



To all Chairs and Principals of Corporations

24 February 2014

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you today to share my experiences as the first FE Commissioner. As you may know, I have been in my role as FE Commissioner for six months. This role was announced by the government in *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* (April 2013) to deliver robust and rapid intervention in those FE Colleges and FE Institutions that have failed Ofsted inspection and / or minimum standards and / or have inadequate financial health or management.

It has been a busy six months. I, and my team of FE Advisers, have gone into six FE Colleges; City of Bristol College, City of Liverpool College, Stockport College, K College, Barnfield College and LeSoCo. In all the colleges I have visited as FE Commissioner I have seen dedicated and passionate Governors, leaders, staff and students all striving to work together to deliver high quality education and training to individuals, businesses and the communities they serve.

But I have also been repeatedly reminded of the value and importance of strong governance and leadership to a dynamic, innovative and sustainable FE sector, where colleges are fulfilling their role as social enterprises in their communities. You and your governors are critical to raising the standards in FE; you provide the strategic direction of your college and hold your Principal to account. I know from my experience in a variety of roles in the FE sector that where governance is strong, providing effective strategic direction and oversight of both quality and financial health, excellence thrives.

Conversely, where governors fail to scrutinise and challenge the Principal and senior leadership team, robustly holding them to account, problems can and do arise. We all instinctively know this to be the case - there are many examples of good governance that exist in colleges - but it is a feature of my role that I see too many examples where things have gone wrong.

Today, I would like to share with you my reflections following the first intervention cases. I hope these reflections help you to challenge yourselves, your Principal and your senior leadership teams on the actions you are taking to deliver the high quality provision that each and every learner deserves.

- College governors are dedicated and committed to the mission of the college. Many are well qualified, and are important figures in their communities. However, college governors must take greater ownership of their college, driving the strategic direction forward and challenging the Principal and senior leadership team on the quality of teaching and learning and the institution's financial position.
- A good working relationship between college governors and the Principal is important. However, the flow of information to the Board is often channelled solely through the Principal. College governors must satisfy themselves that they have a complete picture of how the college is operating by triangulating the information they receive with other sources of information, for example the new Data Dashboard being produced by Ofsted and which is due to be published in the Spring.
- It is essential to undertake effective succession planning of the governing body; bringing in new and diverse skills and fresh thinking regularly. I especially see the case for more business people on boards; people who are used to providing challenge and handling changing financial circumstances. This recognises that colleges are multi-million pound enterprises responsible for delivering the best services it can to tens of thousands of people and hundreds of businesses in their communities.
- Clerks are vital to the success of colleges. Clerks ensure that good governance practice is followed and that the Principal/senior leadership team are not exceeding their authority. Clerks should be independent, supported and have the skills and experiences necessary to fulfil their role.
- If you're not already doing so, it is very important that you conduct an annual professional appraisal of your Principal, which examines and reports on their performance to date and sets clear SMART targets for the year to come.
- College governors should have regular and purposeful training and development. As the recent AoC report concluded, the training currently available is not adequate for the tasks they are expected to carry out. They often are working in something

of a vacuum with little or no contact with Board members from other colleges and hence are unable to benchmark their performance against their peers. Some Boards have “twinned” with other Boards in the sector, which seems to work well. I know the Education and Training Foundation is committed to ensuring governors can access the right support.

- There is some evidence that college governors can be reluctant to take the difficult decisions when there is evidence of poor performance. I think there should be more guidance for governors on how to deal with underperformance.

Over the coming months I will continue to monitor and review progress in those colleges I have visited, and I stand ready to respond when an FE College and FE Institution fails Ofsted inspection and / or minimum standards and / or has inadequate financial health or management.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Dr David Collins', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dr David Collins CBE
FE Commissioner

