



Governance effectiveness review for the Edge Hill University

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Aaron Porter

Associate Director (Governance), Leadership Foundation

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1. Introduction

Edge Hill University is a well-respected university which is widely considered to have enjoyed a successful decade. Highlights have included securing university title, a steady and sustained growth in student numbers, and national recognition winning the THE University of the Year.

In 2011, the university underwent a governance review which indicated that governance was effective with a number of minor areas for consideration. The governing body have already taken into account the revised CUC HE Code of Governance in December 2014 with a gap analysis which demonstrates compliance with the Code, and a small number of areas for action which are picked up in this report.

This review has been commissioned in the context of a successful track record both for the university, but also the regard with which governance is considered and undertaken at the university. The findings for this report are derived from one to one interviews with a range of members of the governing body and university executive, a detailed survey which was open to all members of the governing body and the observation and a full meeting of the Board of Governors.

2. Summary

This report finds that governance and the Board of Governors works very effectively at Edge Hill University. The findings from this review, support the gap analysis already produced against the CUC Code, which showed that the university is able to demonstrate compliance with the 7 principles of the CUC HE Code of Governance (see Annex One).

Other requirements which the university needs to meet include the UK Quality Code (published by the Quality Assurance Agency), the conditions of designation for student support funding, and the requirements from the Home Office in order to be a Highly Trusted Sponsor for international students.

The main body of this report will address a number of thematic areas highlighting examples of good practice and in some areas recommendations have been made for the governing body to consider.

As the university's own analysis and internal audit suggests, this review endorses the finding that governing body complies with the CUC HE Code. Indeed this report is able to point toward a number of examples of outstanding practice in relation to the rest of the sector, there are also a small number of areas where the governing body may wish to reflect on practice in order to further enhance what is being delivered.

Particularly impressive features of governance at Edge Hill include the spirit and commitment to operating as an open and transparent board, the board culture and the quality of secretarial and clerking support provided to the governing body. The main area of improvement for the governing body focuses on oversight of academic matters and how this can be strengthened.

3. Main findings and recommendations

3.1. Culture

Through the feedback from governing body members, interviews and also the board meeting observation all provide evidence that the board operates in an open and transparent fashion. Information is made readily available to governing body members, and where further detail is requested this is willingly accommodated. Discussion, scrutiny and debate is welcomed by the executive and facilitated ably by the Chair. Members feel confident to be able to probe lines of enquiry, and they have confidence the executive bring them an appropriate level of detail.

There is a positive culture and collegiality amongst the board which extends to the directorate and university staff. This lends itself as a positive forum for discussion and scrutiny.

3.2. Balance of board business and academic governance

Overall it was felt that the governing sought to cover the main areas of business adequately. Necessarily a good proportion of board meetings over a cycle are dedicated to reporting and compliance, oversight of finance and other business operations.

Some governors however felt, that particularly in light of increasing interest in governing body involvement in academic matters, a more concerted effort could be spent to dealing with learning, teaching and wider issues relating to the student experience. This is also supported by the questionnaire results which although very positive overall, flag a lack of confidence in academic oversight as the primary gap which the governing body ought to focus on more.

As part of the new approach to quality assessment in English higher education and the revised operating model, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have included a new requirement from governing bodies through the existing Annual Accountability Return (AAR). The AAR already seeks assurance on financial stability, good governance and management, data quality and value for money. From December 2016, governing bodies will be asked to provide some additional quality-related assurances on the quality of the student academic experience, student outcomes and the standard of awards.

Some specific examples for how other institutions have sought to strengthen their oversight of academic matters include in addition to what exists already:

- A joint meeting of senate and the governing body to discuss/consider wider academic matters

- A specific review of academic governance and structures
- Oversight of academic partnerships (annual reports, presentations, visits etc.)
- A focus on academic governance in the regular students' union contribution to the governing body and senate
- Audit and reporting on published information relating to the academic experience

Recommendations:

- 1. Reflect on ways in which academic governance can be strengthened, informed but not limited by the suggestions above.
- 2. The governor link opportunity should be prominently encouraged to connect lay governors with senior academic members of the university.

3.3. Cycle of meetings

Members supported the current cycle of 6 board gatherings a year, with some meetings having a specific focus (such as strategy in January, review in July and compliance and reporting in November). It was felt that this allowed governing body members to gain a regular enough insight into the performance of the institution in a rapidly changing higher education sector.

3.4. Secretarial and wider support for the governing body

Members were very positive about the support that they were provided both formally and informally. Papers were generally circulated in a timely fashion, were well written and had the relevant information clearly set out. Members also felt they had access to expert, confidential and experienced support should they ever need to access it. The scores in the questionnaire for the secretarial support also back this up, comparing very favourably to governance reviews at other higher education institutions. This report would consider that the quality of secretarial and wider support for the governing body at Edge Hill University to be a very strong example within the UK higher education sector.

