

# An analysis of the role and responsibilities of chairs of further education college and sixth-form college governing bodies in England

Educational Management  
Administration & Leadership  
1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/1741143215587310

emal.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

This article reports research into the role and responsibilities of the chairs of governing bodies of further education colleges and sixth-form colleges in England. Further education colleges and sixth-form colleges represent a significant part of post-16 educational provision in England. Every college in the sector has a governing body, which has a chair elected from and by the governing body's membership. Sixteen chairs from further education and sixth-form colleges in England were interviewed and data themes identified: the chair's role and responsibilities reflect those of chairs in non-further education/sixth-form college settings; a range of expertise is required, but detailed educational knowledge is not a priority in the requisite skill-set; chairs consider they bring a range of high level values and commitments to the role; chairs' participation in role-specific training and development was not a strong theme; the responsibility of being the chair is substantial and complex; high-quality chair–principal relationships are crucial and complex; the governing body clerk has a significant role in relation to the chair, the principal and college governance generally; and the role and the responsibilities of chairs and the way they are specified locally by their governing bodies have significant implications for further education and sixth-form governance.

## Keywords

Further education, sixth-form colleges, governing, governance, governing body, chair of the governing body, board of governors

## Introduction

Further education (FE) in England: 'includes any study after secondary education that is not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree)' (DfE, 2014: 1). Education providers in the FE sector are very varied and include a number of different public

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institutions and for-profit organisations. Their annual income is £7.6 billion, most of which comes from central government (Association of Colleges (AoC), 2014) and: ‘every year colleges educate and train over 3.1 million people’ (AoC, 2014: 2). FE is therefore a substantial and important part of educational provision in England.

The main institutional settings for FE provision are general further education (GFE) colleges and sixth-form colleges (AoC, 2014). The 231 GFE colleges provide a broad range of courses, typically with a skills-based and vocational orientation, for learners aged 16 years and over. The 93 sixth-form colleges normally provide courses for students aged between 16 and 19 years that lead to a range of qualifications, such as GCSEs, A-levels and the International Baccalaureate Diploma (CollegeNET, 2014a). GFEs and sixth-form colleges have governing bodies that are responsible for the strategic direction and performance of their institution.

Despite the importance of GFE and sixth-form colleges, the governing of such colleges has not been the subject of extensive research-based enquiry. It was to help remedy that situation that the research reported here into the role and responsibilities of chairs of GFE and sixth-form college governing bodies in England was carried out.

Following this introduction, there are sections that describe the further education sector in England, the governance of GFE and sixth-form colleges in England, and the role and responsibilities of board chairs in a range of non-FE settings and those of chairs of FE college and sixth-form college governing bodies. We then explain the methodology of the study and the findings. In the subsequent discussion section, we focus on particular issues to emerge from the analysis of the findings and the article ends with some concluding comments. Throughout the article, we use the term ‘governing body’ where we are making specific reference to college governing. We use the term ‘board’ to denote boards of private or public bodies.

## **The FE sector in England**

The FE sector in England provides a variety of courses for students, who are typically over 16 years of age, as follows:

- apprenticeships, which are paid jobs incorporating training that lead to nationally recognised qualifications;
- education and training courses that are provided mainly in a classroom, workshop or via distance learning;
- workplace learning, which encompasses a range of training at various levels;
- courses leading to ‘skills for life’ qualifications that are intended to enhance everyday skills in reading, writing, mathematics and communication;
- informal community learning courses for a range of participants (Skills Funding Agency, 2014).

The FE sector encompasses a broad range of institutions of various kinds and offers different forms of provision (AoC, 2014). In addition to the 231 GFE colleges and 93 sixth-form colleges, there are: approximately 17 land-based colleges, which offer courses predominantly in agriculture and horticulture; specialist FE colleges, which typically offer programmes for adults with disabilities; 19 FE adult colleges; and 30 art and design colleges. FE is also provided in 18 universities. The number of land-based colleges is continually falling because of mergers with GFE colleges.

The exact number of specialist FE colleges is not clear with some sources, for instance CollegeNET (2014b), numbering them at 35 and others, for example, Natspec (2014) at 70.

Arguably, the practice of teaching, the characteristics of the learners and the nature of and rationale for curriculum provision can be particularly complex in FE settings. Teaching in the post-compulsory sector can pose complicated pedagogic challenges (Bathmaker and Avis, 2007; Huddleston and Unwin, 2013) with the sometimes varied nature and motivations of students, particularly those studying for vocational qualifications adding a further level of complexity (Fuller and MacFadyen, 2012). These challenges have further implications for college leadership and management, which again has many problematic aspects (Jameson and McNay, 2007). All these characteristics of FE institutions will have implications for the governing of colleges.

## **The governing of the FE sector in England**

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a) enabled the Secretary of State to establish a 'body corporate' for the purpose of conducting an FE institution. This process, which is typically known as incorporation, created FE corporations. To enact the 'corporation', a governing body is formed. In most cases, the corporation governing body has oversight of a single college. However, in some cases, group structures have been formed where the governing body is responsible for more than one college 'brand' and possibly other entities too, for example, a subsidiary company/companies. As each 'corporation' is a charity, the governors are trustees in role and responsibility.

Every college corporation has a statutory Instrument and Articles of Government that sets out the responsibilities of the corporation and the principal and provides the framework within which the corporation must operate. The AoC Foundation Code of Governance makes clear that: 'the governing body should determine the size and composition of its membership in accordance with its College's Instrument and Articles of Government' (AoC, 2011: 2), having due regard to achieving an appropriate balance of skills, experience and knowledge; acknowledging the merits of renewing and re-invigorating its membership and the advantages of diversity; and establishing: 'its own clear rules for the appointment and re-appointment of governors' (AoC, 2011: 2). At the time of writing, this Code is under review.

