so that they can anticipate the future better and plan for it. In any event, communication becomes a vital element in maintaining morale and commitment from staff and students.

How can governors safeguard the educational character of the organisation?

Governors need to review any strategic proposals to assure themselves that any changes will not adversely affect the educational character of the organisation. This will help to ensure that there is no drift away from the agreed purpose identified in the mission and needs statements. They also need to assure themselves that the character of the organisation complies with the wider educational environment.

Section 4

The organisation's strategic plan – key aspects

What kind of institution does the governing body want?

A key role for governors is to decide what kind of institution they want, and to ensure that it is delivered. In the Instrument and Articles, governors are given the specific responsibility of "approving the quality strategy of the institution". This requires strategic thinking and a strategic plan. This may sometimes be referred to as a development plan, but should not be a substitute for the essential elements of any strategic plan. These essential elements are **objectives, scope and means**:

- What are the specific objectives of the strategy?
- What are the limits (the scope) of activity planned by the organisation?
- By what means does the institution intend to achieve its goals?

It is important to note that while you are responsible for ensuring that the planning process is effectively managed, detailed planning is primarily the responsibility of management. Your major contribution lies ahead of the detailed planning stage. It lies in determining the strategic objectives that the plan is designed to achieve. You also have a responsibility to see that the agreed plan is effectively monitored (see Section 6).

The strategic objectives of the organisation will be formed through a consideration of the complex wider environment in which it operates. You will be expected to take into account both national and local priorities as set out in a variety of policy documents by various agencies including BIS, DfE, Ofsted and by local authority and employer organisations. Whilst there are good opportunities for colleges and other sector organisations to design individual strategies – and no two organisations will have the same strategy – the scope for manoeuvre is necessarily limited by policy directives, funding regimes and a range of political, social and economic imperatives. The emphasis on quality has also ensured that all provision must be able to demonstrate high and continuously improving outcomes for learners.

Governors have a particular responsibility for the development and pursuit of medium- to long-term objectives and it is the function of your organisation's strategic plan to realise these objectives.

A good strategic plan will:

- bring together objectives and the resources necessary to achieve them;
- assess the risk of not achieving objectives, given possible variations in resources;
- reflect the relationship between the organisation and its external environment;
- reflect the relationship between areas of activity within the organisation;
- incorporate a continuous process for regular review and updating;
- set out in some detail an annual operating statement and the objectives for successive years of the plan; and
- provide the basis for monitoring performance.

In more detail, governing bodies should expect the strategic plan to include:

- a statement of the organisation's mission;
- an analysis of the needs for further education provision in the area, including some assessment of the demographic data and labour market information as well as an analysis of the organisation's current student population;
- the key objectives for the organisation over the next three years;
- a broad outline of the education provision the organisation intends to make, including the quality strategy and information technology strategy;
- a human resources strategy;
- projected student numbers;
- an accommodation or investment strategy setting out the organisation's plans for estate management and development;
- a financial forecast for the next three years linked to the key elements of the plan;
- an operating plan covering the first year of the strategic plan;
- an analysis of the main risks to the achievement of the plan; and
- a community development plan demonstrating how horizontal accountability to communities will be discharged.

Governors may have some difficulty in coming to terms with what are sometimes lengthy strategic plans and may find it helpful to have an accessible executive summary that clearly sets out the key elements. A challenging but worthwhile exercise is to discuss and arrive at a 35-word statement of the organisation's strategy. This will clearly state the key defining objectives, the limitations on activity and the means of achieving it.

Activity

The contents of the strategic plan

1. Ask for a copy of your organisation's strategic plan and check whether or not it contains each of the elements identified above.
2. Write a short commentary against each element in the plan to remind you what you will be looking for and how you will use it to contribute to the planning process.
3. Work with your fellow governors and senior management team – perhaps during a development session – to draw up a brief strategic statement (35-50 words maximum) for the organisation. Note the extent to which this process contributes to your understanding of the key aspects of your organisation's unique strategic approach in securing its mission and long-term vision.

Viewpoint

If there are elements of the plan which appear to be missing, you will need to discuss these with the principal and senior managers (if this is possible) as part of the process of establishing a constructive and appropriate link between governance and management.

There is an ever-present danger of governors becoming bogged down in the detail of strategic planning and not seeing the wood for the trees. What matters most for governors is to be clear about the medium- to long-term vision for the organisation and the extent to which this is reflected in the strategic plan. The best environment for effective strategic discussion is at an informal away-day when there is plenty of time to have wide-ranging and thoroughly-explored debates about the vision and the best ways in which to achieve it.

