Insight Guide:
governing bodies and academic assurance

www.lfhe.ac.uk/AcademicGov

Inspiring Leadership | **Leadership Foundation** for Higher Education

HIGHER EDUCATION *hefce* FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg Uwch Cymru **Higher Education Funding Council for Wales** — hefcw

Department for the Economy www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Inspiring Leadership | **Leadership Foundation** for Higher Education

Contents

Contact details:
LFHE Consultancy team:
Andy Shenstone
M: 07813 527 942
E: Andy.Shenstone@lfhe.ac.uk

01 Foreword

Higher education in England, Northern Ireland and Wales enjoys a reputation for good quality and high standards. To ensure that teaching and learning continues to provide a worthwhile student experience, especially in the light of tuition fees, the relevant funding bodies have reformed their quality assurance frameworks. In doing this they have sought to underline and emphasise the role of governing bodies in ensuring quality and standards by introducing new assurance requirements.

The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education has undertaken fieldwork on behalf of the funding bodies and in our sample found that higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) delivering higher education are keen to discharge their new duty effectively and that, in all institutions visited, steps have been taken to provide the members of governing bodies with the tools they need. The review also found that:

▌ There is a need to instil a greater understanding of academic life in the governing body, particularly the lay members.

▌ There is potential for a stronger inter-relationship between governing bodies and academic boards/senates and the equivalent in further education colleges.

▌ The volume, complexity and density of reports to governing bodies presents a challenge.

▌ The diversity and background of governing body members needs to reflect a degree of expertise in, and empathy with, the institution's academic work and the make-up of the student population.

▌ Governing bodies have a need for comparative/benchmarking data and information to illuminate their assessment of academic performance. This is a more acute need in FECs than in HEIs.

▌ Governing bodies need to escalate their engagement with the student experience and the student voice.

This Insight Guide explores the new assurance requirement and gives advice based on developing practice in the institutions visited. Ideas about changing practice are intended to be used selectively: one of the factors behind the sector's reputation is that each HEI and FE college is unique. Accordingly, it is anticipated that an approach to academic assurance will be tailored for each individual institutional context.

The Insight Guide will be of interest to external or lay governors, especially those who are new to higher or further education. The new assurance requirement potentially increases their involvement and they will find the case studies in the document of interest as these illustrate how their peers are going about the new challenge. The comparative dimension and Leadership Foundation advice may also be of interest to student and staff governors and senior managers who will know more about how the institution's academic systems and governance work but who are now faced with the challenge of providing external assurance.

The Guide should be read alongside Leadership Foundation companion guidance aimed at new governors, student governors and governing bodies seeking to review academic assurance; relevant circulars from the funding bodies; the Committee of University Chairs' (CUC) Higher Education Code of Governance; and Illustrative Practice Note 3 on Academic Governance published by the CUC and the Leadership Foundation. ▪

Andy Shenstone

Director of Consultancy and Business Development
Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

02 Introductions

The governing bodies of providers of higher education have the ultimate responsibility for the quality of the teaching and learning and the standards of awards that take place within their institutions. In 2016-17 the higher education funding bodies in England, Northern Ireland and Wales introduced a requirement for governing bodies to provide an annual academic assurance (see Annex A). This Guide explores the implications of the new duty and provides advice for governing bodies and their individual members as well as for senior managers, governing body secretaries and clerks. The advice is illustrated by brief case studies drawn from current practice in the sector and a fuller set of case studies is being published on the Leadership Foundation website **www.lfhe.ac.uk/AcademicGov** at the same time as this Guide.

The new requirement covers those providers that are higher education institutions, ie universities and colleges that are grant funded by and subject to the conditions imposed by the UK funding bodies, and further education colleges delivering higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This guidance may be of interest in Scotland where there is also a requirement for governing body assurance.

The requirement is not currently imposed upon alternative providers as a condition of designation but the governing bodies of those providers are advised to take note of this guidance.

The assurance requirement relates to the standard of awards and to the student academic experience and student outcomes, i.e. it is about teaching and learning at all levels of higher education, undergraduate and postgraduate, including taught and research degrees and students at home and overseas. In the higher education system generally and in some institutions, the focus of scrutiny around the new requirement has been on undergraduate provision and there is more data available to inform consideration of undergraduate than postgraduate experience and outcomes. The assurance requirement does not expect governing bodies to give assurances about the quality of pure and applied research, although the ultimate corporate governance responsibility for the quality of research is the same as that for teaching.

The advice should be read alongside the Illustrative Practice Note 3 (IPN) on Academic Governance published by the CUC and the Leadership Foundation in 2017. The IPN discusses the governing body responsibility for academic governance and the funding body assurance requirement. This advice complements the IPN and gives additional advice based on fieldwork undertaken by the Leadership Foundation in 2017 which explored how governing bodies engage with academic governance.

The Higher Education Code of Governance published by the CUC in 2014 is clear that the provision of academic assurance to the governing body is one of the primary elements of governance. The Association of Colleges Code of Good Governance makes it clear that it is the governing body's responsibility to foster exceptional teaching and learning. The conditions of grant imposed by the funding bodies expect Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FEC) governing bodies to have effective frameworks to oversee and manage the quality and standards of education.

The constitutions of HEIs, both chartered bodies and higher education corporations, and FECs usually make governing bodies (generally councils in chartered bodies and boards of governors in higher and further education corporations) the ultimate authorities for academic activity. This sits alongside the potential delegation of responsibility for oversight to senates or academic boards (or their equivalent in FECs). Some alternative providers have governance models closely modelled on HEIs. In others, the normal legal duty for trustees and directors to have full responsibility for strategy and risk effectively means, again, that their boards have ultimate authority for quality and standards.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), is the established guide to how all providers of higher education should go about managing and operating their systems for academic quality and standards: it is comprehensive, authoritative and widely followed.

This Insight Guide was informed by fieldwork undertaken by the Leadership Foundation for the funding bodies in England, Northern Ireland and Wales in 2017 - 16 HEIs and FECs were visited. The Guide draws on cameos giving examples of developing practice in those institutions which suit their own circumstances and that may also be of interest elsewhere.

The principles underpinning the guidance are that it aims to:

❚ Be complete but succinct.

❚ Address the needs of HEIs and further education colleges while recognising the differences between the two.

❚ Be constructive.

❚ Ground advice in developing institutional practice.

Overall, there are a broad range of measures that institutions have developed or might develop to address the requirement and no model is prescribed. ■

03 Insight Guide

A: The relationship between academic governance and academic assurance

Corporate governance is about the direction and strategy of an organisation and how internal delegation and accountability works. In a higher education institution - although not explicitly in a further education college - this has to be balanced against the legal requirement for academic freedom. Therefore, responsibility for the operation and management of academic systems is delegated to the heads of institution their teams and internal groups and committees, but assurance about its effectiveness is subject to an independent system of **academic governance**. This Guide is concerned with the area of overlap (Figure 1) between the systems of corporate and academic governance and specifically the mechanisms by which those responsible for academic operations and management - and the governance of these matters - assure those responsible for corporate governance that the quality and standards of education are satisfactory.

