

Higher Education involvement in school governance:

Findings from a small informal SHELL survey, Spring 2010

By *John Hall, Head of SHELL at London Higher*



1 Purpose, method and summary

Purpose: The SHELL project is being undertaken by London Higher (the regional university association for London) as part of the London Challenge programme to 2011. It promotes 'school-HE links in London' (hence the acronym). One component is to encourage **reciprocal working between the sectors, and an important element of this is cross-representation on governing bodies**. The scale of the 'strengthening links' challenge in London is to stimulate over 40 HEIs and over 400 maintained secondary schools to be connected more systematically and regularly. Ideally we want to get beyond awareness and outreach-as-recruitment into links between subject staff at both ends.

Method: In spring 2010 I circulated a questionnaire to the **JISMAIL Governance group** seeking evidence from any HEIs that encourage staff in their university to become secondary school governors. I offered to follow up any 'Yes, we do that' replies with a telephone call. The enquiry yielded about a dozen responses from a variety of HEIs in terms of age, size, mission and location. Emails were followed up with phone conversations for some of these.

Summary: **No surprises** – there is a spectrum in this self-selected group of respondents from passivity to strong commitment in encouraging such staff involvement in school governance. From those at the active end of the spectrum I have selected a clutch of **useful web pages showing how they are organised and what they do** – see the links at the end of this report.

2 The relevance of strategic mission to an HEI's interest in governor representation

Several respondents viewed engagement with schools (and the FE sector, which is outside the direct scope of the SHELL programme in London) as part of their mission to **engage with, and maybe provide leadership within, the 'local community'** however defined. Some viewed school engagement as an ideal example of 'volunteering'.

HEIs with **education faculties** add an overlay of direct engagement with schools for teacher training and CPD, including school leadership, and for them working with schools is built in to daily routines.

In some places, and Hull was evidenced, there is encouragement for engagement with local authorities at the strategic level, leading to some partnership working with the local authority's schools division. (I appreciate that such collaboration might be strengthened through the work of local Aimhigher partnerships, although respondents did not mention this.)

3 The importance of strategic leadership

Some respondents were members of the institution's senior management team at DVC/PVC level. By the way they described their duties, it was clear that they were committed personally to encouraging staff to engage with schools, and raising awareness of opportunities for HE staff within departments and administrative units (but not so readily in students' unions, it seems).

4 HEI staff as governors

Few HEIs know how many staff *are* school governors, although most know that ‘some staff are – usually in a personal capacity and often beginning as a parent governor’. One incoming senior manager surveyed all staff in his (large) HEI to gauge the extent of such service. Other HEIs have compiled *inventories* of membership. There are also examples of rights, or maybe we should say traditions, of making nominations to governing bodies.

The governments’ *academies programme* (Labour earlier, and the Coalition Government is on the same trajectory) has certainly caused many HEIs to decide how to encourage staff to serve on the governing bodies of academies. In some cases DVCs and other senior staff have become chairs. We might speculate about the possibility of primary schools seeking HE governors as they adopt academy status, and if HEIs act on the National Council for Educational Excellence’s recommendation for stronger engagement with the primary sector.

As to any *rewards or recognition for staff for taking on governor duties*, these seem very low key if not absent. Managers might be encouraged to acknowledge the time taken up when they discuss duties and work programmes with staff. Nottingham Trent University allows staff who are governors 20 hours a year in lieu to attend to their duties. But on the face of it governor service does not feature in formal performance appraisals.

5 Interest and requests from the schools side

The pressure is not all driven by HEIs. Clearly some schools and academies want to have people from the HE sector on their governing bodies, although the regulations are stronger in defining parents, community and staff participation than the education providers for the years beyond school. One academy in west London can boast of a DVC from one (very large) HEI and a deputy director from a prestigious small specialist HEI.

And recruiting governors might only be part of a wider narrative. UWE, for example, reports having ‘enhanced partnerships’ with a half of Bristol’s secondary schools, and of using its networks to help recruit, for example, a legal partner and a marketing director to school governor roles. In a school with a ‘maths problem’, a PGCE maths lecturer has become a governor...

6 Are HEI governors supported in their roles?

The answer is ‘sort of’. There are some self-help networks within individual HEIs, and some governor recruits are offered briefings and materials. (One of my ambitions for this short inquiry was to uncover examples of staff being briefed about how to take the approach of: *‘I work within the HE sector, and I can help you to understand changes in the whole system’*. In other words not just viewing themselves as a governor from a particular HEI, and therefore possibly directly interested in student selection and recruitment.) Both UWE and Nottingham Trent offer support to staff in governor roles.

7 Reciprocity: do people from the schools sector feature in university governance?

The answer here is 'hardly at all'. While not surprising, it is disappointing to the extent that it helps to reinforce the view that leadership in the schools sector is of lesser importance to an HEI's governing body than hard, professional skills, especially from business and finance. Principals of FE colleges, by contrast, are often represented on university councils. (Of course, many FE colleges rival HEIs in size, and may offer HE courses including foundation degrees, usually in conjunction with a local HEI.)

However, respondents did give examples of schools heads and others serving on larger and more broadly-constituted university courts rather than on governing bodies.

Corroboration of the trends towards smaller governing bodies and the appointment of governors with more obviously business-facing skills was provided in my conversations with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

8 Having read this, will you please send your views or experiences?

Dear Reader: This was a quick survey by way of helping the SHELL team to understand the range of approaches to school (and university) governance across the country, and so to have a better idea of how to encourage our London HEI partners to examine their own behaviours.