Activity

Evaluating your contribution to strategic thinking

The Ofsted Common Inspection Framework makes judgements about the quality of provision in all forms of further education using the following headings:

- outcomes for learners;
- quality of teaching, learning and assessment;
- effectiveness of leadership and management; and
- overall effectiveness.

Judgements result in grades with the following headings: 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate'. There are two overarching categories: adequate and inadequate. A provider will be deemed to be inadequate if it is graded inadequate for overall effectiveness. If a provider is judged 'inadequate', or to 'require improvement' on two consecutive inspections it will be required to conduct a structure and prospects appraisal under the provisions of **New Challenges New Chances**.

Inspectors will make a judgement on the effectiveness of leadership and management by evaluating the extent to which leaders, managers and, where applicable, governors:

- demonstrate an ambitious vision, have high expectations for what all learners can achieve, and attain high standards of quality and performance;
- improve teaching and learning through rigorous performance management and appropriate professional development;
- evaluate the quality of the provision through robust self-assessment, taking account of users' views, and use the findings to promote and develop capacity for sustainable improvement;
- successfully plan, establish and manage the curriculum and learning programmes to meet the needs and interests of learners, employers and the local and national community;
- actively promote equality and diversity, tackle bullying and discrimination, and narrow the achievement gap; and
- safeguard all learners.

The following passages (see next page) are taken from Ofsted inspection reports that relate to leadership and management. As you read through them evaluate to what extent they are relevant to your own organisation. Self-assessment is about continuous improvement based on well-informed and honest judgements. What lessons are there for your organisation that you might want to pursue? If appropriate, note down one or two points for action covering:

- what I need to do
- who I need to talk to
- when I need to do it.

Quotes from inspection reports

"The principal, senior managers and governors have a clear strategic vision for the college that they have translated successfully into practice. The overall progress made by learners is excellent, and consistently high success rates are attained. Lines of communication between all staff are strong and managers adopt an open and consultative style. An ethos of high expectations is prevalent among staff and learners."

"The governing body is experienced and highly skilled. Governors monitor the performance of learners' outcomes very well, receiving detailed information on results, particularly the progress learners make from their starting points. They offer highly effective support and critical challenge to senior managers. The college's financial health is good with outstanding financial management and control arrangements."

"Governors, leaders and managers have not taken sufficiently robust action to address a significant decline in performance. Quality improvement actions have insufficient impact and self-assessment is over-generous in its grading. Arrangements for safeguarding students and the promotion of equality and diversity are satisfactory. The college is in a weak financial position and does not have the capacity required to make the necessary improvements."

"The culture of the college has changed; morale is high and the focus on raising standards is much stronger. This is reflected in the wholehearted support that staff give to the college's new values and strategic aims. However the improvements are not yet complete. Strategies for developing the curriculum and income diversification are insufficiently developed and the quality of curriculum management remains too variable."

"Governors have a wide range of skills and expertise that support the college. The corporation receives regular reports from curriculum managers but these lack clarity and consistency in their approach and do not always give a clear picture of the key points to be considered. Governors closely monitor the college's financial position and are encouraged to ask challenging questions at board and committee meetings."

"Students feel that they are treated with respect. All staff and governors have undertaken accredited training in equality and diversity. Managers ensure teachers have good support to improve their practice in promoting equality and diversity, although teachers do not make consistently good use of opportunities to promote equality and diversity in lessons."

"Students are involved effectively in decision-making through the students' council and membership of the governing body. Managers and governors listen to them and respond where possible and their views are taken into account in self-assessment at all levels." "Value for money is inadequate. The college is financially sound and resources for learning are at least satisfactory and many are good. However, outcomes for students are inadequate."

"Governors involve themselves directly in biennial school reviews and through links with specific curriculum areas. The corporation's own self-assessment identifies ways in which the govern body can improve its effectiveness still further."

Viewpoint

In the report **How Colleges Improve** (2012), Ofsted identified areas of strength and weakness in college provision. Under the heading 'the role of governance' they note: "The visits to the colleges and the review of inspection reports showed the importance of the relationship between governors and college managers in ensuring a culture of accountability and success. The influential role of governors in understanding their responsibilities and thus establishing a clear learner-centred ethos was strong in the outstanding colleges visited and correspondingly weak in the other colleges".