Figure 1:

The relationship between corporate and academic governance

Corporate governance

Academic governance

Academic governance

Academic governance involves the personnel, structures, policies and relationships that regulate the management and conduct of teaching, learning and research in a higher education provider. It is a system that ensures the institution's standards are maintained, quality is defined and monitored, and there is continuous improvement. It is important to governing bodies because it is about (a) mitigating academic risk and (b) ensuring the sustainability of provision.

Academic governance is usually led by the head of institution, who is also responsible for the management of academic affairs; it is overseen by a network of groups and committees culminating in the academic board or senate (or equivalent in a further education college); and it is conducted according to documented institutional policies and academic regulations.

The process of academic governance is integrated with the systems for the conduct and management of academic operations. The personnel involved have multiple roles, sometimes teaching, managing and governing academic operations. All of this is undertaken on behalf of the whole organisation and is subject to the ultimate authority of the governing body. In much of the UK's higher education system, the governing body now has to provide an **external assurance** on the education provided and, in order to do this effectively, it has to receive **internal assurance** from the system of academic governance.

Many HEIs also have links between their academic operations and other providers, including FECs, through collaborative partnerships, franchises or validation agreements. Some of these links are international. Each of these partner bodies has its own duty toward quality and standards, notwithstanding oversight by the HEI. The awarding HEI itself has a duty to ensure that its own quality and standards are being maintained by partners and it will have agreements with those partners which will be actively supervised. The HEI's academic governance arrangements will extend to partnerships and the governing body will need to receive and give assurances that quality and standards are being maintained in these partnership arrangements.

Academic quality, standards and enhancement

Academic quality refers to how and how well the higher education provider supports students to enable them to achieve their awards. It covers learning, teaching and assessment, and all the different resources and processes a provider puts in place to admit students and to help them progress and fulfil their potential.

Academic standards are the standards that individual degree-awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications. Within this, the threshold academic standard is the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for the award of academic credit or a qualification. For equivalent qualifications, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK.

Enhancement is the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported: a higher education provider has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities and to have policies, structures and processes in place to detect where improvement is necessary.

Academic assurance

The UK Quality Code defines academic quality assurance as the process for ensuring that the academic standards and quality of higher education provision meet agreed expectations. This Insight Guide is primarily concerned with:

▌ How the governing body receives assurance that this process is working and that it is maintaining and enhancing quality and standards.

▌ How the governing body converts that assurance input into the assurance output that it is now required to give, on an annual basis, in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

B: The different requirements across the UK

Across the UK, the binary arrangement of a council or board of governors operating in partnership with a senate or academic board is near universal in HEIs and, in principle, is how FECs and a number of alternative providers of higher education are structured. However, the approaches to quality assurance and the role of governing bodies in the provision of academic assurance varies across the home nations. Moreover, these approaches have been changing of late because of legislation and the different approaches of the funding bodies and, at the time of drafting this Guide, more change is possible, not least in England as the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act is implemented.

England and Northern Ireland

The quality assurance regime in England and Northern Ireland has changed from one where external assurance was primarily provided by the Quality Assurance Agency to one in which the focus is internal: on governing bodies providing assurance. This, in turn, is part of an annual desk based monitoring exercise, the Annual Provider Review (APR).

From December 2016, each governing body has been required to give a formal annual assurance covering the enhancement, quality and standards of their teaching and learning. The precise specification as set down by Hefce and the Department of Education (DfE) is at Annex A and it requires each governing body to:

▌ Receive and discuss a report and action plan relating to the student experience and outcomes, informed by internal and external evidence and student input, and confirming that that the methods used to improve the student experience are appropriate;

▌ Confirm that the standards of awards are being appropriately set (in the case of degree awarding providers) and maintained.

In short, it now falls to the governing body to give a public assurance that education in the institution is subject to continuous improvement and that the standard is being maintained.

To complement this, governing body assurances are then tested through annual and periodic reviews undertaken by Hefce in England and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. The annual provider review essentially confirms that that the institution has complied with the assurance requirement. A five yearly Assurance Review will explore with management and the governing body how they derived their academic assurance and whether it is soundly based.

Wales

The quality assurance approach is developing in Wales with a significant continuing requirement for independent and cyclical external quality assurance reviews (for example from the Quality Assurance Agency). An annual assurance will still be required from each governing body but it is not identical to those required in England and Northern Ireland, it is being introduced one year later (December 2017) and the first year will be treated as developmental. The precise specification is at Annex A and it requires each governing body to report annually that the governing body:

▌ Has received a report taking account of the external quality assurance review, and an action plan has been put in place and implemented as appropriate, in partnership with the student body.

▌ Can confirm that the methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of its knowledge, robust and appropriate.

▌ Can confirm that the standards of awards have been appropriately set (for degree awarding bodies) and maintained.

▌ Has considered a report on the annual dialogue between the institution and the student union or equivalent, scrutinised student survey outcomes and confirmed that action plans had been put in place and implemented, in partnership with the student body.

▌ It has received a copy of the relationship agreement between the institution and the student union or equivalent, and a copy of the student charter, both of which have been reviewed within the past year.

It now falls to the governing body to give a public assurance that the most recent external review of education is being actioned, that education in the institution is subject to continuous improvement and that the standard is being maintained. The assurance in Wales requires a more detailed statement about student engagement than in England or NI.

An additional factor in Wales is that, in academic oversight and all their other work, governing bodies have to reflect the bilingual character of higher education. This has implications for membership, induction, development and support for governing body members and for how they conduct their business.

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

The common requirements across all three countries are that governing bodies should receive reports and assurances about quality and standards, and then provide annual assurances. The exact specifications for the assurances to be given are set down by funding bodies and are clear.

Overall, because the assurance requirement is clear, the means to inform the governing body should not be problematic. The Leadership Foundation fieldwork found that governing bodies and management accepted, understood and were making changes to deliver the new assurance. Having stated that, on the basis of discussions in institutions, we also found that:

▌ There is a need to instil a greater understanding of academic life in the governing body, particularly the lay members. In FECs, there is a clear need to address this in higher educaiton induction.

▌ There is potential for a stronger inter-relationship between governing bodies and academic boards/senates.

▌ The volume, complexity and density of reports to governing bodies presents a challenge for members to manage within the time available.

▌ The diversity and background of governing body members needs to reflect a degree of expertise in, and empathy with, the institution's academic work and the make-up of the student population.

▌ Governing bodies have a need for comparative/benchmarking data and information to illuminate their assessment of academic performance. This is a more acute need in FECs than in HEIs.

