

Governing colleges today

**raising quality
and achievement**

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1. Introduction: a message to governors

Quality issues have not always been high on the agenda of governing bodies. Inspection processes were limited and less rigorous before incorporation. A pre-occupation with financial and personnel issues, and with rapid growth, characterised the immediate post-incorporation issues. Today, improving participation, retention and achievement demand the attention of governing bodies. They reflect Government policy to improve national competitiveness, to lessen social exclusion and to equip students with the skills needed for the future.

This FEDA report provides guidance to help you chart your own response to the challenge of improving quality and standards. It is not a replacement for induction training or training that gives you greater familiarity with curriculum, participation, retention and achievement issues.

This report assumes that governing bodies and colleges have certain systems in place, including the self-assessment cycle. The challenge is to use the system well. This report will enable you to ask, at a strategic level, more pertinent questions and to keep a sharper focus on quality issues.

This report reflects the framework of circulars that apply to further education in England but does not repeat the detail of those circulars. A companion report may be available in the future with reference to Wales. This report contains:

- Key messages for governors on quality issues
- A description of the governors' role in the quality agenda
- Personal viewpoints on key aspects of the quality agenda
- A look into the future, emphasising the enduring importance of the pursuit of high quality
- A bibliography listing key reference documents.

Throughout this report, the terms 'corporation' and 'governing body' are used interchangeably. This report has been written with the assistance of, and contributions from, John Graystone, John Hall and Robin Jones.

2. Governance and raising standards: summary and key messages

The challenge

Quality and the governors' role

Quality in further education is concerned with the students' learning experiences and successes. A close and continual focus on those experiences and their outcomes is a key part of governance. Governors have a strategic role in raising and maintaining high standards. They need to set targets to improve quality and monitor student retention and achievement. There should be debate involving the governing body, but this debate should not descend to the detail of individual quality mechanisms.

The Quality Improvement Strategy

The quality framework in further education is built on college self-assessment and internal quality assurance systems. The inspection process checks the rigour and accuracy of these systems. The FEFC Circular 98/21 sets out a Quality Improvement Strategy. The first initiatives under that strategy are to provide benchmark information, to publish college data, and to provide guidance on target setting. The Quality Improvement Strategy provides an approach whereby governing bodies can take up the challenge of raising quality. The Standards Fund, detailed in the FEFC Circular 99/24, has been introduced to support the drive to raise standards.

Getting started

Establish the current position

Colleges differ. Governance styles differ. Colleges' existing quality assurance systems differ. Taking up the quality improvement challenge requires you to examine the current situation in your college to establish your particular starting point.

You should consider:

- Your need to seek consultancy in working through this process.
- Your approach to decision making: does a 'whole board' culture or a 'pattern of committees, working groups and affiliations to college functional areas'

best describe the organisation of the governing body and its method of working? Whatever structure is then created, the handling of quality issues should mirror the style of governance.

- Your procedures, information flow and decision-making: what contribution do these activities make towards raising standards?
- Your need for training and/or expertise within the governing body on quality processes and systems, target setting and raising standards, to help you deliver the vital quality dimension within governance.
- Your commitment to standards: has your corporation made a clear commitment to raising standards? If so, has that commitment been fully communicated throughout the college?
- Your answers, so far, in comparison to the views expressed in the college inspection report and the evidence of college self-assessment.
- Comparing your findings with other colleges.
- And finally produce an action plan setting out the governing body's drive to raise standards.

Identify the requirement

A number of FEFC Circulars set out for governors what has to be done, when and in what format. This information, and the clerk's knowledge of it, provide support to the governing body. Governing bodies should use the guidance on:

- **The role of self-assessment** both as part of a college's continuous quality improvement strategy and within the inspection framework: action plans should stem from self-assessment and from the college's written response to weaknesses identified in the inspection report (FEFC Circulars 97/12 and 97/13).
- **Target setting**, including retention and achievement targets, at departmental and college levels: precise instructions exist for the format and the timing to be followed for approval by the governing body and forwarding to the FEFC (FEFC Circulars 98/35 and 99/08).
- **Aiming for accredited status.** Amongst other things, accredited status is proof that quality standards are embedded in the operation of a college (FEFC Circulars 98/22 and 98/41).

