

“AdvanceHE

# + Response to CUC Code of Higher Education Governance Review Call for Evidence

Advance HE

December 2025



# Contents

|                                                                   |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                                               | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Foundational questions on format and structure of the Code</b> | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Thematic areas for consideration</b>                           | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>In conclusion</b>                                              | <b>10</b> |

---

Advance HE would like to give special thanks and acknowledgement to Alison Allden for her work on compiling and authoring the response.



# Introduction

Advance HE welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *CUC Code of Higher Education Governance Call for Evidence* and recognises the inclusive and considered approach being taken.

Advance HE is a member of the CUC Code of Higher Education Review steering group. As part of this role, we have formally submitted '[The Big Conversation: Shaping the Future of Higher Education Governance](#)' summative report and '[Thematic analysis of governance benchmark survey qualitative data](#)' to the call for evidence.

Advance HE has deep experience in supporting and enhancing effective governance in higher education.

- + We have an unparalleled track record of adapting to sector needs to support the development of governors over the last 20 years. This includes:
- + Conducting over 75 governance effectiveness reviews since 2018.
- + Supporting around 700 governors, senior executives and governance professionals per year as part of our annual Governance Development Programme training and events.
- + Running the HE sector's only Governance Conference with around 100 delegates annually bringing together governors, governance professionals, senior leaders and sector bodies to focus on contemporary challenges facing governing bodies.

Leading on key challenges for higher education sector governance, including:

- + [The Big Conversation: Shaping the Future of HE Governance](#) ran in partnership with multiple sector bodies and mission groups. [Shaping the future of higher education governance | Advance HE](#).
- + Measuring What Matters: With sector partners, we look at current practice, challenges and recommendations for university accountability and performance monitoring '[Measuring What Matters' – why and why now? | Advance HE](#).
- + Co-leading a project with Universities UK, GuildHE and the Committee of University Chairs on [academic assurance](#) to support governing bodies to effectively receive evidence-based assurance on “student outcomes”.
- + Supported governing bodies and institutions in responding to the [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Act](#).
- + Led work on improving board diversity, including launching the [Board Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit](#), [Supporting Inclusive Boards Project](#) and publishing the bi-annual [Diversity of Governors in Higher Education](#) report.

Advance HE is well-placed to offer an informed, evidence-based response to the consultation, rooted in sector partnerships and a commitment to continued collaboration.

We foster and encourage the importance of collective effort across sector bodies that share responsibility for promoting responsive, reliable and progressive higher education governance.

This response will focus on what Advance HE considers most helpful by way of support for the diverse higher education organisations (geographical and organisational) that use our services.

We specifically address the consultation question about “development of tools to support boards in assessing and improving their effectiveness,” an area closely aligned with Advance HE’s programmes and services for the continuous improvement of sector governance.

Our response draws on the findings of *The Big Conversation: Shaping the Future of HE Governance* report, as well as our broad and deep knowledge and insights from over 75 governance effectiveness reviews and from our governance training and development programmes.

Our response is inclusive, in that we have engaged our most expert Governance Associates (independent colleagues delivering our governance products and services across the sector), the Advance HE Advisory Group of expert members, the Governance Strategic Advisory Group and contributors to our development events to inform this submission.

## Foundational questions on format and structure of the Code

- 1 There is widespread support for the Code of Higher Education Governance (Code) to remain principles-based, enabling institutions to apply it flexibly/appropriately across a diverse sector with varying missions, legal structures and regulatory requirements. A **principles-based Code** is best suited to a rapidly evolving landscape and to a diverse sector with high levels of autonomy.

However, core expectations—such as fostering positive culture and behaviours—should be explicitly articulated as universal requirements.

- 2 The ability to **test and evidence governance effectiveness** is essential. Expectations should include robust, regular internal appraisal of trustees, ongoing self-assessment of committees and the governing body, and externally facilitated effectiveness reviews at least every three years. **These reviews should assess adherence to the Code, highlight strengths, and identify areas for improvement.** A curated, collaborative sector-wide knowledge bank of good practice would be an invaluable resource to support this work, and Advance HE could contribute to it. In addition, **the Code should provide clarity over what it expects a governance effectiveness review to contain**, ensuring individuals or organisations who undertake them are sufficiently experienced and that findings are effectively triangulated to form developmental recommendations, allowing for innovation and evolution to meet evolving sector and institutional needs, going beyond compliance evaluations.
- 3 High-quality **governor induction, training and development** are critical to effective governance, alongside clarity about their role in relation to strategic oversight and regulatory responsibilities. Governors must develop a thorough understanding of the academic, financial, social and cultural context of their institution. **Institutions should be able to evidence a structured, monitored programme of induction and ongoing development for all governors—including student and staff members—underpinned by an up-to-date skills matrix.** This skills matrix should have an eye on the institution's future strategic ambitions and link directly to the institution's strategic aims, including succession planning.

