

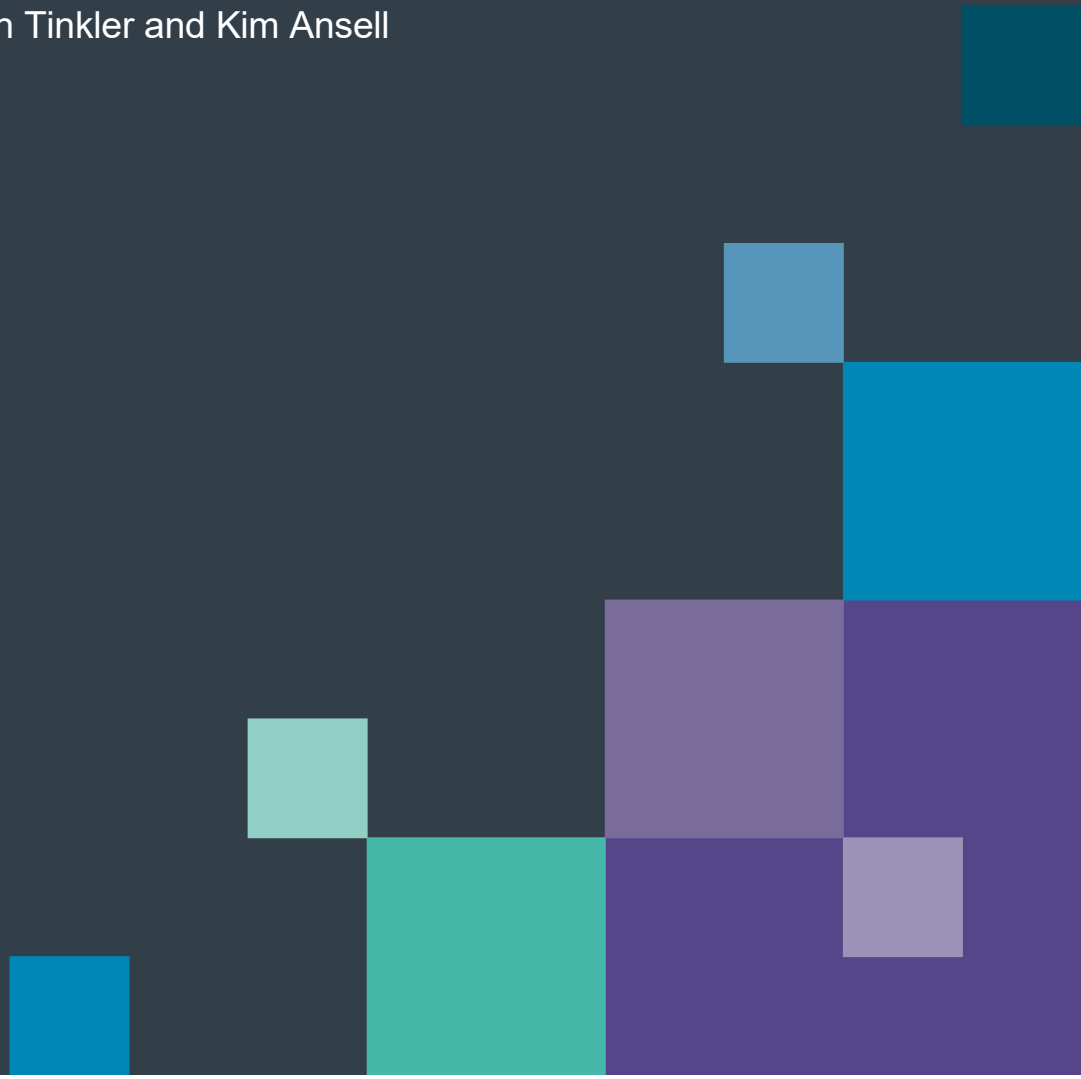
“AdvanceHE

+ **Governance effectiveness**

**Thematic analysis of governance benchmark survey
qualitative data**

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1 Executive summary

'The Big Conversation: shaping the future of higher education governance'¹ is supporting the UK HE governance community to engage with the challenges it faces through an open and collaborative dialogue, sharing insights, experiences and practical support.

This analysis of open comments received through the surveys from over 60 Advance HE governance effectiveness reviews since 2020, provides insights to inform that collaborative dialogue and through the themes identified in [The Big Conversation Summative Report](#), we profile the voice of governing bodies to enhance understanding of the issues and identify potential solutions.

