

A think piece



**The leadership of teaching, learning
and assessment by governors**

157 Group

The 157 Group represents 29 of the most influential colleges in the FE sector. It was formed in 2006 in response to paragraph 157 of Sir Andrew Foster's report on the future of further education colleges, in which he argued that principals of large, successful colleges should play a greater role in policymaking.

The 157 Group offers a UK-wide view of educational practice and policy development. Its member colleges are large, have a range of specialisms, identify their core function as securing and delivering the highest quality of teaching and learning and are strategic leaders in their locality.

The 157 Group exists to serve its members and to be at the leading edge of the sector more widely in terms of thought leadership, practice improvement and policy influence.

It focuses on the areas of vocational teaching and learning, strategic influence and economic impact and employer engagement and advocacy.

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Publisher

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Published by the 157 Group. Publication reference 157G-120.

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Foreword | 4 |
| Executive summary | 5 |
| The leadership of teaching, learning and assessment by governors | 6 |
| Background | 6 |
| Initial evidence | 8 |
| The workshop | 9 |
| 1. Structural issues | 10 |
| 1.1 Defining the elements of outstanding teaching, learning and assessment | 10 |
| 1.2 Being clear about the place of teaching learning and assessment on the governors' agenda | 11 |
| 1.3 Involving stakeholders at every level | 12 |
| 1.4 Establishing a clear mechanism to convert discussion to action | 12 |
| 1.5 Engaging external support and validation | 13 |
| 2. Process issues | 14 |
| 2.1 The use and analysis of data | 14 |
| 2.2 Reports to governors from college managers | 15 |
| 2.3 Learning walks | 16 |
| 2.4 Curriculum area reviews | 17 |
| 2.5 Stakeholder engagement | 17 |
| 2.6 'Task and finish' groups | 18 |
| 2.7 Visible outputs | 18 |
| 3. Human factors | 19 |
| 3.1 Who are the governors? | 19 |
| 3.2 Having a 'grip' | 20 |
| 3.3 Activity, not passivity | 21 |
| 3.4 Realism and confidence about governors' own strengths and weaknesses | 21 |
| 3.5 Ambition and relentlessness | 22 |
| What next? | 23 |



Foreword

Further education is a very important part of our education system – it teaches critical vocational and academic skills and plays a key part in local economic growth.

To fulfil these objectives, it is important that the quality of the teaching, learning and assessment within further education is very high. The Common Inspection Framework recognises this, as do college leaders across the country.

There is a national focus on the quality of teaching in colleges – the 157 Group has published several very useful think pieces that have helped to influence the practice of teachers and leaders and Ofsted has a library of good practice guides on which practitioners can draw.

However, the role of the governing body in this work, is all too often ‘unseen’. Governors have a responsibility to ensure that the core function of the college – that is, teaching, learning and assessment – is the best it can be. Many do this against a backdrop of uncertainty, a lack of confidence or an absence of clear and timely management information.

With this in mind, Ofsted worked with the 157 Group to run a workshop with serving governors and senior leaders to tease out the real issues for governing bodies in the realm of teaching, learning and assessment. This report is the product of that workshop. It mirrors the 157 Group’s previous approach to developing ‘think pieces’ through listening to practitioners.

It tackles three key areas to aid governing bodies improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their colleges – process, structure and the thorny area of human relationships – which need to be clear if governance is to be effective.

A resource bank supplements this report.¹ We would urge you to visit it, and to engage with others who are on the journey of developing a real understanding of the role of governors in quality improvement.

Peter Roberts
Chair, 157 Group

Matthew Coffey HMI
Chief Operating Officer, Ofsted

¹ Available at www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment

Executive summary

The purpose of this report, which results from the 157 Group working with Ofsted and others, is to provoke discussion and reflection on the role that governors in further education colleges play in improving performance.

Many of the ideas in the report emerged from a half-day workshop attended by over 40 governors, principals and clerks from FE colleges. These ideas have been supplemented by secondary research on college governance in recent years. The specific focus of the report is on how to put into practice governors' responsibility for overseeing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their colleges.

The report argues that effective governance that leads to improved performance and better outcomes for students can be articulated through three main components: structural issues, process issues, and human factors.

Within the **structural issues**, we highlight:

- defining the elements of outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, through reference to Ofsted criteria
- being clear about the place of teaching, learning and assessment on the governors' agenda
- involving stakeholders at every level
- establishing a clear mechanism to convert discussion to action
- engaging external support and validation.

Within the **process issues**, we highlight:

- the use and analysis of data
- reports to governors from college managers
- learning walks
- curriculum area reviews
- stakeholder engagement
- 'task and finish' groups
- visible outputs.

Within the **human factors**, we highlight:

- the composition of the governing body – what skills and expertise do governors have?
- having a 'grip'
- activity, not passivity
- realism and confidence about governors' own strengths and weaknesses
- ambition and relentlessness.

Our conclusion offers a model for reviewing performance of the governing body in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, and a 'three-point plan' for improvement:

1. Be clear about what constitutes outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, and look at each component of the definition separately.
2. Develop the confidence of your governors to immerse themselves in this definition and form judgments based on the widest sources of evidence.
3. Ensure that governors participate in the college's quality monitoring cycle – focusing on the self-assessment report (SAR) and establishing small ad hoc groups of governors to review evidence and progress as necessary.

