

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Governance Effectiveness Review 2024-2025

Report of findings from an external review and
recommendations to the Board of Governors

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and scope

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (the RCS/the Conservatoire) commissioned Advance HE to carry out an external review of governance effectiveness. The approach drew on the Advance HE framework for identifying and supporting governing body effectiveness reviews, and the three interrelated factors that underpin governance effectiveness: Behaviours, Outcomes and Enablers¹, and the requirements of the Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance² (the Scottish Code). We also make reference to the CUC Higher Education Code of Governance³ (the CUC Code) where relevant.

The review used a mixed-modes methodology, including a benchmarked online survey, which is cited in the report, document reviews, observations and (a limited number of) interviews. Details of the methodology, including benchmark cohort, are included in Appendix One of the report. The review was initiated in September 2024 and concluded with a report to the Board of Governors in March 2025.

A Steering Group of selected members of the Board of Governors supported the review process.

1.2 Context

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland was founded in 1847. It was the first conservatoire in the UK to be granted its own degree-awarding powers and is one of the world top ten performing arts education institutions⁴. The RCS offers diverse creative and performing arts education, research and knowledge exchange, across two purpose-built locations in central Glasgow. In common with many providers, the institution is facing challenges around long-term financial sustainability and viability in the face of diminishing public funding. These are challenges which are exacerbated for small, specialist institutions.

The previous external review of governance effectiveness at the RCS was undertaken in 2019.

The RCS Strategy 2030 *People, Place and Promise*, contains clearly articulated aims, ambitions, and commitments. In our review process, it was acknowledged that, in order to remain relevant and focused, the strategy will need to flex and prioritise, as challenging

¹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/framework-supporting-governing-body-effectiveness-reviews-higher-education>

² <http://www.scottishuniversitygovernance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/GOOD-HE-GOVERNANCE-A4-REPORT-2023.pdf>

³ <https://www.universitychairs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CUC-HE-Code-of-Governance-publication-final.pdf>

⁴ QS World Ranking by Subject 2024

headwinds continue to impact the Conservatoire. A new Chair of the Board of Governors was appointed in December 2022. The Chair has led a refresh of the Board's focus on strategy, including a sharper approach to recruitment target setting and financial forecasting.

2. Executive Summary

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has well developed frameworks and processes to support effective governance of the institution. We found close attention to regulatory requirements and planning and management of business. We note the more recent developments in the governance structure, which have strengthened oversight at Board level. Based on the information provided for this external review, we did not identify any issues relating to compliance.

We make a recommendation and a number of suggestions to enhance governance oversight and to support effective induction and development of members of the Board of Governors, who clearly bring a good range of skills, expertise and commitment to the governance of the Conservatoire. We also make a number of suggestions to enhance ways of working.

Our review identified the need for ongoing attention to the core areas of strategy and performance oversight, and we make recommendations and suggestions to strengthen effective oversight and assurance, bringing focus to KPIs and structured information provided to the Board and committees.

Across the scope of this report, we make five recommendations and sixteen suggestions; some are small points. Recommendations are key findings and merit the direct attention of the Board of Governors; suggestions are offered as enhancements to current practice and are for the attention of the Chair of the Board, the Academic Registrar and Secretary and/or relevant committee, Senior Management Team (CSMT).

The review has benefitted from the positive and open approach of all involved, in particular the members of the Steering Group, and the commitment and support of the Academic Registrar and Secretary, and the Assistant Registrar.

3. Main Findings

3.1 Governance enablers

3.1.1 Governance frameworks, processes and practices

The RCS has developed and documented a comprehensive suite of governance frameworks and processes to support and enable good governance practice. *Effective governance structures and processes* is one of the highest scoring sections of the survey, and above benchmark. We found evidence of well-thought-through and comprehensive documentation, aligned with the regulatory requirements and the Conservatoire's governing documents. Mapping of practice against the Scottish Code had been undertaken and we encourage this as a regular practice, to support good governance and provide assurance of compliance and good practice.

Under the leadership of the current Chair of the Board the governance structure has been further developed with the introduction of a new People and Culture Committee and a Convenors' Group⁵, both of which were referenced in our interviews as enhancements to governance effectiveness. The cycle of business for committees is planned and overseen by the Convenors' Group. Looking at the annual Board Strategy meeting programme provided we can also see a balance of items for the Board discussions: RCS as a creative institution, Strategic Plan and funding settlement.

A range of governance and governor information is publicly available on the RCS web site, including skills and diversity data. We commend a good level of transparency in the information about membership, responsibilities and operation of the Board of Governors, and also note that some of the information is out of date, and that the most recent Board minutes published were 2022.

