



City College Plymouth

Consideration of a policy governance model

City College Plymouth is a large general further education college with 794 staff, 18,447 students and an annual college group turnover of £38 million. It is principally located on two main sites, with smaller units spread throughout the city.

The Corporation consists of 16 members comprising 12 general governors, 2 student governors, 1 staff governor and the Principal. A new principal was appointed in December 2011 and a strategic review and benchmarking study have been commissioned to inform future strategy.

What was the catalyst / driver for reviewing the governance structure?

The realisation that the governance structure of City College Plymouth needed review was identified almost three years ago as a result of the recruitment of more dynamic governors from the private and voluntary sector who questioned the added value that the Corporation brought to the College. Changes resulting from this realisation have been gradual and have led to significantly better engagement by governors and greater recognition of the Corporation's strategic

role. These changes have included a reduction in the number of committees and the introduction of more regular Board meetings which have led to all governors, particularly the student governors, having a better appreciation of the wider picture and therefore feeling more able to contribute, guide and question the College's strategic proposals.

Moving on from these initial changes, all governors now believe that, as a result of government initiatives affecting the FE sector, a further change in governance structure is needed to meet the challenges ahead and fully exploit the resultant opportunities in a flexible and responsive way.

Governors have discussed how to develop further the changes already made and the Clerk identified the concept of policy governance, where the outcomes are the prime focus not the means by which they are achieved, as a possible area for further study. A selection of governors attended a presentation on policy governance and agreed that some, but not all, of the tenets put forward might be worth further discussion and study. Following on from this, at the Corporation's strategic planning weekend, the Clerk arranged a more detailed presentation of the practicalities of adopting policy

governance from the Clerk of a college who had taken that step.

What process is being used to carry out the review?

The Corporation, as a whole, was attracted to the outward-looking nature of policy governance and considered that it had the potential to provide a focus on the end results rather than the means by which they are achieved. As a result, a small governance working group, led by the incoming Chair and Vice Chair, was set up to investigate policy governance as a possible model for the Corporation to customise and adapt to its needs. External assistance was received from another college that has adopted this model and it is intended that further advice and guidance will be sought from an experienced proponent to develop a set of delegations, executive limitations and policies to meet the Corporation's needs. It was further agreed to seek advice from the College's internal auditors to ensure that all risks pertaining to the adoption of such a model were identified and addressed.

The working group was established in June 2011 and has physically met once but has been active through email, reporting progress to the Corporation on a regular basis. To date, four strategic outcomes have been approved by the Corporation and a series of executive delegations have been drafted and await approval. However, further work by the group has been put on hold as a result of the recent retirement of the Principal and the subsequent appointment of a new one. Governors considered that adoption of a governance model based on policy governance should be done with the full, informed and enthusiastic support of the Principal and not to involve him in its development from the start would be unfair. It was therefore agreed that the new Principal should be allowed his probationary period to settle into the role before embarking

on the fundamental change in governance that the policy governance model advocates.

How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

To date, only internal stakeholders have been involved in the process as it is important that the Board first establishes a clear vision of what it wishes to achieve and an outline view of how best to proceed before consulting with the wider community. However, the Board recognises that one of the key tenets of the policy governance model is that the Corporation and College are 'morally owned' by the community they serve and must consult extensively as to its needs and provide feedback on their progress.

As a general FE college, City College Plymouth has a very wide offer and, consequently, the range of external stakeholders is extensive and varied, representing many sectors of the community. On a corporate level, they include public and private sector employers, the third sector, schools, the University of Plymouth. Equally important, but often under-consulted, are the general public who use the College to achieve their personal aspirations.

Extensive consultation on what the community needs and how the College can tailor its offering appropriately is critical. To that end, a strategic review has been commissioned by the College to fully understand how it is perceived by external stakeholders and what strategies should be adopted to improve these perceptions where necessary and reinforce them as required. This strategic review is due to report to the Corporation in late March and will include a series of options to move the College forward. Further discussions, debate and decisions are planned at a Corporation strategic planning weekend scheduled for mid-May. From this, the Corporation will set a clear strategic direction for the College for the next five years, and agree with the

Principal a programme of clearly articulated objectives and milestones to report against. It will be at this point that the Corporation may investigate the possibility of establishing a regular forum with external stakeholders to ensure that the community's views are continually being sought and acted upon and that the College is able to provide feedback on progress made to date.

