

Review of the Lanarkshire Regional Strategic Body

Report by David Newall, Chair of Board of Management, Glasgow Clyde College

1 Introduction

This report considers how the Lanarkshire Board has been addressing its responsibilities. The remit and context are set out in **Appendix 1**. In undertaking the review I have read the relevant paperwork and met with a range of senior managers and governors (see **Appendix 2**). I would like to thank everyone who contributed. Thank you especially to Penny Neish and Morag Tyrrell for their assistance.

2 Challenges facing the Lanarkshire Board

As chair of an assigned college in Glasgow, I have experienced another model of regionalisation. Comparing the situations in Glasgow and in Lanarkshire, there are specific issues in Lanarkshire that have made regionalisation very challenging for everyone involved. These are:

.1 The regional structure

The Lanarkshire Board has responsibility through current legislation for regional governance as well as governance of New College Lanarkshire. This is an extremely difficult model to operate. It has a conflict of interest at its very core. It makes it hard for governors to distinguish their regional from their college roles. It also creates anxiety on the part of South Lanarkshire College because, while the model was intended to promote collaboration, it can feel like a takeover.

.2 Strategic priorities

In recent times, the Lanarkshire Board has been overseeing the implementation of a challenging business plan for NCL as well as handling legacy issues from the recent merger. These subjects have rightly occupied the attention of governors and of senior managers. Consequently there has been limited time to focus on addressing the regional remit.

.3 Executive resource

Unlike in Glasgow, where the Regional Board is served by a team of regional staff, there is no such resource in Lanarkshire. The workload associated with regionalisation has therefore been taken on by staff who are already fully engaged with their college responsibilities.

3 The Board's Record of Achievement

The following paragraphs discuss what the Lanarkshire Board has achieved in its regional role. In view of the challenges identified above, a lot has been accomplished, and much credit is due to Board members and senior executive staff. But I think there is room for improvement. In Section 4 below, I have made some suggestions for the Board to consider.

.1 Governance and reporting structure

There have been important achievements in this area. Fundable status has been secured. Outcome Agreements have been approved and arrangements established to monitor progress. A regional strategy has been published. The Funding Council's reporting requirements are being addressed, as are financial reporting requirements.

On the negative side, the way in which the Board conducts its business is untidy. I have two principal concerns:

- Regional business ought to be clearly identified on Board agendas, and to be quite distinct from NCL business.
- Given that the SLC Board reports to the Lanarkshire Board, I do not think SLC Committees should also report to Lanarkshire Committees. I appreciate this structure may have been put in place with a view to bringing the colleges closer together, but it seems a cumbersome approach. Surely it would be simpler if each college had its own committee structure, and all regional business was reserved for the full Board?

.2 Student Experience

There are initiatives, such as Foundation Apprenticeships and Developing the Young Workforce, where a Lanarkshire-wide approach is benefiting the student experience. In addition, the two students' associations talk with each other and the colleges liaise closely in issuing offers of admission.

However, Glasgow's experience suggests more could be done in this area. GCRB has been prominent in leading regional initiatives in areas such as Embracing Diversity, Mental Health support, and Support for Care Experienced students.

.3 Efficient Service Delivery

The two colleges collaborate effectively with APUC on joint procurement. They have also taken joint initiatives to procure specialist resource in Data Protection and Information Security. There is collaboration on staff development, and service functions are encouraged to share good practice. Lanarkshire's approach in this area is similar to Glasgow's.

.4 Strategic allocation of resources

In transferring student credits from NCL to SLC, the Board has shown itself able to reallocate resources strategically to serve the interests of the Region as a whole. However, the annual allocation of resources between the colleges remains a difficult area because of the conflict that exists between Lanarkshire Board members' duty to the Region and their duty to New College Lanarkshire.

There may be lessons to learn in this area from Glasgow. Here, the Regional Board has established a protocol for resource allocation whereby it receives recommendations from a group that includes an independent financial expert and whose members have no vested interest in the outcome.

.5 Communications / Public Relations

Lanarkshire is not performing well in this area. One reason is that there have been tensions within the Board which have been evident to outside parties. Another is that the Board has not been producing high quality reports and promotional documents setting out what has been achieved by Lanarkshire's colleges.