Our review raised some areas for attention in the roles and resourcing of governance across the Conservatoire. In our experience many higher education institutions now have integrated support teams for all governance matters with the University Secretary having oversight. Others still retain some separation between support for governance across the Executive/Leadership Team, the governing body and its committees and Senate/Academic Board. The trend is for a secretariat at a central level to have oversight for all governance activities with localised support linking in where relevant. We suggest that a successful system should be well connected, visible and supportive of the institution's needs. At RCS, the Academic Registrar and Secretary is Secretary to the Board of Governors and the Academic Board, as well as the governance committees/groups; however, secretariat for the main committees of the Board of Governors is provided by senior professionals in the relevant areas. Our findings suggest that while this broadly works well, there can be a lack of join up, especially around consistent governance practices, and information-sharing

⁵ Convenors are Chairs of Committees

across committee secretariats. The quality of committee documentation, accurate and adequate recording of discussions and decisions, and tracking of actions are fundamental to assurance and risk (see 3.2.2 below). We **recommend** governance practice is enhanced by more consistent practices in documentation for committees, with high-level oversight by the Academic Registrar and Secretary, to strengthen clarity, accountability and assurance.

The previous external review of governance effectiveness at the RCS was carried out in 2019. While the review found Board-level governance appears to be compliant, we also note a number of aspects of governance and recommendations that are consistent with the findings of this review. We therefore bring attention to implementing the actions from the 2024-25 review.

Looking at governance oversight we make three **suggestions** for the Nominations Committee:

- + the Committee to have a planned schedule of meetings (these are currently *as required*) to ensure active oversight of the effectiveness of governance structures and practices, and the composition and competence required for the Board of Governors and committees. Committee oversight should include monitoring implementation of recommendations and suggestions (where accepted) from this review.
- + the name of the Committee does not encompass the breadth of the remit; renaming Governance and Nominations Committee, or similar, would make this clearer.
- + the responsibilities of the Nominations Committee to include, explicitly, oversight of the governance activities and resource requirements, to ensure the good practice and consistency is maintained across the governance of the Conservatoire. In light of our findings regarding the overall quality of governance paperwork (see 3.2 below), early consideration should be given to staff capacity in governance support.

3.1.2 Board composition and competence

The composition of the Board of Governors meets the requirements of the Scottish Code. Board and committee membership and terms of office are documented and reviewed. We saw up-to-date documentation and evidence of methodical recruitment processes, with attention to gender balance⁶ in membership. Board diversity data have been published on the RCS website; however, this is out of date. There is a skills matrix, of 30 'skills' with skills levels recorded for all members.

Members of the Board of Governors clearly bring a good range of skills, expertise and commitment to the governance of the Conservatoire and its role as a creative institution. Although there are evident good foundations, the findings from our review indicate a need for development. *Governing body membership, quality and diversity* is the lowest scoring section in the survey and this is consistent with comments and interview feedback. Some

⁶ As required by the [Gender Representation on Public Boards Act \(Scotland\) 2024](#)

areas in the survey, including recruitment, appear to be issues of communication rather than practice; questions about recruitment, induction and reviews have the highest 'don't know' responses: 19% - 28%.

The current skills matrix identifies professional-level experience on the Board of Governors for all but two of the identified skills and experience. We heard confidence in the skills of members and also gaps were identified by members, although these varied according to member backgrounds and roles.

Board of Governors membership: Has an appropriate range of skills and experience

88% agree, but 12% disagree and only 67% of Executive/student/staff members agree, compared with 100% of lay members.

Some members felt their skills were underused (by CSMT), and, again, there is a potential lack of awareness of skills and knowledge around the Board table. Governors articulated good awareness of the context and environment for the RCS, including sector challenges. (See also 3.1.3.)

The [Advance HE Governor Competencies Map](#) may provide a useful framework for broader consideration of governor knowledge, skills and behaviours to support reviews and development of Board members.

We commend the Governors' Handbook (we saw the 2024 version), which will provide the core information for governor induction – responsibilities, expectations and roles of members and the governance structures through which these are enacted. It will also serve as a useful reference document; however, it is rather lengthy and we **suggest** a more interactive format would make it more accessible, as and when resources allow. We did not see any additional induction material.

Induction for members of the Board of Governors is the process through which individuals not only develop their understanding of the RCS, role and expectations, it is also the start of building effective relationships with key individuals and other members of the Board, becoming familiar with ways of working and understanding how to bring skills, experience and other value to the process of governing. Induction should be viewed as a longer process, to enable members to learn and consolidate from experience, identify and meet development needs. Effective and focussed induction is critical to enabling student members and elected members, which often have shorter terms and specific challenges as governors, to feel able to contribute, challenge, bring their full selves and competence to the table.

