College senior staff and their contribution to college governance

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Acronyms and interpretation of terms used:

'College Governing Body' means further education corporation
'Board' means further education corporation
'Corporation' means further education corporation
'Staff Governor' means staff member

ASNs	Additional student numbers
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
FDAP	Foundation degree awarding powers
FTE	Full-time equivalent
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HEIFES	Higher education in further education: students survey
HE in FECs	Higher education in further education colleges
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HESES	Higher education students early statistics survey
HNC/D	Higher national certificate/Higher national diploma
ILR	Individualised learner record
IQER	Integrated quality and enhancement review
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSIS	Learning and Skills Improvement Service
NPHE	Non-prescribed higher education
NSS	National student survey
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
Ofqual	Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
QTS	Qualified teacher status
QTLS	Qualified teacher, learning and skills
SSCs	Sector Skills Councils
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
UK PSF	UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education
YPLA	Young People's Learning Agency

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 This guide aims to use the findings from a recent research study looking at the contribution of senior staff to college governance to suggest ways in which governance processes can be improved.

1.2 This guide develops the notion of the 'governance team' where governors, senior staff and the clerk perform their respective roles to achieve governance with impact. In this context 'senior staff' are considered to be those staff who write governance reports and attend governance meetings (either Board meetings, or committee meetings or both). The research study recognised the role of the principal as a governor and also as a commissioner of reports for governance and so, therefore, principals were not included in the questionnaire circulation.

1.3 Very little is known about the various ways in which college senior staff engage with governors and the processes of governance. From a literature search, there is no published research on this topic in relation to colleges. Furthermore, there is no published research regarding the contribution of school senior staff to governance, and very limited reference to the contribution of senior professionals to public, voluntary or corporate governance generally. However, Roberts et al (2005) in considering corporate board effectiveness stated

"... it is the actual conduct of the non-executive vis-à-vis the executive that determines board effectiveness" (p s6)[1]

1.4 With respect to colleges there are numerous formal and informal interactions between senior staff and governors that can condition the way(s) in which college governance operates. Such interactions could be critical to the performance of governors as there can be substantial reliance on senior staff perception, interpretation, analysis, communication, expectation and ambition.

2. Research questions

2.1 There were two primary research questions addressed by the research study:

- What are the ways in which senior college staff interact with college governance processes?
- How are these various ways of interaction with college governance perceived by senior staff?

2.2 As the contribution of senior staff to college governance has not been previously studied and reported, this study aimed to appreciate the range and nature of activities undertaken by senior staff, and the perception of senior staff of the contribution they are making to governance.

Details of the research study are included in the Appendix. An article for an academic journal will be published in due course.

1: Roberts, J. McNulty,T. and Stiles, P. (2005) Beyond Agency Conceptions of the Work of the Non-Executive Director : Creating Accountability in the Boardroom British Journal of Management Vol 16 s5 – s26

3. Responses from senior staff

3.1   There were a number of key messages arising from 102 questionnaire responses from senior staff.

i.   There was a generally supportive and positive response towards college governance from senior staff respondents who usually attend governing body meetings.

ii.   There was variation in the arrangements for senior staff regarding guidance from either the principal or governors for attendance at governance meetings. In some cases the principal invited senior staff to attend governance meetings, in other cases there was a standing invitation from governors.

iii.   There was variation in the role of the principal regarding approval of reports drafted by senior staff prior to circulation of reports to governors. In some cases the principal reviewed reports before circulation to governors, in other cases, the report was passed directly to the clerk to the corporation for circulation to governors.

iv.   There was a very low level of professional development provided for senior staff in relation to governance e.g. the role of the governing body, report writing for governance meetings, or performing at governance meetings.

v.   There was variation in the degree of involvement of senior staff in planning annual governance workplans and agenda setting.

4 . Case example colleges[2]

4.1   The visits to example colleges highlighted some limitations to the operation of governance through:

- governors' lack of appropriate knowledge of colleges/education/ learning/learners by governors (as perceived by some senior staff);
- senior staff lack of knowledge of basic responsibilities of the Board;
- lack of mutual appreciation of respective roles (senior staff / governors);
- senior staff lack of involvement in governance planning;
- lack of feedback to senior staff from governors regarding written or verbal contributions at meetings; and
- considerable fuzziness in relations and expectations between senior staff and governors.

