

Governor Training Materials

Strategy and educational character

**Further
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Funding
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For suggestions on how to get the most out of these self-study materials, see the section on Using the materials.

Introduction

The overall character of a college – what courses it offers, which students it caters for, what sort of learning environment it provides – is referred to as its educational character. A key responsibility of governors is to assure themselves that their college's educational character, and hence the type, range and accessibility of its courses, meet the needs of the communities it serves.

Another key responsibility of governors is to ensure that the college mission – the statement of the fundamental aims and purposes of the college – both reflects the needs of the communities it serves and informs and directs every aspect of the college's activities.

A third key area of governor responsibility is the ethos of the college – how the college community interacts at a human level in achieving its objectives. How does it respond to diversity, what is its commitment to quality and the morale of its staff, what does it do to enable innovation?

This module gives you the opportunity to explore these areas in relation to your own college, and to develop a better understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of governors for strategy and mission.

Aims

By the end of this module you should be able to:

- explain the purpose of your college strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment
- describe how your college's mission and ethos inform its strategy
- explain how the educational character of your college reflects its mission, ethos and strategy
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your college
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the college.

Contents

Mark the sections you want to study and tick them off as you complete them.

To do Done

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Working on the self-study activities

These materials have been designed for flexible use, so that you can work through sections and activities in your own time and at your own pace if you would find it difficult to attend organised training sessions. Governors who have tested these materials point out how valuable it is to work on at least some of the suggested activities together with another governor or group of governors, as there is such potential to learn from each other’s experience. For suggestions on how to organise this kind of support for yourself, see the section on *Using the materials*.

What you will need

To complete activities in this module you will need to get hold of the following documents from the clerk:

- a copy of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) guide *The College Governor*
- your college’s mission statement
- your college’s strategic plan.

Where you need to make notes in response to activity questions, we suggest you do this in a notebook or on separate sheets of loose-leaf paper, and store the information you compile along with the module for future reference.

Section 1 Introduction to strategy and educational character

Your role as a governor is to be responsible for the mission, educational character and solvency of your college. You should also keep the overall strategy of your college under review to ensure that it matches the wider educational environment. Governors need to assure themselves that their college provides the services required by the communities they serve.

In understanding the role of governors it is helpful to contrast it with that of the college management. College management is responsible for:

- developing and proposing the educational character and mission of the college to the governing body
- developing and managing services and academic activities.

Broadly, governance is primarily concerned with formulating and monitoring medium- and long-term strategy, while management is concerned with implementing those strategies.

Governors bring a broad experience to their task. They may have local business interests, be employed by other key local agencies such as the local education or unitary authority, or come from community or voluntary sector organisations. This wide experience should be drawn on when reviewing such things as the college's proposals for programmes of learning, major investments of assets, and medium- and long-term strategies.

Governors have a critical role as the custodians of the mission, ethos and educational character of the college. This means that they are responsible for checking that strategic decisions comply with and implement the agreed college statements about ethos, educational character and mission. It is their role to identify any substantial drift.

How can the role of governors and management be distinguished?

Consider the following situation at a college. This fictitious scenario embodies several issues related to governors' role in shaping strategy and educational character. While it is very unlikely that a real college would face all these difficulties at once, this case study brings together a number of common dilemmas faced by governing bodies.

A tense moment at Bluewater College

The term's full governing body meeting in May had a packed agenda. The principal needed to reach agreement with the governing body on a number of key issues.

Firstly, the college strategic plan needed to be sent to the funding council the following week. The chair had suggested that the whole governing body should discuss the plan, rather than just 'signing it off' as had happened in previous years.

Secondly, the proposal for a new building development needed to be agreed.

Following a complex restructuring process, the principal submitted proposals for redundancies. Notices had to be issued within a week of the meeting, so that the new structure could be in place in September.

Many of the governors had seen press articles about colleges in financial difficulty. They were aware that in the last set of management accounts Bluewater College had forecast a £500,000 year-end deficit. After reading the papers sent out before the meeting, there was general concern amongst governors that the next strategic plan also meant a deficit budget.

The chair had already expressed concerns to some governors that the college needed to run different learning programmes which would return to the college's original focus, stated in its mission, on being a provider for high-achieving students on advanced-level programmes. Some governors were concerned that the re-structuring proposal meant the loss of long-serving staff members with high levels of qualification and experience.

One of the governors felt that the new building plans were too modern in design and that a different firm of architects should be tasked to design a more traditional extension.

Activity What should the governors' approach be in the meeting?

Consider the situation outlined at Bluewater College. Imagine that you were one of the governors at the college. On a separate piece of paper, note down three points you would want to explore with the principal at the meeting of the full governing body.

