



Further Education College Clerk Development and Training Programme Resource Pack

Module 6 Strategy and Educational Character

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

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Introduction

Welcome to Module 6, which explore the mission, vision and values of the college and the role of the clerk in advising governors on their responsibilities for its strategy and educational character.

The overall character of a college – what courses it offers, which students it caters for, what sort of learning environment it provides – is referred to as its **educational character**. A key responsibility of governors is to ensure that their organisation’s educational character, and hence the type, range and accessibility of its courses, meets the needs of the community it serves, and the clerk should ensure there is appropriate time allocated to fulfilling this task.

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

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

Probably the most important responsibility for governors is to agree the college’s **vision**. This will be aspirational, indicating what kind of college governors are striving to create. An example would be *‘our vision is to be the best provider of vocational education in the country’*. The key to a good vision statement is that it should be achievable but stretching. It should also be reviewed on a regular basis to monitor progress and test validity in changing circumstances.

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

Aims

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

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

Contents

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

To do	Done		
		Section 1	Introduction to strategy and educational character
		Section 2	The educational environment
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		Section 4	The college's strategic plan – key aspects
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Working on the self-study activities

These materials have been designed to be used flexibly (e.g. dip in and out for reference; complete in one sitting; work through alone or with others).

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

What you will need

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

- your local economic strategy as set out in your Local Enterprise Partnership's strategy document;
- your college's mission, vision and values statements; and
- your college's strategic plan.

Section 1. Introduction to strategy and educational character

Your role as a clerk is to create the circumstances for the formation of the college's mission, educational character, quality and solvency of your college. You should also keep the overall strategy of your college - the key objectives and how they are to be achieved - under review to ensure that it matches the wider educational environment. Governors will need to assure themselves that their college provides the services required by its local community including those required by employers.

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

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

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

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

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

How can the role of governors and management be distinguished?

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

What next at Main College?

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

The board agenda includes: an update on a meeting between the local Skills Funding Agency representative and the senior management team; discussion of proposals for the reshaping of the curriculum offer by the deputy principal; discussion of proposals for increased collaboration with neighbouring colleges; and a review of the college staff profile (age, industrial experience, staff development activity, sickness and absence, shortages, etc.).

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

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

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

Activity

What should the governors' approach be in the meeting?

Imagine that you are the clerk at Main College. Note down three questions that you would want the governors to explore at the meeting of the full governing body. As clerk how would you advise the chair on handling of the meeting?

Viewpoint

Governors need to be very careful that they do not get diverted into discussing the detail of the proposals, rather than reviewing their impact on the educational character, ethos and mission of the college. There will be a degree of tension between governors who have a special interest in issues relating to the Art and Design Department, and governors and senior managers who have a broader interest.

Some of the questions you might have considered are:

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

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

Two further points:

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

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

Why should governors think about mission and corporate strategic objectives?

Mission statement and corporate objectives

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

Role of community interests

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

Governance and management

"In order to be obsessive about ends, the board has got to get a lot of clutter that currently consumes its time out of the way... board members do have legitimate worries about how things are being practised (so) the board must be sure it is getting the monitoring data that keeps its worrying down."

John Carver and Miriam Mayhew (1994) *A New Vision of Board Leadership*, Washington: Association of Community College Trustees

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

Approaches to policy governance

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

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

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

Committee-based governance

Many colleges will retain a traditional governance model with a board and several committees, including e.g. finance and general purposes, curriculum and quality, search and remuneration. The committees will have formal terms of reference and report to the full board. An advantage of this model is that it provides the opportunity to discuss matters at more length, thereby giving governors more detailed experience and access to college policy implementation.

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

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

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

- it provides an aspirational target for the college to aim at; and

- it encourages governors to think about longer term objectives e.g. 5, 10 or 20 years ahead.

Activity

Assessing the quality of governing body contributions

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

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

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

Viewpoint

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

A further question:

How might this governor more appropriately and effectively make his/her view known? How would you advise him/her?

