

Module 2 Strategy and educational character

For suggestions on how to get the most out of these self-study materials, see the booklet on Using the materials.

Introduction

The overall character of a college – what courses it offers, which students it caters for, what sort of learning environment it provides – is referred to as its educational character. A key responsibility of governors is to assure themselves that their college's educational character, and hence the type, range and accessibility of its courses, meets the needs of the community it serves.

Another key responsibility of governors is to ensure that the college mission – the statement of the fundamental aims and purposes of the college – both reflects the needs of the community it serves and informs and directs every aspect of the college's activities.

A third key area of governor responsibility is the ethos of the college – how the college community interacts at a human level in achieving its objectives. How does it respond to diversity, what is its commitment to quality and the morale of its staff, what does it do to enable innovation?

This module gives you the opportunity to explore these areas in relation to your own college, and to develop a better understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of governors for strategy and mission.

Summary of changes to the 2002 edition

The Learning and Skills Act 2000 established the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to plan and fund post-16 education and training, with a broad strategic brief to create a learning and skills sector capable of meeting the needs of a knowledge-based economy. Much of the strategic planning and funding at local level is implemented by the network of local LSC councils.

Governing bodies need to test management strategic objectives against both the educational character and ethos of the college, as reflected in the mission statement, **and** the local LSC vision for their area. Furthermore, governors must ensure that colleges respond to changes in the wider educational environment. Recent changes have included an increased focus on local communities and the formation of local learning partnerships, a drive for wider participation and equality of access to post-16 education and training, a move to closer relationships with local regional employers, and the Centre of Vocational Excellence (COVE) initiative.

These changes are reflected in the content of this revised edition.

Aims

By the end of this module you should be able to:

- explain the purpose of your college strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment
- describe how your college's mission and ethos inform its strategy
- explain how the educational character of your college reflects its mission, ethos and strategy
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your college
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the college.

Contents

Mark the sections you want to study and tick them off as you complete them

To do *Done*

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Working on the self-study activities

These materials have been designed for flexible use. You can work through them with other governors in training and development sessions. You can also work through sections and activities in your own time and at your own pace if you find it difficult to attend organised training sessions. Governors who have used these materials point out how valuable it is to work on at least some of the suggested activities together with another governor or group of governors, as there is such potential to learn from each other's experience. For suggestions on how to organise this kind of support for yourself, see the booklet on *Using the materials*.

What you will need

To complete activities in this module you will need to get hold of the following documents from the clerk:

- *The College Governor* published by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC)
- your local Learning and Skills Council Strategic Plan for 2002–2003
- your region's Economic Strategy

- your college's mission statement
- your college's strategic plan.

Where you need to make notes in response to activity questions, we suggest you do this in a notebook or on separate sheets of loose-leaf paper, and store the information you compile along with the module for future reference.

Section 1 Introduction to strategy and educational character

Your role as a governor is to be responsible for the mission, educational character and solvency of your college. You should also keep the overall strategy of your college under review to ensure that it matches the wider educational environment. Governors need to assure themselves that their college provides the services required by the community they serve.

In understanding the role of governors it is helpful to contrast it with that of the college management. College management is responsible for:

- developing and proposing the educational character and mission of the college to the governing body
- developing and managing services and academic activities.

Broadly, governance is primarily concerned with formulating and monitoring medium- and long-term strategy, while management is concerned with implementing those strategies.

Governors bring a broad range of experience to their task. You may have local business interests, be employed by other key local agencies such as the local education or unitary authority, or come from community or voluntary sector organisations. You may be a student at the college or a staff member. This wide experience should be drawn on when reviewing such things as the college's proposals for programmes of learning, major investments of assets, and medium- and long-term strategies.

Governors have a critical role as the custodians of the mission, ethos and educational character of the college. This means that you are responsible for checking that strategic decisions comply with and implement the agreed college statements about ethos, educational character and mission. You will need to be aware of the local LSC strategic proposals for provision within your area. It is your role to identify any substantial drift from the college mission and the local LSC vision for the area.

How can the role of governors and management be distinguished?

The fictitious scenario that follows embodies several issues relating to governors' role in shaping strategy and educational character.

What next at Bluewater College?

Bluewater College's principal has been in post for 18 months. The principal has undertaken a successful restructuring of the college and has begun to establish a strong quality culture. Not everyone signs up to the new focus on standards rather than seeking the latest business opportunity, but there is a growing acceptance within the college that quality matters. Some governors regret the loss of some very good and influential business governors.

The agenda includes: an update on a meeting between the local LSC and the senior management team; discussion of proposals for the reshaping of the curriculum offer by the deputy principal; discussion of proposals for a COVE in the local area; and a review of the college staff profile (age, industrial experience, staff development activity, sickness and absence, shortages, etc.).

The art and design department faces a number of challenges, given recent levels of industrial experience, retention and achievement below national standards and the establishment of a COVE in this vocational area in a nearby college. Possible options include: closure of the department; partnership arrangements with the nearby Goodpractice College art and design department; growth of a niche market department of fashion which would require investment in staff and equipment.

The papers about the curriculum and the staff profile have already prompted a number of calls to the chair and the principal. Three governors have a long-term commitment to the art and design department: one governor works within the media industry; another is matched with the department and has been approached by staff members anxious about its future; the third is a head teacher from one of the main feeder schools who is concerned about reduced choice for school leavers.

Governors have recently met with colleagues from Goodpractice College and have noted some differences in approach between the colleges; the vice-chair is keen that managers at Bluewater learn from their opposite numbers at the other college. Some governors were very impressed by the art and design department at Goodpractice College which got a grade 1 in a recent inspection.

Activity What should the governors' approach be in the meeting?

Imagine that you were one of the Bluewater College governors. Note down three questions that you would want to explore at the meeting of the full governing body.