Viewpoint

This situation is one where the governors need to be very careful that they do not get diverted into discussing the detail of the proposals, rather than reviewing the impact of the proposals on the educational character, ethos and mission of the college. Some of the points that your notes might have covered are:

- Governors have a responsibility for the solvency of the college. They need to question the principal about the proposed deficit budget. The governing body should be looking at the long-term trend. Is the deficit budget for the next year solely a product of restructuring costs or is it the start of a longer-term trend?
- Governors have a responsibility for the ethos of the college. Do the restructuring proposals meet with college policy on equality of opportunity and with employment law?

Governors are responsible for the mission and educational character of the college and may need to ask:

- How do the restructuring proposals affect the educational character of the college?
- What implications does the strategic plan have in relation to the educational character of the college? Does the plan meet the needs of the community? Are the proposals consistent with the educational character and mission of the college?

Issues about the architectural character of the proposed building could be viewed as borderline between the responsibilities of governance and management. The choice of which firm of architects to engage is clearly a management decision.

You might also have suggested some of the following points:

- Discussion about which staff should be protected in the restructuring would not be appropriate governance. However, governors may wish to ask to see the redundancy policy and to be assured that legal requirements are being met.
- Suggesting ways in which the college might bring the budget forecast into balance is a management task. Governors could task the management to revisit the budget and return with one which is in balance or identifies how the college will move out of deficit within a defined period.

The case study and viewpoint illustrate the need for governors to test management objectives, as set out in the strategic plan, against the college's mission, and to scrutinise their impact on the educational character and ethos of the college. We shall now look at the issue of mission and corporate objectives more closely.

Why should governors think about mission and corporate objectives?

Mission statement and corporate objectives

A key question that governors should ask about their college is 'What's it for?' – why does the college exist? The answer should be contained in the mission statement of the college. Governors should ensure that the mission statement and the associated corporate objectives identify the college's core purpose and the ends that the college should achieve. The mission statement also provides the acid test against which current and proposed activities should be evaluated.

Role of community interests

Governors play a vital role in representing the beneficiaries of the college – the community which it serves. Governors' judgements about strategy and educational character should always be measured against the question 'What benefit does this bring to the community the college serves?'

Governance and management

'In order to be obsessive about ends, the board has got to get a lot of clutter that currently consumes its time out of the way...board members do have legitimate worries about how things are being practised (so) the board must be sure it is getting the monitoring data that keeps its worrying down.'

John Carver

This quote from John Carver highlights one aspect of his 'policy governance model', which has been widely discussed in further education and is favoured by some colleges, but not all.

John Carver's policy governance model

The model enables governing bodies to concentrate their attention on strategic leadership. They are directed to focus on **ends** rather than **means**. Governing bodies must decide upon ends. Their task is not to work out what has to be done to achieve the desired ends: these are means and should be left to management to determine. Governing bodies must be about setting expectations and then monitoring them.

The model empowers governing bodies to become more visionary. They become less immersed in detail and more concerned in what Carver calls 'making a difference', in deciding about the college's effect 'on the world outside'. Mission statements and identifying priorities are about ends and are the responsibility of governing bodies. The design and execution of means or strategies to achieve those ends are the responsibility of management.

There is a danger of governors becoming embroiled in the means when their job is to set the ends – which are the educational character for the college and the standards against which the governors can assess their college's effectiveness.

Checklist: The contribution that a mission statement makes to governing body business

- It provides a clear sense of purpose and direction to the organisation.
- It specifies ends.
- It provides the parameters for management decision-making.
- It aids evaluation – by providing the benchmark or quality standard against which the college can measure its achievements.

Activity Assessing the quality of governing body contributions

Look at the case history below which describes a governor's approach to governing body meetings. Consider this approach and say whether you think it will help the governing body as a whole to discharge its duties.

Think of three examples in recent governing body meetings where you or other governors took a similar approach.

'One thing I notice our governing body sometimes does is to go into individual line items and question their validity. We question the cost And we don't comprehend the whole. And so I pick one little thing that I may know something about and question it, even though it may be an inappropriate question for me to be raising. But trying to take part in the budget process, I feel as if I've been pressured not to expose my ignorance so blatantly and to question those things that maybe I can understand.'
Governor

Viewpoint

The governor in this case study has diverted the governing body meeting into too detailed considerations, because this is what the governor is familiar with, rather than taking a strategic overview of the budget process as a whole. The role of a governor in this process is to check that overall expenditure is within

budget and complies with corporate objectives and the mission statement. Delving into detail because it is familiar is often the way in which a governing body loses sight of its true purpose. If it happens in your governing body consider ways in which the priorities for your meetings can be redefined.

