



ACTIVATE LEARNING FURTHER EDUCATION CORPORATION CORPORATION MEETING

Meeting date: Tuesday 13th February 2024

Venue: **Microsoft Teams**

PRESENT:	Sue Sturgeon Gary Headland Alison Blight Smitha Nair Natalia Malczewska Cathie Prest Andy Stone Emma Shipp Kathy Slack Latifah Taha James Voûte Dan Willis	Chair of the Corporation Chief Executive Officer Student Governor Student Governor Staff Governor
IN ATTENDANCE:	Cheri Ashby Jon Adams Steve Ball Neil Brookes Silja Latvin Cat Marin Paul Newman Lauren Ward	Deputy Chief Executive Officer Chief Strategy Officer Chief Operating Officer Executive Director Faculty and Campus (North) Founder/Chief Executive, PsycApps (<i>As indicated in the minutes</i>) Group Director of Strategy and Innovation (<i>As indicated in the minutes</i>) Executive Director Faculty and Campus (South) Governance Officer / Minute taker
CLERK:	Amy Gleeson	Acting Head of Governance / Clerk to the Corporation

MINUTES

The meeting started at 17.00

<u>MINUTE NO.</u>		<u>ACTION RESOLUTION</u>
1.	Apologies 1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Dermot Mathias, David Goosey, and Lesha Chetty.	
2.	Declarations of Interests, Gifts, and Hospitality 2.1 The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) notified the Board that he was gifted a bottle of alcohol-free mulled wine and a bamboo coffee cup from PsycApps before Christmas. Both were gifted to Activate Learning.	

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NO.**

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3. Confidential Minutes and Matters Arising of the meeting on 12th December 2023

3.1 There were no outstanding confidential matters arising from the meeting on 12th December 2023.

3.2 The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 12th December 2023 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Minutes of the Meeting on 12th December 2023

4.1 A spelling error was raised under item 6.9 of the minutes. The Acting Head of Governance (**HoG**) agreed to make the correction.

4.2 The Board approved the minutes of the meeting on the 12th December 2023 as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters Arising from the Meeting on 12th December 2023

5.1 There were no matters arising from the meeting on 12th December 2023.

6. Organisational Objectives and Strategic Risks (Balanced Scorecard)

6.1 The Board received the Balanced Scorecard report, which was taken as read.

CEO Update

6.2 The CEO informed the Board that the organisation was in a strong position, organisational clarity had improved, and the finances were stable. The CEO commended the Group Executive Team for their strategic planning and ability to identify and manage risks early, as well as their alignment to the organisation's mission and purpose.

6.3 The Board noted that Part Two of the Review of the Learner Journey which related to the Faculty Manager role, led by Paul Newman, was complete. The plans included an investment of 10,000 additional hours into frontline leadership, aiming to address the concerns raised by various stakeholders about the workload and coping abilities of frontline managers. The investment would be funded in part by the reduction of a Group Executive Team (**GET**) post in December 2023.

6.4 The CEO highlighted the sector-wide concerns regarding the scale and pace of curriculum reform amidst political unrest, and provided assurance to the Board that the organisation was proactively managing the changes.

6.5 The Board noted that comprehensive planning was underway for the next academic year.

6.6 The Board praised the quality of the meeting pack and the strong connection between the papers presented by the executive.

Risk Register Management Discussion

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6.7 One governor requested further clarification on the organisation's current strategic risks, specifically querying whether adjustments to the risk register were necessary to include risks such as cybersecurity, Safeguarding, Staffing, and other challenges impacting the FE sector. The CEO responded by outlining the process through which the strategic risks were identified and communicated to the Board. The CEO emphasised that there was a systematic approach which involved the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and the Audit and Risk Committee and explained that there was a separation between operational and strategic risks. He acknowledged the importance of cybersecurity and agreed to include it in the top-level risk register for visibility. The COO highlighted the recent changes to the organisation's approach to managing risks and informed the Board that the Audit & Risk Committee will be focusing on conducting deep dives into the primary risks on the risk register. The Board noted that there was a separate safeguarding risk register which was reviewed monthly by GET.

CEO

ACTION: Add Cybersecurity to the Strategic Risk register.

Staff shortages.

6.8 The CEO updated the Board on the status of staff shortages. The Board noted that the risk had been removed from the strategic risk register as it was operational, but it would continue to be monitored. The CEO conducts exit interviews with teaching staff, to collect candid feedback and to better understand the factors which are influencing staff turnover. Additionally, the CEO advised that there was a proactive staffing strategy in place to recruit teachers before the summer break in preparation for the anticipated increase in student numbers for the upcoming academic year.

Reputational / UTC risk.

6.9 The Board received an update on the UTC Reading and UTC Swindon risks. The Board noted that UTC Reading had a monitoring visit in the late Autumn and continues to be categorised as 'Needing Improvement', pending further evaluation. UTC Swindon was identified as being 'At risk' but there has been significant leadership changes and actions agreed to elevate UTC Swindon to a 'Good' standard by the Summer.

Employer Engagement.

