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IMPACT GROUP NEWSLETTER

Processes and Practices of Governing in Colleges of Further/Higher Education in the UK

Welcome to the latest edition of the Impact Group Newsletter. In this issue, I provide a summary of the recent Impact Group Webinar that was held in late April, and an overview of a workshop that I delivered at Scotland's College Development Network as their annual conference was moved online due to the implications of the COVID-19 working restrictions.

Webinar: 'Connecting the Board to the Learner' Wednesday 29 April 2020

Members of the research team introduced three key themes emerging in the research, and posed several questions under each to stimulate discussion.

1. Connecting the board to the learner: Is learning the core business of the college? Does learning get the attention it needs by the governing board? Do governing boards include sufficient individuals with expertise in learning?

The webinar participants discussed how learning was implied as being continuously present for governing boards whatever the agenda. However, it was noted that their connection with learning for some college governors was assisted by their membership on various committees.

"The board is so complex, it's very difficult to say that its main focus is purely on the students."

"A big part of a board is making sure it has the money to run. Making sure it has the buildings to have the students in."

Another participant reminded us that the role of the governors is to keep the college running effectively to facilitate learning activities and how the core business of the organisation (in the case of colleges – learning) is addressed through college governance practices. One participant reminded us that codes of college governance place learners and learning as central to college governance and also suggested that the role and contribution of student members were helpful ways to connect college governance to learning.

2. Discourses of the learner in colleges – how are learners understood in college governance practices? How are learners thought about by college governors? How are learners envisaged by college governors? How are learners talked about through the practices of governing? Is there an ideal college learner?

This topic included three ways in which the research team had observed learners being talked about and topics where learners appeared:

- Learner attendance and retention – both as a celebration but also, sometimes, as an area of concern

- Learner success – usually presented in data form, with senior staff interpretation and commentary

- Learners beyond learning – in the wider pastoral context and learner well-being

One webinar participant reflected that it is common for governing boards to consider learners in the form of data, but it was suggested that this is often the only way in which boards can meet the expectations of funding agencies, ministerial policies and legislation.

"It's maybe better just to recognise that everybody is different and then trying to make sure that the college is actually responding to those different needs."

In contrast to the notion of the 'ideal learner', webinar participants wished to recognise the diversity of learners and the inclusive practices of colleges. There was a reminder that governance was about ensuring the college was operating properly in its functions to be able to provide for all its students. There was insight that learner identity could change over time according to political preference – through policy determination, and through funding arrangements.

It was added that the regular learner voice at governing board meetings helped governors connect with learners.
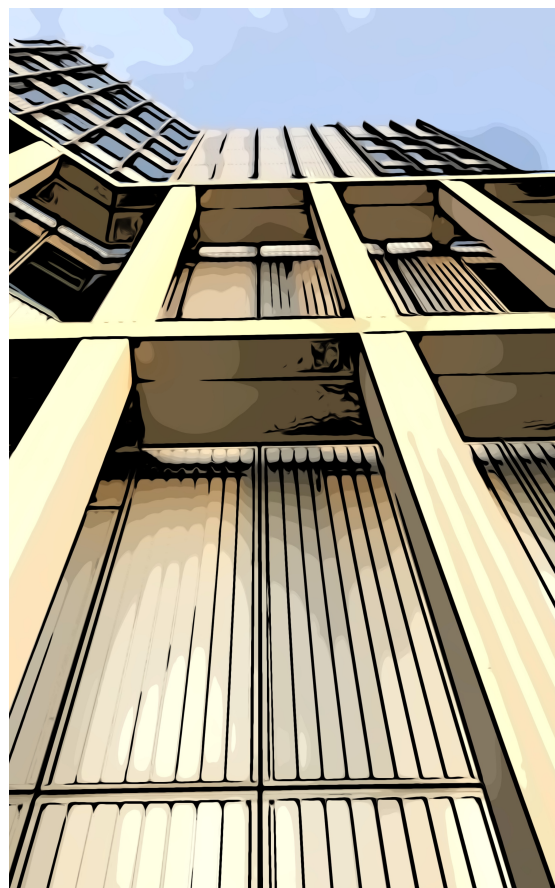
Also, systematic visits to courses by governors to meet learners and staff enhanced governor understanding of learner perspectives. The visibility and profile of learners at board away-days could also assist with an understanding of what it's like to be a student. The spotlighting of individuals at board meetings to celebrate good practice/ high achievement is also encouraged.

A participant reminded us that student support/welfare was an important matter for governing boards but, due to funding restrictions, this approach could create particular problems for their decision-making practices.