Creating a solution for your college

When you have established the current situation and clarified what you must do to discharge your responsibilities for raising standards, the governing body should:

- Consider using the Standards Fund (FEFC Circular 99/24) to help focus on raising quality in your college
- Make use of a thorough self-assessment of the governance function – but remember to keep quality issues foremost in mind
- Work with clerk and college senior management to prepare the ground for the 'quality dimension' in the oversight of the college performance
- Revise the structure and role of committees or working groups to ensure a clear focus on standards in decision making and in the operational activities of the college
- Communicate your commitment throughout the college and emphasise:
 - The need for an open and constructive culture of self-assessment that welcomes identification of areas for improvement rather than attributes blame
 - A determination to celebrate high levels of achievement rather than dwell exclusively on problem areas
 - The need for feedback at all levels if standards are to rise
 - The value of using some of the intervention strategies suggested by hard evidence as ways of improving retention and achievement.
- Embed the theme of 'raising standards' in the college strategic plan and make sure that this theme is present in management and in action plans at all levels.
- Get started as soon as possible – familiarity and expertise come with practice not with sitting on the sidelines. Belief that the governing body is capable of and can effectively carry out the quality role will grow as you tackle the task and make it a priority.

3. Governance and the quality agenda

Overview

Responsibilities of the corporation

Every corporation is responsible for:

- Determining the educational character and mission of the institution, and for overseeing its activities
- The effective and efficient use of resources, the solvency of the institution and of the corporation, and for safeguarding their assets
- Appointing, grading, suspending, dismissing and determining the pay and conditions of service of the holders of senior posts and of the clerk to the corporation
- Setting a framework for the pay and conditions of service of all other staff
- Approving annual estimates of income and expenditure.

FEFC's Quality Improvement Strategy

The strategy (FEFC Circulars 98/21 and 98/37) is a multi-faceted programme intended to help colleges raise the standards of their work. The first initiatives of the strategy are:

- Publication of benchmarking data from the individualised student record using data for 1995–96 and for 1996–97
- Provision of individual college performance data on retention and qualifications achievement
- Guidance on target setting
- Extended re-inspection arrangements, where applicable
- Accreditation.

Governing bodies and quality issues

Many governing bodies meet their responsibilities for education and quality issues and receive good inspection grades for governance. Indicators of good practice which you could use to help review your own position include:

- Effective involvement in strategic planning and quality assurance

- Clear focus on the importance of each student's performance – achievement, retention and progression
- Rigorous monitoring of course, departmental and college data on teaching and learning
- Involvement in determining the college's values and strategic direction
- Strong commitment to the college and to involvement in the community.

Governing bodies and quality: the problematic issues

Good practice is not so universal. The Chief Inspector's annual report 1998–99, *Quality and standards in further education* (FEFC, 1999), contains a number of cautionary statements.

- *Another key characteristic of successful colleges is effective governance ... the governance of the great majority of colleges is sound [but] even in those colleges where governance is satisfactory, there is not enough recognition of the need for governors to assure themselves that their college's academic performance is of the highest standard.*
- *The Council's review of guidance for governors ... and the development of material in support of governor training, will help to sharpen the focus on standards during corporation meetings.*
- *A substantial number [of colleges] have yet to determine the measures of college performance that will enable them to carry out this role [monitoring the college's progress in implementing its strategic plan] effectively.*

Raising quality: the agenda for governors

There are several elements that contribute to the 'quality' dimension of governance:

- **The self-assessment process** by which colleges seek to ensure quality on a continual basis and as part of the inspection and audit cycle. The governance is one of the separate elements within that cycle. Governors can become more involved in self-assessment at two levels: their own governance function and the college-wide level by.
- **Taking the lead** and making a clear statement of the board's intention to monitor the quality and standards of provision on offer in the college.
- **Debating, approving and monitoring targets**, linked to performance indicators, using the information provided by FEFC benchmarking data about retention and achievement. Some practical advice to tackle this aspect whilst minimising the time required is contained in *Measuring performance – improving quality* (FEDA, 1999).

