
External Board Review

**Buckinghamshire College
Group**

Reviewer: Rob Lawson

January 2024

| Version | Approved by Board Reviewer | Date |
|---|----------------------------------|---------|
| Draft | | 4/1/24 |
| Draft for moderation | | 5/1/24 |
| Draft post moderation/shared with college | | 15/1/24 |
| Final (with Board endorsement) | | 4/3/24 |

Executive Summary

This External Board Review (EBR) considers principles from Codes of Governance (including the AoC Code of Good Governance), the Education Inspection Framework and the DfE’s guidance on EBRs.

The full report sets out the findings made against the three Board dimensions in the Framework with key evidence that informs those findings. The following table summarizes some of the headline strengths and areas for development:

| | STRENGTHS | AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT |
|---------------------|--|--|
| BOARD MAKE UP | A great balance of skills, experience and backgrounds – from both the private and public sectors | Address the lack of diversity on Board – this is being looked at |
| | Well networked with a genuine commitment to the college and area | Four committed and long-serving governors are standing down in 2024 – it’s important for the Board that suitable replacements are found quickly. |
| BOARD SYSTEMS | Effective committee structure | Explore how to continue improving the student voice |
| | Agenda and minute writing | Explore how to make Board/committee packs shorter and more accessible |
| BOARD RELATIONSHIPS | Professional working relationship between Board and SLT | Training and development could be improved, with training more aligned to Board needs |
| | Challenge and scrutiny are strong | Increase the opportunities for governors to meet students |

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that there is strong evidence that the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts positively on college strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes.

Thanks and appreciation is recorded to all those who have engaged in this Review. Particular thanks to Anna Smith, Director of Governance at Buckinghamshire College Group (BCG), who worked so hard to ensure that arrangements have been smooth and efficient.

Our Approach

This External Board Review was undertaken by Rob Lawson between October and December 2023, after an initial meeting in September 2023. Rob previously carried out several reviews of college Board effectiveness as part of the DfE pilot programme. He then carried out an audit of 23 such reviews on behalf of the FE Commissioner Shelagh Legrave. Rob is the Chair of Hull College and a National Leader of Governance appointed by the office of the FE Commissioner.

Rob has used a framework comprising of three Board areas – Make-up; Systems and Interaction.

Evidence has been drawn from a variety of sources, some published and others provided by BCG, and triangulated to draw findings around an overarching question for each Board area:

1 Make-up

What skills, knowledge, mindset/attitude do members of the Board possess currently and what additional attributes would allow the Board to better meet its objectives?

2 Systems

Does the current Board processes and structures equip members to optimally engage with each other to deliver the objectives effectively, with transparency and in compliance with regulations?

3 Relationships

Does the Board's culture and interactions between Board members allow for the most effective deployment of individuals and collective skills to meet the College's goals?

Overall Board effectiveness focuses on the core functions of the Board as a Governing Body and the extent to which the board culture delivers nine key outcomes which characterize highly effective boards –

Integrity: Commitment to Nolan Principles and the AoC Code (or relevant code)

Strategic: Setting a clear direction and objectives for the organisation

Quality: Progress and achievement of students effectively monitored and scrutinised

Financially Sound: Robust financial system and processes

Responsive: The board engages and has positive partnerships within the local community

Collectively Accountable: Responsibility for strategy and decisions and compliant with regulations

Inclusive & Diverse: Diversity and inclusion are central to decision-making and impact is measured

Reflective: Board performance and impact are thoroughly reviewed

Student Experience: Student voice is valued and student experience and safeguarding are central to decision-making

Rob met Chair Martin Tugwell, CEO/Principal Jenny Craig and Director of Governance Anna Smith in September 2023 for an initial scoping meeting at which the process of the review was outlined and agreed. A general review of governance at the college was agreed, and Rob was also asked to look at progress against recommendations outlined in the Review of March 2021 – namely the move from Carver model to a traditional committee structure and making the student voice louder.

Review Process

The Review processed involved:

- An online survey/questionnaire sent out to governors in early November;
- A desk-top analysis of key college documents, policies and minutes of meetings;
- Attendance and observation at a Board meeting and four committee meetings;
- Interviews with seven Board members, the Chair, the CEO/Principal and the Director of Governance

Survey:

All governors who were sent the survey responded (this did not include the CEO/Principal, the two newly-appointed student governors or new governor Cathie Prest).

Desktop analysis:

Time was spent looking at a wide range of documents including: policies; the strategic plan; governor CVs and profiles; meeting schedules; the latest skills audit; the schedule of business; corporation committee membership; committee and Board minutes; an internal assessment report and induction documents.