3. Learners as governors: What can the student governor bring to the board? How do student governors contribute to realising the strategic aims of the college? To what extent can the role of the student governor facilitate the governing board's consideration of learning?

The research team has observed a wide variation in the ways in which the student governor engages with the governing board. Some student governors did not contribute at all to board meetings, while others were very active contributors to board practices.

"I think also it's very important for your study to make the difference between the learner and the student union. Because they are very different things."

One webinar participant observed that, in Scotland, with the development of bigger, regional colleges has come the sabbatical student president and vice president. This has provided the opportunity for more engagement with the governing board and a more dedicated, even 'professional', approach to the role of the student governor.

"I think the student governor is extremely important. We try to make it easy for them to participate. But it's not easy because their job is being a student, it's not being a board member. So they're coming at an early time in their life and their career and their knowledge, and understanding governance and how the work is hard. "

Another participant recounted how challenging it was to find a 'good, able student' to come forward to commit to the required time and effort to be a student governor. Credit was given to the National Union of Students for student governor training and support, however, one participant stressed the distinction between learners and the student union, and it was also noted that student representatives from the student union tended towards welfare issues rather than learning matters.

The webinar concluded with recognition that so much of college governance is in response to policy and set procedure and of the difficulty that governing boards faced in balancing a range of 'client interests' with the required accountability. Members of the Research Team found the webinar to be very helpful for the exploration of data gathered and the development of understanding and are very grateful to the Impact Group members who contributed. If you were unable to attend the webinar (or would enjoy a re-run) you can read a full transcript here or watch a recording here.

Next Webinar : 'Governing Colleges at a Time of Pandemic' – Wednesday 17 June 2020 (5.30pm – 6.30pm)

Our next webinar will explore the dominant theme of the current time to consider how college governing boards are meeting their governance responsibilities in two themes:

- the usefulness of risk oversight and assurance, in the extreme case of a pandemic (Cate Watson)

- lessons from observing an on-line 'Teams' college governing board meeting (Ron Hill)

The majority of the webinar will be given to discussion about the experience of governing in recent months during lockdown and, now, thoughts about emerging from lockdown.

It would be very interesting to explore localised approaches (which could be college level and/or national level) to the pandemic, and also to share your thinking about what happens next for learners, staff and stakeholders associated with colleges. If you would like to join this seminar, please contact Nicki at nicola.blair@stir.ac.uk

Creative Governance for an Innovative Sector Thursday 30th April 2020

Scotland's College Development Network developed an innovative approach to a conference that had been scheduled for 29 April 2020 but, of course, was subsequently cancelled under the prevailing lockdown conditions.

I had been asked to lead a workshop titled 'Creative Governance for an Innovative Sector' and so this was converted to an on-line one-hour event on Thursday 30 April 2020 which attracted 70+ registrations and used Microsoft Teams for the link-up. A summary of the workshop content is provided below.

What is 'creative governance'?

The term 'creative governance' is not common in the governance literature. Indeed 'creative governance' might, on first encounter, seem to be the opposite of sound, responsible, deliberative governance. However, in my definition of creative governance, it is intended to convey the possibilities of governing in more productive and more effective ways by thinking about the processes and practices of governing. In essence, this is an exploration of the 'governance space' which for many is simply, in essence, one formal meeting after another. The intention with creative governance is to find new ways to release the governor voice and thus to gain

as much as possible from the latent governor talent. I outlined the main components of creative governing as:

- Meetings (formal and, of course, necessary for decision-making)
- Creative time – for exploring strategic questions and options
- Development – for imaginative link-ups with students, staff, stakeholders

In summary, the observed benefits of creative governance are:

- decision making in formal meetings improves due to better strategic discussion in creative time and better connectivity with key groups of learners, staff and stakeholders;

- formal meetings can be shorter and better focused;

- governor talent is maximised through differing opportunities for governors to participate, e.g., some are better at strategic problem solving in informal settings, some are better at face-to-face meetings with students, staff, stakeholders;

- greater awareness within the college of the membership and commitment of the governors;

- improved triangulation of assurance for governors, not just relying on reports to the governing board;

- better strategic thinking, by allocating more and regular time to thinking through strategic options.

"My presentation was based on my working experience in five colleges in England, all of which have adopted the principles of creative governance and are currently very strong colleges."

If you would like more information about this approach to governing, do get in touch on ron.hill@stir.ac.uk

Reminder:

Please remember that the scheduled Impact Group meeting in London on Friday 4 September 2020 has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation. However, we will be arranging more webinars for later in 2020.

With best wishes from the Research Team, Professor Ron Hill

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If you are not doing so already, follow us on Twitter @FE_Governing
for updates on any new content not appearing on our webpage.