Viewpoint

Governors need to be very careful that they do not get diverted into discussing the detail of the proposals, rather than reviewing the impact of the proposals on the educational character, ethos and mission of the college. There will be a degree of tension between governors who have a 'special interest' in issues relating to the art and design department and governors and senior managers who have a broader interest. Some of the questions that you might have considered are:

- What is the pattern of the local curriculum offer in the areas under discussion? How might each of the proposed options affect this?
- What impact would each of the proposals have on the educational character and ethos of the college?
- What are the resource implications for each of the options? What impact would they have on the medium- and long-term financial stability of the college? What impact would they have on the staffing profile of the college? Are there implications for the human resource development plan in seeking COVE status?
- Would there be any differential impact upon specific groups in the local area from any of the options? How do any proposals affect 'travel to study' patterns? What would the impact on the local skills base be for each of the options?

Issues about the broad nature of a 'niche' offer could be viewed as borderline between the responsibilities of governance and management. The way in which the agreed proposal is implemented is clearly a management decision – for example, how to gain the necessary staff skills profile or the precise nature of the partnership between the colleges.

Two further points:

- Questions about which staff and courses should be protected in any restructuring would not be appropriate governance. However, governors may wish to seek clarification or reassurance about the implications of any changes for the relationship with the local LSC or in relation to legal obligations surrounding any redundancies.
- Suggesting ways in which the college might meet the challenge of the COVEs initiative is a management task, but governors could ask management to revisit their proposals if they think the educational character and ethos of the college would be undermined by a particular management decision.

This case study illustrates the need for governors to test management proposals against the college's mission and the local LSC's broad strategy for the area, and to examine their impact on the educational character and ethos of the college. We shall now take a closer look at the issue of mission and corporate objectives.

Why should governors think about mission and corporate objectives?

Mission statement and corporate objectives

A key question that governors should ask about their college is 'What's it for?' – why does the college exist? The answer should be contained in the mission statement of the college. Governors should ensure that the mission statement and the associated corporate objectives identify the college's core purpose and the ends that the college should achieve. The mission statement also provides the acid test against which current and proposed activities should be evaluated.

Role of community interests

Governors play a vital role in representing the beneficiaries of the college – the community it serves. Governors' judgements about strategy and educational character should always be measured against the question 'What benefit does this bring to the community the college serves?'

Governance and management

'In order to be obsessive about ends, the board has got to get a lot of clutter that currently consumes its time out of the way...board members do have legitimate worries about how things are being practised (so) the board must be sure it is getting the monitoring data that keeps its worrying down.'

John Carver and Miriam Mayhew (1994) *A new vision of board leadership*
Washington: Association of Community College Trustees

This quote from John Carver highlights one aspect of his 'policy governance model' which has been widely discussed in further education, and which is favoured by some colleges. The model enables governing bodies to concentrate their attention on strategic leadership.

Approaches to policy governance

Governors should focus on **ends** rather than **means**. Governing bodies must decide upon ends. Their task is not to work out what has to be done to achieve the desired ends – these are means and should be left to management to determine. Governing bodies must be about setting expectations and then monitoring them.

John Carver's model empowers governing bodies to become more visionary. They become less immersed in detail and more concerned in what Carver calls 'making a difference', in deciding about the college's effect 'on the world outside'. Mission statements and identifying priorities are about ends and are the responsibility of governing bodies. The design and execution of means, or strategies to achieve those ends, are the responsibility of management.

There is a danger of governors becoming embroiled in the means when their job is to set the ends – which are the educational character of the college and the standards against which the governors can assess their college's effectiveness.

Checklist: The contribution that a mission statement makes to governing body business

It provides a clear sense of purpose and direction to the organisation.

It specifies ends.

It provides the parameters for management decision-making.

It aids evaluation – by providing the benchmark or quality standard against which the college can measure its achievements.

Activity Assessing the quality of governing body contributions

Look at the case history below which describes a governor's approach to governing body meetings. Consider this approach and say whether you think it will help the governing body as a whole to discharge its duties.

Think of three examples in recent governing body meetings where you or other governors took a similar approach.

'I am extremely concerned about the proposal to close our painting and decorating provision. As you are aware I run a construction company and I rely for labour on a pool of local youngsters who have been appropriately trained. Furthermore I have been the link governor for this programme area and I am concerned about the future of the staff there if this goes through. Surely there must be some other way of saving money? We said nothing about this in our strategic plan.'

Governor

Viewpoint

In this typical scenario, the governor has diverted the meeting into too detailed considerations because this is what the governor knows and understands, rather than taking a strategic overview. Closing a section may well be precipitated by a rationalisation of provision determined by the local LSC. As a governor, you should try not to lose sight of the bigger picture.

In this particular example, there is also an unacceptable element of self-interest. Governors need to retain a focus on the needs of the community as a whole.

Section 2 The educational environment

The educational environment has become very turbulent, or changeable, since colleges were incorporated. Your principal will, no doubt, have highlighted new issues in the national environment which affect the college. In addition broader factors affecting the college, such as globalisation, and the move to a high skills, knowledge-based economy, all have profound effects on the future direction and character of your college. Governors need periodically to review the broad educational and social environment, and assess whether the college mission and objectives need to be reviewed in the light of changes.

Why keeping an eye on the broader educational environment is important

Issues in the broader environment, such as the knowledge-based economy, developments in information and communications technology, and changes in working patterns will require your college to change the way it delivers key curriculum and business support activities in the future. The type of programmes, staffing

requirements, skills requirements, buildings provision and investment patterns of the college may all need to be reconfigured to accommodate future developments. There is evidence that these changes are already impacting on colleges.

Curriculum 2000 was intended to make study broader and more flexible for people over the age of 16. (Curriculum 2000 was introduced in *Qualifying for success*, a consultation paper published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in January 1998.) The first year of its development proved challenging. It is important that the governing body distinguish between the immediate difficulties of implementing radical change (a management issue) and the longer-term impact of the changes upon the community the college serves, the ethos of the college and the experience of learners.

The recommendations laid out in the government white paper *Learning to succeed* are already having an impact through the establishment of the LSC with its network of local councils. (DfEE, *Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* Cmnd 4392 was published by The Stationery Office, June 1999.) The implications for colleges are far-reaching. For example, colleges are working within much clearer geographical boundaries with an increased focus on local community. The move from competition towards collaboration is embedded through local learning partnerships and is likely to spread to include other providers. The emerging nature of the role of the local LSC in planning will help to inform the governors in their role in shaping the college.