While it is not for governors to get too involved in operational detail, the effective oversight of the teaching, learning and assessment strategy is essential as is the impact it has on student outcomes and the wider community.

We suggest that governing bodies might find the content of this report helpful, as will those whose responsibility includes assessing the effectiveness of governors in the management of teaching, learning and assessment. It contains the views of governors themselves, and is offered in a spirit of peer support for improvement.



The leadership of teaching, learning and assessment by governors

Background

Ofsted's 2011/12 annual report² had painted a fairly gloomy picture of the state of further education colleges. In that year, only two general further education colleges had been judged to be outstanding. No college was judged to have outstanding teaching and learning. Too many colleges were satisfactory or inadequate, and the report stated that “weak accountability, leadership and governance are common failings in poor provision”.

A new inspection framework³ was launched in September 2012, and the evaluation criteria made clear the responsibility of governors as follows:



Where there is a governing or supervisory body, inspectors will consider their effectiveness, including how well they:

- know the provider and understand its strengths and weaknesses through appropriate involvement in self-assessment
- support and strengthen the provider's leadership and contribute to shaping its strategic direction
- provide challenge and hold the senior leader and other senior managers to account for improving the quality of learning and the effectiveness of performance management systems
- work efficiently, including through having a systematic approach to meeting statutory duties and approving and monitoring priorities that are focused on improving teaching, learning and assessment.

The new framework also put teaching, learning and assessment at the heart of inspection, and replaced the 'satisfactory' judgement with 'requires improvement'. Governors' responsibilities for overseeing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment could not be clearer.

2 TSO (2012). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*. Norwich: TSO. www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1112

3 Ofsted (2012). *Common Inspection Framework for further education and skills*. Manchester: Ofsted. www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/common-inspection-framework-for-further-education-and-skills-2012

Last year, the Association of Colleges (AoC) undertook a review of governance on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which made wide-ranging recommendations on the composition and workings of governing bodies. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has set out explicitly his expectation that governing bodies should immerse themselves in tools such as the Ofsted Schools Data Dashboard, in order to be fully conversant with the performance of their institution.

Many college governors are recruited specifically because they do not have a background in education – they bring valuable insights to the role from other walks of professional life. In their *Review of Governance and Strategic Leadership in English Further Education* in 2009,⁴ the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and AoC noted three primary purposes of governance – namely maximising institutional performance, accountability and compliance, and representation and democracy. It was claimed that governance in FE had often focused on accountability and compliance, and that a shift towards maximising performance was needed. In particular, the LSIS and AoC report detailed the need for refocusing of governors' work in the light of the failure of governance in the banking sector, the increased emphasis on localism and the changes to Ofsted methodology being proposed at the time.

In summer 2013, LSIS produced *Leading Learning Organisations: An Analysis of Leadership in the Further Education and Skills Sector*,⁵ which contained important reflections on the progress that had been made in relation to governance in the intervening four years.

Summarising the views of a series of sector leaders who were interviewed for the report, the author stated that:

“ There is a need to clearly define the role of governing bodies and the relationship between these and the organisation's leaders. Historically, and particularly in the college part of the sector, governing bodies have largely assumed an oversight and audit role, rather than a strategic role. There is a real and urgent need for governing bodies across the sector to proactively develop and define, in partnership with the executive team, their organisational strategy based on the following aims (as suggested by a current college principal):

- improving the deal for the learner
- improving the deal for the employers
- improving the deal for communities.

A sector-wide 'stocktake' needs to take place to ensure that governing bodies have the right people with the right skills and experience to support and deliver organisational strategic aims and vision.

That report discussed the importance of focusing on the 'core business' of teaching, learning and assessment, and noted that this, in particular, is one area that still needs attention as the skills and abilities of governors are reviewed.

It was against this backdrop that the 157 Group and Ofsted came together to set out clearly the direct relationship between governance and teaching, learning and assessment and to offer some real and practical advice for the improvement of governance in the sector.

This report offers examples of good practice from those who took part in the workshop, and a series of issues for leaders across FE to think about as they go about improving their own approach to outstanding governance of teaching, learning and assessment.

4 LSIS (2009). *A Review of Governance and Strategic Leadership in English Further Education*. Available: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130802100617/http://lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Documents/GovernanceReview_Summary.sflb

5 LSIS (2013). *Leading Learning Organisations: An Analysis of Leadership in the Further Education and Skills Sector*. Available: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130802100617/http://lsis.org.uk/publication-content/leading-learning-organisations-analysis-leadership-further-education-and-skills>

Initial evidence

We believe, and inspection evidence shows, that governor understanding of, and involvement in, pedagogical issues is a critical element in enabling a college to become an ‘outstanding’ provider. This report aims to provide a backdrop for how leaders can work with their governing bodies to move towards ‘outstanding’ in this area, and overall. It outlines the work of excellent practitioners to ensure that we can genuinely learn ‘from the bottom up’.

An AoC governance review published in 2013, *Creating Excellence in College Governance*,⁶ highlighted four key areas for activity by governors in regard to teaching, learning and assessment:

- Improving teaching, learning and assessment
- Developing a localised curriculum
- Supporting specialisation and providing for the needs of 14 to 16-year-olds, including safeguarding
- Using performance benchmarking to improve learner outcomes.