The examples quoted above, along with the emphasis of the new common inspection framework, serve to demonstrate:

- the holistic nature of the new common inspection framework;

- the importance of a clear focus on successful and continuously improving student outcomes;

- the significance of developing a well informed and strategic overview of the curriculum;

- the importance of ensuring that governors have reliable and comprehensible data by which to monitor strategic objectives; and

- the importance of having an appropriate balance of support and challenge from governors.

This section has highlighted the inter-connectedness of all college activity, which needs to be expressed through coherent strategic thinking and planning. Undertaking a thorough self-assessment of governance could help this process.

Section 5

Organisational capacity

Governors are required to assure themselves that the operation of their organisation is well managed. This includes a responsibility set out in the Instrument and Articles for the "oversight of its activities" and for "the effective and efficient use of resources".

One key aspect of these responsibilities is reviewing whether the organisation has the capacity to deliver the proposed activities. Governors should pose questions at governing body and committee meetings to test out whether the organisation has the capacity to meet the demands placed on it by the strategic plan, or by proposals for special projects.

Governors' responsibility for organisational capacity

The organisation's management is responsible for deciding how resources should be applied to deliver the strategic plan, but governors are responsible for considering more long-term resource implications arising from major changes in the environment. These considerations should inform their scrutiny of the annual strategic plan and of new developments as they arise. They need to test out resource implications by questioning the senior team about accommodation, equipment, staffing and professional development.

Activity

Is the organisation ready to deliver the programmes proposed?

Look at your organisation's strategic plan. Identify one of the key aims identified in the plan. Has the organisation considered the implications of the proposed action in terms of the following?

- a) the annual budget
- b) equipment investment needs
- c) property strategy
- d) staffing
- e) staff development
- f) support for learners
- g) local communities.

If the answers from the organisation's managers do not give clear evidence that these issues have been considered, governors should ask questions to check. For example:

- how does the organisation plan to implement this development?
- what are the implications for our financial, management information systems, accommodation, human resource, and student support strategies?

Viewpoint

Sometimes an organisation proposes a new development – for example, to develop an international department or higher education programmes – without fully considering its viability. Governors need to make sure that managers have considered the strategic implications of the proposed development. Here the role of governors is not to seek to present different ways of tackling the issue but to provide a reality check as critical friends to the organisation. You can do this by asking the

Strategy and educational character

kind of checking questions above. This activity becomes ever more important as traditional sources of funding come under pressure and management teams look for alternative ways of generating income. The worst of all worlds is where this leads to a 'scattergun' approach with a raft of initiatives that lack the appropriate planning and risk assessment.

As with the assessment of organisational capacity required by the strategic plan, governors should be posing questions about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment.

Activity

Is the organisation ready to meet the challenges from the changing educational environment? Look back to Section 2 where you identified key issues in the educational environment. Choose one of these. What are the implications for the organisation in terms of the following?

- financial forecasts
- equipment investment needs
- management information systems
- accommodation strategy
- staffing
- staff development
- student support needs
- partnership and collaboration.

Viewpoint

Governors need to have a long time-frame in mind when assessing the ability of the organisation to respond to changes in the educational environment. They should expect the management to explain how they intend to develop the organisation over the next three to five years.

For example, if the organisation is seeking to widen participation, governors might wish to assure themselves that there are plans for staff to be supported to acquire the skills they may need to meet the needs of new student groups. If the organisation is seeking to extend its work with employers, governors might want to establish how equipment and accommodation can be developed to meet the demands for up-to- date and flexible provision. If a college is proposing to sponsor an academy in the local area, governors will want to know what resources, both human and capital will be required to ensure its success and be satisfied that this will not compromise other aspects of the organisation's provision.

What should governors do?

As each new proposal for activities is brought to governors, they should adopt the role of 'critical friend' – providing both support and challenge by double-checking that the implications for medium- and long-term management of resources have been considered against proposed developments.

Section 6

Using meetings to monitor the organisation's strategic plan

As a member of the governing body you are responsible for monitoring and reviewing the long-term policies that have been established and agreed by the governing body to achieve the mission.

To do this you need to bear in mind the issues identified for governing bodies in Section 1. To recap, these are:

- to avoid becoming immersed in detail and losing sight of the governance role;
- to identify the core purpose of the organisation; and
- to put in place the policies to achieve that purpose.

