Understanding practices of UK college governing: Rethinking strategy and accountability

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Abstract
College governing boards are widely held to be the keystone of institutional strategy and the prime locus of support, challenge and accountability in respect of the actions of the senior Executive. Whilst there are many normative prescriptions about the conditions and arrangements required for effective college governance, relatively little is known about how and to what extent the practices of boards reflect or realise these prescriptions. This paper draws upon a unique research study of eight further education colleges across the four nations of the UK. Following Chia and MacKay and Hendry et al., our 'strategy as practice' approach gives primacy to emergence and immanence through board practices. Video and observational data, supplemented by some interview and documentary data are used to develop an understanding of governing practices. Our analysis suggests that current normative prescriptions lack the conceptual sophistication required to support governing as it really happens. We offer a reconceptualisation of both strategy and accountability suggesting that the latter includes lateral, inward- and outward-facing functions that make conflicting demands on governors. We argue that these distinctions are vital in enabling further positive development of governing in the college sector.

Keywords
Governing, governance, college governing boards, further education, strategy-as-practice, inward-facing and outward-facing accountability

Introduction and context

Colleges of further education (FE) are a major part of the educational landscape in all four countries of the UK, providing a wide range of vocational, academic, technical and professional programmes alongside some higher education (HE) and some compulsory curriculum. In England, 238 colleges

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currently provide courses for 2.2 million students. Scotland has 26 colleges (with 270,000 students); Wales has 13 (with 122,000 students) and Northern Ireland six (with 80,000 students). Between them, they serve well over 2.5 million students (Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020). The annual budget for the sector in England was approximately £6.9 billion in 2017–2018 (AoC, 2020), over £700 million in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2019), £281 million in Wales (Champion, 2018; Wales Audit Office, 2017) and £212 million in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (2020).

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act took colleges out of local authority control and they became independent corporations. Subsequently, devolution led to some divergence between the four countries, with differences in the relationships that colleges have with governments and key agencies. A recent study also noted signs of convergence, arguing that there was ample scope for greater 'policy learning' across the four countries: for England, it proposed that the pursuit of a common project involving a rich mix of social partners would '… require shifts towards the more collaborative approach to FE and skills that characterises the three smaller countries of the UK' (Hodgson et al., 2019: 277). A little earlier, Keep (2018) had set out the tensions and dilemmas for leadership in such a highly marketised sector.

Both analyses were prescient. In July 2020, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills endorsed the findings of a government-commissioned report pertaining to England (Ney, 2019), the main driver of which appears to have been the rising probability of financial failure in a context of intense marketisation. The report states that 'In April 2019, 123 colleges (45%) were in financial intervention categories, with 32 in formal intervention', adding '… the overall profile of fragility of financial standing of colleges remains alarming' (Ney, 2019: 7). In addition, attention is drawn to the large volume of public money requiring stewardship in conditions where transparency and standards of governance are highly variable.

Ney concluded that the 'government must have a strategic relationship with FE colleges' in which 'every college is part of a coherent plan to meet local and regional need'. A 'collaborative FE system' is required, so that whilst 'there is a place for competition … it is also important that colleges work together to meet need and learn from the exceptional practice that exists in the sector' (UK Parliament, 2020). In part, this was to be achieved through an upgrading of the guidance issued by government to reduce the great variety of practices it currently permits.

Many recommendations of the Ney report are visible in a recent White Paper (Department for Education, 2021). For example:

> We will develop a clearer line of sight with all colleges … From next year, all colleges will have an annual strategic conversation which will provide an opportunity for their leaders to set out strategic objectives, risks, and opportunities showcase good practice, and discuss plans with government. (53)

At the time of writing, the draft Skills and Post-16 Education Bill[1] before parliament includes mention of a new accountability requirement that governors publish an annual review of how the education and training they provide is meeting local needs, and what may be done to improve this.

Whatever form it finally takes, the 'annual strategic conversation' proposed for England mirrors current practice in Scotland. An appetite for fundamental reform including greater convergence is also visible in the recent UK-wide report produced by Independent Commission on the College of the Future (2020). Linking governance developments to greater accountability and efficiency, the report recommends 'developing a single post-16 education oversight and funding body within each

nation … [which will be] crucial to ensuring a coherent lifelong education service, and to addressing nugatory competition between colleges and with other education providers'. (16)

Divergence and convergence of this kind is important context for the concerns of this article, though we focus here on matters that have remained largely common. Each college in the UK has a Governing Board (GB). With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Hill, 2012), there has been very little independent research on the nature of college governing, and still less that gets close to 'boards in action'. The project on which this article draws has an over-arching aim to develop an understanding of processes and practices of governing in further education colleges in the UK: in particular, we ask how governing boards realise the strategic aims of the organisation. A series of seven objectives contribute to this aim (including identifying the practices that constitute governing; examining the disjuncts between aspirations and enactments of governing. See https://fe-governing.stir.ac.uk/). In this article, we address the following three linked research questions:

(a) What is the nature of GB involvement and engagement in strategy and accountability?
(b) Do practices differ from prescriptions in these two areas, and if so, how?
(c) What are the implications of our analysis of (a) and (b) for the future of college governance?