It became clear as we reviewed much of what has been written about college governance in recent years that governors’ responsibility for shaping colleges’ mission and character has clear bearing on teaching, learning and assessment, and that the government priority areas of rigour and responsiveness have led colleges themselves to place a much greater emphasis on teaching, learning and assessment as their core business. Teaching, learning and assessment teams now have significant influence within college management structures. But it seems that governance is taking its time to catch up with this message.

We know that there is much good practice going on, with colleges ensuring teaching, learning and assessment is a key focus. For example, many heads of department are required to account for their teaching, learning and assessment strategies in governors’ meetings using both qualitative and quantitative data. Many colleges are adopting smaller governing bodies with designated individuals focusing on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, while all are required to have an overall picture. Partnership governors with educational expertise – from local schools or universities – are often contributing to the work of corporations.

In the 157 Group publication *Pedagogic leadership*⁷ we emphasised the importance of leaders role modelling the importance of learning for themselves – openly discussing pedagogy and their own professional development with staff and students. The same must be true of governors, who should be visibly mirroring their own learning and talking about teaching, learning and assessment at every opportunity. While it is not for governors to get too involved in operational detail, most agree that governor oversight of the teaching, learning and assessment strategy is essential and that this should be monitored through rigorous checking of evidence.

In many cases, governors’ own expertise can be brought to bear on some of the most pressing issues for a college – redesigning curriculum to meet local need, for example, could benefit hugely from the input of local business people who happen to be governors, and governors can offer an objective and outside view of skills development by learners. Our review of research and practice to date, though, left us with several unanswered questions. These were:

1. Where is teaching, learning and assessment on the governance agenda?
2. Is data enough to use to monitor teaching, learning and assessment?
3. Should governors observe lessons?
4. What is the line between governance and management in relation to teaching, learning and assessment?
5. How does teaching, learning and assessment relate to the culture of the organisation?
6. Should all governors be expert in teaching, learning and assessment?

These questions, in turn, suggested three areas in need of consideration – namely, the structure of how a governing body should approach teaching, learning and assessment; the processes that would enable it to do so effectively; and, critically, the human factors that might get in the way of this important work. We tackled each of these themes when over 40 governors, clerks and principals came together in London on 21 January 2014. What follows is the result of the thinking of that group.

6 AoC (2013). *Creating Excellence in College Governance*. Available: www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Creating_Excellence_in_College_Governance-1.pdf

7 157 Group (2013). *Pedagogic leadership: Creating cultures and practices for outstanding vocational learning*. Available: www.157group.co.uk/pedagogic-leadership



The workshop

There was, perhaps unsurprisingly, great interest from senior colleagues when we said that we would be holding a governors' workshop to focus on teaching, learning and assessment. It is an important theme, and one that all are keen to get right as the drive for ever higher quality within the further education system continues. Principals and senior leadership teams feel a great responsibility for ensuring all their provision is of a high quality, and governors are feeling their way in working out how they can both support leaders in this task and hold them to account for their performance.

The 157 Group firmly believes that those who are grappling with an issue at the moment are often in the best position to advise others and to generate policy thinking, and so we have developed a tried-and-tested methodology for bringing together practitioners, focusing their energy and thinking and producing outputs that are helpful to the sector and to those who make policy about us.

Representatives from 20 colleges came together to contribute their collective wisdom to this report, with more than 40 people, including principals, chairs of governors, governors and clerks taking part.

We were joined by two senior inspectors from Ofsted, whose role was to act as a sounding board for the many opinions and examples of good practice highlighted during the course of the afternoon.

We noted at a very early stage, however, that good governance is not just about 'pleasing Ofsted', and that those governing bodies that were functioning at the highest level did so because they had an unwavering commitment to providing the best possible education that their organisation could provide. Colleagues from Ofsted were clear that, if that was the case and the agenda was pursued vigorously and relentlessly, then meeting the requirements of the Common Inspection Framework should occur as a matter of course.

Ofsted colleagues were able to provide some example grade descriptors for governance in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. Along with other resources shared by participants from the afternoon, these are available to view on the 157 Group teaching, learning and assessment governance web page.⁸

8 www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment

1. Structural issues

How a governing body is structured can affect how easy it is to prioritise issues to do with teaching, learning and assessment. Many colleges are adopting some or all of the principles of the Carver model of governance. This has led many to slim down the composition of the governing body, to replace standing committees with ad hoc 'task and finish' groups and to focus reports on impact rather than process.

However the principles of organisation are applied, the participants in our workshop were clear that the governing body should consider five structural issues when seeking to improve governance around teaching, learning and assessment.

1.1 Defining the elements of outstanding teaching, learning and assessment

Question for governors:
Do you know what outstanding teaching, learning and assessment looks like? Would you know it when you see it?

It is tempting to view teaching, learning and assessment as something of an indefinable concept – many governors are not educationalists (that is, often, their very strength), but research focusing on pedagogical principles, debate around the purpose of education and disagreement about the measurable outputs that demonstrate success all contribute to a feeling that this pig is rather more complex than most to weigh.

Our participants talked about the need to view teaching, learning and assessment as a process in its own right – to break it down into meaningful elements that could be evidenced and related to the impact on learners, and then to report on those elements in a regular, reliable and understandable way. What is more, the definition of the elements could be specific to an individual college – based, for example, on a particular cohort of students or economic climate into which students will be entering.