Attendance and observation:

Meetings attended:

- Remuneration– Tuesday, November 7
- Finance – Wednesday, November 13
- Curriculum – Wednesday, November 22
- Audit – Wednesday, December 6
- Corporation – Wednesday, December 13

Interviews:

- Jenny Craig, CEO/Principal – October 9
- Anna Smith, Director of Governance – October 23
- Tim Marshall, governor – October 23

-
- Eddie Weiss, Chair of Audit – October 23
 - Martin Tugwell, Chair – October 23
 - Nick Bevan, Chair of Search Committee – October 24
 - David Bainton, Vice Chair – October 24
 - Ian Greggor, Chair of Estates committee – October 25
 - Ian Harper, Chair of Quality, Curriculum and Students – October 26
 - Cathie Prest, new governor and Vice Chair of Quality, Curriculum and Students, December 13

An initial findings meeting was held on Monday, December 18 between Rob, Chair Martin Tugwell, CEO/Principal Jenny Craig and Director of Governance Anna Smith.

A draft report was shared with the Corporation Chair and governance professional on January 4 to check for factual inaccuracies before being sent for moderation. ***Following moderation by National Leader in Governance Heather Cross, a final report was sent to the college in advance of being presented to the Board's Away Day on Wednesday, January 17.***

An action plan, developed and agreed by the college, can be found at the end of this report. An analysis of the responses to the survey can also be found in the appendices.

Board Make up

Background

Buckinghamshire College Group (BCG) was created in October 2017 through a merger between Aylesbury College and Amersham and Wycombe College. BCG has campuses in Aylesbury, Amersham and High Wycombe, where plans for a new campus are being developed.

It is the only college situated in the county. During 2022-2023 there were 5,565 students and Apprentices on programmes. 2,808 students were on education programmes for young people, 1561 on adult learning programmes, 519 following apprenticeship frameworks and standards programmes and 377 learners were in receipt of high needs funding.

At its last full Ofsted inspection, the college was graded Good (November 2021) and the college's finances are graded Good by ESFA.

The Board adheres to the AoC Code of Governance, and this is reaffirmed annually. Corporation and committee self-assessment is also conducted annually, as is a skills audit.

Knowledge and Experience

The board consists of 13 independent governors, the CEO/Principal, two student governors and two staff governors, and is led by a relatively new but well-respected and committed Chair, Martin Tugwell.

Board members include: the Chief Executive of Transport for the North (BCG's Chair); the Head of Organisational Development and Workforce at a local NHS Trust; a partner in the banking and financial services team at a nationally respected law firm; a former advisor for the FE Commissioner (and senior FE leader); the finance director at a global engineering company; a business transformation specialist; a former commissioner at the Criminal Cases Review Commission (and a former member of Lloyd's Corporate Finance panel); a director of estates at an NHS Trust; the chief executive of two educational organisations; a financial consultant (who left his role during the review process); a director of a screen/media training company; a retired university pro-vice chancellor, a former senior director from the media industry and a former FE Principal.

Responses to the survey/questionnaire recorded governors who had very recently joined the board to two governors being on the Board for nine years (a year beyond the AoC's recommendation of a maximum of eight years, but approved by the Board due to exceptional circumstances, aligning the Vice Chair role term and retaining key apprenticeships expertise and local partnership working).

The survey also showed all governors are over 35 years of age with the majority being 45-65. One governor is 92 – he is standing down from the Board in Spring 2024. The Board appointed two student governors in September 2023, 18 and 19 years of age, who were not included in the survey due to their short time on the Board.

The Board has a majority of male governors (65 per cent). No members identified as having a disability. The majority of the Board are white, with one member identifying as Asian. There is a lack of diversity on the Board in terms of gender, ethnicity and disability (the student body has a large percentage who identify as disabled, but no governor identifies as disabled). The Board is aware of its lack of diversity and is addressing the issue through recruitment to replace four long-standing governors who stand down in Spring 2024. The search committee has set itself a target to recruit a governor who identifies as disabled to fill one of these vacancies. (In interview, several governors stressed the need to recruit governors with a financial background to make up for the experience lost when the four step down).

However, there is a diversity of thought on the Board, with the range and depth of experience giving the Board an ability to explore and analyse issues with knowledge and though different perspectives. Governors are confident in a Board environment and clearly feel able to ask questions and make points in meetings.