Recent change and volatility in the HE sector have been well rehearsed and exacerbated by geopolitical factors. The survey data highlighted some less recent issues such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and wider policy and funding issues and we can assume that these factors will continue to have an impact.

Such volatility impacts working relationships and governance is no exception. In our analysis we highlight feedback about the relationship between the Board and Executive and more broadly about the importance of social capital. This in turn surfaced comments about trust and mutual understanding.

This analysis identified six key themes which also align with the emerging themes in the Big Conversation dialogue and report.

1 Stakeholder engagement

37% of the comments emphasised the need for improved communication with stakeholders, but there is a strong call across all governing bodies for deeper engagement with staff and students along with a need for stakeholder mapping to provide more clarity about the needs, interests and expectations of stakeholders in the context of the university strategy.

2 Strengthen links with academic governance

Building on this theme of connectivity with stakeholders, **17% of the comments expressed a need for stronger links between corporate and academic governance.**

3 Strategic focus and risk

+ Focusing on the governing body role of strategic oversight, the [Big Conversation Summative Report](#) concluded that there is a need for governing bodies to make more time for discussion about institutional strategy and future strategic developments.

Analysis of the survey comments suggest governing bodies broadly felt equipped to

¹ The Big Conversation was a project which examined the future of HE governance convened by Advance HE and delivered in partnership with AHUA, CUC, Guild HE, IHE and UUK.

support this important role but raised some issues around risk management and strategic risk. **19% highlighted the need for improved risk focus.**

- + Comments called for better **scenario planning** and **stress testing**.
- + This was raised as a topic for improvement particularly by executive and staff members of governing bodies.

4 KPI reporting and performance oversight

- + Comments referred to the relevance and comprehensiveness of KPIs and for more clarity about how they align to and deliver the strategy.
- + There is a call for reporting clarity around performance and indicators of success.
- + Small/specialist institutions expressed more dissatisfaction about KPI reporting and performance oversight.

5 Board Diversity

It is important to recognise that Board diversity outside the HE sector often lags practice in HE, so there are limited benchmarks to aspire to.

Despite some satisfaction with limited progress, our analysis identified that governing bodies perceive that gaps remain, in particular: **ethnicity (23%)**, **age (19%)**, and **gender (6%)** diversity. In the Big Conversation we also heard of the need for experience from diverse sectors which complement the portfolio of their institution and socio economic and international perspectives; this is reflected in the analysis of open survey questions.

6 How the governing body adds value

Ultimately, the sector needs governing bodies which add value to the institution. To do that as well as paying attention to the composition and size of the Board, some important enablers need to be in place. Our analysis suggests that while an annual one-to-one meeting with the Chair of the Board and board members was common to review the contribution being made. **Only 6% suggested the reviews held were formalised**, and we received comments about the need for a clearer process with outcomes and expectations of governors being better articulated and acted upon.

2 Introduction and context

Advance HE's governance effectiveness review (GER) survey comprises 10 benchmarked sections with 49 separate questions, ranked on a Likert scale with options for open text feedback on each section. These sections are:

- 1 Commitment to effective governance
- 2 Effective governance structures and processes
- 3 Governing body membership, quality and diversity
- 4 Governing body commitment to organisational vision, culture and values
- 5 Effective strategic development and performance measurement
- 6 Effective body information and communication
- 7 Future governance
- 8 Working relationships and board room behaviours
- 9 Outcomes of effective governance
- 10 Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in the work of the governing body

Over 1,200 respondents from more than 60 institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland completed the GER survey as part of a governance effectiveness review, with 955 providing substantive open comment responses, across the questions considered in this report. Data is from the past five years (since 2020 and the introduction of the revised Advance HE governance framework). Where institutions have carried out more than one review with Advance HE, only the most recent data is included.

The findings reflect perceptions of board members and attendees on key aspects of governance, highlighting areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Previous quantitative analysis offers a similar picture of key themes which require focus and attention. See annex 1.

2.1 About the data and analysis

The analysis in this report is based on responses to open questions from surveys in GERs conducted by Advance HE as part of a broader GER methodology at individual institutions. This highlights some limitations in using data which is created as part of a more comprehensive exercise where information is typically triangulated with observations, interviews and document review.

