

Hereward College External Governance Review

Executive Summary, July 2024

Context for the Review

Hereward College is a general further education college based in Coventry. At the time of this review, the college had 313 learners aged 16 to 25 studying a curriculum which is based on preparation for adulthood and progression to employment. The college's curriculum includes three pathways with an increasing academic or vocational/technical level, an autism-specific offer and a sensory programme designed to build communication and independence skills. The college was also working with the West Midlands Combined Authority, providing a range of online courses to 136 adult learners who work in or aspire to work in the health and social care sector.

The college was graded Good by Ofsted in April 2023. Its High Needs (all its full-time provision) and Behaviour were judged to be Outstanding, inspectors gave a judgment of Strong for meeting local skills needs, and said that arrangements for governance were effective. The college's ESFA financial health grade is currently Outstanding (Management Accounts, May 2024) and has been so since 2019.

At the time of the governance review there were a number of new governors including the Chair. Within the leadership team the Vice Principal Finance and Resources was still within her first year with the college. The Principal was dedicating two days a week to the development of a strategic partnership between the college's trading subsidiary, HTS Ltd, and Whitbread PLC. The Vice Principal Quality & Curriculum had taken on temporary additional responsibilities as Deputy Principal.

The board appointed Shirley Collier to carry out the governance review, in August 2023. The board review framework includes Structures, Processes, People and Culture. It relies on the collation of evidence around an overarching question in each area to ascertain an understanding of board dynamics. The board was also interested to understand the effectiveness of its current committee structure, how to future-proof governance, the balance between strategic and operational; and governors' engagement.

Board Structures

The board's model of governance is broadly fit for purpose both currently and in the future. Its Q&S and Audit Committees are effective at monitoring, scrutinising papers and challenging senior staff, and committee business is shared appropriately with the board. Financial monitoring is carried out through presentation of monthly management accounts at each board meeting, with a clear dashboard and narrative. The approach the board has taken to establishing appropriate governance for HTS Ltd is also a strength. In the absence of a Finance and General Purposes Committee, the board should strengthen some aspects of strategy-setting, monitoring of progress and oversight of risk management. Oversight of HTS Ltd will sit with its own board, and the interface with the Hereward College board will need to be embedded with care.

Board Processes

Current board processes are a strong platform on which to build. The Director of Governance has significant experience and relevant knowledge. Key documents are clear and well-developed. Scrutiny of the SAR and the challenge of grades is robust. The learning walk is an invaluable tool to develop governors' insight into the student experience. Some processes need further development in order to equip members to engage with each other to deliver their objectives effectively. Processes are compliant with regulations with the exception of the Remuneration Committee. Papers provided by SLT are generally transparent, but governors need to develop their independent sources for triangulation.

People and Attributes

The board is currently very small and this is stretching governor resources to their limit. In terms of composition, the board has many of the skills and attributes required to fulfil its functions, including cognitive diversity and oversight skills. The current recruitment campaign will hopefully allow the board to expand, and broaden its skills. The addition of someone with commercial acumen will strengthen the board in the short term; to achieve the full potential of HTS Ltd, an informal advisory group may be needed, with a view to strengthening the board further as the initiative develops.

Board Culture and Governors' Interactions

There is evidence that both governors and SLT perceive board culture positively and consistently. Levels of trust are high. Many of the strategies which lead to strong team culture are in place but some, for example, the link governor scheme, are under-developed. Increasing the number of governors will relieve some of the current pressure on a small number of individuals. Board meetings, and hence the board's performance, would be strengthened by more strategic challenge and less discussion of operational detail. Governors identified one aspect of board culture as "decisive" – this could be applied to time management which would benefit everyone.

Conclusion: Overall Outcomes, Impact and Effectiveness

The evidence from the review shows that the board of Hereward College is proficient and impacts on college strategy, effectiveness, and outcomes. Governance provides senior management with one of its lines of defence; the current approach should give assurance to stakeholders that the college is managing its assets prudently and putting the student experience at the heart of its deliberations.

Shirley presented the main findings of her report to the board in July 2024. The board will consider the full report and decide on an action plan, at the start of the new academic year 2024/25.