



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

## Welcome to the latest edition of the Impact Group Newsletter

As we start the process of analysing the data gathered from our participating colleges last year, we are producing a series of Project Briefings to highlight emerging themes and to stimulate discussion. You should already have received the first briefing, [‘The Management of Risk’](#). In this first briefing, we describe how our data has highlighted a number of interconnected themes emerging in the analysis, including the way in which risk is calculated and presented to the board, the conflation of risk and uncertainty, the social construction of risk, and the rise of the ‘risk industry’. Our analysis seeks to explore how these constructions of risk and their management contribute to the ‘conceptual structure’ of the organisation and acts as a model for governance itself.

For example, ‘dramatic failure’ in risk management by governing boards has been widely cited as a key factor in the 2008 financial crisis and, since then, measures have been put in place to strengthen this. However, a recent report by [Rajgopal et al. \(2019\)](#) concludes that, despite these measures, there is ‘no evidence that the intensity or effectiveness of risk oversight by the board has improved’ (p. 32). A sobering thought. The *effective* oversight of risk is one of the key areas we are looking at in the data. We would be interested to hear your thoughts about this – does strategic risk management contribute to college sustainability, for example? Further briefings planned include ‘Strategy/Away Days’ and ‘HE in FE’. Your response to any of these issues will be very welcome.

We look forward to hosting our first Impact Webinar on the 18th March 2020 at 5:30pm, exploring the ways in which the governing board ‘connects’ with learners and learning. We will shortly be sending out an invite to our next Impact Group meeting in September. In the meantime, if you would like to get in touch, you can email me at [ron.hill@stir.ac.uk](mailto:ron.hill@stir.ac.uk).

Professor Ron Hill

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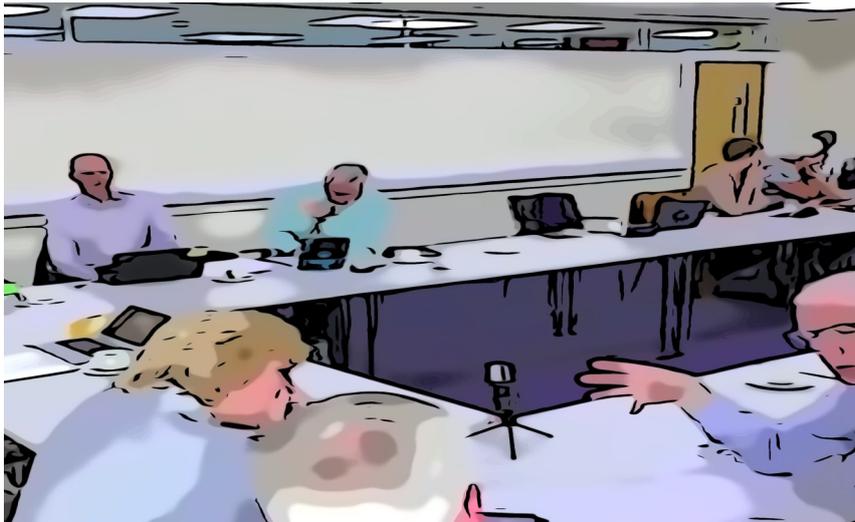


## An Update from Scotland and Northern Ireland

We are very pleased to announce that the project has now had two papers published. Both are available on the website. The first is a review of the literature on observation of boards, ‘Opening the ‘black box’: what does observational research reveal about processes and practices of governing?’ (Watson, Husband and Ireland, 2020). This has been published in the *Journal of Management and Governance*. In the paper we critically examine the findings of research which has observed boards in action, focusing on three emergent themes: (1) the extent to which empirical research supports the established theories in the field, particularly agency and stewardship theories; (2) what research says about ‘good’ and ‘effective’ governance and the relationship between them; and (3) the methodological and conceptual orientations which frame this research. We conclude with an agenda for taking the field forward in order to extend knowledge and to contribute to theory around governing.

The second concerns policy, ‘Further education in the UK: lessons from the governance of colleges in Scotland’, (Watson, Husband and Young, 2020). This appears in the *Journal of Education and Work*. This paper draws on policy documents and interviews with key policy actors to examine the ‘Scottish Approach’ to policy and the effects of this on the performance of the sector. While this has undoubtedly resulted in a more coherent system, it is argued that colleges have paid a price for this, foregoing much of their previous autonomy.

If you would like a copy of either papers please [email us](#) and we will happily send you a PDF copy.



## An Update from England

We have now completed fieldwork in our two English colleges. During this year we have observed and recorded a total of 12 corporation meetings and 7 other committee meetings. We have also undertaken 12 interviews and attended governor strategy events/away days for both of the colleges.

In September, Jodie Pennacchia attended a seminar at The British Academy on The College of The Future. The College of The Future is an independent commission, chaired by Sir Ian Diamond, dedicated to discussing what the college of the future will need to look like given the changes and challenges being faced in the sector. It will report next year. The event consisted of two panels. The first panel focused on the question: What should colleges deliver, how and for whom? The second addressed: What is the role of the college within local, regional and national systems and structures? Governing was notable for the lack of attention it received during the presentations, comments and questions at the event. We will be tracking the development of the commission and watching keenly to see how governing features in the final outputs.