▌ Governing bodies need to escalate their engagement with the student experience and the student voice.

One element of the new assurance duty that is arguably open to interpretation is where governing bodies give assurance 'to the best of our knowledge'. This requires members to actively scrutinise and challenge the information and assurances they are given so that they can be confident in their knowledge base as they in turn give assurance. A crucial tool for members as discussed in this Guide is that of triangulation: using internal and independent external information as well as hard data to corroborate and reconcile what governing bodies are told. We found in our fieldwork that most but not all governing bodies will as a matter of course be informed – probably at aggregate level or by exception – about judgements being made about provision by professional, regulatory or statutory bodies as they accredit provision and by external examiners: these are potentially telling sources of independent assurance.

The assurances required distinguish between HE providers with and without degree awarding powers. For the most part HEIs award their own degrees and many also franchise provision to, or validate awards in, other providers; and most FECs and alternative providers use HEIs as their collaborative partners. There are exceptions to this, for example as more FECs gain foundation and taught degree awarding powers. Degrees from UK universities may also be awarded overseas as part of an institution's transnational work. This adds complexity to the trail of assurance to the governing body but, ultimately, governors must be confident that the quality of teaching and learning and its enhancement and the standard of awards – wherever delivered and whoever delivered by – are covered by the new annual assurance.

C: The Teaching Excellence Framework

The new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was developed by the Department for Education in England. While higher education policy is a devolved matter, individual providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also able to take part if they wish. The TEF is a scheme for recognising excellent teaching, in addition to existing national quality requirements for universities, colleges and other higher education providers. It provides information to help prospective students choose where to study. The TEF is voluntary and each higher education provider decides whether or not they wish to take part.

The TEF judges an institution's teaching and learning based on an independent panel's judgement of benchmarked key metrics concerning the student experience, noncontinuation and graduate destinations in the context of a written submission.

Participating higher education providers receive a gold, silver or bronze award (or a provisional award) reflecting the excellence of their teaching, learning environment and student outcomes. The awards cover undergraduate teaching. There is a publicly available written summary of the panel's conclusion explaining and giving the background to the gold, silver or bronze assessment.

The first results from the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) were announced in 2017, with 295 institutions submitting.

The TEF is of potential interest to a governing body as it attempts to draw its own conclusion about quality and standards. The institution's written submission to the TEF should be informative and should be consistent with other information coming to the governing body; the metrics draw on key data that should already be known to the governing body; and the TEF panel's interpretation of this range of evidence gives the governing body an independent and external opinion that can be calibrated with members' own views. Further information on the TEF can be found at **www.hefce.ac.uk**.

D: Fieldwork by the Leadership Foundation 2017

The Leadership Foundation learned a great deal about how governing bodies currently engage with academic life in visits to 16 universities and colleges in 2017 and how they have begun to address the provision of annual assurance on quality, standards and enhancement. The Leadership Foundation found that academic boards or senates (or board committees in FECs) are discharging their roles in the oversight of teaching and learning in the manner expected and that heads of institution provide solid support for governing bodies in academic matters and act as the nexus where governance, management and academic practice meet. We found a number of examples of interesting practice that provide the basis for further development and dissemination to the sector.

At the same time, all the institutions also accepted that further improvement was both possible and desirable. Areas for possible improvement revolved around one or more of the following six areas:

▌ A greater need for mutual recognition of and respect for the distinct roles of governing bodies and academic boards/senates.

▌ A need for a greater understanding by lay members of governing bodies of academic life, language and process.

▌ Concerns about the level and complexity of reports being provided and a need for authors to empathise with the requirements of lay governors in particular. This issue is exacerbated, at some institutions, by the extensive use of academic language and acronyms.

▌ A need to ensure that concise and accessible data and information are provided at an appropriate level of detail to facilitate the engagement of the governing body in the limited time available to them, but for the members' engagement with academic matters to be across the year, not just when they receive an annual report.

▌ A variable level of engagement with the student voice (though also examples of very effective practice); and common recognition of the need for institutions and students' unions to enable the effective induction of student governors and to provide them with support in their work.

▌ Governing bodies identifying a need to increase the amount of academic expertise available to them in order to build greater confidence in the discharge of their new academic assurance duty.

These six areas of development come together in a coherent set of enablers to facilitate effective governor oversight of teaching and learning:

▌ Respect for different roles in academic oversight. This enables an awareness of distinct academic governance roles, namely the governing body; academic board/senate; vice-chancellor or principal; and senior management.

▌ Understanding of academic life by lay members. This enables a deep understanding by governing bodies, especially lay or independent members – of academic life, its language and processes.

▌ Reports tailored for non-academic lay readers. This enables a reporting culture that delivers documents that are meaningful, relevant, comprehensible and useful to governing bodies in undertaking their scrutiny of academic governance; proper governing body activity; and effective recording of discussions and decisions.

▌ Information supplied in a digestible form. This enables the provision of data and information that is clear, accurate, timely and reliable, and appropriate to the governing body role in academic governance.

▌ Effective engagement with the student and staff voice. This enables effective engagement with the student voice in academic governance, particularly at governing body level; and similarly with elected staff governors.

▌ Academic expertise amongst the lay membership. This enables the balancing of academic knowledge and experience with other skills sets amongst the governing body's lay or independent membership.

Although institutions are looking to improve their approaches and processes, it was clear that the essential requirement for a successful set of arrangements is the development of a culture within organisation of openness, trust and respect. There needs to be an integrated and embedded culture that understands and accepts different duties in that part of institutional life where corporate and academic governance meet. Culture sits at the heart of the six enablers we set out above (see Figure 2 below). We found this culture to be present, to variable extents, across the institutions that participated in the review.

Figure 2:

Enablers for academic assurance culture

Example of developing practice: University of the West of England

The fundamental building block of academic assurance at the University of the West of England (UWE) is a culture, based on a clear direction set by the vice-chancellor, of openness and transparency with the Board. Key principles are no surprises, listening to students, and ready access to information and people. The deputy vice-chancellor and provost plays a key role – she provides overall briefings on UWE provision, presentations on the nature of academic life at UWE, and detailed briefings on the work of the NSS Taskforce.

A key element of the arrangements is the existence of a Board Committee, the Strategic Planning, and Performance (SPP) Committee – this Committee, chaired by the Board Deputy Chair, looks in more detail at key aspects of performance both academic and nonacademic. It reviewed in depth the assurance statement from Academic Board, looked at the University's submission for QAA review and was provided with examples of Departmental action plans which had been generated from the NSS Taskforce review. They also considered the Performance on a Page (the key set of indicators (KPIs) produced for all academic departments) as well as the aggregates of those KPIs. The Committee has also looked at the black and ethnic minority (BME) attainment gap and plans to tackle it. The University is currently developing a new Enhancement Framework – based on 6 key principles and it is anticipated that, when finalised, it will go via SPP to the Board for endorsement.