Activity

Picturing the vision for your college

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

Viewpoint

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

Section 2. The educational environment

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

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

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

Why keeping an eye on the broader educational environment is important

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

The Secretary of State for Education has introduced major changes to both A levels and GCSEs in terms of both curriculum and examination. The AS examination has been decoupled from the A level and all syllabuses are being reviewed for content. The modular approach has been significantly reduced with a return to linear examinations conducted at the end of the year. GCSE grades will be numbered 1 to 9; syllabus content is also being reviewed accompanied by a return to linear examinations and significantly reduced modular opportunities. These changes will be introduced for A, AS and GCSE over the period 2015 to 2017 and a summary of the reform timetables can be found on the [Ofqual](#) website.

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

DfE's main policy interventions in 2014 are to improve the quality of education available to young people at school, through:

- increasing the quality of state-funded schools, by [increasing the number of academies and free schools](#) and [improving the quality of teaching](#);

- [reforming the qualifications and curriculum](#) for young people;
- [raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils](#);
- [improving the support available for young people with special educational needs](#); and
- [holding schools and colleges more closely to account for the outcomes they achieve for their pupils](#).

Through implementation of these policies DfE expects more young people to reach the age of 16 well qualified and prepared for further and higher education and for work.

DfE also wants to improve the quality of what young people study after the of 16. For 16 to 19 year olds, they are:

- [reforming A level qualifications](#);
- continue to [increasing the quality of apprenticeships and introduce new traineeships](#) to help young people prepare for these opportunities;
- reforming [vocational education](#), creating new [16 to 19 study programmes](#) concentrating on English and maths, substantial qualifications and work experience;
- [holding education and training providers closely to account](#) for the outcomes they achieve for young people; and
- introducing a clearer and [more transparent funding system](#) for 16 to 19 year old education.

DfE is also supporting more young people to stay in education by:

- [raising the participation age](#) in 2013 and 2015, requiring young people to remain in some form of education or training until their 18th birthday;
- making sure that young people have the information they need to make good choices by extending the duty on schools and colleges to secure independent, impartial careers guidance;
- providing targeted financial support to young people who need it through the £180 million 16 to 19 bursary fund; and
- supporting 16 to 17 year olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and have few qualifications to move into education or training through the Youth Contract

As well as the DfE agenda, BIS' '[Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills](#)' statement emphasises a new approach to intervention where colleges underperform. Measures can include: the termination of funding contracts; referral to the FE Commissioner who has powers to recommend to ministers new 'administered college' status, restructuring and competition for new colleges following a 'Structure and Prospects Appraisal', replacement of governors, or college dissolution.

Activity

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

Note three ways in which you can keep up to date with issues that emerge in the educational environment, and help governors to do the same.

Viewpoint

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

- the principal's regular report – which should cover trends in the wider environment, not just within the organisation;
- the education press ([Times Educational Supplement](#), [Times Higher Education Supplement](#), education supplements of the daily newspapers, [FE News](#));
- websites for Government departments (e.g. DfE, BIS, Department for Work and Pensions);
- [the Association of Colleges' website](#), the Chief Executive's weekly letter and the Governance newsletter;
- attending conferences; and
- talking to staff.

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

Activity

What are the current key issues in the educational environment?

Over a couple of weeks, get hold of two or three newspapers or journals devoted to educational issues, such as the Times Educational Supplement, or the education supplements of the Guardian, Telegraph or Independent and look at the websites mentioned above.

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

Viewpoint

You may have identified a number of issues, for example: concerns about changes to the inspection regime; new frameworks; school sixth forms; raising the participation age; A level and GCSE reforms and the end of modularisation and a return to end tests; a report on a possible merger of neighbouring colleges; a new university technical college being established; changes to apprenticeships; English and maths; traineeships; expanding student loans; new visa requirements for international students; reductions in funding for adult learning; leadership development for senior and middle management.

This activity may have helped you identify an issue that will have a significant impact on your college. To develop the governing body's responsiveness to this kind of issue, you can help governors ask a number of further questions, such as:

- What additional information do I need to be sure my college is ready to meet this issue?
- What changes, if any, do we need to make?
- What resources will this require?

It is important to make sure that the college doesn't get out of step with its environment. Keep monitoring developments – those that don't seem particularly significant for your college now may prove to be so later.