1,201 respondents from 63 institutions completed the survey, with 955 providing substantive open comment responses. Respondents are governing body members or regular attendees and are approximately categorised (based on self-selection of role) as:

Role	% of respondents
Chair/convenors	5%
External/lay members	50%
Executive/senior manager members	10%
Staff (including Senate/Academic Board) members	13%
Student members	4%
Executive/senior manager not a member	15%
Staff (including Senate/Academic Board) not a member	2%
Other or former members	2%

Respondents and the institutions are not a representative sample of HE providers in the UK, as the sample is based on institutions that have undertaken an effectiveness review with Advance HE. However, it does represent a wide spread of institutions. These include Russell Group universities (n6), small and specialist institutions (n12) and private providers (n2). There is also representation from across both representative and mission groups, including GuildHE, Universities Alliance, Million+ and the Russell Group. Most institutions are English providers (n50), with some institutions from Scotland (n10), Wales (n2) and Northern Ireland (n1).

Analysis of the open questions is based on themes emerging from discussions as part of the Big Conversation. The most relevant questions for analysis from the survey are:

- + Are there any issues arising from, or improvements that can be made, to mechanisms and arrangements for effective governance structures and processes? (Note: these open comments follow agree/disagree questions on financial resilience, assessment of risk and assurance of quality student experience).
- + Are there any issues arising from, or improvements that could be made to governing body information and communication, to better enable effective governance?
- + What are the main reasons for your answer that the governing body is or is not well equipped to support the organisation's long term strategic plans?
- + Are there any issues arising from, or improvements that could be made, to performance monitoring and measurement to better deliver effective governance?
- + In what ways is the contribution of members reviewed and how regularly?
- + What are the main reasons for your answers that the governing body membership has an appropriate range of skills and experience?

- + Are there any issues arising from, or improvements that could be made, to working relationships and behaviours?

It should be recognised that respondents providing data are assessing their own and their institution's performance. However, it should also be noted that the nature of the survey encourages an open and honest exercise. While the dataset has not been compiled using a sampling method, the approach offers an evaluation of how governing bodies perceive they are performing and where the opportunities are for improvement.

As mentioned, analysis comprises coding to identify main themes, with emphasis on those themes identified as part of the Big Conversation. The Big Conversation centred around four key themes:

- 1 Measuring what matters beyond financial pressures
- 2 How governance contributes to financially and socially sustainable institutions
- 3 Effective decision making
- 4 The governance of mergers and acquisitions

Of these, the governance of mergers and acquisitions is beyond the scope of the core survey questions. However, open questions are related to information to focus on long term strategy and enabling effective decision-making through structure, culture and skills.

3 Main themes

3.1 Stakeholder engagement

The need for greater stakeholder engagement, particularly with students and staff is a common theme. This is seen as an enabler of greater board understanding of the HE context; supporting transparency and helping to address difficulties in ensuring a diverse board.

Responding to the question on whether there are any issues arising or improvements that could be made to governing body information to better enable effective governance, the greatest percentage of comments (37%) related to the need for greater engagement or communication with stakeholders.

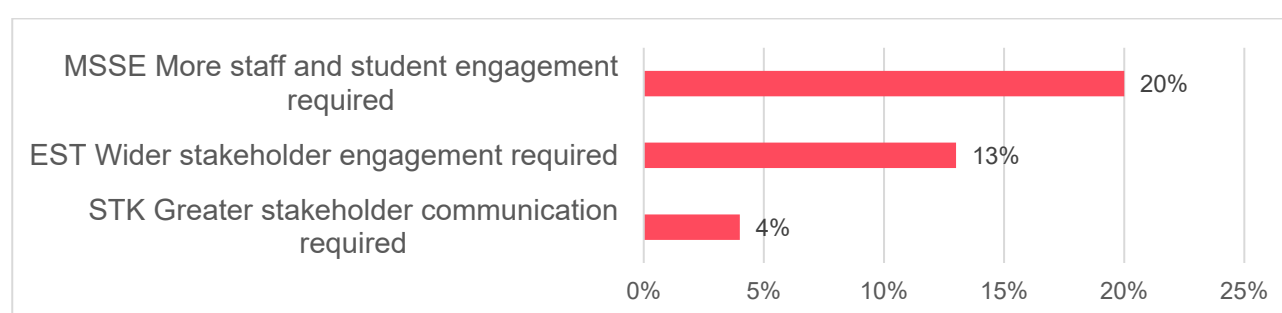


Figure 1: Stakeholder engagement

“..... I feel that there’s much more that could be done to demystify governance for staff and students and how they can make sure their voices are heard. It’s hard because of current circumstances but I’d like us to have a debate about innovative approaches in other organisations that we could learn from.”