3.5. Delegation of business and sub-committees

Although there is positive feedback about the manner, style and approach of the meeting, the board should be mindful to ensure meetings continue to be efficient and avoid topics being covered more than once. Linked to this, there are examples of business being brought to sub committees only for the same discussion, debate and decision to be re-rehearsed at the board. Steps should be taken to provide greater clarity on the nature of the intended paper at each committee and how this relates to the board to avoid repetition (e.g. a matter may be considered and scrutinised at a sub-committee which will then provide a recommendation to the board. The board should then be appraised of the scrutiny that has already been undertaken, in order to ratify the recommendation).

Recommendation:

3. The scheme of delegation between the board and the sub-committees should be revisited, and at the very least, lay members in particular should be reassured as to why certain decisions and discussions are delegated.

3.6. Skills Matrix

Although the clerk and the nominations committee are conscious of the skills and expertise round the board table, these are not formally captured in one document. The most sophisticated skills matrix move beyond simply stating whether a particular skill is present or not (red or green; tick or cross), but also encourage an assessment of the degree of expertise that a particular governor has (usually on a scale of 0-5). Typically this is done in the form of a self assessment from governors themselves.

Steps should also be taken to more proactively capture the characteristics and background of governors, taking note of key characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity and disability. Whilst skills should continue to determine future appointments to the governing body, ensuring a diverse board should also be a conscious lens through which members are appointed.

Recommendation:

- 4. The clerk should take the lead in developing a skills matrix which covers the skill areas which the governing considers important (e.g. finance, legal, HR, audit, higher education, estate etc.). The skills matrix should be informed by a self assessment from governors themselves, and should ask members to score themselves on a scale of 0-5 across each skill area. The updated Skills Matrix should be analysed to determine whether there are any collective skills gaps for the governing body which they would benefit from receiving support on.

5. In order to help further strengthen academic oversight, academic expertise should expressly added to the skills matrix to ensure that this is always captured amongst lay members of the governing body.
6. Future governor recruitment should be explicitly informed by the Skills Matrix to ensure that any skills gaps are filled adequately.

3.7. Training and induction for new governors

Governors were generally very positive about their access and encouragement to participate in training. It is generally considered to be good practice within the higher education sector that when individual members meet with the Chair to discuss the performance of the board as a whole, but also individually, ongoing training opportunity should be considered for members of the governing body.

All governors are able to access induction locally (through the Clerk to the governors), and there is often the opportunity to participate regionally or nationally through other organisations including the [Leadership Foundation](#).

Recommendation:

7. All governing body members should be invited to discuss individual training needs/opportunities with the Chair as part of 1-2-1 appraisal and review.

3.8. Ongoing training and development

In addition to individual training opportunities, the governing body should consider whether it can use the time before and possibly after meetings more smartly to provide an opportunity for informal feedback and training as a group.

Academic departments and service areas of the university should be invited to deliver a 30-45 minute slot, open to all governors before the formal board meeting to provide some added context and training to governors on the performance of areas of the university. This slot could also be used as an opportunity to hear external perspectives such as HEFCE on wider funding and regulatory matters, UCEA on pay and pensions, the Leadership Foundation on HE governance, the HEA on teaching etc.

The results from the questionnaire in particular pointed toward the view that the board would welcome more input external to higher education, and this presentation slot could also be used to facilitate this content.

Once the skills matrix has been updated, consideration should also be given as to whether there are collective training needs which the governing body could benefit from.

Recommendations:

- 8. Re-introduce an informal session before (or after) governing body meetings to listen to external input, or hear from departments/faculties/services within the institution.

3.9. Annual performance and review

To support ongoing improvement for the board, members should be encouraged to have one to one meetings with the chair on an annual basis, facilitated by the clerk. These meetings would be an opportunity to review the collective performance of the governing body, as well as any individual thoughts that members may have.

Recommendation:

9. All governing body members should have an annual one to one meeting with the chair to review the collective and individual performance of the board.

3.10 Student voice

There is clear evidence that the student voice and student engagement is valued by the university and specifically the board. The inclusion of a standing item with a report from the students' Union is particularly welcome, as is the extension of observer status to the Chief Executive of the students' Union. There are particular challenges to maximise the input and contribution from Student governors, and strengthening the formal and informal means through which the student members can engage with the chair is a route to maximise this.

Recommendation:

- 10. To augment the student voice further, there should be a formal 1-2-1 meeting between the Chair and the two new student governors as part of their induction process each year, and a meeting mid year to review progress.

