FURTHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE MATURITY MATRIX

RESEARCH REPORT

ABOUT FETL

Skills and Education Group

With more than one hundred years of collective experience, the Skills and Education Group offers high quality services, support its Further Education members and the wider Further Education and Skills Sector.

Its charitable objective is the "advancement of skills and education to improve the lives of individuals" and, in support of this, Group services and support enables its members and the wider sector adapt to and operate in an ever-changing environment, act collaboratively and achieve excellence. The Group provides services which enable the FE sector to be innovative, responsive and includes support for leadership and governance, teaching, learning and assessment and non-teaching roles.

Nottingham Trent University

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is nationally recognised for outstanding teaching, research, engagement with employers and student satisfaction. It was awarded University of the Year 2019 (The Guardian University Awards 2019) and was the winner, University of the Year 2017 (THE Awards 2017)

The School of Social Science is has a national and international reputation for its theoretically informed and applied research. The School fosters a culture that values the diversity of all communities and creates a vibrant and inclusive and teaching environment grounded in scholarship, research and professional practices. Through strategic partnerships, the School influences and shapes civic, cultural and social life.

Good Governance Institute

At the forefront of national governance thinking and innovation, the Good Governance Institute (GGI), exits to help create a fairer, better world. Its part in this is to support those that run organisations. GGI aims is to ensure that organisations are run by the most talented, skills and ethical leaders possible and they work to build fair systems that consider all, use evidence and guided by ethics.

Working across several sectors including education, health and social care, housing, the Third Sector, corporate sector, culture, media and sport, GGI believes that good governance benefits society as a whole; from the smallest charity to the greatest public institution.

About the researcher

The research was undertaken by a team led by Dr Andrew Clapham of the Nottingham Institute of Education (NIoE), Nottingham Trent University. Andrew is an Associate Professor of Education Policy, Higher Education Academy Senior Fellow and Director of the Centre for Behavioural Research Methods.

Andrew examines the sociology of education and focuses on, how education policy plays out in different education settings. He has undertaken numerous projects researching education in its many guises, with an interest in informal learning, education governance, mathematics education and assessment, and teaching in the further education and skills sector. Through developing bespoke research tools, he has been able to assist organisations to understand and develop their education offer across audiences.

Andrew works closely with policy-makers and practitioners to develop empirical evidence that informs and critiques educational policy. His research expertise has led to him working extensively in regional, national and international settings.

Acknowledgement

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

I very much welcome this report that concerns a topic close to the Further Education Trust for Leadership's core focus and importance: governance. As the authors note, governance is one of the most challenging aspects of leadership in further education. It is also one of the least scrutinised and most poorly understood. There is too little support available for governors and a general lack of definition around the role and its core purposes. Yet good governance is an indisputable and much-needed element of effective college leadership and a contributor to high-quality teaching and learning. That is why FETL has made governance one of the keynotes of its final year of operation, and this report is a welcome contribution to this.

This report is valuable in that it attempts to move the discussion about governance in further education forward, and asks, in particular, what steps need to be taken to enable governance to move to its next phase, what this report terms 'maturity'. The 'maturity matrix' it outlines gives governing bodies an opportunity to 'drill down and review performance' against the Association of Colleges' Code of Good Governance. I hope it will be widely used in the sector.

The research undertaken for this report has enabled the authors to draw on the experience and wisdom of the sector in thinking about what mature governance should look like in FE and skills. This is important as, too often, reform has been imposed on the sector with too little consideration of impact and a lack of understanding of the challenges of implementation. FETL has

always tried to rebalance this and to fund and support projects that begin from the ground up, in listening mode. Rather than telling the sector what is good for it, we prefer to ask the sector what it thinks would work. FETL is therefore pleased that the authors listened carefully to what sector governors think.

These are times of challenge for further education and skills providers, and good governance will be more important than ever as we come to terms with a new and, as yet, uncertain normal. Leaders need the support of learning. They also need scrutiny-for-success if they are to do their best by their staff and students. This report aims to enhance capacity for governance and support the development of governance-wise strategies within institutions. It represents an opportunity to shift our gaze and do better, as we seek post-pandemic renewal. I very much hope that it be will be taken up as an instrument, among others, for continuous improvement.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

1.0 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The governance of a Further Education College is one of the most challenging aspects of leadership. We as a sector place many demands on our governors who are volunteers and placed in a position to give oversight and strategic leadership and yet we give them little support and few tools in which to provide that much needed oversight. Since our last work funded by FETL on what innovative governance looks like in 2015. As an organisation steeped in supporting the FE Sector for over one hundred years, we have been pondering what mature governance looks like.

The sector is under unprecedented pressure to perform within a tightening funding and quality regime and seemingly few tools to support governors and governing bodies to assist them in assessing their performance and to plan forward. Skills and Education Group prides itself on providing practical tools, training and support to its members and the wider sector. We achieved this with our innovative governance work in 2015. Partnering with NTU and The Good Governance Institute has enabled us to develop and test a practical tool, and to anchor it in academic rigor.