As a governor, you can add value to the strategic planning processes of your college by reviewing its curriculum offer, educational character, mission and organisational capacity in the light of changes in the environment. To do this effectively you need to keep up to date with developments within and beyond education.

Activity How can governors keep up to date with trends in the educational environment?

Note three ways in which governors can keep up to date with issues that emerge in the educational environment.

Viewpoint

You may only have time to make use of one or two of the following, and may only manage to use them sporadically, but all these are potentially useful sources of information on current issues:

- principal's regular report – which should cover trends in the environment, not just within the college
- college newsletter
- education press (*Times Education Supplement*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *LSDA (Learning and Skills Development Agency) Briefings*, *FE Now*, etc.)
- the websites of the LSC, Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and 10 Downing Street
- talking to staff
- conferences.

The principal's report can be the best way of getting a grip on what is going on in post-16 education and training, but reviewing some of the education press periodically will help you develop your own feel for the latest trends. Before your next governing body meeting try to access one of the sources above.

Activity What are the current key issues in the educational environment?

Over a couple of weeks, get hold of two or three newspapers or journals devoted to educational issues such as the *Times Educational Supplement*, the education supplements of the *Guardian* or the *Independent*, or journals targeted at governors. If you have access to the Internet you may wish to check some of the press releases from the website addresses listed in the 'Useful resources' section in *Using the materials*. (Your college may be able to help in giving you access to some or all of these resources.)

- 1 Make a note of three issues in the educational environment that are featured in the press or on the websites.
- 2 For each issue, make notes on the ways it is likely to affect your college. Ask yourself what the issue means for your college. Is this issue a challenge or risk for the college or is it something you can feel confident about?
- 3 Compare your ideas with those of other governors. What are the three most important issues for your college at the moment? Which are likely to be passing challenges and which are more long-term?
- 4 How will you monitor their medium- and long-term importance for the college?

Viewpoint

- 1 You may have identified a number of issues, for example concerns about the joint inspections, the focus on responding to diversity, the teachers' pay initiative, the challenge of delivering key skills and basic skills effectively, the requirement to develop human resource development plans, the use of the Standards Fund, the professional development of senior staff.
- 2 This activity may have helped you identify an issue that will have a significant impact on your college. To develop the governing body's responsiveness to this kind of issue, governors can ask a number of further questions such as:
 - what additional information do I need to be sure my college is ready to meet this issue?
 - what changes, if any, do we need to make?
 - what resources will this require?
- 3 It is important to make sure that the college doesn't get out of step with its environment. Keep monitoring developments – those that don't seem particularly significant for your college now may prove to be so later.
- 4 It is clearly too much for individual governors to keep track of all the developments affecting the college, but you might agree areas of special interest, or responsibility for one particular source of information.

What should governors do?

Review the press as often as possible so that you are alert to issues likely to affect the college in the current or approaching year. Having identified the issues, you should be prepared to raise them in the appropriate committees and to question the principal on them. You may wish to ask the principal to report on current issues in the environment on a regular basis, receiving reports as part of the regular meetings of the full governing body.

Section 3 Educational character and ethos

One of the five key areas of responsibility of governors identified in the articles of government is 'the determination of the educational character and mission of the institution and oversight of its activities'.

The principal's role is outlined as a responsibility 'for making proposals to the corporation about the educational character and mission of the institution, and for implementing the decisions of the corporation'.

Your role, then, is periodically to consider proposals on the mission and character of the college, and to check whether these are appropriate for the environment in which the college finds itself.

A new governor may well ask 'What is meant by educational character?' Educational character is perhaps not an easy concept to take hold of at first. It is how the college delivers its mission – the kind of college it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides, its approach to teaching and learning, the quality of its partnerships with other agencies.

Why think about educational character?

Educational character and ethos are fundamental to your college. Over the last few years there has been a refocusing of the role of colleges towards continuous improvement, wider participation, equality of access, development of a stronger local skills base, and partnership between providers. This has placed new demands upon senior staff and governors, but also new opportunities for innovation. Nevertheless many of the old financial pressures are still there. Many colleges are affected by the legacy of the past in terms of standards of retention and achievement below national benchmarks, a weak local economy, debt, a blame-based culture or autocratic leadership. Governors and senior staff will need to shape the educational character and ethos of the college to meet the new national and local political environment.

Educational character at Bluewater College

Over the last two years, Bluewater College has refocused its mission upon responsiveness to its local community and delivery of flexible, high quality programmes to a diverse community. Its mission statement reflects this educational character and ethos. It struggles to achieve some aspects of this mission. There are excellent standards of retention and achievement in some areas, but some are proving slow to improve despite the concerted efforts of senior managers and staff teams. Likewise, efforts to widen participation are producing only marginal improvements.

The college still suffers from low levels of investment in the fabric of the college over the last five years, though there is now a ten-year plan to improve accommodation and access. Partnerships with other local providers are developing, though some staff are anxious that they will 'give away' their expertise, only to lose their jobs if the local LSC offers their provision to another institution.

Senior staff appear more confident in the new environment than they did a year ago and the new principal is having a strong impact upon the culture of the college. Nevertheless it is difficult to encourage innovation. Staff perceive a continuing (although lessening) divide between senior managers and the rest of the college. Some staff are afraid to innovate because they remember the level of redundancies implemented when the new principal and senior team arrived. Governors are still not happy with their levels of interaction with staff and students.

The educational character and ethos of the college has begun to change significantly. Core values held by the senior team and the governing body are now about quality and access for both students and staff, but efficiency is still a guiding principle. An increasing number of students are living locally but many local residents still have to travel some distance to access programmes. The college will need to take account of the local LSC's Strategic Plan. The college really needs to invest in accommodation, equipment and staff – but in what direction?