Skills

A Board skills audit completed in May 2023 and presented to the search and development committee on June 7 shows a wide range of skills and experience, as you'd expect from the make-up of the Board as outlined above.

The Board has significant experience in areas of strategic importance to the college and reflects areas of further planned development, such as healthcare and the screen/media sector.

The skills audit also reflected changes on the Board since the previous skills audit, received by the search and development committee in September 2022. This is evidence of the Board using the skills audit to adjust the make-up of the Board to reflect the college's future needs.

For the skills audit, Board members were asked to judge their own skillset through rating specific areas of expertise 1-4, with 1 being 'strong agreement.'

The vast majority of scores recorded were '2's, in answer to statements such as:

- Have governing experience in education or in a different sector
- I am/have been chair of a board or committee

-
- I have experience and expertise in developing a strategy
 - I am aware of how the College is funded and what the funding is spent on
 - I can interpret budget monitoring reports and ask relevant questions
 - I understand how my governing board engages with stakeholders – students, parents, staff and the wider community – and how this informs decisions
 - I know how to build the knowledge I need to be effective in my governance role
 - I can build positive, collaborative relationships with members of my board
 - I feel able to speak up if I am concerned about non-compliance and unethical behaviour **(scored 1)**
 - I can identify when independent, expert advice may be required **(scored 1)**
 - I have knowledge, experience or training that will help me to promote diversity and inclusion
 - I understand how to use relevant data and insight to identify and resolve issues relating to inequality

Elsewhere in the comprehensive audit, governors describe their own skills and experiences relevant to their roles as governors. This area of the audit is evidence of the depth of the Board's business experience; its depth of experience in the health and social care sector; governors' HR experience; estates experience; film and media experience; HE experience; experience in the area of apprenticeships, and its collective experience in law and finance. Judging by the audit, the Board looks very short of education experience, particularly in FE – however, the addition of Cathie Prest, a former advisor for the FE Commissioner (and senior FE leader) – since the audit was completed has addressed this weakness.

There is an excellent mix of governors with public and private sector backgrounds and many governors considered themselves to be 'senior managers' which gives the Board an impressive capacity to think – and act – strategically and understand the important dividing line between SLT and the Board.

Further evidence of the wide range of skills and experience was clear through CVs sent through with other documentation for desktop review – and through the interviews completed.

Governor profiles are available on the college's website -

<https://www.buckscollegigroup.ac.uk/about-the-college/corporate-information/governance/membership>

This area of the website includes key governance documents, a meeting timetable, minutes of previous Corporation and committee meetings. This is a good practice and is evidence of an open and transparent approach to governance.

Conclusions

The Review has identified that the Board currently has an excellent and impressive mix of skills, experience and perspectives.

The following table summarises headlines:

| BOARD MAKE UP | |
|--|---|
| STRENGTHS | AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT |
| 1. A great balance of skills, experience and backgrounds – from the private and public sectors | 1. Audit committee is effective, but needs more members, particularly when three current members stand down |
| 2. Good diversity of thought | 2. Address the lack of diversity on Board – this is being looked at |
| 3. Well networked with a genuine commitment to the college and area | 3. Four committed and long-serving governors are standing down in 2024 – it’s important for the Board that suitable replacements are found quickly. |

Board Systems

Background

The Board has moved on successfully from its Carver model and now operates a traditional committee structure – with audit (3 annual meetings); remuneration (2 and more if needed); search and governance (2 meetings and more if needed); estates (as required but a major capital programme has led to 3 meetings in the last year); finance and resources (4 meetings) and curriculum, quality and students (3 meetings). Corporation meets four times a year, with two away days (used to discuss strategy among other items) also planned annually.

The estates committee comprises eight members, including the Chair, a governor with vast estates experience, the Principal and the Chief Operating Officer.

A calendar of meetings is scheduled well in advance and the Director of Governance holds an in-depth and detailed schedule of Board business (the business and meetings schedules are aligned).

The Board uses Teams to distribute papers which are uploaded at least a week before meetings. While not the best governance platform available, Teams appears to work effectively and there were no complaints from governors about its efficiency. The reviewer's knowledge of using Teams for a governance function is limited, but there are several governance specific platforms highly regarded in the sector, including Cloud-based systems such as Decision Time.

Findings

A corporation self-assessment review for 2022-23 (approved by the Board at the December meeting) was completed – this included evaluation of Corporation and committee meetings, and also listed suggested improvements for 2023-24.

The corporation self-assessment review looked at the Board's principal responsibilities as laid out in the AoC Code of Governance (the old version) and then governors graded how the Board had discharged these responsibilities. The vast majority of governors either fully agreed or partially agreed that the Board had discharged the ten principal responsibilities – no governor disagreed.