We **recommend** strengthening induction and development, to include bespoke support and development to meet the different needs of members, for example, student and staff members/representatives, those new to the sector or governance roles, and planned, ongoing development for all members in the first 12 months of appointment. We **suggest** all new members are allocated a buddy or mentor for the first year and more regular opportunities to meet with the Chair. In addition, we **suggest** members of the Board are encouraged to subscribe to sector updates, for example, [WonkHE](#) and [HEPI](#) email briefings,

and Advance HE [Governance Newsletters and News Alerts](#). These insights will support members of the Board to maintain current awareness of the dynamic and evolving landscape for higher education institutions. In addition, members of the Board should be alerted to opportunities for networking and development – regional, national and creative sector.

Induction for new members should include opportunities to meet and have time with the Principal and members of the CSMT. These contacts are important for building understanding about the organisation and the matters that will come to the Board; and, an established relationship creates opportunities for better dialogue. Induction should highlight the opportunities and expectations for Board members to be visible and available to internal and external stakeholders, and for members to be actively engaged, while respecting the executive role and not straying into management.

Effective induction process and practices can help to develop a pipeline of members who can take on more responsibilities and fill key roles in due course. One additional area that can often be overlooked in governance is succession planning, particularly for Convenor roles. This could be incorporated into the existing Board and committee membership planning. Convenor roles require skills, as well as relevant professional competence, to chair meetings, ensure committees meet their terms of reference and provide assurance to the Board of Governors, which can be developed through mentoring and shadowing.

Monitoring of Board membership, *including balance of skills, attributes, equality and diversity*, is within the current Terms of Reference of the Nominations Committee. We **recommend** this responsibility is broadened to include oversight, evaluation and reporting of induction and development for all members of the Board of Governors. Reviews of member effectiveness are within the current responsibilities, and the process and outcomes for these should be included in reports to the Board.

3.1.3 Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion in membership and practice are critical to good governance. Diverse boards and inclusive ways of working bring a range of perspectives and insights to discussions and decisions, making for effective governance and stakeholder assurance.

From the survey, we noted:

Board of Governors membership: Provides a range of approaches to problem solving

77% agree: 92% lay governors agree, but only 50% Exec/student/staff governors agree, 5% below benchmark

The RCS [Equality Outcomes 2021-2025](#) includes specific and inclusive outcomes to enhance diversity of the Board of Governors. We **suggest** these should have a higher profile for the whole Board and in governor documentation and development. More prominently, the RCS Strategy 2030 leads with a specific commitment to,

Address inequalities and enhance inclusion across every aspect of our activity.

Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education is a rapidly evolving area, which requires regular development of governor competence in order to provide visible leadership of strategic commitments and outcomes. One area of lower competence that we noted from the survey is,

All Board members demonstrate up-to-date knowledge and confidence in discussions of equality, diversity and inclusion matters

At 77% agree this is one of the lower-scoring questions, and again we see a difference in perception between lay members, 83% agree, and Exec/student/staff members, 67% agree.

Sometimes we see this in universities where the governing body lacks confidence in the issues or feels that the topic (the issues and language), move so quickly that it is difficult to keep up with the changing narrative. We **suggest** a dedicated discussion and development session for all members of the Board, to build confidence and to deepen awareness and understanding of EDI, bring focus to the RCS frameworks and commitments, and sector context. The Board may also wish to consider introducing a reverse mentoring scheme for lay members, where governors are mentored by current RCS students, with the aim of developing greater insights into student experience. It is important that reverse mentoring is approached as a meeting of equals, where both parties can learn through the relationship and dialogue.

Additional insights and good practice examples from Advance HE resources include the [Board Diversity and Inclusion Tool Kit](#) an integrated and holistic approach to inclusion and diversity created from the [Board Diversity Practice Project](#). See also [Board Diversity](#) notes and the recent [Diversity of Governors in Higher Education](#) report.

Recommendations:

- + Governance practice is enhanced by more consistent practices in documentation for committees, with high-level oversight by the Academic Registrar and Secretary, to strengthen clarity, accountability and assurance.
- + Strengthening induction and development, to include bespoke support and development to meet the different needs of members, for example, student and staff members/representatives, those new to the sector or governance roles, and planned, ongoing development for all members in the first 12 months of appointment.
- + Terms of Reference of the Nominations Committee are broadened to include oversight, evaluation and reporting of induction and development for all members of the Board of Governors. Reviews of member effectiveness are within the current responsibilities, and the process and outcomes for these should be included in reports to the Board.