External/lay member, Post 1992 English institution

“Students most likely don’t know what Council is, what its purpose is, what it does, what our strategic aims are, or what the relevance of Council is to their student experience.”

Student member, English institution

In contrast, only 4% suggested that communication with stakeholders was not a board role. In some cases, engagement or communication is hindered by a lack of understanding of who the wider stakeholders are, with 6% mentioning the need for stakeholder mapping.

This theme of greater staff and student engagement is common across institutions, whether Russell Group or small and specialist, and regardless of location. It is the major response across all types of governing body member.

Greater staff and student involvement is also a theme emerging from responses to the question on whether there are any issues arising from, or improvements that can be made, to mechanisms and arrangements for effective governance structures and processes. 32% of comments suggested more involvement, with some comments suggesting that current approaches meant that there was a narrow representation of students and staff. Although there are a small number of student member responses, greater involvement of students (41% of comments) and of staff (18% of comments) is the main focus for this group of respondents.

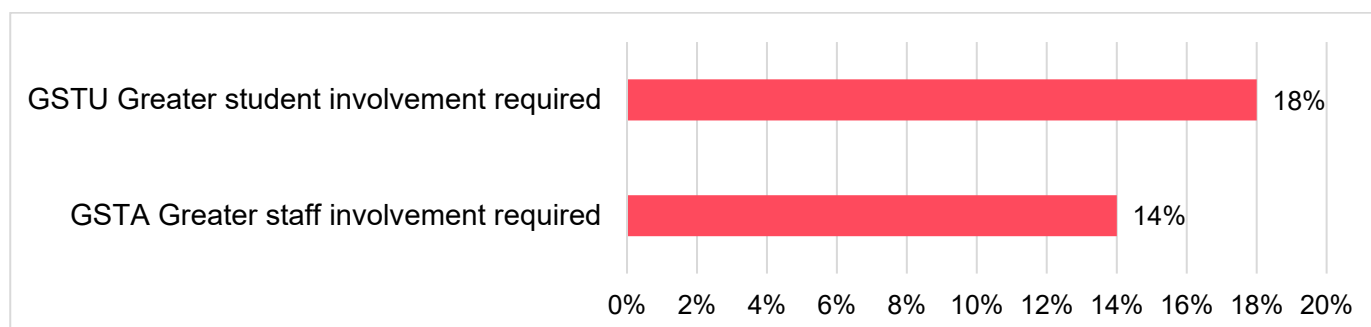


Figure 2: Staff and student involvement

“There is involvement from the student body in the Board with regular reports. These tend to be focused around specific projects or initiatives. It would be beneficial to increase the Board's understanding of the student experience, with a focus on steps to increase overall student satisfaction.”

External/lay member, small and specialist institution

“Although staff and students are represented on the Board, I am not sure how effective this is, especially when the student representatives change annually. Also, I am not sure that the current process of electing staff members on the Board is again very representative of the workforce as a whole.”

Staff member, post 1992 English institution

3.2 Strengthen links with academic governance

The comments suggest the importance of creating stronger links with academic governance. 17% of comments on improving governance structures and processes were coded to this theme, with 40% of comments from respondents at Russell Group institutions raising this theme. The links between corporate and academic governance are seen as important for the governing body to be assured of the quality of learning and teaching, student experience and the standards of awards.

“Perhaps more regular opportunities to understand how the senate is in practice ensuring that quality and standards of teaching and learning remain high (including, presumably, the work which the senate itself delegates to its sub-committees); while entirely respecting their role in leading academic governance.”

External/lay member, Russell Group institution, England

3.3 Strategic focus and risk

19% of responses refer to there being a greater need to focus on risk, as an improvement to mechanisms and arrangements for effective governance structures and processes, with a further 2% mentioning the need to improve stress testing and scenario planning. 21% of comments from external/lay members to this question mention risk, but it is also a major theme for executive/senior manager members (18%) and staff members (19% mentioned).

“I believe there is a need to increase the knowledge of the Board in identifying and mitigating risks associated with HEIs especially as we get closer to that status.”