2: The term 'case example' college is used as the selected general further education or sixth form colleges colleges were simply chosen as examples where there is 'outstanding' or 'good' governance.

5. Recommendations

5.1 There are three headline recommendations as follows:

Achieve greater clarity of relations and mutual expectations between senior staff and governors

The agenda here requires the Board to express clear expectations regarding the style of written reporting in order to achieve informed governors who are focused on the impact of decision-making on the quality of teaching and learning.

There is plenty of evidence that governors receive too much paperwork for governance meetings, leading to scanning, selective report reading or no report reading. Senior staff and clerks recognise the problem of the quantity of governance paperwork but seem unsure about resolving what is a high-risk aspect of governance i.e. too much paperwork presenting a barrier to informed governors. Governors, senior staff and the clerk to the corporation need to work together to improve the quality and reduce the quantity of reporting.

The role of the principal vis-a-vis report writers needs to be clarified. Is the principal a senior staff report reviewer, quality assurer, gatekeeper, adviser, or none of these roles? Senior staff, governors and the clerk to the corporation need to be sure of decision making and responsibility in this key aspect of supporting governance.

There would seem to be greater scope for the clerk to the corporation to influence the standard and focus of reports for governance meetings. This maybe easier if the Board clearly expresses a desire to lift the quality of governance reporting, and where a defined advisory role for the clerk to the corporation is described.

Arrangements for attendance by senior staff at governance meetings was surprisingly fuzzy. Some senior staff were simply unsure whether they should be attending meetings or not, and if so, for what purpose: Professional development? Supporting the principal? To give extra detail if asked? To present a report?

Some senior staff described their experiences of governor development and strategic planning events for governors. In the development of an overall governance process by the governing body, formal governor meetings should be considered to be a part of a wider approach to governor involvement with the college and corporate decision making. Senior staff should have a clear and positive role to play in all aspects of governance.

Provide training for senior staff in aspects of governance

From the questionnaire responses, it is clear that appropriate training for senior staff in core elements of governance is not taking place.

There are three aspects of training that could provide a significant boost to senior staff confidence and performance

- foundations of governance (including the responsibilities of the governing body)
- contributing to governance meetings and other governance processes; and
- report writing for governance meetings

It may help to encourage senior staff to act as school governors or trustees for other organizations to gain an insight into playing the governor/trustee role.

Consider the employment relationship between senior staff and the governing body

As well as being part of a governance team of governors, senior staff and the clerk to the corporation, designated[3] senior staff are also directly employees of the governing body. Senior staff generally view the governing body as their employer. Recognising these acknowledged roles of employer/employee, the following actions would be supportive of good employer intentions by the governing body:-

- Improve communication between the governing body and individual 'designated' senior postholders

- Approve arrangements for the performance management of all senior staff

- Regularly monitor the implementation of the governing body's senior staff performance management scheme

- Periodically review 'designated' senior post status and its implications for the senior management team structure, the role of employer undertaken by the governing body, and the impact on leadership performance.

3: Governing bodies have the option of defining a senior post as a designated senior post, thus the governing body acts as direct employer of the postholder, rather than the Principal

APPENDIX

(i) Research methodology

The research methodology involved two phases

- PHASE 1 involved the use of a questionnaire which was circulated electronically to all 'senior staff' on the LSIS mailing list and it was also promoted to all AMiE (Association of Managers in Education and part of the trade union ATL) members. The questionnaire was available for completion from 5 June 2011 until 30 June 2011. In total 102 responses were received from senior staff who attended governing body meetings and participated in governance processes.

- PHASE 2 involved three case study colleges in northern England – a large general further education college, a medium sized further education college, and a sixth form college – in the period February/March 2012. At each college there were individual interviews with senior staff, the principal, the clerk, and experienced governors.

(ii) Three case example colleges

Visits to the three colleges in northern England took place in February and March 2012. All interviews were conducted (a) within the ethical framework of the University of Southampton (b) by two researchers who are very experienced in governance in the further education sector and were able to engage easily with the respective roles of all interviewees.

The most recent (self-assessed) grade for governance in each of the colleges (for 2010/11) is

College A : Outstanding/ College B : Good/ College C : Good

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