Other areas covered in the self-assessment included the link governor scheme (very positive, showing strong support); if the Board and its committees are effective in helping governors to support their duties (91 per cent fully agreed, 9 per cent partially agreed) and whether governors felt able to support and challenge SLT (again 91 per cent fully agreed, 9 per cent partially agreed).

Governors who responded to the survey collated to compile the 2022-23 self assessment report felt the Board's strengths, in context of the ten responsibilities outlined by the AoC Code, were:

-
- Responsibility No. 1 – Formulate and agree the mission and strategy including defining the ethos of the college;
 - Responsibility No. 2 – Be collectively accountable for the business of the College taking decisions on all matters within their duties and responsibilities;
 - Responsibility No. 3 – Ensure there are effective underpinning policies and systems, which safeguard students and facilitate the student voice;
 - Responsibility No. 6 – Adopt a financial strategy and funding plans which are compatible with the duty to ensure sustainability and solvency of the College;
 - Responsibility No. 7 – Ensure that effective control and due diligence takes place in relation to all matters including acquisitions, subcontracting and partnership activity;
 - Responsibility No. 10 – Ensure that there are organised and clear governance and management structures and that there are regular reviews of governance performance and effectiveness.

Areas of improvement suggested by two or more governors included:

- Fostering exceptional teaching and learning – the suggested actions for improvement were *Corporation to maintain strategic oversight through the Curriculum, Quality and Students Committee’s scrutiny of progress against the aims set out in the Exceptional Learning Experiences Strategic Plan. Governors are encouraged to continue to participate in the refreshed governor link scheme and to experience teaching and learning first-hand within the classroom as appropriate.*
- Oversee the design of a robust environmental sustainability strategy and adopt standards and frameworks which enable effective implementation – the suggested action for improvement was *Corporation to maintain strategic oversight through the Estates, Finance & Resources and Audit & Risk Committees’ scrutiny of progress against the aims set out in the Financial Sustainability Strategic Plan.*
- Meet and aim to exceed its statutory responsibilities for equality, diversity and inclusion – the suggested actions for improvement were *Equality, diversity and inclusion to remain a high priority for consideration in all decisions of the Corporation and its committees. Governors are encouraged to support and challenge on this. In terms of diverse representation, the college is already committed to increasing diversity in the Board and leadership team composition through succession planning.*

An appendix to the self-assessment report included results of governors’ evaluation of Corporation and committee meetings. (Governors are asked to evaluate every meeting at their conclusion, a good practice ensuring any issues or potential issues are addressed immediately). The results of this evaluation were very positive, and the process a good example of an open and transparent culture and a Board intent on improving.

The Chair, appointed in July of this year, has already completed 1-2-1 review meetings with every committee Chair and some governors – the Chair’s performance is assessed through annual questionnaires which form the basis of a report that goes to the Board through the search and governance committee. The Director of Governance’s performance is reviewed annually by the Chair.

Board members are heavily involved in setting strategies and strategic direction – the Board signed off the new strategic plan (see above) in July of this year, and governors (both in interviews and through the survey) said they were involved at every stage of development.

There is an effective governor link scheme in place which increases Board knowledge and improves triangulation. Link governors are expected to go into classrooms at least once a year. Governors also complete regular classroom walks and several attend student lunches which are organized twice a year.

Analysis of in-year data also improves effective triangulation. However, through the review survey and through the reviewer's 1-2-1 interviews, governors expressed a desire to meet more students and more members of staff in order for them to increase their knowledge of the college and their understanding of the experiences of staff and students.

Risk is well understood and scrutinized by the Board and individual governors. There is one overall strategic risk register which is overseen and updated by the audit committee – other committees are not responsible for their risks. The risk register is presented to the audit committee and main Board at least twice a year for discussion.

A particularly good example of scrutiny of risk was observed at the full board meeting on December 13. A detailed discussion explored the risk of increasing costs around the development of a new campus at High Wycombe. Governors wanted to understand the risks involved with the development. The probing was in-depth and knowledgeable, and the scrutiny was accepted in a mature and sensible way – governors received the reassurance they were after, but only after several governors asked a range of good questions.

Further examples of good scrutiny and challenge were observed at audit committee (around whether the college management team was too 'comfortable' with the college's internal auditors and around succession planning on the committee) and at the curriculum, quality and students committee (around the low level of work experience placements and the 'AI assistant' Teachermatic).