Section 2 The educational environment

The educational environment has become very turbulent, or changeable, since colleges were incorporated. Your principal will, no doubt, have highlighted new issues in the national environment which affect the college. In addition broader factors affecting the college, such as globalisation and the move to a high-skills, knowledge-based economy, all have profound effects on the future direction and character of your college. Governors need periodically to review the broad educational and social environment and assess whether the college mission and objectives need to be reviewed in the light of changes.

Why keeping an eye on the broader educational environment is important

The government's Curriculum 2000 proposals are intended to make study broader and more flexible for people over the age of 16. When you come to look at this in *Module 3 Curriculum and quality* the proposals may at first appear simply as a re-packing of existing provision, but this development will significantly affect the future delivery of college programmes.

Issues in the broader environment, such as developments in information and communications technology, will require your college to change the way it delivers key curriculum and business support activities in the future. The type of programmes, staffing requirements, skills requirements, buildings provision and investment patterns of the college may all need to be reconfigured to accommodate future developments.

Of even greater significance in the longer term will be the recommendations laid out in the government White Paper, *Learning to Succeed*. This sets out proposals for the planning of learning beyond the age of 16. The implications for colleges are far-reaching. Governors will need to understand their local, regional and national responsibilities; they will need to adapt to the move from competition towards collaboration. You will need to pay close attention to these recommendations and how the college intends to implement them as they come into force over the next two or three years.

As a governor, you can add value to the strategic planning processes of your college by reviewing its curriculum offer, educational character, mission and organisational capacity in the light of changes in the environment. To be effective at this you need to keep up to date with developments within and beyond education.

Activity How can governors keep up to date with trends in the educational environment?

Note three ways in which governors can keep up to date with issues that emerge in the educational environment.

Viewpoint

You may only have time to make use of one or two of the following, and may only manage to use them sporadically, but they are all potentially useful sources of information on current issues:

- principal's monthly report – which should cover trends in the environment, not just within the college
- college newsletter
- education press (*The Times Educational Supplement, The Times Higher Education Supplement, The Guardian, The Independent, FEDA Press Scan, FE Now, etc.*)
- The websites of the Further Education Funding Council, Department for Education and Employment and 10 Downing Street
- talking to staff
- conferences.

The principal's report can be the best way of getting a grip on what is going on in the sector but reviewing some of the education press periodically will help you develop your own feel for the latest trends. Before your next governing body meeting try to access one of the sources above.

Activity What are the current key issues in the educational environment?

Over a period of two weeks, get hold of two or three newspapers or journals devoted to educational issues such as *The Times Educational Supplement*, the Education supplements of *The Guardian* or *The Independent* or journals targeted at governors. If you have access to the Internet you may wish to check some of the press releases from the website addresses listed in the section on *Useful resources* (Your college may be able to help in giving you access to some or all of these resources.)

- 1 Make a note of three issues in the educational environment that are featured in the press or on the websites.
- 2 For each issue, make notes on the ways it is likely to affect your college. Ask yourself what does this issue mean for my college? Is this issue a challenge or risk for the college or is it something we can feel confident about?

Viewpoint

- 1 You may have identified a number of issues, for example a concern about achievement standards, student absence levels, levels of staff qualifications, pay and performance of staff, levels of participation by specific groups, or suggestions that new programmes of work are required.
- 2 This activity may have helped you identify an issue that will have an important impact on your college. To develop the governing body's responsiveness to this kind of issue, governors can ask a number of further questions such as:
 - what additional information do I need to be sure my college is ready to meet this issue?
 - what changes, if any, do we need to make?
 - what resources will this require?

What should governors do?

Review the press as often as possible so that you are alert to issues likely to affect the college in the current or approaching year. Having identified the issues, you should be prepared to raise them in the appropriate committees and to question the principal on them. You may wish to ask the principal to report on current issues in the environment on a regular basis, receiving reports as part of the monthly or termly meetings of the full governing body.

Section 3 Educational character and ethos

One of the five key areas of responsibility of governors identified in the articles of government is 'the determination of the educational character and mission of the institution and ... the oversight of its activities'.

The principal's role is also outlined as a responsibility 'for making proposals to the Corporation about the educational character and mission of the institution, and for implementing the decisions of the Corporation'.

Your role, then, is periodically to consider proposals on the mission and character of the college, and to check whether these are appropriate for the environment in which the college finds itself.

A new governor may well ask ‘What is meant by educational character?’ Educational character is perhaps not an easy concept to take hold of at first. It is how the college delivers its mission – the kind of college it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides, its approach to teaching and learning, the quality of its partnerships with other agencies.