Chair, Small and specialist institution, England

“Whilst advised that these exercises are being undertaken, perhaps greater clarity in terms of scenario planning for 'worst case' scenarios should risks identified in the risks register materialise, in particular in terms of their impact on the financial stability of the institution.”

External/lay member, Post 1992 institution

“As we did at our most recent meeting, risk management should come earlier in the agenda. It is not a very exciting subject but is incredibly important.”

External/lay member, Post 1992 institution

“Ensure risk processes and risk appetite utilise simple and clear frameworks that facilitate easy communication with and understanding by governing body.”

Executive, Post 1992 institution, England

“Given how quickly the world is changing around us we just need to constantly review what we consider to 'normal' how risks have moved and what may come eg student expectations, the environment, building safety.”

External/lay member, Welsh institution

3.4 KPIs and performance oversight

Overall, respondents perceive that their governing body has the key skills in place to support institutional strategic plans (43% of comments relate to this) and there is agreement across board member categories. Where comments do point to areas of improvement it is in relation to the setting and reporting of performance and KPIs. While there is a sense that this is an area that is improving, the following figure indicates where further improvements are suggested.

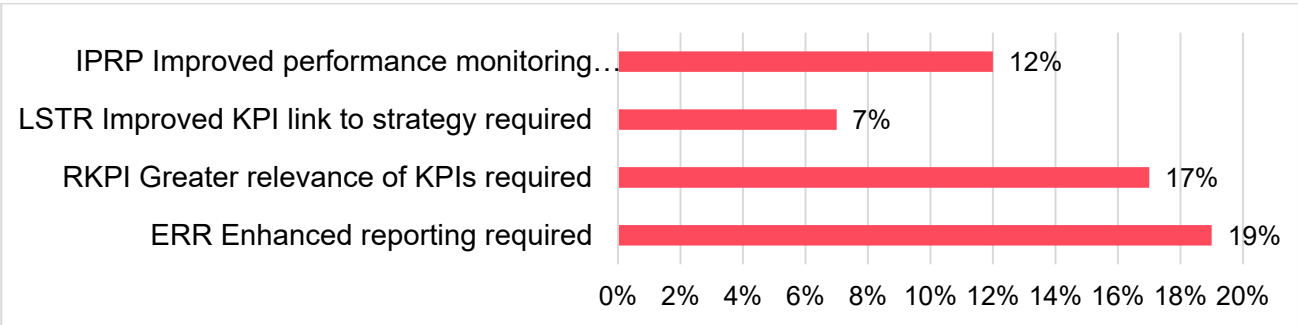


Figure 3 KPI and performance monitoring

Small and specialist institutions are less likely to perceive that the performance monitoring processes in place are working well (9% of comments, compared with 20% overall) but there is no discernible difference between English and Scottish institutions with around 20% of respondents in both nations answering in this way. A slightly higher percentage of executive/senior manager members perceive the process to be working well (26%) compared to 19% of external/lay members who commented in this way.

“There is a lack of clarity about some of the measures to be reviewed or what exactly is being asked for. The secretary often fills this by creating more reporting requirements - there is an issue with the communication between board and staff because the secretary acts as a conduit, and therefore shapes the required data, which often has an impact of creating more work and different ways of saying the same thing.”

Executive/senior manager member, Scottish institution

“A simpler set of performance measures that are more measurable and demonstrate the strategic direction of the University. Something more tangible than the current set.”

External/lay member, English institution

“In general we may spend too much time on passive reporting for internal and external assurance purposes rather than on forward strategy. We need to find a more streamlined approach to managing the accountability burden.”

Chair, Welsh institution

3.5 Continued focus on board diversity

While 22% of comments suggested that respondents perceive there to be a good mix of members, skills and perspectives, the need for greater diversity in the following areas (in the Figure below) is recognised in the comments.

