Executive Summary Report [1]
For Harlow College
Board Review 2024

Author: Pauline Odulinski OBE

Date: 8th June 2024

Version: Final

---

[1] Full report held by the Head of Governance

Contents

1. Foreword

First of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of those who contributed to this review in the spirit of openness and transparency.

Particular thanks go to the Head of Governance for providing me with access to a vast range of information and documentation, for arranging interviews and generally for being helpful.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. General Background

Harlow College is a medium-sized Further Education (FE) college in North West Essex with two campuses and four smaller satellite learning centres. The College's main campus is on the edge of Harlow's town centre, with Stansted Airport College (part of Harlow College) located at London Stansted Airport. The smaller satellite learning centres within Harlow and at Stansted Airport are used to deliver the majority of its adult provision. The College offers a wide variety of vocational, technical and professional qualifications including apprenticeships and programmes for learners with high level needs. In 2022/23 the College had over 5,000 students enrolled on courses, drawing just under half of its learners from Harlow and with the remainder primarily from West Essex, East Hertfordshire and North London.

The current Strategic Plan and Skills Statement for Harlow College runs from 2019 to 2024 and forms the starting point for this board review.

2.2. Scope

The College has outlined the aims of the board review, which it deems timely as the current Strategic Plan is coming to the end of its cycle and the Board and Senior Leaders are actively engaged in considering the next Strategic Plan for 2024-2029.

The aim of the review is to assess the current position of the College regarding governance and, building on what has been achieved, provide advice and guidance on the possible actions to be taken to enhance and add value to current practice. The College acknowledges that, whilst the Senior Team and the Governors did a great job during the Covid 19 pandemic of ensuring that leadership and governance were as effective as possible in the circumstances, there has been, as in most colleges, an impact from the restrictions faced in operating the board virtually, an example being the governors not being able to visit classes and talk to staff and students. The College recognises the importance and value of face-to-face interaction alongside some virtual operations, both of these being vital for Governors and Senior Leaders. There is very much a sense of a positive, strong ambition and drive to move forward together.

The particular areas for consideration identified by the College are succession planning and induction for new governors, the link governor scheme and

people development, together with advice on best practice from elsewhere. The review is also to consider the new areas outlined in the revisions to Government policy and in the associated revised AOC Code of Governance for FE and to offer advice on any associated requisite actions.

2.3. Board Composition – People and Attributes

The Board has set clearly defined values and members model their behaviour based on a culture of openness, trust and a focus on the needs of the students.

A key strength of the Board lies in its diverse membership with its wide range of skills, knowledge, expertise and experience, matching the skills audit, and the skills tracker is an effective tool for identifying this.

The members of the Board display a strong sense of commitment to the College and its objectives and members do provide constructive challenge and scrutiny whilst being encouraging and supportive.

There are strong relationships between the Executive and the Board and the student governors are very engaged and articulate, asking productive questions and able to challenge in a constructive manner.

There is strong team work demonstrated by the triumvirate of Chair, Principal and Head of Governance with a high degree of mutual trust and integrity.

The College has an annual plan of business for the Board and each committee to ensure that the annual requirements of college business are planned and implemented effectively and efficiently.

2.4. Board Structure and Processes

The Board structures and processes provide a framework for members to deliver optimally on priorities and objectives, acting in compliance with the regulations. All the key College governance documents are in place.

The Board is currently actively involved with the Executive in developing a new Strategic Plan for 2024/2029 which will incorporate the proposals from recently commissioned external research into the College infrastructure, estates and capital needs. This research will inform the plans for satisfying the longer term requirements.

The Board structures are meeting the needs of governance effectively, with experienced chairs of committees, chosen for their expertise and skills, providing effective oversight of business matters. The Board has access to a significant amount of information relating to College performance, both financial and academic, and there is a willingness to be open and transparent when sharing information.

The process for the recruitment of governors is effective with members, in the interviews, commenting on how well they are supported through induction, initial training and development. The College records the activities and events

undertaken by governors in terms of their development and support, both internal and external, effectively.

A governance self-assessment process takes place annually and a resulting action plan is drawn up and progress monitored. This process also links to the College SAR for coherence.

There are strong, positive relationships between the Board and the Executive.

2.5. Board Culture and Governor Interaction

The level of governor interaction with the Board is high and there is a positive and effective relationship between the Board and the Executive team based on mutual trust and respect.

There is a sense of cohesion between the Board membership and the Executive and a desire to focus on achievement and success through planning and delivering the governance agenda.

There is an understanding between the Board and the Executive team of the clear distinction between the role of leadership and governance, and leadership and management. Furthermore, there is a positive mutual respect and understanding shown by the CEO/Principal and the Executive team and an awareness of the requirement to service the needs of the Board through effective reporting and accurate data and information to facilitate the efficient functioning of the Board.

2.6. Board Impact and Effectiveness

Overall, College governance is proficient and effective with the Board demonstrating a very positive impact on College outcomes.

The Board is developing a new strategic plan, which is timely as it coincides with changes in government policy and regulation and enables it to consult widely with local and regional stakeholders to satisfy the needs, the key focus being on delivering an excellent student experience.

There is a strong culture of inclusion and shared values in action in governance and the leadership team work well together.

Governors are aware of their statutory duties and responsibilities and demonstrate an understanding of the code of conduct.

Governance documents and the arrangements of the Board are aligned and robust. Processes work well and governors have significant information and data provided relating to performance and delivery against objectives.

There are strong links with employers and these provide exemplars of good practice, such as the Employer Advisory Forums and other collaborative partnerships, including the work carried out at the campus at Stansted Airport.

2.7. Summary of Recommendations

1. Enhance the very effective Executive collaborations and partnerships by the governors developing their own independent stakeholder engagement strategy/plan to demonstrate their independence in terms of insights, perceptions and observations of brand and reputation and to inform scrutiny and challenge of the outcomes and impact measures amongst the wider stakeholder groups.

2. Consider enhancing current practice further with a Link Governor Scheme focused specifically on 'the student experience' to aid governors' understanding and inform critical, productive challenge. This may also benefit governors' insights alongside the stakeholder engagement plans.

3. In relation to longer term succession planning, enhance current practice further by consideration of the need for additional future-focused expertise as the curriculum adopts new vocational and technical subjects such as ecology and the green agenda.