The Board also receives, at each meeting, a vice-chancellor update, where the vicechancellor describes any key events and members can discuss topics or call for more detailed reports (Teaching Excellence Framework, Research Excellence Framework, the Office for Students, etc.). Use is also made of governor away-days to inform the Board – with the next one due to consider four topics, namely Campus Culture; Recruitment and Performance; Engagement with the City of Bristol, and Mental Health.

The Board receives 'soft' assurance from the operation of the Student/ Governor Forum. This is a forum that reports to the Board, consists of 15 or so students, and is chaired by Student Union president and the agenda is set by the students. There are three governors who are members, but any member can attend. Academic Assurance is further supported by students through a comprehensive system of student representation, with paid representatives reporting into a Student Council, which in turn has a regular slot at Academic Board. ■

E: Roles and relationships of governing bodies

The governing bodies of HEIs and FECs are composed of different categories of members and they have relationships with other individuals and internal groups.

External, lay, co-opted and independent members

External members form a majority of the membership on all HEI and FEC governing bodies. Practice in alternative providers varies. The external members are generally recruited through a nominations process. The governing body chair is typically elected from this group. The external members will be recruited because they bring qualities and skills to the governing body but only a minority of them will be people with extensive knowledge or experience of higher education. This poses a potential challenge given that they are now asked to provide an assurance on the quality and standards of education in their institution. In this sense, the external members are no different to many nonexecutive directors and trustees in a wide range of organisations where appointments are made sometimes because of a person's relevant skill set but more often because they bring broader knowledge to complement the expertise of the executive team. In FECs the picture is more complex as members are required to understand both further and higher education. This Guide is designed to help external members in particular, and institutions should be devising training and briefing to equip members to effectively understand and appropriately oversee educational activity while acknowledging that they will not all have specific experience of higher education.

Head of institution

The vice-chancellor or principal in a HEI or FEC is a full member of the governing body and a trustee. In other providers this is not always the case but it is probably exceptional if the head of institution does not attend the governing body. As well as being a governor, the head of institution is normally also the chief executive, chief academic officer and the chair of the academic board or senate. Again, in HEIs, the same person is also the designated officer, for example the officer appointed by the governing body to represent it and the institution in its dealings with Hefce and other regulatory bodies. He or she is responsible for:

▌ The deployment of staff and other resources to operate and manage the teaching, learning and research in the institution.

▌ The development and implementation of the academic strategy or equivalent, ie that part of the corporate strategy concerned with the institution's plans for, inter alia, teaching and research, including the portfolio of provision and student numbers.

▌ The oversight of academic activity through the proper and effective operation of an academic board or senate, supported by a committee infrastructure, and with adequate arrangements for staff and student representation and consultation.

▌ The management and provision of data and information to the governing body and external stakeholders that demonstrates academic performance and provides assurance.

▌ Ensuring that provision satisfies the requirements of external review and accreditation bodies and external examiners.

▌ Ensuring student success and satisfaction, including the effective management of arrangements for complaints and appeals.

The head of institution is thus the key individual in the institution's academic life and should be central to the assurance process: this is the governing body's key relationship in this context.

Staff

Management and staff have a critical part to play in delivering academic assurance. Staff may be full members of the governing body if their role qualifies them as ex-officio members, or if they are directly elected (academic or non-academic staff), or if they have been nominated to attend from the academic board or senate. By whatever route they become members of the governing body they are invaluable as a direct source of information and assurance to the full meeting and they will often have been involved in preparing subjects for debate.

In addition, staff with specific responsibilities (eg for quality and standards) will be required to attend governing body meetings either as a matter of course or in response to particular agenda items. Ideally, the governing body should determine who attends its meetings.

By these means the governing body will have both a stable and a changing cohort of people who can be questioned, provide information and enable triangulation with what other sources are saying.

Students

Governing bodies will typically include one or two student members, either students' union officers who attend by virtue of their position, eg president or vice-president (education), or elected representatives. The level of representation will normally be set down in constitutional provisions and as these tend to be fixed it can be difficult to increase representation. In one of the HEIs visited, one of the two student members represented an FEC within the group. In all institutions, of all types, student representation and involvement will be replicated at course and departmental level, all the way up to the academic board or senate. This should in turn ensure that the student voice is heard at governing body level.

Student input is invaluable for academic insight in governing bodies. The student engagement in these governance structures embraces and reflects the participation of student representatives on governing bodies; an effective means of representing student views and interests; and heightened awareness of academic governance within the wider student body.

The student voice is a significant resource for all governors when seeking assurances around the academic governance of an institution. Governing bodies can draw on any institutional data, information or cases that the student governor is able to present. Students can help interpreting the outcome of the National Student Survey both quantitative and qualitative. Students can also then triangulate these sources of information with the views of course representatives.

The student governor will have often a wealth of experience that they are able to draw on. If they are effectively enabled to feed in these views this will help strengthen governors' assurances. Support for student representatives can include training and induction which ideally happens as early as possible in the process - potentially even as part of the selection process for governors. Some institutions have also introduced a mentoring system linking the student governor with a longer-serving governor.

It is important for year-on-year continuity that institutions and their partner unions develop a data and evidence bank that holds information on projects already undertaken that can set a precedent, and information that has previously been collected on student opinion.

The Leadership Foundation is working with the National Union of Students (NUS) to prepare advice for student governors alongside this Guide which will address the uniqueness of their role.

Governing Body secretaries and clerks

The clerk or secretary of the governing body has a vital role to play in ensuring that the institution's statutory and regulatory business is scheduled at the appropriate time and this individual will maintain a dialogue with the chair and the head of institution to ensure that members have the information they need to derive and give academic assurance. The secretary can provide a useful service to members by reminding them at the year end when they give assurance of the relevant work they have undertaken during the year's meetings. This can be consolidated with performance indicators.

Academic boards/senates

Every HEI (and many alternative providers) has an academic board or senate although exceptionally it is called something different. FECs do not necessarily follow this model and may have a governing body sub-committee that performs the same function. In some FECs the governing body retains direct responsibility for academic matters. An FEC committee is likely to have members who are full members of the governing body: this would be exceptional in a HEI. All of these entities operate under delegated authority set out in governing articles or charters as approved by governing bodies.

In the case of an academic board the general role is usually to advise the vice-chancellor and governing body on all issues relating to research, scholarship, teaching and courses. In chartered institutions the equivalent body is senate and the role is seen as being responsible for the ordering, regulation and supervision of teaching and research.

Audit committee

HEIs and FECs (but not alternative providers) are required to establish audit committees with a remit for corporate governance, internal control and risk management. One of the factors behind funding bodies calling for academic assurance is the possibility that academic risk is not given sufficient prominence in institutional risk management. To a considerable extent, an assurance that quality, standards and enhancement are all as they should be is also an assurance that risks to teaching and learning are being identified and mitigated. This gives the audit committee a locus in academic affairs and some institutions have sought to provide assurance to governing bodies through this route.