- **Pursuing accreditation**, which the FEFC has adopted as part of an overall strategy to help colleges raise the standards of their work and improve student achievement.

Quality: structure and culture

The invitation

Baroness Blackstone's letter of 9 February 1999 to chairs of governors invited them to consider the desirability of 'all governing bodies at the very least designating a specific governor who will have a responsibility for pursuing standards issues ... it would be even better to establish a "standards committee" along the lines of existing financial committees, to reflect the importance of this issue.'

Whilst not making a standards committee a statutory requirement, FEFC gave full support to the thrust of the recommendation. All colleges are encouraged to introduce arrangements to ensure that members are well placed to monitor the quality and standards of provision on offer in the college.

The corporation response

Structures

The response of governing bodies to Baroness Blackstone's invitation will depend upon the degree to which they judge that effective quality monitoring structures are already in place. The structure will depend on their particular approach to decision making and to business.

An existing and effective **whole corporation approach** to decision making is a powerful reason to retain quality issues as a matter for the governing body as a whole. This brings the added benefit of stimulating debate, knowledge and ownership among the greatest number of governors.

A **strong committee culture** may lead towards consideration of quality issues by either a specially formed standards committee or by assigning the task to an existing committee. Where such an approach is adopted it is essential to see that the committee's views are properly known and debated by the whole corporation.

Governor representation on management groups or affiliation to cross-college functions, such as quality assurance, can achieve some governance oversight of routine college operation. As with the committee approach, the challenge remains that of bringing the topic into the corporation's discussion and decision making forum. An approach designating a governor with responsibility for quality can be a starting point if no other mechanisms exist. However, it risks keeping discussion of quality issues away from the full governing body.

The choice of structure is for each governing body to decide. However, the importance of the quality issue is such that, eventually, the debate can only benefit from involving all governors.

Commitment

It is essential that the governing body demonstrates a clear commitment to raise standards, communicates this commitment throughout the college and holds it foremost in mind at all meetings. The corporation must accept and communicate its acceptance of responsibility for quality policies and strategy in the same way as it does, for example, for personnel, finance and estates. Strategies to raise achievement and retention work best where they are accompanied by a strong lead and by an uncompromising commitment from governors and the senior management team.

Forming the culture: messages

Governors should ask themselves what 'messages' they give, individually and collectively, about the importance that they attach to quality and improvement. Remember that it is often the intangibles, rather than formal statements and structures, which convey the most powerful messages. Questions you can ask include:

- How much time is spent discussing student achievement and retention issues? Limited time and infrequent discussion carries the clear message that quality issues are not that important.
- What do you regard as 'success' or 'failure'? How is the former celebrated and communicated to the entire college and what is done about the latter?
- What links does the governing body have, either as a whole or through individual members, to curriculum and cross-college functions? If these are important areas of college business, key areas where quality improvement will be achieved, they deserve direct contact and recognition (with the caveat of avoiding stepping into college management activity).

Forming the culture: a check on procedures

As a governor, there are a number of questions you can ask about governing bodies' activities with regard to raising quality. The answers will suggest steps that the corporation should take towards creating a quality improvement culture. One possible checklist is as follows:

Key elements Are key elements in place?

- An overall policy on quality
- The setting and regular monitoring of targets
- Focus within targets on measurable improvements in the retention and success of students
- Regular reporting arrangements
- Links to action plans, staff development and appraisal.

Information available to governors Does the information presented to governors include:

- The annual report and, in particular, satisfy yourselves that it contains a concise summary of the self-assessment review and key performance indicators?
- An action plan to address weaknesses revealed by self-assessment?
- Regular information on performance indicators involving student and course, departmental and college achievement, retention and progression, presented in such a way that trends are easily identified and can be compared to natural data or that from similar institutions?