Why think about educational character?

Educational character and ethos are fundamental to your college. But in many colleges consideration of these issues has been ousted by over-concentration on financial objectives and imperatives. Pressures for efficiency savings have sometimes been intense, causing colleges to ignore their fundamental purposes. Consider the case history of Bluewater College.

Bluewater College

In the late 1980s Bluewater College had a national reputation for excellence in responsiveness to its local community. Its mission statement reflected this educational character and ethos. It achieved its mission despite lower-than-average levels of funding and poorly furnished and maintained accommodation.

At incorporation in 1993, it inherited this poor accommodation and suffered continuing low levels of funding income. Local competition from a prestigious sixth-form college and a large general further education college was intense. Many local schools had, or were developing, sixth forms.

Bluewater felt its options were limited – to merge with another organisation, to gradually shrink and die, or to grow through an energetic programme of franchised provision to employers. Within three years over half of its funding was used to support FEFC-funded training programmes for large national employers. In 1995 the college closed its engineering and construction departments as part of a cost-cutting approach.

Within a few years, the educational character and ethos of the college had changed significantly. Core values were growth and cost efficiency. Half of its students did not live locally. Many local residents had to travel some distance to access programmes and overall flexibility and local choice had been lessened.

In many ways the approach the college took was a rational one – it was encouraged to grow by the FEFC funding approach. Nevertheless its educational character and ethos were out of step with its mission statement and ultimately out of step with a changing educational environment. In 1997 there were strong indications that the new government was likely to use funding levers to widen participation and respond to social exclusion. In 1998 the college was inspected and received a grade 4 for governance. Governors in the college had failed in overseeing one of their core responsibilities – to set an appropriate educational character and ethos. How can you prevent a similar divergence opening between your college’s activities and its mission and ethos?

Checklist: What is the educational character of your college?

Who are the potential and actual students in your college? Is this the same as in previous years or are there any major changes? Are any changes proposed for the future? If so, what is the rationale for this change?

What kind of learning environment is there in the college? What kind of technical facilities are there? What are the social facilities for students?

What kind of teaching and learning approaches are used? Is most teaching done through lectures? How much self-study/resource-based learning do students undertake? Is information and communication technology used widely in all areas of the curriculum?

What levels of student support are offered? What levels of pastoral care are offered?

Which other agencies does the college work with? What kind of partnerships does the college have?

Activity Describe the educational character of your college

To do this activity you will need to ask your clerk for a copy of your college’s strategic plan and information about the college’s student cohort. (You may already have student cohort information to hand if you completed the activity in Module 1 *Introduction* which asked you to draw together information about your college.)

Read through the checklist above. On a separate sheet of paper note down your responses to each question. Write two or three lines on each. When you have made notes, compare your ideas with those in the viewpoint.

Viewpoint

Data from your college about your student cohort should include information on numbers of students:

- under 19
- over 19
- who are male/female
- who study full-time/part-time
- with learning difficulties
- with a disability such as partial sight or mobility problems
- in different ethnic groups
- employed and/or unemployed
- from particular postcodes.

You may also have information on students' previous qualifications and previous school.

The college's strategic plan should include information on patterns of need within the local community. The plan should indicate if there are proposals to increase or decrease certain categories of student.

You should be aware both of the physical condition of the college buildings – their state of repair and suitability – and of any plans the college has to deal with depreciation of the building stock. You should also be aware of the learning aids and resources available to students and staff, where deficiencies lie and what programmes are in place to address these deficiencies.

Teaching may be lecture-based or much more individualised. This may vary across subject areas. Information and communication technology (ICT) may be used, but perhaps in limited areas of the curriculum such as art and design and IT.

Your college may offer personal guidance and support (for example to those with housing, immigration or financial difficulties), counselling or high levels of pastoral care. Learning support may be offered in specialist centres or within the core curriculum. This may cover aspects such as study skills, dyslexia support, or equipment for those with partial sight or mobility problems.

The college may have limited partnerships such as an agreement with local schools to undertake school visits or to deliver some shortage subjects, or it may have much deeper partnerships with other colleges, employers, voluntary sector organisations, local authority departments, etc.

Educational character and decision-making

The effect on the educational character of the college should be borne in mind whenever you make decisions. For example, when considering the financial forecast for the next year, you need to assess whether the current educational character can be sustained if a cut in course hours is proposed.

Activity Consider educational character when making key decisions

Read through the situations below and consider them as if they applied to your own college. On a sheet of paper note down the implications for the educational character of your college.

