

New College Durham External Board Review 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New College Durham is a large, General Further Education College in the North East region, with around 4,750 students and a turnover of circa £42M. It operates from a main campus located in Framwellgate Moor on the outskirts of Durham City and is the largest college to provide vocational Further and Higher Education in County Durham.

A series of changes over the last 18 months have impacted the College's governance arrangements including the appointment of a new Chair, a new Principal & Chief Executive, a new Chief Financial Officer, changes to the Executive Leadership Team and more recently a new Head of Governance. Over the same period the Corporation has developed a new Strategic Plan for the next 5 years, approved revised Terms of Reference for a number of committees and appointed six new independent Members to the Corporation.

Considering these changes alongside the recently published DfE interim guidance on strengthening governance, the Corporation commissioned an external review of governance effectiveness in the Spring term of 2022, so that any changes could be implemented in time for the 2022/23 academic year.

The review was carried out by Shirley Collier MBE, of Shirley Collier Consulting. The approach used was endorsed by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in their 2021 pilot reviews. The methodology included a desk-based review of selected board documents such as the governing documents and Minutes; confidential surveys of governors and senior staff; individual confidential discussions with board members and senior staff; and attendance at and observation of Corporation and committee meetings.

Structures and processes

The governing documents and arrangements of the board are aligned and robust. Processes are thorough and well documented. Board members have access to a significant amount of information relating to college performance, both financial and academic, including a number of sources which are independent of management. The Principal, members of SMT and Head of Governance are open and willingly share information.

Areas for development include the strengthening of input to the Search function; introduction of a formal process for individual governor appraisal and Chair's appraisal; and consideration of meeting time and agendas to allow for more free debate. There is an opportunity, now that the new Strategy is embedded and monitoring and reporting are established, for Strategic Reviews to be future-focussed and shaped by governors, include more time for open ended debate and some governor-led sessions.

People and Attributes

The board is composed of members with a breadth of skill encompassing finance, education and business. There is also a mix of people with public and private sector experience. Recent recruitment has concentrated on people with relevant business experience. Members have the specific skills necessary for effective strategic oversight of the corporation (strategic thinking, analysis and synthesis of information and communication) and the soft skills required to build constructive relationships. They also show an attitude and mindset that fosters independent thought, a commitment to the Nolan Principles and those of good governance (independence, curiosity, ethical and mission-focused) and which is open to critical reflection including of the board.

Areas for development include greater use of governors' professional contacts and networks; and reflection on skills and attributes needed in the medium to long term.

Board Culture and Governors' Interactions

The board works hard to ensure that it is developed as a whole (rather than as a series of individuals), through recruitment, induction, development and deployment of its members. There is a growing sense of cohesion around a board culture/style which strives for achievement and success through careful planning, and trust between governors and the executive. There is room for more challenge and less scrutiny in order to preserve the distinction between management and governance.

Areas for development include a more bespoke induction process which meets governors' preferences and fast tracks them so that they are fully able to contribute as soon as possible; a more structured approach to supporting student governors; activities to allow board members to get to know each other post pandemic; and consideration of how much governors need to know and understand in order to challenge and contribute to high quality debate.

Overall Impact and Effectiveness

The evidence from the review shows that the board of New College Durham is highly proficient and that governance is effective. Of the key effectiveness features identified by the Association of Colleges, two could be developed further. The diversity of the board would be more evident if student governors contributed more in meetings. There is also potential for the board's engagement with its local community to be strengthened through links with larger employers.

Governance has had a beneficial impact on the college throughout the past two years, particularly in the development of strategy, and the oversight, monitoring and scrutiny of this. Impact is not always easy to measure for a variety of reasons. There is potential for greater impact as the culture of the board evolves. A conscious stepping back from the operation would facilitate this, as would a purposeful focus on the future.

Conclusion

The governance review has found that following substantial change at New College Durham, governance is well managed and highly effective. In future, the approach currently taken could be reviewed slightly in order to give governors and senior staff more time for challenge and debate.