Suggestions:

- + Nominations Committee to have a planned schedule of meetings (these are currently *as required*) to ensure active oversight of the effectiveness of governance structures and practices, and the composition and competence required for the Board of Governors and committees. Committee oversight should include monitoring implementation of recommendations and suggestions (where accepted) from this review.
- + The name of the Nominations Committee does not encompass the breadth of the remit; renaming Governance and Nominations Committee, or similar, would make this clearer and add more value to the Board.
- + The responsibilities of the Nominations Committee to include, explicitly, oversight of the governance activities and resource requirements, to ensure the good practice and consistency is maintained across the governance of the Conservatoire. In light of our findings regarding the overall quality of governance paperwork, early consideration should be given to staff capacity in governance support.
- + A more interactive format of the Governors' Handbook would make it more accessible, as and when resources allow.
- + All new members of the Board are allocated a buddy or mentor for the first year and more regular opportunities to meet with the Chair.
- + Members of the Board are encouraged to subscribe to sector updates, for example, [WonkHE](#) and [HEPI](#) email briefings, and Advance HE [Governance Newsletters and News Alerts](#).
- + RCS *Equality Outcomes* should have a higher profile for the whole Board and in governor documentation and development.
- + A dedicated discussion and development session for all members of the Board, to deepen awareness and understanding of EDI, bring focus to the RCS frameworks and commitments, and sector context.

3.2 Strategy and Performance

3.2.1 Performance Oversight

Section 5 of the survey *Effective strategic development and performance measurement* had an overall score of 73% and was the second lowest scoring section for the Conservatoire. Two aspects of performance oversight are addressed in this section of the survey. Firstly, in response to

The Board of Governors ensures that effective performance reviews of the head of institution are undertaken

62% of respondents agreed (3% below benchmark), 12% disagreed, 19% 'don't know'

However, comments provided by respondents suggested that the low score may have been due to communication to the Board regarding how the Principal's performance is reviewed rather than any deficit in the review process itself. As a minimum, members of the Board should have assurance about the performance review of the Principal, in accordance with the RCS policy.

Secondly, in response to

The Board of Governors has agreed performance measures incorporating leading and lagging indicators against which it receives assurance of institutional performance against the strategic plan

85% of respondents agreed and the score for this measure was 5% above benchmark.

However, comments provided by respondents suggested that there could be more clarity about performance measures and that KPIs required further development. In our review of documents including Board and committee papers, together with interviews and observations, we saw evidence that work on this is underway and acknowledgement that the Board is on a developmental journey with KPIs and strategy oversight.

The RCS Strategy 2030 *People, Place and Promise* contains a number of clearly articulated goals. But it was acknowledged in interviews conducted by the review team that, in order to remain relevant and focused, the strategy will need to flex as challenging headwinds continue to impact on the Conservatoire. The Board will need clarity about the full suite of KPIs along with any dependencies, associated risks and other measures being used to monitor strategic performance.

Based on the evidence we have seen, it was clear that the new Chair has led a refresh of the Board's focus on strategy, raising the prominence of strategic discussions in the Board's business. For example, the observed meeting of the Board of Governors commenced with a presentation by the Head of Engagement on the Conservatoire's new 5-year Knowledge Exchange and Innovation Strategic Plan. This was received very positively by members and was followed by questions and discussion. In the same meeting, the Deputy Principal

introduced a revised student recruitment strategy including target numbers for recruitment. This was linked to the later items on finance, when a discussion ensued around the inter-relationship between future recruitment targets and financial forecasting and the importance of effective risk management was identified.

The student recruitment papers noted the relevance of recruitment targets to KPIs. In the separate Board discussion of KPIs, in a number of areas progress had been colour-coded as red and members acknowledged that the Board and the institution are on a journey with KPI development. The Chair asked members the question “whether we are getting closer to a [KPI] document that is useful in focusing Board discussions” and the following were suggested:

- including the Conservatoire’s cash position in the KPIs,
- the need to map the KPIs across to RCS’s risk register and to consider both at the same time (while also considering the risk register itself more regularly).

The Chair requested that the Board’s schedule of business ensures that both are considered at the same time.

Based on the evidence seen, including discussions observed at the Board meeting, we **recommend** that the Board completes its development of an agreed suite of KPIs, ensuring that these map to the strategy and supporting plans, along with an articulation of risk, including those for student recruitment and financial performance.

The papers for the observed meeting of the Board lacked consistency in content and appearance. There was no use of cover papers except where the paper was from the Academic Registrar and Secretary. The Board may be accustomed to this and may even be content with the overall approach. Indeed, from the survey,

Board papers: Are of consistently high quality, 96% of respondents agreed.

However, this aspect of the governance enablers at the Conservatoire does not reflect standard corporate governance practice, or good practice in the HE sector in either Scotland or the wider UK.

3.2.2 Assurance and Risk

The clarity in Board-level strategic focus and oversight was evident at the observed meetings of two Board committees. As with the Board itself, raising the bar for the quality of committee papers would be beneficial, especially as regards cover papers, executive summaries and commentary on data tables.