With a small commitment of resource, the Board could be much more effective in publicising what it is delivering for the Region. As an example, it is worth comparing the recent self-evaluation reports prepared by GCRB and by the Lanarkshire Board. If Lanarkshire does not make improvements in this area, it is likely to be perceived in a relatively poor light by external parties such as SFC and Audit Scotland.

.6 Costs of the Regional Structure

It is to Lanarkshire's credit that it has taken on board the Regional workload without incurring much additional cost. The approach is remarkably inexpensive when compared with that in Glasgow. However, if improvements are to be made in the Board's performance and the way it is communicated there may be a need for additional resource. If so, SFC may be prepared to provide some financial support as it has done in the past with GCRB.

4 Suggestions for the Board to consider

- .1 Establish a 'Regional Lead' for Lanarkshire. This role might be addressed by a senior member of executive staff as part of a wider portfolio of duties. Among other things, the Regional Lead would:
 - provide a comprehensive report to each meeting of the Lanarkshire Board covering the full range of Regional business;

- with the support of a communications officer (see 6 below), ensure that formal reports by the Regional Board are produced to a high standard and that the Region's achievements are publicised effectively; and
- be the Region's single administrative point of contact with the SFC - something that should help avoid SFC staff approaching staff in both colleges when seeking information.

If this suggestion is taken forward, it is likely that additional staff resource will be required to free up the time of the Regional Lead.

- .2 Reconstitute the current Lanarkshire Committees, which in future would simply be committees of New College Lanarkshire.
- .3 Introduce regular, informal meetings of the two college chairs plus the two principals. These meetings would enable good communications between chairs and principals, which are essential for the Regional Board to work effectively. They could be attended also by the Regional Lead (1 above).
- .4 Identify areas in which a region-wide approach could be taken to improve aspects of the student experience. These should feature prominently in the collaborative plan that is currently being developed.
- .5 Develop a formal process for allocating revenue and capital funds. A starting point might be to meet with staff from GCRB to review their approach.
- .6 Make available communications/PR expertise to support the work of the Regional Lead (1 above). It may be possible to source this expertise from within the existing college teams. If so, additional resource may be required for backfill.

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Background

As part of the Scotland's Colleges 2018 Report, the Auditor General (AG) considered the work being undertaken in the three multi-college regions, namely the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI), the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board (GCRB) and the Lanarkshire Regional Strategic Body.

In this report, the view taken by the AG of the Lanarkshire Region was not as positive as that expressed with regard to either UHI or GCRB. More specifically, the AG stated that *"... the benefits of regionalisation in Lanarkshire have come about mainly through the merger of colleges to create New College Lanarkshire. Under the regional structure, New College Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire College are working together to meet core statutory requirements, but the regional arrangements are not delivering any significant regional benefits"*. Further, the report went on to say that *"The Lanarkshire Board should develop a clear plan for improving collaborative working across the region"*.

The AG's report commented that:-

- significant co-operation or integration between the (Lanarkshire) colleges had been limited;
- there was limited evidence that the Lanarkshire Board had sought to address the issues described or that its colleges had explored opportunities for more effective regional working; and
- most members of the Lanarkshire Regional Strategic Body recognised that the current arrangement was not ideal, going on to record that SLC Board Members saw no additional benefit to be gained from any changes across the region.

Remit for Review Exercise

The Lanarkshire Board notes the AG's perspective and, while having a different view itself, wishes to react positively to the comments made in the Scotland's Colleges 2018 Report. The remit proposed for this exercise, therefore, is seen as being several-fold:-

- To review and comment on: the Board's response to the Auditor General's report; its self-evaluation of June 2019; and its "next stage" additional planned activities.
- To consider and comment on past, present and proposed regional collaborative and operational engagement arrangements in Lanarkshire against that (being) delivered in the other multi-college regions;
- Given the existing regional arrangements and the accountable role of the Regional Strategic Body, to consider the current arrangements for the SFC collecting information on college activities and comment upon its need to engage with, or collect information, directly from Assigned Colleges.

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