

Exeter College

From 'Notice to Improve' to 'Outstanding' in four years



The role and experience of a governor

Exeter College became the UK's first Tertiary College in 1970, providing all post-16 education and training for the city of Exeter, bringing together the former grammar schools, sixth forms and Exeter Technical College. The College now educates and trains over 11,000 young people and adults, full time and part time from the city of Exeter, Devon and the South West. The College's mission is 'to be regarded as an outstanding college within our community, realising the opportunities through partnership and innovation'.

In 2008 the College was graded 'Good' by Ofsted in all areas, but in May 2008 received a 'Notice to Improve' for some success rates below acceptable minimum standards. In 2012, as part of a pilot 'No Notice Inspection' under the new Ofsted Common Inspection Framework, Exeter College became the first college to be graded 'Outstanding' overall, with the three key themes, Student Outcomes, Teaching and Learning, and Leadership and Management, all gaining an 'Outstanding' grade.

What part have governors played in the College's success and what are the lessons to be shared with all college governors?

Alan Douglas has been a governor of Exeter College since April 2005 having moved to Exeter following relocation with the Met Office where, as a senior manager, he was the Relocation Director. With previous experience as a school chair of governors, his motivation in joining the College Board of Governors has been to support the College in achieving its aim of being one of the country's best colleges. He has been a member of the Business Services Committee since April 2005 and Chair of the Quality and Standards Committee from February 2008.



In this governance article and think piece, Alan shares his journey and experience as governor of an outstanding college:

Exeter College has certainly been in the headlines in recent months. Following the first pilot 'No Notice' Ofsted inspection of an FE/Tertiary College in March 2012, our College was assessed to be 'Outstanding' in all key categories of the proposed New Inspection Framework, including Teaching and Learning, Outcomes for Learners and Leadership and Management. Yet less than four years previously, in May 2008, Exeter College was formally served with a 'Notice to Improve' because of success rates below acceptable minimum standards.

How did the College turn this position round, and in particular, what was the role that governors played in this transformation?

The Start of the Journey

In 2008, Exeter College had good A level and International Baccalaureate (IB) results but other results were mixed. An Ofsted Inspection in March 2008 resulted in an overall 'Good' grade; but the College was left with a clear message that whilst the best parts were good, the rest needed to improve, since in many cases success rates were below the national average. The Notice to Improve, based on the 2006/07 success rates, re-enforced that need and proved to be a catalyst in terms of changing the College's culture and approach.

The start of the change was when the governors and College worked together to create a new five-year strategic plan – with an agreed vision for the College “... to be considered Outstanding by the community”.

Following receipt of the 'Notice to Improve', the Quality and Standards Committee sought details of why the College was in that position:

- what were the issues?
- what were the reasons for the poor success rates?
- was it retention?
- was it poor levels of achievement?
- what success rates had been expected?

Over a two-month period, the true position was identified. It became clear that:

- retention was poor in some areas;
- achievement levels were less than acceptable in some areas (especially in some AS subjects);
- pockets of poor success were being masked by good results (and the reverse);
- the College did not have procedures in place to spot problem areas at an early stage; and
- the data tracking was neither robust nor fit for purpose.

Clearly there needed to be action, and it was agreed that the first priority was to secure a lifting of the 'Notice to Improve' based on the success rates achieved in 2009 (the 2008 exams had already been sat, so nothing could be done to influence the 2008 outcome).

Two key decisions were taken at this stage, actively encouraged by the governors, and these were to: continue to offer education opportunities to every student who applied, and to insist on the highest integrity in reporting numbers and success levels. The College staff then looked at what they could do to support the drive to improve.

In the summer of 2008, the College adopted the policy of 'right student, right course'. This meant that, whilst no student was refused a place, the College would no longer accept a student on a course which was inappropriate to their experience and level of entry qualification. Following the 'Notice to

Improve', LSIS supported the College through a consultant. The governors showed their commitment to change by being present at, and being active in all key meetings with the consultant.

During the remainder of 2008, the College interviewed for and appointed, on the basis of the candidate who could best deliver the quality aspirations being sought for the College, a vice-principal (Curriculum and Standards) who took up his position in January 2009 (the governors forming the majority of the selection panel). Also during 2008, the Quality and Standards Committee insisted on better data tracking and reporting – and secured a key change; an acceptance by SLT on a set of aspirational, challenging but achievable targets for that (and subsequent) academic year(s). These targets were consistent with securing changes which would give, over time, success rates delivering Ofsted 'Outstanding' levels by 2012. The Quality and Standards Committee also really challenged the College in detail on their draft SAR, pointing out inconsistencies and lack of evidence of claimed grades, and also sought and secured changed policies to improve retention levels.