Each corporation governing body has responsibility for the educational character and mission (purpose) of the college(s), the strategic direction and oversight, the quality of teaching and learning, the financial health and value for money, and the employment of staff. The AoC Foundation Code of Governance specifies that: 'every College should be headed by an effective governing body, led by an elected Chair' (AoC, 2011: 2).

Within the framework of regulatory guidance, the way governing bodies operate in practice is open to interpretation and good practice is therefore highly contextualised (Schofield et al., 2009). Hill (2014) argues that since 1993, governing in the FE sector generally has moved through four phases: (1) 'creativity' in the years immediately after the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014a); (2) 'regulatory compliance', which followed some high profile collapses of college governing; (3) 'micro-management' when colleges were overseen by the Learning and Skills Council, which was disbanded in 2010; and (4) the 'current era', which he characterises as: 'a more open and imaginative phase as the current government encourages the strong colleges to play a bigger part in local education provision' (Hill, 2014: 972). The eras of compliance and micro-management up to 2010 were supported by Gleeson et al. (2011), who reported that governing bodies in the FE sector often felt restricted in how they operated. They

argued that governing bodies could be more creative in the way they worked and that inter alia, this creativity would support a greater responsiveness by colleges to their local communities. More recently, Massunga (2013) has broadened the debate by reporting that the ambiguous purposes and demanding tasks of governing in the FE sector can have a detrimental effect on governing practice. He suggested that a clarification of the governor role would be of value.

## **The role and responsibilities of board chairs in non-FE settings**

In this section we review the literature on the board chair's role and responsibilities in a range of non-FE settings to provide insights into the nature of the role and responsibilities of the FE governing body chair; to shape the data analysis; and to inform the interpretation of the data.

### *The board chair – knowledge, capabilities and characteristics*

Substantive themes in the literature on board chair effectiveness in a range of settings relate to the knowledge, capabilities and characteristics required. Effective chairs of for-profit companies have knowledge of 'the industry' and experience of 'board work' (Coombes and Wong, 2004), with knowledge of the organisation's business and the sector generally deemed to be particularly valuable (Bloch, 2005; Leblanc, 2005). Effective board chairs draw on a range of capabilities including: 'the ability to challenge and probe; critical thinking ability and sharp critical faculties' (Dulewicz et al., 2007); 'independence and the management of relationships and interactions especially among board members' (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2006); 'social awareness' (Cornforth et al., 2010); the ability to network and establish positive relationships with local political figures; the capacity to 'take the flak' during critical incidents; 'being able to communicate appropriately' (Leblanc, 2005; Lechem, 2002); and 'credibility with the professional workforce' (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001). Cornforth et al. (2010) argue for the importance of leadership-orientated capabilities and also emphasise management/organisational functions, for example, the ability to manage meetings and provide information. Board chairs need to be able to mobilise the power available to them, which are structural power, ownership power and expert power (McNulty et al., 2011).

The characteristics of board chairs are considered important, because they are likely to underpin and shape the role. Two main aspects are identified: (1) values and principles; and (2) the 'overall approach' to the role (Dulewicz et al., 2007). The Seven Principles of Public Life enunciated by the Nolan Committee (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995) are typically considered important: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership (Cornforth et al., 2010; Dulewicz et al., 2007; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2006). Features of the overall approach required include flexibility in the operation of board processes and having an open style of leadership (Bloch, 2005).

### *The training of chairs*

The literature on the training of chairs of for-profit companies is limited. Cornforth et al.'s (2010) study of board chairs in the voluntary sector draws attention to the importance of training for the role. A number of organisations, for example, the Institute of Directors, provide training and development programmes for directors of for-profit companies, including chairs (Institute of Directors, 2012).

### *The board chair's role in relation to the board*

A number of authors assign the responsibility for ensuring the functioning of the board to the board chair; see for example, Leblanc (2005). Garratt (1999) puts this responsibility very directly: the chair is the: 'Boss of the board' (Garratt, 1999: 29). Outstanding board chairs consider they are personally accountable for the board's performance (Bloch, 2005). Ensuring appropriate board functioning involves:

- overseeing the recruitment and induction of board members (Garratt, 1999; Leblanc, 2005);
- establishing and overseeing the board committees including appointing committee chairs (Furr and Furr, 2005; Leblanc, 2005);
- hiring and overseeing independent advisers (Furr and Furr, 2005);
- the performance management of board members (Lechem, 2002).

The 2010 UK Corporate Governance Code (FRC, 2010) is clear that: 'The chairman [sic] is responsible for leadership of the board and ensuring its [the board's] effectiveness in all aspects of its role' (FRC, 2010: 6).

For chairs in the UK public sector, ensuring public accountability and making sure that the public receives value for money are considered important (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001). Similarly, Furr and Furr (2005) assert that the board chair should: 'ensure all remedial actions required by regulatory bodies are handled' (Furr and Furr, 2005: 13). In the UK voluntary/charity sector, the chair's role in ensuring the board's independence is emphasised (Cornforth et al., 2010).