Decision making Ask yourself if the information is used by governors when analysing and debating:

- **Policy review, development and decisions.** Do college policies and ‘standard operating procedures’ enable governors to discuss quality issues? An implications paragraph that included ‘quality issues’ incorporated as a standard part of all papers put before the corporation could be one powerful means of keeping the quality issue to the forefront of decision making.
- **Strategic planning.** Does the strategic planning process help or hinder responsiveness to some or all of the range of courses offered, the cross college services that support students, and the distribution of resources?
- **Monitoring.** Can trends and any diversion from the college mission be quickly and readily detected? Does the monitoring include questioning existing practices that may otherwise roll on from year to year?

Expertise and training What training have you received to help you understand quality issues?

- The quality issue is so important that the board’s ‘intelligent view’ on the topic cannot be the preserve of only a few, even though in-depth expertise among some members is an asset.
- Information on curriculum and quality: The content should cover the essential quality processes and systems on the one hand, and target setting, raising standards, student retention and progression on the other.

Quality improvement culture

Embedding the drive to raise quality

Action by the governing body alone will not raise quality. The drive to raise and maintain quality standards must be embedded in college

management procedures and in the minds of all staff. Raising quality has to be an integral part of college life.

Evidence

You need to be certain that quality issues are embedded in your college. If this is not the case, your corporation needs to provide clear strategic direction to college management on this issue. Although it is not your role to run quality systems, governors do need to satisfy themselves that effective systems are in operation. You might ask for evidence that the following are in place as part of the general organisation of the college and see that they form part of the evidence examined as part of the of self-assessment cycle:

- An annual review of courses
- Annual programme area action plans that address achievement difficulties and include specific targets drawn up with managers
- Service standards, action plans, targets for support areas that are embedded in a similar annual review process
- An annual report that records those targets that have been met and identifies and gives reasons for those not met
- Management structures that facilitate leadership, implementation and monitoring of the quality assurance function
- Job descriptions for senior managers and team leaders that include reference to raising standards
- The use of mentoring to help keep to the fore the drive to raise standards and methods of achieving that goal
- Evidence of improvement as an indicator that quality assurance is having an effect.

Target setting

The governors’ role

Council’s guidance to colleges (FEFC Circulars 98/35 and 99/08) requires colleges to set and report on annual targets for levels of student retention and the achievement of qualifications. The governing body should:

- **Agree and monitor targets** as part of their duties in respect of college performance review and strategic planning. Additionally, they have an influential role in agreeing targets and in monitoring their college’s progress towards them.
- **Work to a timetable:** they must consider and approve targets for the current teaching year before they are sent to the FEFC, by the end of March of each year. Additionally, they must review performance against previous targets.

- **Use the two FEFC publications** produced annually for target setting. One comprises an analysis of targets set by colleges and is intended to inform future target setting. The other lists the targets set and the performance of each college, as reported by colleges, with a summary analysis of the sector's performance as a whole.

Setting appropriate targets

You should expect that the targets proposed to you by college managers will:

- Be set annually for all programmes offered by a college at departmental or sectional level and be aggregated to form targets for the whole college
- Specify levels of retention and the achievement of qualifications
- Be in a format that matches the national benchmarking data published by FEFC
- Reflect the objective of raising levels of student retention and achievement each year, or of maintaining them at a very high level
- Use the individualised student record as the primary instrument for recording progress against targets
- Conform, when presented, to the college's normal cycle of business.

The inspection process, self-assessment and accreditation

Quality and inspection

- You should appreciate that the Government's aim to promote improvements in quality is met, in part, by the inspection process.
- Within that process, quality improvement is the outcome of a combination of:
 - the inspection
 - the inspection report
 - the requirement to develop post-inspection action plans
 - reinspection of weaknesses.
- FEFC Circular 97/12 sets out the framework for assessing quality in the further education sector. The governance function is among the areas that are graded in the whole college inspection.

Self-assessment and inspection

- Self-assessment by colleges of the quality of their provision is central to the inspection framework.

However you should appreciate that self-assessment is a continuous process in colleges. It is designed to enable improvement, not just to monitor and report it.

- Extensive guidance to colleges on how self-assessment reports will be used during the inspection is contained in FEFC Circulars 97/12 and 97/13.
- The Circulars have relevance to you in three ways:
 - They contain information applicable to the self-assessment of governance
 - They explain the inspection process as a whole
 - They draw your attention to the type and range of characteristics associated with effective quality assurance procedures and the vital nature of their linkage to the self-assessment process.

