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# **A Practical Guide to Improving the Diversity of College Boards**

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## **Introduction**

College boards across the country are striving to achieve the appropriate diversity of membership that reflects their student population and the communities they serve. This guide pulls together information which will support search committees in their work to achieve this aim. It is the outcome of a series of seminars delivered by the Women's Leadership Network (WLN) and Eversheds in 2014. It comes from work undertaken by the two organisations as well as inputs from those who attended these seminars and other workshops led by the WLN, information from those supporting the achievement of diversity on colleges' governing bodies and from good practice (of which there is much) in the sector. Individual chairs, vice chairs, governors, clerks and other experts in the field of governance have also made valuable contributions to the guide for which the author is very grateful.

The guide recognises that achieving diversity of board membership is not always an easy or quick activity and aims to support clerks and board members in making progress towards this target. It is not an exhaustive list of things every board must do, but more indications of things boards may like to try within their own context. Organisations which are listed here are not recommendations, but suggestions and examples of those that may be able to help boards to recruit from a wider pool of people.

## **Context**

In 2011 the Davies report

([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/31710/11-745-women-on-boards.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31710/11-745-women-on-boards.pdf)) found that only 12.5% of FTSE

100 companies' board members were women and clearly set out the reasons why boards should better reflect society. This led WLN to

undertake its own research

(<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/WLN%20-%20Women%20on%20boards.pdf> ) in the following year to examine whether there was a lack of representation of women on college boards.

This research found:

- Twice as many governors were men
- Men were three times more likely to chair committees as women (and men were more likely to chair audit or finance and women to chair search or quality)
- 17% of boards were chaired by women
- 2.5% of governors were appointed through competitive interview (with women governors much more likely to have been appointed in this manner)
- 16% of governors applied through an open advertisement (again with women governors much more likely to have been appointed in this manner)
- Nearly half of governors were recruited as a result of a personal approach
- Little had changed in the last decade

This is all within the context that the majority of staff and students within the further education (FE) sector are female:

- In 2011/12 the Learning and Skills Improvement Service found that 63.5% of further education (FE) staff in England were female
- The Welsh Government's Statistical Release on Staffing in FE Institutions in Wales in August 2010 found that 62% of staff in FE in Wales are female

- Government data shows that in 2014 56.3% of adult learners and 52.4% of all age apprentices were female.

In 2013 the Association of Colleges (AoC) undertook a survey with a wider brief and reported that 62% of governors are male and 38% are female, similar to the findings of the WLN the previous year:

- Report of 2013 Survey:  
<http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Board%20Composition%20Survey%202013.pdf>
- Data tables from 2013 Survey:  
<http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Borad%20Composition%20survey%20Appendix%20%203%20data%20tables.pdf>

This suggests there may be less momentum towards achieving diversity in college governance than in the private sector, as reflected in Davies's year-on-year reports. The same AoC survey gave a fuller picture of the ethnic backgrounds of members of boards:

- 88% of governors are white British with another 3% with other white backgrounds.
- 4% of governors have a Black African, Black Caribbean or Other Black background, and Indian, Pakistani and British Asian backgrounds account for 3% of governors.

This is within a context of a high proportion of ethnic minority students choosing to study in FE Colleges. The AoC data for 2013 shows that ethnic minority students make up 21% of student in colleges, compared to 15% of the general population. The survey found that the proportion of governors who assess themselves as disabled was 3% compared to 18% in the general population in 2011.

It is important that, as the AoC surveys progress, more and more colleges participate so a full picture of board composition can be built up and progress towards diversity carefully mapped. The data in the survey also gives colleges a good comparator to mark their own progress in achieving diversity of board membership.

### **Raising awareness**

Those who might be interested in joining college boards are not always aware of the opportunity or what it entails. AoC Governors' [Code of Good Governance for English Colleges](#) states that: "The board and, where it exists, the search committee (or equivalent) should agree its own approach to equality and diversity in relation to appointing new members, and should take full regard of the implications of the college's overall equal opportunity and diversity policy, including any measurable objectives that may be relevant."

