

Governing of Teaching and Learning: is it still important?

Report of the Governing Working Group

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Abstract

This paper has its origin in the *Reimagining Further Education* 2018 conference which revisited Coffield's 2008 paper 'Just Imagine that Teaching and Learning were the first priority.' The authors offered a working group 'Centring Governing on Teaching and Learning'. Despite heavy promotion by the conference organisers, no one signed up for it. In examining reasons for this, we build on the assumption that the understanding of teaching and learning needs improving at board level.

The paper draws on the narrative of the conference and its working groups in building support for this proposition and suggests three challenges that contribute to the low priority that teaching and learning is given at board discussions. These relate

to governance codes, the need to reconceptualise what teaching and learning looks like in an employer-led system, and tensions caused by contested priorities for further education providers.

The working group model was intended to solicit solutions from the delegates to these challenges. In the concluding section of the paper we propose what these remedies might have been. In adopting an optimistic tone, we suggest that 'governing' provides an action-focussed alternative to 'governance'. This needs to be supported by sense-making activity that develops governor capacity to appreciate the nature of teaching and learning in contemporary further education settings. We suggest that this can be contextualised by including a reflection at all meetings of boards on the impact of discussions on the quality of teaching and learning.

Key words: governing, governance, teaching and learning, further education, governance codes

Context

It didn't happen. There was no take up for the working group on the theme of Governing at the *Reimagine Further Education Conference* held at Birmingham City University on 27 June, 2018. Nevertheless, the conference itself was full, lively, and challenging. The way the event was organised and framed resulted in fresh and inspiring thinking. Professor Matt O'Leary and Suzanne Savage, the organisers, actively promoted the Governing workshop to partners, so there was no lack of energy behind the agenda.

So why the lack of interest? We can look at Professor Frank Coffield's (2008) publication 'Just imagine that teaching and learning were the first priority,' which provided thematic inspiration for the conference. Coffield identifies board members as having a significant role to play in supporting the conditions where leadership fosters a reprioritisation of teaching and learning (Coffield *op cit*, p 63). This was reinforced by the emergence of a governance narrative at several points during the ReimagineFE conference. Ali Hadawi's keynote first hinted at the link between governance and teaching and learning; this was revisited in the final plenary by Ian Pryce and also Dr Abdulla Sodiq's observation about the role staff governors can play in prioritising teaching and learning.

Clearly the preconference information outlining the content of the Governing working group was unattractive to delegates. Perhaps it implied too strongly that the audience should have been made up of governors. It was clear from a request for a show of hands, there were in fact, several governors at the event but they prioritised other themes and working groups such as Leadership. We hoped to develop the idea of governors and other leaders working together and focussing on professional development in order to reduce the distance between governors and teaching and learning. Clearly this did not come across strongly enough and the authors are grateful for another attempt to make this argument through this think piece. In constructing the brief for the conference, we made three assumptions:

- 1) 10 years after Coffield's call to board members, teaching and learning are still a priority and governors, trustees and their equivalents, in every FE setting, have an important role to play in securing this imperative.

- 2) That the links between governors' understanding of and contribution to teaching and learning need improving.
- 3) That delegates would be interested in *governing* not *governance*. In the use of 'governing' we are aligning with Kooiman's (2003) position, using interaction theory, which emphasises the necessity to look at the reality of governing alongside the theory of governance, because 'unintended as well as intended consequences are inherent in governing interactions due to tensions within and between roles of actors involved and situational factors'.

Alongside our own views about what is of key importance, Ofsted gives us confidence in the first assertion. The current Further Education and Skills Handbook (Ofsted 2016:37) indicates that leadership and management judgements will be informed by:

how successfully leaders, managers and governors secure and sustain improvements to teaching, learning and assessment through high quality professional development, including developing management and leadership capacity and robust performance management to tackle weaknesses and promote good practice across all types of provision.

So, the governance link with teaching and learning should be a given. However, in reading inspection reports of individual further education providers, it is very rare to read more than a paragraph on the governors' contribution to the quality of teaching and learning. Examples of the total comments directed to governance in Ofsted reports include:

Governors are well informed about the areas of the college that still require improvement. They identify correctly that leaders and managers must increase the proportion of learners who achieve high-grade passes in GCSE English and mathematics and improve the retention of learners on access to higher education courses. (published college [overall effectiveness: good] inspection report Sept 2018)

Leaders have very recently strengthened governance arrangements by establishing an education governance board. The new board includes experienced practitioners from the hairdressing and beauty therapy industry,

employers and learners. (published Independent Training Provider report [overall effectiveness good] July 2018)

Our use of 'governing' also responds to David Russell's (Chief Executive Officer, Education and Training Foundation) closing contribution to the conference. He outlined several prerequisites for high quality professional development, one of which was for it to be 'action focussed'. Contextualising Russell's position in creating a higher priority for teaching and learning at board level would imply an active approach needs to be adopted in improving the link.

The challenges

We came away from the event feeling that perhaps our assumptions had some merit and there may be benefit in exploring how teaching and learning can be (re)prioritised in board discussions and actions. We outline three challenges in this context.

Codes of Governance

Codes of governance do signpost the importance of teaching and learning. The Association of College's Code of Good Governance (AoC 2015) indicates teaching and learning sits as one of the ten principal responsibilities. This theme is underpinned by 8 elements, one of which is 'the board must foster exceptional teaching and learning'. Six of the other elements include 'should', suggesting a lower priority for boards.