It is clearly too much for individual governors to keep track of all the developments affecting the college, but you might agree areas of special interest, or responsibility for one particular source of information.

What should you do?

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

Section 3. Educational character and ethos

As part of the new freedoms being given to colleges, the Education Act 2011 made provision for governing bodies to draw up new Instrument and Articles of Government. Colleges may opt to continue with their current Instrument and Articles of 2008 which specify the key responsibilities of governors, the chief executive and the clerk. The law now requires only two board responsibilities to be included:

- *“the determination and periodic review of the educational character and mission of the institution and the oversight of its activities”*; and
- *“the effective and efficient use of resources, the solvency of the institution and the safeguarding of the organisation’s assets”*.

The principal’s role is stated in the Articles of Association as having a responsibility for *“making proposals to the corporation about the educational character and mission of the organisation, and for implementing the decisions of the corporation”*. A governor’s role then is periodically to consider proposals on the mission and character of the organisation, and to check whether these are appropriate for the environment in which the organisation finds itself.

A new governor may well ask: “What is meant by educational character?” It is how the college delivers its mission, the kind of college it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides, its approach to teaching and learning, the quality of its partnerships with other agencies. It may also include the values to which the college’s community subscribes and how they underwrite the behaviours to which they aspire.

Why think about educational character?

Educational character and ethos are fundamental to your college. In recent years there has been a refocusing of the role of colleges and other sector organisations towards continuous improvement, widening participation, equality of access, development of a local skills base and partnership and collaboration between providers. This has placed demands on senior staff and governors, but also provided new opportunities for innovation. Financial pressures remain however, particularly as we emerge from a deep economic downturn and the consequent pressures on public sector funding.

The sector has been very successful in meeting targets for improved success rates, investing in new infrastructure and professional development for staff. However, pockets of underachievement still remain, leading to some poor inspection reports and formal notices to improve from the Skills Funding Agency. ‘Notices to Improve’ have now been replaced by ‘Intervention Notices’ which follow three stages, the first of which is a ‘Notice of Concern’, the second a ‘Notice to Withdraw’ funding and, finally, a ‘Notice of Confirmation’ to withdraw funding. More information on this procedure can be found in the SFA’s document [‘Approach to Intervention’](#).

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

Case study: Educational character at Main College

Over the last two years, Main College has refocused its mission on responsiveness to its local community and delivery of flexible, high-quality programmes to a diverse community, including school leavers and employers. Its mission statement reflects this educational character and ethos. It struggles to achieve some aspects of this mission. The standards of retention and achievement are excellent in some areas,

but some are proving slow to improve, despite the concerted efforts of senior managers and staff teams. Work with employers is slow to develop and currently making a loss.

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

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

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

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

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

A checklist for determining the educational character of your college

1. Who are the potential and actual students in your college? Has this changed? How does this relate to the college's mission? Is the pattern consistent across all programme areas and course levels? Are any changes proposed for the future? If so, what is the rationale for this change? What impact will any changes have on the educational character of the college?
2. Is the college ensuring access to all elements of the local community? Is it responding to the needs of the national and local economy?
3. What kind of learning environment is there in the college? What kind of technical facilities are there, including access to information technology? What are the social facilities for students?
4. What kind of teaching and learning approaches are used? How much teaching is done through lectures? How much self-study, resource-based learning do students undertake? What do students say about the teaching and learning approaches?
5. What student support or pastoral care is offered? How effective are the safeguarding measures? Are students satisfied with this provision?

6. What are the levels and quality of career advice and guidance? What proportion of students progress into work or higher education? How widespread and effective is employer engagement?
7. Which other agencies does the college work with? What kind of partnerships does the college have?

Activity

Describe the educational character of your college

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

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

Viewpoint

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

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

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

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

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

Your college will offer personal guidance and support (for example to those with housing, immigration or financial difficulties), counselling or high levels of pastoral care. Learning support may be offered in specialist centres or within the core curriculum. This may cover aspects such as functional skills, dyslexia support, or equipment for those with partial sight or mobility problems.

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

What part does the ethos of a college play?