Visits to college websites show that this is not always the case: in some incidences it is quite difficult to find information about the board and what it does. In other cases colleges put together an informative and detailed package of information for prospective governors and sets out how they take the next steps. The City of Bath College fully explains the work of the college, the board and the commitment required from governors:

<http://www.citybathcoll.ac.uk/the-college/governance/governance-core-facts.html> . It explains the rules governors must follow - the Nolan

Principles - as well as outlining where the meetings are held and the core purposes of the board itself. Similar examples can be found elsewhere, for example [Doncaster College](#) offers a very clear description of what a

governor does and from [East Norfolk Sixth Form College](#) which uses a leaflet both electronically and paper-based to get its message across.

### **Appointment processes**

The Davies Report states that in the private sector there are often unclear selection criteria for board membership and that one or two key selectors search for recruits in their own image. He also says that the focus is on prior experience rather than debating and influencing skills, strategic input, quality interventions, integrity and potential. Some of this may chime with activity in colleges where individuals are approached to join the board rather than there being a more objective process. This does not mean that individuals cannot be invited to apply to join a board, but just that the process means there is no advantage or disadvantage to that candidate or others.

In order to prevent 'recruitment in their own image' happening in colleges it is important that the search committee obtains the best possible advice.

This sits in the college with the HR Director – in the same way that the finance committee is supported by the information supplied by the finance director, the search committee could benefit from similar professional input.

When deciding on how to fill a vacancy, colleges invariably turn to their audit of the skills that exist on the current board. Some also look at the make-up of the board in terms of gender, ethnicity and even geographical spread to reflect differences in the communities they serve. This latter practice means they have information on both the professional skill set and the personal experience required to achieve a diverse and effective board. Just as with appointing staff, a college should set out a description for the role of governor. In its 2013 review of governance, the Department for

Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) produced specifications for the role of college governor

[http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Review\\_of\\_Further\\_Education\\_and\\_Sixth\\_Form\\_College\\_Governance.pdf](http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Review_of_Further_Education_and_Sixth_Form_College_Governance.pdf). This is a good starting point to craft a

role description and associated person specification within the context of a particular college. If a certain skill set is required this can be written into the documents so it is clear exactly what the Board is looking for. If there is a need to broaden the diversity of backgrounds of board members then phrases that are used to do this in recruiting staff can also be used on advice from the HR Director. For example, in a recent recruitment campaign for HEFCE Board members they stated:

*"We particularly welcome applications from women, people with disabilities and from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to improve the representation of these groups on the board."*

When recruiting staff a college will not necessarily replace like with like and the board should also think carefully about the best fit for their membership and the best skills and experience for the college. The process should stand up to the same sort of scrutiny as filling a paid position to ensure it does not fall foul of the law.

### **Targeted marketing**

There is often a lack of awareness of board vacancies. Sometimes this is because they are not advertised at all or sometimes because they are only advertised in a very limited manner. If a college is trying to recruit a specialist teacher, it will often advertise in a targeted manner rather than put a general advert into either the local press or the education press. Some colleges have targeted their governor recruitment in a similar fashion to good effect. Colleges use social media well to attract new learners or

communicate with existing ones. It can also be used to contact a broader demographic about board vacancies.

There are many organisations which will help with recruitment of governors – some for free and some for a fee. Below are a few suggestions and the college HR department will be able to suggest more.

Examples of national organisations:

- SGOSS (formerly the School Governors' One Stop Shop) offers a **free** service to colleges matching the needs of the board to candidates. <https://www.sgo.org.uk/colleges/college-service.html> . You can find examples of their service at <http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Using%20SGOSS%20to%20recruit%20business%20governors.pdf>
- Women's Leadership Network – members can advertise governor vacancies for free with a fee for non-members. [www.wlnfe.org.uk](http://www.wlnfe.org.uk)
- Network for Black Professionals – boards can advertise for a fee <http://www.nbp.org.uk/>
- LinkedIn (which is free) could be used as part of the recruitment campaign either through using the 'share' facility or by joining groups and then sharing the vacancy on the board with their members; for example the 30% Club group on LinkedIn aims to support women to gain board positions and the Association of Asian Women Lawyers promotes equality and diversity in the legal profession. It is easy to search for groups with the specific characteristics your board requires.
- Even Break – a recruitment website for people with disabilities - posts job vacancies and supports disabled candidates for a fee and will post governor vacancies <http://www.evenbreak.co.uk/>