- (a) The principal's report states that your college has won £2,000,000 revenue funding from European sources. The funding is to be used to deliver vocational skills courses to unemployed adults in computer network management, call centre operations and website design. The project must be delivered in partnership with local employers.
- (b) The principal has indicated that government priorities include widening participation to include non-traditional participants (such as those with a history of exclusion or poor attendance at school, adults with mental health difficulties, lone parents, etc). The college is considering how it might address these priorities.
- (c) The college owns a building in poor repair, in an area which is about to benefit from improved transport links. The college is proposing to sell the site for housing development and open a new site in the town centre, five miles away from the current site.
- (d) The governing body has received a report on enrolments for the current year. It shows a significant drop in the number of 16 – 19-year-old students, and a rise in students over 25 in employment.
- (e) The head of human resources presents a paper to the governing body identifying a restructuring plan which will include a redundancy programme.

Viewpoint

- (a) This involves a number of new areas of work for your college and may attract a different mix of students to the college. £2,000,000 is likely to mean a new cohort of 400 to 500 students. Depending on the size and nature of your college, this may alter its educational character. It could still be in keeping with the college mission, but the change in educational character should be registered, especially if it forms part of a pattern of change. (It may be part of a positive change.) In a small college such a large contract may have wide-ranging impact upon the character of the college.
- (b) Your college may have an excellent reputation for pastoral care and for high levels of achievement in 16–19-year-old qualifications. You may welcome the broadening of the student base, but need to assess how widening participation may affect the college. Alternatively it may be a specialist college with the potential to offer exciting entry-level qualifications to those with basic skills needs. Whatever the nature of your college, widening participation challenges you to engage students you currently do not recruit. In all cases, you will need to ask questions about the type of staffing and professional development which may be required to ensure staff are well prepared. You will need to ensure that appropriate types of student support are available.
- (c) The educational character of the college may be one of local responsiveness. Moving to a new site may mean that the college can no longer attract its traditional student groups. The students attracted to the town centre site may be very different. You need to ask if the change is in keeping with the college mission and how the change in take-up is to be addressed.
- (d) Any major shift in enrolment patterns should be discussed by the governing body – it may be necessary to ask the principal for further information. This could be part of a change in the market that the college is seeking to address (for example a shift from working with 16–19-year-olds in the face of heavy competition). The key check will be back to the mission statement to see if the educational character of the college still fulfils the mission.
- (e) Any restructuring may affect the educational character. For example, there may be high levels of redundancy proposed in one area, such as student services. The character of the college may currently be that of supporting students with financial and personal difficulties. Proposals to reduce course hours may reduce the quality of pastoral care. The governing body should seek to question the proposed action, asking the principal to identify how the plan proposed will ensure that the educational character of the college is sustained.

How can governors safeguard the educational character of the college?

Governors need to review any strategic proposals to assure themselves that any changes will not adversely affect the educational character of the college. This will help to ensure that there is no drift away from the agreed purpose identified in the mission and needs statements. They also need to assure themselves that the character of the college complies with the wider educational environment. (See Section 4.)

Section 4 The college strategic plan – key aspects

What kind of institution does the governing body want?

A key role for governors is to decide what kind of institution they want, and to ensure it is delivered. This requires strategic thinking and a strategic plan. However, it is important to note that while you are responsible for ensuring that the planning process is effectively managed, detailed planning is primarily the responsibility of management. Your major contribution lies ahead of the detailed planning stage. It lies in determining the strategic objectives which the plan is designed to achieve.

The College Governor explains that governors have a particular responsibility for the development and pursuit of medium- to long-term objectives. It is the function of your college's strategic plan to realise these medium- and long-term objectives.

The College Governor provides detailed information on what should be contained within the strategic plan. To fulfil your role as 'critical friend' in this process you need to have an overview of your college's activities and the context within which it operates rather than detailed knowledge of the minutiae of college life.

Activity The contents of the strategic plan

- 1 Work through items 5.2 to 5.4 in Section C1 of *The College Governor* and identify which of those elements you have not seen.
- 2 Make a note of how you intend to access these data.
- 3 Write a short commentary against each element to remind you what you will be looking for when you receive this information and how you will use it to contribute to the planning process. (6.1 of Section C1 in *The College Governor* will help here).

Viewpoint

If there are a number of elements which you have not seen, you may want to consider the suggestion in *Module 1 Introduction, Section 7 The relationship between the governing body and the management team* that you review the relationship you have as a governing body with the senior managers of your college.