I don't want to undertake a further survey, but we should be ***pleased to hear about other good examples, especially where we could add further web links to this report*** – the report itself being destined for the SHELL website.

Please send any examples or views to SHELL@londonhigher.ac.uk.

Future work: We are also preparing a factsheet for London HEIs on how to find out about school governor vacancies across London, starting with the School Governors' One-Stop-Shop service (www.sgoss.org.uk). We are also in conversation with students' unions about how they support work in local schools, including ambassadors, mentors and governors.

9 Thank you to respondents to my survey:

Namely: Mary Brittain, Head of Schools, Colleges and Community Outreach, Nottingham Trent University; Jane Bunce, Registrar and Clerk, University of Northampton; Prof Glenn Burgess, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning & Teaching); University of Hull; Sally Neocosmos, Interim Registrar & Secretary, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; Jennifer Nutkins, Academic Registrar, Loughborough University; Maxine Penlington, Executive Secretary, Committee of University Chairs, Birmingham City University; Kevin A Porter, Deputy Director, Royal College of Music; Derek Pretty, Registrar and Secretary, University of Bristol; Prof Ron Ritchie, Assistant Vice-Chancellor and Dean of the School of Education, University of the West of England, and from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education Governor Development Programme: Dawn Forman and Allan Schofield. All views and any errors of reporting are mine.

A selection of web links begins on the next page...

10 A selection of web links

Bristol's two universities, the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England Bristol (UWE), provide helpful pages about staff engagement, including school governing, on their websites.

For the **University of Bristol's** approach, start with its Centre for Public Engagement, which is part of Communications and Marketing Services, and described at www.bristol.ac.uk/cms/cpe/outreach. Volunteering as a school governor is reported at www.bristol.ac.uk/publicengagementstories/stories/2009/67.html and the broader staff policy on volunteering (including a day's paid leave) is addressed on the personnel 'positive working environment' pages at www.bristol.ac.uk/pwe/volunteering.html. A home-grown and student-organised volunteering programme which serves a quarter of the city's primary schools is described at www.bristol.ac.uk/publicengagementstories/stories/2009/98.html. Three university staff are governors of the Merchants' Academy which the university co-sponsors (the school's site is www.merchantsacademy.org).

From **UWE Bristol's** home page there is an immediate link to pages for 'teachers and advisers' www.uwe.ac.uk/schoolsandcolleges which describe pre- and post-16 outreach work, partnership opportunities and professional development. Of particular interest in a SHELL context, because we want to encourage stronger subject-based school-university collaboration, is the page on 'subject-based outreach activity' at www.uwe.ac.uk/schoolsandcolleges/outreach-subjects.shtml.

The university's 'enhanced partnerships' with the City Academy Bristol and as co-sponsor with Rolls Royce of a separate federation of three other academies, along with its innovative work with Trust schools, is described at www.uwe.ac.uk/schoolsandcolleges/enhanced-partnerships.shtml.

UWE Bristol was also one of 11 English HEIs that participated in the **HEFCE-funded grant programme into links between HEIs and schools, colleges and academies**. As at July 2010 the national overview report was not available, but there are links to individual reports at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd07_10. The previous government's prospectus for academies, trusts and higher education (a joint publication between what in 2007 were the Departments for Children, Schools and Families and for Innovation, Universities and Skills) is at www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/ec_group/D167293100713.

And here is an example of how **Nottingham Trent University** encourages staff to become school governors and supports them:

'Are you currently a school governor or interested in becoming one? If so, we would like to invite you to join us at our School Governor Network Session: **1 July 2010** ...

'Many NTU staff undertake the role of school governor as a personal commitment unrelated to their day job. This session gives an opportunity to meet other colleagues who are governors and share experiences over lunch. You will also hear how the University policy can support your role and learn about how the University already works with many schools and colleges across the region.

'The role of governor involves contributing to the education and achievement of pupils within schools and colleges by overseeing school policy, budgets, recruitment and curriculum, offering informed and critical support to the school management.'

Involvement with trusts and academies and governor engagement featured strongly in recommendation number 5 of the HE Ambassador Group to the previous government's **National Council for Educational Excellence** (NCEE; see www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee/downloads/DIUS-NCEE.pdf). The topic was also mentioned in the report by Institute of Education researchers for the Sutton Trust (see www.suttontrust.com/reports/IOE.pdf, page 27).

See also Universities UK's findings and recommendations in *Higher education engagement with schools and colleges: partnership development* (2009) which was published with a simultaneous report on *Academies and trust schools: where do universities fit in?* (both at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Category/Pages/Engagement-with-schools-and-colleges.aspx).

It will be interesting to see how the Coalition Government views HE engagement within its expanded academies programme (see www.education.gov.uk/academies).

The framework of **governance in HEIs** is outlined in the Committee of University Chairs *Guide for members of higher education governing bodies in the UK* (HEFCE, 2009), pages 40-47 (see www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_14).

This SHELL report can be downloaded from www.londonhigher.ac.uk/SHELLGovernance.html.

Coming soon:

A SHELL information leaflet entitled:

'Become a School Governor in London: Guidance for university staff and students'

downloadable from www.londonhigher.ac.uk/SHELLGovernance.html in September 2010.