The board chair's leadership of the board is a strong theme in the literature; see for example, Leblanc (2005) and Brunninge et al. (2007). A key purpose of the leadership role is to ensure the board's involvement in strategy (Machold et al., 2011). The various sub-themes in the literature include: the importance of developing a team-based approach (Gabrielsson et al., 2007); engendering a collective sense of board functioning (Veronesi and Keasey, 2010); ensuring participation (Machold et al., 2011; Vandewaerde et al., 2011) and developing and sustaining board motivation (Machold et al., 2011). At the heart of the board chair's work with the board is the ability to develop high-quality relationships with others, which Cornforth et al. (2010) report has a substantial, positive influence on board effectiveness.

Pick (2009) draws attention to the problematic nature of the chair's leadership and the inherent dangers in chairs overstepping their authority. Although chairs may be de facto board leaders, they are nonetheless elected/appointed by the board and cannot order board members to take particular actions (Vandewaerde et al., 2011). Gabrielsson et al. (2007) concludes that the board chair should be viewed as 'first among equals' rather than 'commander in chief'.

### *Organising and chairing board meetings*

The board chair's role in organising and chairing board meetings are very substantive themes in the literature. They are reflected in the UK Corporate Governance Code (FRC, 2010) and The Charity Commission's (2008) guidance for trustees of charities. Various authors argue for the chair having a responsibility for developing the '12-month schedule' of meetings (Furr and Furr, 2005); controlling meeting attendance (Lechem, 2002); summarising discussions in meetings (Roberts, 2002); enabling a consensus at meetings (Dulewicz et al., 2007); and enabling inclusive participation of board members at meetings (Cornforth et al., 2010; Garratt, 1999; Machold et al., 2011).

### *The board chair's role in improving board performance*

The role of the board chair in improving board performance features prominently in various accounts, see for example, Roberts (2002), with Lechem (2002) arguing that it is the central aspect of the role. Outstanding board chairs spend a significant amount of time developing, advising and mentoring board members (Dulewicz et al., 2007) and they continuously work to improve the performance of their boards (Bloch, 2005).

### *The board chair's role in relation to the chief executive officer*

The board chair has a significant responsibility for working with the chief executive officer (CEO) (Bloch, 2005; Leblanc, 2005) and indeed with the management more generally (Furr and Furr, 2005; Lechem, 2002).

Securing a balance between close team working and being a distinct and separate player in the chair–CEO relationship is important. Clarity in the delineation of the chair's and the CEO's roles avoids confusion and conflict (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001). However, Stewart (1991) points out that the two roles overlap and that the relationship and role specification can vary. Roberts and Stiles (1999) argue that the roles of the board chair and the CEO in relationships are negotiated by the board chair, the CEO and other stakeholders – board members in particular. This negotiation is on the basis that the board chair leads the governing body and the CEO leads and manages the organisation (CIPFA, 2004). The negotiation of roles in voluntary organisations can be particularly problematic (Otto, 2003).

The characteristics of an effective chair–CEO relationship is a substantive theme in the literature. 'Psychological closeness' is deemed to be of value (Jones, 1995) as it enables the interpretation of issues in a collaborative way (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2006). Professional integrity, mutual trust, caring and emotional support, shared value systems, respect, personal compatibility, openness and a balanced exchange of information are also important (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988; Roberts and Stiles, 1999).

The board chair–CEO relationship is significant in a range of ways. The board chair and CEO can provide a check and balance for each other's authority (CIPFA, 2004). The chair may act as a sounding board for the CEO (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001). The relationship is a: 'vital source of knowledge' (Roberts, 2002: 502) for the board chair. It enhances board performance (Burton, 2000; Ng and De Cock, 2002; Roberts, 2002) and a shared board chair–CEO commitment to a plan or action is important for the sustainability of the organisation and the board (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2006).

'Ensuring the succession planning and CEO evaluation process occurs' is a substantive responsibility for the chair (Furr and Furr, 2005: 13), and the chair leads the processes of appointing the CEO and overseeing the CEO's performance management (Leblanc, 2005; Lechem, 2002). A significant feature of the chair's role in the corporate sector is, when necessary: 'Replacing the CEO' (Roberts, 2002: 514).

### *The board chair's role in the organisation's wider environment*

The role of board chairs in the wider 'external' environment of the organisation has a number of aspects including: meeting and working with those who have a stake/interest in the organisation (Lechem, 2002); being the public face of the organisation (Charity Commission, 2008; Exworthy

and Robinson, 2001); serving as: ‘an articulate and informed spokesperson to all constituencies’ (Furr and Furr, 2005: 13); and managing relationships with those with a financial stake in the organisation (shareholders) (Lechem, 2002). In small firms, board chairs’ work with external contacts is a priority (Borch and Huse, 1993), where they have a role in securing the organisation’s legitimacy (Davis and Pett, 2000). The board chair’s role in the organisation’s ‘internal’ environment is deemed important (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001).

### *The board chair’s role liaising with staff and having a ‘within-organisation’ presence*

The board chair’s role in communicating and interacting with staff and having a presence in the organisation features in the literature. For example, Exworthy and Robinson (2001) argue that the role in UK health service settings includes: making speeches to staff, ‘being seen around the hospital’ (Exworthy and Robinson, 2001: 88) and working with the professional workforce especially hospital consultants. The Charity Commission (2008) suggests that the chair: ‘may also be the link between the trustees and the employees’ (The Charity Commission, 2008: Section E9).

### **Chairs of college governing bodies**

The Education Act 2011 (Schedule 4) (Legislation.gov.uk, 2014b), which defines the basic requirements of the Instrument and Articles of Government for FE college corporations and sixth-form colleges, makes no reference to the role and responsibilities of the chair. The role and responsibilities are locally determined by the governing body.

