

# **Raising Standards in Further Education: The Work of College Governors**

**NATIONAL  
REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE**

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**THE  
FURTHER  
EDUCATION  
FUNDING  
COUNCIL**

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## ***Preface***

Governors have a demanding role and many legal responsibilities. They commit substantial time and expertise to their task. Governors do this work on a voluntary and unpaid basis, providing invaluable support for colleges. Most governing bodies have steered their colleges successfully through years of considerable change. For many governing bodies, the focus of their work has broadened from an initial emphasis on ensuring the financial viability of the college to include consideration of the quality of the education and training for which they are responsible.

This report highlights the good practice that inspectors have found in governors' monitoring and improving of the quality of education and training. It is written to help governors by providing examples of how they can carry out this key element of their role.

**James T Donaldson**  
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## *Summary*

Governors' monitoring of the quality of education and training in their colleges is steadily improving. Some governing bodies have long-established arrangements for monitoring the quality of students' experience and the standards that students achieve, sometimes accompanied by thorough evaluation of the governing body's own performance. Many more governing bodies have recently established a standards committee or other similar arrangements for this purpose. The recruitment of members with expertise in education and training or in quality assurance has strengthened the ability of governing bodies to understand educational issues and to form an independent view of the quality of the college's provision. In many colleges, the presentation of information to governors has improved. However, these developments are often very recent. There is more to be done, particularly to ensure that governors receive clearly presented, accurate information on which they can make rigorous judgements about the performance of the college. Governors need to be more active in seeking assurance that managers are taking action to address weaknesses and raise standards.

The recruitment of governors with an appropriate mix of skills and experience is a prerequisite for successful monitoring of the college's performance. Many governing bodies now use audits to record the skills of existing members and to identify any gaps that need filling. In the best practice, they use this information when recruiting new members. Most governing bodies make good use of their members' expertise and experience. More members are being recruited with expertise in education and training and quality assurance. Governors need a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities, including the distinction between governance and management if they are to monitor the quality of provision effectively. In some colleges, this understanding is developed through a structured induction programme for new governors, governors' training needs are regularly reviewed and a training programme is designed to meet them. In many colleges, however, there is no planned programme of governor training. The new training materials for governors and the training programme supported by the standards fund should help governing bodies to develop a more systematic approach to training.

Governing bodies have established various structures to support their monitoring of the college's educational provision. Many have a committee with a remit for monitoring standards. A few have made this a task for the full board and this is appropriate where the curriculum offered is straightforward and where the board can devote sufficient time to the task. Where there is a standards committee, the most effective governing bodies ensure that the committee's reports and recommendations to the board contain enough clearly presented information to allow all members to make well-informed decisions. Governing bodies use a variety of other methods to help them become better informed about the college's curriculum and performance. Many colleges now have arrangements for governors to be attached to an area of the college or to attend as observers at meetings of college working groups. These arrangements can be very useful, provided that there is a clear understanding of their purpose.

Most governing bodies now review the college's educational performance against agreed performance indicators and targets. In the best practice, governors are actively involved in approving targets for student retention and achievement. Some have developed their own benchmarking criteria that they review in conjunction with national benchmarking data. Value-added information is increasingly taken account of in colleges with a large general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) programme. Governors' monitoring of college performance is most effective where the governing body has agreed clear criteria against which the college will be assessed, as well as having data presented in the most appropriate format and at the most appropriate level of aggregation. Increasingly, colleges are establishing an effective annual cycle for target-setting and review. Although there are a growing number of examples of good practice, some governing bodies are not yet monitoring college performance with sufficient rigour, or within a timescale that allows them to set targets for improvement in the next academic year.

Governing bodies use various methods to obtain information about the views of those who use the college's services. Where there is good practice, student governors are encouraged to play an active role and governors receive reports on students' levels of satisfaction with the college. Some governing bodies effectively monitor policies relating to students' welfare. However, inspectors have identified colleges where the governing body has received no recent reports on the implementation of such policies. A growing number of colleges have developed structures for direct and effective contact with staff and students and for useful dialogue between governors and members of the wider community.

While many governing bodies receive and discuss reports on colleges' educational performance, there is less evidence of subsequent action to bring about improvements. Effective governing bodies make prompt and clear decisions about the actions proposed by managers to address identified weaknesses. They ensure that actions are followed up and that the outcomes are reported and discussed at future board meetings. A key aspect of governors' monitoring of quality is their involvement in the college's self-assessment. As well as providing an overview of the college's performance, the self-assessment report can help to identify areas in which they themselves can improve their work. Some governors have made effective contributions to the development of the college's self-assessment report. However, in many colleges the governing body has accepted an overgenerous judgement of the quality of the college's provision.

Effective self-assessment by governors involves a commitment to continuous improvement and a determination to carry out duties in accordance with best practice. In some colleges, there is a systematic and regular review of the governing body's performance, as well as a careful assessment by individual governors of their own performance. Where self-assessment is strong, governors use clear targets and performance indicators.

# Raising Standards in Further Education

## Introduction

1 *The Further and Higher Education Act 1992* specifies the powers and duties of the governing body. Governors hold ultimate responsibility for the educational character of the college and the quality of education and training that it provides. Since incorporation, increasing emphasis has been placed on governors' role in monitoring the quality of education and training in their colleges. Improving quality and raising standards should be a prime aim of all colleges, and most governing bodies are now devoting more of their time to considering how this aim is best achieved.

2 The updated Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) guidance for governors, *The College Governor*, published in March 2000, lists the responsibilities of the governing body for quality and standards. It:

- **must** satisfy itself that sound arrangements are in place to assure the quality and standards of the college's work
- **should** expect to monitor the college's performance and ensure that any changes necessary to bring about improvement are implemented and thus ensure that standards are maintained or raised
- **would** normally expect to approve a college policy for quality assurance
- **should** expect to take part in annual self-assessment and, where appropriate, any arrangements for inspection
- **might wish** to receive regular reports from the academic board, appropriate committee or management team on the outcomes of the quality assurance process
- **will be** expected to consider and formally approve annual targets for student retention and achievement and monitor their college's progress towards achieving them.

3 *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report* expressed concerns about governors' role in monitoring the quality of provision:

- governing bodies paid insufficient attention to students' performance and quality assurance
- some governors had inadequate understanding of the curriculum
- many governing bodies had no formal arrangements for ensuring that all governors had effective induction and training.

4 A year later, *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report* indicated that there had been a significant improvement.

Increasingly, governors were:

- seeking to gain a closer understanding of the day-to-day work of the college
- receiving reports from curriculum managers
- sitting with students and staff on committees, and
- joining groups involved with quality assurance.

5 This report examines the current involvement and effectiveness of governors in monitoring the quality of education and training in their colleges. It also offers examples of good practice. The aim of the report is to help governors to address questions from the checklist on quality and standards provided in *The College Governor* (section C2, 11), as well as helping them to fulfil their wider responsibilities for monitoring the quality of college provision.

## The Survey

6 The report is based on a survey of the evidence gathered from 96 colleges inspected since September 1997 and from other colleges visited, some of which have not yet been inspected in the current cycle.

7 The survey focused on colleges that had received a grade 1 for governance in the second inspection cycle, together with several that had received a grade 2 or 3 but where inspectors considered governors' monitoring of the quality of education and training was a key strength.

8 The survey addressed six important questions:

- How well informed are governors and what training do they receive to help them monitor the college's performance and the quality of the education and training that it provides?
- Does the structure of the governing body and its committees help all governors to fulfil their responsibility for monitoring the quality of education and training?
- What is the quality of the information presented to governors to help them carry out their monitoring role?
- Do governors have the means of ensuring that they are well informed about the quality of students' experience and the degree to which clients are satisfied with the college?
- Do governors ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to the information that they receive and is the action effective?
- How effectively do governors evaluate their own performance?