The college sector has the well established AoC Code of Good Governance which was established in 2015 and updated in 2019. The Maturity Matrix, I am delighted to say, doesn't argue against the Governance Code, but adds value to it. The Maturity Matrix enables governing bodies to drill down and review performance against the code. It supports a colleges annual self-assessment and provides a tool by which governing bodies can assess their "maturity"

The sector is operating in a complex and challenging environment at all levels and especially at the leadership and governance level. The Matrix will enable governing bodies to talk and create the space needed to consider where the governing body is in terms of its maturity. For this reason, we are delighted to support the sector with this work. We will apply the learning acquired from the work underpinning this report and use this to inform the way in which we, and other sector bodies, develop and provide leadership and governance support

We are grateful to FETL for supporting and funding this work and to NTU and GGI for their work to develop, research and test the Maturity Matrix.

Paul Eeles
Chief Executive
Skills and Education Group

1.1 Introduction

> Mature governance…well, in many ways, it's really simple – it's all about the right people, doing the right things, at the right time. The trick, though, is being able to do that.

The above statement is from Sandra,[1] a governance professional with many years' experience of governance in both the public and private sectors, and one of the participants in this research. Sandra made these comments when her group was asked what mature governance is. She made it clear that what might appear to be a simplistic representation of what governors do and how governance works was actually based on many hours considering just such a question herself. This report explores the perspectives of Sandra and other governors in relation to the efficacy of a tool designed to help boards map, assess and integrate their governance capacity and strategy – the FE Governance Maturity Matrix.

> Mature governance. It's of course about avoiding risk. Not being risky, and holding the executive to account in relation to risk is what we're all about. But it's also about taking risk on. Being overly risk-averse can itself be detrimental…Mature governance weighs up the pros and cons of taking or not taking a risk. After all, without risk most private sector companies wouldn't exist. (Sunil, finance committee governor, interview)

For all of us interested in governing and governance, it will come as no surprise to hear governance described as a high-profile and high-stakes activity. Nor, as Sunil told us, would it be surprising to hear governance further characterised as activity that is not without personal and organisational risk – when governance goes wrong, the consequences are quite often of such a magnitude that the public eye is drawn to it. Such risk is not restricted to one sector but is shared across many types of governance models

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1 All names in this report are pseudonyms, and the research was undertaken in accordance with the BERA (2018) ethical guidelines for education research.

in the public, commercial and charitable worlds. In recent years, the collapse of British Home Stores, Carillion and Patisserie Valeria could be attributed to poor corporate governance and stewardship (*Finance Director*, 19 March 2019).

A Charity Commission inquiry on Oxfam (June 2019) was published with the headline 'Regulator slams Oxfam over governance failings' (*Accountancy Daily*, June 2019). An equally damning indictment of governance failing was the Institute for Government's (February 2016) headline 'Kids Company: an anatomy of failure' accompanied by an article that talked of 'a charity suffering a chronic failure of governance'. In the seemingly never-ending search for the next headline, successful, well-managed day-to-day governance remains mostly unreported – after all, good news does not sell. Governance in further education (FE) is not exempt from this. For example, a search in *FE Week* reveals headlines such as:

> Time to get serious about developing governor capacity. (January 2020)

> Chair quits at college stung by £20m scandal. (October 2019)

> Second chair resigns from college group embroiled in financial scandal. (May 2019)

Such headlines illustrate the focus and interest in poor governance and the effect such governance has on FE institutions and their mission to meet socio-economic education and training needs. *FE Week* (2020) describes itself as the 'premier news services for the education and skills sector in England'. Although headlines in this publication provide a journalistic, rather than an academic and research-based review of poor governance, they do offer a barometer for assessing what interests – or incites – the readership. Particularly, a readership that may consider themselves to be on the receiving end of poor governance. Whether this interest is altruistic or voyeuristic is not clear, but, either way, the interest remains.

Allied to the headline-grabbing stories are the day-to-day pressures which are facing governance and governors.[2] Front and centre of these pressures is the role – or, perhaps more accurately, 'game' – of accountability in FE governance, a game which is becoming increasingly more high-stakes. As Clapham and Vickers outlined in 2017, accountability draws fully on discipline and disciplinary technologies of power. In the contemporary English education system – be it an FE provider, primary school, early-years setting or a university – the most prominent of these is inspection, either though Ofsted inspection frameworks or by FE Commissioner intervention.

Despite inspection – or perhaps because of it – high-profile failures of FE governance appear to stem from docile rear-view governance, overly concerned with a ritualistic preoccupation with performative regulatory mechanisms. Over fifteen years ago, Peck *et al.* (2004) explored the 'board as ritual'. They reported that the board served as a facilitator of social solidarity, whilst often failing in its core instrumental purpose of strategy-setting. This resonates with the findings of a number of FE Commissioner Intervention reports that note, for example,

> Governance at – College is complex, lacks transparency and is ineffective (*FE Commissioner Intervention Report*, 23 May 2019)

> The board currently lacks expertise in finance, audit and accounting and needs to refresh the expertise in FE, curriculum and quality. (*FE Commissioner Intervention Report*, 2 November 2018)

> There is limited evidence of clear direction and action from the board to the senior leadership team. (*FE Commissioner Intervention Report*, 15 October 2019)

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2 The term 'governor' is used in this report to describe all those concerned with the governance process – Chairs, Governors and Governance professionals - unless indicated otherwise.

