



Board Advisory & Leadership and Talent Consultancy

NCG

External Board Review Report

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Prepared for:

The Board of NCG

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1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 The Government's White Paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (January 2021), drew attention to the pivotal role that strong governance and effective executive leadership plays in the Further Education (FE) sector, stating that it is the combination of these factors which enables high quality provision and enables the workforce and learners to succeed. This built on the findings coming from a variety of sources in the recent past, all of which cite those issues stemming from governance, which have contributed to failings in some colleges and other educational institutions.

1.2 Ofsted's 'Improving Governance' report of 2017, FE Commissioner's annual reports and the Ney Report (independent review of college financial oversight 2019) both raised concerns about governance arrangements in FE. The requirement for annual self-assessment of governance and a three-yearly external review of governance is one of the mandatory reforms to governance activity for sixth-form college corporations dictated by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. The stated objective of the external review is to support continuous improvement by demonstrating where an organisation is working well, identifying areas for development and helping Boards keep up with good practice. Future financial returns will need to confirm when a governance review took place or reported to the Board and give the name of the external reviewer.

1.3 The increased focus on the importance of good governance has been welcomed by many in the FE sector, and NCG see the value in not only engaging external assessors in reviewing their governance arrangements, but benchmarking themselves against best practice, or even next practice in good governance, both within FE and in other regulated sectors. They have an ambition to be outstanding in all that they do, and governance is no exception.

1.4 Methodology:

1.4.1 We utilised a range of methods of gathering data, information and insight. These included:

- Meetings with key stakeholders and members
- Desktop research
- Meeting observation
- Online survey of internal stakeholder groups

1.4.2 Reporting: The research is collated and triangulated and brought together in a final report that provides a summary of the key findings, and presents a series of recommendations (R), whilst also benchmarking and sharing best practice (B) against FE and other sectors.

1.4.3 We recognise that NCG is a forward-looking College Group who are seeking to stretch and develop their governance arrangements, and therefore the benchmarking information and suggestions have been outlined in an effort to support the thinking in these areas.

1.4.4 Our approach was to review and benchmark NCG's governance arrangements against excellence in governance practice, not compliance, and therefore although there are a broad range of recommendations within this report, we have found no significant red flags in our research. The recommendations and suggested actions will support NCG in stretching their approach to good governance practice to achieve excellence in governance.

1.5 Key Findings:

1.5.1 In comparison to other FE institutions and governance arrangements in other sectors used as benchmarks through this exercise, we found NCG to be performing well.



1.5.2 NCG has spent significant time developing a new approach to governance and establishing robust governance arrangements and structures to support its new approach. Once fully implemented, these arrangements should support NCG in its 'place based' approach to governance and providing effective oversight of the group.

1.5.3 NCG has taken a robust approach to recruiting new members to the Corporation Board and has plans to support the onboarding of new members to enable them to be effective in the new arrangements.

1.5.4 Feedback from across the Board has identified strong leadership, effective chairing, and an appreciation of the breadth of backgrounds and expertise in place on the Board.

1.5.5 A strong senior team were also acknowledged throughout the review, with the Board feeling generally well supported and informed.

1.5.6 In the future there may be capacity for the committees to take on further responsibilities in relation to being delegated authority to approve rather than recommend (such as policies), building further capacity for the Board to focus on strategic matters.

1.5.7 The further expansion of external stakeholder relationships could be developed, possibly through further utilising members to engage and influence across their broad geography and bring further insight into the Board to inform strategic decision making.

1.5.8 Further consideration and focus on creating connectivity with students could inform and develop the processes through which students' voices are heard, and how they can contribute to, and inform decisions taken at Board level.

1.5.9 Formal appraisal processes for members needs to be introduced to ensure that expectations on member are clear and performance is measured. This will also assist NCG develop well informed succession plans that have been lacking previously.

1.5.10 Committee Chairs should take on a more structured role in reporting through to the Corporation Board and holding responsibility for committee recommendations and decisions.

1.5.11 Further consideration should be given to the need for a Finance / Resources as the new governance structure develops over the next 12 months.

1.5.12 NCG need to ensure that the appropriate support and resources are made available to continue the implementation plan around the new governance arrangements and membership, ensuring that the dynamics of the new Board are effective and that appropriate connectivity between the Corporation Board and College Boards is strong.

1.5.13 As stated under section 4, our approach was to review and benchmark NCGs governance against excellence in governance practice, not compliance, and therefore although there are a broad range of recommendations within this report, we have found no significant red flags in our research and most of the recommended or suggested actions will support the stretch and growth the governance arrangement and support the establishment of the new approach.

1.5.14 There was enthusiasm from all who engaged in the process, and strong motivation to support NCG on its journey and provide excellent opportunities for a broad student base.



1.6 Summary:

1.6.1 We find the governance exercised by the Board to be effective, although recognising that there is significant change being implemented that needs to be managed appropriately to ensure that systems, processes and members are able to provide appropriate governance oversight and stretch the College Group. With the implementation of our proposals, on top of existing good practice, and the continued implementation of the governance changes, the Board could achieve excellence in its governance arrangements.

1.6.2 In comparison to other FE institutions and governance arrangements in other sectors used as benchmarks throughout this exercise, we found NCG to be performing well.

1.6.3 In all areas we were met with enthusiasm and passion for both the College Group and what it stands for, and the impact members and the staff group can have on students, their educational experience and their life opportunities.