The educational character and ethos of the college are increasingly in line with the changed educational environment. The college has responded to the political environment and is making strong commitments to meeting the demands of the new agendas. However the pace of change has not reduced and the environment locally has become more rather than less uncertain. It is more important than ever for governors to review the educational character of the college in relation to the political environment and the needs of the local community.

Checklist: What is the educational character of your college?

Who are the potential and actual students in your college? Has this changed? How does this relate to the college mission? Is the pattern consistent across all programme areas and course levels? Are any changes proposed for the future? If so, what is the rationale for this change? What impact will any changes have on the educational character of the college?

Is the college ensuring access to all elements of the local community? Is it responding to the needs of the local and national economy?

What kind of learning environment is there in the college? What kind of technical facilities are there? What are the social facilities for students?

What kind of teaching and learning approaches are used? Is most teaching done through lectures? How much self-study/resource-based learning do students undertake? Is information and communication technology (ICT) used widely in all areas of the curriculum? What do students say about the teaching and learning approaches?

What student support or pastoral care is offered? Are students satisfied with this provision?

Which other agencies does the college work with? What kind of partnerships does the college have?

Activity Describe the educational character of your college

To do this activity you will need to ask your clerk for a copy of your college's strategic plan and information about the college's student cohort. (You may already have student cohort information to hand if you completed the activity in *Module 1 Introduction*, Section 1 'Post-16 education and training' which asked you to draw together information about your college.)

Read through the checklist above and note down your responses to each question. Write two or three lines on each. Compare your ideas with those below.

Viewpoint

Data about your student cohort should include information on numbers of students:

- under 19
- over 19
- male/female
- studying full-time/part-time
- with learning difficulties
- with a disability such as partial sight or mobility problems
- in different ethnic groups
- employed/unemployed
- from particular postcodes.

You may also have information on students' prior qualifications and previous school.

The college's strategic plan should include information on patterns of need within the local community. The plan should indicate if there are proposals to increase or decrease certain categories of student.

You should be aware both of the physical condition of the college buildings – their state of repair and suitability – and of any plans the college has to deal with depreciation of the building stock. You should also be aware of the learning aids and resources available to students and staff, where deficiencies lie and what programmes are in place to address these deficiencies.

Teaching may be lecture-based or much more individualised. This may vary across subject areas. ICT may be limited to areas of the curriculum such as art and design and IT.

Your college may offer personal guidance and support (for example to those with housing, immigration or financial difficulties), counselling or high levels of pastoral care. Learning support may be offered in specialist centres or within the core curriculum. This may cover aspects such as study skills, dyslexia support, or equipment for those with partial sight or mobility problems.

The college may have limited partnerships such as an agreement with local schools to undertake school visits or to deliver some shortage subjects, or it may have much deeper partnerships with other colleges, employers, voluntary sector organisations, local authority departments, etc.

What part does the ethos of a college play?

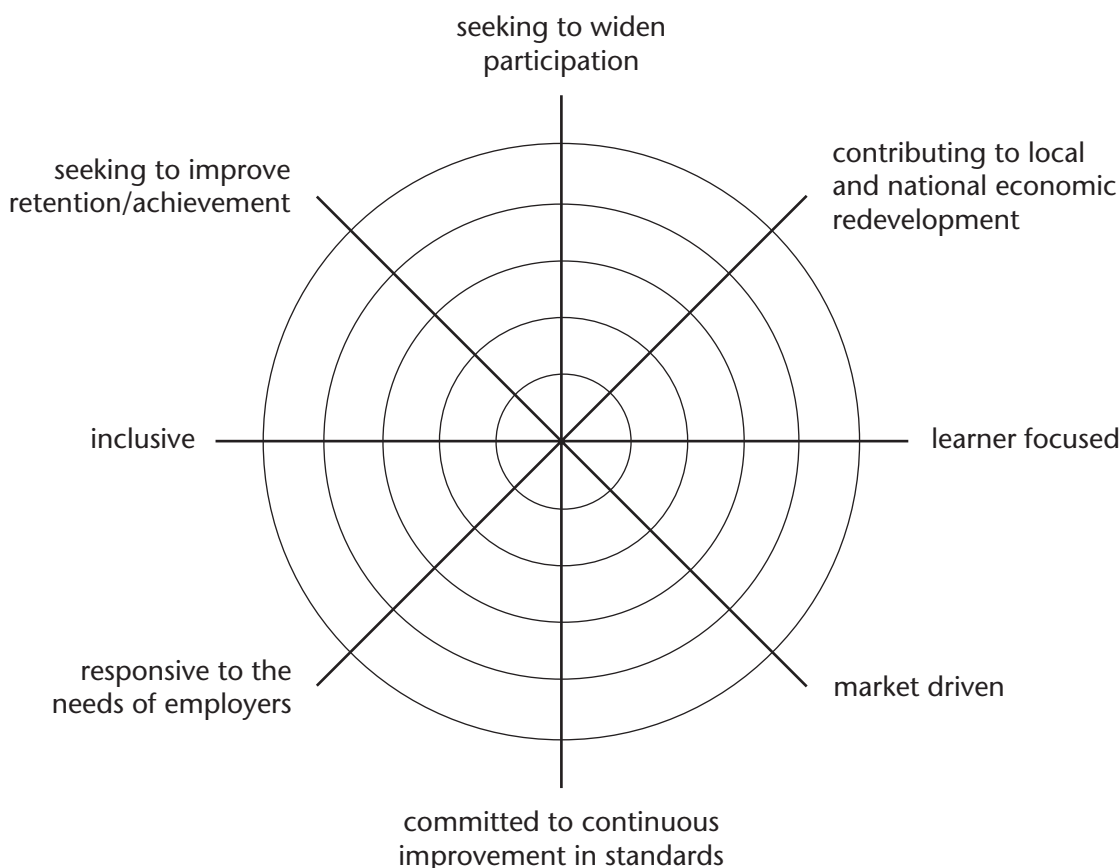
A critical aspect of the educational character of a college is its predominant ethos. In many ways the ethos of the college is about the core values that underpin the organisation. These include:

- equality of opportunity for students and staff
- approaches to cultural and religious diversity
- levels of empowerment of staff and students
- relationships with the local community
- approach to risk
- commitment to continuous quality improvement
- support for innovation and creativity
- leadership and management style
- commitment to partnership and collaborative approaches
- approach to human resource management.