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

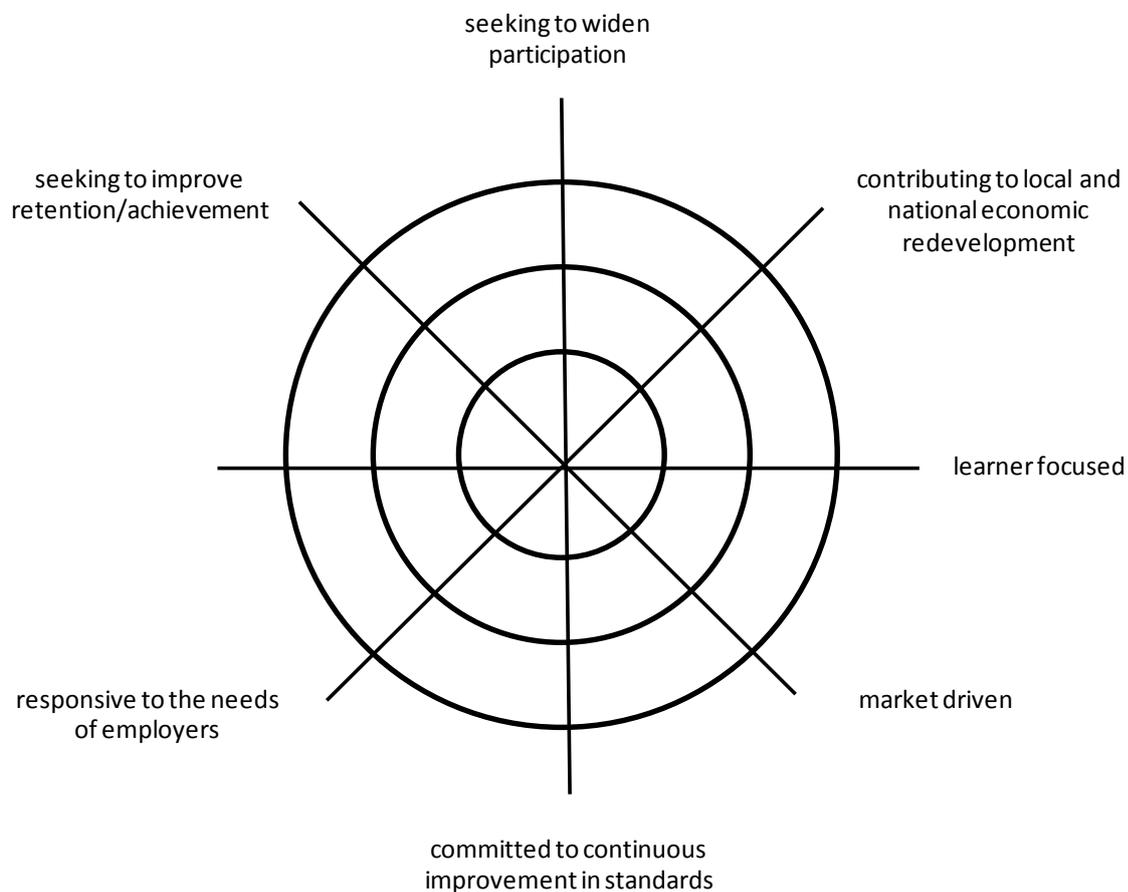
- equality of opportunity for students and staff;
- approaches to diversity;
- levels of empowerment of staff and students;
- relationships with the local community;
- employer engagement;
- approach to risk;
- commitment to high standards and continuous improvement;
- support for innovation and creativity;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

- commitment to partnership and collaborative approaches; and
- approaches to human resource management.

Activity

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

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



Viewpoint

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

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

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

Activity

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

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

competitive	collaborative
risk-seeking	risk-averse
innovative	stability-focused
market-driven	policy-driven
hierarchical	distributed leadership
autocratic	democratic