The English Colleges’ Foundation Code of Governance (AoC, 2011: 2), which is currently under review, provides: ‘recommended threshold standards of good governance practice’. It states that: ‘the governing body should ensure that . . . the roles and responsibilities of the Chair, the Principal, the Clerk and individual governors, are clearly defined’ (AoC, 2011: Section 1.4). The Code acknowledges and stresses the importance of the chair and makes clear that: ‘a proactive chair having the opportunity to ensure that the governing body plays a key role in helping shape and influence key strategic decisions’ (AoC, 2011: Section 2.35). It also draws attention to the chair’s role in ensuring that: ‘the governing body receives appropriate, timely and high-quality information’ (AoC, 2011: 2) and that: ‘the performance and effectiveness of all governors is assessed on an ongoing basis’ (AoC, 2011: Section 3.3). FE college governing bodies are not required to adopt the Code.

A recent wide-ranging review of governing in the FE sector (AoC, 2013) confirmed the importance of the chair’s role and responsibility asserting that chairs have: ‘considerable authority in determining how a governing body influences the head of the institution’ and: ‘a crucial role in governance’ (AoC, 2013: Section 2.35). The review also asserts that: ‘the style and skills of the chair’ are crucial in: ‘creating an appropriate atmosphere within Boards’; ‘the ability to chair meetings is vitally important’ and that: ‘the skills of a chair . . . are important for fostering team working between governors, both within and outside the meetings’ (AoC, 2013: Section 2.36).

### **Summary**

FE is a significant sector in the provision of education in England. FE provision is complex with considerable institutional variation. The governance of FE and sixth-form college institutions is thus important, but also likely to be challenging. The role of the board chair in non-FE settings

in ensuring the proper conduct of both the board and the organisation being governed is widely recognised and the role requirements are understood. The role of the FE or sixth-form college governing body chair is deemed to be very important, but little is known about it and how it is experienced by office holders. This lack of knowledge is significant given the size, complexity and importance of FE and sixth-form college institutions, the expectations accorded to the role and the considerable scope for different models as a consequence of the local determination of the chair's role and responsibilities.

## Methodology

The research aimed to analyse: (1) chairs' responsibilities and how those responsibilities are experienced and interpreted; (2) the role of the chair; (3) chairs' relationships with their college principals and clerks; and (4) the development needs of chairs. Our interpretation of the notion of role is a set of practices that are commensurate with a formal position in an organisation/institution (James et al., 2006). The idea of responsibility is being accountable in some way for the proper functioning of an aspect of the organisation/institution (James et al., 2007). The chairs of the governing bodies of 16 colleges (11 GFE, 4 sixth-form and 1 land-based) were interviewed using a semi-structured schedule (Cohen et al., 2007), which was developed from the review of the literature. Respondents varied in their time in post as chairs and their colleges were distributed throughout England and were diverse in: whether they were a single college or a group of colleges; income; the number of full-time equivalent students (in 2012/13); the Ofsted leadership and management grade (Ofsted, 2014) at the last inspection; and whether they had adopted the Foundation Code of Governance (AoC, 2013), as Table 1 indicates. The respondents comprised 5 female and 11 male chairs.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were analysed for consistent emergent themes (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The preliminary analysis was reviewed by two experienced chairs of FE governing bodies in discussion with the researchers to consider and to verify the validity of the findings and their interpretation. The research conformed to the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) for the ethical conduct of educational research (BERA, 2011). Maintaining respondent anonymity and confidentiality were particular aspects of the research which posed specific ethical issues. The respondents were informed that the data would be kept securely and that any publication of the findings would not breach agreed confidentiality and anonymity. The respondents participated on that basis.

## The findings

In this section we report the emergent themes from the data. We have aggregated the themes under various headings, which relate to the main themes we identified in our review of the literature: the capabilities required, the role in relation to the functioning of the board, the chair's relationship with the principal and the representation role in the wider environment and the college. We have also identified two further main themes: the chair's role in working with the clerk and the personal experience of being the chair.

### *The capabilities required*

*The skills and knowledge required.* Respondents cited a wide range of skills that were part of the chair's role and important for effective working, which covered: leadership, communication skills,

**Table 1.** The respondents and their colleges.

Respondent (time in post)	Type of college	Single college or group of colleges	Number of FTE students 2012/13	Income 2012/13	Ofsted leadership and management grade	Adopted Foundation Code of Governance (AoC 2013)
R1 (1 year)	General FE	College	17,000	£43.8 m	Outstanding	No
R2 (3 years)	General FE	College	3890	£18.8 m	Good	Yes
R3 (2 years)	General FE	College	5900	£26.7 m	Good	Yes
R4 (6 years)	SFC	College	1009	£5.4 m	Good	No
R5 (6 years)	General FE	College	825	£8.1 m	Good	Yes
R6 (More than 12 years)	General FE	College	2937	£29.2 m	Good	Yes
R7 (2 years)	General FE	College	1569	£18 m	Good	Yes
R8 (2 years)	SFC	College	790	£4.2 m	Good	No
R9 (9 months)	SFC	College	2364	£11 m	Good	No
R10 (5 years)	General FE	Group	16,424	£88.8 m	Good	Yes
R11 (12 years)	SFC	College	1548	£9.4 m	Requires improvement	No
R12 (4 years)	General FE	College	3664+	£38 m	Good	Yes
R13 (2 years)	General FE	College	Circa 3500	£16.8 m	Good	Yes
R14 (2 years)	Land-based	College	5200	£26.3 m	Good	Yes
R15 (6 years)	General FE	College	Circa 5000	£20 m	Good	Yes
R16 (4 years)	General FE	Group	Circa 5000	£21 m	Good	Yes

Notes: (1) The respondents have been anonymised.