The paper is also underpinned by particular theoretical and methodological considerations. These are introduced in the next section to provide the foundations on which the substantive argument is built, focusing on contrasting uses of 'governance', and its relationship to strategy and accountability. We then introduce the research design and method, followed by two vignettes detailing brief episodes of GB practices before offering our analysis of the wider themes they illustrate when comparing prescriptions and practices of governing. Our conclusion considers the significance of the analysis for current reforms, especially in the case of England.

Methodological and theoretical considerations

Our interest in 'boards in action' (Cadbury, 2000) shaped our research design and required an early and thorough consideration of theoretical tools. From the outset, the project encompassed a desire to bring (i) concepts and lines of enquiry from organisational studies such as the 'Communicative Constitution of Organisation' or 'CCO' perspective together with (ii) a sociological perspective on both social practices and field relations. With (i), we found Taylor's view promising: 'The goal of organisational communication theory ought to be to bridge the micro/macro gap, by showing how to discover the structure in the process and delineating the processes that realise the structure' (Taylor, 1993: 261, cited in McPhee and Zaug, 2009: 24). With (ii), our own prior research (e.g. James & Biesta, 2007) and that of others (e.g. Avis, 2009) had demonstrated the great significance of how colleges are 'positioned' in social space and the practical consequences of this for teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum and so forth. Put simply, we required a theoretical perspective that would allow us to attend to both the 'manoeuvres' of governors *and* their 'room for manoeuvre', *and* how these two things are related. This would encompass both micro-interactions and more 'macro' conceptualisations of the social world. This general theoretical ambition frames our examination of strategy and accountability in college GBs, as we explain below.

Governance and governing

Some 25 years ago Rhodes explored both the popularity and imprecision of the term 'governance', setting out six different meanings and concluding that it was most helpfully conceived as 'self-

organizing, interorganizational networks' (Rhodes, 1996: 660). The rise of network governance counterbalanced the retreat from bureaucratic and centralised government (the 'hollowing out of the state') and in the British case, accompanied Conservative reforms giving primacy to markets, competition and individualism. It would however be a mistake to regard this shift from 'government to governance' (Newman, 2005a) as either a replacement for prior models of hierarchical control and marketisation, or as some sort of diminution of the state's involvement in the affairs of public organisations and the lives of citizens. Writing specifically about further education in a slightly later period (during which a New Labour government had further developed the trends described by Rhodes – see for example Newman, 2001). Avis (2009) described an emerging central government recognition of the limits of target-driven performativity, but also argued that the 'remedy' of 'new localism' was never a simple empowering of organisations and communities. In the main, analyses of 'governance' have focused on the structures, flows of power and discursive elements that frame and position people and organisations in relation to the state, especially in the public sector. Newman has provided some of the most insightful work here, for example examining the socially constructed and contested nature of accountability for public service managers in landscapes that had been altered radically by the rise of both New Public Management and network governance (Newman, 2004). Related work investigated the discursive construction of new subjectivities for public sector managers, as 'transformational leaders', in a model gaining its appeal from both its origins in the USA and its association with private business (Newman, 2005b). Although educational leaders were not part of Newman's sample, the shifting expectations surrounding their roles have been re-drawn by the same forces. We return briefly to this point in our conclusion.

The continuing significance of the concept of governance for educational leadership and management was recently underlined by Wilkins and Gobby (2020), for whom governance represents a political and economic strategy of governing achieved 'in the absence of any direct, coercive government intervention' (314), signalling a change in dominant ideas about responsibility:

> '… matters of public interest including duties of care and responsibility for others and to the self … are purposely reimagined under governance as matters of private interest and individual responsibility … Governance therefore signals the abrogation of state responsibility and its reluctance to protect individuals and organizations against some of the worst excesses of unregulated markets'. (314)

Governance, in this broader sense of the means and ends of state-level government and how these are achieved, sets the context for *governing* and therefore provides some of the conceptual tools for understanding it. In this paper and the project on which it draws, the primary interest lies with *governing,* or more specifically, the *processes and practices* that can be seen in college governing. The governance/governing distinction is therefore important but is difficult to keep in mind partly because the terms are often used interchangeably or alongside one another as if they mean the same thing. For example, 'governance' appears in both senses in both the Independent Commission report and the White Paper mentioned earlier, where it is about the terms of the relationship between colleges and the state, but also about the more specific actions and arrangements of governors and GBs.