These Commissioner Reports have a recurring theme of capacity. Mature governance has the capacity to recruit well, to be open and transparent and to put the right people in the right roles. Clearly the opposite is also the case – immature governance struggles to, or is incapable of, providing fit-purpose leadership. Capacity, then, is key. When we look closely at the '*Time to get serious about developing governor capacity*' article, what we find is a story that is supportive rather than critical of governance in FE. Indeed, Wright (January 2020) makes the case that:

> …the role of the governor has become hugely more challenging in the past few years. Colleges are growing in size and complexity and financial pressures mean there is an increasing need for forensic scrutiny of leadership decisions.

Wright goes on to note that 'effective governance is crucial to the success and sustainability of colleges' and asks if the sector is asking too much of what remains a largely voluntary role. The intersection between the voluntary role of governors and the high-stakes accountability which they are subject to, is part of the challenge which faces FE governance.

Having the capacity to develop governance to become more mature is a goal all governing bodies would aspire to. However, the current accountability climate is one where – as Mike described – governors are in many instances trying to 'keep their heads above water' rather than develop a mid and long term strategy:

> I think the matrix is really interesting…look, there should really be another column that's called 'pre-fundamental'. [Researcher – Really? Why?] Well I think that there are loads of colleges up and down the country, who, if they used the matrix, would really struggle to map their governance to all the indicators in the fundamental column. That's one of the reasons I think this is potentially a useful tool…to support people to map where they're at, identify what they're good at and what they need to get better at, and to help develop mid-to long-term strategy. (Mike, Focus Group 2)

As Mike's comments illustrate, it is 'stress testing' the efficacy of the FE Governance Maturity Matrix to (i) support the capacity to do governance and be a governor, and (ii) support the development of governance strategy, which is the focus of this report.

1.2 What the report does

This report supports the view that effective, mature governance is crucial and recognises that college governors are volunteers who offer their skills and expertise to the sector. Its purpose is to examine how the matrix can act as a tool that could help governing bodies measure their governance maturity and, if weaknesses are found, inform a decision on how these can be addressed.

Crucially, the report does not propose the matrix to be simply a toolkit for avoiding 'worst case' headlines. Indeed, as Suzy told us, one of the recurring concerns regarding a tool such as the matrix was that it could easily become a tick box or checklist:

> I guess, what I want to ask you is how this doesn't become another checklist. I suppose what's a little ironic is the more mature governance is, the more maturely the matrix will be used. Perhaps there should be a box in the fundamental column which says something like 'the matrix is not used as a checklist'! (Suzy, focus group 1)

Being mindful of the concerns of Mike and many other informants, we state that the purpose of the report is to outline how the matrix values the role of the governor whilst also providing a means to audit how their skills, knowledge, time, energy and effort can be best utilised.

At the outset it is important to stress that this is a report about the FE Governance Maturity Matrix. It would be relatively easy to stray away from the evidence base and make substantive comparisons between private- and public-sector governance or between school, college and university governance; such comparisons are outside the report's scope and should be a separate, much-needed piece of work.

To illustrate why the report has a deliberately narrow focus on the matrix, it is a relatively simple task to illustrate the complexity of education governance across the UK. For example, a brief foray into Higher Education (HE) sector governance reveals that, in England, most HE institutions are funded by government and are independent, self-governing bodies. Such an examination also reveals that universities have generally been instituted by royal charter, papal bull, Act of Parliament, or an instrument of government under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 or the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

However, what at first might appear relatively unproblematic soon becomes extremely complex. For example, although most English HE institutions are part-funded by the government, and are independent, self-governing bodies, and formally charities, some private, for-profit universities are not. Similarly, in England at least, most HE institutions are exempt charities, whose regulator is the Office for Students (OfS) – except those that are not exempt and so regulated by the Charity Commission. To add even more complexity to HE governance, amongst the longest-established universities the most common form of legal structure is incorporation by royal charter – except those that are a statutory corporation.

The state school sector is equally complex, with different governance structures for state-maintained schools, individual academies, multi-academy trusts, free schools – the list goes on. As such, this report focuses upon how the maturity matrix plays out in the FE sector only. What is important to stress, however, is that the elements of mature governance which the matrix portrays – be it in the public or private sectors – share a number of traits. It is these traits which are distilled and illustrated through the elements which together form the matrix.

This report provides an evidence base responding to three research questions concerned with the efficacy of the maturity matrix:

- Is a governance maturity matrix useful in FE organisations?
- How could a governance maturity matrix be developed to make it more 'fit for purpose' in an FE context?
- How could a governance maturity matrix be used in a FE context?

The aim of the report is to provide evidence for all those with an interest in FE governance – be they governor, chair, governance professional, student, parent, employer or policy-maker – to help them decide if a maturity matrix might be a viable tool for the sector. What is also important to stress is that this is a research-informed report. The research team went out to meet governors and talk governance. The outcomes of those discussions are illustrated throughout the report and inform its findings. For example, Tina told us that the matrix was about self-checking rather than providing a tick box audit trail:

> The matrix's a really helpful tool…I wish I'd had it last week for my governors meeting! What's important is that it's more than a tick box exercise…being able to self-check against the matrix, and then ask people to evidence how they've ranked themselves, is what checks and balances is all about. It's also about how we develop as governors, as governance professionals, as a board. (Interview, Tina)

It is data such as that provided by Tina which underpins this report and its findings. However, as much as the discussions were concerned with the matrix, governors told us that having the opportunity to 'talk governance' with similar, interested people powerfully illuminated many of the larger issues at play in relation to governance in the FE sector.