Accreditation

The purpose of accreditation is to encourage colleges to achieve high standards of performance and accountability and to maintain these standards over time. The tangible benefit to colleges is a reduction in the extent to which they are subject to inspections.

Accreditation and quality assurance

To fulfil the Council's criteria for accreditation, your college will be expected to show that 'it has established comprehensive, effective and rigorously applied systems of management control and quality assurance covering all aspects of its work'.

Using the accreditation criteria to raise quality

Aside from the accreditation process, you can use the five accreditation criteria, laid down in FEFC Circular 98/41, as a check list to help you determine the strength and breadth of college quality assurance procedures and generate action plans to tackle any weaknesses shown. The criteria are:

- The existence in the college of formal and effective control, quality assurance and monitoring arrangements.
- Regular and rigorous self-assessment, validated during the course of inspection.
- The setting and consistent achievement of appropriate targets for institutional performance.
- Demonstration that standards of students' achievement are being improved and/or maintained at a high level over a three year period.
- Effective action to address weaknesses and demonstrate the college's accountability.

4. Viewpoints

This section presents the viewpoints of four individuals each of whom has considerable experience of the governance function. Each contributor emphasises different aspects of the link between governance and quality. These viewpoints will reinforce what you have read so far and give you further, fresh, thoughts on the subject.

Quality and governance

John Graystone, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region

A number of 'key messages' stand out very clearly from an analysis of comments on governance found in FEFC inspection reports:

- Governors should pay more attention to academic performance, to quality assurance and to monitoring the college's progress in implementing its strategic plan.
- Governors have an influential role in target setting and monitoring particularly with regard to enrolments, retention, achievement and student distinction.
- Governors need to be aware of the 'central business' of the college: teaching and learning.

The frequency of comments on specific aspects of governance indicates the importance and need for attention to them. See Table 1 below.

The important role of governors in setting the strategic direction of the college is balanced by the need to monitor the achievements of the plan. The monitoring function of the governors makes a key contribution to improving quality. The Government has recently emphasised the importance of training existing governors and of induction training for new governors. The latter need to be clear about their roles and responsibilities, with particular reference to the overall performance of their college.

Quality and governance

John T Hall, Head of Education Law, Eversheds

The central nature of quality

Continuous improvement in the quality of services to students and the local community is central to the well being of every college. It is one of the reasons why colleges were granted corporate independence in 1993. Quality should be the yeast in the dough of the incorporated further education sector and, unless governors have a very clear understanding of what is meant by 'quality' (other than in terms of financial performance), values such as 'mission', 'achievement' and 'equality' will be of little meaning.

A practical approach by governors: a matter of attitude

What practical steps can governors take to ensure that they oversee the strategic direction of the college effectively and in a way that improves quality? This question is easier to pose than to answer. However, I think that the attitude adopted by governors when discharging their responsibilities is as important as the list of indicative sources of evidence of self-

Table 1. Top ten aspects of governance activity identified in inspection reports

Incidence	Number of mentions	%
Monitoring the strategic plan and academic performance	223	14.1
Involvement in strategic planning	197	12.5
Commitment, experience and expertise	175	11.1
Conduct of business and operations	168	10.7
Financial monitoring and reporting	141	9.6
Committee structure	137	8.7
Clerking	87	5.5
Involvement in evaluation of own performance	86	5.5
Clear distinction between governance and management	74	4.7
Induction and training of governors	73	4.6

assessment laid down by FEFC. For example:

- Promoting action – not bureaucracy: governors must not simply adopt college policies; they must actively promote them. There must be no room for paying lip service to governance policies or treating key procedures (e.g. those relating to delegation) as a bureaucratic inconvenience.
- Challenging – not complacent – acceptance: governors must be ready to challenge assumptions, demand well-ordered agendas and quality briefings, and never be reluctant to ask management relevant questions or to press for an answer.
- Real – not superficial – involvement: governors must involve themselves fully in the strategic planning process and ensure that every major decision is informed by the college's strategic and operational plans.
- Focus on student achievement: governors must ensure that the college's systems are focused on student achievement and support.
- Champion self-criticism: only by making themselves aware of weaknesses within the board and the college will governors be able to ensure that the necessary action plans are adopted to improve quality.