## Background

9 While it is the key responsibility of the principal to ensure that mechanisms exist within a college to offer an appropriate curriculum, to monitor performance and to implement changes to achieve necessary improvements, the governing body is ultimately accountable for the quality of education provided by the college. In the years following incorporation, however, the main priority for many governing bodies was ensuring the solvency of their colleges. Their membership reflected this concern. As a result,

many colleges have benefited from an impressive range of experience in finance and management. The development of the curriculum and assuring its relevance and quality were thought to be the responsibility of college managers, the professional experts. Although most governing bodies received reports on the overall development of provision and its quality, the reports often lacked sufficient detail or explanation to enable governors to form a realistic assessment of the college's performance. Many governing bodies lacked members, other than academic staff governors, who possessed the necessary knowledge and expertise to make informed judgements about the curriculum and the performance.

10 In 1998, the government indicated its intention to modify colleges' instrument and articles, with effect from August 1999, to reinforce colleges' accountability to the communities they serve. Colleges, therefore, began to review the composition of their governing bodies. Appropriately, in many instances, they took the opportunity to carry out an audit of governors' skills and expertise to ensure that there were those with sufficient expertise or experience in education to support the college in taking forward the standards agenda.

11 The new inspection framework introduced in 1997, Council Circular 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment*, placed a greater emphasis on self-assessment, and gave more prominence to teaching and learning, and students' achievements. In 1998, the FEFC formulated a quality improvement strategy to support colleges in raising the standards of their work. As part of the strategy, it published benchmarking data on retention and achievement rates, asking colleges to set their own targets in relation to these. The introduction of the standards fund indicated the further expectation by government that colleges would strive to improve their year-on-year performance. In February 1999, the minister of state for education and



employment wrote to governors to remind them of their responsibility for raising and maintaining standards. In April 2000, the FEFC published its updated guidance for governors, *The College Governor*, based on the work of its good governance advisory group.

12 These developments have led governors to review their role in monitoring the quality of provision in their colleges. A significant proportion of governing bodies had already demonstrated their vigilance in monitoring student retention and achievement, and the relevance of the curriculum. Other governing bodies have now considered the advice of the minister of state and established standards or quality committees or modified appropriately the terms of reference of existing committees so that they can undertake a systematic review of their colleges' performance. A number of governing bodies, however, have been slow to respond effectively to the standards agenda.

13 In May 2000, the FEFC published a set of training materials for governors. It was produced by a consortium managed by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) and will be followed in 2000-01 by a training programme for governors supported by the FEFC's standards fund. Details are provided in Council Circular 00/15, *Use of the Standards Fund 2000-01* and Council Circular 00/19, *Standards Fund 2000-01: Non-sector Colleges*. The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) is also developing standards for governance.

14 The following sections of the report cover the six main questions addressed in the survey.

## Governors' Knowledge and Training

*Q: How well informed are governors and what training do they receive to help them monitor the college's performance and the quality of the education and training that it provides?*

### ***An appropriate mix of skills and expertise in the governing body***

15 Some colleges have a long-term approach to the recruitment of governors to ensure continuity and an appropriate blend of skills and expertise. Some place a limit on length of service while maintaining a reserve list of prospective governors with relevant skills. Skills audits help to identify any gaps in the governing body's collective expertise, so that this can be remedied when a vacancy arises.

#### **Using an audit of governors' skills**

A college in the Midlands uses a checklist to undertake a detailed analysis of governors' expertise, attributing a numeric value to the skills and expertise which each governor possesses. This approach enables the board to construct an overall picture of its range of expertise. When a member's term of office comes to an end, the board is quickly able to assess the impact of this and to seek new governors with the appropriate expertise.

16 Colleges use a variety of procedures to recruit new governors. In the spirit of the principles of public life as defined by the Nolan committee, colleges are increasingly advertising openly for new governors. Some still rely on personal recommendation and some colleges use both strategies. In the best practice, colleges provide specifications for the person and the tasks, identifying the knowledge and skills required by the governing body. Applicants are interviewed, sometimes by members of the search committee, and receive clear guidance about the level of commitment expected; for example, that they:

- attend regularly
- use their expertise in committee work
- participate in training, and
- engage in self-assessment.

17 While many colleges in the sector have recruited governors with knowledge and expertise in education, or experience of quality assurance in the private or public sector, there are still colleges where this expertise is confined to the principal and staff governors. Such an arrangement does not provide the independence essential to the governing body's effectiveness. It is important that governing bodies have members who can make an independent assessment of the quality of education and training, and students' performance, and who have the knowledge and expertise to analyse and question the information presented to them.

### **Induction**

18 *The College Governor* (section E2) provides a detailed example of an induction programme for governors.

19 The induction of new governors is a key process, enabling them to play a full part in the governing body's activities. It helps them to understand their role and responsibilities, and the important distinction between governance and management. A typical induction programme includes a meeting with the principal, a tour of the college and an introduction to senior managers and other governing body members.

#### **Arrangements for induction of new governors**

At a college in the south, effective arrangements for the induction of governors include briefings by the chair, chairs of committees and the clerk. Each new governor has the support of an experienced member of the board throughout their first year. The clerk also provides advice and support to individual governors.

20 New governors usually receive a large amount of documentation, the volume and complexity of which can be daunting. Help from

the clerk or from other governors in working through the information is valued. Increasingly, governing bodies have introduced mentoring arrangements for new governors, usually during their first year of office. When well organised, this practice has proved very successful. Arrangements may include the opportunity to go through agenda papers with the mentor prior to a board or committee meeting, or contact by telephone that allows a new governor to seek advice on a particular issue.

### **Training**

21 The training of governors presents a challenge to governing bodies. Many governors hold demanding jobs, often at a senior level, and their time to participate in training may be limited. In many colleges, training is provided in reaction to circumstances as they arise or at the behest of individual members. It is not planned systematically. Where there is good practice, the governing body undertakes an annual review of its training needs and a training programme is arranged to meet the needs of the individual, the governing body and the college.

#### **Planning governors' training**

In a college in the north, the staff development officer discusses training needs with governors and individual training plans are drawn up. In another college in the north, such planning is the responsibility of a governors' training committee. At a college in the south, governors identify their individual training and development needs and are able to take advantage of appropriate modules from the college's own training programme.

22 Many colleges organise residential seminars where governors and managers consider strategic or self-assessment issues, sometimes with support from external consultants. Some colleges stage a 'vision

weekend' to allow governors to consider long-term strategic issues with college managers and representatives of the local community.

23 In a number of areas, chairs and principals of groups of colleges meet to explore matters of common interest. The colleges have sometimes established a consortium, one purpose of which is to provide opportunities for all governors from the member colleges to meet for joint training. This is a cost-effective way to promote networking, collaboration and the sharing of good practice. A good example is provided in *The College Governor* (section D1, 4).

24 To take account of the time constraints upon governors, many governing bodies invite curriculum or cross-college managers to make presentations about the areas of work for which they are responsible, usually at the beginning of meetings. These help to develop governors' knowledge of academic and management matters and provide the opportunity for them to ask questions. On some occasions, governors themselves give talks to other members of the board; for example, after a visit to an area of the college with which they are linked. Some governing bodies invite students to talk to them, in order to gain insights into students' perspectives on the college.

25 Some innovative work has been undertaken in the use of information technology (IT) to support the work of governors.

#### **Use of the Internet to support the work of governors**

A college in the south has exploited the potential of the Internet to provide a service to governors, enabling governors to communicate with each other and with members of the college senior management team through electronic mail and to have on-line access to governing body papers.

The clerk has created an intranet for governors, and computers are available on

loan from the college, if necessary. The governors have access to a comprehensive menu of information, including:

- an introduction to the establishment of the further education sector
- the role and responsibilities of the governing body
- the instrument and articles of government
- members of the governing body including photographs
- members of the governing body and their links with schools and departments
- committee structures and membership
- key governing body documents
- governing body updates
- a calendar of meetings
- non-confidential minutes of meetings
- how to access information on the governing body
- the register of interests
- complaints
- issues to be addressed at future meetings
- questions and answers - governors' opportunities to ask questions and receive answers from the clerk.