1.3 Building on Innovative Governance in FE

In early 2015, the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) supported research to explore what innovative governance in the further education (FE) sector looks like. Creating a space to

allow governors the time consider the kinds of governance now needed in the sector, the Innovative Governance in FE project used a combination of research models, including one-to-one interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and ethnography, to identify an evidenced-based research bank of knowledge, experience and expertise.

The findings of the research were used to design, test and develop a series of self-reflective frameworks to enable governors and governing bodies assess where they are in relation to current practice and where they may need to be. Captured in the publication '*New Models of Leadership through Innovative Governance in the FE Sector – Think Piece Compendium*' (Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2016), the research formed the basis of a useful toolkit for both new and existing governors. Revisiting this work has prompted the questions about how governance in FE has matured, how innovation is supported and measured, and how good/effective governance may be recognised.

While investigating the ways in which maturity in governance is assessed in other sectors, discussion with the Good Governance Institute (GGI) suggested a model by which governance in FE could be assessed and further developed. This report explores how this model could be used to support the assessment and development of governance in FE. It comes at a time when the impact of reported failures of governance ripple across the sector and when what constitutes 'good' governance is even more widely debated than usual.

New Models of Leadership through Innovative Governance (FETL, p. 39, 2016*)* looked at 'innovative' governance and suggested that 'there is no distinct or correct way to be innovative'. The report went on to add that:

> Innovation is a relative term; something which might be considered innovative at one institution could be a customary practice elsewhere.

It may be argued, therefore, that the word 'good' could be equally relative and that the definition of this may vary from institution to institution depending to on the maturity of governance within the institution. Research undertaken in support of this study, examined the value of – and appetite for – adapting the matrix currently used by HEIs for use by the FE sector.

1.4 Why a maturity matrix for governing bodies?

The matrix is a practical development tool providing a structured means of assessing organisational performance against a range of indicators of good governance. The standards are based on knowledge and indicators relevant to the sector for which the matrix is developed. In the case of this study, the standards looked at related to the HE sector. Governance professionals taking part in this research could, however, draw many parallels with the role of governance in the FE sector.

The matrix is intended to be used as either a framework for reflective self-assessment or as part of an independent review of governance, whether to meet statutory compliance or provide a 'health check'. The matrix supports progress to be assessed in a consistent and effective way over time. An initial assessment will provide a clear indicator of the relative maturity of the governing body, the results of which can be used to put in place a development programme.

1.5 Why a maturity matrix for further education governance?

As discussed earlier, the report is not concerned with making comparisons between governance in different sectors of state education provisions. Nor is its purpose to map out how FE governance is organised and being undertaken. Having said that, it is appropriate to spend a little time illustrating why a maturity matrix was considered useful in an FE context.

The starting point for this process was having established that a maturity matrix can assist the development of a governing body and, by doing so, support 'good governance', the obvious question arises, 'Why would such a matrix matter to the FE sector?' The answer, if not the solution, appears relatively straightforward. According to the Chartered Governance Institute (Bould, 2017), 'good governance is critical to FE providers as they undertake this vital role while navigating rapidly changing regulation'. Bould went on to note that:

> There is an acknowledgement of the importance of good governance which is reflected in a central drive to increase the spread and level of skills found on FE provider governing boards. (Bould, 2017)

The role of the governor has, notes the Education and Training Foundation (Wright, 2020), 'become hugely more challenging in the past few years'. Wright goes on to say that 'effective governance is crucial to the success and sustainability of colleges.' He asks, however, if the sector is asking too much of its governors who are, largely, volunteers. Setting aside the debate about whether or not increasing responsibilities support an argument for governor remuneration, it is clear that the expectations on governors supports a need for sustained governor development. The Education and Training Foundation recognise this and will be launching a Governor Development Programme in 2020.

The Association of Colleges (AoC) suggests that good governance is essential to the successful running of colleges and provide a range of information, resources and services to support governors and governance professionals. This comprehensive package of support includes a well-received *Code of Good Governance for English Colleges* (AoC, March 2015, amended May 2019). The code suggests that:

> College governance is not a static concept...the need to demonstrate exemplary governance practices will be even more important as the sector continues to diversify and innovate. (AoC, March 2015)

In setting the scene, the code goes on to say that, for colleges:

Adopting the...code is an opportunity to rethink and refresh approaches as the sector strives to be at the forefront of best practices in governance. It signals a willingness to enter into a new era of governance with the energy and commitment to ensure the very highest of standards. (AoC, March 2015)

The code was referred to a number of times by those participating in this study. The matrix was not – nor should it be - viewed by participants as a replacement for the code; the two can co-exist and provide mutual recognition and support. The code itself is not a stand-alone tool or document, but is one that should be read and used alongside relevant legal and statutory requirements including Instruments and Articles of Governance. As such, the code and matrix used in conjunction with one another cover many of the aspects of the continuum from fundamental to mature governance.

2.0 MATURITY MATRIX STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Up to this point we have been locating the maturity matrix within the FE sector. In this section, we delve into the matrix itself to outline what it looks like and how it might work.

The matrix is structured around nine themes or key elements and five levels to represent the main building blocks of effective governance. Each cell (see Figure 1) sets out statements against which an assessment can be made. The cells are progressive, assessing maturity from 'Fundamental' (level 1) to 'Excelling' (level 5); the higher the assessment, the greater the maturity. A single assessment is made for each theme, rather than an overall assessment. A governing body could, therefore, be mature in some thematic areas, but not in others.