Our participants were equally clear that the ambition for outstanding teaching, learning and assessment should be articulated over a period of one to five years, rather than in the short term. While some elements of what can be measured might change with time, the overarching ambition must be clear – and the evidence used to track progress must be consistent over this period. Governing bodies who make knee-jerk reactions to the latest changes in the Common Inspection Framework were felt to not be doing the best job they could for their college. Rather, the governors (and this was a consistent message) should set a long-term vision and strategy, which will deliver what is needed for their students and for their local community.

Governors will need time, and input from teaching, learning and assessment experts, to establish this vision, and to determine the measurable elements of evidence that will be required for monitoring progress. Governors should rely on more than just lesson observation data – not least because that is a snapshot, may not take sufficient account of the progress of learners, and does not give any sense of the 'feel' we have described before. Rather, evidence should come from a triangulation of observations along with data on learners' achievements and information about performance management.

Stoke on Trent College's model⁹ is a useful pointer for how 'outstanding' teaching, learning and assessment might be broken down into measurable elements. The governing body is able to focus on individual aspects of this set of criteria during learning walks and governing body meetings, and establish measurable outcomes for each which help to form a picture of performance across the whole area of teaching, learning and assessment. Significant governor training around these elements has also helped to increase governor awareness of a definition of outstanding teaching, learning and assessment which works for Stoke on Trent College. However, it is important that colleges then cross-check this definition against the Common Inspection Framework and that there is a clear focus on improving outcomes for learners.

1.2 Being clear about the place of teaching, learning and assessment on the governors' agenda

Question for governors:
How often do you talk about teaching, learning and assessment and what prominence does it have on your agendas?

Many participants described a governing body where the agenda of meetings was felt to be overly prescriptive, fairly 'passive' and allowing for little more than 'noting' the conclusions of reports presented by senior managers. In the 'traditional' model, clerks populate the agenda with matters around, for example, finance, buildings, pay and ratios. If a governing body is performing well, this should not be the case.

The best practice has teaching, learning and assessment highlighted as the first item of every governing body meeting – and broken down into measurable activity as described above. As well as examining data, ample time is given to a discussion of how the college 'feels' in terms of teaching, learning and assessment, any feedback from staff and students and, quite often, to probing 'evidence' sessions from individual managers and staff.

A governor with lead oversight of teaching, learning and assessment matters, perhaps drawn from an educational background, can help to steer discussions in a meaningful direction, but several participants in the workshop were keen to point out that monitoring the quality of teaching, learning and assessment does not necessarily require meetings. From a structural point of view, several described a governing body that was in constant contact via email in between meetings, sharing the results of visits to the college or elements of data available on the Data Dashboard. This level of engagement led to more productive discussions when the meetings did happen.

Rather than pushing quality matters to a standing committee, in many cases now it is a significant agenda item for the whole governing body. The idea of 'deep dive' investigations into individual curriculum areas or aspects of teaching, learning and assessment was a popular one, where teachers and managers with responsibility are called to governing body meetings to face questions on what they are doing to ensure improvement. In this way, governors can gain a much more human insight into the situation as well as an understanding of the problems being encountered. For this to work, the culture must be one of enhancement, rather than fear.

Where specific issues are highlighted, many governing bodies will now establish ad hoc 'task and finish' groups to investigate and to support the staff in their endeavours. This was felt to be much more effective than a standing committee. And such groups enable the governing body to record a significant degree of challenge and proactivity in their minutes – which is more likely to achieve quality improvement.

While the need for a focus and drive on quality is self-evident, several participants in our workshop felt it was important to remember that this must not be driven just by what Ofsted might want to look at. In particular, aspects of the college curriculum that may not come under the close scrutiny of inspectors must not be neglected.

9 www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/stoke-tla-framework

1.3 Involving stakeholders at every level

Question for governors:

How do you know what students, employers, parents and other customers know or think about the quality of your teaching, learning and assessment?

Governors in the modern age must seek out evidence from every available source in order to ensure that they are posing the right degree of challenge to college managers. Even if teaching, learning and assessment is broken down into meaningful elements, and time and structure provided for proper enquiry, there is still a danger that scrutiny of teaching, learning and assessment will focus on the process of what is being delivered rather than what really counts, its impact on students and the wider college community.

So, the best performing governing bodies spoke of their active engagement with students, employers and staff at all levels, either through learning walks or through their quality monitoring cycle. Many have a governor presence on student councils or parents' forums, while in some cases, a lead governor will support senior managers in dealings with the local business community, or, at the very least, receive and question any report of discussions.

Walsall College's annual quality cycle¹⁰ offers a good mechanism for integrating this activity into the rest of the governing body's work – with regular opportunities for review periods, during which governors engage with students and find innovative ways of including the feedback gleaned into their overall assessment of teaching, learning and assessment and its impact.

1.4 Establishing a clear mechanism to convert discussion to action

Question for governors:

How do you evidence that your discussions are actually making a difference to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment?

However informed the governing body is about teaching, learning and assessment, and whatever opportunity it has to ensure that it investigates progress and action and focuses on impact, it is the impact of those discussions themselves that is the hardest to measure. What difference does it make if a governing body is robust and challenging, if nothing comes of that challenge?

