College Governance: Women on Boards

A Research Report into the involvement of women on governing bodies

Conducted by
The Women’s Leadership Network

Summary of findings
September 2012
Introduction

There is a dearth of information about the membership of college Boards of Governors across the FE and Skills sector and therefore about the level of involvement by women in those Boards. The WLN was prompted by this and by two other occurrences to undertake this research. The first was a direct approach from women Chairs who were interested in a full and accurate view of the sector as well as in forming a support and exchange network for themselves, and the second was the publication of the Davies Report in 2011 about women on corporate Boards, which highlighted the under-representation of women in Board positions, considered the positive contributions of those women who were on Boards and made a series of recommendations to improve the gender mix.

Initial desk research suggested that only 54 Chairs of governing bodies were women – approximately 17% - but little else was known. The project sought to learn more about the membership of boards and particularly the gender balance and also to contribute to the discussion about impact and effectiveness of boards in FE.

Part of the primary research involved surveying governors and clerks to governors to find out how women participate in and influence college governance. This report focuses on the information obtained from two web-based surveys: one completed by 120 governors of 50 colleges and the other by the clerks of 81 colleges – a total of 93 colleges took part. 78% of them were general FE colleges.

Findings

Profile of governing bodies and governors

- The average size of the governing bodies represented in the surveys was 18 of which, on average, 13 were independent members with one vacancy per governing body.
- Overall, the ratio of male to female governors was 11:6 – almost twice as many male governors as female ones on college Boards represented by this survey.
- There were only half as many female Chairs of Governors as there were female Principals/Chief Executives.
- Almost three quarters of governors were 50 or older and only 12.5% were under 40, of whom a third were student governors.
- More than half of respondents have been on the Board for more than 3 years, with 15% having served for over 10 years.
- There was a marked contrast between male and female chairs in the length of time they have been in the role – with only 37% of female chairs having been in the role for more than 3 years as compared with 57% of male chairs for a similar period.
Recruitment of governors
- Only 2.5% of governors indicated that they had been selected following a competitive interview although women were more likely to be recruited as a result of a public advertisement than men.
- Most governors were recruited as a result of being approached by the College’s Corporation Search Committee. Men were more likely than women to be encouraged by an existing governing body member to apply.

Governing body and Committees
- The average number of meetings of the full governing bodies over the past year was 5.46 and most lasted between two and three hours.
- Committees are almost three times more likely to be chaired by men than women.
- Men were much more likely to chair and be members of college Audit and/or Finance committees than women, who were more likely to chair and be members of Search, or possibly Quality Committees.
- Only about a quarter of the colleges had committees related to self-assessment, students or employment policy. Self assessment / professional review appears to be a very low priority – meeting less often than Remuneration.

Attendance patterns
Timings of full governing body and committee meetings may pose particular difficulties for many women – particularly in the under-50 age groups.
- Over 30% of women (compared with 17% of men) were unable to attend a meeting of the full governing body on three or more occasions over the past year.
- Women were also more likely to be unable to attend college-hosted events to which they were invited than men on a similar ratio.
- The majority (over 60%) of both full governors’ meetings and of committees were held in the early evening (5:30 - 7:00pm) on weekdays.

Governor development and training opportunities
- Overall, training for governors is well-regarded by both male (81%) and female (77%) respondents.
- Even so, only 57% of female respondents felt that governor training and development opportunities had been tailored for them either ‘quite’ or ‘very well’.
- About 20% of Clerks to governors considered that training/development was either: ‘not very well’ or ‘very poorly’ tailored to meet the needs of the Chairperson and almost a quarter gave similarly poor ratings for tailoring to meet male and female governors as discrete groups.
- The most valued types of development included: ‘getting to know you’ sessions with managers, meetings with students and attachment to a specific manager or department.
- The highest priority areas for development by both women and men were: community needs, marketing, information and communications technologies and employer training needs.
Perceptions of effectiveness