Progress Levels

Key Elements	Fundamental 1	Developing 2	Strengthening 3	Sustaining 4	Excelling 5
Culture and Behaviour					
Purpose and Leadership					
Structures and Business Flow					
Skills and Capacity					
Finance and Resources					
Risk and Agility					
Stewardship and Standards					
Engagement and Voice					
Impact and Reach					

Table 1 – Maturity Matrix: Progress Levels and Key Elements/Themes (GGI, 2017).

GGI recommend that assessment against the matrix is carried out by a sub-group or by the governing body as a whole and note that:

> …choices around who undertakes the assessment are important. There needs to be a spread of different perspectives. (GGI, October 2017)

Comments by FE governance professionals as part of this study suggested that assessment could be coordinated by the governing body clerk and, possibly, introduced as part of the annual self-assessment process (AoC East of England Governance Network, 17 October 2019).

GGI suggest that those assessing against the matrix should be encouraged to rate the institution's level of maturity against each key element not only from their perspective, but also to use evidence rather than merely rely on opinion.

In some cases, institutions may also want scorers to make an assessment of ambition; that is the level of maturity the organisation would want to achieve within an agreed period which may be, for example, from six months to within two years. Development plans for individuals and/or the governing body as a whole can be agreed and put into place.

GGI further suggest that collated results should be presented in a facilitated discussion to allow differences in scores to be debated and a consensus achieved, not only about the assessment but also about possible action which would strengthen governance. This process of quality assurance and consensus-building is in itself developmental.

The matrix can also be used to gauge the level of understanding and insight of key stakeholders inside and outside the institution, by including them either as assessors or as part of the quality-assurance process. Feedback and engagement in this way can provide a worthwhile opportunity to explore relationships and possible areas of joint development of governance with partners and stakeholders.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the efficacy of the matrix in the FE context. This was as much a pragmatic decision as any other. The research team valued the voices of those 'doing' governance. Therefore, rather than undertake a survey to generate a large set of data with little depth, we instead decided to generate deep contextual data from a small set of informants. To do so, two primary research tools were used – focus groups and semi-structured interviews (see Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Thematic analysis (see Reisman, 2008) was employed to explore qualitative data. Research data were generated via focus group and interview data.

Tool	Overview
Focus Group	Two focus groups were undertaken covering the East Midlands and South East of England. • Focus group 1. $n=4$ • Focus Group 2. $n=10$
Semi-structured interviews	Themes from the focus groups were used as catalysts for semi-structured interviews. Themes • What is governance for? • What is 'good' governance? • What is 'mature' governance? • Is the matrix useful? • What needs to change in the matrix? Interviews • Chairs $n=2$ • Governance professionals $n=3$ • Governors $n=4$ • Post-Compulsory Education trainees $n=3$

Table 2 – Research data tools and informants

Prior to the interviews and focus groups, participants were provided with copies of both the HE of the FE matrices – see Appendices. This approach was designed to use the draft FE matrix as a catalyst for the discussion. Focus group informants were asked how they wished the focus group and interviews to take place. Focus Group 1 informants asked to go through the matrix row by row, whereas Focus Group 2 informants wanted a more general discussion around points of interest. Analysis of the focus group data led to the identification of five themes which were used to frame the semi-structured interviews. There was no interview schedule employed as the research team wanted to co-construct the discussion around the broad themes which had emerged from the focus groups rather than specific questions.

3.1 Data Analysis

The focus group and semi-structured interview data were analysed via Riessman's (2008) model of thematic analysis and comprised four 'phases':

- Generate codes from the data
- Combine codes and map them to themes
- Narrow the themes
- Map codes and themes to meaning.

This process identified a set of data codes, with these data codes then grouped together to give themes, as illustrated in Table 3.

Theme	Data
• Matrix recognises that governance maturity is context-specific – governance might be ranked as mature in one organisation but developing in another	'Good governance is on a continuum…what's counted as good in one college is not in another. What the matrix does is enable you to map your governance in terms of its maturity in relation to your own context.' (Governor, Focus Group 1)
• Matrix not a 'tick box' exercise, but will it become one?	'My concern is that the matrix will just be used as a kind a measurement tool which governance is measured against by others, not something which governors use themselves.' (Governor, Focus Group 1)

