

Learning Board Case Study

John Ruskin College



Context

The LSIS Learning Board programme was agreed and approved by the John Ruskin Sixth Form College Corporation in October 2010. The project was funded as support from a Notice to Improve and the College was requested to produce a case study within six months to review how the Learning Board project had contributed to Board effectiveness.



The report has been compiled by the Clerk to the Corporation and approved by both the Principal and the Chair of the Corporation. Any comments attributable to specific individuals are identified within the text of the report.

The case study is based on the responses to 6 key questions posed by the LSIS Learning Board consultants, Jo Matthews and Mike Snell.

Key Questions:

What were the original reasons and purpose for deciding to use the Learning Board?

Background

John Ruskin College is a small sixth form college in South Croydon.

Since approximately 2006 the College had experienced falling student recruitment and success rates. By 2008 there had been a continual three year trend of decline in student recruitment most notably in A level courses.

In addition, during 2008 the college had explored collaboration with the local authority that would have involved the local authority using the college resources for the 14-19 site of an academy. The Corporation would therefore have been legally dissolved (by order of the Secretary of State) and the College site integrated into a new Academy.

However, by the end of 2008 those plans were no longer realistic or achievable within the original timescale envisaged. Government ministers had also made it clear that they did not want the College to lose its independence and autonomy.

The College therefore decided to retain its independence as a sixth form college specialising in vocational programmes for its learners from entry level to level three. This was a challenging decision to take at a time when there had already been a sustained period of uncertainty for the College.

The College faced declining recruitment which was clearly heightened by the proposed plan to drop A Level provision which made up approximately 40% of the student cohort. In addition, this was set within the context of increasing choice of provision elsewhere; the backdrop of a changing landscape within the sector; and the imminent demise of the LSC.

In the spring term of 2009 the then Principal announced that she would retire at the end of the academic year 2008/09.

The appointment process commenced in spring 2009 for a new Principal with a new appointment made with effect from 1st September 2009.

The Chair of Governors indicated that he would step down in January 2010 and with effect from 1st January 2010 a new Chair was appointed.

In March 2010 the College received a poor OfSTED assessment with student outcomes and leadership and management being graded as inadequate.

With a new Principal and a new Chair of Governors in post, governance arrangements, structure and decision-making processes were substantially reviewed. At a strategic review day held in June 2010, the Corporation approved in principle the adoption of the Policy Model of Governance proposed by John Carver.

However, the Corporation subsequently decided based on cost and the necessary management time required to delay the full implementation of the model. A clear focus on the impending OfSTED re-inspection was considered a greater priority for managers as opposed to the re-writing of policies to conform to the policy governance framework.

The Corporation therefore decided for the year 2010/11 to suspend non-statutory Corporation committees and to meet more regularly in a 6/8 week frequency corporate mode. The intention was to ensure that all members were fully conversant with cross college issues and to strike a clear difference between ends and means, management and governance.

In September 2010, the Principal, with the agreement of the Chair approached the LSIS with the aim of developing board performance as a part of a rapid drive for transformation into becoming an outstanding provider.

By October 2010 the LSIS Learning Board programme had been agreed. Interviews with individual governors were held over the period October to December 2010 and three meetings of the Corporation were observed.

What key impacts or changes were you hoping to see?

The Board had clearly been through a very unsettling time over a number of years. Significant changes to both the College's curriculum offer and governance arrangements had taken place together with the appointment of a new tier of senior post holders.

Whilst some members had been present for a number of years, some had only recently been appointed. There were therefore diverging views amongst members and a palpable lack of Board cohesion. In addition, set against a poor OfSTED inspection in March 2010 and under the pressure of a Notice to Improve (with an impending re-inspection anticipated in March 2011) there were also concerns over whether there was sufficient time to build and develop Board trust and support and to evidence an improvement in governance.

The LSIS proposal was welcomed by the Board as it was seen as a way of helping the Board through a quagmire of change and of providing specific and targeted help to both Board members as individuals and the Board as a collective entity. It was also an opportunity to ring fence time and energy on Board development. This was development over and above simply training but on providing meaningful and practical help in achieving a better level of governance and strategic leadership.

It became apparent from early discussion with the LSIS consultants and before much of the work was undertaken that as a Board we needed to set aside time and effort in actually developing the Board as a team.

The Principal and Chair specifically were keen to see a more cohesive and effective board with the focus on strategic debate and challenge and a move away from operational detail or the mundane spotting of an inconsequential typographical error.