Activity What are the key elements of your college ethos in relation to students?

- 1 Consider the current ethos of your college in relation to the students and community it serves.
- 2 Map this on the spokes of the wheel on the next page. Place a dot towards the outside circle if you consider that your college strongly shows this characteristic; place your dot towards the centre if you think this characteristic is less visible in your college ethos. Join up the pattern of dots when you have thought about all the characteristics.

- 3 Compare your pattern to that produced by your fellow governors or other groups within the college. Identify any differences.
- 4 Does the pattern meet the needs of the student cohort? Identify any areas of the college ethos that you believe need to change. List these in order of priority.



Viewpoint

Your pattern of joined-up dots is likely to show peaks and troughs. Each college will have a different pattern, depending on its location, local industry and levels of employment, etc. There are dangers if the college values are out of step with the environment. For example, there has been an increasing focus on achievement and standards, together with a pressure to widen participation. You will need to review your core values against the current policy themes locally and nationally and decide whether they need realigning so that the college is better able to respond to external changes.

It will also be important to establish whether the pattern of values held is consistent between governors, the principal, senior managers and the staff. If there are areas of mismatch between the governors' vision of the ethos of the college and the view of senior management, this will need to be explored.

The college ethos may need to change over time in response to competing demands. You will need to prioritise these demands to determine the direction of change. You might want to find out about the ethos of a college which achieves and sustains excellence.

Activity How does your college management style relate to the college ethos?

- 1 Consider the fit between your college ethos and the way in which its managers operate. Map the management style of your college along the scale of management values set out below. For example, if you think the style of senior management is strongly collaborative, put a mark at the far right end of the line. If you think the style is neither strongly collaborative nor strongly competitive, put a mark in the middle of the line, and so on. Do this for each set of values.
- 2 If you can, compare your pattern with those produced by other governors.

competitive	_____	collaborative
risk seeking	_____	risk averse
innovative	_____	stability focused
market driven	_____	policy driven
hierarchical	_____	empowering
autocratic	_____	democratic

Viewpoint

There is no 'right' answer; you need to identify the current management ethos and relate it to the policy environment. For example, if you have identified that the college is risk averse (i.e. managers do not like taking risks), then seeking rapidly to develop new provision to respond to a policy or funding initiative may throw up difficulties because this approach is out of step with the management ethos. Here, new provision may require more careful planning and staff development than in a college where management is already geared to rapid change.

The ethos in a college may become out of step with the environment. Many organisations are finding that the turbulence of the environment and the speed of change demand different management approaches.

Educational character and decision-making

The effect on the educational character of the college should be borne in mind whenever you make decisions. For example, when considering the financial forecast for the next year, you need to assess whether the current educational character can be sustained if a cut in course hours is proposed.

Activity Consider educational character when making key decisions

Read through the situations below and consider them as if they applied to your own college. Note down the implications for the educational character of your college.

- 1 The chair of governors has reported enthusiastically on a visit to one of the first colleges to have a curriculum area designated as a COVE. The principal and chair are keen to gain similar status for a department at the college.
- 2 The college has been approached by local schools to offer vocational programmes for 14–16 year olds. The proposed pilot programme would have 50 pupils for whom the National Curriculum is considered inappropriate.
- 3 One of the college's new outreach centres is under-performing by comparison to others. The senior manager responsible has produced a report suggesting the centre be closed.
- 4 The principal has proposed that managers and governors work collaboratively with a similar size and type of college. One of the colleges has recently received a poor inspection report whilst the other has a number of excellent curriculum and cross-college grades.
- 5 The college is concerned to deliver better work-based learning provision and has been approached by a large local training-provider with a view to merger with the college.

Viewpoint

- 1 The COVE initiative offers a number of opportunities and challenges, although governors will need to consider the potential destabilising effect upon the rest of the college of achieving COVE status in one area. There are some major HR issues that would need to be considered here, including redeployment, staff development and, perhaps, redundancy. Governors will also need to consider the financial implications of investing in a COVE and the impact upon the character of the organisation if investment is skewed, leaving other areas under-resourced. Other local college COVEs may offer opportunities for partnership working.
- 2 The disestablishment of the National Curriculum for some pupils so that they can take part in vocational education is an increasing phenomenon. Governors will need to examine how a cohort of much younger students might affect the educational character of the college. For example, health and safety implications in practical subjects may influence teaching and learning approaches and thus the character of the college. Additional facilities might be required for pastoral care.
- 3 The closure of any centre will have an impact on the community it serves, but also upon the wider reputation of the college. It may be perceived as a purely financial decision, a raising of hopes for non-traditional learners that are then dashed when it becomes inconvenient. On the other hand, a continuing financial drain on college resources will have an adverse impact on the rest of the college. Governors may want to ask managers to explore alternatives which allow the provision to be continued, for example through partnership.
- 4 Managers within a very successful college, who have been in post for a long time, may become complacent. Exposure to new management challenges may

re-invigorate the team. However the new partnership may take them away from their normal duties and undermine their current role. Governors will need to examine the management proposal, testing out the likelihood of achieving the anticipated benefits.

- 5 Any merger will have an impact on the educational character of an organisation. Continued and rich levels of communication with staff are vital if the merger is to work. A successful merger cannot be just about financial synergies and benefits; there needs to be a degree of cultural fit between the two organisations. Governors will need to test out with managers the likely impact upon the character of the college and the process of communication with staff in both organisations.

How can governors safeguard the educational character of the college?

Governors need to review any strategic proposals to assure themselves that any changes will not adversely affect the educational character of the college. This will help to ensure that there is no drift away from the agreed purpose identified in the mission and needs statements. They also need to assure themselves that the character of the college complies with the wider educational environment (see Section 4).

Section 4 The college strategic plan – key aspects

What kind of institution does the governing body want?