Governing and strategy

'Strategy' is frequently used in respect of the purposes, responsibilities and actions of GBs, and the board's involvement in it is seen by some as the key purpose of the Chair (Hill and James, 2017).

Whilst the term's military connotations remain important, the main parallel for college GBs is with its use in business. Definitions of strategy vary in their compass. A relatively focused example has strategy as:

> '… a set of guiding principles that, when communicated and adopted by the organisation, generates a desired pattern of decision making … A good strategy provides a clear roadmap … that defines the actions people in the business should take (and not take) and the things they should prioritize (and not prioritize) to achieve desired goals' (Watkins, 2007: 1).

Here, strategy is focused on the 'how' of decision making, but also incorporates some attention to what might be called the 'mission' (the 'what'), the vision (the 'why') and the value network (the 'whom') of the organisation. A more expansive concept is Mintzberg's (1992) well known '5 Ps for strategy' (Plan, Ploy, Pattern, Position and Perspective), all the elements of which can be seen in college GBs. In this conceptualisation, while strategy is often something consciously intended and made in advance (a *plan*), it can also or instead be a *ploy*, perhaps used to outwit rival organisations. It can however be more emergent or 'realised' through a series of actions, even if there was no clearly articulated intention ('*pattern*'). *Position* is a more relational element, referring to the location of an organisation in a wider context or field. Finally, strategy can mean *perspective*, or something like collective mind or 'world view', where members of the organisation share a way of thinking and acting. Arguably, the latter three meanings could also be referred to as aspects of 'organisational culture', or in the case of a college, a 'learning culture' (Hodkinson et al., 2007).

The parallel with company boardrooms is helpful in identifying the nature of involvement of college governors in strategy and how this may be understood. Hendry et al. (2010) indicate that studies of the strategic role of boards '… have largely followed the broader corporate governance research agenda, focusing mainly on structural aspects … especially board composition … In other words, their focus is on proxies for board involvement in strategy rather than on actual board behaviour' (34). Recent studies have augmented this with more attention to process, activity and context, exemplified in the widely cited distinction between 'active' and 'passive' strategizing (e.g. Demb and Neubauer, 1992; McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999). Nevertheless, '… research in this area does not provide consistent or systematic insights into the impact of these factors on board involvement in strategy … (it) lacks an overall framework or lens through which this relationship may be considered' (Hendry et al., 2010: 35). For these reasons, Hendry and colleagues adopt a 'strategy as practice' perspective. This views strategy rather differently, as 'a situated or context-dependent, socially-accomplished activity directed towards the achievement of strategic goals and constructed through the actions and interactions of multiple actors or groups' (36). Here, strategy is something that is 'done', and 'strategising practices' are the focus, including '… the flow of activities … such as strategic planning, decision making, resource allocation and strategic change' (36).

Although Hendry and colleagues make no reference to it, their argument builds well on a more philosophical critique that appeared three years earlier. Chia and MacKay (2007) demonstrated how studies of strategy as a *process* (and indeed many of those declaring a 'strategy as practice' approach) had allowed the term *practice* to refer to a very wide range of activities. In turn, this lack of specificity had enabled a continued focus on the individual (or the individual organisation) as the prime and causal unit of analysis, for example, seeking to explain practices of strategy solely as the result of individual or joint intentions. Thus, a more thoroughgoing epistemological break was necessary to give primacy to 'an immanent logic of practice rather than to actors and agents … it is this immanent logic emerging through practice which constitutes what we mean by strategy'

(Chia and Mackay, 2007: 219). Strong parallels are drawn with a Bourdieusian logic of practice and its capacity to straddle structure and agency (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990). In the research on which this article draws, a 'strategy as practice' perspective helps us to pay attention to both 'manoeuvres' *and* 'room for manoeuvre' in GBs.

Governing and accountability

The accountability functions of GBs are often framed as involving 'scrutiny', 'monitoring' and 'challenge', or more prosaically, 'asking questions'. Like strategy, the term accountability appears to mean several different things in both official and casual discourse. One potential clarification is a distinction between public and private accountability. Writing about schools in England, West et al. state:

> '… public accountability can be seen as a range of systems by which organisations or people are held to account in the public sphere – through election (representative democracy), through dialogue (participative democracy, networks), through the courts and through audit. As such it is distinctive from the private accounts of private organisations (with consumers and with shareholders)'. (West et al., 2011: 41–42)

However, these authors acknowledge that the public/private distinction is much more difficult to make than it once was. Many analysts attribute this, directly or indirectly, to the rise of governance that we noted earlier. Writing in this journal, Ranson (2008) pointed to the significance of the replacement of post-war social democratic arrangements and assumptions, with mechanisms of choice and market competition, reducing the role of democratic accountability through local government. The effects include repositioning the public as individual consumers whilst promoting and enabling new combinations of public and private interests, especially in education (Locatelli, 2019; Wilkins, 2016).