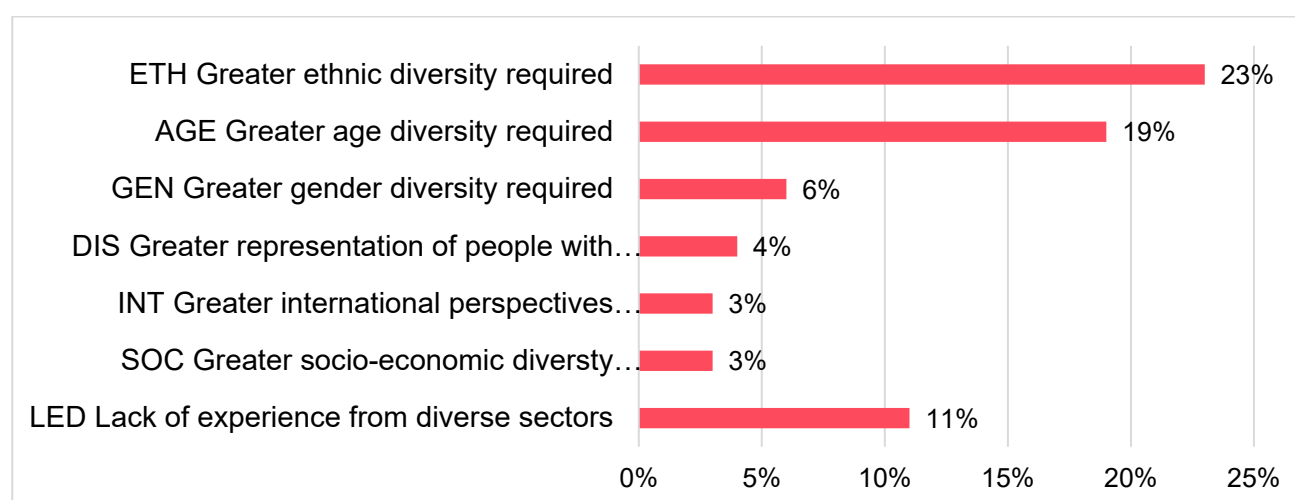


Figure 4 Board diversity

The issue of board members not being representative of the age of staff and student stakeholders is recognised, along with the difficulty in addressing this. Greater staff and student involvement and engagement is seen as a way of accessing these perspectives and lived experiences. Some comments refer to approaches undertaken to attract a broader range of members, including using or considering the use of remuneration, and introducing governor apprentices. The importance of rethinking processes and approaches for recruitment emerges in some comments.

“It is difficult for the governing body of a higher educational institution fully to reflect diversity in age, especially when the time commitment is considerable and the positions are not remunerated. That is why I believe we should offer an honorarium for members (which is confidential and can be declined) so that younger people are able to take on a role which demands attendance in normal working hours. It is likely that this also have a positive impact on diversity generally. We should also consider the timing and length of meetings which would be off-putting for many well-qualified people.”

External/lay member, small and specialist institution, England

As well as individual characteristics of board members, there is a perception that there is a need for governing bodies to incorporate experience from a more diverse range of sectors to support governance and institutional sustainability.

“The Court body lacks diversity and therefore while the Court has a strong range of skills, by the very nature of the lack of diversity it means the experiences brought to the table are not necessarily reflected of the challenge which is needed. Consideration could be given to the expertise needed for [the new strategy] eg expertise on sustainability would be an example”.

Executive member, Scottish institution

Only 1% of comments from external/lay members suggest there is a need for greater experience or understanding of HE amongst board members, while 13% of executive/senior managers perceive this as a need.

3.6 How the governing body adds value and expectations of governor development

While governor development is not addressed specifically in the core governance effectiveness survey, respondents are asked about the contribution that members make, and how often that is reviewed. 41% mentioned that an annual review is carried out, although in a small number of cases (2% of comments) it is suggested this is only carried out every three or four years, prior to reappointment. Over 50% of comments suggest that member reviews are carried out via a one-to-one discussion with the Chair, but only 6% suggest that these are formal reviews. Opinion varies within institutions on whether the reviews are informal or formal and of course there will be different perceptions of informality/formality.

While recognising that much of HE governance is a volunteer system, the critical role that governing body members play, suggests that review of governor contribution and added value, along with ongoing governor development, is crucial to effective governance.

“Board members have a one-to-one with the Chairperson on an annual basis. The information gathered is used to set or change priorities for the member and possibly the Board for the forthcoming year. This appears to be a very effective system but it is not clear what happens if someone is underperforming and perhaps the 1-1s need to be slightly more formalised or codified.”

Chair, English Post 1992 institution

“Although we review ourselves as a group (and the audit committee as a group) per an earlier answer, I cannot recall anything that reviews my individual performance as a Board member other than the skills audit.”

