

# Ethical Standards Commissioner

## HARNESSING BOARD ROOM DIVERSITY – WEST COLLEGE SCOTLAND

The difference that diversity  
makes to your board's governance

February 2019

**BODY:** WEST COLLEGE SCOTLAND

**CATEGORY:** SYSTEMS

## **KEY LEARNING POINTS FROM THIS CASE STUDY**

- *Designing a strategic and sustainable approach to tackling known and emerging issues around board diversity*
- *Creating an integrated action plan for improvement*
- *Building understanding (internally and externally) about what board diversity really looks like and the positive impacts expected from it*
- *Recognising and developing the cultural and attitudinal foundations that impact on progress in this area*

## **Background**

West College was formed by merger in 2013 as part of a country-wide movement towards college regionalisation. This coincided with a national focus on college governance and effectiveness arising from the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. While many of the funding and financial arrangements for colleges across Scotland form part of a well-structured national system, every college is governed locally by a board of management.

The West college board had recognised for some time that although they had a good gender balance and tended to be well-served by members with 'classic' governance skills (e.g. finance, HR, public accountability) they were not always succeeding in attracting applicants to the Board that reflected the broader range of stakeholders and users of the college or that necessarily matched all optimal skills areas that would be beneficial to the Board now and in the future.

## **What has happened so far**

A particular catalyst for action was the Government's expectations around gender balance and 50/50 by 2020. Discussion of this at Board level led to the more strategic decision to adopt a whole-system improvement approach to Board diversity and governance – as opposed to only focusing on this one metric in isolation. Recognising the risks of 'group think' and the potential for 'limiting beliefs from how we've always done things', the Board Chair invited an independent expert who already had associations with the College to lead a short life working group on board diversity.

The group is made up of Board members, external experts and executive leads in organisational development, HR and governance. This approach was deliberately chosen to encourage fresh perspectives, a clear and detailed focus and a way of introducing positive challenge into Board discussions.

The group's remit is to use internal analysis and wider good practice to:

- Review the effectiveness and impact of existing recruitment approaches and adapt as needed to attract and encourage a wider range of applicants
- Consider support mechanisms and talent pipelines to bring more people closer to Board membership along with retention measures to develop them once in post
- Produce an action plan and targets for integrated activity in this area
- Report back to the Board with proposals for achievement

The group's action plan and recommendations were accepted by the Board and work is now ongoing under the following broad themes

## Main areas with diversity focus for the West College Scotland Board and the difference that they make to the way diversity is harnessed

Area of focus	Activities
<p><b>MIND-SET and CULTURE</b> <i>Recognised early on as being an <u>essential</u> foundation to delivery of the whole action plan</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitated work with Board to establish common base of understanding about what Board Diversity really means and looks like.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Important to address head-on some lingering misconceptions that 'greater diversity may equal a reduction in quality'</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Agreeing a common starting point and a desired outcome – <i>"A sustainable Board that reflects its community(ies) of interest and has an appropriate diversity of skills to fulfil its responsibilities"</i> Aligning the Board diversity initiative with the College's wider work on cultural values and its behaviours framework "Building our collective future"</li> </ul>
<p><b>SKILLS &amp; COMPETENCES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very important for the group to work on both the diversity of <i>skills and competences</i> that the Board needs alongside the diversity of <i>experience and personal characteristics</i>.</li> <li>• Seeing the Board as a 'Team' and recognising that not everyone needs to be an 'expert' in everything to achieve good governance:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Developing a skills matrix that values personal qualities and experiences alongside more traditional technical / professional aptitudes</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Recognise and value current and future Board skills and adapt recruitment approaches according to the types of vacancy available</li> </ul>