The focus going forward should be on mission, vision and values and it was important that the Board actively contributed to the development and review of those concepts and that there was evident "governor buy-in".

The move to a more corporate style of governance was reflected in a new format for Corporation agendas where the focus would be divided as to items for strategic debate, approval (compliance) and information. In addition, management were charged with revising the data presented to the Corporation and over time the formation of key performance indicators was debated and agreed. The intention was that the regular monitoring of key PIs would ensure that debate remained centred on those key strategic items.

The new corporate approach was also to ensure that all members had an understanding of key cross college issues ranging from the curriculum offer to financial review. As this was a relatively small college it was not unreasonable that all members should have a familiarisation with key areas. This approach would mark a move away from certain areas being simply the domain of committees and information merely being reported back to the entire Board in a "rubber stamping" exercise. The intention was also that this should encourage more open debate and participation from all. Minimal or "nil" participation was no longer to be acceptable.

Explain the process in brief and how it was organised and how it fit around board business.

The initial steps involved the circulation by email of a questionnaire prepared by LSIS which was distributed to all Board members. Members were asked to complete the questionnaire confidentially and to return it direct to the LSIS consultants.

A series of interviews were then scheduled for each member to meet with one of the two consultants. These were scheduled to take place in 1 hour slots on the days before the planned Board meetings.

The questionnaire was issued to the total number of members of the Board at that time (16 in total out of a prescribed membership of 17) and all except the then parent governor were interviewed. Of the 15 interviews conducted, 14 were face to face interviews with only one being conducted over the telephone. The Clerk was also interviewed.

Three Board meetings were observed by the LSIS consultants and these were the three consecutive Board meetings that had already been scheduled in October, November and December 2010.

The report was presented to the Board in January 2011 at the scheduled December Board meeting.

It was agreed that to allow sufficient time to discuss the report that it would form one of the main items to be reviewed at the planned away day in February 2011.

What actions did you take during the process as a result of the midterm feedback?

We sought to review the format and content of agendas as some meetings worked much better than others.

The three meetings observed by the LSIS consultants varied greatly in terms of contribution and quality. One meeting was highly interactive and engaging – with members making a significant contribution towards the revision of the College's mission, vision and values. The format had been more of a workshop than the usual more structured Board meeting.

The next one was overtaken by operational HR issues that ultimately led to a formal vote being taken on a HR issue that was not strategic. This was also the first time a formal vote had been taken on a non strategic issue. This caused the meeting to feel difficult and ultimately divisive.

Feedback from the LSIS observers informed the decision to seek to evolve the agendas and to be cautious in the quantity of items included and to defer certain items to Strategic Away days. The inclusion of timings for the agenda was also suggested as a means of assisting the Chair in moving debate along.

The third meeting reflected a much happier balance and has formed the basis for agenda setting going forward. On a practical level it was also agreed following these experiences that the Corporation would only be asked to approve the Policy Statement for all policies

(comprising scope and purpose). As all College policies and procedures were available on the College intranet, members were re-issued with passwords so that they could review the accompanying procedures at their leisure.

What impact did the report have and the reactions from the clerk/chair/principal and governor perspective? How was the report shared and the general feedback from the Board?

The impact of the report was very positive. Members really valued the opportunity to have a confidential face to face meeting with the consultants. All members were unanimous that the interviews were the key strength of the process. Members considered that there was real value in having an objective forum to express their views in a non-judgemental environment.

Issues that surprised me ranged from the general to the specific. On a general level what was surprising from the Clerk's perspective was the level of support and enjoyment that members received from being a governor of the College. "I really do – I love it – I love this college" was a quote from the report made by one member. From my perspective this level of passion hadn't been evident in the behaviour or dialogue of members. It has however reinforced for me the very real commitment that members have for the College and the journey that we have been on.

A more mundane but still relevant point was a comment made regarding the current meeting room which was felt not to provide the best environment for meetings. This view may not have been voiced in any other forum but it is a valid point and one that we are now addressing. A change to a more pleasant but corporate meeting room and the potential move to adopting e-governance is a way of the College acknowledging the contribution that members make.

The Principal commented that the process has had a marked impact on our discussions. "It is clear that the Corporation are leaning towards strategic discussions and monitoring although there remains some that are still keen to get into the operational detail."

The away day impact and the follow up that took place after that.

A Strategic Away Day was held in February 2011. The Learning Board Report clearly highlighted the general support for the Strategic Review Days which are held on a Saturday at the College. During 2010/11 there have been two such Away Days.

These events have been seen by members as a good opportunity for informal exchange and have helped to develop a more effective team based working relationship.

