

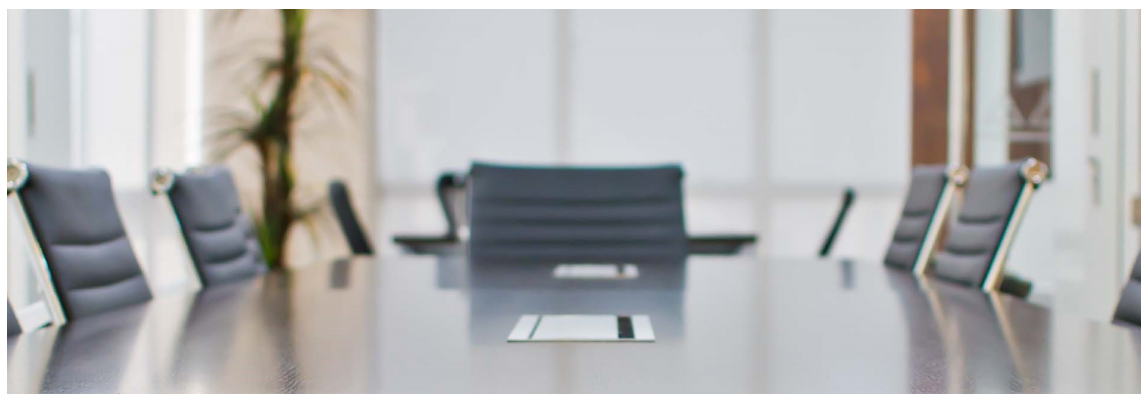
Issue 8

February 2021



IMPACT GROUP NEWSLETTER

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



Welcome to this edition of our ESRC Project Newsletter.

Dear Colleague,

This newsletter will include

- A reflection on aspects of recent college policy development in England – could there be wider implications?
- Considerations of impact from the ESRC project
- Details of forthcoming Impact Group meetings

Professor Ron Hill, University of Stirling

February 2021

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Leading Learning, Inspiring Success

A reflection on aspects of recent college policy development in England – are there wider implications?

◇ The White Paper

Towards the end of January 2021, the Secretary of State for Education in the U.K. Government issued a White Paper entitled 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth'.

Before getting into some of the detail of the paper it could be entertaining to notice the various expressions used in the White Paper for the learning which is expected to produce 'skills for jobs'. Here's a sample to whet your appetite ...

- Further education
- Post-16 technical education and training
- Post-16 skills
- Technical education
- Post-16 technical and higher technical education
- Institute of Technology
- Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
- Further education providers
- Adult education and training
- Lifelong learning

It was only in 2010 that the Learning and Skills Council ceased to operate after a life of ten years during which the limited LSC lexicon of expressions such as 'learner', 'skills' and 'provider' were de rigour. Thankfully, the 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper shows that we've moved on from bland, orthodox LSC language to richer, more aspirational expressions of vocational education and training.

◇ Strategic Planning Conversation

From research I was associated with at the end of the LSC period¹, it was interesting to hear from college governors about how they were trying to reach beyond the dominant LSC conditioning by 'creative governing', i.e., broadening student and staff horizons beyond the narrow LSC performativity requirements. After 10 years, the LSC language of 'learners' and 'skills' could have deadened the identity of colleges (known by the LSC as 'providers') and what colleges could offer and achieve, but we discovered a resilience amongst college governors to aspire to more and better.

Looking to the expectations of 'Skills for Jobs', college governors in England will need to embrace *agile* governing – in terms of both responsiveness and innovation. Governing boards of colleges will want to have appropriate board members to encourage and achieve the new possibilities and accountabilities. Following through the White Paper will mean a new relationship between each college board and the Department of Education. From next year, all colleges will have

'an annual strategic conversation which will provide an opportunity for their leaders to set out strategic objectives, risks, and opportunities, show case good practice, and discuss plans with government'. (para 121, Skills for Jobs)

That's going to be a significant conversation and brings college strategic planning to a higher status than some boards have been used to. It's worth noting, in passing, that this approach isn't new. The Further Education Funding Council for England used a similar style in the period 1993-2000.

¹Gleeson, D., Abbott, I. and Hill, R. (2010) Creative governance in further education: the art of the possible?

One of the consequences of the return to a governing board level planning emphasis (which is expected to be accompanied by longer funding predictability beyond 12 months) is to encourage governance professionals, i.e. the clerk to the corporation in English colleges, acting as strategic influencers, to plan for the development and approval of the necessary conversational material to meet government requirements. Given the annual cycle of conversations being established, the governance professional will also want to be incorporating evaluation processes for the college strategic plan into the annual governance agenda planner.

◇ **What is 'strengthened governance'?**

Paragraphs 124-128 are worth a read. We're informed straight away that 'excellent college governors and leaders are pivotal to delivering high-quality provision and enabling their workforce and learners to succeed'. To achieve the best everywhere, the White Paper wants to 'level up standards of governance'. Then the White Paper expectations become somewhat vague, pending further details, until the statement 'set new requirements for annual board self-assessment and regular external governance reviews'. This provision could improve the effectiveness of college governance. A newly published paper from the Chartered Governance Institute² presents useful advice on independent board evaluation, and the recent experience from Scotland's colleges should be particularly relevant here. In the coming months, a summary of the 2020-21 external reviews of all Scotland's colleges will be produced by the College Development Network to highlight strengths and suggest areas for improvement.