It was during this period that the College Board recognised that they needed to devote the same energy to quality, teaching and success rates, as they had been recently giving to finance and a refurbishment programme if the College were to become 'Outstanding', and teaching and quality issues were often taken first at board meetings.

Getting there

In 2009, the Quality and Standards Committee kept up requests for all the latest information on retention, and started to seek information on expected success rates; by 2010 this information flow had become 'the norm'. The Committee spent much time challenging the College on what new procedures they had put in place to actively monitor what was happening in the College, identify early signs of weaknesses, and be reactive in trying to overcome a problem before it affected outcomes.

One of the changes introduced that year was the introduction of modified termly quality and review days where each faculty leadership team presented to the SLT: their current position, expected success rates, any issues they had and identified resource needs. Importantly, the purpose of these meetings was to help faculties deliver their targets and they were encouraged to raise problems they had identified to help ensure targets were delivered, as against feeling they were 'letting their faculty down' by admitting to a problem. To help, the Board allocated an agreed level of resources to SLT to be available to recruit extra staff, or do what was necessary – all that they expected in return was that targets were achieved. A governor sat in as an observer for one (of the six) sessions each term – to show (to faculty teams) governor support for the process. Based on the outcomes from these reviews, the Quality and Standards Committee identified and supported equipment and/or facility requests put to the Business Services Committee.

During the summer of 2009 we recognised that whilst we still had pockets of poor performance, the College would achieve success rates which would initiate the lifting of the 'Notice to Improve'. The staff were thanked for their efforts, and for meeting all of their challenging targets that year; and the staff responded by setting themselves targets for 2010 that were so challenging that the Quality and Standards Committee lowered one or two slightly! However, the change in culture was now in full swing and the staff could see that the changes being sought were bringing about the required improvements. The next challenge was to improve the standards across the board, and not just in the areas where there were weaknesses. The College set itself a challenge to get above national averages in every course it ran, and eventually aim for the top quartile for all courses, the top 10% in key subjects, and similar levels for A levels, but set against Sixth Form College data; by 2012.

SARs continued to be challenged and the governors supported peer reviews and inspections from Colleges already at an 'Outstanding' level – with governors being interviewed and attending the feedback sessions, as with an Ofsted inspection.

The governors also recognised that processes alone would not deliver the overall success levels being looked for and therefore supported suggested changes to help improve the standards of teaching and learning by individual lecturers and by faculties. All faculties were internally observed and inspected over a three year period, initially in development support mode, and later in inspection mode, including use of an Ofsted Inspector – and the Quality and Standards Committee considered all the reports. By academic year 2011/12 all faculties were expected to be graded ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’. At individual level, every lecturer was observed at least annually, and with development and support to help staff be graded, initially at least as ‘Satisfactory’, and then at ‘Good’ or better in classroom practice. Governors insisted that the College did not retain staff who, after appropriate support were unable to deliver the required levels.

Following detailed review of, and challenge to the SAR in December 2011, the Governors endorsed a SAR grading the College as overall ‘Outstanding’ and ‘Outstanding for Teaching and Learning’. The assessments in the SAR were then validated by the pilot Ofsted ‘No Notice Inspection’ at the beginning of March 2012.

So what have been the key actions by the Governors, primarily of the Quality & Standards Committee? In this respect it must be noted that it is essential that the Governors do not define or implement the processes; their role is to be supportive, to help establish the framework, set the targets, and ensure changes take place if targets are not being met.

My advice to any governor or board of governors seeking to achieve an outstanding level of college performance is as follows:

1. Make sure that you have access to and really understand the underlying data, so that it can be effectively challenged on the details.
2. Satisfy yourselves that the College SLT have identified the real priority issues and take appropriate action.
3. Help establish a shared vision with the staff and actively promote a “can do, will do” attitude and culture.
4. Set annually, clear, SMART targets which are challenging/aspirational but achievable, and then require regular reports on progress towards the targets.
5. Be seen to support the SLT in establishing and implementing processes which aim to deliver good/outstanding teaching by all staff, and deliver outstanding success outcomes for all learners. These processes must have regular reviews to spot, at an early stage, where a Faculty or an individual needs support to get them back to the required level. Governors should check that the required actions have been taken and the outcome delivers the expected results.
6. Ensure the whole Board of Governors recognises the priority that needs to be given to effective Teaching & Learning and specialist resources, if the College is to be an outstanding performer.
7. Be present at feedback sessions from Ofsted or other reviews by external bodies, including consultants and peer reviewers, to show support for what is being done.
8. Recognise and celebrate success as targets are achieved and help promote the advances the College has made.