In interview and through the reviewer's 1-2-1 meetings, governors expressed a satisfaction with the college's approach – and their understanding – of risk. All of the governors who responded to the survey said the Board could consider key risks and decide on associated actions.

Governing Documents and Arrangements

All key documentation relating to governance practice is in place and well written, and there is evidence of the monitoring of compliance. Governors interviewed all praised the professionalism of

the popular, widely-respected and experienced Director of Governance. At the December 13 Board meeting, the Director of Governance gave her own report, which included approval of the 2022-23 self-assessment review, approval of the audit committee self-assessment review 2022-23, ratification of confidential SPH reviews and a governor engagement record. The Director of Governance report is a fixture on the Board's agenda – a welcome innovation that reflects the importance of the role and how BCG's values the DoG's contribution.

Cover sheets for Board and committee meetings are exemplary and contain areas such as: actions required; associated strategic goals; associated risks; context and a very helpful key areas of focus section which governors in interview said was a helpful prompt with information which could help shape questions and discussions. One other area which could be added is whether the paper/agenda item has already been considered at committee stage.

A rolling 'actions arising from corporation meetings' section is presented at Board meetings, and includes date the action was raised, the action, the action owner and the current position. This ensures governors are kept up to date with 'live' issues. It was clear from the report that issues are closed down and not just 'kicked down the road.'

Some governors interviewed said Board papers were too long and contained too much detail, making it too time consuming to read and understand papers before meetings. However, the reviewer didn't think the papers for meetings he attended were excessively long – and the point about governors overburdened with papers is a sector-wide issue.

Governors may want to consider the wider use of RAG-rated pie charts as an easier way to present key information in a more accessible way. These charts are particularly helpful in immediately identifying areas of concern, particularly in financial reports. The use of RAG-rated appendix in a KPI report to the full board on December 13 is evidence that BCG do use this way of conveying information – and also its effectiveness.

Meetings

Committees attended – and the Corporation meeting – were well chaired, in a friendly, welcoming environment which encouraged contributions. All meetings observed were well paced. In the 2022-23 Corporation self assessment report, all governors who responded to the survey said corporation and committee meetings were well chaired – and that decisions were 'arrived at in an appropriate manner.'

Governors interviewed and those who responded to the survey said the Board conducts its business thoroughly and professionally.

BCG's overall attendance is at the sector average – 83 per cent, against a sector average of 82.64 per cent.

All Corporation meetings are in-person with committee meetings available virtually.

Governors attend meetings well prepared and in the meetings observed had clearly read the papers. They have a healthy curiosity about the college and the student body.

Although some live and work outside BCG's footprint, governors know the locality well and show a genuine commitment to the college. The Chair lives within walking distance of BCG's Aylesbury campus, and one governor said in interview: "Knowledge of local community is a strength, governors are pretty well aligned and plugged in with the local community."

The Board appears well networked into the local community (as evidenced in the survey, internal skills audit and the 1-2-1 interviews conducted by the reviewer) and has good links into the local business community. For instance, governor Ian Harper sits on the LEP Skills Advisory Board, the CEO/Principal sits on the LEP Board and several governors are linked into the influential Bucks Business First group.

The Board is closely involved in strategy and strategic direction – governors attend and contribute to strategy workshops and meetings, and two strategic planning days a year. The survey suggested governors were satisfied with their level of contribution to the new five-year (2023-28) strategic plan, Beyond Ambition. During interviews governors said they felt able to contribute to the vision and values of the College, and were satisfied that they helped represent the views of students and staff when the new strategic plan was being developed.

Students

Two new student governors have recently been appointed to the Board, but several governors interviewed said more meetings with students were needed to understand their experiences in more depth. Respondee to the review survey said the quality of the student experience was central to decision making, but one governor stated they wanted to meet more students.

Through interviews, governors said they met students at Open Days, college performances, awards nights and classroom walks. They also said they'd met students at lunches arranged at strategy/away days and on other occasions.

There's no doubt that the student voice is louder at BCG than it was when the 2021 EBR was completed, but more could still be done, and governors are still seeking more opportunities to meet students.

Transparency

Minutes and agendas of full Corporation and committee meetings are available in an open governance area of the college's website

(https://www.buckscollegegroup.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=822:meetings&catid=55) This area also includes a helpful list of meetings.

Documents including the college constitution; the AoC Code of Governance (old version); a code of conduct for corporation members and a complaints policy can be found in the same area, as can profiles of governors. This is clear evidence of an open and transparent approach to governance, and a Board which acts with integrity. A further level of transparency would be added with the uploading of the latest corporation self-assessment report.