Your role is to monitor the progress of strategic priorities and the extent to which they have been effectively accomplished. It is management who must develop the strategies to realise the mission and whilst governors may contribute in part to this, you should not become directly involved in this. Your concerns should be: "Are we on target? What do we need to know to judge whether or not this is the case? And if not, what are the reasons and how can the problem be resolved?"

How to monitor compliance with the strategic plan

The main resource available to you for carrying out your monitoring responsibilities is the governing body's cycle of full and committee meetings. These provide the opportunities for you to scrutinise management's fulfilment of the strategic plan by requesting the information you require, items to be placed on the agenda and asking pertinent questions.

The kind of information governors' require to monitor compliance effectively is of vital importance and you will need to be sure that it is accurate. The most effective governing bodies generally arrive at a limited number of key performance indicators (KPIs) which allow them to check progress against targets over time. A 'dashboard' format of graphs and trend lines can be helpful in providing a pictorial view. KPIs will invariably cover financial targets but should also address student numbers, retention, achievement and success rates and also quality indicators such as lesson observation grades and staff satisfaction. The exact number and nature of indicators is for governors to decide but it is important to remember that too much detail r uns the danger of obscuring the fundamental drivers for the organisation.

The idea of a *balanced scorecard* as a means of monitoring the success of the agreed strategy in achieving the mission and vision is becoming more widely used. This approach identifies four basic perspectives from which the strategy needs to be viewed, for example:

- the financial and resource perspective (e.g. managing resources better);
- the stakeholder perspective (e.g. satisfying learner and customer needs);
- the internal processes perspective (e.g. managing innovations); and
- the learning and growth perspective (e.g. growing human capital).

This approach avoids the tendency to concentrate only on financial matters and student numbers. Important though these are, adopting the different perspectives and finding ways of assessing performance from those perspectives will give a much better picture of how successful the adopted strategy is.

Asking questions is one of the most important activities for governors. It is often an underrated art and one that highly effective governing bodies practise frequently. Asking the right question in the right way is one of the most effective ways of getting to the heart of an issue, with the opposite also

being true. *Appreciative inquiry* is a method that anticipates how the person being questioned is likely to respond. "Why" and "What" questions can sometimes be intimidating and asking a closed question that requires only "Yes" or "No" as an answer is rarely a good way of probing.

The following questions provide a model for the type of questions that you might ask at a governing body meeting.

Asking searching questions

Q.   Can we clarify that our learner number, retention and achievement this year has met the targets we set?

Q.   How is this data on recruitment, retention and achievement distributed across curriculum areas?

Q.   How does this data relate to teaching and learning observation grades for the various curriculum areas?

Q.   Can we see a brief commentary attached to these figures, explaining the emerging trends and the implications for meeting our targets?

Q.   How does our curriculum offer reflect the needs of the community we serve? What scope is there for improvement and to what extent does our offer remain in line with our mission?

Q.   What implications do recent local inspection reports have for our strategic thinking?

Q.   How do we know if we have enough information on student views and that we are taking steps to respond to those views?

Q.   How do we know what our local employers want from us?

Q.   The staff survey reveals that some staff are understandably anxious about possible restructuring in the light of financial constraints. What can and should we be doing about this?

Q.   Some managers are perceived as being remote from day-to-day issues. How is this impacting on our mission and what action are we taking to address this?

Q.   Are we being rigorous enough in pursuing our equality and diversity policy?

Q.   How can we ensure that we are encouraging an innovative and creative environment at a time when resources are so hard to come by?

Q.   If we were to approach this initiative in partnership with other local providers, what difference would it make?

Activity

Using questions as a means of monitoring at governing body meetings

Read through the list of questions above and consider how they might apply to your organisation. Choose one of the questions which is relevant to your situation, discuss it with the Chair or clerk and ask how it might be included on the agenda of the next appropriate meeting.

Viewpoint

You may already be asking these kinds of questions. If so, are you satisfied with the responses you are getting? If not, what has prevented you from contributing in this way, and do you feel you have the resources to tackle the issues?

The most effective way for governing bodies to support and challenge is to develop good team relations amongst themselves and with the executive team. Where this happens, trust becomes the bedrock of good governance and makes rigorous debate and questioning an expected and welcome way of conducting business.

Governors need to avoid becoming deferential and subservient to senior managers but without becoming aggressive or intimidating. This requires high levels of personal communication skills which are best developed in informal rather than formal settings. What methods do you have in your governing body to discuss these matters and enhance your skills? How often do you meet informally and off-site when good relationships can be established? What training and development is available to you and your fellow governors?