(2) The 'Ofsted L. and M. grade' refers to the leadership and management grade awarded during the most recent college Ofsted inspection (Ofsted, 2014).

(3) SFC refers to sixth-form college.

the ability to manage people/groups of people and the abilities to run meetings effectively, manage organisations and deal with staff. Specific responses of interest included: 'being able to manage multiple issues' (R6); 'being a good listener' (R2); 'the ability to run a meeting effectively' (R1, R4); and: 'the ability to manage relations' (R6).

In terms of the knowledge required, again a range of aspects was reported within the themes of knowledge of: finance/business processes including strategy, the college and its context/setting and governance. Knowledge of education was present as a theme, but not strongly and was clearly not a priority. When it was present, knowledge of education had been used to good effect, for example, in the cases of R4 and R15.

*Commitments and values underpinning the role.* The respondents espoused a number of commitments and values that underpinned their work as chairs, which were in four broad categories. The first was a commitment to learners and the provision of high-quality education. For example, R13 expressed his commitment to: 'students and community', and felt that his: 'commitment to young people' was important to him. The second was a commitment to education generally, for example, R7 and the provision of high-quality education, for example, R10 who stressed the importance of education and skills and his commitment: 'to achieve a high-quality service'. Respondents also

espoused a clear commitment to good governance, for example, R9 and to frameworks of governance such as Cadbury (1992) and Nolan (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995) principles (R3, R6). Respondents reported a range of other underpinning values, such as integrity (R13, R5), democracy (R1, R10), humility (R6), openness (R2), respect for others (R4) and truthfulness (R16).

*The respondents' overall approach.* There were two main linked themes in the respondents' overall approach to the role: how they sought to be viewed and how they sought to act. Respondents sought to present themselves in particular ways. A strong theme was the desire to: 'set an example to fellow governors' in order to: 'give the governors confidence' (R4). This example-setting necessitated: 'demonstrating relevant expertise' (R11) and showing 'wisdom' (R14). Another sub-theme reflected the importance of developing relationships by being seen as 'approachable' (R11), 'a good listener' (R2) and 'supportive' (R14).

The theme 'how the chairs sought to act' clearly showed their desire to 'be in charge' and to be seen to 'be in charge'. It was manifested in statements such as being: 'robust and practical' (R11), 'prepared to direct and intervene' (R13) and 'providing leadership' (R9). R16 reported: 'I'm happy to take feedback, the one-to-ones I've instigated have been two-way', but he was clear: 'I listen, but I'm ready to stand my ground'.

*The experience and expertise brought to the role and the expertise gained.* Roles other than that of being the governing body chair were very clearly sources of relevant experience for the respondents. The experience was often gained in paid work typically at a senior level in other settings, although respondents cited 'senior' management experience in leisure/voluntary organisations and political work as local councillors. Other settings for experience varied – public, private, third sector and, in some instances, leisure interests. Senior organisational institutional experience, typically management experience, perhaps as managers/CEOs and in some instances non-executive directors, was also cited. In one example, R16, this experience was considerable and very varied.

The experience of being the chair gave respondents substantial and relevant insights into the role and developed their capabilities in a number of ways. The insights gained related to a range of matters including: the business cycle (R5), which is the typical sequence of the organisational activities of planning, monitoring, reporting and evaluation; 'pressure points' in the business cycle (R8); the annual processes of financial management; board structures and insights; management roles and processes; commercial insight; and legal awareness.

*Training for the role of chair.* The training that the chairs had undertaken to prepare them for the role and/or to improve their practice was explored during the interviews and a number of themes emerged.

The lack of engagement in role-specific training was a significant theme in the data. There was general support for role-specific training, but also some uncertainty about whether any training would be useful unless it was context specific. Typically, the respondents had developed their capability as chairs by chairing committees and being vice chair. One respondent, R16, had gained experience during his four years as vice chair of the governing body deputising for the chair on a number of occasions because of the chair's ill health.

The respondents' experience of other previous chairs – both positive and negative – had influenced their practice. Respondents cited role models who had shaped their sense of the capabilities required. Capabilities exhibited by positive role models included: 'the ability to blend control with

flexibility' (R9); being: 'considered, wise, urbane and respectful' (R12); and acting as a: 'dominant, but impressive achiever' (R9). Capabilities of previous chairs that were not valued included: not being 'a completer-finisher' (R7), which is someone who does not complete tasks; and being 'perverse', which was the term R4 used to describe a previous chair who was contradictory and unpredictable in his approach. The chairs also brought insights from their own experience – current and/or previous – from other settings into their role as chair.

### *The role in relation to the functioning of the board*

Explorations of the chair's role with the respondents in relation to the functioning of the governing body revealed that respondents did not find it necessarily easy to articulate what they do. It was difficult for them to separate their role from that of the board and many of their answers reflected that. So responses included a responsibility: 'for the educational character, mission and strategic direction of the college' (R3); to: 'ensure the college is employer of choice' (R6); and to: 'make sure the college is moving in the right direction' (R5), which are arguably responsibilities that all members of the governing body would undertake.

A number of themes emerged in the respondents' views of the main aspects of their role. Organising and managing the governing body was a significant theme. It was a wide-ranging aspect of the role: 'supporting the governing body to obtain the necessary information from the senior staff' (R11, R13, R4); 'enabling good communication with the board' (R16); 'to make sure the governing body has right people as members' (R13); 'ensuring a proper division between management and governance' (R10); 'making sure the governing body is carrying out its role and responsibilities' (R9); 'to develop a culture that permits good governing' (R1); and: 'maintaining open relations between governors and senior staff' (R4). At a very straightforward level, for R4, a key part of governing body organisation was: 'getting the right chairs for committees'.