Governing bodies need to be aware of two potential issues in taking academic assurance largely or exclusively through the audit committee route. Firstly, it means that alongside academic management and academic governance the landscape for oversight can become congested. Secondly, the notion of academic risk separates out risks to learning, students, quality etc., but in HEIs and FECs are there any non-academic risks? The traditional business of risk management addresses risks to finance, estates, commercial subsidiaries, etc., but these are only risks because ultimately, they threaten the success of educational activity.

Overall, the audit committee has a role in providing advice and assurance but this should not in any way supplant the management role of the head of institution or governance role of the academic board/senate. The audit committee by its nature engages with the institution's internal auditors and will consider the auditor's plan and findings and provide advice to the head of institution and governing body. The internal auditor's plan should factor in the risks surrounding academic systems and work undertaken as appropriate but auditors have to be careful not to intrude upon or second guess the work of academics. It is also important for internal auditors who touch on academic activities to have relevant knowledge and experience and in-house teams and specialist consortia are likely to have that background. Audit committees and internal auditors in HEIs have a parallel assurance duty to provide assurance on data integrity and this is germane to academic assurance given the criticality of student performance information to the assessment of the student experience.

Example of developing practice: Ulster University

Ulster University is a chartered institution where the ultimate authority rests with Council but with Senate having delegated responsibility for the oversight of all academic matters. Alongside this framework the University has responded to the new academic assurance requirement by channelling information through, and seeking the advice of, the Audit Committee.

The Audit Committee clearly already has a responsibility to advise the governing body on risk and the University sees academic assurance as in part a way of identifying and addressing risks to academic quality and standards. As in other universities, management prepare an annual report (the Academic Assurance Report) that collates a wide range of commentary and data, from both internal and external sources. This has been enhanced to support governing body academic assurance. The report is scrutinised by the Audit Committee which in turn provides advice to Council.

The University has thus taken the significant step of recognising that academic assurance is about risk and given that risk is a Council responsibility, it is appropriate to see the challenge from an audit perspective. At the same time, Council and Senate are in dialogue about how the relationship between those two bodies needs to evolve as Council's academic assurance role becomes embedded. Typically, institutions are seeing academic assurance as a bilateral challenge for their governing bodies and senates/academic boards; at Ulster University it is very much a matter of triangulating those two entities with the Audit Committee. ◼

Example of developing practice: King's College London

At King's College London, the Academic Board of the College has responsibility to ensure academic standards and report on academic quality to the Council. However, while not involved in specific academic oversight and accreditation, the College's Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee has taken a leading role to review internal processes to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose. Together, the Academic Board's report on substantive matters related to academic quality and standards, and the Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee's report on the processes used, provide assurance to the full Council. This also helps develop a better understanding of the inter-relationship between academic and corporate governance. ◼

F: Advice to governors

This section of the Guide discusses how institutions are addressing the new assurance requirement. Each institution is following its own path and governing body members are encouraged to determine their own approaches, informed by practice elsewhere. The Guide then draws on existing guidance from the Illustrative Practice Note on Academic Governance and complements this with further advice arising out of the Leadership Foundation fieldwork.

How institutions are addressing the new assurance requirement

Enhancing members' academic understanding

Approaches being taken to deliver this objective include:

▌ Requiring governing body members to complete an extensive formal induction including a presentation on academic standards and quality assessment.

▌ Inviting lay members to observe academic board/senate meetings or sit on programme validation boards, to aid oversight of academic areas while simultaneously providing governing body members with a direct assurance role.

▌ Providing inductions via a well-developed process for members which includes a briefing on the role of the academic board or senate, and its relationship with the governing body.

▌ Less commonly, offering induction sessions for new members of academic board/senate, which include briefings on the role of the governing body.

Example of developing practice: University of Wales Trinity Saint David

The Senate of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David is responsible for academic oversight and it is accepted within the University that both Senate and senior management have roles in enabling the Council to give assurance about academic quality and standards. Council is supported by a number of committees including the Strategy Committee; that in turn has sub-committees dealing with international education and the student experience.

The Student Experience Sub-committee provides advice to management, the Strategy Committee and Council on academic affairs, performance and risk and it is thus a crucial foundation for Council to give assurance. The Sub-committee has a majority of lay Council members which, in contrast to other universities and considered to be valuable in this case, gives those members an unusual degree of direct engagement with academic matters. The Chair is a lay member who reports directly to Council. ■

Improving the inter-relationship between governing body and academic board/senate

Approaches that institutions are taking to further strengthen the inter-relationship include:

▌ The recruitment and appointment of a lay member on the governing body with deep higher education expertise. This has reportedly strengthened informal ties with academic board/senate and provided higher education expertise amongst the lay members to aid scrutiny.

▌ Developing the annual assurance report, compiled by academic board/senate, to include a formal opinion on the operation of arrangements for quality, standards and enhancement.

▌ Increasing opportunities for informal interaction between academic board/senate and the governing body and the wider university via 'Meet and Greet' gatherings where lay members can interact with staff and students of the university in a structured way.

▌ Improving the information received by the governing body from academic board/senate through enhanced reporting. In one HEI, the University Senate provides a concise cover paper to add to the meeting minutes in addition to a verbal report. This has enabled the University Council to focus upon the key issues much more effectively than hitherto.

▌ Improving the induction process of academic board/senate and governing body members to develop a stronger and more cohesive relationship via specifically designed sessions to brief each party on the other's responsibilities, remit and role.

Example of developing practice: Salford University

As part of a deliberate move to improve the mutual understanding between Council and Senate a number of steps have been taken at Salford University to enhance the respective roles and relationship between both bodies.

Emphasis has been placed on improving the expertise of the lay membership on Council to discharge their oversight role in this area too. The appointment to the Council of a former vice-chancellor with particular expertise in relation to academic oversight has provided added input, scrutiny and confidence to Council as a whole.

Key committees which feed into the academic governance structures of the university, the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee (ASQAC) and the Academic Ethics Committee have also made the provision for two co-opted external members. For ASQAC both external members are senior staff at their own University, one drawn from academia and one from professional services, both are also QAA reviewers. Their appointments are intended to provide greater externality to the deliberation of these committees, as well as added confidence to Council on the nature of scrutiny of academic governance internally. ▪

Producing reports to inform and assure the governing body

We found that institutions either already had some sort of vehicle for giving annual information on academic quality (in FECs this is an established process linked to selfassessment across all levels of provision) or they were developing one to address governors' needs. The content and depth of these reports varies. In at least one university, governors expressed an interest in examples of adverse information in order to learn about things that go wrong and how they are then put right. The sentiment being that over emphasis on things that have gone well can be unconvincing. In one FEC, Board papers include a signpost on the cover that guides members to ways of cross-referencing, triangulating and validating the information with each paper.

