

Case Study

Institution

Northumbria University

Project title

Governance Effectiveness Review

Background/Context

Northumbria University appointed a new Chair to its Board and, with significant external volatility at the time, it was decided to review its governance to explore if and where governance could improve or be enhanced and what appetite there was for developmental opportunities in governance effectiveness.

The review took place during the Covid-19 crisis, to which the University responded well. During the process, the Committee of University Chairs published an updated Higher Education Code of Governance, which was considered as part of the context for the review.

Solution

The review examined governance practices through a survey, observations and interviews. It sought to inform through best practice in the HE sector, examine the culture and ethos and the Board's role in helping to determine mission and strategy and the University's commitment to embedding governance equality and diversity.

In addition, it considered the scope, remit and relationships of the five Committees of the Board; explored and evaluated the relationships between the Board and both the Academic Board and the Executive Group; and aimed to stimulate an informed deliberation of existing practice, structures, processes, behaviours and opportunities for improvement.

Outcomes

Overall, the review found a positive and collegiate culture for Northumbria governance, with passion and commitment from independent governors, and many areas of good practice.

It made 19 recommendations, a number of which built on existing practice or were extensions of work already in progress.

Focus for continuing improvement and development of effective governance identified four areas, comprising prioritising improving Board diversity; a small suite of recommendations to strengthen the link between academic and corporate governance; some continuous improvements to aspects which enabled good governance and to focus the Board on more strategic, aggregated and interdependent risk.

“The Governance Effectiveness Review has been a useful way of reviewing all our governance agreements and allowing us to focus on how we make the right improvements to allow us to work more efficiently and effectively in this ever changing HE environment.”

“We were pleased that Advance HE found Northumbria had a positive and collegiate culture of governance and are now working across the University to implement the further recommendations that were made, building on the already good practice in place.” **Georgina Bailes, Head of Governance and Secretary to the Board.**