External/lay member, Small and specialist institution, England

4 Culture is crucial

The Big Conversation concluded that culture is crucial. The analysis of comments in answer to issues and improvements to working relationships underline the importance of good board / executive relationships. Another theme running through the comments is the impact of the Covid pandemic restrictions on relationship building. 12% of comments on working relationships relate to the importance of building or re-establishing “social capital” through face-to-face or informal meetings outside the board room, to improve transparency, trust and mutual understanding.

The analysis does not yet emphasise recent challenging circumstances in HE with institutions experiencing financial sustainability crises, more policy changes and turbulence, changing international student demographics and less real terms funding. We anticipate that the continued turbulent environment will continue to impact negatively on culture and working relationships.

Such factors seem particularly important for external/lay members and staff members, with 13% and 14% respectively referencing this theme.

“A dinner is being held for board members next month. This is to be welcomed. Board members need to be able to spend a little time with each other outside of formal meetings. This is so that we can recognise and configure and draw on each other’s strengths, values and interests together in a team that can thus be still more effective through such synergies. The showcasing of innovation across schools that is happening imminently is another initiative of late to which all board members are invited. This gives board members licence to draw closer to the inner life of the university and learn still more how/where to optimise how it can support and help. This flattening of levels of dialogue and engagement is a great step forward I think.”

Staff member, English institution

“I don't think that governors know each other very well, and our interactions with the executive are quite limited, so it is difficult to answer this question. Executive members are always open, polite and welcoming. Perhaps if we all knew each other better, working relationships and behaviours would have more secure foundations and so really transform the organisation?”

External/lay member, English Post 1992 institution

“As mentioned in a previous comment, I think Court need to trust more and the Executive need to view Court members as critical friends rather than an obstacle to decision-making.”

Staff member, Scottish institution

5 Conclusions

The analysis of the Governance Effectiveness Review surveys show some correlation with what we are hearing through the Big Conversation, including improving stakeholder engagement in an integrated story about the transparency of governance, the need for raising expectations for governor continuous professional development, strengthening links with academic governance and board composition (including board diversity), underpinned by governance culture being crucial to success. But of course, this is not the whole picture and there is much work to be done to understand and address the future of HE governance.

Advance HE Governance Effectiveness Reviews are not just an audit of processes, controls and compliance, they seek to evaluate culture and relationships and reflect on how the governing body adds value to the institution that it is governing. In most cases, the reviews include self-assessment by the governing body and executive members in regular attendance who typically demonstrate strong commitment to the organisational vision and culture and to effective governance which cautions us to assume a level of optimism bias, but our analysis also suggests that careful interpretation is needed to get a fair and balanced picture.

For example, views about the governing body role in assurance of financial sustainability will be integrated with the depth and breadth of information they receive, the context in which that information is received and discussed by the Board and its committees, the level of challenge and scrutiny being enabled and the ability for the members of the governing body to put that information into context, organisationally and within the sector.

It is clear to us that first and foremost that the governing body role needs to think in an integrated way about short-, medium- and long-term strategy – that means resources (including finance), risk and performance oversight need to be a joined up strategic discussion and we do not observe this regularly happening at board meetings.

Beyond HE there are examples of more integrated thinking, for example, The King IV Code of Governance requires that, *“the governing body should appreciate that the organisations core purpose, its risks and opportunities, strategy, business model, performance and sustainable development are all **inseparable elements** of the value creation process.”*

There is clearly a need for some re-shaping of governance practice and outcomes in the sector. Advance HE offers this report as a contribution to this conversation. As identified in

the Big Conversation and throughout this research, governance culture is the crucial driving force and the relationship between the Chair, Head of Institution and the Secretary is paramount in shaping the future to drive forward the strategic transformation of HE governance.

Annex 1: 2024 Quantitative analysis of the GER survey

The core GER survey is constructed of a set of quantitative questions using a 7-point Likert answer scale (from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'). An index score for each question is derived by calculating the percentage that responded *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, or *Partially Agree*. Subsequently, an agree (index) score is derived for each framework area (the 10 sections mentioned earlier). In analysis carried out in 2024 (of a dataset including pre-2020 data) we derived an index score for each framework area in the survey.

As with the qualitative analysis in this report, the data suggests that working relationships are a little more challenged than in our previous 2019 analysis. This may be due to a number of factors including increased regulatory burden, the impact of the pandemic and other aspects of change. We are also curious as to whether the levels of information and communication have indeed deteriorated, or whether governors' expectations about them have increased, therefore suggesting a slight deterioration in their evaluation of this aspect of governance.