Activity Evaluating your contribution to strategic thinking

The following passages are taken from college inspection reports. They provide clear examples of how not to fulfil the role. As you read through the passages, evaluate to what extent they are relevant to your own college. Self-assessment is about continuous improvement. Are there lessons here for you and your college which you might want to pursue? If so, note down one or two points for action covering:

- what I need to do
- who I need to talk to
- when I need to do it.

Quotes from inspection reports

The information (governors) receive on retention and achievements is not sufficiently reliable or detailed to assist decision-making.

There is too little discussion of some important issues, for example, students' achievements, the profile of students who enrol and some aspects of the curriculum. ...There are no systematic arrangements nor are targets set that might help to ensure that the college is effectively managed.

There is no evidence that governors set targets for the college and its senior managers to achieve. The governors largely react to advice from managers.

Governors do not have the information they need to monitor the performance of the plan against its strategic goals.

Governors have played little part in strategic planning, and have not monitored the achievements of the college's plan.

Viewpoint

Some of the examples above provide a powerful indication of how governors can fall short of thinking strategically. When that happens they are unable to

set parameters for management to design a strategic plan. The relationship between yourselves as governors and the principal and senior managers is, therefore, crucial. Their role here is to ensure that you are fully and appropriately briefed to enable you to determine the overall direction of the college. If you can't do that then you will not be able to provide them with the parameters they will need to design a strategic plan.

A note on planning

As we have seen, strategic plans are an essential requirement for colleges. They provide the FEFC with important information on the effectiveness of the college and its long-term viability, and are an internal instrument for monitoring progress against targets.

However, you should bear in mind that planning has its weaknesses. In the complex and uncertain environment in which all organisations find themselves, plans can often be superseded by new developments. As circumstances change, plans need to be adapted. Plans are only valid for the circumstances in which they were drawn up.

Section 5 Organisational capacity

Governors are required to assure themselves that the operation of their college is well managed. This includes a responsibility for the 'oversight of its activities' and for 'the effective and efficient use of resources'.

One key aspect of this responsibility is reviewing whether the organisation has the capacity to deliver the proposed activities. Governors should put questions at governing body and committee meetings to test out whether the college has the organisational capacity to meet the demands placed on it by the strategic plan or by proposals for special projects.

Governors' responsibility for organisational capacity

The college management is responsible for deciding how college resources should be applied to deliver the strategic plan. But governors are responsible for considering longer-term resource implications arising from major changes in the environment. These considerations should inform their scrutiny of the annual strategic plan and of new developments as they arise. They need to test out resource implications by quizzing the senior team about accommodation, equipment, staffing and professional development.

Activity Is the college ready to deliver the programmes proposed?

Look at your college's strategic plan. Identify one of the key aims identified in the plan. Has the college considered the implications of the proposed action in terms of:

- (a) the annual budget
- (b) equipment investment
- (c) accommodation strategy
- (d) staffing
- (e) staff development?

Viewpoint

Sometimes a college proposes a new development – for example, to develop resource-based learning as a major delivery mechanism for all college programmes – without fully considering its viability. Staff may not have the necessary skills; further IT equipment and software may need to be purchased; accommodation requirements may change.

Governors need to make sure that managers have considered the strategic implications of the proposed action. They should not seek to present different ways of tackling the issue but they should provide a 'reality check'. Governors can do this by asking 'checking questions' such as:

- How does the college plan to implement this development?
- What are the implications for our financial/accommodation/human resource strategy?

As with the assessment of organisational capacity required by the strategic plan, governors should be posing questions about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment.

Activity Is the college ready to meet the challenges from the changing educational environment?

Look back at Section 2, where you identified key issues in the educational environment. Choose one of these. What are the implications for the college in terms of:

- (a) financial forecasts
- (b) equipment investment
- (c) accommodation strategy
- (d) staffing
- (e) staff development?

Viewpoint

Governors need to have a long time frame in mind when assessing the ability of the college to respond to changes in the educational environment. They should expect the college management to explain how they intend to develop the organisation over the next three to five years.

For example, if the college is seeking to widen participation, governors might wish to assure themselves that staff are to be supported in acquiring the skills to meet the needs of new student groups. If the college is seeking to work with employers, governors might want to establish how equipment and accommodation could be developed to meet demands for up-to-date and flexible provision. In both cases governors would expect to see resources allocated to these purposes in the college financial strategy.

What should governors do?

As each new proposal for college activities is brought to governors, governors should adopt a role of 'critical friend' – double-checking that the implications for medium- and long-term management of resources have been considered against proposed developments.

Section 6 Using meetings to monitor the college's strategic plan

As a member of the governing body you are responsible for monitoring and reviewing the long-term policies that have been established by the governing body to achieve the mission.