Governors interviewed said minutes were sent out in good time, with little delay to receipt following meetings. Minute taking is thorough and provides the external reader and stakeholders with transparency in the conduct of the Board.

Evaluation

BCG is particularly strong on evaluating the governance function. Each committee evaluates itself annually (as well as at the end of each meeting), as does the Corporation. The latest annual reports were presented to the December Board meeting.

The Board self-assessment was particularly thorough - governors were asked to complete an online survey considering whether during 2022-23 they were satisfied that the Corporation fulfilled the ten principal responsibilities of Good Governance set out in the AoC's Code of Good Governance.

In addition to the responsibilities set out in the code the survey also sought governors' views on three additional areas: the link governor scheme; whether reports to Board and committees are effective and whether they feel able to provide sufficient support and challenge.

Views on the Governor Link Scheme were very positive with comments showing strong support; 92 per cent of governors fully agreed executive reports helped them exercise their duties, and eight per cent partially agreed; 77 per cent agreed they felt able to provide sufficient support and challenge – 23 per cent partially agreed.

The college's latest SAR (2022-23) was approved at the December Board meeting, where it was stated that the SAR had been moderated by (among others) a panel of governors and a Director of Quality from another college. The SAR concluded the college's provision was 'Good.' It gave the same grading for the college's leadership and management, stating: *'Leaders and governors have worked*

collaboratively throughout the year to develop an ambitious refreshed strategic plan with student success, inclusion and collaboration at the heart.'

The comprehensive SAR listed areas of development (including apprenticeships and attendance) and a detailed QIP, which included sections for target impact and milestones.

Training & Development

Although five governors said through the review survey that training needed to be improved, only two flagged it as an issue in interviews. Others believed they were given sufficient training and development opportunities.

The Director of Governance organises training for governors, at their request, at her suggestion or after Chair 1-2-1s have identified a need. Most training is delivered online, some by external parties such as AoC or ETF. Internal training covers areas such as safeguarding and Prevent, while external training includes subjects such as finance and curriculum development.

Induction documents were provided to the Reviewer, which included the strategic plan, college constitution, code of conduct, code of good governance, committee membership and structure, a governor role description, committee dates and the latest Ofsted report. A governor handbook, incorporating many of these documents, is currently being pulled together.

Training and development is an area which could be improved.

Conclusions

BCG's board structure works well and provides the requisite platforms and opportunities for oversight, challenge and scrutiny.

The following table summarises headlines:

| BOARD SYSTEMS | |
|---|---|
| STRENGTHS | AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Effective committee structure2. Agenda and minute reporting3. Processes of governance and evaluation4. Cover sheets a particular strength5. The performance of a highly-effective Director of Governance | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Explore how to continue improving the student voice.2. Explore how to make Board/committee packs shorter and more accessible3. Governors to help shape an environmentally sustainable strategy4. Training and development could be improved |

Board Relationships

Background

The interaction observed between governors and SLT is respectful, courteous, good-humoured and mature. There is a good degree of scrutiny and challenge, but challenge is made in a positive and respectful manner and is received well by SLT.

Similarly, there appears to be good working relations between Board members, who seem to get on well with each other. Chairs work hard to ensure an inclusive, welcoming culture at Board and committee meetings.

Challenge

These observations were backed up by responses in interviews, with governors agreeing that challenge and scrutiny was at the appropriate level and that challenge was constructively and positively received by SLT.

A good example of the latter was cited by two governors – at a Curriculum and quality meeting, Cathie Prest challenged the exec team on data presentation. Cathie (vastly experienced in the FE sector) then worked with the relatively new Vice Principal C&Q on preparing reports for the committee, the SAR and QIP.

At the finances and resources meeting of November 13, another governor (Chris Oakley) challenged the exec team on the use of LSIF funding received and asked for more detail of the LSIF expenditure. This challenge led to the Principal giving detail on key LSIF projects at the December Board meeting, at which the Chief Operating Officer also detailed amount allocated to each area.

Another challenge not observed but reported to the reviewer was around performance related pay (PRP). Historically a PRP scheme had been in place for senior post holders and executive directors. The remuneration committee challenged this in May 2022 with support from the Principal. In November 2022 it was recommended the scheme be terminated and a 'one team' approach be adopted. The Board supported this and approved termination of the scheme impacting in all staff receiving college pay awards equally.

These examples show the quality of challenge and the impact BCG governors have had on the college.

