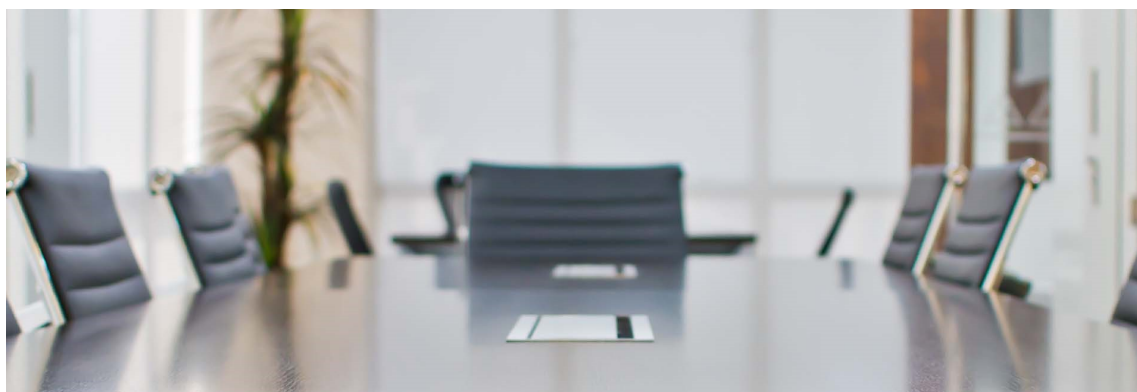




IMPACT GROUP NEWSLETTER

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



Governing colleges on-line

Professor Ron Hill, University of Stirling

Reflecting on recent months for the governing of colleges, governors, governance professionals and senior staff have 'risen to the challenge' of on-line alternatives to face-to-face meetings. From the initial concerns about lack of experience with on-line meetings and questions about how such events could occur on-line, governing bodies have succeeded in making on-line arrangements work. Whilst there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings – the atmosphere, the body-language, the collegiality, the engagement with college life – governors were able to fulfil their responsibilities at such a critical time.

In addition to formal meetings, strategic events have been held on-line to ensure the momentum of forward-thinking, innovation and responsiveness remains central to governing board activities.

At the time of writing (September) it seems that on-line college governing will continue for some time. Of course, governors will have to be careful to ensure that governing impact is achieved, rather than simply satisfy the on-line process.

Alongside the flexibility and dedication observed in governing boards to date are the challenges of governing within a demanding strategic context in each of the four nations, including:

- Covid 19 conditions
- Funding tensions
- Brexit-related policy
- Employment limitations and pressures
- Learner anxiety
- Staff stress and uncertainty

Impact Group Webinar

On Thursday 17 September 2020, the Impact Group started a series of seven meetings with each meeting reviewing one of the objectives of the project in the light of evidence acquired through our fieldwork.

Dates and themes for these forthcoming Impact Group meetings will be circulated shortly. The project objectives are as follows:

1. Reveal the practices that collectively constitute governing. This objective concerns the linguistic and material practices which collectively constitute board members 'doing' governance in board meetings.
2. Explore the processes that underpin the construction of 'strategic aims', 'outcomes' and 'quality of provision'. This is concerned with the development of strategy 'narratives' over time and asks, how do these narratives emerge and become stabilized or destabilized?
3. Investigate the ways in which boards are positioned within complex policy/external contexts, including relationships with governments, labour markets and employers. This concerns the external contexts within which boards operate in the 4 UK countries and how these are made visible in processes and practices of governing.
4. Consider how strategic decision-making addresses issues of quality of provision, including provision that is equitable, promotes social mobility, and addresses questions of inequality and social justice. If a key aim of FE is to promote social justice, how is this made manifest in the processes and practices of strategic decision-making?

5. Examine the relationship between boards, leadership and management. This concerns positioning of board members/senior management in relation to their respective roles in governance and leadership of colleges.
6. Consider sources of accountability (including Instruments and Articles of Governance; and inspection regimes) and how these influence processes and practices of governing boards. ie. How are sources of accountability reflected in the processes and practices of boards?
7. Reveal disjuncts between aspirations and enactments of governing. To what extent are normative 'codes of good governance' reflected in the processes and practices of governing boards?

The project objective reviewed recently was:

Explore the processes that underpin the construction of 'strategic aims', 'outcomes' and 'quality of provision'.

This is concerned with the development of strategy 'narratives' overtime and asks how do these narratives emerge and become stabilised or destabilised?

To assist the Impact Group, three stimulus sessions were provided as follows:

- The meanings of strategy and the possibilities for board member engagement with it (David James)
- Processes and practices of 'strategizing' in the boardroom: a case study (Cate Watson)
- Governance professionals: hidden strategic leader or humble backroom administrator? (Ron Hill)

David explained that 'strategy' and 'accountability' were central to the concerns of college governing boards. He explored meanings of strategy and highlighted the distinction between inward-facing accountability and outward-facing accountability and the contingent tensions therein.

Cate referred to the case study of one college where the emergence of strategy was observed over time as process and as practice. Cate discussed the nature of the language of strategizing, noting differences between formal and informal governing settings.

Ron referred to the single intention across the four nations to appoint a governance professional to support and guide the governing practice of college boards. However, evidence gathered through the study has revealed many versions of the governance professional. Some of the factors influencing the operation of the governance professional were highlighted and the various tensions that were inherent in the achievement of the role. Ron presented some tentative conclusions about the extent of the influence of the governance professional.

Impact Group members provided a range of very helpful contributions, confirming/expanding on the interpretations presented in the stimulus sessions.