Area of focus	Activities
<p><b>ENGAGEMENT &amp; COMMUNICATION</b>  <i>The board take time to collectively sharpen their learning about how to work with differences well</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying where there are potential ‘mis-matches’ between the levels of interest / representation that communities or networks might have with the college generally and how that might be (under) reflected at governance levels</li> <li>• Mapping connections and contact opportunities with varied communities / networks / interest groups and seeking more aligned engagement approaches across the college (e.g. tech/digital stakeholders, care experienced, entrepreneurs, women learning returners)</li> <li>• Review and refresh external communications to be more relevant and tailored to different audiences Build two-way channels to build and maintain relationships not just ‘broadcast’</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUILDING A POOL and SUPPORTING MEMBERSHIP</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the barriers to more diverse applicants</li> <li>• Outreach and awareness-raising</li> <li>• Developing Board buddies / mentors and external ‘ambassadors’</li> <li>• Review recruitment methods and their practical delivery to ensure they are fit for the roles / skillsets being sought and do not inadvertently limit the pool at any stage</li> <li>• Tailor board induction and development to better reflect the reality of diverse members needs</li> </ul>

## The key elements in achieving the difference and how the activity is maintained

### RAISING AWARENESS

Members of the short-life working group recognise that as well as being about a series of concrete actions, their work is also about raising awareness of what Board diversity is really about and (where necessary) offering constructive challenge to some ‘limiting beliefs around old models of good governance’. There is a recognition that if true sustainability and relevance is to be achieved, that what has worked before will not necessarily be sufficient for a different future.

Key to building and maintaining momentum has been the opportunities that the steering group members and the whole board have had for ‘frank and challenging discussions around diversity and different people’s positions on this’. This has been described as ‘not being defensive around what we know and what we thought we knew’ and ‘not just overlaying our own norms, perspectives, values and priorities’.

### UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

The ongoing challenges the group is successfully addressing include;

- Practical challenges of a volunteer Non-Executive membership such as time, focus, prioritisation and maintaining momentum
- Operationalising change in a governance context when there may be perceptions around increased risk or resource associated with moving away from a single 'proven' system
- A cultural status quo around perceptions of 'good governance' that is on occasion more suited to past experiences than current and future realities

In terms of positive drivers of the work, it is noted that the relatively large size of college boards and the reality of operating within a tightly governed national system of college governance, offers scope to easily reflect a diversity of skills and experiences without compromising local financial or legal competence. Similarly, the sheer diversity of college stakeholders and varied functions that colleges play in local, regional and national contexts offers great potential to attract and harness new skills from many places.

## The diversity in governance indicators in evidence

- Board members have the confidence to air disparate viewpoints and to challenge constructively
- Board members are able to recognise the limitations of their personal skills, knowledge and experience and understand where individual and shared agendas diverge
- Enhanced engagement allows greater knowledge exchange and resource sharing
- Different skills, knowledge, experience and perspectives are deployed allowing more comprehensive challenge and more productive scrutiny
- Board members can show how their own skills and understanding have developed
- Board members are satisfied that robust testing of ideas precedes implementation.

## Checklist for actions that boards that wish to replicate these activities can use

- ✓ Establish a short-life working group tasked with coordinating improvement and engagement activities that will deliver a more systemic approach to increased Board diversity.
- ✓ Make time for the board to regularly cross-reference its key operational and strategic priorities against its own skillsets and be prepared to challenge any potential 'over-valuing' of traditional governance skills against those that may be as relevant for the future
- ✓ Identify communities / networks / stakeholder groups that could bring specific new skills and experience to the Board and design outreach or engagement approaches (or tap into connections that already exist for a different purpose)
- ✓ Use both quantitative data analysis and more informal engagement to understand how existing recruitment approaches are affecting both the people who are attracted to apply and how successful they are in the process
- ✓ Ensure that equality and diversity are understood as a core responsibility of the whole board and intrinsic to the organisation's fundamental values. Actively

encourage diverse perspectives and ensure this is aligned with all organisational initiatives

- ✓ Develop a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the body's internal and external communication channels so that messages can be properly tailored to diverse audiences and their desired impact.

## Further contact / information

Keith McKellar, Board Chair or Maggie McManus, Chair of short life working group on board diversity – West College