Advance HE data shows that participation in the training offered by the Governance Development Programme decreased in 2024/25, as sector finances are under increasing pressure; 27% of unique places across the year were for Student Governors (excluding the Governance Conference). While we note that there is higher turnover among student governors due to shorter terms, this demonstrates an institutional commitment to supporting and developing them. Still, it is not proportional to that of wider governing bodies. The data suggests that there is a need to ensure that staff governors, independent governors, and governance professionals engage in a similar level of training and development on an annual basis. This could be articulated as part of internal mapping to the Code.

**Training should be accessible and flexible**, including regular opportunities to engage, learn and understand through different channels, shared learning, peer support and mentoring, consistent with Advance HE's development provision.

- 4 The Code should **support institutions in understanding the legal and regulatory requirements relevant to their specific context.** Variations in legal status, national jurisdiction, levels of provision (from Degree Apprenticeships to research degrees) and

institutional profile all have implications for governance. They should be clearly recognised within the Code. While we understand and appreciate that this is a governance code for higher education institutions, increasingly governing bodies will have oversight of wider provision, including FE and degree apprenticeships, where the code should allow flexibility to engage with other regulatory requirements.

- 5 Institutions frequently request examples of good practice during effectiveness reviews. **The Code should therefore be supported by commissioned case studies and guidance materials**, maintained and updated to assist providers in interpreting and applying the principles. Advance HE could contribute to this.

## Thematic areas for consideration

- 6 Advance HE has undertaken work to improve sector understanding of **academic assurance mechanisms**. Our work clarifies the relationship between the academic enterprise (including the Academic Committee/Board) and the governing body.

**Many governing bodies still lack confidence in academic assurance matters**, and expectations within the Code should encourage them to develop the required knowledge and understanding to have effective oversight of educational quality, student experience and research outcomes. Advance HE's work on [academic assurance](#) with CUC, UUK and GuildHE in 2022/23 produced a reflective questions guide highlighting the importance of **six key areas that governing bodies should adopt when seeking academic assurance**. This could be added as an expectation within the Code and further utilised by governing bodies as part of their role in developing academic assurance:

- a Board recruitment
- b Induction and training
- c Academic Board/Board of Governors relationship
- d Board processes
- e Data and information
- f External assurance

**Academic assurance is dependent on the provision of sufficient knowledge and understanding across the governing body.** Only then will there be real independent governor engagement in assuring the quality of the education offered, the student experience and the ambition and outcomes of research. The links between this role and the regulator's requirements should be explicit.