The Impact Group was recorded. For anyone wishing to watch a recording of the 70-minute event, please download [here](#). You can contact emma.gilbert@stir.ac.uk should you encounter any issues with the download.

Project findings

Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker and Dr Jodie Pennacchia, University of Birmingham

We are currently preparing summary findings from the project, which we aim to present to each college during the coming months. We are focusing on a number of key issues that have arisen during the course of fieldwork during 2019, as listed below:

Who are governors?

Where does governing take place?

Role of the governance professional (the clerk or secretary)

Role and relationship between principal and chair of governors

Relationship between governors and Senior Leadership Team:

Which learners are the focus of attention in each country and why?

External agencies and their significance (such as regulators in different countries)

Management of risk

Destabilising events that affect colleges' work: high profile and day-to-day events

Mission and purpose

Accountability and strategy

NEW BLOG POST

Defining purpose, values and priorities: where do college governors come in?

Dr Jodie Pennacchia and Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker have been working together with Mary Kent, Independent Skills and Further Education Consultant, to prepare a blog post for the Independent Commission on the College of the Future website. You can read the blogpost here: <https://www.collegecommission.co.uk/blog>

Governance in the time of COVID-19

Dr Aileen Ireland, University of Stirling

As each facet of the education sector scrambles to tend to the ever-changing effects of COVID-19, each organisation has had to adopt creative ways in which to govern their responses to this disruption. The governance of further education has moved to online spaces in which to meet and debate; not only to govern the complex unpredictability of how to appropriately adhere to urgent and constantly shifting health regulations, but also to attend to the usual routine governance of further education institutions. As such, the processes and practices of FE governance have undergone a radical shift – meetings for which it would normally be mandatory to be held in person have quickly had to move to take place online.

Over the past few months, the research team has been privileged to be invited to observe several online meetings in each of our partner colleges. The shift to meeting online has provided us with a unique opportunity to explore how the processes and practices of governance have changed in the move to online spaces – to explore how this change of boards in action continue to conduct the processes that underpin the construction of ‘strategic aims’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘quality of provision’ while grappling with the uncertainties that the pandemic has presented. Part of this challenge has included the governors having to contend with new technologies as well as new processes of ensuring that the regulated processes of governance are being upheld. Because we have a wealth of observations of what constitutes ‘boards in action’ before the pandemic hit, we are in a good position to consider how these new online technologies and ways of working are mediating the governance of FE.

Our early analysis shows that the boards have adapted well to the online video meeting platforms, with most utilising the built-in functions to ensure that the meetings run smoothly. Many boards note that, by moving their meetings online, they have a much better attendance rate, and that the meetings seem to be shorter and issues are addressed more quickly. Some members commented that they were able to draw on the existing online learning platforms available to staff and students and that the expertise of college staff made the transition to online meetings work seamlessly. However, there was an indication in the early meetings of certain teething issues, where the boards sometimes struggled to find a platform that would be suitable for multiple types personal devices.

One other change we observed was that the contact between the executive and the board occurred much more frequently, often on a weekly and even daily basis, to keep members updated as the situation changed during the initial stages of the pandemic. This meant that the focus of the board meetings towards the end of the semester was placed on the response to the pandemic and planning for the coming academic year. However, by the end of the summer, the board meetings we observed had shifted to focus on assurance; first, that the quality of the student learning experience would be upheld, and also that the executive had acted appropriately to ensure that they had done everything that could be done to preserve the safety of the students and staff, and the financial viability of the college.



We have also observed that, while the Chairs strive to maintain the same rhythm of the in-person meetings, by keeping to time and closely monitoring the discussion, some of the more natural qualities of a round-table discussion are lost. For example, private conversations between members during a meeting, which often prompt open comments to the wider group, seem to have stopped, so some collaborative discussions may now be missed. While there is the opportunity for members to use the 'Chat' function in most online platforms, in our observations, these quiet tete-a-tetes were often a way in which the members could test out the waters to gain consensus before contributing to the wider group. This includes quiet discussions that normally take place between key board members, for example, the Chair and Principal/CEO and the Clerk/Secretary. There was some indication, however, that these conversations may have taken place in prior meetings, or via private messaging services, such as WhatsApp.

In addition to our observations, we have been able to collate several perspectives of the shift to online governance from Impact Group members who have taken part in our recent webinars. Some examples of changes in practice include an increase in the number of meetings between committee chairs to provide more frequent updates to board members, and the setting up of a separate risk committee to focus on the response to COVID-19. Some board meetings were initially cancelled to allow the Chair, CEO/Principal and Clerk/Secretary to meet prior to rescheduled board meetings. Other boards increased the number of board meetings to deal specifically with issues relating to COVID-19. Some members expressed that they liked not having to travel to participate in the meetings, and others also enjoyed participating in committee meetings during working hours rather than in the evenings. Others expressed that they felt the online meetings were more 'business-focused'. However, some indicated that they missed the 'human' element of meeting in person, particularly when members had to mute their microphones and video cameras to allow better internet connectivity when other members were speaking. In addition, some members felt that there may have been an element of 'information overload' with the initial increase in frequency of the updates, however, it was generally acknowledged that this was better than being ill informed of developments.

During one webinar, it was suggested that there is perhaps a need to develop a new protocol for governing online, and Ron suggested that governors might be interested in the ICSA Chartered Governors Institute document, [Good Practice for Virtual Board and Committee Meetings](#). We are hoping to develop our observations further and we welcome any feedback or comments you may have. You may also wish to view a recording of the webinar in which this topic was discussed, which is available [here](#).

Don't forget to keep up to date with our website:

<https://fe-governing.stir.ac.uk>

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



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