• Matrix can be used as one-off or annually	'I like it that the we can decide how to use the matrix… it could be just once, or it could be annually, or it could be used by us and then outside consultants to bring our analysis together.' (Governance Professional, Focus Group 2)
• Matrix develops the *Code of Good Governance*	'I see the matrix as the next step from the code. There not in competition. I suppose that the code could be the pre-fundamental stage.' (Governance Professional, Focus Group 2)
• Matrix stresses that mature governance is mature governance regardless of sector	'What the matrix does is map out the obvious. Good governance is good governance regardless of where its being done.' (Interview)
• Matrix could be more outward-facing	'I think the matrix has fallen into the trap of being too much about governors doing governance. It needs to be more outward-facing – how do people know if something is being done well so we need to include students, employers…' (Focus Group 1)
• Who does the work?	'My issue is not about what the matrix does, but who's going to do the work it entails? Governance professionals, outside consultant?' (Focus Group 2)
• How does the matrix map to risk?	'The matrix needs to be clearer on risk…not just measuring and negotiating risk but also embracing it.' (Focus Group 1)
• Matrix can be a tool for development	'What I like about it [the matrix], is how it's not only something that can, for a better word, audit the governing body. It's also is a developmental tool for the governing body as part of annual self-assessment.' (Interview)
• Matrix needs to acknowledge that much is made of 'good governance' but what is it?	'Look we've been talking about mature governance. Isn't this really about good governance? And yes, there are traits of good governance that are true no matter what sector. But as a governor, I want to know what good governance looks like in a college like mine, facing the same challenges mine does.' (Focus Group 2)
• Matrix helps with highlighting that mature governance is doing the right thing, in the right way	'For me mature governance is the right people, doing the right things, in the right way at the right time….'
• Matrix supports boards' efforts to do what needs doing to achieve aims and objectives in a way that supports values and culture	'The matrix is powerful in that it maps governance not against external measures like inspection but against the fundamental aims and objectives which are all about why we are here in the first place.' (Interview)
• Matrix highlights that mature governance is the foundation of vision with longevity	'Mature governance is about sustainability and longevity… it's about being in it for the "long haul".' (Focus Group 1)
• Matrix highlights stakeholder voice and how can it be empowered	'Good governance values a range of voices, not merely a case of stakeholder governors.' (Interview)

• Matrix highlights that varied ways of managing the board impact on what happens as much as how it happens	'In my experience an effective board is one that not only has members with the required skills, but is one that can put those skills to work in the most appropriate way...' (Focus Group 2)
• Matrix supports adaptation of structure and business flows to meet the skills set of governors	'...for example, any skill audit must speak to committee membership. But we also be mindful that there might be people without obvious experience who are passionate about a committee and can bring a lot to it.' (Focus Group 2)
• Matrix highlights structural ways of encouraging/managing committee membership	'In my college the number one challenge is recruitment...' (Focus Group 1)
• Matrix highlights different modes of governor recruitment	'Good governance is on a continuum...what's good in one college is not in another. What the matrix does is enable you to map your governance in terms of its maturity in relation to your own context.' (Governor, Focus Group 1)
• Matrix outlines need for succession planning and highlights skills required to meet longer-term aims	'Yes, recruitment is problematic but so is retention. We don't want people to stay beyond their terms of appointment, but similarly its nonsensical to lose good people without any obvious replacement.' (Focus Group 1)
• Matrix supports recruitment strategies – for example, focused on people not yet operating at board level	'It [the matrix] highlights how important it is to recruit people who mightn't have board experience.' (Interview)
• Board diversity	'The matrix stresses the need for board diversity whilst also recognising the practicalities of trying to achieve this.' (Focus Group 2)
• Impact and reach	'The matrix discusses impact and reach but what are the sector indicators for these?' (Focus Group 2)

Table 3 - Thematic analysis of data

4.0 DISCUSSION

When we consider these research themes, it is important to return to the original research questions.

- Can a maturity matrix support mature governance in FE?

- What aspects of the FE Maturity Matrix need development?

- What aspects are missing and could be added to the FE Maturity Matrix?

In the following sections, the themes are mapped to the research questions.

4.1 Can a maturity matrix support mature governance in FE?

When asked if the matrix was a useful tool for mapping mature governance in FE, 98% said that they agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 2% were neutral.

As the above analysis illustrates, when governors were asked if a maturity matrix can support mature governance in FE, overwhelmingly the answer to this question was yes. There were clear areas of the matrix which needed development. Indeed, those who remained neutral did so not because of resistance to the idea in principal but more because of specific areas of the draft matrix which required development. Informants reported that being able to self-check governance through a structured tool such as the matrix was welcome. As Shahida told us, one of the powerful aspects of the matrix was

that it highlighted how attitude, culture and mind-set were absolutely crucial for mature governance:

> Look, governance is governance! The same principles apply regardless of sector, it comes down to an attitude and mind and these are the reasons why culture and behaviour are at the top. (Focus Group 1)

Informants explained that they valued how the matrix recognised that governance maturity is context specific – governance might be ranked as mature in one organisation but developing in another. Similarly, informants told us that the matrix was not a 'tick box' exercise, with that caveat, that there was a concern that it might become one:

> What needs to be clearer, is that this is about self-assessment and board development not about a performance indicator for external scrutiny. (Focus Group 1)

Informants were also positive in relation to how the matrix could be employed in the governance life cycle and that it could be used as a one off or annually:

> What I like about the matrix is that I could've used it yesterday as a one-off or I could employ as part of our annual self-assessment cycle. (Focus Group 2)

What was revealed through the conversations with informants was how they saw the matrix as augmenting and indeed developing the code. This was not a criticism of the code per se, more an acknowledgment that the matrix was a tool with which governors could drill down into and review performance against the code requirements. Central to this discussion, was how the matrix stresses that mature governance is mature governance regardless of sector. In other words, the code and matrix both share fundamental principles of 'good' governance:

> The code and the matrix share the same DNA really… they're all about good governance. (Interview)

Informants also stressed how the matrix can be a tool for developing the governing body as part of annual self-assessment. As part of this, the matrix was seen as a tool which highlighted that mature governance is the right people, doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. Informants described how they felt the matrix can support boards to 'do what needs doing' to support aims and objectives in a way that simultaneously supports values and culture. Moreover, informants outlined how the matrix highlights that mature governance is as result of a vision which values and acknowledges longevity.