Viewpoint

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

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

Educational character and decision-making

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

Activity

Considering educational character when making key decisions

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

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

Viewpoint

1. Some colleges struggle to achieve national benchmark success rates with their A level provision. This can compromise inspection report outcomes and be at variance with a mission that is committed to high standards. However, many students with moderate GCSE grades remain attracted to A levels as a route to higher education. Governors will need to consider the impact on choice and widening participation of the proposal as well as the financial implications. What programmes are being proposed as replacements? What are the implications for staff? How will the 'new' curriculum impact on the educational character and ethos of the college? What alternative strategies might there be to retain A levels?
2. Working in partnership with a local training provider could have many benefits. There will need to be careful consideration of the nature of the agreement, the costs and staffing implications. How will the quality of provision be assured and what will be the management arrangements? There will need to be a robust risk assessment of the proposal.
3. Why is the centre underperforming and what steps has management taken to improve quality? Closing a centre, possibly an adult education provision that no longer attracts funding, could have a significant impact on the local community as well as the staff. Evening provision is seldom profitable but often greatly valued by local residents. Proposed closure could significantly affect the reputation of the college as well as the educational character. What steps are being proposed for consultation?
4. New types of schools are being introduced through legislation, including academies, free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges.
5. These providers can be viewed as either competitors or partners and governors have a significant role to play in assessing the options. A formal federation could be an innovative way of working collaboratively in a local area, but there are obvious implications and risks that need to be assessed. How should governors handle the chair's suggestion?

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

When a college finds itself in extreme difficulty, e.g. financial failure or an inadequate inspection outcome, it may be required to conduct a [structure and prospects appraisal](#), guidance for which is provided by BIS. The college will also attract a visit from the [FE Commissioner](#) whose job it is to provide a report for the minister on how a rapid improvement might be achieved. Whilst these are extreme circumstances, it is important for governors to know how such circumstances are provided for.

How can governors safeguard the educational character of the college?

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

Section 4. The college's strategic plan – key aspects

What kind of institution does the governing body want?

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

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

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

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

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

A good strategic plan will:

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

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

- a statement of the college's mission;
- an analysis of the needs for further education provision in the area, including some assessment of the demographic data and labour market information as well as an analysis of the college's current student population;
- the key objectives for the college over the next three years;
- a broad outline of the education provision the college intends to make, including the quality strategy and information technology strategy;

- a human resources strategy;
- projected student numbers;
- an accommodation or investment strategy setting out the college's plans for estate management and development;
- a financial forecast for the next three years linked to the key elements of the plan;
- an operating plan covering the first year of the strategic plan;
- an analysis of the main risks to the achievement of the plan; and
- a community development plan demonstrating how horizontal accountability to communities will be discharged.

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

Activity

The contents of the strategic plan

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

Viewpoint

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

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

Activity

Evaluating your contribution to strategic thinking

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

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

Judgements result in grades with the following headings: 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate'. There are two overarching categories: adequate and inadequate. A provider will be deemed to be inadequate if it is graded inadequate for overall effectiveness. If a provider is judged 'inadequate', or to 'require improvement' on two consecutive inspections it will be required to conduct a structure and prospects appraisal under the provisions of [New Challenges New Chances](#). The FE Commissioner will be directly involved in how the college determines a rapid recovery. Inspectors will make a judgement on the effectiveness of leadership and management by evaluating the extent to which leaders, managers and, where applicable, governors:

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

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

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

Quotes from inspection reports

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Students are involved effectively in decision-making through the students’ council and membership of the governing body. Managers and governors listen to them and respond where possible and their views are taken into account in self-assessment at all levels.”

“Value for money is inadequate. The college is financially sound and resources for learning are at least satisfactory and many are good. However, outcomes for students are inadequate.”

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

Viewpoint

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

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

- the holistic nature of the new common inspection framework;
- the importance of a clear focus on successful and continuously improving student outcomes;
- the significance of developing a well informed and strategic overview of the curriculum;
- the importance of ensuring that governors have reliable and comprehensible data by which to monitor strategic objectives; and
- the importance of having an appropriate balance of support and challenge from governors.

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

Section 5. Organisational capacity

Governors are required to assure themselves that the operation of their college is well managed. This includes a responsibility set out in the Instrument and Articles for the “oversight of its activities” and for “the effective and efficient use of resources”. Your role is to ensure there is time on the agenda to do this and to do it in a form that makes it easy for governors to implement in their role.

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

Governors’ responsibility for organisational capacity

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

Activity

How will the college deliver the programmes proposed?