◇ **Concluding Remarks**

In many ways the White Paper – Skills for Jobs could herald exciting times for colleges. The White Paper raises the profile of colleges in general and also reminds us of the scope for further, adult, technical and advanced technical education. The provisions in the White Paper include a number of ideas which will need some trialling, e.g., employer leadership, access support for training and re-training, new support for teachers, improved college accountability, and greater autonomy for colleges. This could be a period of considerable change for governors, but it is possible that the role of the governing board could become more visible, more creative, and more rewarding for students, teachers and wider communities. I look forward to offering advice to the Department of Education shortly on the college governance elements of the White Paper.

Considerations of impact from the ESRC Project

We are reaching the stage in the ESRC project when we're thinking about drawing together the various forms of impact associated with the project. You may be aware that we've been publishing papers on aspects of the project along the way. Here's a summary of the papers already published and also details of papers submitted for review to date.

Published

[Further education in the UK: lessons from the governance of colleges in Scotland](#) – Cate Watson, Gary Andrew Husband & Helen Louise Young. Published online 13 February 2020.

[Opening the 'black box': what does observational research reveal about processes and practices of governing?](#) – Cate Watson, Gary Husband & Aileen Ireland. Published online 21 February 2020.

[Boards in action: processes and practices of 'strategising' in the Boardroom](#) – Cate Watson & Aileen Ireland. Published online 12 December 2020.

²The Chartered Governance Institute (2021) *Review of the effectiveness of independent board evaluation in the UK listed sector January ICOSA 2021*

Under review

Negotiating tensions between the high performing and socially just college in governing boards: a consideration of the discursive construction of youth. Currently under review. Jodie Pennacchia and Ann-Marie Bathmaker

Technologies of risk management and enactments of 'tone at the top' by governing boards. Currently under review. Cate Watson and David James

Prescriptions and practices of UK college governing: rethinking strategy and accountability. Currently under review. David James, Steve Garner and Gary Husband

Reviewing the strategic influence of governance professionals in U.K. colleges: acting as the translator of the conduct of conduct. Currently under review. Ron Hill, Aileen Ireland, Steve Garner

There are, of course, other ways to consider the impact of the research study so far. We recognise that, in general, the impact of educational research on policy and practice is often 'complex and indirect, rather than linear and straightforward'.³ This comment seems particularly apt in relation to the governing and governance of colleges.

Our research focus on the ways in which college governing boards influence the strategic development for colleges both [a] confirms that governing boards do influence college strategic direction, and [b] articulates how this influence operates through college governing processes.

The 'headline' issues emerging from our data from eight example colleges and our connectivity with the leading agencies and organisations in the college sector include:

- Who are the college governors
- How and where governing takes place, i.e., the nature of the governance space
- The role of the governance professional as translator of governing actions
- The respective roles and relations between the chair and the principal
- The relationship between governors and the college senior management team
- The conceptualisation of 'learners' by respective governing boards
- External agencies and their significance for colleges
- Strategic management of risk and assurance
- Responses to destabilising events that can affect college plans and performance
- The formation and interpretation of college mission and purpose
- The ways in which governing boards demonstrate accountability
- How governors influence, shape and determine college strategy
- Risk culture and development of the 'tone at the top'
- On-line college governing and the response to the pandemic

These themes are being addressed with the Impact Group through the webinar series focusing on the declared objectives for the research study. See below for the dates and themes for the remaining webinar meetings.

The research team has found the webinar events to be very helpful for placing research findings and our interpretations into context. Thank you to all who have participated so far, and please stay with the study for the remaining months. The study formally concludes in June 2021, but dissemination and impact work will continue well beyond this date.

³Bates, R. (2002) The impact of educational research: alternative methodologies and conclusions Research Papers in Education Policy and Practice

As someone who has been closely associated with this project, can you think of any ways in which the study has made a contribution to thinking, to practice, to discussion, to performance? This contribution might be at, e.g., personal level, team level, board level, wider than college level.

Please supply a paragraph describing the nature of the contribution from the project, and at what level has the contribution been achieved? Any further information would be very welcome, too.

Has the contribution been academic (intellectual contribution) and/or of a wider external nature?

Please send your replies to ron.hill@stir.ac.uk by Friday 26 February 2021.

Forthcoming meetings of the Impact Group (by webinar)

Thursday 18th February 2021 at 4pm

Objective 6: Consider sources of accountability (including Instruments and Articles of Governance; and inspection regimes) and how these influence processes and practices of governing boards, i.e.: How are sources of accountability reflected in the processes and practices of boards?

Tuesday 16th March 2021 at 4pm

Objective 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?

Thursday 20th May 2021 at 4pm

Objective 1: Reveal the practices that collectively constitute governing.

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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