They are conducted in a less formal atmosphere and do not have the pressure of time commitments unlike the Corporation meetings which are conducted in the evening with a start time of 7pm and a target finish time of 9pm.

The two Away Days held this year have undoubtedly helped forge a more effective team working basis going forward. There is a much greater rapport and a sense of common purpose amongst members.

In particular, the Away Day in February 2011 saw the key involvement of the two new Vice Principals. Their contribution was significant on the day and it emphasised that in a formal Board atmosphere it is not always possible for Corporation members to really get to know and understand the strengths and personalities of the senior post holders. The new SLT introduced some “ice breaking” exercises - a novel change to our previously rather dry power point presentation format and this provided a much more energised approach to the day. Members had the opportunity to have some fun and this was certainly novel!

The day provided time for the focus to be on key issues and to regroup on the agreed values and mission.

Facilitated by the LSIS consultants the Corporation also considered the formation of a governance self assessment plan. From a Clerk’s perspective the input from the LSIS consultants who reiterated to members that this was governance self assessment and that members had to take ownership of it was welcomed.

The final and approved Governance Self Assessment Quality Improvement Plan now includes identified actions (with named governors responsible) that range from the inclusion of reports to the Corporation on local and national developments (designed to develop governors’ awareness and response to external factors) to the commissioning of a DVD about the Governing Body and its role and purpose (to be made by the Creative Industries Department) intended to build the Board as a team and to enhance relationships and build trust amongst members.

The LSIS consultants also encouraged members to persist with the new format for agendas and to persevere with timed agendas and to then review in say 6 months time. They encouraged the use of key PIs (dashboard presentation in particular) and the continued development of informed executive summaries for papers.

In supporting and endorsing the governance changes that have been made, the LSIS consultants certainly helped allay any concerns of members that we were changing too much, too soon. This external validation has ultimately led to the Board feeling and acting as a much more collective body.

How has the process supported your original intentions and were the changes and key impacts realised? What unexpected outcomes were there if any?

Our original intention was to have a more cohesive and effective Board of Governors. I feel that we do now operate as a more cohesive Board. The Board meetings certainly now exhibit a much better quality of debate.

We also intended to evolve high level KPIs and I am pleased to confirm that we have been able to do so and in turn these are now monitored much more effectively.

Through the governance changes governors’ knowledge and understanding of cross college issues does now seem to be much more detailed.

However, we are still learning. We still get it wrong at times but we get it right more often. There is a different “feel” at meetings. There has been a subtle shift in the group dynamic and this stems from the LSIS project and the journey that we have been on as a group.

There have been examples of high level disagreement but the Board as a whole is better placed now to deal with such a situation and to be able to ultimately reach a consensus.

Management continue to be constructively challenged. This is well received and encouraged by managers and when changes flow from those challenges this is fully appreciated by members. This cycle in itself builds trust and support.

The Principal has commented “That meetings subsequent to the project have been progressing well although I am sure that we will take the odd deviation.”

Collectively, the Corporation’s response to the question “What were the three most valuable outcomes from the process?” were:

1. The quality of debate has increased – in part as members have a much clearer overview of the organisation;
2. A more effective working relationship; and
3. The Governance Quality Improvement Plan.

In addition, the Principal added “Being together was very helpful and also being able to discuss how we conduct ourselves as a Board.”

In response to the question “In terms of the process what worked well?” the Corporation response was:

1. The interviews in particular;
2. In general the process showed up where there was agreement and where there wasn’t.

The Principal’s individual feedback was “the ability for all Board members to discuss board processes with the facilitator.”

In response to the question “What could have been done differently and what improvements would you recommend?” then the only comment that the Corporation made was that if possible the process could have been completed more quickly as the Board were keen to see the results. This was in particular due to the impending OfSTED inspection.

In terms of an unexpected outcome then the final comment comes from the Principal insofar as “ it probably brought us closer with regard to our collective vision of the college.”

Finally, following the OfSTED inspection in May 2011, it is pleasing to report that OfSTED acknowledged the considerable distance the College has travelled over the past few months commenting that “leadership and management are good and the new Principal and his senior management team have brought about a change in the culture since the previous inspection and there is a palpable sense of urgency amongst staff about the desire to continue to raise standards.

As a result of the positive comments made within the report we are confident that we can now safely say that the College is on its way to outstanding, making us a high quality provider in Croydon and the surrounding boroughs.

Barbara Maude
Clerk to the Corporation
John Ruskin College

30th June 2011