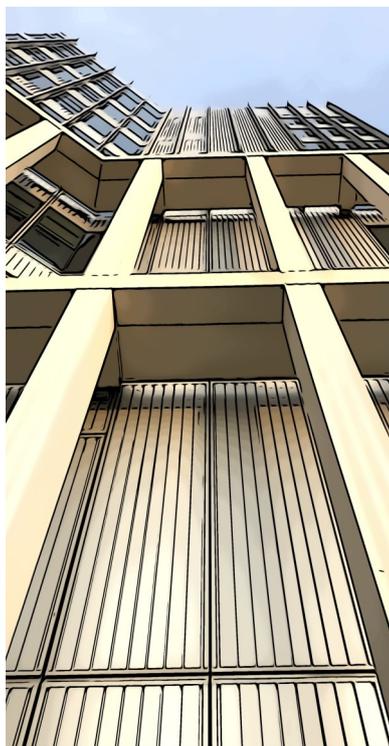
## *The College of The Future*

## An Update from Wales

All of the video data for the governing body meetings have been collected for the two Welsh colleges included in the study. Final interviews have now been arranged with the Chairs, the Governance professionals, and other key Governors in both colleges.

We are making good progress with our first major paper, based on the project data, which we plan to complete by the end of March 2020, and that we will submit to a journal such as the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.

We led on the development of a project-wide symposium proposal for the European Educational Research Conference, which takes place in August. The conference moves to a different European country each year, and, in 2020 will be held in Glasgow. All proposals are entered into a peer-reviewed competition, and we should know the outcome by April. In addition, Steve has been invited to attend the next meeting of the Wales FE College clerks' network in May, to discuss the research.



At the beginning of February, the project objectives, design and methods featured in the learning materials in a module on the Cardiff University Professional Doctorate and Masters in Social Science Programmes. There was a great deal of interest across the groups in our approach to video analysis, and in the ways in which governance can be conceptualised 'on the ground', in practice.



## Impact Activity

During this period, Ron Hill has been involved in the following work;

### **Monday 20 January 2020: *CDN Facilitating College Board Reviews in Scotland***

The purpose of this event, organised by the Scottish College Development Network, was to train a group of 'facilitators' to be able to support a college board self-review. Regular college governing board self-reviewing is a requirement of Scotland's Code of College Governance. Previously colleges have found it difficult to identify credible facilitative support for self-reviews and have therefore tended towards an audit of governance undertaken by the college's external auditors.

A key part of this new approach by CDN is helping a board to reflect on how it devised its strategic plan, how it implements its strategic plan and how it will evaluate its plan. Thus, 'planning' and shaping the direction of the college will be core to this self-review process. Colleges will not be required to use CDN facilitators, but it is assumed that the opportunity to gain a wider interpretation of governing board impact is expected to be attractive.

By the end of 2020 it might be possible to gain a considerable insight into college governance across Scotland as a result of the reports emerging from this exercise.

### **Thursday 23 January 2020: *AoC/ ETF Annual Conference for Governance Professionals (England)***

Amongst other matters, on the programme\* was reference by HMI Paul Joyce to the annual report from the Chief Inspector of Ofsted (Amanda Spielman) for 2019, which included reference to the observed mismatch between board strategic plans and local/regional labour market require-

ments. The 'relevance' of college provision already has a higher profile in the latest round of college inspections in England being undertaken from Sept 2019 onwards.

There is an irony in this observation: whilst governing boards of colleges in England might be considered to have the widest scope for strategic creativity of the four home nations, they appear to be unwilling to take risks on new curricula features. That risk could be very high given the investment needed for e.g. wind turbine engineering, with only limited knowledge of and a lot of hope for a positive student response. As good college financial health is paramount, some college governing boards might just be pleased to keep offering the same course programme year on year in the reasonable belief that what was popular with students last year will be popular again next year.



## Our Analytical Themes

Now that the data collection phase is complete, we have identified several analytical themes that we are currently taking forward across the project. These include themes relating to: governing board processes and functions (governing elsewhere/governing as audience, risk management practices/governing of risk); the influence of various roles within the governing board (the linguistic performance of the governance professional and staff responses to that role, contribution of committees to boards); the identity of the governing board and of the college (board/college mission, imagined communities and safeguarding how the board is conceived by others, the kind of organisation being constructed); and the ethos of the governing board (board learning, autonomy of governing bodies, meeting culture).

Importantly, we are considering how each of these themes are interlinked, particularly in relation to the wrap-around materialities and linguistic practices we observed. While these themes emerged out of the observations of each individual research team in the four countries, we are working together during the analysis process to identify related themes throughout the entire dataset. This will enable us to find similarities and contrasts between settings to reveal the linguistic and material practices that collectively constitute governing.

Don't forget to keep up to date with our website. The FE news updates may be of particular interest.

<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 appearing on our website.