The cycle of meetings

The college year has a cycle of key events that need to be reflected in the agendas for governing body and committee meetings. This cycle provides you with an easily accessible checklist to help you monitor and review the long-term policies established by the governing body.

Activity

Your organisation and the annual cycle

The list below provides a typical example of an annual cycle of governing body meetings and the issues appropriate at different times of the year.

Throughout the year

Policy review / revisions
Receiving management reports
Keeping updated on new initiatives
Consider inspection report and quality improvement plan Consider self-assessment report
Management accounts
Recruitment and retention
Risk assessment and management
Autumn term

Achievements and success rates

Student profile
Targets met?
Staff survey
Student satisfaction
Employer satisfaction and review of employer engagement
Strategic targets
Accounts

Spring term

Retention Review mission
Review targets Conduct self-assessment
Management accounts
Curriculum plan
Contribution to the community
Summer term
Retention Budget
Set targets
Financial forecast
Strategic targets
Admissions Review of equality and diversity
Review of safeguarding
Review of strategic plan

Look at the list above and compare the cycle of meetings and agenda items with those of your organisation. How many of the agenda items does your governing body consider?

      a)   throughout the year
      b)   during the autumn term
      c)   during the spring term
      d)   during the summer term.

Viewpoint

The cycle and agenda items are not exhaustive – there will be additional issues with a legitimate demand on governor time in your organisation. Depending on the structure of governance in your organisation, the frequency of meetings may be monthly with a reduction in the number of committees or arranged on a quarterly basis with committee meetings reporting to the full governing body. In any event, think carefully about any items on the list that are missing from your business agenda or additional to it. Do you know why there are differences? If not, how will you find out?

For more information about the annual business cycle of meetings and financial strategy, see Module 10: Finance and Resources.

Activity

The governing body's agenda

Consider the following passage:

> "The main thing about the board agenda is that it really must be the board's agenda, not the staff's agenda for the board. The board owns it, it's the board's agenda. I think if I were honest about it, we'd have to admit that usually the agenda material comes more from the president than anybody else. So in fact the agenda is really an executive kind of agenda, but raised to the board level. That doesn't produce a governance agenda."
> John Carver

If you substitute 'principal' or 'chief executive officer' for 'president' in the quote, does this reflect your experience of governing body agendas? Do you think your own governing body needs to take more control of the agendas for its meetings? If this is so, note down what you intend to do about it.

Viewpoint

If this quote echoes your own experience, maybe it is because the governing body has not felt confident in the past about compiling an appropriate agenda. Or maybe the governing body felt that the principal had more expertise in conducting business. To be an effective governing body you must be more proactive in determining agendas.

Some governing bodies make clear distinctions on the agenda between items of a strategic nature for discussion or decision and items for information and note. The addition of estimated times allocated to items can be a further help to the Chair in making sure that meetings do not over-run or become bogged down in the detail of one item.

It is not for others to prescribe how your governing body should be structured or compile its agendas, but the list above is a good account of how an effective governing body would cover strategic objectives in its work over the year. It would also include at least one or two strategic away-days as part of its meetings schedule so that members can interact informally.

The key issue is to appreciate the way in which the cycle of student recruitment, retention and achievement drives the rest of the business in the organisation.

The setting and monitoring of targets, the consideration of the curriculum offer, the self-assessment report (including the governors' self-assessment of their own effectiveness), financial forecasting and the approval of the strategic plan all fit within a coherent schedule of requirements and responsibilities. Adherence to this cycle is a prerequisite of effective governance in a college or other sector organisation.

Activity

Your organisation and the committee structure

Consider the passages below taken from the work of John Carver who has published widely on governance. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How many committees does the governing body operate?
2. Outline the contribution that each committee makes to the work of the governing body
3. Does your committee structure fit these assumptions?

4. What scope is there for a reconsideration of the number and nature of your committees in the light of Carver's observations?

"Committees will assist the board by preparing policy alternatives and implications for governing body deliberation.

"Committees are often impediments to good governance.

"Committees are OK if they exist to help the board do a part of its job. But there should never be a board committee to help the staff do any part of the staff job. When you put that admittedly absolute rule into effect, a lot of committees just disappear. The board then is left with committees which only help the board get its own job done.