Examples of local organisations:

- The college will have links with its Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and many businesses and community groups. Often they hold a database of such organisations (whether it as customers, suppliers or work placement providers for example), these are organisations that already have a relationship with the college and therefore may look favourably on supporting the recruitment of governors.
- Colleges are often members of their local Chambers of Commerce, which may also be willing to help with governor recruitment. You can find your local Chamber of Commerce at <http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/find-your-chamber>
- Volunteering has become a major facet of our culture. Volunteering England has a network of centres in England and you can find one near you at <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/where-do-i-start>
- Soroptimist International is a women's global volunteering organisation with branches throughout the country. You can find your local club at <http://sigbi.org/>.
- There are many groups across the country that represent particular cultural groups. The college may already have links with such community groups or board members themselves may have contacts with such groups.

There are so many groups supporting people with a variety of disabilities that it would be impossible to list them all here. However a few suggestions to start the search are listed below. Many of these organisations have newsletters or advertise vacancies on their website and so it would be worth contacting local groups to see if they would include governor vacancies. [The UK Disabled Peoples Council](#)

[www.ukdpc.net](http://www.ukdpc.net), the Association of Disabled Professionals  
[www.adp.org.uk](http://www.adp.org.uk) or [Disability Rights UK](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)  
<http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/about-us> might be able to give you  
some advice on this. Other groups that might be able to provide local  
connections include the British Deaf Association <http://bda.org.uk/>,  
Action on Hearing Loss <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/> and the  
[RNIB http://www.rnib.org.uk/](http://www.rnib.org.uk/).

Another good source of a broader range of potential governors is the college's alumni. Some colleges have active alumni associations and most will have records of past students. Curriculum areas often have contacts with successful alumni as they are used as visiting speakers or for other enrichment activities. Alumni can make committed and hardworking governors as they are often keen to 'give something back' to the college which set them on the path to success.

### **Welcoming and supporting governors**

It is important not just to recruit governors, but also to keep them. One of the reasons people may not apply to be college governors is that it is seen as 'not for people like me'. Occasionally, at the seminars, boards were described as 'boys' clubs'. This cultural change is difficult to achieve – making everyone feel welcome and respected is important in both attracting new governors and retaining existing members. Clearly induction plays a major role. Most colleges run induction activities alongside being a governor. AoC's website includes a governors' induction section that would be of interest to both clerks and new governors:

<http://www.aoc.co.uk/funding-and-corporate-services/governance/induction-governors>. This can be very time

consuming for the new governor and also may mean they are attending meetings before they understand the context in which they are working. There is no reason why induction cannot happen prior to taking up the full role of governor and could ease a new governor in gently. A mentor for new members is important as are the opportunities to see other boards at work and to undertake training activities outside of the college. All of these things will give confidence to a new governor so that they can play a major role in the development of the college. A few colleges also offer potential governors the opportunity to undertake training or to be external members of committees or to observe board meetings. These activities need to be handled with care to ensure they give out the message 'you are included here'.

Some colleges have examined the practicalities of board attendance, which may stop some sections of society even considering becoming governors. It is common for colleges to ask existing governors what times and days they prefer for meetings but few then undertake an equality impact assessment of whether this excludes some people from becoming governors. Colleges do offer expenses to non-executive governors for attending meetings, but some make it clear that they do not expect them to be claimed which could preclude some people from being able to attend meetings. This would be easy to amend by turning the expectation on its head with those who do not wish to claim not doing so. It is common to see trustees for charities advertised as having 'reasonable expenses' and this is something colleges may also wish to consider. Universities regularly pay their board members' caring costs so that they can attend meetings. It is now possible to amend the instrument and articles to allow teleconferencing, for example, which would also ease the pressures on

some governors of being physically present at all meetings. However, few colleges appear to have taken up this opportunity.

Changing the culture of a board can be done. Hugh Baird College was determined to improve the diversity of their board and also the way it worked <http://www.hughbaird.ac.uk/>. They set themselves the target of working towards a culture of open governance starting with a review and leading to the appointment of an independent clerk tasked with that goal.