Our workshop participants had a number of thoughts on this – and they began with a 'call to arms' for governors to make sure that they and their college were absolutely aligned and 'on the same side'. This may seem obvious to say, but some described a situation where the governors were seen as a nuisance rather than a supportive tool. This, it was felt, was a recipe for disaster – and lacking the much-needed quality of 'critical friendship'. Rather, governing bodies should take time to establish shared objectives around teaching, learning and assessment and to make sure that the culture of the organisation is one that is likely to bring about success.

From a structural point of view, governors should consider whether their own model of 'doing business' is fit for purpose – is it enough, for example, to rely on a six-monthly review of data in order to form a view of teaching, learning and assessment, or is the picture likely to be moving more quickly than that? After all, many practitioners describe a nine-month window to remove underperforming teachers – if governors are only catching up on that every six months, it is likely to mean that scrutiny is insufficient.

10 www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/walsall-quality-cycle

Participants felt that governing bodies should establish a clear process for tracking the actions of senior leaders against governor discussions and recommendations, and ensure that meetings have adequate time for reviewing the impact of governor input. Governors themselves should 'own' this agenda, and not see their role as simply helping the management to jump through a set of hoops prescribed by Ofsted or others.

The role of the governing body is to have a high-level knowledge of teaching, learning and assessment as it is across the whole college, to set (in consultation with senior leaders) a strategy for improvement and to ensure that the scrutiny of that strategy's implementation is robust.

1.5 Engaging external support and validation

Question for governors: Where do you get expert advice and support on teaching, learning and assessment from, outside your own college? How do you know that what you are doing is valid?

Almost all were in agreement that some form of educational expertise either as a part of, or working alongside, the governing body was a crucial part of ensuring success in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. In some cases, this meant the secondment of 'independent experts' to support ad hoc groupings of governors; in others it was permanent non-executive membership for representatives of local schools or universities.

As well as the support that this might offer, such a presence could be invaluable for the external validation of college decisions, or judgments as contained within a self-assessment report (SAR). It is a clear responsibility of the governing body to ensure that external challenge and validation of a SAR takes place – the challenge of the governors themselves is part of that process, external validation could add breadth to the review of the SAR.

This provides an ideal opportunity to make sure that the college is talking effectively to others within the educational community – there were numerous examples of SARs being validated through peer review groupings with other colleges, for example, which also provided an opportunity to discuss joint responsiveness to economic need.

The input of the educational 'experts' was felt also in other ways – governor training, for example. As many governors do not themselves have a background which would lend itself to forming judgments about teaching, learning and assessment, a dedicated governor awayday to consider evidence and the current state of play before establishing priority areas for improvement was felt to be an excellent idea.

And one message came through from participants very clearly – that governors themselves should not serve too long on one governing body. The world moves fast – and the educational landscape does too. A key plank of external validation seems also to be that constantly fresh pairs of eyes are exposed to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment within the college.

2. Process issues

Having ensured that the structure and ways of functioning of the governing body lend themselves to the effective monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment, the participants in our workshop were able to move on to sharing their practical tips for how this might be done.

A number of resources are available on the website that has been set up for this project.¹¹

Here we group together some collective thoughts on the practicalities of how elements of teaching, learning and assessment can be monitored in the most efficient way.

2.1 The use and analysis of data

Question for governors: Do you find it easy to pin down the data you need to measure the quality of teaching, learning and assessment? How much data do you get?

The **Barnet and Southgate College Data Dashboard for Governors**¹² presents one option for thinking about a set of data that might usefully inform discussion about teaching, learning and assessment. Much of what is included here could also be used for financial and overall performance monitoring, but in this case, specific conclusions are drawn in relation to the likely impact on teaching, learning and assessment of issues such as student attendance and learner satisfaction.

In this case, governors themselves have had input into what data they believed they needed. Similarly to the approach from Stoke (detailed earlier), governors spent time understanding the context of teaching, learning and assessment for their own college and then devised a methodology which meant that updates on this data would be available to them in a way that was regular, reliable and accessible. The addition of a red/amber/green (RAG) rating scale makes the data more instantly understandable, and allows governors to establish probing questions for upcoming meetings and visits to the college.

From the baseline, governors should set stretching targets – one of our participants suggested this was a good way of looking at the concept of ‘value-added’, while others pointed out that a 90 per cent satisfaction rating should never be grounds for complacency. “The job of the governors is to worry about the other 10 per cent,” she said.

One very important aspect of data, and one that is often commented on in Ofsted reports, is whether or not it comes from ‘a wide range of sources’. The governing body must not rely just on data produced by the college’s own management information system. That will give a snapshot, but cannot help with understanding about student experience or what is actually happening in the classroom. We have already seen that there are ways of enabling data to be collected about these aspects (such as in Stoke’s approach), and it is important to make sure that this is taken into account.

Ofsted is producing a Further Education and Skills Data Dashboard for governors, which will be available from summer 2014. The aim is to provide a high-level, accessible entry point for outcomes for post-16 students and college performance data so that governors can start a conversation with the data. The main aim, from Ofsted’s point of view, is to help governors identify the first, big questions about the quality and impact of the college’s provision.

¹¹ www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment

¹² www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/barnet-and-southgate-data-dashboard

2.2 Reports to governors from college managers

Question for governors:

Is it easy to draw out questions and conclusions from the reports about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment that you receive?

Many governors described their exasperation at reports which are overly wordy, hide the real headlines and take so long to understand that the time for challenging questioning is exhausted by the time everyone has queried the detail.