It is illustrative to look at the index score for each of the 10 key framework areas presented in Figure 6 below.

Key area	Questions in survey	Index score 2024	Index score 2019	Variation
1 Commitment to effective governance	Q2-Q3	86%	81%	Up
2 Effective governance structures and processes	Q4-Q10	89%	86%	Up
3 Governing body membership, quality and diversity	Q11-Q15	72%	65%	Up
4 Governing body commitment to organisational vision, culture and values	Q16-Q17	95%	92%	Up
5 Effective strategic development and performance measurement	Q18-Q19	72%	68%	Up
6 Effective governing body information and communication	Q20-Q21	85%	86%	Down
7 Future governance	Q22-Q23	90%	77%	Up
8 Working Relationships and Board room behaviours	Q24-Q27	89%	90%	Down
9 Outcomes of effective governance	Q28-Q31	87%	84%	Up
10 Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion	Q32-Q35	80%	N/A	N/A

Figure 6: Index scores for the 10 key framework areas

In our 2024 quantitative analysis, measures relating to the review of performance and contributions of governing body members also score low, with Q12 *Effective reviews of governing body members' contributions are conducted periodically* scoring 59%. That this is a cross-sector issue with only 15 of the 71 institutions responding to this question, having an agree score of 80% and above.

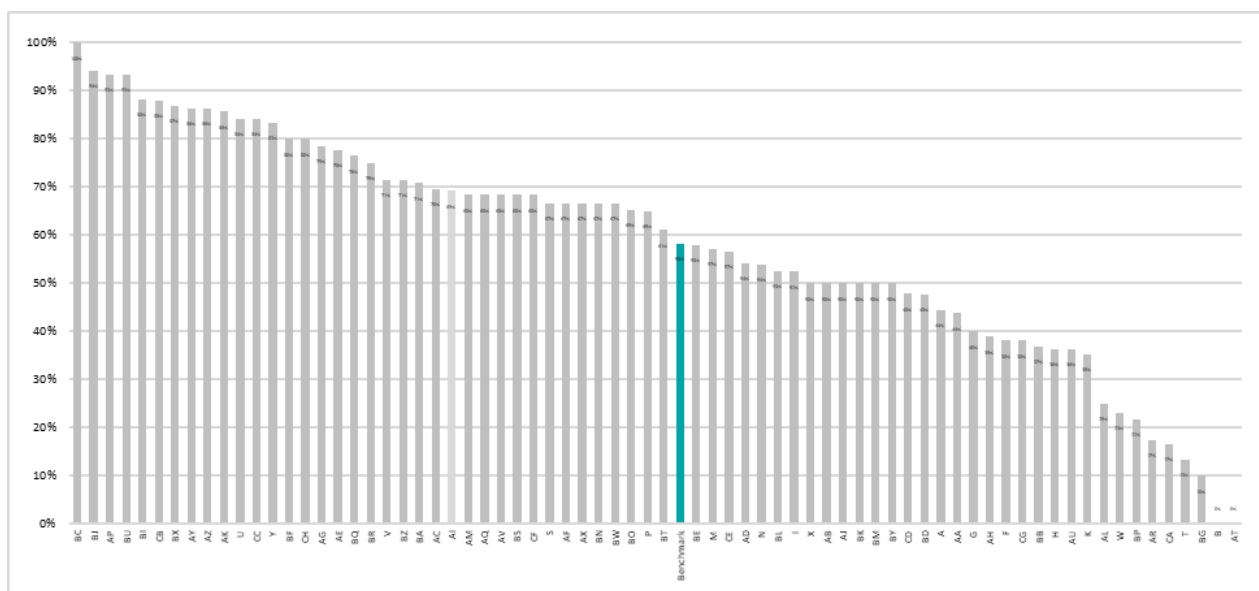


Figure 7: Q12 Effective reviews of governing body members' individual contributions are conducted periodically (n71)

Note: Bar in teal indicates the benchmark/index score of 58%

Annex 2: Further resources

- + [Big Conversation: Shaping the future of HE governance, ten priorities to improve higher education governance](#)
- + [Governing and Leading Transformation](#), Advance HE member benefit
- + [Governor Competencies Map](#)
- + [Measuring What Matters- Shaping future understanding of institutional performance for value creation and strategic decision-making in 2024](#)

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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.

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