

MidKent College External Board Review February 2023

Executive Summary

MidKent College is a large, General Further Education College in the Medway region of Kent, with campuses in Gillingham and Maidstone, providing education and training for approximately 7,000 young people and adults. The college was judged Good by Ofsted in 2018. In line with the recent requirement outlined in the Skills Bill 2022 for colleges to undergo external board review every three years, MKC commissioned this review to consider the overall effect of governance, board behaviours, dynamics and size, and how culture, policies and processes can be enhanced for maximum impact. The work took place in the Autumn term of 2022, so that any changes could be implemented in the 2023/24 academic year.

Structures and processes

MidKent College's governance arrangements are generally effective. Committee chairs meet with the Executive Team (ET) lead and Clerk to prepare agendas, and have calls in advance of meetings. Compared to other colleges, papers are easily accessible and are circulated in a timely fashion. The college instigated additional Quality of Teaching and Learning (QTL) data calls in 2015 and continues to arrange these to allow scrutiny of data, and discussion with the Executive, by all governors. Governors have access to multiple sources of information to allow them to scrutinise and triangulate and there is an active link governor programme. The Remuneration Committee's annual meeting with SPHs allows dialogue which builds relationships and strengthens governance. Governors, the Principal and the Clerk are responsive to suggestions to improve governance.

Areas for development include clarity about how employer engagement is to be monitored and scrutinised, and development of risk appetite and familiarity with the strategic risk register by all governors. Although many aspects of administration are strong, there is a need to supplement the Clerk's capacity and strategic skills through the appointment of an additional part time Director of Governance. Guidance on the content and format of board papers should be finalised and greater internal quality assurance carried out, to ensure that papers are fit for purpose. Verbal introduction of papers at meetings requires development. The effectiveness of board meetings should be more fully evaluated.

People and Attributes

Succession planning of board membership and committee chairmanship is actively managed by the Search and Governance (S&G) committee and members have an appropriate breadth of skill and experience and cognitive, racial, sexual and gender diversity. This mix maps positively to the requirements of the college, its curriculum and its educational character, as well as the needs of college governance. Newly appointed members contribute in their first meeting and the great majority of governors feel that their technical/professional skills and knowledge are utilised to the extent that the college needs them. In meetings governors demonstrated that they were able to scrutinise reports and ask pertinent questions, drawing on their own field of experience and on papers presented. Some committee chairs are highly skilled in summarising key points from a wide ranging conversation which ensures that the discussion results in action and adds value.

Areas for development include consideration of governors' contacts; a small number of governors feel that their professional contacts are not used as much as they could be. Discussion should be underpinned by the understanding that contacts will only be followed up if required, the decision on this being taken by management not the board.

Board Culture and Governors' Interactions

The board, and the Chair in particular, work hard to ensure an appropriate culture of challenge and support. Despite a number of governors and ET being relatively new in post, there is considerable agreement over prevailing board culture. Collaboration, inclusivity, community and sustainability are all foci for board development, particularly at the individual level. All governors and all members of the Executive believe that levels of trust, transparency and openness are very high. Evidence seen during this review illustrates the board's ability to act strategically, and draw on the skills of governors, and also its agility in responding to change. Chairs of Finance and Resources and QTL committees hold the Executive to account through a coaching style approach; questions and challenge are designed to develop the Executive's understanding and skills.

Areas for development include review and updating of the skills matrix used for governor recruitment, both the content and the way reports are presented. Induction needs to be tailored to the needs of individual governors given the high expectations of governors as soon as they start. When the board reappoints to the role of Group Risk and Audit committee chair it could consider an external appointment (this is the norm in some colleges) and S&G committee could also consider rebalancing the distribution of roles. When evaluating meetings for overall impact and effectiveness particular factors relating to culture and inclusivity should be considered: the role of the Chair (or committee chair) in keeping discussion at a strategic level, or clarifying with governors what points they are making, and contribution and value added by all governors.

Overall Impact and Effectiveness - Conclusions

Governance is increasingly well managed and has had a beneficial impact on the college throughout the past two years, particularly in the development of strategy and oversight of it. When surveyed half the governors felt that the board's activities have considerable positive impact on the college's achievements and half felt that there was some impact and room for more. Most governors were able to articulate how they impact on governance, through their professional expertise, support of other governors including staff and student governors, challenge of the executive in key areas and championing of key drivers of improved student outcomes, eg student attendance. Through their challenge and questions, governors require members of the Executive to reflect further, sharpen their focus and think laterally.

To comprehensively evaluate whether, and the extent to which, the board is performing effectively, it is important to understand the key governance outcomes that flow from the above core functions. To accomplish this, the review process uses the key principles of the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code as the basis for reflecting on whether the board's work has translated into impact. The evidence from the review shows that the board of MidKent College is proficient in most of the key effectiveness features. Commitment to the Nolan Principles and the AoC Code is clear. The college is financially sound and the board has good oversight of the key processes. It is responsive to the needs of its communities and governors are actively involved in working out how to remain abreast of developments and opportunities, so that they can challenge and support appropriately including through their ambassadorial role. Students' achievement and wellbeing is central to governors' thinking and work is underway to strengthen Student Voice. Governance also provides senior management with one of its lines of defence; the current approach should give assurance to stakeholders that the college is managing its assets prudently and putting the student experience at the heart of its deliberations.

In this review, Areas for Development have been identified in relation to additional strategic governance skills and experience to support the ongoing development of the board; the improved monitoring of progress and achievement through more succinct papers and consistent presentation; and the regular, frequent evaluation of impact and effectiveness at the level of individual meetings as well as overall.

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