A bulletin board is being developed.

Governors are also guided on how to access the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and FEFC websites. The clerk ensures that the governors' website is up to date. Materials relating to induction and training are being added.

26 Most governing bodies now have members who understand the development of educational provision, including changes in content or in assessment, the value-added dimension, and the complex area of qualifications. Similarly, governors with expertise in quality assurance make a vital contribution to the development of effective methods of self-assessment for their own boards and to the overseeing of quality systems and procedures used by college

managers to raise and maintain standards. Their contribution not only ensures that the governing body has an adequate appreciation of how well the college is performing but it also helps meet training needs, by developing the understanding of other governors.

### **Governors' expertise**

Members of the governing body of a college in the south include a retired civil servant from the DfEE, a consultant who works with further education colleges, a headteacher, the deputy vice-chancellor of a local university and a local authority official with responsibility for lifelong learning. Their expertise, combined with that of the principal, staff governors and student governor provides a sound basis for monitoring and improving the college's performance.

27 Two areas of training that have become increasingly important, as a means of enabling governors to monitor the quality of provision, are retention and achievement rates, and the college's self-assessment report. Sometimes, however, governors have had difficulty in digesting the volume and complexity of the retention and achievement data that they receive and have asked senior managers to provide the information in a more accessible, summarised format which enables them to grasp essential messages about the college's performance. The introduction of benchmarking and target-setting has prompted a need for additional training for governors.

## **Governing Body Arrangements for Monitoring Quality**

*Q: Does the structure of the governing body and its committees help all governors to fulfil their responsibility for monitoring the quality of education and training?*

28 The *College Governor* (section C2) clearly defines governors' responsibility for monitoring both quality and standards. Quality in further education relates chiefly to the students' experiences at the college. Standards relate to the levels of achievement expected of and reached by students. Governing bodies have adopted various structures to enable them to monitor quality and standards.

29 In a few colleges, governors monitor the college's performance through meetings of the full governing body. They consider that having a separate committee could diminish the importance and attention paid to teaching, learning, retention and achievement. This form of monitoring may be appropriate for smaller colleges where the curriculum provision is not complex, but is likely to be less appropriate for larger institutions. The effectiveness of channelling all consideration of quality through the full governing body is enhanced where the governing body conducts its business efficiently, where papers are clear, succinct and provide helpful commentary, and where all governors have a serious commitment to improving the quality of provision. Where targets for improvement relate directly to the strategic plan, it is much easier for governors to exercise their responsibility for monitoring the performance of the college as a whole.

### **Monitoring by the full governing body**

A college in the north was commended during its inspection for the governing body's detailed knowledge of the college's curriculum performance. Monitoring the quality of provision was seen to be the responsibility of the whole board, as a means of ensuring that each member was fully and effectively informed about the key business of the college.

At a college in the south, the whole governing body reviews academic performance. Reporting is clear and concise and is related to the seven aims in the strategic plan.

### ***Governing body committees***

30 Many corporations have committees responsible for monitoring the quality of college provision, some of them long established. Successful quality committees have clear terms of reference. They monitor performance closely and demonstrate a commitment to improving quality and raising standards.

#### **Composition and terms of reference of a standards committee in a Midlands college**

##### ***Composition***

At the first meeting in each academic year, the board of governors shall appoint up to six governors to serve on the standards committee. The board may co-opt up to one member who is not a member of the board of governors, providing that the total membership of the committee does not exceed six. The principal must be one of the six members.

##### ***Terms of reference***

- To advise the board on matters concerning the quality and effectiveness of the college's curriculum.

- To consider appropriate targets for improvements in students' achievements for recommendation to the board.
- To consider matters referred by the board such as areas of outstanding or weak performance.
- To contribute to the annual self-assessment cycle, particularly in relation to governor self-assessment.

##### ***Quoracy***

The quorum for all meetings is three.

##### ***Conduct of meetings***

Each committee is acting on behalf of the board of governors and as such will be administered in accordance with the rules of clerkship that apply to the board of governors.

31 Some terms of reference for college standards committees are highly specific about what is to be discussed.

#### **Detailed tasks for a standards committee**

A college in the south includes the following tasks in its terms of reference:

- to review at least annually the college charter and the college disability statement and to forward proposed changes to the governing body for approval
- to receive and consider an annual report on complaints received from students and others and to review the arrangements for dealing with such complaints
- to receive and monitor the following and to draw key issues to the attention of the governing body: student achievement; targets on students' retention and achievement; student destinations
- to consider the annual report on equal opportunities and to draw key issues to the attention of the governing body.

32 Some colleges have more recently established specific committees to oversee standards, prompted by the advice from the minister of state. Many newly established committees take time to develop their role and to ensure that they have the right terms of reference and remit. This is an essential stage in the development of an effective committee and helps to avoid overlap with the work of other committees.

33 In many colleges, new committees have been established to carry out urgent tasks; for example, to set and approve targets, to develop self-assessment for governance or to validate self-assessment reports. In some cases, the focus on urgent tasks has distracted the governing body from systematically considering the college's performance and focusing on improvement. A college in the south established a curriculum, standards and student matters committee. It was not operating effectively, however, because its focus on quality was restricted to target-setting.

34 Some governing bodies have allocated responsibility for academic monitoring to an existing committee. An important factor in determining whether this strategy is successful is the nature and breadth of the committee's existing responsibilities. In a few colleges, responsibility has been given to the audit committee. This is not appropriate, because the amount of work required to monitor performance effectively is likely to deflect the committee from its primary purpose. The work of monitoring the quality of provision is a substantial commitment, and is increasing.

#### **A standards and performance committee with a comprehensive remit**

The standards and performance committee at a college in the Midlands was established in June 1997. It was set up to oversee developments in quality assurance, to receive reports on agreed areas of college

performance, to approve the self-assessment report and monitor action plans. Since then the committee has expanded its remit to include: validation of the self-assessment report; increased involvement of link governors when specific curriculum areas are being discussed; consideration of annual reports on student destinations; monitoring the outcomes of surveys of student opinion; and setting targets for retention and achievement.

35 Appropriate membership of governing body committees with responsibility for quality and standards is essential. However, the most important feature of membership is that members have complementary skills and experience and can develop a productive working relationship with senior managers. It is not appropriate for such committees to be chaired by the college principal, because senior managers, including the principal, are responsible to the governing body for improving quality and raising standards.

36 The quality of communication between the board and its committees is a key element in the effective operation of the governing body. Some standards committees simply provide a brief report of their meetings when making recommendations to the full board. Others provide an overview of the college's performance, through supplementary papers or presentations, helping governors to form a sound judgement about the college's strengths and weaknesses and to identify where action is required to improve performance. In some colleges, the full board receives insufficient information from the committee to fulfil its responsibilities for monitoring performance.

#### ***Governors' attendance at college committees***

37 A few governing bodies rely on their members' attendance at college committees, such as the college quality committee, to help

them maintain their oversight of performance. This can cause confusion if it is not clear whether the committee has an operational or strategic focus, and whether decisions taken by the committee have governors' approval. The roles of governors and managers can become blurred, particularly when the college committee does not report directly to the governing body or one of its committees. In a college in the Midlands, governors had taken responsibility for a quality committee that had previously reported to the academic board. This change had made governors more aware of issues relating to quality and standards but had caused some confusion, because the work of the committee was still steered primarily by managers.

38 The attendance of governors at college committees can be effective where it complements other independent monitoring arrangements operated by the governing body.

#### **Productive attendance at a college committee**

At a college in the north, a business governor, who works as a quality assurance manager in another organisation, is a member of the college's quality assurance and self-assessment committee. This governor sits on an internal self-assessment audit group that validates sections of the self-assessment report. However, the full board takes responsibility for academic monitoring and for approving the full self-assessment report.