The challenge of new arrangements and expectations

Revised inspection arrangements will establish a 'loose-tight' framework of control. Colleges will have more freedom from external scrutiny but will need to demonstrate progress in achieving key performance indicators. Colleges will need to deal with the challenge of improved performance and that of widening participation. Access to good advice to help students select courses that are really suited to them will be very important if colleges are to widen participation and then, with good teaching that satisfies students, improve results and retention. These new arrangements and expectations present governors with important areas demanding their attention.

Accreditation

Robin Jones, Chair, Association of College Registrars and Administrators

Seeking accredited status

Colleges need to give serious consideration to the pros and cons of seeking accredited status and remember that the FEFC can withdraw that status if it is thought

that a college has failed to maintain the expected standards. Questions to ask include:

- How does pursuit of accredited status fit with the college strategic plan?
- How does a college maintain the standards for accredited status once it has been achieved?

Implications of accredited status

Governors could usefully bear in mind that:

- Achieving accredited status should not be seen as a short-term project – demonstrating that high standards can be maintained is equally vital.
- The Council will foster the dissemination by accredited colleges of good practice. It will make available funds, at an amount to be reviewed annually. Thus, accreditation brings a commitment on the college to be involved in spreading good practice.

Accountability for learning

- Governors are accountable for the outcomes of learning and report to the local community how improvements in learning have been brought about.
- Governors assess their own performance and monitor and set targets for student performance.

Deciding the criteria for good governance

Ideally, governors should decide on the criteria for good governance that are right for their own college. But, time is limited and you may need to seek help with the process outside of the constraints of a formal business meeting. Your clerk or your college quality manager can provide face-to-face advice. Many colleges have developed their own questionnaires for governors' self-assessment using those published earlier by the Association of Colleges. FEFC's published college inspection reports contain a wealth of information upon which a governing body can build, or review its own set of criteria to assess the governance function.

Student retention and achievement

Peter Davies, FEDA

Governing bodies can take note of many useful research findings that provide starting points for their action with regard to retention and achievement.

Retention

Findings from FEDA research indicate that the true reasons for student drop out and failure are often complex. Even so, the key points are as follows:

- Withdrawal is more likely when personal, financial or employment problems coincide with a lack of confidence that they have made the right course choice or that there is enough support in the classroom.
- Retention is more likely when there is a high level of student satisfaction and confidence in the chosen course and in the quality of teaching. Feelings of satisfaction and confidence act as a powerful support mechanism that allows external, personal problems to be handled without the student withdrawing from the course.

Satisfaction

Surveys show that student satisfaction and willingness to recommend college attendance to someone else is associated with their own positive feelings about:

- The help that they received to settle in to the college
- Their perception of teaching quality and student support.

Intervention strategies

Research with a number of colleges suggests that intervention strategies can have a positive but short-term effect on retention. Key areas for intervention are:

- Investment of time and effort into links with schools to refine the procedures for application and enrolment
- Swift follow-up of absence from class
- Better induction programmes and tutorial support
- Use of student mentoring schemes
- Good use of resource centres as a means of developing the ability of students to work independently balanced carefully with the need for direct teaching.

5. The future

The Government has made it clear in the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* that in the world of post-16 learning after 2001:

- The central challenge is to improve the quality of learners' experiences, to widen participation, and to improve retention and achievement
- Everyone undertaking education and training should expect providers to demonstrate high and rising levels of retention, completion and achievement of learning and skills objectives
- Colleges are expected to:
 - Be well governed
 - Manage and deploy funds to achieve best value for money
 - Operate with the probity required of any body receiving public funding.

These imperatives will set the overall context for the future irrespective of any changes that might occur in terms of the inspection process. The need for governing bodies to attend to quality issues represents a long-term commitment. The new culture of learning envisaged by the government will underpin national competitiveness and personal prosperity, encourage creativity and innovation and help to build a cohesive society.

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