In the pack for the observed meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, there were no cover papers, executive summaries, or key matters highlighted for attention. Minutes of the previous meeting were comprehensive, but the action tracker did not include progress updates. The papers flowed into each other in the pack and were only identifiable by the agenda number on the first page. Data sets were presented without cover notes or commentaries. At the meeting itself, the Chair identified key items for discussion and

provided a clear steer on financial items, providing opportunity for discussion and questions from other members. Members made good quality contributions, asking many questions and seeking understanding. The student number and status report appeared insightful for governors and prompted broad discussion and engagement with future planning. Overall, the meeting provided a forum for relevant business, and evolving thinking for papers and discussion at the Board of Governors; however, effective committee-level oversight of financial performance was impacted the lack of context and analysis in papers or stated action required from the Committee.

In the pack for the observed meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee, again there were no cover papers or executive summaries. Minutes of the previous meeting were clear and there was an Action Summary listing owners and deadlines for actions, although some actions were listed simply as “asap”, a practice which we would suggest potentially inhibits accountability and creates a lack of clarity. All decisions and actions, should be considered in the context of resource available to take responsibility for the action and timeliness.

Papers were generally well-structured and presented despite the lack of cover papers. There was inconsistency in format and content, although it should be noted that some were external reports. At the meeting itself, the Chair explored points raised by members, summarised items and noted clear actions. Again, members’ contributions and questions were of good quality, evidencing a high level of professional expertise and knowledge.

Two items of discussion were particularly noteworthy. Firstly, the internal audit items, where there was a frank and transparent discussion about RCS’s relationship with the provider and agreement about lessons learned and not to be repeated in future. Secondly, a review of the risk register which, prompted by the Chair, developed into a wider discussion of the risk environment and the dynamism of the Conservatoire’s approach to risk identification and evaluation. It was noted that sustainability remains the top-level area of risk for the institution, and there was agreement about the importance of actively maintaining the risk conversation between governors and the senior team.

In sum, both of these observed meetings included good exchanges between governors and members of the senior team, demonstrated/evidence value add from the governing body, and were beneficial in evolving thinking and business for reporting to the full Board. As noted previously, better quality papers would have supported good discussion. Accordingly, we **recommend** the design and implementation of a standardised cover paper template for use by all boards and committees of RCS. That used by the Academic Registrar and Secretary provides a useful starting point. A sub-section should be included for indicating whether and how the paper is concerned with academic assurance (see section 3.2.3 below). We also **suggest** the implementation of training in best practice for all authors of papers, the focus to include brevity, conciseness, and the use of plain English.

We encourage evolution of performance and assurance and **suggest** some specific attention to practice development, to include data/insights, processes and behaviours. The discussion paper [Measuring What Matters](#) offers reflective questions for senior leaders and

governing bodies, and aims to share insights into current practice and suggest where attention could be focused.

The RCS has identified the need to 'join the dots' across strategy, KPIs (data) and risk. An example Strategic Scorecard from the above paper is shown at Annex A of this report, which may support this thinking and articulation.

3.2.3 Academic Assurance

In the survey responses, the scores for three questions suggest a positive view of how the Board of Governors is fulfilling its responsibilities for academic assurance:

Mechanisms are in place for the Board of Governors to be confident in the processes for maintaining the quality and standards of teaching and learning and the standard of awards:

96% agreed (11% above benchmark, 0% disagreed, 0% don't know (92% lay members agreed; 100% exec/staff/student members agreed; 100% exec non-members agreed)

The respective responsibilities and relative accountabilities of the Board of Governors and the Academic Board are appropriate, clearly defined and mutually understood

92% agreed (7% above benchmark), 8% disagreed, 0% don't know (100% lay members agreed; 83% exec/staff/student members agreed; 86% exec non-members agreed)

The Board of Governors ensures that defined quality levels for the student experience are being achieved

85% agreed (2% above benchmark), 12% disagreed, 4% don't know (83% lay members agreed; 67% exec/staff/student members agreed; 100% exec non-members agreed)

At the same time, comments received with the survey suggest a desire for more clarity about the importance of the Board's responsibilities for seeking and receiving assurance about quality and standards and the wider student experience, and more prominence for academic assurance in Board agendas and papers. For example,

The Board is stronger, in my view, in its strategic input than in matters of quality of student experience, where my perception is that the issues that determine (and detract from) the student experience are not always in view for members.

The link between the Board and the deliberative structure of Academic Board and Board of Governors Committees could perhaps be clearer at times, to ensure that the deliberative structure is properly used, and that the Board has the means to engage with the issues that arise from it with a full understanding of context. The intersection of Academic Board and Board of Governors Committees might be better articulated.