Changes of this kind give rise to the need for a fresh conceptual approach. West et al. (2011) take some steps towards this, distinguishing seven 'types of accountability: professional, hierarchical, market, contract, legal, network and participative' (46). Their analysis considers the demands, effects and sanctions associated with each, yet also has puzzling features. Teachers are said to have 'professional accountability' to their peers and to the (now former, English) General Teaching Council, but there is no mention of their accountability to senior management, something that is far more likely to dominate their thoughts, practices and subjectivities (Ball, 2003). It is especially odd that although the GBs are rightly said to be accountable to several other agencies, no person, role or entity is signalled as being accountable to them. This omission may itself be a symptom of the rapid diversification of models and purposes of school GBs in England.

It is helpful to view GB accountability through a more sociological lens. Wilkins (2016) cites Charlton's (2002) distinction between, on the one hand, *technical* or *financial* meanings (e.g. the presentation of auditable accounts), and on the other hand, *managerial* meanings, which refer to the subsuming of a wide range of activities in systems of audit. This point has strong affinity with Hoyle and Wallace's (2005) earlier definition of managerialism and with more recent scholarship on 'datafication' in educational settings (Williamson, 2017; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2019). For Wilkins, governors (and we would add, those prescribing or commenting on their functions) often use 'accountability' to refer to both these things, interchangeably. Accountability has become largely synonymous with governance itself, where

'… all actions and decisions are transposed from the incalculable to the calculable as potential "risks" to be governed … Accountability therefore functions to make sure that individuals and organisations are made to answer for the outcomes of particular decisions … Accountability demands compliance, which it achieves by subsuming the activities of governors within formal calculative regimes, or... "technologies of performance".' (Wilkins, 2016: 133–134)

As a result, governors may hold others to account but are *themselves* in a strong sense accountable, to the extent that what they do is largely defined by 'formal calculative regimes' and the governance of risks. This point was to become central in our analysis.

Newman (2005a) noted that typically, analyses of governance had adopted rather 'thin' concepts of the social. She argued that governance should be approached and understood as meaning making in circumstances that already make some strategies and courses of action thinkable and others unthinkable. Our study attempts to realise a similar goal. Our research approach to GBs in action, and to governing – which might be most simply expressed as 'what is going on here in the name of governing, what does it achieve and why does it matter?' – has a strong connection with previous work by some of the team on learning cultures in further education. This too incorporated a Bourdieusian perspective, and it took a similar questioning stance toward pre-constructed and official institutional definitions of the central concepts (see e.g. Colley et al., 2007; Hodkinson et al., 2007; James & Biesta, 2007).

Design and method

The research study was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Reference ES/R00322X/1) and carried out by a team of researchers from the universities of Stirling, Cardiff and Birmingham.[2]

As the earlier discussion indicates, our research seeks to make *practices* the central unit of analysis. This 'requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its context and in its particular situation' (Stake, 2006: 2). Eight college GBs in the UK (two in each of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England) were the main sites for data gathering, selected from a range of possible colleges and following a process of negotiation through established networks and which ascertained governors' willingness to have researchers present.[3] This provided a 'collective instrumental', multiple case study (Stake, 1998, 2006). Whilst they were all large general providers, and therefore the most common type of college, we do not claim or assume that these GBs constitute a representative sample in the classic, narrow sense. At the same time, this does not preclude all forms of generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011).[4] We *do* claim that our close examination of practices and processes, combined with our study of the national contexts, enables us to identify issues and themes that illuminate large parts of UK college GB practices and processes *in general*. We also develop new knowledge on what GBs actually do.

Data were gathered throughout the 2019 calendar year. Observation of GBs 'in action' was the primary means of data-gathering. Observational data totalled 193 h and included: 48 Board meetings (92 h); 29 Committee meetings (51 h) and seven GB strategy sessions (50 h), recorded using a combination of video, audio and fieldnotes. In addition, we carried out 41 in-depth interviews, averaging 1 h in length, with people in key roles including CEOs, Chairs and Governance Professionals (GP) in each college, and with policy actors including senior civil servants, academics and policy advisors. We also examined a range of documentation produced for GBs (e.g. Codes of Practice and other guidance), and by GBs (e.g. materials for meetings, risk registers and minutes).

Data have been continually shared, compared and discussed across the research team, enabling the identification of incidents and episodes that have resonance across the cases as well as those which appear more distinctive.[5] We made some use of specialised software _Transana_[6] in the comparison and analysis of video recordings of meetings. With all data, we followed strict protocols to maintain security and confidentiality. An innovative feature of the research has been frequent engagement with an Impact Group comprising people with both college and sector-level governance responsibilities.

We next present two brief vignettes drawn from our data. These are not presented for their typicality as episodes, but because they are recognised across the project team as having thematic resonance with other incidents in the overall dataset. Whilst they are of course each unique, we are confident that they illuminate important aspects of practices in college governing and the current realisation of certain concepts of strategy and accountability.

