Project Success Story

# InstitutionNorthumbria University

# Project titleNorthumbria University, Governance Effectiveness Review (GER) 2020 to 2023

# Background/Context

Advance HE was appointed to carry out Northumbria’s GER following a tender process, starting in 2020. The sector understanding of Advance HE and the expertise of their nominated review team were key factors in the decision to appoint.

Initiated in 2020 by the new Board Chair, Dr Roberta Blackman Woods collaboration with the Vice-Chancellor and Secretary to the Board, and with the support of the wider Board the aims were:

* to establish for the new Chair a baseline of information about the effectiveness of governance arrangements already in place and areas where improvements could take place
* to acknowledge the impact of the Covid Pandemic on governance effectiveness
* to further develop the current governance arrangements which were deemed to be effective in practice, but which could be further strengthened and streamlined.

The review was seen as an important aspect of the Board adhering to the wider goal of continuous improvement across the institution.

# The approach

The review process itself started with the production of a review document that set out clearly the framework for the review, the overall approach to be taken including the methods that would be used to gather information, and timescales for each stage of the review. This document was extremely helpful in outlining the scope of the review and developing a common understanding for the Board and others of what the review would encompass.

This included a documentation review, a survey of Governors, interviews with Governors and University Executive members, and observation of a full cycle of Committee and Board meetings (all elements online because of Covid restrictions).

The process was overseen on behalf of the Board by a Steering Group (Chair, Deputy Chair, Senior Independent Governor, Vice-Chancellor, and Secretary to the Board). This facilitated a ‘no surprise’ and transparent culture for the review and enabled the university to keep the Board appraised of progress with authority.

Emerging findings were presented to Board in late February 2021, with the final report presented in April 2021.

# Arriving at the final report

The Steering Group discussed and negotiated the emerging findings with the review team before presentation to Board in February 2021.

Full Board discussion of the emerging findings took place at the February meeting and Advance HE were challenged about their findings regarding the Boards role in strategic matters and Board functions

The Steering Group then worked with the review team to finalise recommendations and suggestions, which remain independent from Advance HE, and which the Board subsequently decided to adopt in full.

The Report noted:

“…effective governance at Northumbria University, with evidence of high standards, and opportunities where Northumbria is well positioned to take advantage of areas for further development to be considered by the Board.”

“…a solid foundation of structure, policies and practices and capability to enable the Board effectiveness, with a particularly strong focus on regulatory compliance. An environment of constructive support and challenge exists between the Board and the Executive*,* and the Board overall has a positive impact on the University’s performance and reputation.”

# Approach to implementation

The Report set out 27 recommendations and suggestions “which together offer Northumbria opportunities for enhancing performance with the ambition to move from good to excellent.”

The Board established a Task and Finish Group to oversee the action planning and implementation of the recommendations. The group comprised the Chair and VC, the lead Governor and lead University Executive member for each workstream (see below) with support from the Secretary and Governance Services team.

The recommendations and suggestions were grouped into four work streams (aligned with the structure of the report), each led by a Governor with the relevant member of University Executive, also with support from Governance Services. The Workstreams were:

1. Academic Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

2. Board and Committee Membership and Organisation

3. Strategy, Performance and Risk

4. Diversity, Recruitment, Induction and Training

Each workstream considered the recommendations that had been allocated to it and formulated action plans with timescales for delivery. These were then challenged and refined by the Task and Finish Group, which also ensured that any links between the workstreams were identified and addressed. Progress was reported to every meeting of the Board from June 2021 until April 2022, when the Board confirmed the completion of the implementation plans and the Task and Finish Group was stood down.

# Impact

A number of the recommendations and suggestions focused on continuous improvement and plans that were already in place, but the review helped drive elements of significant change including:

* **Academic/Corporate Governance** – Board of Governors already received annual reports on Degree Outcomes, OfS Compliance and Quality and Standards, but following the recommended joint workshop between Board of Governors and Academic Board, mutual understanding of the roles of both bodies was significantly enhanced enabling much more effective reporting and challenge of sources of assurance.
* **Strategy development** – the formative strategic discussion programme introduced following the review has helped broaden the Board’s appreciation of the University’s and the sector’s strategic landscape beyond the discussions at Strategic Performance Committee. It helped lay the foundations for the Board’s leadership and guidance of the development of the new University Strategy 2024 – 2030 which is currently in progress.
* **New strategic risk approach** – following the recommendations of the review, Board approved a new Strategic Risk Policy in March 2022 and agreed the University’s risk appetite statement as well as taking more in-depth looks at a number of specific risk areas and increasing the frequency in which Board considers the Strategic Risk Register. This strengthens the universities ability to prepare for and mitigate the impact of the changes in the internal and external environment.
* **Environmental Sustainability** is now a specific responsibility of Strategic Performance Committee, which has considered not only a new Sustainability Strategy but also the impacts of the University’s activities relating to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.
* **Board diversity** – the review acknowledged the progress that had been made in achieving gender balance for the Board but noted that continuing emphasis was still required to address ethnicity and disability. The most recent governor recruitment exercise was successful in appointing two excellent BAME governors, from which we anticipate richer and more insightful discussions at the Board .
* **The Board has overhauled its approach to governor recruitment** – staff, student and independent governors, improving supporting documentation, opportunities to meet the Secretary and Chair beforehand and enhanced induction, mentoring and development programmes for all governors. This has enabled those governors to engage in Board business more quickly and better understand their role and how they can add value.

The overall outcomes of **the review also informed a major update of the University’s key governance documents** (Instrument and Articles of Government, Statement of Primary Responsibilities and Governance Regulations) for the first time in ten years.

# Conclusion and next steps

Overall, the experience was extremely positive and it certainly helped to improve governance arrangements at Northumbria from an already strong base. Northumbria University would support regular effectiveness reviews as a way of keeping governance arrangements up to date and the best they can be.

They are now planning some ‘deep dives’ into Board diversity and academic assurance for 2023/24 and look forward to the next governance effectiveness review in 2025/26.

***The review was undertaken by Aaron Porter, Advance HE Associate Director Governance, and Kim Ansell, Advance HE Senior Consultant, Governance and Leadership.***