What questions have arisen for you throughout this process?

A Corporation's primary role is to set the strategic aims of the institution for both the short and medium term and then to monitor their attainment. One of the most significant questions that this review process has raised is centred around the level of knowledge required for the Corporation to fulfil its role. Put simply: is it possible for non-executives to set strategic aims with only limited knowledge of the core business? These questions have provided the Board with much food for thought as the key challenge has been to rise above the natural need for a comprehensive understanding of how the College works and concentrate on the provision of strategic direction and monitoring the progress towards its attainment.

The dynamism of our current Corporation is a reflection of the fact that the governors are all highly intelligent, well motivated professionals who are fully in control within their own spheres of influence. Having governors with these skills, however stimulating for discussion and debate, can be two-edged, as they are used to making strategic decisions and monitoring their impact, but also expect to have a full understanding of any situation.

There is a temptation for governors to request a high level of operational detail in order to more fully understand the environment the College operates in. While this demand is met by managers, it can detract from the Corporation's primary role, as outlined above. This tendency to require more detail could be seen as a trust issue but should be viewed more as an instinctive thirst to know more in order to make better decisions.

There are further questions stemming from whether too much or too little information informs decision-making. The review process will involve a careful risk analysis and further study of the policy governance model, which is concerned with outcome rather than process. This approach would delegate operational management to the Principal, and leave the Corporation to concentrate almost exclusively on strategy development.

What conclusions or decisions have you come to so far?

Although it is too early to have come to any firm conclusions or decisions, the review process to date has been beneficial in identifying the key issues that now face our Corporation. We continue to look inwards at how our governance processes work and how they could be improved. This, coupled with working to achieve a greater understanding of how the external environment is changing (new government legislation, reductions in public funding and a shift in emphasis to the 'Big Society'), has improved our ability to work at a more strategic level, thereby supporting and directing our College in accordance with our statutory role. It has become clear that resolving the questions posed by the process so far will enable the Corporation to fulfil its primary role and help shape City College Plymouth to better meet the needs of the community it serves.

We feel that the decision to put the further development of a policy governance model on hold, as a result of the appointment of a new Principal, is a sensible one. However, there is still a clear appetite for a change in governance to reflect the requirement for the Governing Body to be more proactive and strategic in meeting its responsibilities.

How has the changing external environment for FE and Skills influenced this review?

With the prospect of some deregulation and increasing autonomy ('New Challenges, New Chances') and Baroness Sharp's push for colleges to become the 'dynamic nucleus' of their communities, now is the time to exploit the resultant new freedoms and opportunities. Our Corporation hopes that, by investigating policy governance where the principle of 'moral ownership' by the community is a major tenet, it can become more proactive in identifying the needs of our community and take a more active role in planning and directing the future strategy to meet them. At the same time, following the policy governance model will allow the Principal the freedom to concentrate on providing a student experience which is second to none. However, we recognise that our Corporation also needs to reinforce the College's preparedness for increased competition, less public funding and the removal of safeguards that come with deregulation and it is this balance which will provide the challenge in the future.

Next steps

Once the outcomes of the strategic review have been analysed and a future strategy agreed and set in motion, the Policy Governance Working Group will be reinstated to progress the current Corporation view that governance should be dynamic and responsive and focused entirely on outcomes and its value to the community. This view recognises that governance does not stand still and will continue to evolve to keep pace with the ever-changing educational environment.

What three lessons learned would you share with other governing bodies considering a similar change process?

We have realised that it is important to be very honest in our self-assessment in order to establish a true baseline from which to work. The simple question of the value added by the Corporation opens up a very wide area for debate and is often the key driver for change.

The Corporation cannot stand alone; there must be a very strong relationship based on trust between the Principal (and his/her senior management team) and the Corporation where there is mutual respect for each other's role.

Changes in the rules governing colleges and the opening up of the Further Education sector to more competition, balanced by greater freedom to take advantage of opportunities, will place colleges under greater pressure to succeed. We have realised that we cannot sit back and ignore the dangers; now is the time to be proactive, identify opportunities and have the courage to exploit them but, in so doing, never to lose sight of our statutory and fiduciary responsibilities.

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