Two vignettes: board practices

College strategy in relation to HE provision

Our first example is the presentation of the news (in a senior manager's report to the GB) that a college was successful in a review process giving it the right to run courses at HE level. A governor who works in HE had worked with a small team of senior teaching staff (some of whom were GB members) to devise various required evaluation measures and prepare to respond to questions likely to be asked during external scrutiny.

The presentation made it clear that preparing for and achieving this status had been a strategically important activity invested in by the senior team for at least 2 years. Board members then asked questions, and responses were given by the CEO and Chair. In these responses, the pursuit of the opportunity was portrayed as unavoidable, and the successful outcome was described as a thoroughly positive development which could only benefit the college.

Following the presentation, the GB Vice Chair asked what the future strategy was, and whether the college would be able to deliver degrees. Fundamental features of the strategy were revealed in the CEO's answer to this question; the CEO explained that the focus would be on areas that universities did not cover and where the college had recognised expertise and historical precedents, such as HNCs and HNDs. As it was the Vice Chair who asked the question, it appears unlikely that this area of strategy had been discussed in a GB meeting, and still less likely that there was a firm sense of GB ownership. Whilst the preparations had been discussed in one of the GB committees, the questions and answers revealed that the wider GB itself was not party to quite fundamental elements of strategy and some members were unaware of the completed preparatory work.

A time-sensitive opportunity

Our second vignette sees a GB presented with an opportunity to lease a nearby building that had been used by another FE college for teaching purposes. The other college was nearing the end of its lease on the building and had approached this college to see if they wanted to use it. However, it was a time-sensitive offer, and its urgency meant that members of the finance committee were emailed for responses in-between that committee's regular meeting dates. The item was explained to the GB in a 10-min presentation from the Chief Operating Officer (COO) as part of a 'strategy and update report'. The rationale centred on the college growing student numbers

and being able to access funding, based on projections of the increasing size of college enrolment. The COO explained that the new building would enable more students to be taught, thus extending the college's capacity, and that there was a bonus, in that the building also had features conducive to the specialised nature of the teaching that would take place there.

The COO explained that the 80 students already enrolled with the other college had been told that negotiations were underway to provide them with a course, but they had to know for certain by the summer (the GB meeting was held in the Spring). Toward the end of the presentation, the CEO also contributed, to confirm that the long-term goal was to try to grow numbers, in line with the college's values and strategy, in which this particular area of curriculum had been identified as up and coming.

The ensuing discussion lasted around 20 min. The GB was asked to approve accepting the offer, rather than to approve signing the lease itself. The Chair of the Finance Committee summarised the two main queries raised by the committee's members. One was about the feasibility of using an existing college building instead; the other was a check that the financial commitment would not place the college in any financial difficulty. The GB Chair stressed: 'Speed is of the essence here. We've got 80 students being held in abeyance'. Only one other Governor challenged this. They spoke twice, the first time stating that 'we are effectively being asked to agree to let you sign up to a lease without knowing if it pays'. At the end, when the Chair asked for agreement, after assuring the board that there would be another chance to scrutinise the matter in Finance Committee, the same governor stated: 'I think we should record the fact that Finance has agreed this outside the normal circle, otherwise we are just being asked to agree something without a plan'. In the event, the deal was agreed and endorsed by the Finance committee (which met a fortnight later), and the building was open for business in the following September.

We now consider how these two episodes relate to prescriptions for governing, before turning to our account of them as *practices*.

Strategy and accountability: prescriptions and practices

Prescriptions

Prescriptions for what college governing should encompass, and indeed the characteristics and qualities thought necessary in governors themselves, come in three main forms: (a) general government or ministerial guidance (e.g. Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, 2019; Scottish Government, 2014); (b) diagnostic reviews, sometimes motivated by specific failures (e.g. Greatbatch and Tate, 2018; Humphreys, 2011; Ney, 2019; Scottish Government, 2016); and (c) codes of practice, especially from bodies representing colleges themselves (e.g. AoC, 2019).

These documents vary a great deal in tone, intended audience, and quality. For example, where the Welsh review (Humphreys, 2011) was broad, seeking to define and restate the purpose of FE colleges to present recommendations to government about governance structures and cultures, the more recent English one (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018) was narrow, driven by a recognition that the English FE sector was already amid a fundamental reform programme.[7] It identified a need for more 'high quality and high performing governors' (11), at the same time acknowledging great ambiguity and variation in the purposes of FE college governance (64). Disappointingly, the report presented these two matters as if they were unrelated.