Informants reported how the matrix highlighted stakeholder voice and how can it be empowered – over and above the voice of stakeholder governors.

> For us to know how well we're doing we can't just ask ourselves…we need to know what others say. (Focus Group 1)

The matrix also highlighted that varied ways of managing the board impact on what happens as much as how it happens. Similarly, informants reported that the matrix supports adaptation of structure and business flows to meet the skills set of governors. In doing so, the matrix highlighted structural ways of encouraging and managing committee membership as well as different modes of governor recruitment.

Informants also outlined how the matrix identifies the need for succession planning, and highlights the skills required to meet longer-term aims. Linked to this was how the matrix supported recruitment strategies – for example, focused on people not yet operating at board level, as well as the need for the provision of development opportunities.

4.2 What aspects of the FE Maturity Matrix need development?

Although the matrix was well received informants identified some areas that would benefit from development. Perhaps the most prominent of these areas was that although informants told us that the matrix was not a 'tick box' exercise, there was a concern that it might become one. It should be developed to make it explicit that the matrix was an indicator of governance maturity not a simple step-by-step guide to be followed to develop mature governance.

> Governance is in many ways logical. It's also pretty much common sense. But having said that it's also very complex. So distilling this complexity into what could be seen as a step-by-step guide to good governance is problematic. (Focus Group 1)

Informants felt that the matrix could be developed to be more outward-facing. For example, many informants wondered how boards know if something is being done well or not. A recommendation for development linked to this was that students and employers should feature more prominently in the matrix:

> What's really missing here are the other voices. Yes, we have expertise as governors but we need to hear what other think as well…that's missing at the moment. (Interview)

A developmental area rehearsed by governance professionals, chairs and governors alike, was that although the matrix was a worthwhile tool, the question remained 'Who does the work?' The matrix could make it clearer as to what aspects would be carried out by a governance professional for example, and which by an outside consultant.

> When I look at this my first thought is 'Who's going to do all this?' (Focus Group 2)

A final area of development identified was how the matrix maps to risk. The matrix was recognised as a useful tool in relation to measuring and negotiating risk, but could do more in relation to embracing risk:

> When we talk about risk and governance it's all about risk avoidance. And in the current culture that's not at all surprising…especially with the accountability. But we're looking at incredible times politically and socially in our country. There're lots of examples where entrepreneurism is championed as part of the British psyche. And I agree. So, why can't colleges be entrepreneurial…surely, we should be sensibly engaging with risk, so we can grow and get better. (Focus Group 1)

Informants explained how that the matrix recognises that boards develop their own appetite for risk but that this aspect could be more explicit than implicit.

4.3 What aspects are missing and could be added to the FE Maturity Matrix?

Informants told us that a central aspect that could be added to the matrix was related to what is 'good' governance. Informants told us how the use of 'good' in relation to governance is increasingly unhelpful. Informants felt that the matrix was missing an acknowledgment that much is made of 'good governance' but that this is still a contested, and indeed poorly defined, term:

> The whole thing about good governance is a challenge, as good governance is really specific to an individual college. What I mean is that yes, there are obvious things that make governance good…but what are the sector indicators for this? How do I know how well my board and my committees are doing in relation to what is good in other colleges? (Focus Group 2)

Also missing from the matrix - but also an indicator of sector-wide omissions – is that both impact and reach are crucial indicators of mature governance but there is an absence of sector indicators:

> If we're attempting to audit our impact and our reach, we need two things. We need to have the research which can get the data and we need to know the sector indicators. Without these how do we know…(Focus Group 1)

The matrix stresses the need for board diversity and recognises the practicalities of this.

> It's so important that diversity is part of what mature governance is. But in my college, where we are geographically, we simply don't have a diverse population. Of course, we have an equal gender and age distribution. But we're really underrepresented in relation to BAME governors…this isn't because we have tried though, because we have. (Focus Group 2)

However, as the above data illustrate, informants told us more could be done to acknowledge that in some settings diversity is difficult to attain, despite concerted efforts.

5.0 HEADLINE FINDINGS

From the stories and analysis presented above, there are several 'headline' findings from the research which indicate that the matrix:

- mediated conversations and understandings around diverse approaches and activities that constitute mature governance
- acknowledges and values the voices of a wide range of participants
- mediated positive impact upon participants' understanding of mature governance
- mediated the development of a wide range of governance approaches
- acknowledged the importance of collaborative working between governance stakeholders
- identified transferability of effective practice
- valued wide-ranging and effective professional development activities.

What also needs to be stressed, is that one of the main findings that emerged from the research was the degree to which governors valued talking with other governors. All of the informants highlighted how 'talking governance' with other governors was welcomed. This was in many ways an indicator both of the research into the efficacy of the matrix but also the 'state of play' of FE governance. What was absolutely clear was how committed the informants were to the governance of their colleges and to the sector as a whole. Many of the frustrations which governors outlined were specifically

linked to fundamental issues of policy and funding which, although outside their control, had in some cases catastrophic implications for students, staff, parents and employers alike.

As such, the matrix was seen as a useful tool but one that had to operate within a context that was dictated by others. Accordingly, informants told us that although the matrix offered a lens upon governance it was a lens that was be constantly refocused by others – most notably the Treasury – outside, and with little knowledge of, the FE sector.