One participant at the workshop said the balance was to make sure that reports were 'concise but detailed', which may appear to be a contradiction in terms, but is made easier if you have established the key points for reporting in the ways we have already described.

Presenting reports as a set of slides offers one way of avoiding 'word overload', and also enables the true headlines to be picked out. **Chichester College's** examples of governor reports show one way in which this might be achieved.¹³

It is important to acknowledge in reports that governors may need some background information – perhaps on the detail of qualifications contributing to performance tables, or on some staff CPD activity that has taken place related to teaching, learning and assessment. However, the detail is probably best kept for an annex, so that the headline report can concentrate on giving governors a picture of the main activity and the main impact. Taken alongside the data provided, it should be easy for governors to establish where the gaps are and what questions they should be asking for continuous improvement purposes.

One idea suggested is for those people writing reports to imagine themselves in a situation they know nothing about – running a bank for example, and asking what they would need to know in the space of five minutes in order to tell whether the chief executive was doing a good job or not.

Above all, reports must be presented in such a way as to enable governors to establish clearly and quickly where there is lack of correlation. If the governing body is a supportive and challenging friend, it should be self-evident if, for example, a student success rate of 45 per cent in one curriculum area sits alongside a lesson observation profile of 80 per cent good or better. Any governor would then easily be able to establish that something in one or other part of the process is not right and ask what is being done about it.

13 www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/chichester-governor-updates

2.3 Learning walks

Question for governors:

How are governors involved in getting a ‘feel’ for teaching, learning and assessment taking place across the college? Is this structured in the best way?

Governors must be a part of their college – they need to ‘feel’ it and understand how it works in order to supplement the data and reports with which they are presented. Learning walks provide an opportunity to enable governors to do this, but a number of tips will help to ensure that learning walks fulfil a real purpose.

The boundary between governance and management here is key – those present at our workshop were very clear that governors were not going into classrooms or workshops in order to observe and assess individual teachers – that is the job of the college’s performance management system. Rather the purpose of the governors’ presence is to better their own understanding and to gather that breadth of evidence that they need in order to ask challenging questions.

As such, a clear culture and protocol for conducting learning walks is essential. **Cornwall College** has offered such a protocol to others in support of the workshop.¹⁴ It makes very clear the roles, responsibilities and agreed outcomes for learning walks, and, as a by-product, ensures that the work of the governing body is more visible to staff and students.

To be successful, learning walks must be contextualised – governors should understand student profiles and some background to the area being looked at. Above all, they must be focused – we have already talked about them either looking at a particular curriculum area or a particular aspect of the defined teaching, learning and assessment relevant to the college itself.

One college looked specifically at behaviour for learning, and had a direct impact on approaches to integrating employability into the curriculum. The local employers who also happen to be governors are now advising on the arrangements for the delivery of that element of teaching, learning and assessment.

Not all governors are able to attend all learning walks, but if the structure of the governing body (and its means of virtual communication between meetings) is well-established, then all should be able to share in the conclusions. One college has invested in the innovative solution of showing governors video clips of teaching, learning and assessment taking place in different settings during their ad hoc meetings in order to give more of a ‘flavour’ of things. Harnessing the benefits of technology could be beneficial for governors’ understanding of teaching, learning and assessment.

¹⁴ www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/cornwall-learning-walks-guidance

2.4 Curriculum area reviews

Question for governors:
Are governors a natural part of the college's ongoing quality monitoring systems?

Several of those at the workshop described processes for identifying courses or curriculum areas that needed particular attention from the governing body – usually the same ones coming under increased scrutiny by senior managers in the college. Such a list of areas, as one person described them, in 'intensive care', enables governors to bring an extra sharp focus to their enquiries, to question curriculum managers and to drill down through data at a relevant level.

In many cases, the 'intensive care' areas benefited from the establishment of a link governor post, specifically someone with very little knowledge of either the curriculum area itself or of teaching, learning and assessment. This governor was able to adopt the position of dispassionate but interested individual, and challenge managers and staff to see things from a different perspective.

In such a role, many governors were also involved in specific curriculum area reviews as part of the college's quality monitoring processes. While being conducted (as with learning walks) in the same spirit of support and challenge, rather than management, such involvement brought a new angle of enquiry to the governing body's own deliberations.

2.5 Stakeholder engagement

Question for governors:
How does the governing body engage with students, parents, employers and staff?

One idea that several had tried, tested and found useful, was to take an active approach to engaging broader stakeholders in the work of the governing body. Activities described included:

- 'shadowing the learner journey' – taking one learner and linking them with a governor who at various points in the year makes contact for an informal chat about different elements of the college's provision and support
- 'shadowing the learner experience' – enabling governors to spend a day in the college with one learner or group of learners to gain an in-depth understanding of teaching, learning and assessment and the functioning of the college
- 'the community day' – where governors host an event for prominent local figures, employers, parents and students themselves, where much informal evidence gathering can take place.

Such activities, it was felt, were an invaluable addition to feedback mechanisms such as online surveys and reports from stakeholder meetings with managers.

2.6 ‘Task and finish’ groups

Question for governors:
How does the governing body respond to particular issues of concern that need immediate action?

In the previous section on structural issues, we discussed how a governing body might set up and run a series of specific groups consisting of governors and managers to look at key areas of teaching, learning and assessment activity, rather than relying on standing committees to do the job.