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

- the annual budget
- equipment investment needs
- property strategy
- staffing
- staff development
- support for learners
- local communities

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

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

Viewpoint

Sometimes a college proposes a new development, for example, to develop an international department or higher education programmes, without fully considering its viability. Governors need to make sure that managers have considered the strategic implications of the proposed development. Here the role of governors is not to seek to present different ways of tackling the issue but to provide a reality check as critical friends to the organisation. Governors can do this by asking the kind of checking questions above. This activity becomes ever more important as traditional sources of funding come under pressure and management teams look for alternative ways of generating income. The worst of all worlds is where this leads to a 'scattergun' approach with a raft of initiatives that lack the appropriate planning and risk assessment.

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

Activity

Is the college ready to meet the challenges from the changing educational environment?

Look back to Section 2 where you identified key issues in the educational environment. Choose one of these. What are the implications for the college in terms of the following?

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

Viewpoint

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

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

What should governors do?

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

Section 6. Using meetings to monitor the college's strategic plan

As the clerk you are responsible for helping the governors to monitor and review the long-term policies that have been established and agreed by the governing body to achieve the mission. To do this you need to bear in mind the issues identified for governing bodies in Section 1. To recap, these are:

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

Your role is to support the governing body to review the progress of strategic priorities and the extent to which they have been effectively accomplished. It is management who must develop the strategies to realise the mission and whilst governors may contribute in part to this, they should not become directly involved in this. The governor's concerns should be: Are we on target? What do we need to know to judge whether or not this is the case? And if not, what are the reasons and how can the problem be resolved? As clerk it is your role to help the governors get the information they need to form a judgement.

How to monitor compliance with the strategic plan

The main resource available to the clerk is the governing body's cycle of full and committee meetings. These provide the opportunities for the governors to scrutinise management's fulfilment of the strategic plan by requesting the information they require, putting items on the agenda and asking pertinent questions.

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

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

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

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

Asking questions is one of the most important activities for governors. It is often an underrated art and one that highly effective governing bodies practise frequently. Asking the right question in the right way

is one of the most effective ways of getting to the heart of an issue, with the opposite also being true. *Appreciative inquiry* is a method that anticipates how the person being questioned is likely to respond. “Why” and “What” questions can sometimes be intimidating and asking a closed question that requires only “Yes” or “No” as an answer is rarely a good way of probing. The following questions provide a model for the type of questions that might be asked at a governing body meeting.

Asking searching questions

- Q. Can we clarify that our learner number, retention and achievement this year has met the targets we set?
- Q. How are these data on recruitment, retention and achievement distributed across curriculum areas?
- Q. How do these data relate to teaching and learning observation grades for the various curriculum areas?
- Q. Can we see a brief commentary attached to these figures, explaining the emerging trends and the implications for meeting our targets?
- Q. How does our curriculum offer reflect the needs of the community we serve? What scope is there for improvement and to what extent does our offer remain in line with our mission?
- Q. What implications do recent local inspection reports have for our strategic thinking?
- Q. How do we know if we have enough information on student views and that we are taking steps to respond to those views?
- Q. How do we know what our local employers want from us?
- Q. The staff survey reveals that some staff are understandably anxious about possible restructuring in the light of financial constraints. What can and should we be doing about this?
- Q. Some managers are perceived as being remote from day-to-day issues. How is this impacting on our mission and what action are we taking to address this?
- Q. Are we being rigorous enough in pursuing our equality and diversity policy?
- Q. How can we ensure that we are encouraging an innovative and creative environment at a time when resources are so hard to come by?
- Q. If we were to approach this initiative in partnership with other local providers, what difference would it make?

Activity

Using questions as a means of monitoring at governing body meetings

Read through the list of questions above and consider how they might apply to your college. Choose one of the questions which is relevant to your situation, discuss it with the senior leader who is responsible for college performance.

Viewpoint

Your governors may already be asking these kinds of questions. If so, as clerk, are you satisfied with the responses they are getting? If not, what has prevented the senior leadership team from contributing in this way, and do you feel you have the resources to tackle the issues? Ask the senior leadership team.