A key role for governors is to decide what kind of institution they want, and to ensure that it is delivered. This requires strategic thinking and a strategic plan. However, it is important to note that while you are responsible for ensuring that the planning process is effectively managed, detailed planning is primarily the responsibility of management. Your major contribution lies ahead of the detailed planning stage. It lies in determining the strategic objectives that the plan is designed to achieve.

Increasingly, these strategic objectives will be formed through a consideration of the complex wider environment in which the college operates. You will be expected to take into account the deliberations of the local LSC and its initiatives for ensuring coherence in provision across the region. Similarly, area inspections (see *Module 4 Quality and standards, Section 7 'Area inspections'*) will play a part in encouraging the development of collaborative arrangements with other providers. Finally, an application to achieve COVE status may well require adjustments to other areas of activity within the college. In other words, setting the strategic objectives cannot take place in a vacuum. The scope for manoeuvre that individual colleges may have had in the past has been reduced in the overall interests of improving the quality of experience for the learner.

The College Governor explains that governors have a particular responsibility for the **development** and **pursuit** of medium- to long-term objectives; it is the function of your college's strategic plan to **realise** these objectives.

The College Governor provides detailed information on what should be contained within the strategic plan. To fulfil your role as 'critical friend' in this process you need to have an overview of your college's activities and the context within which it operates rather than detailed knowledge of the minutiae of college life.

Activity The contents of the strategic plan

- 1 Look up 'Strategic planning' in *The College Governor*. This lists the elements that should be included in your college's plan. Identify which elements, if any, you have not seen in your plan.
- 2 Make a note of how you intend to get hold of this information.
- 3 Write a short commentary against each element in the plan to remind you what you will be looking for when you receive this information and how you will use it to contribute to the planning process. (The 'Strategic planning' section in *The College Governor* suggests some useful questions that governors should ask).

Viewpoint

If there are a number of elements which you have not seen, you may need to review the relationship you have as a governing body with the senior managers of your college (see *Module 1 Introduction*, Section 7 'The relationship between the governing body and the senior management team').

The *Governance healthcheck questionnaire*, published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and issued to colleges in March 2001, also provides the opportunity to generate useful data on the quality of communication that takes place between senior managers and the governing body.

Activity Evaluating your contribution to strategic thinking

The following passages are taken from recent college inspection reports. They are drawn from the 'Leadership and Management' section, which poses the question: how effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? As you read through the passages evaluate to what extent they are relevant to your own college. Self-assessment is about continuous improvement. Are there lessons here for you and your college that you might want to pursue? If so, note down one or two points for action covering:

- what I need to do
- who I need to talk to
- when I need to do it.

Quotes from inspection reports

Self-assessment is not yet rigorous, particularly in identifying weaknesses in teaching and learning.

Governors provide a clear strategic direction for the college. They review the college's mission annually and agree the strategic objectives for the coming year. They are well informed about the college and monitor academic performance effectively. They receive regular reports on progress against the strategic plan. The full board scrutinises achievements and asks for action to be taken as necessary.

There is not enough attention to the promotion of equality of opportunity within the curriculum. There is no analysis of student recruitment and achievement to identify equal opportunities issues.

The management board and governors provide clear strategic aims for the college. Team and programme managers understand these aims and use them as the basis for operational plans.

Governors' monitoring of the academic performance of the college has improved since the last inspection. Helped by effective clerking and a comprehensive training plan, governors are now aware of key issues relating to retention and achievement.

Governors challenge the management team to find solutions and recognise that these have not always been forthcoming.

Times of governors' meetings have been changed in an attempt to make it easier for student governors to attend.

The equal opportunities co-ordinator has successfully planned and managed staff and governor training to raise their awareness of issues of equality of opportunity. All governors have attended. Governors have a set agenda item at each meeting on monitoring the implementation of equal opportunities policy.

Governors used recent labour market information, a curriculum audit, an external quality assessment report and the college's self-assessment report when making decisions about the proposed amendments to the strategic objectives.

Governors have not ensured that sufficient action has been taken to tackle the weaknesses identified in the last inspection.

Governors monitor the college's financial performance closely, however they do not receive regular reports on the quality of teaching and learning.

The corporation has a clear picture of the strategic direction of the college.

Viewpoint

These examples serve to demonstrate:

- the holistic nature of the new inspection framework, particularly in terms of leadership and management
- the strategic importance now attached to the development of an equal opportunities culture in colleges

- the significance of developing a strategic overview of the core business, i.e. the curriculum
- the importance of monitoring performance against strategic targets, particularly with respect to quality
- the contribution that governor training can make in enhancing governor effectiveness.

These quotes highlight the inter-connectedness of all college activity which needs to be expressed through coherent strategic thinking and planning. Undertaking the governance healthcheck could help this process.

A note on planning

As we have seen, strategic plans are an essential requirement for colleges. They provide the LSC with important information on the effectiveness of the college and its long-term viability, and are an internal instrument for monitoring progress against targets.

However, you should bear in mind that planning has its weaknesses. In the complex and uncertain environment in which all organisations find themselves, plans can often be superseded by new developments. As circumstances change plans need to be adapted. Plans are only valid for the circumstances in which they were drawn up and the dynamics of provision within the local community may call for significant adjustments from time to time.

Section 5 Organisational capacity

Governors are required to assure themselves that the operation of their college is well managed. This includes a responsibility for the 'oversight of its activities' and for 'the effective and efficient use of resources'.

One key aspect of this responsibility is reviewing whether the organisation has the capacity to deliver the proposed activities. Governors should put questions at governing body and committee meetings to test out whether the college has the organisational capacity to meet the demands placed on it by the strategic plan or by proposals for special projects.

Governors' responsibility for organisational capacity

The college management is responsible for deciding how college resources should be applied to deliver the strategic plan, but governors are responsible for considering more long-term resource implications arising from major changes in the environment. These considerations should inform their scrutiny of the annual strategic plan and of new developments as they arise. They need to test out resource implications by quizzing the senior team about accommodation, equipment, staffing and professional development.

Activity Is the college ready to deliver the programmes proposed?