Variations of this kind should not however blind us to the strong substantive similarities between such documents. *Good College Governance: The Report of the Education Secretary's Task Group*

(Scottish Government, 2016) is an example of our second form, drawing upon three cases of governance failure in Scotland. It would be equally at home in the other three countries. Its foreword, written by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, states the centrality of effective governance and the role of cultural and structural aspects:

> Effective governance is fundamental in supporting colleges to improve the life chances of their students and the performance of businesses. And good corporate governance demands an unswerving focus on culture, values and people – and strong systems and processes underpinning decision-making and public accountability. (Scottish Government, 2016: 2).

A prominent example of our third form is the *Code of Good Governance for English Colleges* (AoC, 2019) offering nine 'core values and expectations' including 'Providing strong leadership to both the senior team and the community the college serves', 'Setting the strategy and acting as guardians of the college's mission', and 'Demonstrating accountability to students, parents, staff, partners, employers, funders, trustees and other stakeholders, including publishing accurate and timely information on performance' (AoC, 2019: 7–8).[8] The *Code* also presents a list of 'principal responsibilities of good governance', the first two of which read:

1. 'Formulate and agree the **mission and strategy** including defining the ethos of the college.
2. Be **collectively accountable** for the business of the college taking all decisions on all matters within their duties and responsibilities'. (AoC, 2019: 9 Original emphasis)

The formulation of *strategy*, and the carrying out of functions of *accountability*, are key in prescriptions across all four countries. Yet the apparent 'straightforwardness' of such statements is deceptive, hiding the considerable complexity inherent in actual practices (Hill et al., 2016). We now turn to a discussion of such practices, centred on the two vignettes and in the light of the theoretical and methodological considerations outlined earlier.

Strategy in practice

Both vignettes raise questions about the meaning, nature, location and ownership of strategy and, along with much of our data, they question the apparent straightforwardness of the concept. As a whole, our data show that there can sometimes be longstanding and fundamental elements of strategy about which GBs *per se* are largely ignorant, and about which there is no apparent sense of collective ownership by the GB.

In the first vignette, the board learns of the strategy as a *fait accompli*, when it is revealed to them as having been behind a long-planned but recent and significant achievement: they are relatively passive and are being *inducted* regarding a key strategic matter. In the second, GB members are more active, though the core process is one of persuasion: they are being asked to support something on the grounds that it is wise, desirable, and keeping with existing strategy (both the COO and the CEO frame the proposal as being consonant with broad strategic matters such as growing student numbers in an up-and-coming area of provision). Notably, the dialogue does not dwell on the strategic pros and cons of the proposal and is centred on risk, financial viability, and the discomfort of breaking with normal committee cycles.

In neither of these instances could strategy be described as a 'clear roadmap' of the sort outlined by Watkins (2007) or as conveyed in the prescriptions, wherein governors devise and articulate collective intentions, then monitor the realisation of them. Rather, GB strategy appears,

simultaneously, to be *both* 'planned' and 'emergent' for different parts of the governance arrangements. This makes the classic 'passive/active' distinction of little help in the analysis of GB involvement. We know from our interviews with CEOs, Chairs and GPs, and other sources, that in many colleges these three individuals are in almost daily contact, forming an 'inner triangle of governance' where ongoing dialogue is likely to include a strongly shared sense of strategy. Given the high volume of activity, together with timescales and cycles that are much faster than the frequency of GB meetings, it is no surprise that many decisions and actions will initially bypass many or most GB members. This arrangement means that GBs often find themselves deliberating on actions and decisions already taken, building a post-hoc appreciation of strategy, or focusing on the legitimacy of what has already happened in their name. These practices, which are largely responses to the wider governance frame, are quite far removed from the prescriptions we introduced above.

Accountability in practice: lateral, inward-facing and outward-facing

Our analysis shows a range of accountability practices that reflect how different governors or different elements of the GB structure are accountable to each other. This *lateral accountability* is a crucial dimension in that it signals a collective identity and a sense of joint responsibility. Lateral accountability appears to be afforded or constrained by both structural and cultural elements. Structurally, these include terms of reference, reporting lines, membership of committees, the timing and sequencing of meetings. Culturally, they include the Chair's 'style' and the extent to which governors feel able to support, question or challenge each other. The first vignette illustrates something of this form of accountability, and it is central in the second, where the Finance Committee has worked closely with the COO, and together they give assurances, sufficient to secure conditional approval, to the GB. The matter in hand is progressed by finding a temporary work-around, bypassing the 'normal' relationship and sequencing of business between the GB and one of its committees: this suggests a high level of trust, but also that lateral accountability can remain significant even when the usual mechanism for achieving it can't be activated.