Example of developing practice: Queen's University Belfast

Senior management in Queen's University Belfast have long recognised that the ultimate responsibility for the oversight of teaching and learning rests with the governing body, the University Senate. When the academic assurance requirement was introduced in Northern Ireland the University responded quickly in order to enable the Senate members to discharge their new duty.

The University introduced an Academic Assurance Statement which summarises the scrutiny of academic activity across the year by committees and groups that report into the Academic Council. The Statement is submitted to and challenged by the Academic Council prior to submission to the governing body. It then provides a platform for the governing body's assurance to the Department for the Economy.

The Academic Assurance Statement for 2015/16 brought together external and internal sources of information and assurance. The external sources included:

▌ The outcome of the QAA Higher Education Review.

▌ Reports from the 14 accreditations in the period undertaken by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

▌ The outcome of the National Student Survey (NSS).

▌ A summary of the findings from the work of external examiners.

The internal sources of assurance included:

▌ A report on the Annual Programme Review of taught (and research) programmes covering, inter alia, the approval and closure of specific programmes.

▌ The outcome of the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey.

▌ The conclusions from two recent and relevant internal audit assignments relating to work placements and examinations.

▌ Key performance indicators, covering the current year's performance compared against target and against two prior years, which in this context cover:

  • Undergraduate tariff entry data
  • Overall dropout rate
  • First year dropout
  • Degree classifications
  • Employment and further study data
  • NSS (overall satisfaction)
  • Student: staff ratio.

The Statement also includes an action plan summarising forthcoming developments relating to, for example, the Teaching Excellence Framework and the University's academic strategy.

The Queen's University Academic Assurance Statement gives the governing body confidence in the work of the Academic Council. It also enables the lay governors to triangulate and calibrate the other information relating to teaching and learning and quality and standards that they receive over the course of a year. ■

Example of developing practice: Cardiff University

Cardiff University introduced, in 2014-15, an Annual Quality Report that is submitted to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee and Senate. The Cardiff University Report is notably comprehensive; it takes a risk-based approach; and it gives an explicit assurance that confidence can be placed in the quality and enhancement of education. It anticipates the assurance requirements by acknowledging that the Council is publicly accountable for quality and standards.

The Report breaks the quality system into its component parts including for example external examining and collaborative provision and gives each area a 'red/amber/green' risk rating. In each area the report draws on qualitative and quantitative evidence and actions for enhancement are set out. The Report summarises the periodic reviews of programmes and collaborative activities that have been completed in the year, and it details independent sources of assurance such as from professional bodies. ■

Engaging with the student experience/voice

Approaches to promoting effective student engagement include:

▌ At one institution, the Student Union president is the formal source for the University Board of Governors to receive information around issues or concerns outside the annual assurance report. The Student Union president is a member of the Board of Governors and is encouraged to participate and there are many informal opportunities for lay members to interact with the student body through award ceremonies, graduations and degree shows.

▌ The Student Governor Forum within another institution consists of several students, chaired by the Student Union president, with the agenda set by the students. This ensures the student voice determines the information presented to the governing body as 'soft assurances'. Three governors are also members, though any governor can attend.

▌ At a third institution, the vice-chancellor has initiated a process designed to coach and mentor student representatives with a view to enhancing their effectiveness as early as possible during their limited tenure.

Particular FEC developments

▎ The proportion of higher education provision in further education colleges (FECs) is generally relatively small and in one of the providers in our sample it was as low as 5%. However, colleges recognised their responsibilities around the new quality assurance duty and the challenge it represented for them in ensuring it received full consideration as the time required to discharge their responsibilities was disproportionately high in relation to the scale of the provision. All the colleges visited had considered the new assurance duty and made changes to their governance structure in whole or in part in response to it.

▎ All minutes scrutinised as part of this review illustrated that a range of reports and papers on higher education were received by governing bodies, including relevant data. All college governing bodies received an annual report in some form and, for some institutions, higher education was an agenda item at every governing body meeting. Reports on higher education provision went to the FEC governing body in addition to reports being produced for the awarding higher education institution. In one FEC, five separate annual reports were required for five separate institutions from whom provision was franchised.

▎ In three of the four FECs in our fieldwork, the responsibilities for academic governance and assurance are undertaken directly by governing body committees/sub-committees or retained by the governing body itself. Those FECs with specific academic committees or sub-committees produce reports on topics typical of those usually covered by an academic board. The sub-committees cover areas explicitly concerning assurance on quality, teaching, learning, enhancement and standards. In one college there is a Curriculum, Quality and Enhancement Committee (CQE) and in another a Quality, Teaching and Learning Committee (QTL). Within institutions, the sub-committees are sometimes supported by additional committees and groups who report upwards feeding directly into the information presented to governing bodies.

▎ Interviews with appropriate members of governing bodies and those that provide support, such as the clerk and chairs of committees, described adequate levels of challenge and scrutiny. In addition, interviews showed that actions taken because of concerns raised via reports were appropriate and proportional.

▎ The student body at FECs contains a mixture of both further education and higher education students, with further education students comprising the majority portion. Thus, in the case of student governors, where one student is appointed, it is common for this student to be taken from the further education cohort, and consequently to predominantly represent further education issues. This potentially reduces governing body exposure to the higher education student voice and increases reliance on other methods eg higher education student focus groups. Where there were two student representatives on the governing body one tended to represent higher education and the other further education.

Example of developing practice: Belfast Metropolitan College

Belfast Metropolitan is a large further education college with over 1,400 higher education students. The College has been able to deal readily with governing body academic assurance due to its arrangements for academic oversight.

The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland already requires colleges to submit an annual Quality Improvement Plan covering both further education and higher education provision. This collation of qualitative and quantitative information is, in principle, similar to the academic assurance reports that universities have been developing in recent years, in part prompted by the CUC Code and in preparation for governing body academic assurance. The Plan provides a valuable potential building block for governing body assurance.

The Plan is scrutinised by the Curriculum, Quality and Engagement Committee which has a role somewhat akin to that of an academic board in a higher education corporation. Unlike an academic board, the Committee membership includes eight members of the governing body (one of whom is chair), giving lay governors a direct insight into academic affairs, both further education and higher education. The Committee has delegated authority from the governing body for all higher education academic affairs.

Alongside these academic governance arrangements, the College has an exclusive channel for the oversight of the management of higher education provision. A Higher Education Co-ordinators Forum of staff involved in higher education advises the Higher Education Forum which ultimately reports to the College Executive. The HE Forum has a key role in disseminating good practice and preparing for external reviews. ▪

Example of developing practice: Newcastle College Group

Newcastle College Group (NCG) is one of the largest providers of skills and training in the UK. Academic governance has been reviewed in relation to new assurance responsibilities and the securing of taught degree awarding powers and new governance arrangements have been put in place.