In interview, governors said they felt most challenge happened at committee level, but that governors also felt able to scrutinize at Board too.

There were several good examples of challenge at the four committee meetings attended - remuneration – Tuesday, November 7; curriculum – Wednesday, November 22; finance – Wednesday, November 13 and audit – Wednesday, December 6. These included a challenge around EDI targets, and the issue of student voice at remuneration; challenge around staff retention and a challenge around staff surveys at finance; a challenge around measurable QIP targets, and a challenge around how safeguarding at BCG compares to other FE colleges at curriculum, and scrutiny of the issue of committee membership and selection of internal auditors at audit committee.

However, governors not on the specific committees mentioned above and therefore not party to the discussions felt able to further challenge and discuss when these items came before full Board on December 13.

The impressive make-up of the Board means collectively governors have the skills, confidence and experience to challenge well. The challenge for the Chair and the Board is the recruitment of suitable replacements for the four hugely experienced and committed Board governors who stand down over the coming months.

There was no evidence of groupthink, with evidence of diversity of thought in committee and the Board meetings attended.

There was evidence of a high level of triangulation – through committees and a well-established Link Governor scheme. However, as stated previously, several governors interviewed said they did not meet enough students and would like more opportunities to talk to them. The Board might want to consider organizing student lunches which governors could attend and speak directly to students, increasing their knowledge of the student experience, and adding to the Board’s ability to triangulate.

The triumvirate relationship between Principal/CEO, new Chair and Head of Governance appears strong, despite the Chair only being appointed in summer last year (July 2023). Monthly triumvirate meetings are held, with more added if and when needed. Outside of these meetings there is regular contact between Chair/DoG and Chair/CEO.

The Director of Governance is an asset to the Board and is well respected by governors and the SLT. She is very well organized, her minutes are well written and there appears to be good and open communication with individual Board members.

Perceptions – questionnaire responses

The Board unanimously agreed that it observes the Nolan Principles although some members felt that they only listened to students and staff to some extent (three). The quality of the student experience was central to the Board's decision making (all agreed) and governors had a good understanding of the local economy and valued the input of local employers and other stakeholders (all agreed). Governors also all agreed they have robust financial management.

Two governors were unsure about EDI being a clear consideration in Board decision making. They all understand the responsibilities as a Board to safeguarding and Prevent. The majority agreed the Board had the skills for organisational change and understanding and questioning financial reports, making financial plans and setting budgets, and consider learner needs.

However, two governors were unsure about considering key risks.

Five governors felt there could be some improvement in their induction process and training and development for their role. (These opinions were echoed in the interviews with particular criticism of the ETF induction course).

The majority agreed the opinions of all governors were welcomed and valued and there were good opportunities to scrutinise proposals and ask questions. The governors operate strategically and the operation of the college is clearly delegated to executives.

Two governors felt the relevant skills of governors could be better used in decision making. All believed the Board works well with Principal/CEO and governance professional.

When asked about what works well the comments were overwhelmingly positive. Comments included 'an ability to ask questions' with 'trust and respect' when 'different perceptions were respected' and a high quality of discussion.

When asked what doesn't work so well the E-learning from ETF was commented on; the diversity of governors was said to be an issue as was the high level of assumed knowledge and the use of too many acronyms.

When asked what the Board could do more of there were few comments, however, one governor suggested more meetings with students and celebrating achievements.

When asked what the Board could do less of, the only comments were 'Board packs too long with too much detail.'

Finally, when asked if they could improve or change one thing, people said:

'Regular, but shorter meetings.'

'Sometimes need more time to discuss things more fully'

'Meetings too long to go without a break'

'Being a relatively new member being impressed with the quality of governance; it is clearly helped by one person making sure the processes work in a timely and effective fashion.'

'I feel proud to have been involved in a group of engaged, motivated people working together collaborating – not always agreeing, but taking good decisions.'

Link Governor Scheme

An appendix to the Director of Governance's Board report on December 13 shows ten link governors are in place, with an eleventh to be appointed. The document details the link area, the lead manager, the link governor and meeting dates. Link areas covered include health & safety; safeguarding & Prevent; SEND; diversity, equality, wellbeing and inclusion (staff and students); careers; maths & English; apprenticeship & skills; construction; creative industries; health & life sciences and learning innovation.

The appendix also includes three recent Link Governor visit reports which detail key areas discussed, ongoing topics and points arising.

The scheme is well managed and supported, and provides governors with an opportunity to meet students and staff, increasing their knowledge of the college and giving the wider Board valuable insights into the experiences of students (and staff).