In the various prescriptions mentioned earlier, the idea of GB holding senior teams to account is prominent. Both vignettes include practices that constitute this kind of accountability, though in this respect they are unusual amongst our data. In the first, the CEO seeks to reassure GB members that the process of achieving the necessary recognition to run HE-level programmes was long-planned, had harnessed appropriate governor expertise and had been handled well. The question from the vice-chair results in a form of 'holding to account' in that it produces clarification of the significance and implications for the college, especially regarding opportunities opened up for specific types of higher education provision to be grown or expanded. This clarification also leads to a fresh articulation of an element of GB strategy, both verbal and in the minutes. In the second vignette, a more robust challenge to senior leaders includes an insistence that the matter is recorded in the minutes in a particular way. It is however important to underline the point that the GB were not being asked whether the college should *proceed* with the deal, but whether they would *support* a course of action that had to move quickly and in which it appeared negotiations were already well advanced. The 'students being held in abeyance' point underlined these governors' limited room for manoeuvre as they confront a situation in which there has already been extensive progress on the part of senior leaders and a small sub-set of governors. We did see examples of this kind of 'holding to account' in our data, and we term it *inward-facing accountability*. However, contrary to its prominence in the prescriptions, it was relatively rare in GB meetings.

The GB members in our second vignette appeared to be 'between a rock and a hard place': they were being invited to discuss and support decisions already made by the CEO and senior leaders, who will have consulted the GB Chair already. With matters so far advanced, serious challenge could have been interpreted by others in the meeting as a reluctance to be supportive of the college. This brings us to the third dimension of accountability which our data show takes up a great deal of the attention of GBs. This form can be found in some of the prescriptions but in a way that conflates it with the 'inward-facing' variety. It concerns how GBs are themselves positioned as 'of the college', and must contribute to processes required by funders, government departments and agencies, quality assessment and assurance regimes, organisations with various accreditation interests and awarding bodies, amongst others. GBs are thus highly accountable, responding to external 'performative' demands, and this directs much of their time and energy, casting a powerful influence on such things as which committees are set up, how often they meet, and how such matters as learning, achievement and progression are conceived, operationalised, monitored or measured. As key outward-facing representatives of the institution, GBs respond to these external demands and agendas with and through senior leaders. We term such processes *outward-facing accountability*. In a highly competitive environment, corresponding to the shifts to 'governance' described earlier, such processes position governors as representing and defending the college and its reputation.

These second and third dimensions (*inward-* and *outward-facing accountability*) require rather different arrangements and relationships to be realised and effective. The successful achievement of outward-facing accountability requires strong governor identification with the college and perhaps with the senior executive team: loyal governorship is that which positively and generously supports the institution to succeed in an environment in which it is constantly measured and compared to other providers. It is also likely to demand increasingly specialised skills and expertise amongst governors to match increasingly specialised demands (Wilkins, 2017). By contrast, the achievement of inward-facing accountability begins from a different conceptual starting-point which sees the GB and the senior executive as separable entities. This may require similar levels of energy and commitment to that which faces outward, yet inward-facing accountability may also require a distinctive sense of criticality and independence. Although governors are heavily reliant upon senior executives for the information available to them (noted as 'ironic' by some, e.g. Farrell and Law, 1999; Wilkins, 2016), they must have the confidence, experience, and inclination to question and challenge plans, decisions, and performance. They must be prepared, should it be necessary, to engage in robust confrontation. As indicated in some of the 'diagnostic' accounts of the sort mentioned earlier, it is precisely this second form of accountability that has been found wanting in some UK college GBs, including those where the governance arrangements led to 'failure'.

We suggest that these distinctions are pivotal in understanding the practices of college governing. A strong division of labour – across a committee structures, between individual governors, and in both the allocation of tasks and in specialist skills driving governor appointments – is an efficient (arguably, necessary) GB response to frequent, high-volume external demands. By contrast, where governor activity and responsibilities are highly fragmented, inward-facing accountability will be undermined and possibly compromised because it must rely on shared understanding, collective responsibility and a detailed and well-articulated sense of strategy. Thus, there may well be an accountability paradox or an 'inverse law' of sorts here, such that the better attuned the governance arrangements are for meeting external performative demands, the less well equipped those arrangements are for engagement in rigorous internal scrutiny of the senior executive.

Conclusion

Earlier we stated that whilst there were important differences in governance across the four nations of the UK, we were for present purposes focused mainly on similarities in both the sector-level prescriptions and in our pan-UK dataset. Governors are everywhere expected to have a strong grasp of strategy in the sense of plans or a 'road-map' and to make accountability a top priority. We have demonstrated how existing prescriptions offer too simplistic a picture of these matters. None distinguish between what we have termed 'lateral', 'inward-facing', and 'outward-facing' accountability (or make any similar distinction), and nor do they recognise the very different starting-points and demands of each and the probable frictions between them. Practices are considerably more complex than the various normative prescriptions would suggest. More specifically, whilst lateral accountability requires structural and cultural collegiality, outward-facing accountability requires strong identification with the college, and inward-facing accountability requires strong allegiance to the public, the taxpayer, the student or other clients. Of course, governors and GB practices may serve all three, but whether they do so (and to what extent) depends on many other factors, such as the volume and pace of business, the way in which the main role-holders see their role, how competent they are, and the nature of governance structures and mechanisms. Perhaps most of all it will depend on the shared view of *purpose* that the Chair, CEO and the GP foster and maintain: *purpose* was identified as a particularly ambiguous and varied facet in England (e.g. Greatbatch and Tate, 2018). It is notable that the identification of similar tensions, and the recognition that GBs were more comfortable with 'stewardship' than 'challenge' led the Humphreys review to recommend a mechanism for broadening 'ownership' in governance to include a wider public in a membership body integrated with a 'leaner' core GB (Humpheys, 2011: 14).