I think the work of Academic Board in terms of quality and standards could be more prominent in Board meetings at appropriate times throughout the year give Governors a greater understanding of this key aspect of the RCS operation.

During the review, beyond comments such as these and occasional comments in interviews, we saw no evidence to suggest any major issues or deficits in academic assurance.

The papers for the observed meeting of the Board of Governors included some which would be typical of the academic assurance activities of any HE provider at this point in the cycle, including a Report from the Academic Board [Section B, Items and Reports To Note] as well as papers for information [Section C] such as the Self-Evaluation and Action Plan. We also note that, in Section A of the meeting [Main Items for Discussion and Approval], items of business included the presentation and discussion of the Knowledge Exchange and Innovation Strategic Plan, and the Report from CSMT, key elements of which were academic in nature.

Beyond the core dimensions of academic quality and standards, the business of academic assurance can have a wide reach. Both the KEI Strategic Plan and the academic elements of the CSMT report were examples of reporting that went beyond assurance about quality and standards and encompassed the wider aim of assuring the Board about the ongoing strategic focus and relevance of the Conservatoire's academic endeavours. Governing bodies do not always recognise this wider level of academic assurance. It might be beneficial for RCS Board agendas and papers to signal more clearly those items and papers which are fulfilling an academic assurance remit, perhaps via a sub-section in a standardised cover sheet template.

Advance HE, UUK, CUC and GuildHE collaborated on a project to understand shared challenges and approaches to academic assurance for governing boards. The [Academic Assurance Reflective Questions](#) are designed to help institutional self-assessment and continuous improvement, and may support this aspect of Board practice and development. Advance HE has also developed a check list of [practical advice](#) on the various ways that Boards can develop an understanding of academic assurance as a continuing process. In addition, the independent Higher Education Policy Institute recently (2023) produced a useful short guide [How are governing bodies seeking assurance on academic quality?](#)

Recommendations:

- + The Board completes its development of an agreed suite of KPIs, ensuring that these map to the strategy and supporting plans including those for student recruitment and financial performance, and include a related articulation of risk.
- + The design and implementation of a standardised cover paper template for use by all boards and committees of RCS. That used by the Academic Registrar and Secretary provides a useful starting point. A sub-section should be included for indicating whether and how the paper is concerned with academic assurance (see also sub-section 3.2.3).

Suggestions:

- + The implementation of training in best practice for all authors of papers, the focus to include brevity, conciseness, and the use of plain English.
- + Evolution of performance and assurance through specific attention to practice development, to include data/insights, processes and behaviours.

3.3 Ways of working

This aspect of Advance HE's Governance Effectiveness Framework, identified in the Framework as "Behaviours", explores the working relationships and boardroom behaviours that enable effective governance and includes well recognised issues such as the importance of the relationship between the governing body Chair and the head of the organisation.⁷

Section 8 of the survey is explicitly concerned with working relationships and board room behaviours and has five questions or measures. Of these, three scored below the benchmark, albeit achieving high scores themselves:

Working relationships between Council members and the organisation's executive are transparent and effective

85% agreed (4% below the benchmark), of which 92% of lay members agreed, compared with 67% of Executive, Staff and Student members, and 86% of Executive/senior manager non-members.

The role of the Council in providing constructive challenge is: Understood and accepted by both members and the executive

85% agreed (5% below the benchmark), of which 92% of lay members agreed, compared with 50% of Executive, Staff and Student members, and 100% of Executive/Senior manager non-members.

The role of the Board of Governors in providing constructive challenge is: Undertaken effectively

80% agreed (7% below the benchmark), of which 83% of lay members agreed, compared with 60% of Executive, Staff and Student members, and 86% of Executive/Senior manager non-members.

While it scored 4% below the benchmark, the positive response to,

Working relationships between Council members and the organisation's executive are transparent and effective,

was borne out by our observations of the Board of Governors and committee meetings, where we saw productive interactions between lay members and CSMT. The tone, behaviours and interpersonal dynamics were positive in all meetings. Discussions were professional, respectful and good-humoured. In interviews we heard that the working relationship between the Chair and the Principal is "good and open", "easy-going and constructive (with) good communications".

Governance discussions can sometimes feel like "two sides of a table"; from one side, Executive members provide information and recommendations, while from the other, lay

⁷ Advance HE Governance Effectiveness Framework, 20.11.2020, p3 and 8

members ask questions and provide views. While we saw an element of this in meetings, we also observed the following:

- Openness to hearing about issues,
- Partnership in resolving issues,
- A focus on the student experience and the long-term interests of the institution,
- Lay member support for the senior team,
- Appropriate boundaries for governance and management.

