

Governance Conference 2021: Evolving governance fit for our futures

18 November 2021

Session abstracts

Deep Dive Session 1a

Inclusive futures: Could targets for board diversity help?

Chair: David Bass, Advance HE

Speakers: Arun Verma, Head of the Race Equality Charter, Advance HE; Norma Jarboe, External Advisor to the Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice, Oxford Brookes University; and Change the Race Ratio

Join us for this session where we will pose the question 'should HE set targets for board diversity?'. Our expert panel will consider the issue from their various perspectives. With the sector still to make progress in board diversity in all its forms (see our report Diversity of Governors in HE, 2020) , we want to explore the role targets could play and what we can learn from other sectors where actions are in place or are in development, as illustrated by this consultation by the Financial Conduct Authority. Earlier in November, Advance HE will launch the first dedicated [Board Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) for HE as a benefit for its members. The toolkit has been developed by University of Gloucestershire, funded through our Collaborative Development Fund and in collaboration with Perrett Laver.

Deep Dive Session 1b

Governing for sustainable futures: ESG – what is it and why should it matter to HE?

Speakers: Phil McNaull, Strategic Finance Consultant Coach and former FD at the University of Edinburgh; Baroness Minouche Shafik, Director of London School of Economics and Political Science; and Joanne Henstock, Executive Director, Accounting for Sustainability (A4S)

Achieving systemic change requires sustainability to be more than a series of strategic and/or operational activities; it requires a broader lens that encompasses all of the institution activities, but few universities adopt a whole-of-institution approach to sustainability.

Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) has been described as an organisation's approach to their collective conscientiousness for social and environmental factors. First implemented in the finance and investment sectors it aims to show that an organisation is able to adapt to risk and protect the longevity of the environment and society in which it operates.

So is ESG just another buzz word for Universities to grapple with or ignore at their peril – a concept which does not translate from the financial services sector to knowledge and education creation sectors?

Can HE really focus on “climate” at the expense of other environmental, social and economic sustainability issues?

Or is ESG a concept which offers us some principles linked to our ethics and values which help us navigate the challenges of the future.

The panel will debate some key questions about ESG, why is it important for the education sector, the strategic implications for institutional leaders (board and executive) and what is important for Board oversight and student voice.

Deep Dive Session 1c

Sponsored session with event sponsor, Diligent: The future of modern HE governance: Thriving in the Digital Age

Chair: Dottie Schindlinger, VP Thought Leadership, Diligent Institute

Speakers: Dr Filipe Morais, Lecturer in Governance and Reputation, Henley Business School

The future of modern governance centers around having diverse perspectives and skill sets represented amongst leadership, having transparency and open communication between leaders and stakeholders, and using the right set of tools to gain clarity on strategy, risks and opportunities. Meanwhile, all of these characteristics became "must haves" during the pandemic, when institutions are pressured to maintain academic rigor, have a "digital-first" approach, and fulfill existing strategic goals despite the extraordinary circumstances. If it sounds like a tall order, it is. Now, more than ever, institutions that embrace modern governance practices will have an edge.

Join us for a candid conversation with Dottie Schindlinger, Executive Director of the Diligent Institute and author of *Governance in the Digital Age: A Guide for the Modern Corporate Board Member*, and Dr. Felipe Morais, Lecturer in Governance & Reputation for Henley Business School and author of a recent report entitled, "The independent director in society: our crisis of governance and what to do about it."

Specifically, this session will explore:

- Transforming your board to fit the times
- Why institutions are embracing digital-first strategies
- How "modern HE governance" must adapt in coming years, and what to do about it

Deep Dive Session 2b

What is the state of HE governance and how should this shape our future?

Chair: Lucinda Parr, Registrar and University Secretary, University of Bristol

Speakers: Victoria Holbrook, Assistant Director (Governance), Advance HE; Alison Wheaton, Governance Consultant and Advance HE Associate

In this session we will take stock of trends and insights into the effectiveness of governance across the HE sector, drawing on two major bodies of work, and asking what do these tell us about the state of HE governance and what Boards should be addressing if they are to be truly effective? Alison Wheaton will outline the findings of her doctoral research which examined two key questions: how are English university governing body roles characterised at sector level and how do English university governing body members perceive their roles and why? Ahead of publication later in the year, Victoria Holbrook will preview the findings from recent analysis by Advance HE of the data and recommendations made as part of their governance effectiveness review consultancy work, looking at the trends that persist and those that have emerged as the sector and its operating landscape have evolved over recent years. Lucinda Parr, University Secretary at the University of Bristol, will chair the session and also reflect on the key role of the governance professional in affecting change.

Further reading for this session: Alison Wheaton – Professionalising university governance: An investigation of influences on and dimensions of English university governing body roles

There is little academic literature nor empirical data regarding English university governing bodies. That which exists is either out of date, primarily conceptual in nature, or focusses on perceived institutional governance failures. Scholarly work on board effectiveness identifies

the need to develop a better understanding of governing body roles. As such, Alison Wheaton's doctoral research addresses two questions: how are English university governing body roles characterised at sector level and how do English university governing body members perceive their roles and why? The analytical framework incorporates governing body attributes, including governing body size, member types, member characteristics and committee structures. Her research explored, from governors' perspectives, influences on and perceptions of their roles. She deployed a range of governance theories from outside of higher education including managerial hegemony, agency, stewardship, and others, as explanatory tools.

Alison conducted the research over the past four years at system and institution level. At system level, she aggregated governing body attribute data across 120 English universities, resulting in a new dataset. She also thematically reviewed relevant documentary evidence and captured insights from interviews with thirteen expert informants, including sector regulators, funders, advisors and practitioners. At institution level, Alison conducted five university case studies which included a Russell Group university, two other Pre-1992s and two Post-1992s. She interviewed over sixty governors, including all of the case study Chairs, Vice-Chancellors, Secretaries/Clerks, many committee chairs and a cross-section of other lay, staff and student members.

English university governing body composition has become more homogeneous both in size and member types but member characteristics have become more varied. Institutions are recruiting lay members, in particular, for their skills and experience. The majority of governors across at least four cases identified nine governing body roles, aligned to strategy, oversight and support clusters. An emerging role with regard to institutional culture was also identified. Governors also identified six key internal, external and individual influences. Three cross-cutting themes relate to influences; the importance of governing body composition, the emergence of 'new' stakeholders and the significance of external and internal context. Two pertain to roles. Governors largely agreed regarding their strategy and oversight roles. Views differed amongst governors, and compared to sector expectations, regarding governors' support roles.

Alison developed a conceptual framework of dimensions of governing body roles, including the degree of integration in the key role areas, the nature of involvement, and the level of legitimacy. The research also prompts reassessment of internal and external member skills requirements, ways to improve academic governance and performance monitoring, how to best codify governing body support roles, consequences of new regulation including capital funding mechanisms and what happens in a crisis.