Acting as the 'leader of the board team' was a significant theme in the chair's role in organising the board, for example, R16. For R9, it involved: 'ensuring the governing body worked together as a team' (R9), while for R5 it entailed acting as a 'consensus builder'. R1 expressed a similar view, but also acknowledged the difficulties of achieving consensus with independent, strong-willed governors. Thus, the leadership role for him involved: 'facilitating and then bringing it all together, but how do you herd cats?' R7 captured the responsibility for board leadership as: 'being the "person of last resort"'. Interestingly, 'working with the vice chair' did not emerge as a significant theme in the data.

Ensuring accountability and the independence of the board was a strong data theme. R11 captured his responsibility very straightforwardly: 'To ensure the governing body is governing the college'. Similarly, R13 felt a responsibility to: 'make sure the governing body is operating to the letter and spirit of relevant codes of governance'. Accountability in relation to ensuring educational quality was significant, which for R6 required: 'making sure the governing body challenges and reviews the quality of the learner experience', and that: 'safeguarding of learners is achieved'. Ensuring the security of the college finances was a significant but not necessarily straightforward aspect of this theme. R6 felt that: 'the chair and the board must understand the college's finances – and it's not easy, the various funding streams are particularly hard for governors to grasp'.

Chairing meetings and conducting the meeting business properly was a data theme with a number of respondents drawing attention to it. For R16: 'Time management ... keeping

everyone's interest ... and making sure everyone speaks' were all important in chairing meetings.

The changes implemented by the respondents to improve board effectiveness had a number of different dimensions with some chairs more active in this regard than others. Examples included: ensuring governing body members take part in training (R13, R11); changing the committee structure (R11, R16); improving meetings (R11, R13, R7); improving the principal's performance management (R11, R7); and changing the way the governing body evaluates its performance (R13). Interestingly, R7 had: 'increased the number of governors with a teaching and learning background' in an attempt to improve governing body functioning. Similarly, R16 had instigated board visits to different college sites: 'I organised the last meeting at one of the other campuses and we had a full walk round and discussions with all the heads of department'.

Improving governing body functioning also involved some quite robust management of individual governors. So, for R16, dealing with a particular governor had been important:

An interesting situation, a loose cannon, I had a lot of respect for what he had contributed, but he has his own agenda, he was saying derogatory things about the college, comments to various people, we took him to task about it and he resigned.

### *The chair's relationship with the principal*

The respondents' relationships with their principals was a significant and consistent data theme. Establishing close working relationships was a clearly a priority for chairs. R7 put it very directly: 'It is important to work at forming a productive relationship with the principal'. As regards why the relationship is important, R1 was clear: 'You (the chair) may be the only one who can ask the principal the crucial question'.

The complexity of the relationship was captured variously: R11 emphasised the need to support the chair, while R10 described the relationship as being: 'a constructive and critical friend to the principal'. He added: 'We communicate on a variety of levels, it's not a hierarchical relationship; we both have our respective roles to perform'. This mutuality in the relationship was a theme, which was messaged in a range of ways, for example, R5 emphasised the importance of trying to: 'appreciate the principal's perspective'. R7 felt that: 'you have to let them get on with their job, but also encourage them to understand what you need for your role as chair'.

A productive relationship may take time to develop and for some chairs this development was still in process – especially in those situations where the principal had only recently been appointed. As R9 put it: 'We (the chair and principal) are beginning to find common ground and using a common language'. Building the relationship required both parties to commit to it. R7 was of the view that: 'developing the team ethos requires both parties to engage'.

The performance management of the college principals was an important part of the relationship and it was particularly emphasised by some respondents, for example, R4. For R6, making sure: 'the governing body sets clear objectives for the principal and senior staff' was an important part of his role. 'Appointing the principal' did not emerge as a theme in the data probably because it was not an aspect of their current practice which was the focus of the study.

### *The chair's role in working with the clerk*

The chair's role in relation to the clerk was a particularly significant data theme with a number of different aspects and it incidentally gave the insights into the role of the clerk.

The strength and closeness of the relationship were substantive themes. R4 said he endeavoured to: 'have a strong relationship with the clerk', while R11 felt: 'we (the chair and the clerk) have a very close relationship'. R11 was clear: 'I always give the clerk priority time'. The chair's role included: 'supporting the clerk' (R11) and 'overseeing and guiding the clerk's work' (R9). All the respondents were involved in the performance management of the clerk.

As regards the value of the clerk for the chair, R12 felt that: 'The clerk is absolutely pivotal to the success of the chair and therefore to the success of the college'. R4 stated that: 'The clerk is my first call for advice on most matters and plays a critical role in the training of governors; he provides clear guidance on what is governance and what is management'.

R7 considered that: 'the clerk is fundamentally important to the role of the chair both for the compliance assurance and the proactivity'. R10 referred to the clerk being: 'the senior executive aide to the chair' and acting as: 'the eyes and ears of the chair in the college'. R2 said: 'The clerk offers an independent, considered view'. R1 used an interesting metaphor to describe the clerk's role and its importance: 'The clerk is my wingman – he keeps me and us (the governing body) on the right track'. The clerk's role could be one of considerable influence on the chair. R1 stated: 'I value the clerk's feedback on my chair's performance – it's honest and very useful'. Understandably, the contribution of the clerk was much appreciated by respondents. R3 said that the clerk was: 'highly valued as an independent source of advice'. R11 put it very directly: 'She's vital!', while R8 felt that: 'there is high value provided by the clerk, who I think of as the company secretary'.