There is a new HE Committee which is a sub-committee of the Corporation with a minimum of three Governors on it. The Committee's terms of reference and calendar of reporting have been designed to comply with the Higher Education Code of Governance. The new HE Committee is charged, in its terms of reference, with responsibility for reporting to the governing body on academic Governance effectiveness. Governance effectiveness is achieved through a clear framework and planned programme of reviews undertaken and presented to governing body.

There is an HE Academic board - the chair is the chief executive officer of NCG and a member of the governing body. The HE Academic Board reports in to the new Corporation HE Committee on all academic matters.

Each governing body meeting receives a monthly higher education report as a standing agenda item.

The report covers:

❙ National higher education policy updates.

❙ Academic standards.

❙ Quality of learning opportunities.

❙ Enhancement and public information.

There is also an annual higher education report to Governors which collates all the relevant data and student feedback for higher education. Included in the report are the outcomes from an HE Quality Audit (where School Quality Managers have been partnered with HE Managers across the divisions to audit other schools) and from HE Quality Reviews undertaken twice a year by School with an internal scrutiny team leading to targeted interventions and focused action planning as outcomes.

The annual review includes:

❙ Programme progression and completion data (including classification statistics where appropriate) including comparisons with previous years' data.

❙ Application and admission data (acceptances and conversion rates).

❙ Withdrawal rates.

❙ Pass rates (including classifications).

❙ Destination and progression of leavers' data. ■

Illustrative Practice Note

The CUC/Leadership Foundation Illustrative Practice Note on academic governance contains the following practical guidance for institutions which the Leadership Foundation fieldwork endorses. Governing bodies should:

▌ Identify where formal responsibility for monitoring academic risks resides and whether the processes are fit-for-purpose, and ensuring key academic risks are included on the institutional risk register.

▌ Ask if there is an effective board member development scheme in place to ensure that the governing body can effectively engage in discussion of how it can best assure itself about academic quality and standard.

▌ Consider if there would be benefit in informal pre/post-meeting presentations from academic departments.

▌ Consider if appropriate time is devoted to discussion of all elements of the institution's academic mission.

▌ Be provided with an annual assurance report on academic governance which includes noting progress against KPIs or other measures, summaries of external reviews and a formal opinion on quality of academic outcomes.

▌ Consider whether joint meetings of the governing body (or a committee) with the Senate/Academic Board on key issues of academic policy could be beneficial.

▌ Ensure regular reviews (with external input where appropriate) of the effectiveness of academic governance.

▌ Ask if pairing external governors with academic departments to increase their knowledge of the context of academic governance might be useful? This would need careful coordination to avoid such governors becoming advocates for the department concerned.

▌ Ask how the governing body can be sure that academic governance is operating effectively and that there are no major concerns that might affect institutional reputation.

▌ Consider what external evidence is there that standards are being maintained.

▌ Determine how the governing body and the senate/academic board be more aware of each other's functions and activities.

▌ Identify what are the major academic risks facing the institution, and how is progress on dealing with them reported to the governing body.

▌ Consider how the governing body and senate/academic board can work most effectively together for the good of the institution.

▌ Determine whether a review of the effectiveness of academic governance been undertaken and was the governing body provided with the outcomes? If not, why not?

▌ Identify what are the future challenges in relation to academic governance that the governing body needs to be aware of.

Example of developing practice: University of Leicester

The University of Leicester has taken a number of steps in recent years to strengthen the understanding and oversight that Council has of quality and standards and academic assurance within the institution, with a particular emphasis on improving the quality of interaction between Senate and Council.

The inclusion of Council members as external members of programme validation boards has proved to be an effective way to get 'under the bonnet' of academic provision at a deeper level, without undue interference and helped to bring alive their scrutiny and assurance role. Because programme validation takes placed in a structured and managed way, it allows Council members to delve into the various component parts which are associated with ensuring that a programme is approved. It also provides a means for Council members to better understand the range of academic assurance which exists within the institution.

Through improving their understanding of the internal processes, it has allowed Council Members to increase their understanding of reports from Senate, as well being able to offer more informed scrutiny of academic matters at the Council itself. ▇

Example of developing practice: City University

City is unusual in the sector, since under its revised Charter, Senate is established as a formal Committee of the Council. Council has delegated responsibility for standards and quality matters to Senate (which in turn has delegated much to the president). Four executive members of Council are ex-officio members of Senate. The Student Union president is a member of both Council and of Senate. Council receives minutes of all Senate meetings and some of the papers presented to Senate are also sent to Council for information.

Additionally, lay members of Council have taken it in turn to attend meetings of Senate as observers. Meetings also take place between the Chair and Deputy Chair of Council, together with the President and lay members of Council, with groups of students and staff each term, at which a wide range of issues, including aspects of the student academic experience, have been discussed. There is academic expertise on the Council, with one Board member a retired vice-chancellor.

City's Council holds three 'Plenary Dinners' a year, on the evening prior to meetings of Council. These dinners are attended by all members of Council, the deans of the five schools at City, and by City's Senior Elected Senator plus one other elected Senator (chosen by the Senior Elected Senator). These dinners enable longer informal consideration of issues of interest to Council but where formal decisions are not required.

The Illustrative Practice Note points to a number of innovative practices including:

▌ One university has established an 'academic audit committee' as a subcommittee of its Senate, specifically to provide oversight on academic governance, and its reports go to the governing body as well as the Senate.

▌ Some institutions have a sub-committee typically on 'student affairs' (or similar), whose role is not strategic but more concerned with aspects of the student experience. However, a small number have an 'education strategy' committee (or similar) with some membership from its Senate/Academic Board.

▌ A few institutions operate a lead governor system, with a designated board member providing a lead around assurance concerning educational character. Such members may also be members of the Academic Board. Some new alternative providers of HE have gone much further and have direct board responsibility for some aspects of academic oversight. ■

Example of developing practice: Arts University Bournemouth

The assurance on quality at the Arts University Bournemouth is built around the institutional strategy map – which sets out the key indicators that are used (including National Student Survey, retention rate, Destination of Leavers in HE). Reflecting the journey the institution has been on, these include indicators on the numbers of qualified staff employed, e.g. the proportion of staff with PhDs.

The Board receives an annual report on academic standards and quality which has detailed sections including data on retention, progression, and achievement. The report describes processes used to provide assurance, including the external examiner system, and it informs the Board that data is considered by the LTQ Committee. It also describes its annual verification process, by which the standards used across all subjects within the institution are compared.

The assurance report includes details of the work done to provide assurance at a partner Colleges. It provides an effective summary of the reports of external examiners. The LTQ also provides an explicit opinion that processes are effective and comply with external standards. The assurance report gives a clear summary of enhancement activities including collaborative projects, seminars delivered and numbers of staff gaining qualifications.

