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College Development Network

# **COLLEGE BOARD RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

**A CDN Insight Report by  
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# 1. BACKGROUND

This research project is aimed at getting an understanding of the recruitment and retention of college board members.

We will explore why some colleges seem to be able to recruit new members easily while others struggle to attract the applicants that they need.

We will explore issues in retaining board members for their full term of 4 or 8 years.

# 2. CONTEXT

The recruitment and retention of college board members is a difficult topic to study.

The following matters have to be noted in order to comprehend the findings and recommendations in this report.

## Base Line

There is no baseline for the recruitment or retention of college board members at national or institutional level. Therefore, the question of whether recruitment and/or retention is better or worse than usual is not possible at national level and not easily considered at institutional level.

## Recruitment

There are many factors which influence the successful recruitment of a board member. These factors include geography, skills preference, diversity preference, capability, meeting schedules, meeting arrangements i.e. time of meetings, day of meetings, in-person or otherwise, conflicts of interest, motivation, and method(s) of recruitment.

## Terms and Conditions

The recruitment of board members takes time, resource and effective recruitment processes to be successful. Therefore challenges in recruitment could lie within these variables rather than (or as well as) any response from potential board members.

## Retention

Retaining board members includes aspects within control of the college as well as external factors including members professional and personal commitments.



Those aspects within the control of the college include making governing a productive and enjoyable experience, including the conduct of meetings, the culture of governing, and quality of reporting to the governing board. For many board members, the sense of belonging to and working to support and develop the college is very important and so connecting the ‘boardroom to classroom’ matters.

But even in the best of college circumstances, professional and personal board member commitments can impact on board membership.

### Perception

This report relies on the perception of governance professionals in a number of ways, such as the possible reasons for difficulties in recruitment of board members and gauging the calibre of candidates presenting for board member vacancies. There is a clearer picture regarding retention i.e. regarding board members already known to the college, but without exit interviews conducted by governance professionals, appreciating the reason(s) for concluding service as a board member may be anecdotal and incomplete.

Existing board members and potential board members have not provided evidence for this report. There may be scope for further study of recruitment and retention of college board members by gathering data from these sources.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

A survey of Governance Professionals (GPs) to gather evidence about the recruitment and retention of board members

- 13 GPs responded to the survey

Two focus groups of Governance Professionals to test out and explore further the evidence gathered from the survey

- 10 GPs attended the Focus Groups

An analysis of the five EERs completed in 2024 to identify the number of vacancies.

The survey and focus groups were undertaken in the period July – September 2024.



# 4. RECRUITMENT

## 4.1 Evidence gathered from the survey provided by governance professionals

The average number of vacancies at the moment is 3.3, with a range of zero vacancies to twelve vacancies. This aligns with the analysis of the EERs conducted this year where the average number of vacancies to be filled was four

- 2022/23 average 3.7
- 2023/24 average 3.1

All the GPs responding the survey reported using a skill matrix to identify the skills and experience gaps on the board, so recruitment was focussed on a specific skill set.

Methods of recruitment vary

- the least used is a recruitment company - those that do use recruitment companies report successful outcomes
- the most successful was word of mouth and LinkedIn
- press adverts tend to attract less suitable applicants

Challenges in recruiting new board members were reported by GPs as

- knowing the right time to recruit to receive best candidate pool
- finding the right balance of information to be provided to potential applicants
- being able to target individuals, particularly those with finance and accountancy backgrounds

Outcome of recent recruitment campaigns

- eleven out of thirteen respondents reported sufficient applicants and successful outcomes
- most respondents were satisfied with the quantity, range of skills, but there was concern regarding restricted diversity in applicants
- finding members with specific skills / expertise especially finance and accountancy has been challenging
- some respondents report lower numbers of applicants but high calibre

## 4.2 Evidence gathered from the focus groups of Governance Professionals

### Perception

The general view is that it is getting somewhat harder to recruit new board members,

- generally, the number of applicants has dropped (but not all colleges have experienced this)
- however, the calibre of candidates has been positive, and colleges have been able to recruit
- attracting a diverse range of applicants remains challenging
- attracting applicants with finance and accountancy experience is challenging

The view was that reputational damage to the college sector resulting from

- the press coverage of the financial challenges facing the sector and
- the press coverage around staff relations and industrial action

are potentially putting candidates off applying.

Some approaches that have worked well in attracting applicants

- working with Changing the Chemistry to reword recruitment adverts and recruitment packs to make the opportunity more appealing
- a fundamental review of the post description and person specification to attract more candidates, dropping the requirement for senior management experience
- emphasising the teamwork element of being on a board and the training and development opportunities
- reducing the time commitment
- informal 'meet the board' sessions for potential applicants
- offering the opportunity for an informal discussion with the Governance Professional
- an open recruitment approach, having an option for individual to express an interest in joining the board even if there are no current vacancies

A key challenge is getting a balance between providing the information required in a way that is not putting candidates off applying.