Several workshop participants had tried this approach and found it to be helpful, and the activities covered included:

- governor engagement in the SAR process, with a clear focus on teaching, learning and assessment and outcomes
- a forensic examination of college performance management processes in regard to teaching, learning and assessment performance
- a business and employer-focused approach to reviewing the college curriculum to ensure fitness for purpose
- monitoring of the quality improvement plan (QIP) for a particular curriculum area
- analysing and scrutinising the impact and outcome of specific college-wide initiatives and projects.

The common element is an activity that is focused, specific and time-bound. Governor involvement in each of these enabled the broader impact of the governing body as part of the leadership of the organisation to be assessed more positively.

2.7 Visible outputs

Question for governors:
How do people in the college know what impact the governing body is having on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment?

A theme that occurred often during the workshop was that of the visibility of the governing body to the college community – students, parents, employers and staff. A proactive approach to grappling with this issue had been felt as beneficial by several, not least because it furthered the governors’ own appreciation of the day-to-day work and impact of the college.

In some cases, visibility might be increased via a robust, if not wholly welcome, decision, such as the need to close an area of provision if it is graded ‘inadequate’ or deemed not to be meeting local need. But there were happier examples, too, such as the governing body that held an annual celebration of the ‘teaching stars’ of the college, as part of their engagement with the teaching staff at Christmas.

While such activity might be seen as an additional ‘nice-to-have’ by many, there was a significant feeling that, when minuted and evidenced thoroughly, such activity undoubtedly contributed both to the governors’ ability to fulfil their own responsibilities and to the ultimate grading of governing body performance.

3. Human factors

Structural and process issues aside, a key part of the discussion among participants at the workshop centred on what we might call the ‘human factor’. Governance, it was recognised, was as much about building relationships as about scrutinising data. In particular, it can be difficult on a human level to get the balance between governance and management right, to get the right degree of involvement in the college without being an interference and to ensure that you have access to the right people, either to work as governors or to bring evidence and information to governors.

We discussed earlier a shared approach to both agendas and to targets, but a fundamental starting point is to establish a shared approach to exactly what the governing body is there to do. Some spoke of new principals who had been appointed, often to their first principalship, and who had very different ideas about governance from their predecessors, or who, themselves, needed guidance on how the governing body could best function for them.

As education and its demands evolve, so it is right for a governing body, in partnership with senior managers to take stock of its position and role on a reasonably regular basis. This is not an invitation simply to ‘navel gaze’. Rather it must have a clear purpose – to establish how fit for purpose the body, its ways of functioning and its human and emotional capabilities are to bring about outstanding teaching, learning and assessment.

3.1 Who are the governors?

Question for governors:

Is every member of the governing body committed to taking responsibility for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the college? How is this shown?

We now turn to the size and composition of the governing body. Does the governing body have the right number of governors? Too few and there is a risk that things will slip through the net. Too many and it is possible that nothing will ever get done.

What seems clear is that there is no right or wrong answer about how many governors you should have – just as with setting teaching, learning and assessment priorities, what works for one college will not work for another. But the possibility of supplementing the governing body with independent advisers, or non-executive members has been valued by many.

In particular, it is worth asking, when appointing new governors, whether there is a specific skill set or area of expertise that you are looking for. If an area of concern is the employability of students, then it may be advisable to seek someone with a background in human resources or careers guidance. The days of simply ‘filling a vacancy with a willing volunteer’ are long gone.

When the governors are in post, are they clear about the minimum level of commitment? We have described how governors should have a knowledge of the college overall and how they should not just rely on data as presented to gain this knowledge. So, what happens if governors do not attend meetings and do not participate in learning walks? Is there a mechanism in place for ensuring governors can be held to account too?

Having the right people on the corporation is complex, but our participants felt it was important to ensure effective governance. And if the college fails to improve, either at inspection or by whatever standards you judge it yourselves, does the governing body have a clear sense of taking ownership of that? In one case study, participants described the agonising of a governing body over resigning en masse after an unsuccessful inspection. While this may not always be desirable, the fact that they were willing even to ask the question demonstrated at least a sense of genuine responsibility that some felt was not always present.

3.2 Having a ‘grip’

Question for governors:

Do governors feel confident that they have a wide range of sources of evidence to inform their views on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and their impact on outcomes for learners?

Whatever the structures and practicalities put in place, all those present at our workshop felt that all governors should have a reasonable grip of teaching, learning and assessment within the college. It had been clearly defined by most as ‘core business’ and, as such, every governor was expected to understand what the goals of the college were and what the basic teaching, learning and assessment mechanisms employed could be.

Learning walks were a good way of engendering this, while, in some cases, governors made informal contact with curriculum areas where they had a particular interest. Notwithstanding the need for staff and students to understand the role of the governor when they appear in college, it was felt very clearly that absolutely nothing should be ruled out if it could contribute to a better understanding of teaching, learning and assessment among the governing body.

In particular, the relationship between governors and staff was highlighted as meriting some attention. How visible are governors, for example, at staff meetings or end-of-year celebrations? Just as a workforce in any environment will feel more valued if the Board is accessible and visible, so it is in a college.

We noted earlier that our own research into pedagogic leadership talks about leaders ‘walking the walk’ and being prepared to share their own learning. The same could apply to governors – for staff to see their own self-management structure in action could be, it was felt, very motivating. A governor blog detailing thoughts on teaching, learning and assessment, or some element of their own professional CPD (especially in an area outside education) had proven in one case invaluable in engaging staff more with the governance of the college.