Alongside this positive view, the responses to questions concerned with the degree of constructive challenge provided by lay members to CSMT are interesting. Regarding:

The role of the Council in providing constructive challenge is: Understood and accepted by both members and the executive

92% of lay member respondents agreed, compared with only 50% of executive, staff and student members.

The role of the Board of Governors in providing constructive challenge is: Undertaken effectively

83% of lay member respondents agreed, compared with only 60% of executive, staff and student members.

This is amplified by comments received with the survey, for example:

It often feels that constructive challenge is graciously received but appears to have little or no influence on what then happens. There are some exceptions to this, but not as many as I would like to see.

There can be a dynamic at the [Board] where governors identify many issues and propose (sometimes conflicting) mitigations in the spirit of offering constructive challenge. Although the intent is not that these all be taken on board, I fear the overall effect can be a dampening of the Executive's enthusiasm.

As noted in sub-section 3.2.1, the new Chair has led a refresh of the Board's focus on strategic discussions. This has also involved raising the bar for the types of issues under discussion and questions being asked. A theme which came through in a number of interviews was the understandable urgency around the need to address the financial challenges facing the Conservatoire. This was reflected in different ways in interviews with CSMT members and lay members, but all concurred that the financial challenges are pressing.

Based on the evidence from interviews, observations and the survey, we conclude that there is further work to be done, firstly to deepen understanding of the important role of the Board in providing constructive challenge, and secondly to enable constructive challenge to be

both sought and provided more effectively. We **suggest** that these could be addressed through holding in-person development sessions, perhaps prior to Board meetings.

We also **suggest** that, to continue strengthening board/CSMT working relationships, it could be beneficial to create opportunities for the following:

- + Building mutual understanding of the knowledge, skills and experience of lay members and CSMT
- + Ensuring a balance between interactive sessions and presentations at Strategy Days
- + Posing some big questions to open strategy refresh discussions, for example: What are the elephants in the room? What have we not been talking about, which we need to get into the open? What will be the role of conservatoire education and training by 2050, and how do we need to position the RCS for this, what are the biggest risks to financial sustainability and are our mitigations robust enough?
- + Creating more opportunities for engagement with the wider staff and student community around the Board meetings (e.g. via presentations from staff teams followed by Q&A sessions; or via small groups of lay members visiting staff teams in their workplaces).

We also refer to our earlier suggestion that a standardised cover paper template for board and committee papers would be helpful, since it could include a section in which authors are explicit about the questions and issues which the board/committee is being asked to focus upon.

Suggestions:

- + Hold in-person development sessions to deepen understanding of the important role of the Board in providing constructive challenge, and to enable constructive challenge to be both sought and provided more effectively.
- + Continue strengthening board/CSMT working relationships through mechanisms such as those identified in the text of section 3.3.
- + Building mutual understanding of the knowledge, skills and experience of lay members and CSMT.
- + Ensuring a balance between interactive sessions and presentations at Strategy Days.
- + Posing some big questions to open strategy refresh discussions, for example: What are the elephants in the room? What have we not been talking about, which we actually do need to get into the open? What will be the role of conservatoire education and training by 2050, and how do we need to position the RCS for this, what are the biggest risks to financial sustainability and are our mitigations robust enough?

- + Creating more opportunities for engagement with the wider staff and student community around the Board meetings (e.g. via presentations from staff teams followed by Q&A sessions; or via small groups of lay members visiting staff teams in their workplaces).

4. Recommendations and Suggestions

| Recommendations | |
|-----------------|--|
| R1 | Governance practice is enhanced by more consistent practices in documentation for committees, with high-level oversight by the Academic Registrar and Secretary, to strengthen clarity, accountability and assurance. |
| R2 | Strengthening induction and development, to include bespoke support and development to meet the different needs of members, for example, student and staff members/representatives, those new to the sector or governance roles, and planned, ongoing development for all members in the first 12 months of appointment. |
| R3 | Terms of Reference of the Nominations Committee are broadened to include oversight, evaluation and reporting of induction and development for all members of the Board of Governors. Reviews of member effectiveness are within the current responsibilities, and the process and outcomes for these should be included in reports to the Board. |
| R4 | The Board completes its development of an agreed suite of KPIs, ensuring that these map to the strategy and supporting plans including those for student recruitment and financial performance, and include a related articulation of risk. |
| R5 | The design and implementation of a standardised cover paper template for use by all boards and committees of RCS. That used by the Academic Registrar and Secretary provides a useful starting point. A sub-section should be included for indicating whether and how the paper is concerned with academic assurance (see also sub-section 3.2.3). |

| Suggestions | |
|-------------|--|
| S1 | Nominations Committee to have a planned schedule of meetings (these are currently <i>as required</i>) to ensure active oversight of the effectiveness of governance structures and practices, and the composition and competence required for the Board of Governors and committees. Committee oversight should include monitoring implementation of recommendations and suggestions (where accepted) from this review. |