### ***The academic board***

39 In a few colleges, governors are members of the academic board. This is not appropriate. However, it can be productive for governors to attend academic board meetings as observers, provided that their role is clearly agreed. Governors can gain helpful insights into the academic matters being discussed in the college. Regular receipt of the minutes from effective

academic boards provides governors with useful information on curriculum issues. It can also provide background information on the development of policies and procedures before they reach governors for approval.

#### **Governor attendance at academic board meetings**

At a college in the south a governor attends academic board meetings as an observer and subsequently provides an oral report to the governing body on the debate and tenor of the meeting. This helps members to put the academic board minutes into context.

### ***Link governors***

40 About one in five of the colleges surveyed for the report had some form of link governor arrangement, where a governor is attached to an area of the college. Link governors are expected to visit regularly and to develop an understanding of their area. Where their expertise coincides with the work of the area, they may also offer direct support, for example, with student activities. Arrangements for link governors vary widely. In some colleges they are very effective.

#### **Link governors**

At a college in the Midlands, link governors are provided with a useful checklist for their termly meetings with their link head of school. The list serves to remind them of the important questions to be asked about students' achievement and about the levels of student satisfaction with the college, as shown in responses to surveys. At a college in the south, a business governor has been closely involved in the Young Enterprise scheme for a number of years.

41 Some governing body members have decided against link governor arrangements, as they are wary of developing partisan views and feel that governors should always operate from the perspective of the whole college. Others have determined that governors should have a link commitment for no more than one year before rotating their responsibilities.

#### **Rotating the role of link governors**

In a college in the north, each governor is attached to a curriculum area for one year. Rotation of the links ensures that governors increase their knowledge of the college each year but do not become advocates of a particular curriculum area. Curriculum managers invite their link governor to visit the college once a term, to meet students and staff and listen to their views and current priorities.

42 Link arrangements are effective when governors and staff are clear about the purpose of the visits and the nature of the relationship. The main purpose is to help governors to become better informed about the work of the college. Link arrangements should not be used to short-circuit college management and communication systems. Most links focus on curriculum areas but governors are also developing links with cross-college areas, such as support for students, and service areas, such as personnel. Governors working with specific curriculum areas benefit from their involvement in events and activities and the opportunity to hear the views of students and staff at first hand. One college invites link governors to meetings of the college's quality committee when the performance of the area to which they are attached is being considered. Link arrangements can provide governors with a better understanding of the college's work, but there is little evidence to show that they have led to improvements in the quality of provision. Few governing bodies have clear guidelines on

what is expected from link governors by way of action or reporting to the board.

## **The Information Provided for Governors**

*Q: What is the quality of the information presented to governors to help them carry out their monitoring role?*

43 Many colleges now undertake a systematic review of the college's performance against agreed criteria. Governors' consideration of performance data has increased considerably in recent years and is becoming more rigorous. When a college has a standards committee, the committee often considers performance data in detail and presents a summary to the full governing body. Standards committees have often been influential in helping college managers to streamline the information provided to governors, requesting data that are summarised or presented in clearer formats which are easier to understand. Some governing bodies have undertaken useful work on identifying key performance indicators against which they wish to receive regular reports on the college's performance.

#### **Governors' identification of key performance information**

A working party of governors at a general further education college in the south identified key performance indicators for curriculum areas that were developed into 'quality profiles'. The indicators measure: growth in enrolments; retention and achievement rates; student attendance rates; the growth in funding from sources other than the FEFC; and the development of community-based provision. The quality profiles are presented annually to governors, and offer an overview of performance in each of the curriculum areas against the college's key strategic priorities.



## ***The presentation of information***

44 There are many methods used to present information to governors on college performance. Governing bodies receive this information either directly or indirectly through one of their committees. Some colleges provide detailed information on a monthly basis.

### **Monthly information for governors**

At a general further education college in the Midlands, governors receive a monthly information pack containing a report from the principal that updates members on college activities. It includes policy reports, committee reports, statistical information and a review of progress against non-financial performance indicators.

At a college in the south, monthly reports on attendance and retention are sent to governors with the monthly management accounts.

45 In many colleges, the principal determines the information that governors receive. In a growing number, however, governors themselves decide what information they require, and at what level of aggregation. Many governing bodies now receive information in a form that enables them to monitor performance at a sufficiently detailed level. The information is often directly related to performance indicators and targets established by the board. Clear presentation of benchmarks for retention and achievement rates and the achievement of other targets helps governors to make a realistic assessment of the college's performance.

### **Clearly presented information**

At a college in the Midlands, the principal has devised a spreadsheet for staff and governors showing the college's retention and achievement rates against college targets and national benchmarks. The use of colour coding makes it easy to see whether performance is improving or declining, whether targets have been met and how the college compares with others. The information is provided for the college as a whole and for individual departments.

## ***The timing and receipt of information***

46 Many governing bodies have established schedules for the receipt of information in order for them to consider the data prior to discussions by the full board or by a committee. In many colleges, it is expected that data will reach governors at least five working days before a meeting. There are, however, a number of colleges where information is regularly provided later than this. In some cases, it is tabled at the meeting, far too late for governors to give it adequate consideration.

47 The governing body's consideration of the college's performance is most effective when the discussion takes place at an appropriate time, when all relevant information is available in plenty of time for the meeting and when the decisions reached are not too late to influence performance for the following year.

### **Regular monitoring of academic performance**

At a northern college of general further education, governors monitor performance in relation to targets and indicators at every meeting and receive regular reports from the academic board. They also monitor the college's progress in implementing the action plans arising from self-assessment. Governors have taken a particular interest in strategies for improving student retention rates.

At a college in the Midlands, the governing body receives an annual report on the college's performance against its strategic objectives. The strategic planning committee of the board also receives a mid-year progress report. Governors effectively monitor the performance of students through their curriculum and guidance committee which regularly receives detailed reports on attendance, retention, achievement and value-added data.

At a sixth form college in the north, governors review operational plans against performance targets every six months. They also receive annual quality reports covering the full range of the college's work.

At another sixth form college in the Midlands, governors are provided with information on students' achievements, retention, attendance and value-added data at every meeting of the governing body.

### ***Planning systematic monitoring***

48 The use of performance indicators and targets for assessing colleges' performance is most successful where it is systematically planned on an annual basis.

49 To improve their efficiency, governing bodies increasingly use an annual calendar, linked to the college's quality assurance and strategic planning cycle, for their work. Some colleges have produced helpful planners or calendars which prompt governors and managers to undertake specific tasks at key points during the year.

#### **A planning calendar for governors**

A college in the south has devised a desk calendar for managers and corporation members. The calendar shows, on a monthly basis, the activities that need to be undertaken in relation to governance, planning and development, marketing, quality, learner support, finance, registry, management information systems and facilities.

50 In order to be effective, governors must agree the criteria to be used in evaluating a college's performance. At an agricultural college in the north, governors have established critical success factors against which to monitor the progress of the college. They have also identified key issues that the college needs to address. The effectiveness of governors' analysis of college performance is sometimes impeded by lack of agreement about success criteria. For example, in a general further education college in the south, the governing body identified a need to improve the presentation of performance data and to establish clear performance indicators. However, governors held widely differing views about what constituted acceptable performance, in terms of students' achievements.

### ***Reporting by sample and exception***

51 A few governing bodies rely on reporting by exception, receiving information only on performance that is above or below agreed targets. Others have chosen to scrutinise in detail a pre-agreed sample of key courses. Where reporting by exception or sample is used, it is essential for governors to establish clear guidelines on the areas they wish to consider in detail.

#### **Exception and sample reporting**

At a tertiary college in the south, governors receive an annual 'exception report', identifying areas of the curriculum that are not meeting their targets.