We mentioned earlier that shifts in broader conceptions of governance forms an important context for our research on processes and practices of governing. In her study of public sector managers, Newman described how the combination of network governance with strong and continuing elements of the hierarchical and market models, presented managers 'with the task of resolving the tensions and dilemmas that are produced as multiple regimes of power intersect collide and conflict' (Newman, 2004: 20). Our analysis shows that the same can be said of governors. Like Newman's managers, they must:

> '… perform multiple identities in different contexts, at one moment being the agent of government, trying to deliver on its policy pledges; at another, a good public servant being held to account through bureaucratic channels to the relevant minister; at another, a member of a partnership body seeking to cut through bureaucracy in order to make something happen; at another, an organisational leader with accountability to staff and other organisational stakeholders; at another, a responsive change agent, accountable to those whom the organisation is seeking to serve (users, communities, a public at large)'. (Newman, 2004: 20)

Such multiple positionings and responsibilities sit in stark contrast to the apparent simplicity of the governing guidance and the related prescriptions that we introduced earlier. Whilst governors are clearly in a different role to college CEOs and Principals, the distinction between lateral, inward- and outward-facing accountability that we have seen across GB practices highlights contradictory demands upon their individual and collective energies. In these circumstances, it will be especially difficult for them to discover or develop a 'coherent ethos of office' (Newman, 2005b:

719). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be worth pursuing a further line of ana-lysis in which governor practices are mapped against a framework of four models of governance derived from Quinn (1988) and developed by Newman. The models are differentiated by two ortho-gonal continua (the horizontal axis being from *continuity and order* to *innovation and change*; the vertical, from *differentiation and decentralisation* to *centralisation and vertical integration*). This gives four models of governance, namely *self-governance*, *open systems*, *hierarchy* and *rational goal*, with each embodying a different dynamic of change that pulls in a different direction (Newman, 2001: 33–38).

Whilst it applies UK-wide, our analysis does have specific implications for college governing in England. Hodgson and Spours (2019) recently argued that further education colleges in England were at a 'crossroads between a national, competitive sector and a locally collaborative system'. In 2020 England saw a series of Ministerial and Prime Ministerial announcements about new funding and investment for further education and skills, and the 2021 White Paper and probable legislation may signal something of a renaissance in the fortunes of the sector (see e.g. Belgutay, 2020). Such a renaissance would need to be facilitated by a much clearer sense of sector purpose, a requirement to plan and engage locally and greater definition of governance, as recommended by Ney (2019). In these circumstances, the gulf we have identified between practices and current prescriptions will matter even more than it already does. Prescriptions of college gov-erning will need fundamental reconceptualization if they are to facilitate a shift from the highly mar-ketised model towards a more collaborative and system-oriented one. We suggest that if guidance is to be refined, it would need at minimum to: overcome the current conflation of governance and gov-erning; be more specific about the meaning of strategy and accountability in practice, including the different forms these can take and how they are sometimes in tension; encourage GBs to take 'cul-tural' elements as seriously as 'structural' elements.

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Notes

1. See https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2868/publications.

2. ESRC Research Project *Processes and Practices of Governing in Further Education Colleges in the UK.* Team members: Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Steve Garner, Ron Hill, Gary Husband, Aileen Ireland, David James, Jodie Pennacchia, Cate Watson, Helen Young.
3. Project website https://fe-governing.stir.ac.uk/
4. Flyvbjerg (2006) examines the pivotal role of case studies across a range of scientific disciplines and identifies a series of frequent misunderstandings including the idea that case studies cannot provide generalisable knowledge. One of his key conclusions is that 'By and large, conventional wisdom is wrong or misleading'.
5. Processes of team sharing and discussion became more protracted under COVID-19 restrictions, which prevented physical meetings in much of our analysis phase. A short no-cost extension to the project has helped to mitigate the effects.
6. See https://www.transana.com
7. Including major changes in Apprenticeships, a new Post-16 Skills Plan and a recent series of reorganisations following Area Based Reviews.
8. There is an interesting ambiguity around the status of the *Code*, in that adherence to it is both 'voluntary' on the part of a college, and at the same time often a condition of funding.

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