Support is provided to Governors through a virtual 'reading room' where various key documents, briefings and other relevant material is accessible. This has been developed from the 24/7 electronic resource of the 'Governors Reading Room' into a 'My AUB' app for governors, so that they will be able to access this material easily at their convenience on a range of mobile devices. ■

Leadership Foundation advice to governing bodies

This Guide and other sources of information from the Leadership Foundation, CUC and funding bodies together provide an extensive source of illustrative practice for institutions and their governing bodies to draw on. There is considerable scope for institutions to learn from each other. This Guide has been prepared by the Leadership Foundation by a project team and advisors drawn from across the higher and further education system. The team and advisors consulted widely and have drawn extensively on existing and developing practice in HEIs and FECs. Final guidance has been distilled to the following interrelated key pointers that are addressed primarily to governing body members but also to senior managers and board secretaries.

1. Engage with academic matters at each meeting and at other opportunities with staff and students throughout the year. Ask the governing body secretary or clerk to provide a brief summary of the year's coverage of teaching and learning assurance. Do not leave your engagement to the meeting which receives the annual assurance report to the governing body. Your institution's calendar may well need to change to accommodate the business that the governing body and others need to deal with in order to ensure this matter is addressed in a timely manner.

2. The foundation of effective governance is mutual trust, respect and honesty – nevertheless good governance requires that you constructively challenge the advice and information you receive from the head of institution on academic quality – and the advice and information you receive from the academic board or senate - which is operating under your delegated authority.

3. Consider opportunities to strengthen and improve the quality of dialogue and interchange between your governing body and academic board or senate.

4. Consider advice from management alongside what students and staff are telling you, both governing body members and others. Remember that the student population will be diverse and that it will be important to hear what different groups feel about the institution: student representatives at governing bodies are often undergraduates but the postgraduate experience may be rather different.

5. Ensure that academic assurance is comprehensive over the range of institutional provision. In this first year good work has been done looking at the full time undergraduate offer. Moving forward governors will want to consider getting assurance on all forms of provision – such as collaborative arrangements (both in the UK and internationally), post graduate and part-time provision, and where appropriate, research degree activity. There are likely to be reviews of these areas of activity which governing bodies can see or be made aware of, perhaps by exception.

6. Consider the information you receive internally alongside that from external/independent sources, e.g., from the institution's TEF submission and award, QAA or other reviews, accrediting bodies and external examiners. One potentially informative indicator could involve data from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator about unresolved student complaints. This can be evaluated against internal data on the overall number and types of complaint.

7. Seek out the views of any of your fellow governors who have experience of higher education, but do not expect to simply rely on them solely. All governors should take an interest in these matters.

8. Pay particular attention to year-on-year key data sets that relate to the student experience, noting where the institution sits against benchmarks, such as:

i. recruitment and average undergraduate tariff entry points

ii. drop-out rates and non-submission rates for research students

iii. degree classifications

iv. overall student satisfaction from NSS results and the results of postgraduate taught and research experience surveys

v. performance in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

9. As set out in the funding bodies' specifications for annual assurance, require and scrutinise an annual report from management and/or the academic board or senate summarising all of the above.

10. Over all, triangulate the various sources to give the comfort that you need with due respect to the head of institution as he or she manages academic operations.

11. Comply to the letter with the funding bodies' assurance requirements and engage fully with those organisations' annual and periodic review processes.

G: Overall conclusion

The funding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have introduced new assurance requirements for governing bodies relating to the quality of the student experience and its enhancement and to academic standards. The requirement is straightforward and does not add to the substantive role of governing bodies. Institutions are managing the introduction of the new assurance well but this experience can be enhanced by learning from others through the medium of this guidance. The changing regulatory landscape of higher education will continue to evolve, notably in England as the Office for Students becomes established, but the role of governing bodies in relation to academic oversight and assurance is unlikely to change fundamentally. ■

04 Annexes

Annex A: HEFCE: Circular Letter 37/2017, 20 October 2017 Annual Quality Assessment Assurance Statements

England & Northern Ireland

As a governor and on behalf of the governing body, I confirm that for the 2016-17 academic year and up to the date of signing the return:

▌ The governing body has received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes. This included evidence from the provider's own periodic review processes, which fully involve students and include embedded external peer or professional review.

▌ The methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of our knowledge, robust and appropriate.

For providers with degree awarding powers:

▌ The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

For providers without degree awarding powers:

▌ The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately maintained.

Signed by the accountable officer as a governor on behalf of all of the governors:

Signed: ....

Print name: ....

Date: ....

Wales (HEFCW Circular W17/07 HE, Annex A, 3 April 2017)

Following the outcomes of the consultation carried out in circular W16/38HE: Consultation on governing body annual assurance statements related to quality, the Governing Bodies of Regulated Institutions will be asked to confirm the following statements annually.

1. The governing body has received a report taking account of the external quality assurance review, and an action plan has been put in place and implemented as appropriate, in partnership with the student body.

2. The methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of our knowledge, robust and appropriate.

3. a) **For providers with degree awarding powers:**
   The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

   b) **For providers without degree awarding powers:**
   The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately maintained.

4. The governing body has considered a report on the annual dialogue between the institution and the student union or equivalent, scrutinised student survey outcomes and confirmed that action plans had been put in place and implemented, in partnership with the student body.

5. The governing body has received a copy of the relationship agreement between the institution and the student union or equivalent, and a copy of the student charter, both of which have been reviewed within the past year.

Annex B: Leadership Foundation Project Team

The project team for this work comprised:

▌ **Andy Shenstone**, Director of Consultancy and Business Development, Leadership Foundation

▌ **Aaron Porter**, Associate Director of Governance, Leadership Foundation

Leadership Foundation Associates

▌ **Paul Greaves** is chair of an alternative provider of higher education; consultant in university governance and regulation; and former head of assurance and chief auditor at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce).

▌ **John Rushfor**th is the secretary to the Committee of University Chairs (CUC).

▌ **Julie Tolley** is an independent consultant, Further Matters Ltd, and a former further education vice-principal.

An academic advisor panel guided the work of the team and comprised:

▌ **Professor Ruth Farwell CBE DL** is a former vice-chancellor and chief executive of Buckinghamshire New University.

▌ **Dr Stephen Jackson** is a former director of quality assurance at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

▌ **Professor Paul White OBE DL** is a former deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield. ■

To find out more about this work contact:

Andy Shenstone
Director of Consultancy and Business Development
Leadership Foundation
E: andy.shenstone@lfhe.ac.uk

Inspiring Leadership

Contact us at

info@lfhe.ac.uk

or connect with us

🐦 @LF4HE

f /LF4HE

in /LF4HE

Ⓦ lf4he.blog

🏠 www.lfhe.ac.uk

Inspiring Leadership

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education