In a large college of general further education in the south, with some 40,000 qualifications taken by students each year, the governors do not attempt to scrutinise all results. Instead, they receive information on key courses. For each curriculum area, a representative sample of courses has been identified. Each school has identified between 10 and 20 courses on which to report, providing a sample of about 200. Each course is then

checked against targets and national averages. The college's quality manager produces a summary for governors, accompanied by a detailed commentary.

At a sixth form college in the Midlands, detailed reports on examination results to the board's academic and planning committee include an analysis of possible reasons for the under-performance of students with poorer than expected results, and strategies proposed by the college to address the issues it has identified.

### ***The use of performance indicators***

52 The key performance indicators for monitoring college activity, which many governing bodies have now established, are usually linked to FEFC performance indicators and may extend further.

#### **The adoption of performance indicators**

A general further education college in the north has adopted 15 key indicators to measure the performance of the college. Eight of these have related FEFC benchmarks but the board also considers retention and other data relating to all students, including non-FEFC funded students, the achievement of annual targets against the strategic plan, and indicators relating to the destination of students.

At a general further education college in the Midlands, governors have introduced a scheme to monitor progress on all areas of college activity, combining quality assurance procedures used in industry with FEFC performance indicators.

53 Examples of other performance indicators adopted by colleges include:

- students' and employers' levels of satisfaction with the college
- the number of students progressing to higher education
- inspection grades
- performance against standards published in college charters for students, parents and employers.

54 Further examples of college performance indicators can be found in *The College Governor* (section A7, 6).

55 Most governing bodies now measure student retention and achievement rates against national benchmarking data produced by the FEFC. Some colleges have developed their own benchmarks to be considered in parallel with national benchmarking data. These may be benchmarks for local colleges or for colleges in a particular category of activity.

#### **College-devised benchmarks**

A sixth form college in the Midlands, located in an area of social deprivation, has developed a system for comparing its performance against similar colleges in other areas of social deprivation. It also compares its general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) results with other groups; for example, the most successful public schools.

### ***Value-added data***

56 Many governing bodies in colleges with a large number of GCE A level students consider value-added data when evaluating the college's performance. Some also consider value-added analysis in relation to students other than those on GCE A level programmes, though this tends to be less well developed. It is important that governors understand the processes used in developing value-added data and their relevance to the college.

### **The use of value-added data**

At a sixth form college in the Midlands, governors have received training in interpreting value-added GCE A level data. They closely scrutinise the data on an annual basis to assess the performance of the college. This has enabled them to identify that, whilst overall, students' achievements are above expectations, some curriculum areas are underperforming.

### ***Governors' involvement in target-setting***

57 The extent to which governors are involved in colleges' target-setting varies. Some governing bodies simply agree the targets prepared by college managers in response to FEFC requirements. In the best practice, however, governors are actively involved in setting the targets. It is also important that governors agree the most appropriate level of aggregation for college targets. If the targets are too few and too broad, governors can not easily identify areas of the college that are performing above or below expectations. If the targets are too specific, governors can be so overwhelmed with statistics that it is difficult for them to draw effective conclusions.

### **Agreeing targets for the college**

At a college in the north, governors agree overall targets for retention and achievement during the autumn term. They are not involved in agreeing targets for individual qualifications. They consider whether the aggregated targets presented to them are realistic in the context of previous performance and their knowledge of the college's stronger and weaker areas.

58 In an increasing number of colleges, performance against targets for the whole college forms the basis of the governing body's annual appraisal of the principal.

### ***Rigorous monitoring***

59 The rigour with which governors monitor college performance varies considerably across the sector. Monitoring tends to be most effective where:

- governors have systematically agreed targets for the college as a whole at an appropriate time of the year and at a sufficient level of aggregation
- governors have identified what information they require and when they want it presented
- an annual schedule is prepared which takes account of the duties of both governors and managers.

### **Rigorous monitoring of college performance**

At a sixth form college in the north the governing body receives reports on enrolment, retention, and class sizes following each of the FEFC's census dates. It receives detailed reports on achievements for every course.

Each year, the governing body receives a 'review of quality procedures'. This succinct report contains a wealth of information. Each section has a clear summary, a brief conclusion and targets for action. The data include:

- the grades for internal lesson observations, compared with FEFC inspection grades at the college and national statistics
- analyses of three-year trends in achievements for each course, including analyses of high grades and value-added data
- retention rates for the college as a whole

- analysis of responses to student and staff questionnaires.

Many of the sections of the report refer to data that has already been presented to the governing body in separate forms. Governors do not simply accept the report but give it detailed critical consideration.

The college operates a programme of internal inspections and each inspection report goes to the full governing body. All reports to the governing body are now preceded by a brief summary.

The governing body also receives termly reports on the college's progress under the standards fund action plan. The governing body has used its close knowledge of curriculum matters and the performance of students when making critical decisions; for example, when considering staff reductions or the closure of courses.

### ***Non-schedule 2 provision***

60 In April 2001, when the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* comes into force, the distinction between schedule 2 provision, and non-schedule 2 provision which is unaccredited, will cease. There are examples of good practice in monitoring the quality of non-schedule 2 provision, particularly in specialist adult education institutions.

#### **Governors' monitoring of non-schedule 2 provision**

At a specialist adult education centre in the south, the management committee, which fulfils the role of its governing body, receives regular reports on quality, including data on student retention and achievement. For the large amount of non-schedule 2 provision, which is funded by the FEFC but does not lead to certification, governors receive reports on retention rates, as well as analyses of the

extent to which students have achieved their intended learning goals, described as learning outcomes. The evidence includes students' participation in performances and exhibitions, their production of creative writing and the ways in which they have applied their learning at work and in other parts of their lives. Governors receive a report summarising the annual survey of students' perceptions of the quality of their learning experience and the extent to which their learning objectives have been met. Governors regularly meet students to hear about what they are learning. The students on non-schedule 2 courses rarely use the term 'achievement' but many talk enthusiastically about the new skills and knowledge they have acquired and the use they make of them.

### ***The self-assessment report***

61 College self-assessment reports should provide a valuable means of helping governors to meet their responsibilities for overseeing performance. The inspectorate report, *Effective Self-assessment*, published in May 1999, listed the key features of governors' effective involvement in the self-assessment process. It emphasised the importance of regular reports to the board on the progress of self-assessment and the implementation of action plans. It is essential that governors understand the process of self-assessment and the need for rigorous judgements. Colleges need to make a clear connection in their self-assessment reports between retention and achievement rates and overall judgements about the quality of the college's educational provision. Where this does not happen, the self-assessment often provides an overgenerous picture of the college's performance, and fails to provide governors with an accurate overview.

## ***Active involvement of governors in the college's self-assessment process***

62 In the best practice, all members of the governing body are fully involved in the self-assessment process and adopt a critical approach. Arrangements are often particularly effective where a governor or a small team of governors attends meetings of the co-ordinating group of staff responsible for overseeing the entire self-assessment process. In some colleges, governors play an active and effective part in helping individual teams to prepare their self-assessment.

### **Governors' involvement in college self-assessment**

In a general further education college in the south, the working group that compiles the college's self-assessment report includes a governor, thereby ensuring that governors' views are sought and expressed in the self-assessment report.

In a tertiary college in the south, a governor with appropriate expertise and knowledge is a member of the college group that produces the section of the report on support for students.

63 A key factor in successful self-assessment is the involvement of governors, together with senior managers and staff, in moderating the college's self-assessment report. The opportunity for governors to participate in internal college discussion groups is valuable. In the best practice, the governing body takes an active part in validating and finalising the college's full self-assessment report. Governors carefully scrutinise each section, and discuss both the content of the report and the grades to be awarded. Their recommendations on grades and other comments are forwarded to the senior manager or group responsible for scrutinising and comparing the sections, and compiling the self-assessment report. The final report is reviewed and approved by the governing body before its submission to the FEFC.