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| S2 | The name of the Nominations Committee does not encompass the breadth of the remit; renaming Governance and Nominations Committee, or similar, would make this clearer and add more value to the Board. |
| S3 | The responsibilities of the Nominations Committee to include, explicitly, oversight of the governance activities and resource requirements, to ensure the good practice and consistency is maintained across the governance of the Conservatoire. In light of our findings regarding the overall quality of governance paperwork, early consideration should be given to staff capacity in governance support. |
| S4 | A more interactive format of the Governors' Handbook would make it more accessible, as and when resources allow. |
| S5 | All new members of the Board are allocated a buddy or mentor for the first year and more regular opportunities to meet with the Chair. |
| S6 | Members of the Board are encouraged to subscribe to sector updates, for example, WorkHE and HEPI email briefings, and Advance HE Governance Newsletters and News Alerts . |
| S7 | RCS <i>Equality Outcomes</i> should have a higher profile for the whole Board and in governor documentation and development. |
| S8 | A dedicated discussion and development session for all members of the Board, to deepen awareness and understanding of EDI, bring focus to the RCS frameworks and commitments, and sector context. |
| S9 | The implementation of training in best practice for all authors of papers, the focus to include brevity, conciseness, and the use of plain English. |
| S10 | Evolution of performance and assurance through specific attention to practice development, to include data/insights, processes and behaviours. |
| S11 | Hold in-person development sessions to deepen <u>understanding</u> of the important role of the Board in providing constructive challenge, and to enable constructive challenge to be <u>both sought and provided</u> more effectively. |
| S12 | Continue strengthening board/CSMT working relationships through mechanisms such as those identified in the text of section 3.3. |
| S13 | Building mutual understanding of the knowledge, skills and experience of lay members and CSMT. |
| S14 | Ensuring a balance between interactive sessions and presentations at Strategy Days. |
| S15 | Posing some big questions to open strategy refresh discussions, for example: What are the elephants in the room? What have we <u>not</u> been |

| | |
|-----|--|
| | talking about, which we actually do need to get into the open? What will be the role of conservatoire education and training by 2050, and how do we need to position the RCS for this, what are the biggest risks to financial sustainability and are our mitigations robust enough? |
| S16 | Creating more opportunities for engagement with the wider staff and student community around the Board meetings (e.g. via presentations from staff teams followed by Q&A sessions; or via small groups of lay members visiting staff teams in their workplaces). |

Appendix 1 Methodology

The review used a mixed-methods approach, producing qualitative and quantitative insights to inform the findings and recommendations. Survey, observations and interviews took place between October 2024 and January 2025.

- + Document review
- + E-survey, with Likert Scale and free text responses, core questions benchmarked against >70 tertiary education providers.
- + Observations of meetings:
 - Audit and Risk Committee
 - Finance and General Purposes Committee
 - Joint Meeting of Audit and Risk and Finance and GP Committees
 - Board of Governors
- + Interviews with members of the Board of Governors and Senior Management Team:
 - Committee Convenors x2
 - Trade Union Governor
 - Lay members (including the Chair) and Student member (group)
 - Principal
 - Deputy Principal
 - Senior Management Team (group)

The review team worked with a Steering Group of members of the Board of Governors and were well supported by the Academic Registrar and Secretary and the Assistant Registrar.

Appendix 2 Survey

Survey responses and benchmarking: *LINK*

Annex A Measuring What Matters

Through 2023-24, Advance HE convened a sector steering group comprising representation from the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), Committee of University Chairs (CUC), GuildHE and Universities UK (UUK). This project sought to uncover the ways in which performance is currently measured, understood and used by boards and senior leaders to evidence achievement of strategic aims, and value creation. The discussion paper [Measuring What Matters](#) offers reflective questions for senior leaders and governing bodies, and aims to share insights into current practice and suggest where attention could be focused.

Example Strategic Scorecard

| Strategic Position | | Strategic Options (Opportunities) | |
|---|------------------------|--|---|
| Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) external positioning and internal ability to deliver and demonstrate. NSS – external ranking and benchmark alongside internal capacity and capability to deliver Research rankings Entry tariffs Research intensive Teaching intensive Student profile | | A major campus decision Merger Strategic Partnerships New policies from sub committees? | |
| Strategic Implementation | | Strategic Risk | |
| Data requirements Milestones KPIs and non-financial performance indicators | Dates, timelines, etc. | Student Fee income and policy | Internal/external - appetite low due to financial position |
| | | New Building Estate utilisation | Internal Internal |
| | | Visa policy | External – appetite high as international student impact limited. |
| | | Key staff losses over merger decision | Appetite low as ability to recruit low |



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