Much of the narrative at the conference related to FE colleges, and Dr David Powell reminded the delegates that the sector was much more diverse than just this group of providers. A wide range of constituents were in the audience which included independent training providers (ITPs), adult and community learning providers and those from the secure estate. In the period just following the conference, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP 2018) published a draft code of good governance for Independent Training Providers. The code shares some common authorship with the college code and contains many common elements including the theme 'Teaching and Learning and Outcome for Learners'. The interplay between governance and teaching and learning is reflected in expectations on board members like:

- Putting the learner, apprentice and employer first.
- Promoting high expectations and ambitions for learners, apprentices and staff
- Promoting inspirational training, teaching and learning and assessment.

Both codes include references to broader frameworks including the: Principles of Public Life, the UK Corporate Code, Charities Code. These codes will frame expectations on directors, trustees and others with governance roles in other further education providers. Nevertheless, the emphasis on teaching and learning appears buried in a raft of other expectations for governors and their equivalents.

The changing nature of teaching and learning

Secondly, we propose that teaching and learning in the sector looks significantly different 10 years on from Coffield's 'Just Suppose'. Despite the best efforts of clerks and company secretaries, it is possible that governor understanding has not kept pace with significant changes. The depth and breadth of the sector are greater than before, and this is reflected in the diverse identities of those who populate it. A recent study (Policy Consortium, 2018) showed that further education 'learners' have seventeen different terms associated with them. Examples included students, apprentices, employees, clients and customers. Learning in further education is often co-funded between individuals, employers and the state. Examples include learner loans and the introduction of the levy to fund the growth of apprenticeships. Teaching and learning can often take place with employers in the workplace. If board members are to engage in governing, then they need an improved contemporary understanding of all of these contexts to re-examine their previous definitions of high quality teaching and learning.

Conflicting governing priorities

Our third consideration relates to the role of governors, trustees and directors in setting the strategic direction of their institutions. They do this in a landscape that characterised by conflicting imperatives and uncertainty. For colleges, the introduction of an insolvency protocol looms large, as does intervention by the FE Commissioner. Other providers can find funding withdrawn at short notice following funding agency intervention and adverse Ofsted judgements. Area reviews have taken up significant governance energy for those in scope and apprenticeship reforms and preparation for technical education changes are demanding of board

member time. Strategy and its formation can therefore become dominated by 'wicked problems' (Head and Alford 2015) which may be difficult to resolve and distract governors from teaching and learning concerns.

These policy changes are intended to underpin the government's dual priorities of meeting local skills priorities and personal development when positioning the sector: 'further education provides the skilled workforce employers need and helps individuals reach their full potential' (UK Government, undated). Gleeson *et al* (2015), in exploring the implications of an employer led further education, highlight the implications for the teaching workforce and its professional status.

Reprioritising governing for teaching and learning

The conference working group model was intended to generate ideas to reconfigure governing in order to prioritise teaching and learning against these, and other, challenges. The following concluding section anticipates what participants may have suggested as possible approaches.

In the Government's Post 16 Skills Plan (UK Government updated October 2017) it is clear that devolution and place-based approaches are central to the government's strategy for regional economic development. Less clear is what both governing and teaching and learning look like in this local context. Certainly, an altruistic model that goes beyond institutional priorities is emerging where governors, trustees and directors are expected to consider how their institutions contribute to the locality. Examples are the 'delivery agreements' between the West Yorkshire Consortium of Colleges and the Combined Authority (2017) and local and regional skills plans across the country. These focus on meeting skills shortages, prioritising progression and more inclusive approaches to developing learning pathways so that future skills needs will be met. At the same time, devolution is likely to mean greater integration of adult learning with planning in those areas where adult learning has an impact, such as health and well-being, social integration, and democratic engagement, as well as skills.

The systems change from an institution-based competitive model to one that is based on collaborative leadership and shared planning has significant implications for governing and the expectations in the respective governance codes which indicate that teaching and learning should be a priority. There is potential for

development of 'sense-making' or even 'brokerage' roles that could make the teaching and learning implications of the systems changes explicit for governors. These roles could be undertaken by local skills partnerships, sector membership bodies or the Education and Training Foundation.

The selection of governors, trustees and other board members are often based on specific skills and knowledge sets. Should expertise in teaching and learning feature more prominently in selecting and developing board members? Momentum is emerging for remunerating board members and the potential for developing 'professional governors,' including those with expertise in teaching and learning, to increase board understanding (Forrest and Hill 2017). The notion of 'remote' or 'flexi' governors is gaining prominence in schools. Such governors provide expertise for boards and at board meetings, usually through virtual platforms (see, for example, QA Education HeadTeacher magazine 2018).

The government has recently put out a call for a refreshed cadre of National Leaders of Governance (UK Government 2018a). Part of these roles will be to 'develop the capacity and expertise of the board of governors'. It will be interesting to see if teaching and learning becomes a priority in this context. This initiative appears to apply only to those learning and skills organisations under the scrutiny of the FE Commissioner. The Commissioner's role does include the brief to share good practice; however, it is difficult to see this centring on teaching and learning as discussions are dominated by financial and inspection imperatives.

There is potential for Ofsted to undertake a more detailed scrutiny of the link between board members and teaching and learning. The proposed changes to Inspection (UK Government 2018b) from September 2019 to include a specific focus on curriculum provides opportunities for practitioners and researchers to explore the changed dynamic.

At the institution level, where learners and staff may be board members, there is potential for their voice to be strengthened in enhancing the teaching and learning narrative at board level. This is unlikely to be straightforward. Learner voice may be a contested concept (Forrest 2007) and although the role of staff governors may also be important in 'professional information giving' to other board members, further development is necessary. (Sodiq and Abbott 2018).

Finally, perhaps each board and committee meeting could conclude with a short discussion on how the debate has contributed to improving teaching and learning. This single action would have significant potential for the rapid repositioning of board thinking to meet Coffield's original challenge of prioritising teaching and learning.

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