## **Obtaining the Views of those who Use the College**

*Q: Do governors have the means of ensuring that they are well informed about the quality of students' experience and the degree to which clients are satisfied with the college?*

64 Governing bodies have devised a variety of methods for keeping in touch with the views of those who use the college's services, including students and, where appropriate, their parents, staff and members of the wider community, including employers.

### ***Students***

65 *The College Governor* (section B1, 5.1) suggests some key questions that governors might ask in relation to students. These include:

- are arrangements in place, and used, through which students can make their views known to the governing body?
- are student governors effective?
- are individual governors involved in events arranged by, and for, students?

66 Student governors play a valuable role in representing students' views. Some governing bodies have recruited two student governors, or invite a second student to attend meetings as an observer. Such arrangements help student governors to feel more confident and to participate more effectively. Some governing bodies provide training for student governors. For example, they enable them to attend external training events organised by the National Union of Students, or provide them with a mentor. The training boosts student governors' confidence in contributing to meetings and provides them with useful contacts in other colleges. Where such support is not given, student governors sometimes lack the confidence to play an active part in meetings of the board.

### **Student governors**

In a residential adult education college in the north, students are members of the corporation's advisory and quality committees as well as the board of the corporation. There is also a representative of past students on the corporation. During the appointment of the new principal, students questioned the candidates and gave their views to the selection panel.

In a sixth form college in the Midlands, the student governor is accompanied at meetings by another student who has observer status. The students also play a leading role in the college's student forum. They provide a direct communication channel between students and governors. They are confident about participating in meetings and make a valued contribution to the governing body's discussions.

### ***Monitoring levels of student satisfaction***

67 Some governing bodies take effective action to obtain information on students' opinions. The methods used include: an analysis of complaints by students, with details of the action taken; reports on surveys of students' views; reports on the extent to which the commitments in the student charter have been met; liaison committees comprising representatives of students and the corporation.

### **Monitoring students' satisfaction**

In a college in the north, the corporation's student committee contains five governors, including the student governor and the chair of the corporation, and four student representatives. The meetings are open, and other students are often invited to attend as observers. The committee reviews all matters important to students' lives at college. It considers the 'support for

students' section of the self-assessment report in detail. The committee allows governors to keep themselves abreast of students' concerns.

In another college in the north, the governor-student liaison committee receives an annual report analysing the outcomes of the college's complaints procedure. It also routinely receives the minutes of the student council. Discussions have led to improvements in students' facilities.

The performance and quality committee of a college in the south receives regular reports on the outcomes of student surveys that are completed at various points during their courses. These outcomes are compared with those for other colleges. The committee endorses 'satisfaction' targets for the following year in relation to each of the questions in the student questionnaire. These are forwarded to the full corporation for approval.

### ***Supporting students and celebrating their achievements***

68 Governors frequently attend celebrations of students' achievements, and musical and dramatic productions staged by the college. In some colleges, governors involve themselves, by invitation, in student activities. Some governors use their experience to provide practical support for students.

### **Supporting students**

In one college, governors shadow students for a day. In others, governors attend meetings of the student council, provide advice on careers and employment, conduct simulated job interviews with students and judge the presentation of students' business plans.

## ***Governors' approval and monitoring of policies relating to students***

69 Governors are responsible for approving and monitoring policies relating to students' wellbeing at college, such as policies on equal opportunities, disability and health and safety. They monitor the implementation of these policies in a variety of ways. Too frequently, they rely on the minutes of the academic board or other relevant committees, and do not give adequate consideration to these matters in governing body meetings. Reports to governors on college policies, where they exist, are sometimes not analytical enough. Effective monitoring means that there are regular analytical reports to governors on each policy area, and full discussion of any issues raised at governing body meetings. Some colleges have a schedule, indicating the arrangements and timescales for reviewing policies and monitoring their implementation.

### **Governors' monitoring of policies**

In a northern college, a governor is a member of the college's health and safety committee, and regularly reports to the board on the implementation of the health and safety policy and on changes to the policy that may be required.

In another college in the north, governors receive regular reports on equal opportunities, including a paper examining whether there was significant variance between the achievements of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those of other students.

## ***Staff***

70 Staff governors, while they do not serve in a representative capacity, frequently act as effective channels of communication between governing bodies and staff. It is common for one staff governor to be a teacher, and another

to be on the support staff, and for each to communicate matters of concern to and from their respective colleagues to the board.

71 As stated earlier, the establishment of link governor arrangements can also help to inform governors about the concerns of staff, provided that the distinction between governance and management is respected. It would be inappropriate, for example, for governors to use their links with a particular curriculum area to argue for preferential treatment in the allocation of resources, or to influence staffing decisions.

72 Less formal contacts between governors and staff occur at college events, such as open days, and on social occasions. In some colleges, governors attend staff training sessions and staff meetings. Governors are often knowledgeable about the views of staff because of the arrangements for staff and governors to attend each other's meetings. In the many colleges where middle managers give presentations to governors on progress in their curriculum areas, this also gives governors the opportunity to meet staff other than senior managers.

### **Governors' contacts with staff**

At a college in the north, governors attend the initial staff meeting at the beginning of the year. In a Midlands college, the chair of governors addresses an annual meeting of all staff.

At another college in the north, governors have instituted a series of afternoon tea meetings with groups of staff. The schedule also includes a meeting with representatives of staff trade unions. Governors find these meetings valuable in gaining a first-hand understanding of college matters.

One college governing body in the south invites staff to attend its meetings as observers. In a Midlands college, the governing body and the academic board hold an annual joint meeting.



73 Reports of governing body business are frequently reported in staff newsletters. Most governing bodies maintain effective communications with the trade unions that represent staff (*The College Governor*, section C9, 6.3).

### ***The wider community***

74 The increased emphasis on collaboration and partnership with other agencies requires governors to be aware of the college's role and standing in the wider community. The views of all those with a stake in the college, including parents, employers and representatives of local organisations, provide useful feedback to governors about the college's effectiveness. The views of employers help governors to monitor the college's responsiveness. Advisory committees provide governors with a channel of communication to local employers associated with the college. Individual governors themselves, also have good knowledge of, and contacts with, employers and community representatives because of their own standing in the community. Many also have good links with local schools whose pupils move to the college and with the higher education institutions to which students progress.

#### **Governors' involvement in advisory committees**

In a general further education college in the Midlands, governors have established an industrial advisory committee, chaired by a retired industrialist. It includes two governors, representatives from six major employers and the economic development officer from the local authority.

A Midlands college has seven advisory committees, each chaired by a governor, which bring together staff and representatives of local industry. The committees cover all areas of the college's curriculum. They consider new course developments and the education and training needs of the relevant industry.

75 Many colleges hold open annual general meetings. At these meetings the presentation of an annual report, including a summary of examination results, is followed by a session at which members of the public may question governors. Attendance is seldom high, though some colleges have ensured a reasonable level of attendance by combining these meetings with other events.

#### **Meetings for the public**

The third annual general meeting of a small college in the north attracted about 60 people, including staff, governors, employers and representatives from the local training and enterprise council (TEC), the local authority and the chamber of commerce. The evening included a student's demonstration of the winning entry in a competition to design a screensaver. The prize was donated and presented by a governor.

At a tertiary college in the north, the annual general meeting is held after a parents' consultation evening, at which students' higher education choices are discussed. Attendance is high.

The first public meeting held by the governors of a Midlands college was attended by around 45 people. Clear presentations from the principal and chair were followed by discussion of the annual report, which had been circulated before the meeting. The questions from the public were largely about the college's proposals for relocation. They were answered fully. The meeting lasted an hour.

76 Some governing bodies allow members of the public to observe its board and committee meetings. However, this opportunity is seldom well publicised, and few members of the public take advantage of it. Attempts have been made to increase public awareness, for example, by advertising in local newspapers.