- The main area where male and female governors’ opinions of the Board’s effectiveness diverged was in relation to increasing the levels and range of professional development opportunities for college staff. Only 30% of women felt their governing bodies were effective in this remit, compared with half the male respondents.
- Women governors were more critical than men when applying ratings to aspects such as: assessing the board’s own impact on the college’s welfare; community responsiveness and influencing the college’s overall culture.
- The majority of governor respondents considered their Board was either ‘quite highly’ or ‘extremely’ effective in all aspects, but more than 20% thought they were only ‘moderately’ or even less effective at: assessing their own effectiveness, making use of their own experience, and overseeing/directing the management and staff of the college.
- More than ¾ of the Clerks considered their governing bodies to be highly effective at: auditing the college’s performance, working collaboratively with the principal, the rest of the SMT and together and at embedding Equality of Opportunity, but far fewer were convinced of their effectiveness in relation to community involvement and increasing professional development opportunities for college staff.
- Clerks’ responses indicated some discrepancies between their perception of the effectiveness of Boards with female and male Chairs. Boards with female Chairs were rated between 9% and 26% higher on factors ranging from influencing the college’s overall culture to assessing its own impact on the welfare of the college.
- Male Chairs were rated higher on auditing the college’s performance and working collaboratively with the Principal.

Governing body priorities

- The highest priorities for allocation of time by governors were strategic planning and financial auditing, closely followed by capital planning, student performance – then quality assurance and teaching and learning.
- The assessments of both women and men were generally similar, although a higher proportion of women recorded more substantial time allocations for quality assurance and teaching and learning matters than men did.
- Strategic planning at every stage is a key priority for the majority of governors, but particularly at the initial planning, approval and formal review points.
- Clerks consider that there are differences in priorities between Boards chaired by women and those chaired by men.
- Female Chairs met more frequently than their male counterparts with the college’s Chief Executive/Principal – at least once every 3 to 4 weeks, while at least 60% of the male Chairs had such meetings only once every 4-6 weeks or even less frequently.
- Female Chairs also met more frequently than male Chairs with one or more of their individual governors on Corporation business - from ‘once a week’ to ‘about once every 4-6 weeks’, with half holding such meetings ‘about every 3-4 weeks’. In contrast, the frequency of such meetings for a third of the male Chairs was about once every 4-6 weeks and a further 14% held such meetings even less frequently.
Key messages and aspects for further investigation

- The ratio of female to male governors appears to have increased only marginally over the past 10 years from around 30% and the proportion of female to male Chairs of Boards is particularly low.
- The age profile of governors seems to be getting older with almost ¼ of the survey respondents aged 50+ although the age profile overall needs confirmation.
- There appear to be some distinctive differences in the leadership and management styles adopted by female Chairs of college Boards and follow-up interviews might seek to ascertain whether such differences are substantive and the extent to which they are more or less effective than approaches more generally adopted by their male counterparts. Areas of particular interest include:
  - Tendency of female Chairs to meet more frequently with the college’s Principal/Chief Executive;
  - Tendency of female Chairs to meet more frequently with other governors individually and in groups on corporation business;
  - The identification and addressing of different priorities from male Chairs by female ones;
  - The appropriateness and quality of development opportunities for Chairs.
- Far fewer women than men appear to chair committees and working groups with the exception of standards/quality/performance committees. This needs further investigation to confirm our data and, if so, to investigate reasons.
- Recruitment of new governors seems to lack an Equal Opportunities approach and the majority of governors seem to be ‘invited on’ by existing governors. Further investigation of current governor recruitment policies and practices seems warranted.
- Self-assessment by governing bodies of their own performance appears to be a very low priority, affecting recruitment as well as performance. Critical professional review which looks for systematic self-improvement, rather than simply meeting the requirements of inspection, appears not to be built into governance practice in all colleges and this hampers the development of the professional capacity of Boards. This is an aspect that needs fuller examination.
- Governors appear to be little involved in developing impact measures for the college’s overall strategy, despite feeling highly involved in strategic planning and monitoring.
- Female governors in particular are more critical of Boards’ effectiveness in assessing their own performance and their impact on the colleges they serve. Further investigation of this would be productive.
- Female governors appear to have more difficulty maintaining regular attendance at meetings of the governing body and this may be a factor in limiting the number of women prepared to participate as Chairs or members of committees. The timing of such meetings may exclude participation of a substantial proportion of current and prospective female governors and needs further investigation.
- Training and development opportunities tailored to meet needs of female governors do not appear to have been given much consideration. A better understanding of how to utilise the expertise and experience of all governors needs to be acquired. Consideration should be given to whether gender specific training would be appropriate and beneficial.