5.1 Aligning the FE Maturity Matrix and the Code of Good Governance

In this section, it is also important to outline how participants saw the matrix and the code working together. It could be argued that, in adapting the matrix for the specific purpose of meeting FE sector requirements, and as a tool for ensuring compliance with the *Code of Good Governance*, that the nine themes should adopt – or be more closely aligned to – the ten Principle Responsibilities of Good Governance in the AoC code for. These are:

1. Formulate and agree the mission and strategy including defining the ethos of the college.

2. Be collectively accountable for the business of the college taking all decisions on all matters within their duties and responsibilities.

3. Ensure there are effective underpinning policies and systems, which facilitate the student voice.

4. Foster exceptional teaching and learning.

5. Ensure that the college is responsive to workforce trends by adopting a range of strategies for engaging with employers and other stakeholders.

6. Adopt a financial strategy and funding plans which are compatible with the duty to ensure sustainability and solvency of the college.

7. Ensure that effective control and due diligence takes place in relation to all matters including acquisitions, subcontracting and partnership activity.

8. Meet and aim to exceed its statutory responsibilities for equality and diversity.

9. Ensure that there are organised and clear governance and management structures, with well-understood delegations.

10. Regularly review governance performance and effectiveness

Adapting, or at least aligning, the themes to match those of the code would require a rework of the standards but would result in a development tool supporting a cohesive approach to assessing, developing and sustaining good governance in FE.

5.2 Maturity matrix critical success factors

Analysis of the participants' data highlighted how they felt there were a number of critical success factors for mature governance to take place. Although these success factors were discussed in terms of the matrix, they do act as stand-alone indicators as to what is, and is not, happening in relation to governance maturity. As such, informants felt that mature governance:

- is owned by a wide range of stakeholders
- values a positive mindset
- values positive governance culture and behaviours
- has the right people, making the right decisions at the right time
- moves beyond the statutory
- makes resources available for the audit and development of governance
- values governor development
- ensures that policies and procedure match the culture and values

- values, understands and agile in relation to risk
- has peer support as explicit in structures
- understands what it sees as 'good' governance
- understand that the most effective leaders are visionary and need the foundations to support their vision
- supports the vision + governance relationship
- values different approaches to business flow
- has structured and strategic time-management of meetings
- values diversity
- maps skills to roles
- actively reaches out to recruit from community
- understands gaps in governance and actively seeks to address them
- succession plans
- makes the correct appointments
- actively encourages corporate social responsibility
- acknowledges the 'stress and strains' of context
- values and maintains successful collaborative working
- values and employs research-informed evidence

Of course, those involved with day-to-governance might not be surprised by these. After all, they are very much common sense. However, these stand-alone features have been derived from research-informed evidence. What these indicators also illustrate are some key principals which can avoid governance from 'going wrong' in the first place.

Often, the reaction to the headlines we described at the outset of this report is 'How did that happen?' Illegality is one thing. However, if the key indicators are front and centre of governance structures, then unintentional but potentially catastrophic implications of immature governance which fails in its core fundamental tasks will nearly always be avoided.

6.0 CONCLUSION

When summing up, one point is particularly clear – participants and partners alike stressed that without the FETL funding, important and developmental discussions around mature governance would simply not have taken place.

Participants highlighted that the 'space to think' about governance afforded by the project was invaluable. Similarly, in many cases partners and participants rehearsed how the project had positive outcomes for them and their work, their organisation and their boards. As illustrated in the interview data at the beginning of this report, the ability to 'talk governance', allied to the simple fact that there was manifest interest in what was going on with regard to FE sector governance, generated a positive response from participants regarding both FETL and the matrix.

Participants strongly advocated the need and demand for mature governance developing across the sector – and that the matrix was a useful tool for helping with this. Participants accepted that the matrix was a 'toolkit' to support governors' understanding of what mature governance might 'look like'. The ability of the matrix to support boards at different levels of maturity to develop mature practices was particularly valued by participants.

The legacy of the FETL funding for this research is that the matrix has been identified and welcomed by those who would use it to develop, support and understand mature governance at the 'shop floor.'

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The positive response to the FE Maturity Matrix and its value as an assessment tool suggests a need to:

- Widen the discussion on the FE Maturity Matrix to ensure a broader reach across governance professionals and senior leaders in the FE Sector through dissemination events and training sessions

- Explore how the nine matrix themes could be adapted so that they more closely match the AoC's ten Principle Responsibilities of Good Governance

- Explore how the assessment statements can be adapted so that they are more relevant to the FE sector and (see above) the Principle Responsibilities of Good Governance

- Test a re-worked version of the FE Maturity Matrix with a FE governing body over an academic year to provide a longitudinal study on how it may be of value

- Explore the development of an interactive, digital version of the Matrix to extend its reach and increase accessibility

- Develop and support continuing professional development for leaders and governors, working with stakeholders and partners to ensure a cohesive offer to governing bodies

- Using case studies that exemplify how the Matrix can be used alongside other tools, such as the Code of Governance, to develop and sustain maturity

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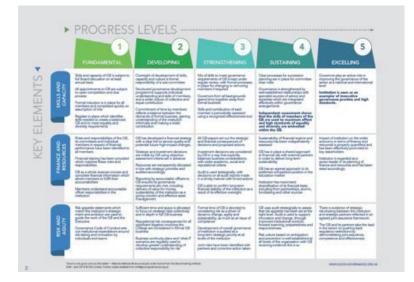
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APPENDICES

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