To do this you need to bear in mind the issues identified for governing bodies in Section 1. To recap, these are to:

- avoid becoming immersed in detail and losing sight of the governance role
- identify the purpose of the organisation
- put in place the policies to achieve that purpose.

Your role is to monitor the progress of strategic priorities and the extent to which they have been effectively accomplished. It is management who must develop the strategies to realise the mission. You do not have the time to become involved in this. Your concern should be 'Are we on target? And if not, what are the reasons and how can the problem be resolved?'

How to monitor compliance with the strategic plan

The main resource available to you for carrying out your monitoring responsibilities is the cycle of the governing body's full and committee meetings. These provide the opportunities for you to scrutinise management's fulfilment of the strategic plan by requesting items to be placed on the agenda and asking pertinent questions.

The questions below provide a model for the type of questions that you might ask at a governing body meeting.

Asking searching questions

- Q. Can we clarify that our student recruitment, retention and achievement this year has met the target we set?
- Q. What does that shortfall mean for us in terms of revenue? What strategies are open to us to rectify the situation for this academic year?
- Q. Do we have a breakdown of how these data on student recruitment, retention and achievement are distributed across the curriculum areas?
- Q. I would like to see a commentary attached to these figures which explains the trends which are emerging and the implications they have for meeting our targets.
- Q. How does our curriculum offer reflect the needs of the community we serve? Is there scope for improving its appropriateness? Does it remain in line with our mission?
- Q. What changes do we envisage to our provision from September 2000? Do they have implications for a revision of our mission?
- Q. What additional spend do we anticipate in the light of the FEFC Circular 99/18 *Information and Learning Technology*? How will we resource this? What will 'have to give'?

- Q. How do our achievements compare with those of other colleges in the region?
- Q. How can we learn from some of these colleges? Is there scope for establishing some collaborative ventures?
- Q. Do we have any data on what employers want from us?
- Q. The staff survey reveals that staff see some managers as remote from day-to-day issues. How is this impacting on our mission? What action are we taking to address this?
- Q. Some of the responses from the student satisfaction survey appear to suggest that we have been less than successful in meeting one of our key priorities for student satisfaction. What steps will be taken to remedy this?

Activity Using questions as a means of monitoring at governing body and committee meetings

Read through the list of questions above and consider how they might apply to your college. Choose one of the questions which is relevant to your situation and send it to the chair or clerk of the committee for the agenda of the next appropriate meeting

Viewpoint

You may already be asking these kinds of questions. If so, are you satisfied with the responses you are getting? If not, what has prevented you from contributing in this way, and do you feel you have the resources to tackle the issues?

The cycle of academic meetings

The academic year has a cycle of key events which need to be reflected in the agendas for the governing body and committee meetings. This cycle provides you with an easily accessible checklist to help you monitor and review the long-term policies established by the governing body.

Activity Your college and the annual cycle

Table 1 provides a typical example of the annual cycle of governing body meetings and the issues appropriate at different times of the year.

Table 1 The annual college cycle and governor responsibilities

Throughout the year	Autumn term	Spring term	Summer term
Policy review/revisions	Achievements	Retention	Retention
College Charter	Recruitment	Review mission	Budget
Receive management reports	Student profile	College targets	Set targets
Keep updated on new initiatives	Retention	Conduct self-assessment	Financial forecast
Consider inspection report	Targets met?	Curriculum offer?	Strategic targets
Consider self-assessment report	Staff survey	Prospectus	Admissions
Management accounts	Student satisfaction	Contribution to community	Sign-off plan
	Employer satisfaction		
	Strategic targets		
	College annual accounts		

Look at Table 1, and compare the cycle of meetings and agenda items with those of your college. How many of the agenda items does your governing body consider:

- throughout the year
- in the Autumn term
- in the Spring term
- in the Summer term?

Viewpoint

The cycle and agenda items in Table 1 are not an exhaustive list – there will be different issues with a legitimate demand on governor time at your college. But think carefully about any items mentioned in the table which are missing from your list. Do you know why your governing body has not considered them? If you don't know the reason, how will you find out?

For more information about the annual cycle of meetings and financial strategy, see *Module 4 Financial management*. For information about the clerk's role in planning and co-ordinating the annual cycle of governing body business, see *Module 6 The clerk to the corporation*.

Activity The governing body's agenda

Consider the following passage:

The main thing about the board agenda is that it really must be the board's agenda, not the staff's agenda for the board. The board owns it, it's the board's agenda. I think if I were honest about it, we'd have to admit that usually the agenda material comes more from the president than anybody else. So in fact the agenda is really an executive kind of agenda, but raised to the board level. That doesn't produce a governance agenda.
John Carver

If you substitute 'principal' for 'president' in the quote, does this reflect your experience of governing body agendas? Do you think your governing body needs to take more control of its meetings agendas? If this is so, note down what you intend to do about it.