The significance of the role of the clerk to the operation of the board was a substantial emergent theme with, for example, R10 stating explicitly that: 'the clerk is a hugely important and influential role'. R6 was of the view that: 'the clerk is a major contributor to how well we operate as a governing body'. The role and influence of the clerk was particularly apparent when a new clerk was appointed. R16, reporting the changes a new clerk had instigated, said: 'He (a new clerk) is pushing us in a direction which we're not used to going'. R16 took specific guidance from the clerk as to how to improve the governing body: 'It is through his leadership and expertise, if you like, that we're now on the way'.

The three-way grouping of the clerk, the chair and the principal and the clerk's role in that group was a strong theme in the data. For example, R2 said: 'She must know all the chair knows so she can properly operate within the inner sanctum of the chair/principal/clerk'. R6 was of the view that: 'the clerk is a very valuable senior member of the governance group'.

The data conveyed a sense that, despite the difference in role and responsibility, there was mutual respect between chair and clerk. Interestingly, in one case, the chair and clerk undertook the performance management of the principal.

### *The experience of being the chair*

The significance of the responsibility emerged as a substantive theme. As R4 stated: 'I'm always aware of the responsibility of being chair all [his emphasis] the time'. Similar statements included: 'It's always with you; it's part of my life' (R6) and: 'It never leaves you – there's always an ongoing issue I'm thinking about' (R11).

The time commitment required to be the chair was considerable. For example, R14 spent: ‘in excess of half a day each week on college work’. R16 felt that he spent: ‘260 to 300 hours a year quite easily’ on his chairing duties. The time commitment could vary with, for example, the appointment of a new principal or merger talks with other colleges. R8 referred to: ‘the peaks and troughs of time spent as chair’ and that: ‘sometimes it can be very intense’. Despite the nature and extent of the commitment, being the chair was evidently a rewarding experience. R16 was clear that he: ‘enjoys it’, adding: ‘I like to see the college prosper’.

### *The chair’s role representing the college in the college’s the wider environment*

The chair’s representational role in the college’s wider environment was a significant data theme. It was messaged variously, for example, as: ‘being the public/external face of the college’ (R4 and R16); ‘being the figurehead for the college in the local community’ (R8); and: ‘acting as an ambassador’ (R10). It could involve various activities, such as: ‘attending regional and national conferences, dinner with (an international delegation), meeting the mayor and attending meetings of the (local) partnership board’ (R16). R1 said: ‘Recently, I have met with the local authority, the leader of the council, the local university, employers, some local schools, the city region and sports clubs locally’. The representational role was not without difficulties especially when it conflicted with other responsibilities. So, for R11: ‘I’m still in employment and so I don’t have the time to be able to attend a lot of events’. This aspect of the chair’s role could also vary over time (R6).

### *The chair’s representational role within the college*

Representing the board to the rest of the college was a theme in the data. The purpose appeared to be: ‘to connect governors to the college’ (R5) and: ‘to ensure effective working relations between governors and senior staff’ (R9). This aspect typically involved joining senior management meetings and meetings of the staff. It also involved participating in college events, for example, attending: ‘the Prince’s Trust Awards evening’ (R16).

## **Discussion**

In this section, we discuss some of the key issues to emerge, particularly in relation to the literature we analysed earlier: the knowledge, capabilities and characteristics required; the chair’s role; and the role in relation to the principal, the clerk and FE governance generally.

### *Knowledge, capabilities and characteristics*

In many ways, the capabilities required reflected those identified in the literature on board chairs generally, which we reviewed earlier in the article. Interestingly, although knowledge of ‘the industry’, the organisation’s business and the sector are considered to be particularly valuable in non-educational settings, see for example, Coombes and Wong (2004), a detailed knowledge of education in an FE context as a priority was not a strong theme. This apparently low priority parallels a broadly similar finding in other settings (James and Sheppard, 2014) and has implications for the chair’s work in leading the governance of the educational aspects of the college. The chairs’ commitment to the role, the institution and their espoused values, awareness and insight resembled those reported on in the literature, especially in the voluntary sector (Cornforth et al., 2010). However, these aspects appeared to be particularly significant in the chairs we studied.

Arguably, the two dimensions of the chairs' approach to the role – how they sought to be viewed and how they sought to act – reflect their board leadership role and the basis of their authority, i.e. their legitimate power in that role. Thus, simultaneously, they are seeking to legitimise the power accorded to them as the chair elected by the governing body – how they sought to be viewed – and to use and protect that authority if it was challenged – how they sought to act. The finding is consistent with the problematic nature of the chair's leadership authority in other non-FE settings, as we discussed earlier in the article.

Chairs undertaking role-specific training was not a robust theme in the data. They drew on their experience as governors and roles beyond their college governing responsibilities to inform their practice. They also clearly learned in the role and role models, for example other chairs, had informed their practice significantly. Chairs expressing a wish for any training to be context specific, that is directly relevant to their context, is significant. The role of National Leaders of FE Governance, who are experienced and expert chairs and can have a mentoring and coaching role for other chairs is relevant in this regard. Nonetheless, given the importance accorded to the role (AoC, 2011, 2013), the possible lack of availability of or engagement in role-specific training is of interest and worthy of further exploration.