The management (or self-management) of the governing body was felt to be something that merited the utmost transparency. Where governors have some form of self-assessment or appraisal, staff should know that it is taking place and be kept informed of its outcomes. This can contribute to a culture of continuous self-improvement, and governors should never underestimate the extent to which their own practice can influence the culture and practice of all in the college.

3.3 Activity, not passivity

Question for governors:

Are governors challenging and setting their own agenda for examining teaching, learning and assessment? Can they evidence this?

One theme is abundantly apparent in Ofsted evidence on the effectiveness of governing bodies in less well-performing colleges: inspection reports refer to a governing body which is pre-eminently passive. Minutes of meetings record that much is 'noted' but very little challenged or done. The evidence put before the governing body is complex, largely from one source and often accepted without question. Any governor development is 'done unto' the governors rather than being something they have initiated for their own better understanding.

A more engaged governing body is, most likely, a more successful one. Participants in the workshop spoke of governor planning meetings, where agendas are thought through, data examined and areas of misunderstanding debated, in order to make the governor meetings themselves more incisive and insightful.

The responsibility of governors is considerable, and several participants in our workshop made the point that "you reap what you sow". Being clear on minimum levels of understanding and engagement is one aspect of this, but it is worth exploring with the principal and others just where your own understanding about the boundary between governance and management sits.

In some respects, some of those present felt that the governance/management distinction could be easily blurred, but encouraging greater involvement and scrutiny need not mean any more conflict in this regard. What happens remarkably little, though, is any discussion between principals and even Chairs about how they should work together. The governing body that spends at least some time focusing on the 'how' of its relationship with the college as well as the 'what' is likely to be more successful.

3.4 Realism and confidence about governors' own strengths and weaknesses

Question for governors:

Does the governing body reflect on its own strengths and weaknesses, and how effective are the mechanisms for doing this?

Having conversations about how you interact with senior professionals takes some courage. It takes perhaps even greater courage still to have conversations within the governing body about one another, and about how you function as a group.

Making space to admit where you do not feel confident can lead to a very effective approach to professional development for governors, and an opportunity perhaps to integrate still further with the work of the college.

But perhaps more importantly, an annual self-appraisal (as a group and individually) of governors' own competences as they align with the established ways of working with the principal, can reap huge rewards. Such a self-assessment can make it easier for governors to know when to 'back off' and when to challenge for more information. Crucially, it can also give them greater courage to ask what one participant called "the daft question that often gets the best answer".

The chair has an important role to play, but so does the whole governing body, and time invested in governor team-building and self-assessment should be a 'must-have' for every college.

3.5 Ambition and relentlessness

Question for governors:

Do governors have a vision about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment which is about making it as good as it possibly can be?

Ambition and relentlessness feature very heavily in Ofsted reports on successful governing bodies, and it is worth unpacking what they mean for each individual college.

Those at the workshop felt that a governing body was most likely to be described as ‘ambitious and relentless’ if it had taken genuine ownership of the improvement agenda around teaching, learning and assessment. It needed to ‘own’ its definition of ‘outstanding’, its own knowledge and skills gaps and its own development. It needed to share and agree targets with the college’s senior management and to evidence the asking of robust and challenging questions of those with responsibility in the college.

It needed to recognise that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to effective governance and that its own definition of success was the most important. It needed to avoid complacency at all cost.

Leicester College describes its ‘community scorecard’ as a tool worked out in collaboration with the governing body that describes a number of key indicators by which the success of the college will be judged.¹⁵ As an example of ‘ownership’, this seems to be highly effective.

And, above all, the most successful governing bodies, it was felt, were more likely to create room for taking risks, both for themselves and their staff, and to allow evidenced intuition to feature as heavily in their judgments about success as does data. In some ways, this is the ultimate expression of ensuring that the human business of educating other people is monitored and scrutinised in a human way.

How the governors behave can influence a whole culture – and, while acknowledging that college governance is asking different things of people who are volunteers, its absolute criticality to the success of a college demands a level of commitment and self-awareness that will, inevitably, take time to develop.

¹⁵ www.157group.co.uk/practice/governance-teaching-learning-and-assessment/leicester-community-scorecard



What next?

This report is intended to provoke debate and to fuel activity in further education colleges across the country. You can use some of the elements to benchmark your own performance, and some of the tools available on the website may assist you to develop your own practice.

The changing nature and responsibility of governance, especially in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, is indisputable. The commitment of governors is paramount, and the ability to establish a positive and meaningful working relationship with senior managers must not be underestimated.

If there is a three-point plan to be drawn from the contributors to our workshop, it is probably this:

1. Establish your own definition of 'outstanding' teaching, learning and assessment, with reference to Ofsted guidelines, and break it down into measurable chunks.
2. Develop the confidence of your governors to immerse themselves in this definition and form judgments based on the widest sources of evidence.
3. Ensure that governors participate in the college's quality monitoring cycle – focusing on the SAR and establishing small ad hoc groupings of governors to review evidence and progress as necessary.

While doing this, the high-performing governing body must be ever mindful of who its governors are and whether they have the right skill set and commitment. It must have an eye to how the governing body is functioning and avoid passivity. And it would do well to reflect on its own operating culture – how it may or may not mirror, but certainly will influence, the operating culture of the college.

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