### **The appointment of chairs of boards and committees**

The Hugh Baird College case study highlights the interesting question of the chairing of committees and boards and how chairs are chosen and supported. Just as the role of governor should have a job description, a period of induction and support from on-going training and development, the same should be offered to those who take on the additional responsibilities of chairing committees and chairing the board itself. A few colleges have advertised for external chairs of the board recently which brings with it additional responsibility for the induction and training of the appointee. There must be a systematic, fair and open process to appointing chairs of committees and the board as there is for appointing governors. Many colleges elect their chair of governors, but a few carry out interviews, which include external candidates. Either way it should be an inclusive and open process. The search committee has a role in reviewing and advising on chairing of committees and, if appropriate, interviewing for such roles. White, male dominance of chairing committees and boards does not encourage others to apply for board membership nor to accept the challenge of chairing themselves.

In 2013 the AoC board composition survey found that:

- 56% of colleges elect their chair at least every 2 years
- 4% had no fixed term for their chairs
- 17% of chairs had been in post for less than 1 year
- 44% for 2 years or less
- 12% for over 8 years
- 8% for over 10 years.

With a fifth being long-standing chairs it is not surprising that the increase in diversity for chairs has been fairly slow.

### **Succession planning**

Terms of office for governors first came to prominence on the publication of the Nolan Report on Standards in Public Life in 1994. The recommendation of the Nolan Committee was for two four-year terms. The AoC 2013 board composition survey found that 70% of colleges had terms of office between four and five years in length and 8% had terms of office of 10 years. Even those who had longer lengths of terms of office (8 – 12 years) said these could be extended. Extending terms of office appears quite common in the sector. Not all colleges have a limit on the number of terms of office with 45% of colleges reporting they had no maximum.

Terms of office are crucial to effective succession planning and, it appears, for continuous quality improvement. The BIS review of Further Education and Sixth Form Governance published in 2013 states that *“Ofsted reports have noted some correlation between failure to refresh governing bodies (or replace long serving Chairs) and poor quality performance”*. This latter point has also recently been made in a few of the reports from the FE Commissioner.

Succession planning should allow the search committee to set up a pipeline of prospective governors in line with predicted vacancies that come from

clear terms of office. By having fixed terms of office, search committees will be able to identify the balance of skills and experience they will need in the coming two or three years. This will enable them to develop links with organisations and individuals that can then create a pipeline of potential governors. It also enables some preparative training and link activities to be undertaken before they become full members of the board. Plans to change board diversity will be thwarted if terms of office are not in place, as turnover will be slow and will reflect what was past practice rather than an open governance approach to membership.

### **Target setting and monitoring**

For colleges serious about improving the diversity of membership of their boards setting clear targets and then monitoring progress towards their achievement can be helpful. These are not quotas in the strictest sense (unlike some other nations which have introduced a quota system for board membership) but it does help boards know their direction of travel in achieving their aim. West Hertfordshire College (LINK) has had a holistic approach to improving the diversity of the membership of their board and set themselves clear targets reporting back on their progress in achieving them. Their diversity targets reflect the college learner community:

- Gender: 50% male, 50% female
- Ethnicity: minimum of 20% non-white British
- Age: reduction of average age from 50-59 to 40-49
- Disability: the recruitment of at least one disabled board member

### **Conclusion**

An open, fair and honest approach to recruitment of board members can improve diversity of membership.

AoC' Governors' Council [Code of Good Governance for English Colleges](#)

states that: "The search committee should produce an annual report which describes the work of the committee, including the board's recruitment policy and practices, a description of its policy on equality and diversity and any measurable objectives that it has set together with progress in their implementation. If there is not a separate report then the college's annual report should cover these areas."

The key element for success in achieving diversity seems to be planning and will lead to an open, fair and honest approach to recruiting and supporting governors. The usual cycle of setting targets, planning how to get there and reviewing outcomes, which boards are used to doing, have been successfully used by those who have improved the diverse nature of board membership. Colleges that have been determined to achieve an open and fair system of governance with a culture that is welcoming to all, have been very successful in achieving these aims and improving the effectiveness of their board. Like many things colleges do, it is not easy but it is worthwhile.

This report was produced by the Women's Leadership Network