The Three Pillars of Educational Governance: Shaping the Future Through Evidence, Strategy, and Inclusion

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Governance in education is undergoing a profound transformation. No longer a compliance-driven exercise, it is now recognised as a dynamic, strategic force shaping the future of institutions, learners, and communities. In the Further Education (FE) and skills sector, where public accountability meets local mission and social purpose, governance defines not only how institutions survive, but how they thrive. This article explores how sector-wide evidence and research are redefining governance, highlighting the hot topics that matter most for boards, leaders, and professionals in further and higher education (Bell, 2025; Husband, 2021).

The big question

In a recent discussion between colleagues with significant interest in governance, the following question was posed.

If you were tasked with designing a mechanism to provide strategic oversight for a highly complex institution with multiple million-pound budgets and tens of thousands of students and employees, with significant links to government, public money, commercial income and multiple stakeholders how would you do it? In addition, this mechanism needs to be the accountable body for legal and financial oversight, appoint the chief executive, approve budgets and accounts, act as an advisory and advocacy panel and ensure that the organisation survives and isn't vulnerable to the actions of individuals.

There were various ideas and the discussion was lengthy but in summary, the outcome was most definitely not, 'we would appoint a single board of volunteer governors'.

This is, however, by and large what we do. Taking a view across education, healthcare and third sector (we are swerving the world of corporate governance quite deliberately here although the parallels are evident), we have for many years accepted that there is assurance and accountability oversight provided by a largely volunteer group of individuals, self-appointed by organisations (with some notable exceptions) to give strategic and financial oversight.

Here then is another important question, unless you are part of a board or know someone that is, when do you hear about the work of boards, governors and trustees? The simple answer is, when something goes wrong. Governors, Chairs and Trustees suddenly find themselves in the limelight and frequently, staring across the room at a public select committee and facing some very tricky questions about oversight, accountability, challenge, compliance, audit and responsibility.

Mercifully, highly publicised failures are rare, and we have begun to learn from these in new and important ways. In the absence of large-scale empirical evidence, we are left then with the plausible inference that, given the infrequency of catastrophic failure, governance structures must be working, at least to an extent (the old adage, the absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence, works well here).

Despite the complexity, difficulties, challenges and broad range of responsibilities, boards seem (perhaps against the odds) to be a fine solution for the question posed in the opening paragraphs of this article.

The big question is possibly, but how?

Thankfully, we are beginning to gain some valuable insights into this very complex world. A series of research projects are shedding some light on what makes governing and governance work, and some key organisations have taken the bold move to partner in research projects to shed light on the principles and practices of governing, importantly, in real time.

In parallel to this, there is a renewed and somewhat focused urgency around codes of practice and mandated external reviews of governance, both with clear guidelines on what should happen within well organised and managed governance arrangements.

To understand how effective governance holds these competing pressures in balance, it helps to look beyond the headlines and into the principles that underpin it. The answer lies in three interlocking pillars that together determine how boards think, act, and lead.

Pillar 1: Structure, structure and more structure.

On the rebuilding of London post 2nd World War Churchill, quoting the American architect, Louis Henry Sullivan, said that 'we shape our buildings and thereafter, they shape us'. This was an observation that the structures we create then influence the decisions we make and the way in which we behave. Sullivan's primary observation was about physical spaces (he built skyscrapers), yet Churchill was also commenting on the structures we create within institutions and society. How we design and inhabit institutional spaces has a material effect on behavior and culture. When developing new projects, departments, businesses, curricular (ad infinitum), one of the first actions is to establish reporting hierarchy, who is in charge, who reports to them, who is responsible for what, what are the key performance indicators, which committees are required etc… governance structures are created first (or at least, normally!). As a species we seem to thrive on order and established rules and behaviors. We like to know how things work and find we are able to navigate the unfamiliar by overlaying familiar structure. We know what to expect and in that space we can navigate. Further to this, it also provides us with some level of assurance that within established and familiar structures, governance and oversight *can* happen, it is of course no assurance that it *will* happen. Strong, flexible structures create the conditions for meaningful scrutiny and dialogue, providing governors with the confidence to challenge, question, and support executive teams constructively.

A couple of decades after Churchill's insight in parliament, the somewhat controversial figure and American activist Abbie Hoffman commented that 'structure is more important than content in the transmission of information', an insightful analysis that had he have lived to see the 21st century would have almost certainly seen Hoffman commenting on the notions of 'post truth culture'. Paraphrasing the analysis, content doesn't matter so much, it's how you communicate it that has the maximum impact. This is especially pertinent when that analysis is applied to complex institutions. The idea that structures can take precedence over content, provides a sage warning about the dangers of performativity with both executive and non-executive leadership. The fact that robust structures exist, committees are in place, articles are followed, and meetings happen is often viewed as a proxy for good governance. If the information that flows within those structures isn't robust, honest, clear, timely, accurate and detailed, the presence of a structure gives little comfort to those facing the public select committee. Whilst the 'how' of governance and governing is important (structure provides form and predictability), perhaps we should be more focused on the 'who' and 'what' of governance and governing?

This tension between process and purpose is especially familiar in the FE and skills sector, where compliance demands and external assurance processes can easily crowd out deeper conversations about mission, values, and impact. But even the most carefully designed governance frameworks are only as effective as the quality of what flows through them: the information that informs every decision.

Pillar 2: What is the 'what' of governing?