The proposed CDN Recruitment Bank received overwhelming support from the Governance Professionals as providing an additional source of potential applicants for board membership, some of whom might have undertaken the Get into Governance training.

## 5. RETENTION

### 5.1 Evidence gathered from the survey - 13 Governance Professionals

Governance professionals believed the greater problem was with recruitment rather than with retention as follows

- 7/13 believed there was a problem with recruitment;
- 4/13 believed there was a problem with retention

Challenges in retaining members include the following,

- board members are charitable trustees - the current financial crisis challenging the sector is an issue particularly for those members with professional backgrounds, there is a potential risk of reputational damage to individual board members
- increasing time commitment and the timing of meetings, 3 hours at the end of a working day can be challenging
- board time spent on discussing finances and governance which is not why members want to join the board.
- board time spent on self-evaluation
- the number of other organisations recruiting non exec members

What might help retain members

- a financially sustainable sector
- remuneration
- raising the profile of board membership
- reviewing the time commitment for the role of board membership



## 5.2 Evidence gathered from the focus groups of governance professionals

### Retention

The view is generally that turnover on boards happens, and members leave for a variety of reasons, mostly personal or professional. Retention has not changed significantly. GPs were firmly of the view that members were honest about their reasons for leaving early.

Some board members commented when leaving their board experience was 'not what they expected,' highlighting the importance of providing sufficient information on the role and responsibilities in the recruitment process and managing expectations.

Elements that negatively impact on the experience of being a college board member include

- over emphasis on governance issues including compliance and self-evaluation
- less time spent on student matters
- length of meetings
- volume of papers
- large amount of board time spent on financial challenges and the impact of strike action
- for some board members, tensions have arisen due to the arrival of new members and a shift in atmosphere during board meetings

The current approach of virtual committee meetings and in person board meetings has reduced the time that members have together and to build relationships with fellow members, thus impacting on the feeling of teamwork.

Much of the 'fun' in being a member of a college board has been compromised over recent years. The move towards virtual committee meetings and in person board meetings seems to have reduced the opportunity for the informal aspects of board membership.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Although challenging, there is no evidence of a crisis in either the recruitment or retention of college board members. Turnover has increased over the last 3 to 4 years, since the last round of effectiveness reviews, but not to a significant extent.

Turnover on boards is to be expected and is part of the dynamic nature of governance. Most, if not all boards, are in some form of transition, as highlighted in the **EER Overview Report** in 2021. It is recognising this and managing the process that is important.

However, attracting applicants with finance skills is difficult. Some boards are co-opting individuals with those skills on to their finance (or equivalent) committees to fill skills gaps.

Board members who decide to leave early, either before 4 years or 8 years, are mostly reporting professional and/or personal reasons, often pressures of work or increased caring responsibilities.

Given the turnover on boards, continually building the board as a 'team' is an essential aspect of effective governance.

There is support for the proposed CDN 'Recruitment Bank.'



# 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

## 7.1 Recruitment of new board members

No single method works effectively, using a variety of methods gets better results. The most successful methods include the following:

- Word of mouth
  - Local networks
  - Informal meet the board events
  - Inviting 'expressions of interest,' even if no current vacancies
  - Offering an informal discussion with the GP pre application
- LinkedIn
  - Good Moves
  - Recruitment agencies (limited use due to cost but generally successful outcomes)
1. The ability to advertise college board vacancies on Public Appointments Scotland would provide another useful method.
  2. The recruitment process is time consuming, and Governance Professionals need to have the time to invest in getting the best outcome.
  3. The Recruitment Pack needs to balance providing clear information on the role and the significant responsibilities with the benefits to the individual of being a college board member.
  4. There is no 'right time' to recruit, the timing is random, luck can be a significant factor.
  5. Plan the recruitment process well in advance and allow for time to re-advertise if the first round is not successful.
  6. The proposed CDN Recruitment Bank received overwhelming support from the Governance Professionals as providing an additional source of potential applicants for board membership, some of whom might have undertaken the Get into Governance training.

## 7.2 Retention of board members

1. Board members need to feel that

- they are making a valuable contribution to an educational institution and the quality of the student experience
- they are part of a team that is making a difference
- they are getting some form of benefit from volunteering their time, for example developing their skills and experience, expanding their network or just 'giving back.'

The board 'culture' needs to support the above and Chairs, GPs, and mentors (if provided) need to invest in the development of new members.

2. The timing of meetings does have an impact on members as does the mix of virtual and in person meetings, however there is no optimum solution.
3. Is 'governance killing governing'?
  - Governance processes and especially the need for self-evaluation can be onerous, and sometimes bewildering for new members.
  - Do boards really need to conduct a self-evaluation in the year they are going through an externally facilitated effectiveness review? The Code would suggest yes, but is this really necessary? (This might be a recommendation for the GGSG, to revise the wording in that section of the Code.)
4. The GP should conduct informal exit interviews in all cases to build a more detailed picture of any retention challenges.





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