The most effective way for governing bodies to support and challenge is to develop good team relations amongst themselves and with the executive team. Where this happens, trust becomes the bedrock of good governance and makes rigorous debate and questioning an expected and welcome way of conducting business. As clerk you can support this relationship and help the senior leadership team provide the information needed by the governors.

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

The cycle of meetings

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

Activity

Your college and the annual cycle

The list below provides a typical example of an annual cycle of governing body meetings and the issues appropriate at different times of the year. Look at the list and compare the cycle of meetings and agenda items with those of your college. How many of the agenda items does your governing body consider and at what stage in the cycle?

The annual college cycle

Throughout the year

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

Autumn term

- Achievements and success rates
- Student profile

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

Spring term

- Retention
- Review mission
- Review targets
- Conduct self-assessment
- Management accounts
- Curriculum plan
- Contribution to the community

Summer term

- Retention Budget
- Set targets
- Financial forecast
- Strategic targets
- Admissions
- Review of equality and diversity
- Review of safeguarding
- Review of strategic plan

Viewpoint

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

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

Activity

The governing body's agenda

Consider the following passage:

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

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

Viewpoint

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

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

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

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

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

Activity

Your college and the committee structure

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

How many committees does the governing body operate?

What contribution does each committee make to the work of the governing body?

Does your committee structure fit these assumptions?

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

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

"Committees are often impediments to good governance."

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

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

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

John Carver

Viewpoint

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

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

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

High quality self-assessment of the governing body's effectiveness is one way of ensuring that the key responsibilities of governors are properly discharged. [The English Colleges' Foundation Code of Governance](#) states that: *"the governing body should undertake a formal self-evaluation of its effectiveness as frequently as it determines is appropriate, but at least every three years"* (S3.2). This process should be conducted by the board, for the board, and is separate from the self-assessment report of the college as a whole which will be prepared by the executive team. The clerk should play an important part in this process. Some governing bodies have opted for expert external review of their activities so that they can receive an independent report for consideration. The [Learning Board programme](#) developed by LSIS is an example of such a process.

Module review

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

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

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

Summary of key learning points

- Governors are responsible for keeping the medium- to long-term strategy of the college under review, while management is responsible for implementing corporate strategic objectives.
- A college's educational character, mission and ethos/values should meet the needs of the community it serves and inform the direction of all the college's activities.
- Colleges exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change. Governors need to keep well informed and up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves: "How will this affect my college?"
- A college's educational character – the kind of college it is, the kind of students or learners it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides – can change as a result of planning decisions. Governors have a key role in ensuring that decisions and developments fit the college's educational character.
- Governors need to be active in setting strategic objectives for management, rather than simply reacting to managers' advice. This may call for additional skills and training in thinking strategically.
- Governors should be ready to act as critical friends in posing searching questions to the governing body and managers about the college's readiness to meet changes in the environment, and changes proposed in the strategic plan.
- Governors need to take absolute responsibility for assessing their own effectiveness, individual and collective, how they are structured and the processes they employ to conduct their business.
- Understand your role as clerk in supporting the above.

Where next?

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

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

Putting it into action

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

Further reading

The most important document for governors to read and understand is the college's strategic plan.

The Government's most recent policy statements can be found on the [BIS website](#).

[The Association of Colleges' Governance Library](#) provides a wide range of relevant resources for governors

[The Further Education and Skills Sector in 2020](#) is a research paper written under the aegis of the RSA Public Services Hub

Many books exist on strategic planning, leadership and management. The list below is by no means prescriptive - it most likely reflects the author of this module's personal preferences!

'Creating an Outstanding College', Sir Bernard O'Connell, Nelson Thornes (2005)

'Good to Great', Jim Collins, Random House Business Books (2001)

'Creating Culture Change: The Key to Successful Total Quality Management', Philip E. Atkinson, IFS Publications (1990)

'A New Vision of Board Leadership', John Carver and Miriam Mayhew, Association of Community College Trustees (1994)

'Educational Leadership', Harry Tomlinson, Sage Publications (2004)

'Leadership Jazz', Max De Pree, Dell Publishing (1992)

'The Leadership Secrets of Genghis Khan', John Man, Bantam Press (2009)

'Leading the Revolution', Gary Hamel, Harvard Business School Press (2002)

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