"I am against board committees that blur the line between governance jobs and management's jobs.

"I'm against board committees that fragment the board into little pieces that know a lot about one thing and little about anything else."
John Carver

Viewpoint

The allocation of committees can be a controversial topic. Current legislation makes no requirement on boards to have committees, although an Audit Committee will be essential to discharge responsibilities under the financial memorandum. Where a decision is made not to have a Search Committee, some kind of nomination process for new members and succession planning will be required. Where committees are retained, the key consideration must be to evaluate the extent to which the committees you currently operate actually enable the governing body to be more effective. You need to be asking yourself the following questions:

- What are committees for?
- Whose interests do they serve?
- Do they exist to inform you or do they provide specialist input for areas in which you and other governors have no expertise?
- To what extent are reports from committees subject to scrutiny in the way management reports might be?
- How much of the committee discussions are repeated at main governing body meetings and what effect does this have on board effectiveness?
- To what extent does the committee structure help or hinder the process of building a team approach to governance?

The clerk to the governing body has an essential role to play in supporting the work of committees, preparing agendas and coordinating their activities with that of the governing body to ensure maximum effectiveness.

Arrange to meet with your clerk to increase your awareness and understanding of the contribution she/he makes. Draw up a list of appropriate questions you may wish to raise about the process of governance in your organisation.

High quality self-assessment of the governing body's effectiveness is one way of ensuring that the key responsibilities of governors are properly discharged. **The English Colleges' Foundation Code of Governance** states that "the governing body should undertake a formal self-evaluation of its

effectiveness as frequently as it determines is appropriate, but at least every three years" S3.2). This process should be conducted by the board, for the board, and is separate from the self-assessment report of the organisation as a whole which will be prepared by the executive team. The clerk should play an important part in this process. Some governing bodies have opted for expert external review of their activities so that they can receive an independent report for consideration. **The Learning Board programme** developed by LSIS is an example of such a process.

Module review

This module has looked at governors' responsibilities for approving the vision, mission and values of the organisation and for formulating the strategy and educational character. If you have worked through the whole module you should now be confident that you can:

- explain the purpose of your organisation's strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment;
- describe how your organisation's mission and ethos informs its strategy;
- describe your organisation's vision;
- explain the distinction between the mission, vision and values of your organisation and the link with strategy and the strategic plan;
- explain how the educational character of your organisation reflects its mission, vision, ethos, values and strategy;
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your organisation;
- discuss ways of effectively monitoring your organisation's strategic plan;
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team;
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the organisation; and
- discuss proposals for the review of the current structure and processes of your governing body.

If you are not sure that you have achieved a particular goal, look back at the contents list in the introduction to the module. You may find it useful to reread the relevant section.

Summary of key learning points

Governors are responsible for keeping the medium- to long-term strategy of the organisation under review, while management is responsible for implementing corporate strategic objectives.
A college or other sector organisation's educational character, mission and ethos / values should meet the needs of the community it serves and inform the direction of all the organisation's activities.

Colleges and other sector organisations exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change. Governors need to keep well informed and up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves, "How will this affect my organisation?"

A college or other sector organisation's educational character – the kind of organisation it is, the kind of students or learners it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides – can change as a result of planning decisions. Governors have a key role in ensuring that decisions and developments

fit the organisation's educational character.

Governors need to be active in setting strategic objectives for management, rather than simply reacting to managers' advice. This may call for additional skills and training in thinking strategically. Governors should be ready to act as critical friends in posing searching questions to the governing body and managers about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment, and changes proposed in the strategic plan.

Governors need to take absolute responsibility for assessing their own effectiveness, individual and collective, how they are structured and the processes they employ to conduct their business.

Where next?

You have now completed work on Module 6 Strategy and educational character. If there are areas in which you need more guidance or information, they may be covered in other modules. Turn to 'Check your current knowledge and skills' in 'Using the Materials'. The self-assessment questionnaire will help you to decide which modules or sections may help to fill these gaps. Tick the useful sections for further study.

If you cannot find the information you need within these materials, turn to 'Action planner' in 'Using the Materials'. Note down what further information, support or guidance you would like. The 'Action planner' gives advice on who may be able to help, and how.

Putting it into action

We hope that working through this module has raised useful questions, increased your awareness of issues and given you ideas for practical action that you would like to follow up. The 'Action planner' in 'Using the Materials' contains a section where you can note down any questions or action points that you want to follow up within your own organisation.

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