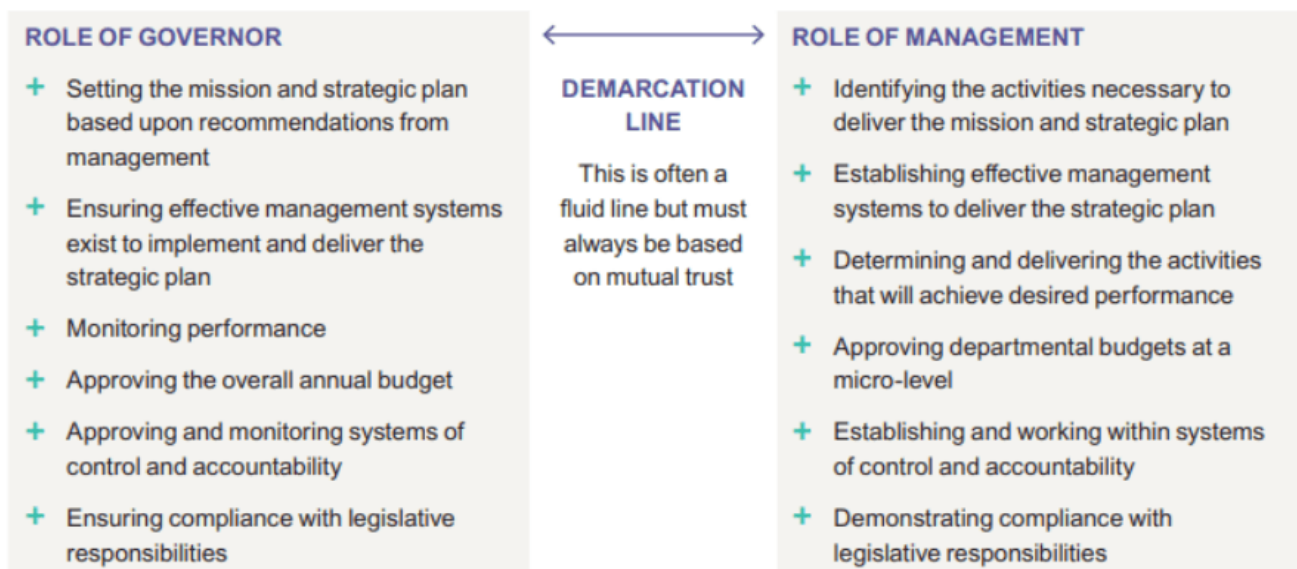
While Advance HE has focused on this issue and provided support to institutions, there is more work to be done in this arena. The expectations embedded in the Code should drive this key aspect of governance forward and provide clarity about the responsibilities of academic governance and the accountabilities of the governing body.

- 7 **Effective financial oversight requires transparent data, comprehensive reporting and a mature approach to risk management** across both the institution and governing body. Boards should be able to demonstrate the breadth of competence and insight required to maintain financial sustainability, accountability and challenge. Advance HE's work on integrated thinking and reporting supports this. [Integrated Thinking – Let's Talk Value | Advance HE](#)

**Institutions should clearly document financial governance arrangements** including the scheme of delegation, responsibilities within the committee structure and reference

to internal and external audit processes. Institutions could benefit from further support about what this looks like, with strong examples provided and clarity over the risk profile when this has not been the case.

- 8 Governing bodies play a crucial role in **strategic planning, performance monitoring and responding to change**. Effective governance requires access to reliable data, emerging technologies, strong reporting systems and active engagement with stakeholders. The governing body's ownership and understanding of institutional strategy should be a core indicator of effectiveness.
- 9 Effective governance depends on **trusted relationships**—especially between the Chair, institutional leader and Secretary/governance professional. Boards should be able to **evidence an inclusive culture, clarity of roles and strong, effective working relationships**. Tools such as the **Advance HE Governance and Management Boundary** diagram should be taken into account alongside existing work on supporting the sector with [navigating the executive-governance boundary](#).



- 10 **Diversity** across the entire governing body membership is **essential for robust decision-making**. Institutions should not see diversity as a binary issue in recruiting, but should embed it as a multidimensional requirement alongside skills, experience and other characteristics. Advance HE's bi-annual work on [Diversity of HE boards](#) analysis from sector data reporting has shown **boards are becoming more diverse** with an increase in women, ethnic minorities and disabled governors. However, **it is not known whether this is driven by student, staff or independent governors**. It is vital that governing bodies understand who the diverse voices in the room are related to protected characteristics and not limited to one type of governor. Governing bodies are often less diverse than the communities of students and staff. Diversity could be demonstrated through **succession planning, open recruitment and development activity**. The [Advance HE Higher Education Board Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) should be adopted as a key sector resource, with the opportunity to update further.

There are further opportunities to **strengthen the existing CUC and Advance HE Board Vacancies Portal**, working with stakeholders across the HE sector and other sectors to attract and recruit diverse talent sustainably while supporting and developing individuals who may be interested in becoming a HE governor, by strengthening their

skills and experience. Advance HE continues to provide publications and development opportunities to support institutions in improving board diversity. [Success on the board: unlocking the power of underrepresented voices in research | Advance HE](#)

- 11 **Internal stakeholders**, particularly staff and students, play an essential role in achieving effective governance. **Institutions should clearly evidence how stakeholder voices inform governing body decisions**, and that does not necessarily mean increasing the size of the Board. [Strong internal relationships with staff and students will ensure the governing body's contribution is at the centre of the university community.](#)