## Action and Follow-up

*Q: Do governors ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to the information that they receive and is the action effective?*

77 Governors should not take direct action to deal with issues relating to the quality of the college's educational provision and performance but they have a clear duty to ensure that college managers take appropriate and effective action. Where governing bodies identify areas of concern, however, they do not always agree the specific actions required to address these concerns or methods of monitoring such actions. Examples of effective practice include actions to deal with low retention and achievement rates and governors' role in monitoring progress.

### **Governors' action on weaknesses in retention and achievement**

At a general further education college in the north, the governing body receives a summary of achievements for major college programmes each November. The report highlights courses with poor rates of retention and achievement. Acceptable levels of retention and achievement are identified, with reference to national benchmarks. Courses with pass rates below 60% are targeted for improvement and monitored by the governors' quality committee through its annual action plan.

78 Sometimes governors identify the need for improvements through sources other than formal reports from the college.

### **Identifying the need for improvement**

In a general further education college in the north, link governors brought to managers' attention shortcomings in resources, following their visits to two curriculum areas. Managers took action to improve the resources.

In a sixth form college in the Midlands, governors acted on weaknesses identified in their self-assessment report relating to communications with staff and students by establishing a governor link scheme and publishing a regular newsletter.

79 Some governing bodies have commissioned reports on areas of college activity. Some have also commissioned research on areas causing concern.

### **Reports commissioned by governors**

At a college in the south, managers agreed to a request from governors that each curriculum area conduct a health check, using a range of appropriate performance indicators, and present a report to the governing body.

In a college in the south, a consultant was used to review the effectiveness of the new management structure approved by governors after one year of operation.

Governors at a tertiary college in the north commissioned research into poor retention rates at the college. This work was overseen by a retention subcommittee. The project resulted in the appointment of course administrators to all curriculum areas in the college and 'retention action teams' for each area to ensure that actions were implemented. Retention rates improved as a result of this initiative.

## ***Effective action to address weaknesses***

80 It is important that governors do not simply receive reports but that they ensure that effective action is taken to address any issues raised and to improve areas of identified weakness.

### **Effective action to address identified weaknesses**

Governors at a college in the north ensure that prompt and effective action is taken in response to identified weaknesses. Following poor retention on hairdressing and catering two-year courses, governors asked managers for a report on the reasons for students leaving early, including the students who left their courses before the November census date. It authorised action to improve retention.

At a sixth form college in the north, the curriculum committee of the governing body authorised action to remedy unsatisfactory pass rates at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and poor results in two GCE A level subjects. Consideration by the curriculum committee resulted in the reorganisation of one of the departments involved.

## ***Self-assessment action plans***

81 Some governing bodies make considerable efforts to ensure that they monitor the implementation of action plans related to the college's self-assessment effectively. This involves careful consideration of regular reports from senior managers on the college's progress in addressing the weaknesses identified. Specific targets and performance indicators are used to measure progress.

### **Governors' scrutiny of self-assessment action plans**

At a college in the north, governors systematically scrutinise the annual self-assessment report to see that action plans are followed up and that improvements take place. For example, changes were made to the staffing structure of the engineering section to ensure that relevant technical skills continued to be available.

## ***Recording mechanisms to support action***

82 For governors to fulfil their responsibility for ensuring that agreed action is implemented, it is important that mechanisms exist to record the actions clearly. Effective minute-taking and clear action points help governors and managers to make sure that action is followed up and progress discussed.

### **Good recording and effective follow-up**

At a college in the south, the governing body minutes show clearly when and how governors have demanded additional information, action or reports on progress. The clerk produces an action sheet following each meeting. It has wide circulation amongst managers, to ensure that they are instigating action or responding to requests. Governors challenge managers, where necessary, and ensure that matters are not allowed to slip. Each committee chair has responsibility for reporting to the governing body about the key areas of focus for their committee and is expected to report if any action or follow-up is necessary.

83 In the best practice, governors thoroughly discuss the college's performance, ask challenging questions and endorse actions to remedy weaknesses that are then clearly recorded.

### **Good practice in monitoring performance**

At a meeting of the quality and performance committee in a general further education college in the Midlands, charts showing student retention and attendance rates by school, and the variance with targets, were presented by each head of school. Examples of courses that were significantly below or above average were given and the reasons for this discussed. Members gave particular attention to the low retention on a course for students aged 16 to 19. They noted that the school was reviewing the way it teaches the course in order to make it more relevant and interesting for students. Attendance was also discussed. Members noted the figures and endorsed the college's decision to review the syllabus for the course.

A paper on achievements for the previous academic year was presented. Processes for checking the accuracy of the data were explained to the committee, with an honest appraisal of poor achievements. The committee scrutinised courses with especially poor achievement rates and the vice-principal gave an analysis of the reasons for this. Governors expect senior managers to account for poor performance and constantly ask for explanations and plans to address problems. The vice-principal outlined the range of strategies being adopted by the college to address unsatisfactory achievement rates. Members noted the achievement rates and endorsed the strategies. They resolved that college management should provide the quality and performance committee with regular information to allow members to monitor the effectiveness of these strategies.

### ***Raising standards***

84 Governors can play an influential role in improving the quality of provision and in raising standards by their careful oversight and by ensuring that action is effective. Close scrutiny

of information about the college's performance is followed by agreed action to bring about improvements. Progress is carefully monitored, often by a committee charged with oversight of the college's academic performance.

### **Governors' effective action in an improving college**

At a general further education college in the south, which had received a poor inspection report in 1995, one outcome of governors' self-assessment was the establishment of a committee to oversee the quality of the college's provision. In addition to monitoring retention and achievement rates, the committee is responsible for overseeing the range of curriculum provision and the quality of students' experience at the college. The committee has taken steps to intervene where it has found poor levels of achievement or retention. Members required managers to produce an action plan to remedy a sharp decline in retention and achievement at GCE A level in 1999. The committee reported its findings to the full board, which approved the recommended action.

## **Governors' Self-assessment**

*Q: How effectively do governors evaluate their own performance?*

85 *The College Governor* (section E1, 2.1) states 'Governors should monitor their performance, both individually and collectively, to ensure that they provide an effective, efficient and timely service to the college.'

## ***Effective procedures for assessing the governing body's performance***

86 Governing bodies have developed a wide range of methods for evaluating their own performance. Questionnaires are commonly used. In designing these, however, governors should first have a clear and detailed understanding of their role and responsibilities, so that the most appropriate questions can be asked.

### **Evaluation of governors' performance**

Governors of a college in the north complete two questionnaires. The first assesses governors' individual contribution. There are 24 questions. On a five-point scale, governors are asked how satisfied they are that they, for example:

- follow trends and important developments in further education and training
- are knowledgeable about the college's activities and services
- understand and support the college's mission.

The questionnaire invites governors to photocopy the responses, so that they can review them over the subsequent year. It also includes a space for governors to indicate their training needs and asks what action the governing body can take to help them become more effective members.

The second questionnaire evaluates the effectiveness of the board's structures and the conduct of its business. It requires governors to award a rating of 1 to 5 to 54 quality statements. These are grouped under the following headings:

- policy and strategic planning
- the management of board business
- the selection and induction of new members
- the board and college resources

- the board and the principal
- the board and the staff
- the board and educational programmes
- the board and external relations.

Examples of the quality statements include:

- the corporation has devised and implemented a plan for the periodic evaluation of the board and its committees
- the corporation, through established channels, maintains close communication with students
- the corporation considers [...] recruitment to target, retention, course completion, [...] pass rates and other successes.

## ***Use of self-evaluation to identify training needs***

87 As well as helping governors to draw up their self-assessment, questionnaires help to identify governors' needs for further training, and to indicate ways in which individual and corporate effectiveness might be improved.

### **Identifying training needs and improving performance**

At a northern college, questionnaires are used to evaluate the effectiveness of individual governors as well as of the governing body as a whole. The chair discusses each governor's response at a personal meeting in which members' training needs are identified.

Governors at a college in the south complete an individual self-assessment annually and identify measures to improve their own, and the corporation's performance. The chair analyses the outcomes of this process following meetings with individual governors, and this analysis is used to inform the corporation's self-assessment.