3.11 Website and communication

The web section for the Board of Governors has an appropriate range and detail of information including governor profiles, photos, meeting agendas, minutes and wider governor resources. This is both useful for governing body members, as well as ensuring transparency and openness for other interested parties.

Communication from the Vice Chancellor to the wider university is also well regarded, and helps to foster a sense of community across the institution, including the board of governors. However the questionnaire results felt that whilst the executive was effective at engaging with the institution at large, the governing body itself did not have prominent visibility with the institution (staff in particular)

Recommendation:

11. Consideration should be given as to how the university can better communicate the discussions and decisions of the governing body through existing internal communication channels.

4. Conclusion

Overall this review finds a number of effective areas of governance practice at Edge Hill University. The findings from this report, support previously undertaken work that the board complies with the CUC HE Code of Governance.

The report also includes a number of recommendations (11 in total) which the board should reflect on, the most notable of which relates to oversight of academic governance, a theme which is already being underscored by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). There is now an additional expectation for the governing body to report on this annually, which the funding council will respond to with a judgement on how this is discharged.

This report gives an opportunity for the governing body to consider how they would like to proceed with implementing these recommendations in order to further improve the effectiveness of the governing body. A table with a summary of the recommendations has been included to track any actions and progress that wish to be taken against this report.

5. Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation	Agreed action	Progress
<p>1. Reflect on ways in which academic governance can be strengthened, informed but not limited to the recommendations made in the report.</p>		
<p>2. The governor link opportunity should be prominently encouraged to connect lay governors with senior academic members of the university.</p>		
<p>3. The scheme of delegation between the board and the sub-committees should be revisited, and at the very least, lay members in particular should be reassured as to why certain decisions and discussions are delegated.</p>		
<p>4. The clerk should take the lead in developing a skills matrix which covers the skill areas which the governing considers important (e.g. finance, legal, HR, audit, higher education, estate etc.). The skills matrix should be informed by a self assessment from governors themselves, and should ask members to score themselves on a scale of 0-5 across each skill area. The updated Skills Matrix should be analysed to determine whether there are any collective skills gaps for the governing body which they would benefit from receiving support on.</p>		
<p>5. In order to help further strengthen academic oversight,</p>		

academic expertise should expressly added to the skills matrix to ensure that this is always captured amongst lay members of the governing body.		
6. Future governor recruitment should be explicitly informed by the Skills Matrix to ensure that any skills gaps are filled adequately.		
7. All governing body members should be invited to discuss individual training needs/opportunities with the Chair as part of 1-2-1 appraisal and review.		
8. Re-introduce an informal session before (or after) governing body meetings to listen to external input, or hear from departments/faculties/services within the institution.		
9. All governing body members should have an annual one to one meeting with the chair to review the collective and individual performance of the board.		
10. To augment the student voice further, there should be a formal 1-2-1 meeting between the Chair and the two new student governors as part of their induction process each year, and a meeting mid year to review progress.		
11. Consideration should be given as to how the university can better communicate the discussions and decisions of the governing body through existing internal		

communication channels.		
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Commended areas of practice

- Board culture and collegiality between members and indeed the wider relationship between the executive and the board. Without being too close, a very positive, constructive relationship has been established and maintained.
- Secretarial and wider support for the governing body and individual members
- The extent to which the governing body is openly briefed about the wider HE policy landscape (including specific input from the Vice Chancellor)
- The use and emphasis placed on Key Performance Indicators to monitor and measure ongoing performance
- Benchmarking of university performance against appropriate institutions and measures
- Shared commitment and endeavour from the board and executive to ongoing improvement in university governance
- The approach to risk management, and the information that is collated to ensure this is discharged effectively

Annex One

The Seven Primary Elements of Higher Education Governance (Higher Education Code of Governance, December 2014)

The governing body is unambiguously and collectively accountable for institutional activities, taking all final decisions on matters of fundamental concern within its remit.

The governing body protects institutional reputation by being assured that clear regulations, policies and procedures that adhere to legislative and regulatory requirements are in place, ethical in nature, and followed.

The governing body ensures institutional sustainability by working with the Executive to set the institutional mission and strategy. In addition, it needs to be assured that appropriate steps are being taken to deliver them and that there are effective systems of control and risk management.

The governing body receives assurance that academic governance is effective by working with the Senate/Academic Board or equivalent as specified in its governing instruments.

The governing body works with the Executive to be assured that effective control and due diligence take place in relation to institutionally significant external activities.

The governing body must promote equality and diversity throughout the institution, including in relation to its own operation.

The governing body must ensure that governance structures and processes are fit for purpose by referencing them against recognised standards of good practice.