Look at your college's strategic plan. Identify one of the key aims identified in the plan. Has the college considered the implications of the proposed action in terms of:

- (a) the annual budget
- (b) equipment investment
- (c) accommodation strategy
- (d) staffing
- (e) staff development?

If it is not clear whether college managers have properly considered these issues, it is entirely appropriate for governors to ask questions to check. For example:

- How does the college plan to implement this development?
- What are the implications for our financial/ management information systems/ accommodation/ human resource strategy?

Viewpoint

Sometimes a college proposes a new development – for example, to develop bite-sized courses – without fully considering its viability. Governors need to make sure that managers have considered the strategic implications of the proposed action. Here the role of governors is not to seek to present different ways of tackling the issue but to provide a 'reality check'. You can do this by asking the kind of 'checking questions' above.

As with the assessment of organisational capacity required by the strategic plan, governors should be posing questions about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment.

Activity Is the college ready to meet the challenges from the changing educational environment?

Look back at Section 2 where you identified key issues in the educational environment. Choose one of these. What are the implications for the college in terms of:

- (a) financial forecasts
- (b) equipment investment
- (c) management information systems
- (d) accommodation strategy
- (e) staffing
- (f) staff development?

Viewpoint

Governors need to have a long time frame in mind when assessing the ability of the college to respond to changes in the educational environment. They should expect the college management to explain how they intend to develop the organisation over the next three to five years.

For example, if the college is seeking to widen participation, governors might wish to assure themselves that staff are to be supported in acquiring the skills to meet the needs of new student groups. If the college is seeking to work with employers, governors might want to establish how equipment and accommodation can be developed to meet demands for up to date and flexible provision. In both cases governors would expect to see resources allocated to these purposes in the college financial strategy.

What should governors do?

As each new proposal for college activities is brought to governors, governors should adopt a role of 'critical friend' – double-checking that the implications for medium- and long-term management of resources have been considered against proposed developments.

Section 6 Using meetings to monitor the college's strategic plan

As a member of the governing body you are responsible for monitoring and reviewing the long-term policies that have been established by the governing body to achieve the mission.

To do this you need to bear in mind the issues identified for governing bodies in Section 1. To recap, these are to:

- avoid becoming immersed in detail and losing sight of the governance role
- identify the purpose of the organisation
- put in place the policies to achieve that purpose.

Your role is to monitor the progress of strategic priorities and the extent to which they have been effectively accomplished. It is management who must develop the strategies to realise the mission. You do not have the time to become involved in this. Your concern should be 'Are we on target? And if not, what are the reasons and how can the problem be resolved?'

How to monitor compliance with the strategic plan

The main resource available to you for carrying out your monitoring responsibilities is the governing body's cycle of full and committee meetings. These provide the opportunities for you to scrutinise management's fulfilment of the strategic plan by requesting items to be placed on the agenda and asking pertinent questions.

The questions on the next page provide a model for the type of questions that you might ask at a governing body meeting.

Asking searching questions

- Q. Can we clarify that our student recruitment, retention and achievement this year has met the target we set?
- Q. Do we have a breakdown of how this data on student recruitment, retention and achievement is distributed across the curriculum areas?
- Q. How does this data relate to teaching and learning observation data for the various curriculum areas?
- Q. I would like to see a commentary attached to these figures which explains the trends which are emerging and the implications they have for meeting our targets.
- Q. How does our curriculum offer reflect the needs of the community we serve? Is there scope for improvement here? Does the curriculum offer remain in line with our mission? Are we being proactive enough in working with the local LSC and other providers to ensure that we can contribute fully in the emerging strategy for the region?
- Q. When will we see a development plan derived from the recent performance provider review?
- Q. What implications does the area inspection have for our strategic thinking? Are there collaborative possibilities that we should be pursuing?
- Q. Are we sure that we have enough information on student views and that we are taking steps to respond to those views?
- Q. Do we have any data on what employers want from us?
- Q. The staff survey reveals that some staff see our pursuit of the COVE initiative as divisive and this is corroding motivation and commitment. What can/should we be doing about this?
- Q. Some managers are perceived as being remote from day-to-day issues. How is this impacting on our mission? What action are we taking to address this?
- Q. What are the HR implications of seeking COVE status? Will staff need additional training? Will there be redundancies?
- Q. Are we being rigorous enough in pursuing an equal opportunities culture?
- Q. In the light of the focus on the centrality of the learner are we comfortable that our current membership profile is appropriate?

Activity Using questions as a means of monitoring at governing body and committee meetings

Read through the list of questions above and consider how they might apply to your college. Choose one of the questions which is relevant to your situation and send it to the chair or clerk of the committee for inclusion on the agenda of the next appropriate meeting.

Viewpoint

You may already be asking these kinds of questions. If so, are you satisfied with the responses you are getting? If not, what has prevented you from contributing in this way, and do you feel you have the resources to tackle the issues? The governance healthcheck might be helpful here.

The cycle of academic meetings

The academic year has a cycle of key events that need to be reflected in the agendas for governing body and committee meetings. This cycle provides you with an easily accessible checklist to help you monitor and review the long-term policies established by the governing body.

Activity Your college and the annual cycle

The figure below provides a typical example of the annual cycle of governing body meetings and the issues appropriate at different times of the year.

Figure 1 *The annual college cycle and governor responsibilities*

<i>Throughout the year</i>	<i>Autumn term</i>	<i>Spring term</i>	<i>Summer term</i>
Policy review/revisions	Achievements	Retention	Retention
College Charter	Recruitment	Review Mission	Budget
Receiving management reports	Student profile	College targets	Set targets
Keeping updated on new initiatives	Retention	Conduct self-assessment	Financial forecast
Consider inspection report	Targets met?	Management accounts	Strategic targets
Consider self-assessment report	Staff survey	Curriculum offer?	Admissions
Management accounts	Student satisfaction	Contribution to community	Sign off plan
Consider performance provider review report	Employer satisfaction		
Consider area inspection report	Strategic targets		
	College accounts		

Look at the figure above and compare the cycle of meetings and agenda items with those of your college. How many of the agenda items does your governing body consider:

- Throughout the year
- Autumn term
- Spring term
- Summer term

Viewpoint

The cycle and agenda items in the figure are not an exhaustive list – there will be additional issues with a legitimate demand on governor time at your college. But think carefully about any items mentioned in Figure 1 that are missing from your list. Do you know why your governing body has not considered them? If you don't know the reason, how will you find out?