6.10 One governor emphasised the importance of employer engagement in the context of apprenticeships and future skills needs and suggested a broader scope for the employment engagement risk. The CEO agreed to review the risk.

CEO

ACTION: Review the 'Quality of Employer Engagement' risk.

Surrey Coroner Inquest.

6.11 The Board was briefed on the ongoing developments relating to the Surrey Coroner's inquest. During the update, it was emphasised that a wide array of support measures had been implemented for the staff involved. These measures included personalised support packages tailored to individual needs, encompassing options like private counselling sessions and workload adjustments. The Chair shared that she was in regular contact with the Group Designated Safeguarding Lead to provide additional support.

Partnership with PsycApps.

Catalina Marin (CM), Group Director of Strategy and Innovation and Silja Latvin (SL), founder and Chief Executive of PsycApps joined the meeting.

6.12 The Board received a presentation from Silja Latvin (SL), founder and Chief Executive of PsycApps. The presentation detailed the features of the eQuoo App developed by PsycApps, which focuses on teaching psychological skills in an engaging and interactive manner. Silja highlighted the evidence-based nature of their approach and the effectiveness of their intervention in improving resilience, reducing depression and anxiety, and enhancing personal development and interpersonal relationship skills. The Board noted the significance of the collaboration with Activate Learning and NCC in conducting a large-scale randomised control trial involving 14 campuses and over 8,000 students.

6.13 The CEO expanded on the strategic importance of the initiative for Activate Learning. It aligns with the organisations aim of being a pioneering educational group and using evidence to inform decision making. It also links directly to the organisational objective of raising the organisation's profile nationally and with government stakeholders.

6.14 The CEO thanked Silja, Cat and Jon for their efforts on the project and emphasised the significance of the initiative in improving emotional and mental health among learners. The Chair echoed her appreciation and support for the project and expressed that the Board would eagerly anticipate its outcomes.

Catalina Marin (CM), Group Director of Strategy and Innovation and Silja Latvin (SL), founder and Chief Executive of PsycApps, left the meeting.

7. Learner Journey Update

7.1 The Board received the Quality Performance Update report, which was taken as read.

Apprenticeship Update.

7.2 The apprenticeship data showed improved employer feedback, increased achievement rates, and fewer withdrawals. The organisation was cautiously optimistic about the trajectory and the focus was currently on communication with employers and apprentice progress tracking.

7.3 The Chair referred to the low income due to poor apprenticeship recruitment and the Institute of Technology numbers and questioned the impact and solutions. The COO advised that historically, there had been consistent underperformance in apprenticeship income compared to budget. The Board noted that the responsibility for apprenticeship sales was now shared between the DCEO and COO and efforts to improve included the formation of a team focused on college-based apprentices, collaboration between the Marketing team and Activate Business School to drive enrolments and a commitment to realistic budgeting and a sharpened strategic focus.

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7.4 The Board discussed improving employer engagement and meeting the industry placement requirements. The Board noted that areas for investment had been identified to stimulate growth and next year's budget would include resources for boosting apprenticeship numbers.

7.5 One governor queried how the organisation's apprenticeship performance compared to the external environment. The DCEO advised that there were no figures to hand, but the current 60% achievement rate was positive considering the challenging nature of the apprenticeship landscape.

Further Education Update.

7.6 The DCEO highlighted that the organisations efforts to improve learner attendance had seen progress, with over 60% of students achieving an attendance percentage of 85% or above. The number of students withdrawing in the first 42 academic days had decreased.

7.7 The Board noted that the results from the November English and Maths exams were positive. There was a notable drop in high-grade achievement in maths which was a national trend.

7.8 The DCEO noted that the organisation would be focusing on supporting the more vulnerable student groups like young parents/ carers by exploring options such as blended delivery to allow for greater lesson accessibility.

Higher Education Update.

7.9 The Board was notified that Activate Learning had received a silver Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) award.

7.10 The DCEO explained that the retention rates were tracking well at 97%, however, there is a focus on retaining and improving communication with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. Efforts were also being made to enhance communication with students regarding feedback and the actions taken.

'Mental Health Matters Here' Strategy Update.

7.11 The Board noted that the 'Mental Health Matters Here' strategy was implemented in May 2023, in response to concern around student Mental Health and Well-being. The Safeguarding Team had handled 1,500 reported mental health cases since September, a 15-20% increase compared to the previous year.

7.12 The Board noted that the organisation had recently conducted Safeguarding audits. The data was being analysed and a report would be submitted to GET after the half-term. The CEO and DCEO provided an overview of some of the measures which had already been implemented based on feedback from staff and students such as improved signposting to college resources, increased leadership visibility, engagement with local authorities and

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daily communications to staff with a named leadership point of contact for support.

7.13 The Board examined the results from the Oxwell Student Survey and discussed the necessity for additional analysis concerning mental health issues, especially the impact on students' everyday lives. It was proposed to request more data from Oxwell. The DCEO shared insights into the organisations sports initiatives and measures to assist students amid the cost-of-living crisis, which include offering free breakfasts, providing food banks/parcels, and sign posting to charities. The DCEO agreed to reach out to Oxwell for more detailed statistics.

