

Making a case for more creative college governing

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Is the way we govern colleges stuck in a rut? Are you (board members, senior staff, governance professionals) fixed in a way of operating governing functions and responsibilities which is just comforting, with the same pattern, even the same agenda, as last year? Do you do governing the way you do because you think the code of good governance says so?

The following opinion is informed by a number of evidence sources.

One source is external governance reviews of colleges, both in Scotland and England. Observing governing processes, these external reviews have provided a wealth of evidence about how governing is enacted. It is clear that the dominant college governing practice is the formal meeting. Furthermore, external governance reviews have emphasised the need for boards to be less operational and more strategic including monitoring progress on strategic delivery, together with monitoring the effectiveness of risk management. This message was repeated recently in the Scottish Funding Council's 'Expectations of Good Governance' (September 2025; 9)

A second evidence source is my evidence of working with a different model for governing a college, trialled in two colleges some years ago. Over the period of three years, I was able to introduce and develop new models of governing which balanced formal, necessary, decision-making meetings with a contrasting, more creative approach. This approach will be expanded in this article.

A third evidence source is the research outcome from a study based at the University of Stirling and reported on in

2021¹. One part of the research considered how college strategy was formed and developed by board members. Looking at a sample of colleges across the United Kingdom, there was a commonality of practice centred on 'away days' or 'strategy meetings'. The resulting Economic and Social Research Council research report stated, at page 12,

In all colleges, the events were positioned as a rare and crucial opportunity amidst busy annual cycles of business to do a range of important things. Away days served a number of functions such as providing opportunities to understand the changing college environment and wider socio-political context, building relationships, and consideration of organisational values, but developing strategy was a key purpose. ... Such opportunities were widely welcomed by all participants and seen as uniquely valuable.'

Responding to the evidence

My proposition is that too much board member time is spent in formal meetings, and insufficient time is set aside for board members to discuss and explore issues away from the heavy governing paperwork.

Most of a board member's time, let's say at least 95%, is spent in choreographed meetings with tight agendas, and lots of reports (some very dense, some very long). Typically, even in the best of formal meetings, there is little scope for all board members to contribute ideas and explore significant questions of strategy. Formal meetings are obviously the bedrock of governing colleges with the pattern and calendar of governing board and committee meetings established for a year or two into the future.

¹ Watson, C. et al (2021) *Processes and practices of governing colleges of further*

education in the U.K. : Uncovering the complexities of governing ESRC, London

A rough calculation of hours spent in governing meetings with a typical governing structure amounts to over 50 hours per college year. This figure could be higher (but unlikely to be much lower) depending on a range of factors affecting governing efficiency e.g. agenda structure, chairing focus, senior staff writing and presentation of reports, the influence of the governance professional.

But what if some valuable board member time was used differently? Instead of 95% of available time spent in formal meetings, how about 65% spent in formal meetings (where there will always be limited opportunity for discussion and exploration of issues) and 30% of time spent in structured informal events, particularly focussed on strategic questions and assurance? (I'm assuming that the remaining 5% is spent at college events, board member development, link roles, and ambassadorial duties).

What is structured informal governing?

Structured informal governing is best experienced through workshop-style events, perhaps one per half-term, addressing strategic questions in readiness for the next version of the strategic plan. We think about student, staff and stakeholder voices, but this is also an opportunity for board member voices to be expressed in a way that formal meetings inevitably restrict. One obvious outcome from this approach, is that many board members, who can often feel frustrated at formal meetings, can share their expertise, local knowledge, good ideas, etc. It also becomes a way in which governors can gain better insight into the college, and in so doing so, develop a more advanced form of assurance. Unsurprisingly, this form of use of the governance space can be more enjoyable for board members, with its opportunity for relationship development and sharing ideas, opinions, and

collectively finding solutions to strategic questions

For this approach to work well there are certain conditions that will have to be in place:-

- There will need to be the circumstances in which the governance professional can create structured, informal governing. The centrality of the college governance professional in the design of governing processes has recently been emphasised in research by the University of Sunderland². The creation of sessions away from the formal agendas need just as much planning and consideration. We know from governance review evidence and statements from governance professionals that achieving sufficient influence in governing processes can be difficult where chairs and/or principals do not work with or encourage leadership by the governance professional. Governing boards should regularly check that the engagement of the 'triumvirate' is genuine and productive for its membership;
- The college principal and senior staff will need to be fully engaged in this form of governing and may act as expert witnesses or strategic guides to both set the strategic question(s) and help with relevant information to help board members to address the topic;
- The chair will need to be able to adopt a style of operating which suits the nature of informal governing. This is not a talking shop; this is guided, structured time to permit discussion and debate;
- All board members need to feel encouraged and confident to

² Husband, G. et al (2025) *Supporting effective college governing in England* University of Sunderland/ Stone King LLP

participate in structured, informal governing. This may take some time for all to feel comfortable to operate in this way. There may be the case for reviewing board membership at the time of possible renewal of terms of office to make sure future needs for the board i.e. formal and informal governing, are taken fully into account.

Shorter formal meetings?

As a consequence of the introduction of structured informal governing, it is possible that formal meetings can become shorter, as informal structured governing provides the space to talk, test, explore, query, propose and generally engage with the bigger questions facing the college. From experience, there has been evidence that formal meetings do become business-driven decision-making meetings built upon the foundation of structured informal governing.

Furthermore, the quality and focus of the next strategic plan becomes much more engaging and can lead to a more strategically focused governing board. The board ownership of the plan intensifies with more involvement through the informal sessions. This carries forward into the formal board meetings where board members want to see through the strategic ideas and expectations from start to conclusion.

In conclusion

Evidence informs that governing colleges is heavily dependent on a schedule of formal meetings, with an occasional away day to look at strategic matters. This article proposes an adjustment to how board member capital is used for the benefit of the learners and learning at the college. In essence, the suggestion is a more a creative use of the 'governance space' to include structured informal governing to hear more of the board member voices than a formal board or committee agenda can achieve.

Moving from the current formal meeting model to a more varied style of governing needs careful planning and discussion. It is not a matter of switching overnight from one style to another. Board members and senior staff need to understand the potential benefits of the revised model and appreciate how they can play their part for the benefit of the college. Any concerns about scrutiny, compliance, assurance and decision making delivered through formal meetings have to be addressed. Similarly, the expectations of the code of good governance needs to be borne in mind through any evolution of the governing model.

With these provisos in mind, I believe much can be gained for colleges from the governing board getting out of the rut of a narrow approach to college governing by adopting a more creative use of the wider governance space.

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