For more information about the annual cycle of meetings and financial strategy, see *Module 5 Financial management*. For information about the clerk's role in planning and co-ordinating the annual cycle of governing body business, see *Module 7 The clerk to the corporation, Section 2 'Servicing meetings'*.

Activity The governing body's agenda

Consider the following passage:

'The main thing about the board agenda is that it really must be the board's agenda, not the staff's agenda for the board. The board owns it, it's the board's agenda. I think if I were honest about it, we'd have to admit that usually the agenda material comes more from the president than anybody else. So in fact the agenda is really an executive kind of agenda, but raised to the board level. That doesn't produce a governance agenda.'

John Carver

If you substitute 'principal' for 'president' in the quote, does this reflect your experience of governing body agendas? Do you think your governing body needs to take more control of its meetings agendas? If this is so, note down what you intend to do about it.

Viewpoint

If this quote echoes your own experience, maybe it is because the governing body has not felt confident in the past about compiling an appropriate agenda. Or maybe the governing body felt that the principal had more expertise in conducting business. To be an effective governing body you must be more proactive in determining agendas.

Obviously we cannot prescribe how your governing body should compile its agendas, but Figure 1 is a comprehensive account of how an effective governing body would cover strategic objectives in its work over the year. The key issue to appreciate is the way in which the cycle of student recruitment, retention and achievement drives the rest of the business of the college.

The setting and monitoring of targets, the consideration of the curriculum offer, financial forecasting and the signing off of the strategic plan all fit within a coherent schedule of requirements and responsibilities. Adherence to this cycle is a prerequisite of effective governance in a college.

Activity Your college and the committee structure

Consider the passages below taken from the work of John Carver who has published widely on governance. Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 How many committees does the governing body operate?
- 2 Outline the contribution that each committee makes to the work of the governing body.
- 3 Does your committee structure fit these assumptions?
- 4 Is there scope for a reconsideration of the role of your committees in the light of Carver's observations?

'Committees will assist the board by preparing policy alternatives and implications for governing body deliberation.'

'Committees are often impediments to good governance.'

'Committees are O.K. if they exist to help the board do a part of its job. But there should never be a board committee to help the staff do any part of the staff job. When you put that admittedly absolute rule into effect, a lot of committees just disappear. The board then is left with committees which only help the board get its own job done.'

'I am against board committees that blur the line between governance jobs and management's jobs.'

'I'm against board committees that fragment the board into little pieces that know a lot about one thing and little about anything else.'

John Carver

Viewpoint

The allocation of committees can be a controversial topic. The key consideration must be to evaluate the extent to which the committees you currently operate **enable** the governing body to be more effective. You need to be asking yourself the following questions.

- What are the committees for?
- Whose interests do they serve?
- Do they assist and inform you or do they provide specialist input for areas in which you and other governors have no expertise?
- To what extent are reports from committees subject to scrutiny in the way that management reports might be?

The clerk to the governing body can play a valuable role in supporting the work of committees, preparing agendas and co-ordinating their activities with that of the governing body to ensure maximum effectiveness. For more information about the support that governors can expect from the clerk see *Module 7 The clerk to the corporation*, Section 4 'Supporting committees and working groups'.

Module review

This module has looked at governors' responsibilities for formulating the strategy and educational character of the college. If you have worked through the whole module you should now be confident that you can:

- explain the purpose of your college strategy and its relation to the wider educational environment
- describe how your college's mission and ethos inform its strategy
- explain how the educational character of your college reflects its mission, ethos and strategy
- describe your responsibility for determining and monitoring the mission, ethos, educational character and strategy of your college
- explain the difference between the governors' responsibility for the strategy and that of the management team
- discuss how to use governing body meetings to fulfil your responsibilities for overseeing the mission and strategy of the college.

If you are not sure that you have achieved a particular goal, look back at the contents list in the Introduction to the module. You may find it useful to reread the relevant section.

Summary of key learning points

Governors are responsible for keeping the medium- to long-term strategy of the college under review, while management is responsible for implementing strategic (corporate) objectives.

A college's educational character, mission and ethos should meet the needs of the community it serves and inform the direction of all college activities.

Colleges exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change. Governors need to keep up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves 'How will this affect my college?'

A college's educational character – the kind of college it is, the kind of students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides – can change as a result of planning decisions. Governors have a key role in ensuring that decisions and developments fit the college's educational character.

Governors need to be active in setting strategic objectives for college management, rather than simply reacting to managers' advice. This may call for additional skills and training in thinking strategically.

Governors should be ready to pose searching questions to the governing body and managers about the organisation's readiness to meet changes in the environment, and changes proposed in the strategic plan.

The governing body needs to monitor managers' progress in achieving strategic priorities. The annual cycle of governing body meetings provides the means for doing this, provided governors are proactive in setting the agenda and asking searching questions.

Committees should help the governing body get this job done. Committees which fragment the governing body or simply exist to help staff get their job done do not help good governance.

Where next?

You have now completed work on *Module 2 Strategy and educational character*. If there are areas in which you need more guidance or information, they may be covered in other modules. Turn to 'Check your current knowledge and skills' in *Using the materials*. This self-assessment questionnaire will help you to decide which modules or sections of modules may help to fill these gaps. Tick the useful sections for further study.

If you cannot find the information you need within these materials, turn to the 'Action planner' in *Using the Materials*. Note down what further information, support or guidance you would like. The *Action planner* gives advice on who may be able to help, and how.

Putting it into action

We hope that working through this module has raised useful questions, increased your awareness of issues and given you ideas for practical action that you would like to follow up. The 'Action planner' in *Using the Materials* contains a section where you can note down any questions or action points that you want to follow up within your own college.