Accurate and honest information is the key to governance and the principles of governing. This may seem to be self evident but, it bares repeating that this is often the issue that is overlooked in well documented cases of failures in governance. You'll notice that we don't say data, this is quite purposeful. Information is data with context and narrative. The 'what' of governing in this sense can then be thought of as the detailed and contextualised information communicated within the established structures of governance. In institutions where governing is an effective practice, information and structure are inextricably linked. Good information communicated in an ad hoc and unstructured manner leaves significant opportunities for error. Things are missed, items of importance are lost, detail is overlooked, and the board can be left unsighted, misaligned and unevenly informed. As with all pillars holding up a structure, one is only as strong as the weakest point of the others and in this sense, poor information in a poor structure can lead to collapse. We are then left asking, what is 'good' information?

From a good governance perspective good information isn't really mentioned in any great depth in any codes of practice. There are statements about evidence informed decisions, about scrutiny and accountability but little recognition that all of these rely on the communication of truth in a clear and precise manner. Where does that responsibility lie? This is where we start to move towards the discussion of the third pillar, people. However, we have touched here upon one of the really difficult challenges of governance, the intersection of executive and non-executive responsibility and responsibilities. There is an abundance of clear and precise information about what governors are responsible for and what boards do, oversight, scrutiny, accountability etc are all well documented (see AoC Code of Good Governance as an excellent example), but without accurate information, that simply isn't possible. How do effective Boards navigate the tricky task of ensuring the data they are being presented is of sufficient quality to enable enactment of the responsibilities of the board? This requires a culture of candour, where truth is valued over reassurance, and where difficult messages are recognised as essential to improvement, not as threats to harmony. As such, people, relationships and experience form the third pillar and are in our view, the final securing piece of the structure of governance.

Pillar three: Who?

'Information is not knowledge'
Albert Einstein

Einstein seems to have been credited with a great many quotes, whether he said this or not, it certainly holds some truth and gives us a point of critical reflection. We can be presented with a lot of data and information, but as the American author Clarence Day pointed out, 'information is pretty thin stuff unless mixed with experience'.

Our earlier description of board members simply as volunteers was deliberately obtuse. We rely heavily on extensive experience within boardrooms that often comes from a hugely diverse range of backgrounds, experience, skills and communities. Boards can of course always be more diverse and inclusive, and it bears repeating that being inclusive is not something that boards should do, it is something that they should be. True inclusion is not an initiative or agenda; it is a defining characteristic of a board's culture and practice.

Thankfully we are now seeing an increased focus on authenticity and inclusion: beyond tokenism. Despite decades of sector rhetoric about putting learners at the heart, research shows that student and staff voices are often marginalised (Jones, 2025; McCulloch, 2009). Authentic inclusion requires more than representation; it demands real power, induction, and ongoing support for these voices to shape decisions. Boards must continue to move beyond tokenism, embedding student and staff perspectives into decision-making structures. This is not optional, diversity and generative dialogue are central to effective, ethical governance.

The make-up of abord is critical and goes beyond the appointed members. In September 2025, researchers from the University of Sunderland and Stone King LLP, published the report, Supporting Effective College Governing in England which as one of the many key findings, highlighted the significant role that people play in making governance effective, but more specifically, the significant role of the governance professional as a central figure in the choreography of governance and governing.

In the recent governance focused conference held at the University of Sunderland, we were struck by how many governance professionals gathered to participate. Circa 50% of attendees on the day have substantial roles and are employed to manage governance within their institutions.

They have quietly become the anchor of board effectiveness, advising on compliance, facilitating strategy, and ensuring governors are both informed and empowered.

Conclusion

Governance in the FE and skills sector has long relied on an improbable construct: a group of dedicated individuals, often volunteers, charged with overseeing institutions of enormous complexity and consequence. That this model continues to hold is not evidence of complacency, but of adaptability and trust in civic leadership. Yet the challenges of the coming decade, including technological disruptions, financial constraints, shifting demographics, and societal expectation, demand that governance itself continues to evolve.

The three pillars outlined here remain the foundation of effective governing. But the interplay between them is where resilience is built. Structures provide form and predictability; information gives insight and context; and people infuse both with judgement, integrity, and purpose. Governance fails when any one of these elements operates in isolation. It succeeds when they interact dynamically: when structures are flexible, information is truthful and timely, and people are diverse, skilled, and empowered.

As we have touched on here, a recurring challenge is linked to the disconnect between strategic planning and governance oversight. When boards focus too much on operational detail or rely too heavily on structure alone, they risk losing sight of long-term outcomes and institutional mission (Husband, Hill & Morrison, 2024; James & Sheppard, 2014).

The most effective boards create clear links between risk, strategy, and monitoring, ensuring that governance drives (not just checks) progress. This requires mature board cultures, effective professional leadership, and clarity in the boundaries between executives and non-executives. The next phase of governance reform in FE and skills should focus less on compliance and more on culture: building boards that learn, question, and adapt. Codes of practice and external reviews are necessary, but not sufficient as soul routes to transformation. What truly sustains good governance is an ecosystem of continuous development, professionalisation, and reflection, where governance professionals are recognised as pivotal, and where governing is seen not as a duty of oversight alone, but as an act of stewardship for learners, communities, and the future.

Across all themes, evidence points to the pivotal role of culture and relationship, especially between chairs, chief executives, and governance professionals, in shaping outcomes. Governance is as much about how as what: trust, openness, and a willingness to challenge are as important as structures and processes. Boards must intentionally cultivate cultures of trust and challenge, recognising that relationships are the foundation of effective governance.

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