Viewpoint

If this quote echoes your own experience, maybe it is because the governing body has not felt confident in the past about compiling an appropriate agenda. Or maybe the governing body felt that the principal had more expertise to conduct the business in that way. Whatever the reasons it is clear that to act as a truly effective governing body you must be more proactive in determining agendas.

Obviously we cannot prescribe how your governing body should compile its agendas, but Table 1 is a comprehensive summary of how an effective governing body would cover strategic objectives in its work over the year. The key issue to appreciate is the way in which the cycle of student recruitment, retention and achievement drives the rest of the business of the college.

The setting and monitoring of targets, the consideration of the curriculum offer, financial forecasting and the signing-off of the strategic plan all fit within a coherent schedule of requirements and responsibilities. Adherence to this cycle is a prerequisite of effective governance in further education.

Activity Your college and the committee structure

Consider the passages below, which are taken from the work of John Carver, who has published widely on governance, and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 how many committees does the governing body operate?
- 2 outline the contribution that each committee makes to the work of the governing body
- 3 does your committee structure fit these assumptions?
- 4 is there scope for a reconsideration of the role of your committees in the light of Carver's observations?

Committees will assist the board by preparing policy alternatives and implications for governing body deliberation.

Committees are often impediments to good governance.

Committees are O.K. if they exist to help the board do a part of its job. But there should never be a board committee to help the staff do any part of the staff job. When you put that admittedly absolute rule into effect, a lot of committees just disappear. The board then is left with committees which only help the board get its own job done.

I am against board committees that blur the line between governance jobs and management's jobs.

I'm against board committees that fragment the board into little pieces that know a lot about one thing and little about anything else.

John Carver

Viewpoint

The allocation of committees can be a controversial topic. The key consideration must be to evaluate the extent to which the committees you currently operate enable the governing body to be more effective. You need to be asking yourself the questions:

- what are the committees for?
- whose interests do they serve?
- do they assist and inform you or do they provide specialist input for areas in which you and other governors have no expertise?

The clerk to the governing body can play a valuable role in supporting the work of committees, preparing their agendas and co-ordinating their activities with that of the governing body to ensure maximum effectiveness. For more information about the support that governors can expect from the clerk see *Module 6 The clerk to the corporation*.

Module review

This module has looked at governors' responsibilities for formulating the strategy and educational character of the college. If you have worked through the whole module you should now be confident that you can:

- explain the purpose of your college strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment
- describe how your college's mission and ethos inform its strategy
- explain how the educational character of your college reflects its mission, ethos and strategy
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your college
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the college.

If you are not sure that you have achieved a particular goal, look back at the list of contents on page 2. You may find it useful to reread the relevant section.

Summary of key learning points

Governors are responsible for keeping the medium- to long-term strategy of the college under review, while management is responsible for implementing strategic (corporate) objectives.

A college's educational character, mission and ethos should meet the needs of the communities it serves and inform the direction of all college activities.

Colleges exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change. Governors need to keep up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves 'How will this affect my college?'

A college's educational character – the kind of college it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides – can change as a result of planning decisions. Governors have a key role in ensuring decisions and developments fit the college's educational character.

Governors need to be active in setting strategic objectives for college management, rather than simply reacting to managers' advice. This may call for additional skills and training in thinking strategically.

Governors should be ready to pose searching questions to the governing body and managers about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment, and changes proposed in the strategic plan.

The governing body needs to monitor managers' progress in achieving strategic priorities. The annual cycle of governing body meetings provides the means for doing this, provided governors are active in setting the agenda and asking searching questions.

Committees should help the governing body get this job done. Committees which fragment the governing body or simply exist to help staff get their job done do not help good governance.

Where next?

You have now completed work on *Module 2 Strategy and educational character*. If there are areas in which you need more guidance or information, they may be covered in other modules. Turn to the section *Check your current knowledge and skills*. This self-assessment questionnaire will help you to decide which modules or sections of modules may help to fill these gaps. Tick the useful sections for further study.

If you cannot find the information you need, turn to the *Action planner*. Note down what further information, support or guidance you would like. The *Action planner* gives advice on who may be able to help, and how.

Putting it into action

We hope that working through this module has raised useful questions, increased your awareness of issues and given you ideas for practical action that you would like to follow up. The *Action planner* contains a section where you can note down any questions or action points that you want to follow up within your own college.

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