

The Boards role in wellbeing as a strategic imperative

An overview of the virtual sandpit event on Thursday 5 May 2022

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Introduction

As part of the Inclusive institutions: enabling and supporting culture change Connect Benefit Series theme, senior leaders and governing body members participated in a sandpit event to explore the board's role in making wellbeing an integrated part of the university strategy and in implementing a holistic approach to organisational wellbeing in universities.

The event was focused around two provocations and you can view these [here](#).

Advance HE Senior Advisors Kim Ansell and Barbara Bassa offer some reflections on the thinking, ideas and questions arising from the provocations.

What Works Wellbeing provocation

[Nancy Hey](#), Executive Director at What Works Wellbeing, offered a provocation about UK National measures of wellbeing, key drivers of wellbeing, and reflected on the sorts of questions governing bodies should be asking about wellbeing in their organisation. She posed two key questions for discussion:

1. Should organisational wellbeing become an integral part of a wider university strategy? And if wellbeing is considered at a strategic level how can it positively impact the organisational culture of the institution?

There was unanimous agreement with the principle that wellbeing should be a key part of the overall strategy picture, but less clarity about the information that the governing body and senior executive should receive. It was also clear that governing bodies mainly receive data and information about student wellbeing, even though they are responsible for understanding all stakeholders, including staff.

Over the last five years (particularly since the pandemic), student and staff wellbeing has been on board agendas more than ever before. This has increased transparency and visibility but in many cases talking about wellbeing or having updates about wellbeing initiatives has not necessarily translated into a healthy and inclusive culture where everyone has a sense of belonging. Participants expressed a need for wellbeing to be articulated in the context of mission, purpose and values, with evidence linked to strategy.

The senior leadership is responsible for strategic oversight and governors need to hold the executive team to account. Creating the right conditions and culture for the strategy to be successfully implemented and ensuring that the core values on which governance should be founded includes the wellbeing of the community which it serves.

Governors reflected that they typically receive information through a range of sources. For example, HR reports, retention and sickness stats, in particular reasons for absence as percentage or numbers of cases for mental health related issues. Typically, absence is rising and staff survey data received by some boards does not directly offer a perspective on wellbeing.

Nancy Hey shared some examples of evidence from other sectors: from a practical point of view advising against 'perceived' negative indicators such as absenteeism, but rather considering 'presenteeism' instead; and strategically, that good, clear leadership and a plan that is data and evidence informed makes for authentic leadership which can be clearly linked to improved wellbeing. The participants reflected that it was likely that if the governing body and senior leadership is 'well' then there will be a ripple effect not only in workplace wellbeing but beyond, driving public wellbeing.

2. What is the role and responsibility of the governing body in embedding wellbeing into the organisations' strategy?

Our panel reflected that the level of organisational maturity is a key part of determining the role of the governing body and its approach to wellbeing. They need to consider three connected elements of strategy:

- + How does the Board receive information and data about performance related aspects of the organisation?
- + How does the values and culture of the organisation enable the governing body to make sense of what is happening?
- + What are the implications of that in the specific context of the university?

Evidence is seen as a challenge for most universities in this respect, and the participants reflected on how the information received translates into the lived experiences of staff and students. It was agreed that more work is needed here.

Alternative ways of thinking – provocation

Considering the levels of consciousness in strategic decision making, [Barbara Bassa](#) offered a provocation which challenged current approaches to wellbeing and offered alternative ways of thinking about it. She posed two key questions:

1. What is the level of consciousness with which we approach strategic design, decision making and strategic oversight?

Some of the issues that we raised were clearly not the sort of issues that the board consider, but there was agreement that they may impact an organisation's ability to deliver the strategy and therefore strategic oversight, as well as issues such as 'How does wellbeing impact on managing staff workloads, and therefore managers of people?', 'Do staff feel inspired to come to work and to think about the future that we want to create post pandemic or are they stressed, worried and overworked?', and 'How do students and staff experience equality, inclusion, compassion and care at their universities?'.

“Middle managers are often in really quite poor health and there is an argument for improving the well-being of managers enabling them to manage effectively as possible”

Nancy Hey

There were mixed views from participants about whether their level of consciousness is and should be a factor in decision making. Mostly there was a desire to have more understanding about what this means and how governing bodies could use this concept to hold the executive to account and to have different information to support this.

It was agreed that most governing bodies would need training and development if they wanted to have a higher level of consciousness in decision making and indeed if the broad wellbeing agenda is explicitly included in the Board's agenda.

2. What impact does the wellbeing of staff and students have on university culture? And, how can shifting onto a higher level of consciousness improve it?

Academic leaders may often feel squeezed between organisational policy, workload pressures, an ever changing external environment, and student expectations. It is difficult with a holistic approach to determine from which perspective the governing body and senior executive approach wellbeing in these scenarios, but having an ethical and more conscious debate should be part of a caring and inclusive culture.

It was commonly recognised that culture and wellbeing are often arm's length issues for governing bodies, mostly driven by senior executive teams. It was generally thought that current systems and processes (culture) stifle innovation and more holistic and

compassionate ways of working. It was recognised that that governors need to work on being inclusive themselves to have a higher level of consciousness in their decision making.

Some also reflected that rapid growth in some institutions has also had an implication for wellbeing and culture, which is typically seen as a positive thing by the board but does not always have a positive effect on culture and wellbeing of its people.

Again this brought us back to information, with a plea from governors to have a more balanced set of information from which to develop a higher level of consciousness. This means that sharing information such as trends over time will be required. The executive may feel uncomfortable with this as they typically want to bring positive news and data to the Board.

In summary, the governors and executive teams who participated in our event thought that despite the difficulties and challenges that a more holistic approach to wellbeing is needed to help shape future culture and to hold the executive to account about the mission, vision and value of the institution. They recognised the circular nature of wellbeing in institutions who must understand the important interplay between the wellbeing of staff and the wellbeing of students. They aspired to lead institutions which, through their behaviours and mindsets, mean that wellbeing is not a problem to fix but a 'consciousness' which makes their institution a better place to work.

Resources

What Works Wellbeing

1. [Fact sheet employee wellbeing](#)
2. [Student mental health & wellbeing evidence review](#)
3. [Wellbeing Monitoring and Action Planning](#)

Advance HE

1. [Connect Benefit Series Wellbeing](#)
2. [Education for Mental Health Toolkit - staff wellbeing](#)
3. [Mental Wellbeing in HE](#)

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