## *Use of external views*

88 Some governing bodies invite external comment on the board's effectiveness. Examples include a review of governance by college staff, the involvement of governors from a comparable college, and the use of an external consultant. Governors may take advice from a college with previous experience of the process of self-assessment and inspection.

### **Staff assessment of governors**

Governors of a college in the south are assessed by senior managers and have also commissioned external consultants to assess their performance.

At another college, the staff complete a questionnaire to evaluate governors' performance. This is included as evidence for the governance section of the college's self-assessment report.

## *Governors' self-assessment*

89 Arrangements for assessing the governing body's performance are often most effective where a group of governors has responsibility for the co-ordination of self-assessment. The group oversees the production of the report and monitors the implementation of the action plan.

### **Self-assessment arrangements**

Governors of a college in the north review their performance over a four-year cycle, completing an annual questionnaire on specific aspects of their role. The governors' quality assurance committee analyses the responses, which are then discussed at the annual residential meeting.

The review and development committee of a general further education college in the south provides the focus for considering the practice of governance and ways of improving performance.

90 In some colleges, each committee of the board prepares its own self-assessment report, with the aid of guidelines provided by the clerk. The governors' self-assessment group co-ordinates the process and brings together the committees' evaluations. Findings are discussed and agreed at a meeting of the full board. The self-assessment group then synthesises the findings and produces a draft self-assessment report on governance. In the best practice, the report is published widely within the college and all staff are invited to comment. Moderation may also involve an external person, such as the governor of another further education college or a consultant. The final report and grade for governance is approved after full discussion by the board.

## *Governors' targets for monitoring their own performance*

91 Self-assessment is most effective when governors assess their own performance against clear objectives, targets and performance indicators. For most governing bodies, the development of targets and performance indicators is still at an early stage. Many governing bodies set targets for attendance at board and committee meetings. The levels of governors' participation in meetings are also monitored. Other targets include:

- the timely dispatch of corporation and committee papers
- the turnover of membership
- governors' attendance at training events
- the number of visits made to the college by link governors.

92 It has also become increasingly clear to governors that the overall performance of the college, particularly in respect of retention and achievement, is the most important indicator of their effectiveness. In a growing number of colleges, governors have established policies covering aspects of governance. The implementation of the policies is monitored and performance indicators are used to measure the extent to which the standards set are being met.

### **The development of performance indicators for governance**

A 'performance indicators and self-assessment' working group of governors of a college in the north has undertaken a review of the performance of the corporation. The review includes a measure of governors' attendance against a set target figure.

The minutes of meetings of the board of a college in the south record the time spent discussing individual agenda items. This information contributes to the self-assessment.

A working party of members of the board in a northern college monitors national developments that relate to governance and makes recommendations to the corporation. The work of the group has improved the quality of governance. For example, one of the corporation's objectives, to develop a more open style of governance, was adopted on the working party's recommendation.

The board of a general further education college in the south regularly reviews its procedures. It has also reviewed aspects of its performance, for example, in relation to its analysis of students' achievements, attendance at corporation meetings and the development of a code of ethics.

### ***Positive action following self-assessment***

93 In the best practice, governors make good use of the self-assessment report to develop a strategy for improvement. Governors consider carefully how improvement will be ensured. Action plans are comprehensive, realistic and precise. They address all weaknesses. They also identify ways of improving aspects of governance identified as satisfactory or good. Timescales are established for carrying out each action. Measurable targets for improvement are set.

### **Action following self-assessment**

In a college in the south, governors have taken action to address shortcomings identified through self-assessment. For example, a programme of briefing events to meet governors' training requirements has been introduced.

Governors of a college in the north identified the need for a training programme. They developed a formal induction programme and made arrangements for governors to identify their training needs and to receive support from the college in meeting them.

At a college in the Midlands, governors identified as a weakness that some members were unable to attend training events because of their work commitments. In response they have instituted brief training sessions as part of governing body meetings, to ensure that all members receive regular updating on key issues.

94 Effective governing bodies take immediate steps to remedy weaknesses and ensure that these are carefully managed. Some corporations decide to implement action through existing committees' action plans. Others set up a working group for this purpose. Progress is considered at board meetings where debate enables governors to identify further areas for improvement.

### **A committee to oversee an 'effective governance' programme**

Governors at a college in the south have set up a governance advisory committee to manage their 'effective governance programme' and to disseminate good practice. Progress in meeting the objectives identified in the 'effective governance' action plan is reviewed at each meeting of the corporation.

## Good Practice

95 Good practice in governors' monitoring of quality and standards includes:

- governors' commitment to raising standards and improving their own performance
- the recruitment of governors with an appropriate mix of skills and expertise, including experience in education and training, and quality assurance
- governors' clear understanding of their role and responsibilities and of the distinction between governance and management
- the effective use of members' expertise and experience
- well-planned induction and training programmes for governors
- appropriate structures for monitoring the college's performance
- effective committees that ask challenging questions
- good communication between committees and the full governing body
- clear and timely information for governors, provided in a format decided by them, to enable them to make accurate and rigorous judgements about the college's performance
- reports to governors on students' and other clients' degree of satisfaction with the college
- effective monitoring of policies relating to students' welfare
- direct and effective contact with staff and students
- effective dialogue between governors and members of the wider community
- clear decisions by governors to ensure that action is taken by managers and followed up in future governing body meetings
- governors' use of self-assessment to identify where they can improve their oversight of the college's performance

- self-critical and comprehensive self-assessment of governance, using specific targets and performance indicators.

## Conclusions and Issues

96 Immediately following incorporation, the main priority for many governing bodies was to ensure the financial viability of their colleges. Some were content to leave the task of developing the curriculum and assuring its quality to college managers. There are, nevertheless, some governing bodies with long-established arrangements for monitoring quality and standards. More recently, the national drive to raise standards has brought a rapid improvement in governors' arrangements for monitoring the quality of education and training provided in colleges. Many governing bodies have recently established a standards committee or made other arrangements to the same end. Some have recruited more members with expertise in the field of education and training and quality assurance, strengthening governors' understanding of educational issues and helping them to form a more independent view of the college's performance. The provision of national benchmarking data has enabled governors to compare their colleges' retention and achievement rates with those of other colleges in the sector and to set targets for improvement. The presentation and quality of information on colleges' performance have improved, helping governors to deal more confidently with a potentially daunting volume of data and to make sound judgements about quality and standards in their institutions. Governors' assessment of themselves is also becoming more rigorous in most colleges. In a number of colleges, however, some of these developments are very recent. Some governing bodies still pay insufficient attention to the quality of education and training for which they are ultimately responsible.



97 The good practice identified in this report is not intended to represent a blueprint for monitoring performance and raising standards. Colleges have very diverse curricula and their circumstances vary widely. Governing bodies need to find the most effective means for fulfilling their responsibilities within the context of their college. The key features of good governance identified and illustrated in this report should help all governors to see how they can carry out their role effectively.

98 Aspects of governors' performance which require further attention include:

- the thoroughness with which governors monitor the college's performance in relation to quality and standards in education and training
  - the creation of an appropriate structure for monitoring the college's performance that respects the distinction between governance and management
  - the recruitment of members, in addition to college staff, with expertise in education and training and in quality assurance
  - terms of reference for standards committees that are neither too narrow nor too broad
  - a systematic programme of induction and training for governors
  - clearly established criteria against which the college's performance will be assessed by governors
  - a planned annual cycle of target-setting and review appropriate for governors and managers that allows governing bodies to set improvement targets for the following year
  - the provision of clearly presented, accurate and timely information, at an appropriate level of aggregation, on which governors can base judgements about the performance of the college
  - mechanisms to ensure that the work of the standards committee is reported in sufficient detail to the full governing body
- the promptness with which managers take appropriate action and report to the board
  - the establishment of performance indicators for governance.

# Annex A

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# Annex B

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