The benefit of staff and students, as members of the governing body, is often poorly appreciated, and their contributions are often undervalued or misunderstood. While staff and students may not always be experts in matters of legal or financial risk, they bring expertise and lived experience that can bring different perspectives to decision-making and strategic oversight. Advance HE supports and improves this aspect of governance through review feedback, published guidance and development programmes, such as [GDP: Student Governor | Advance HE](#)

- 12 External stakeholders are equally important. Effective governance relies on institutions being fully appraised of and engaged in local communities and connected regionally, nationally and internationally – depending on the institution's strategy. Many effectiveness reviews suggest that external understanding about stakeholders is underdeveloped, highlighting the need for stronger expectations about governing bodies' understanding of the needs, interests and expectations of external stakeholders.

It is only when a governing body has this information and insight that it can make fully informed decisions about strategic risk, opportunity and be the guardian of the institution's strategy and mission.

- 13 **Scenario planning and horizon scanning** are vital for identifying risks and opportunities. **Governing bodies should examine the impact of emerging trends** such as AI and technology, monitor developments in other sectors and countries, and engage with intelligence from organisations such as CUC, Advance HE, WonkHE, AHUA, HEPI, UUK, GuildHE and Independent Higher Education. This will strengthen governance foresight and enable agility. The Code should promote giving due time to strategic matters separately for a formal board meeting on at least an annual basis. Board papers should support and articulate how they align with the institutional strategy.
- 14 The **payment of governors** varies across the sector. There needs to be a **sensible evaluation and dialogue about the advantages and disadvantages**, including the demands and expectations of roles and responsibilities. If governors are being paid, the Code should be clear about how the institution demonstrates that governors do not veer into the roles of executive or management, and that there is a clear demarcation line. CUC should look to Scottish higher education governance, NHS trusts and others to understand the impact of paying governors.
- 15 Consideration should be given to **transparency of governance effectiveness reviews**, including whether findings should be published or shared with specific bodies such as regulators. We note that **more institutions have been self-publishing reviews** on their own websites, which Advance HE sees as good practice for transparency and accountability. **There is a further opportunity to share and publish action plans annually to demonstrate how recommendations from reviews have been implemented.**

## In conclusion

The Code must be **future-focused** within the sector and the broader social and political environment. Developments such as the relevant government White Papers, global pressures, political shifts and public perceptions will all shape the governance landscape.

The breadth of perspectives gathered through this consultation will strengthen the Code and is welcomed. The Code should clearly set out its primary audience of CUC member universities while acknowledging that it may also offer value to a range of providers across post-18 education and across all the UK jurisdictions.

The Code should **continue to look beyond the HE sector to identify good practice** which can be adopted from other sectors and encourage innovation in transforming higher education governance to meet institutional and wider societal needs. For example, we note the newly published revised Charity Governance Code (2025) contains suggested evidence and assurance; the CUC Code of HE Governance may also benefit from such an approach.

Advance HE emphasises **the power of collaboration across sector bodies** to deliver coherent, complementary support for governing bodies. We look forward to continuing and expanding our contribution to the development of good governance enablers, behaviours and culture, and to the added value that governance brings to institutions.

Advance HE and our partner sector bodies have identified as part of the Big Conversation: Shaping the Future of HE Governance project, that all aspects of governance effectiveness are **underpinned by culture**. The Code should acknowledge this and further work to support developing a governance culture which fosters openness about the circumstances of the institution, healthy scepticism about projections, scenario planning and stress testing which is shared and scrutinised.

Finally, we recommend that the **Steering Group—or a similar expert body—is reconvened after an agreed interval to evaluate whether the Code is operating as intended** and to review any unexpected consequences of the revised code. This would ensure that the Code:

- remains authoritative, relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the sector
- coordinates a collective and collaborative approach to developing future resources, training and development needs
- provides a structured approach to testing and evidencing robust governance effectiveness, avoiding duplication, expediting learning and providing high-value support to the higher education sector.

# Contact us

## All enquiries

Email: [enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk)

**Advance HE helps HE institutions be the best they can be, by unlocking the potential of their people.**

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Company limited by guarantee registered in Ireland no. 703150. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. Registered Office: Advance HE, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom.

---

© 2025 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact Advance HE: [enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk)

**advance-he.ac.uk**

**in** **X** **f** **@AdvanceHE**