### *The chair's role*

A substantive meta-theme encompasses the role's complexity, its demanding nature and the very wide range of activities the role encompasses. These notions raise particular issues for chairs of FE and sixth-form college governing bodies, a role which is voluntary and unremunerated and carries substantial responsibility. The data shows that chairs assume and accept the very significant responsibility for the functioning of the board and the leadership of the governing of the college. The college for which the governing body is responsible may have a turnover of approximately £88 million (the largest college in our sample). Further, chairs and their governing bodies are arguably operating in a 'high stakes' accountability environment although interestingly, none of the respondents referred to Ofsted, the inspection service in England, or Ofsted inspections in their responses. The significance of the chair's responsibility raises three issues. The first is the appropriateness of the role being unremunerated given the cost and the opportunity cost of taking on the responsibility. The second is whether the chair's responsibility for the conduct of the board should be specified more explicitly in regulatory guidance. The third issue is whether the selection and appointment process of the chair should be solely in the hands of the governing body members.

### *The chair's relationship with the principal*

The chair's role in enabling an appropriate relationship with the principal emerged as a strong theme in the data, perhaps understandably, and reflects the attention accorded to it in the literature on the board chair generally, see for example, Burton (2000). Two interesting aspects of the chair–principal relationship emerged. The first related to the lack of priority given to knowledge of the college's core educational work (see above). The low priority may configure the level of dependency on the principal for knowledge about educational matters in the context of the college. It also complicates the governance model and the accountability relationship as has been reported by James and Sheppard (2014) in international schools. Thus, for 'non-educational matters', such as finance/resources, the chair may be well-placed for exercising a high level of accountability through, for example, their expertise in finance and the relationship may be configured as a

principal–agent model (James et al., 2010). For ‘educational matters’ such as curriculum provision, however, the extent of the scrutiny by the chair may be reduced, because of the chair’s relative lack of educational knowledge and a lower level of accountability may be exercised. The governing model thus becomes more akin to a stewardship model (James et al., 2010).

The significance of the chair–principal relationship is matched by its complex and sophisticated nature, which again is reflected in the literature on board chair–CEO relationships generally. The relationship involves a range of different and often conflicting sub-roles, for example, ‘adviser’, ‘sounding board’, ‘conduit of information’ to and from the governing body and ‘performance manager’. The complex but crucial nature of this feature of the role arguably points to the need for joint and specific training of chairs and principals.

### *The role of the chair in relation to the role of the clerk*

An interesting and in some ways unexpected finding was the significance of the chair–clerk relationship. The chairs clearly looked to the clerk for guidance on due process and appropriate procedures. The clerk was a key player in college governing in contrast to the role as typically undertaken in school settings for example (James et al., 2010). Typically, clerks not only serviced and supported the work of the chair (and the governing body) but they also guided and ensured the appropriateness of governing practice. This latter role of overseeing college governance is significant given the autonomy that FE and sixth-form colleges have had since 1993 when corporate status was implemented and colleges moved away from oversight by the local education authority. There may also be implications in this finding for the role of the clerk of governing bodies of schools in England that have converted to become academies in recent years. These ‘converter academies’ (James, 2012) are now more distant from their local authorities and now have a similar direct line of accountability to central government, as do college corporations.

### *The role in relation to FE governance*

The local determination of the chair’s responsibilities in relation to those of the clerk and the principal is a matter of interest, especially as it is for the governing body to specify the responsibilities. There was very little evidence in the data that the specification was significantly inappropriate, although there was some variation in the way the areas of responsibility were configured and carried out. The local determination does give scope for an inappropriate shift in responsibilities over time. Arguably, there could be a more explicit requirement for governing bodies to adopt and implement the Colleges’ Foundation Code of Governance (AoC, 2011), a requirement which could then be monitored as appropriate by Ofsted and/or other agencies as part of an enhanced scrutiny of a college’s governance during inspections.

## **Concluding comments**

This article has reported research into the role and responsibilities of the chair of the governing body of the FE colleges in England. FE is a significant aspect of educational provision in the UK and FE providers receive significant central government funding for their work. FE institutions are governed by governing bodies that are responsible for the conduct of the colleges and have considerable freedom to manage their own affairs. FE college governing bodies have an elected chair

who has de facto responsibility for the operation of the governing body. The chair's role and responsibilities are therefore significant in FE governance overall.

The research has revealed that: in many respects the role and responsibilities of the chair of the governing body in FE settings reflect those of chairs in non-FE settings; chairs consider that a broad range of expertise is required for the role, but that knowledge and experience of education is not a priority in that requisite knowledge set; chairs espouse a wide range of high level values and commitments that they bring to the role; chairs' participation in role-specific training and development was not a strong theme in the data; the responsibility of being the chair is a substantial, complex and multi-faceted undertaking; the chairs' relationships with their principals is crucial and is similarly complex and has many different and in some ways contradictory aspects; the clerk to the corporation has a significant role and influence in relation to the work of the chair, the principal and also college governance generally; and the role of the chair and the way it is to be defined locally by respective governing bodies, have significant implications for the contribution of governing bodies to the governance of FE and sixth-form college corporations in England.

As is often the case, the research has limitations. For example, the sample is relatively small, although the emergent themes were strong across the whole sample, and it is a study of the chair's own experience and not how they are experienced by others. Both these issues point to potential areas of further research, such as a sector-wide survey of chairs to test the findings with a larger sample, and an analysis of the way chairs are experienced by other key players in GFE and sixth-form college governance. A particularly significant matter for further research is the role of the clerk to the college governing body in GFE and sixth-form college settings, which emerged in this research as valued and important in ensuring proper governance practice.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, and not-for-profit sectors.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the AoC's support of the research. The interpretation of the data is that of the authors and does not necessarily represent the views of the Association.

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