Succession planning

As stated, a number of governors (four) are coming up to end of their time on the Board so succession planning is an active issue. Recruitment plans are in place, with college and governors' networks being used to replace those stepping down (after a skills audit was used to identify what skills will need replacing). Internally, governors are aware of positions they'll be taking up in the summer (ie Vice Chair or Chair of a committee). Succession planning and recruitment is led by the Director of Governance and the Chair (who was himself recruited by Peridot in the Spring of 2023).

Succession planning was discussed as a specific risk at audit committee on December 12 as all three members of the committee stand down this year.

Conclusions

Interactions between SLT and the Board are effective, and governors get on well together. There is plenty of evidence that levels of scrutiny and challenge are high.

The following table summarises headlines:

| BOARD RELATIONSHIPS | |
|---|--|
| STRENGTHS | AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT |
| Professional working relationship between Board and SLT | Increase the opportunities for governors to meet students |
| Challenge and scrutiny are strong | Ensure new governors are assimilated into the culture of the Board and college |
| The Link Governor Scheme works particularly well. | |

Overall Board Effectiveness

BCG has a high-performing Board that is ambitious for the success and wellbeing of its students.

The make-up of the Board is impressive – with an excellent mix of skills, backgrounds and perspectives.

At meetings observed and through interviews and through minutes and documents read, there is clear evidence of a high level of scrutiny and challenge.

The relationship between the Board and SLT works well, as does the relationship between the triumvirate, despite the Chair being relatively new to the role.

The overall conclusion on Board effectiveness is that:

There is strong evidence that the Board is highly proficient and consistently impacts positively on college strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes. Plans are already in place to address some of the areas identified for development.

Recommendations and Action Plan

The Review has drawn a number of conclusions about the strengths of the college's Board and areas for development. Some recommendations are applicable to the key areas reviewed, composition, structure and interaction and fall into key themes. In all cases, the recommendations are suggestions for board improvement and are not intended to overshadow the overall effectiveness of the Board's operation where a lot of good practice is noted.

The following six recommendations are among those identified in the review:

- **Recruit more members to the audit committee:** The audit committee is effective, but needs more members, particularly when three current members stand down later this year.
- **Address the lack of diversity on Board:** This is being looked at in an ongoing recruitment drive, but should be a Board priority.
- **Four experienced, committed and long-serving governors are standing down in 2024:** It's important for the Board that suitable replacements are found quickly.
- **Explore how to continue improving the student voice:** Through various measures, including two new student governors, the student voice is louder on the Board than in 2021, but improvements could still be made.
- **Some governors said through interviews and through the review surveys that governor training and development could be improved:** Use the latest skills audit and an analysis of existing training provision to reinvigorate a governor training programme
- **Explore how to make Board/committee packs shorter and more palatable:** Several governors said through interviews and through the review survey that Board papers could be too long and detailed.

The endorsed action plan is a live document held separately to this report.

Appendix 1

Review survey analysis

Thirteen governors (everyone sent a Review survey) responded. Analysis revealed the Board unanimously agreed that it observes the Nolan Principles although some members felt that they only listened to students and staff to some extent (three). The quality of the student experience was central to the Board's decision making (all agreed) and governors had a good understanding of the local economy and valued the input of local employers and other stakeholders (all agreed). Governors also all agreed they have robust financial management.

Two governors were unsure about EDI being a clear consideration in Board decision making. They all understand the responsibilities as a Board to safeguarding and Prevent. The majority agreed the Board had the skills for organisational change and understanding and questioning financial reports, making financial plans and setting budgets, and consider learner needs.

However, two governors were unsure about considering key risks.

Five governors felt there could be some improvement in their induction process and training and development for their role.

The majority agreed the opinions of all governors were welcomed and valued, and there were good opportunities to scrutinise proposals and ask questions. The governors operate strategically and the operation of the college is clearly delegated to executives.

Two governors felt the relevant skills of governors could be better used in decision making, and the vast majority said that the Board works well with Principal/CEO and governance professional.

When asked about what works well the comments were overwhelmingly positive. Comments included 'an ability to ask questions' with 'trust and respect' when 'different perceptions were respected' and a high quality of discussion.

When asked what doesn't work so well the E-learning from ETF was commented on; the diversity of governors was said to be an issue as was the high level of assumed knowledge and the use of too many acronyms.

When asked what the Board could do more of there were few comments. However, one governor suggested more meetings with students and celebrating achievements.

When asked what the Board could do less of, the only comments were 'Board packs too long with too much detail.'