8. Finance, Information, Estate and Equipment

8.1 The Board received the Finance, Information, Estate and Equipment paper which was taken as read.

Financial Overview.

8.2 The Board noted that the organisation was on track to meet the financial objectives, including an EBITDA score consistent with the budget projections and maintaining a 'good' financial health rating.

Cash Position.

8.3 The cash position was reported as strong, with a forecasted year-end balance of just over £17 million, slightly above budget but down year-on-year due to deliberate investment decisions. However, the long-term financial outlook remains robust, with significant free cash expected over the coming years.

Income and Expenditure Details.

8.4 The COO highlighted positive variances in income lines, particularly in 16 - 18 core income and the high needs income received from local authorities, with a possibility to receive further funding.

8.5 The COO referred to the challenges regarding budgeting for recruiting students on apprenticeships and higher education programmes. The Board noted that the organisation was considering how the budgeting could be improved and that further detail regarding the apprenticeship income would be reported at the next meeting.

Investment Fund and Strategic Investments.

8.6 The Board discussed a £2 million investment fund which would be used to drive efficiency, growth and contribution as well as improvements to the learner and staff experience. The Board noted that some of the funds had been allocated to create additional resources for Safeguarding and learner welfare support. There was also a focus on responding to the growth in student numbers and planning for future scalability.

8.7 The COO advised the Board of some of the strategic initiatives which could be funded through the investment pot, including apprenticeship and higher education recruitment, and the development of online programmes.

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8.8 The Board was notified that due to exceptional student growth this academic year, the organisation was granted in-year growth funding. The COO emphasised the importance of maintaining value for money and advised that there would be a strategic evaluation on how to best deploy the additional funding.

8.9 The Chair raised questions regarding the £300K reduction in lettings income and the potential for setting up an investment reserve for the future, due to underspending the investment funds. The COO explained that any unspent funds could be retained, however, creating a reserve could possibly lead to non-compliance with the accounting standards so it would need to be investigated further. The Board noted that part of the reduction in letting income was due to the ending of a radio station tenancy lease on one of the campus buildings.

8.10 One Governor questioned the strategic implications of the reduction in apprenticeship numbers within certain subjects and how the proposed £1M investment would generate returns and close the gaps. The COO explained that the additional funds will be used to help resolve legacy issues and improve the Marketing strategy to regrow the apprenticeships programme.

9. Strategy Update – Curriculum Reforms

9.1 The Board received the 'Strategic Update: Overview of work to date with focus on Curriculum Reforms Strategy' report which was taken as read.

Strategy Function Overview.

9.2 The Board noted the advantages of having a strategy function within the college and its role in increasing the impact and relevance of Activate Learning's contribution to the communities served and meeting the national skills needs.

Government Policy and Skills Needs.

9.3 The Chief Strategy Officer (**CSO**) highlighted the importance of good government policy as a critical factor for the college's success. He informed the Board of the organisation's efforts to influence policy, understand local and national skills needs, and drive innovation through evidence-based decision-making.

Curriculum Reforms and T Levels.

9.4 The CSO provided an overview of the impending curriculum reforms and the introduction of T Levels. The CSO highlighted the complexity, the challenges they pose and the necessity for the college to prepare for significant changes by September of the following year.

Stakeholder Engagement.

9.5 The Board noted the role of the college in leading the sector through a collaborative group with other colleges and government departments. This collaboration aims to ensure successful policy implementation and reinforce the further education sector as a key partner in meeting national skills needs.

Questions and Discussion.

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9.6 The Board discussed the timelines for implementing curriculum reforms and noted that the new qualifications would be introduced gradually over several years, with Level 3 reforms preceding those at Levels 2 and 1.

9.7 One governor praised the strategic involvement with government and emphasised the potential for influence, advising on the importance of maintaining positive relationships to inform policy effectively.

9.8 One governor raised concerns about structuring student expectations and the reliance on other stakeholders for smooth transitions. The CSO acknowledged the challenge and advised that simplifying the messaging and being clear about curriculum pathways would be crucial.

9.9 One governor highlighted that from the briefings they had attended, there had been some positive shifts in the department's approach, particularly concerning Level 2 qualifications and adult education.

9.10 The DCEO advised the Board that the college was in an advantageous position due to its A-Level provision, which adds flexibility in adapting to curriculum reforms and meeting a diverse range of student needs.

10. Link Governor and Committee Updates

Link Governor updates.

10.1 Kathy Slack, Link Governor for Stakeholder Engagement, highlighted a positive development from the government in December in relation to the Accountability Agreements and Local Skills Needs. The organisation was previously required to produce separate reports, and this has now been consolidated into a single report. Governors were reminded of their statutory duty to ensure that the college meets local skills needs, not only independently but also in collaboration with other colleges in the area. Kathy advised that she was continuing to work with Jon Adams, Cat Marin and David Goosey and an update will be provided in the May Governance & Strategy Day. The Board noted that the final Accountability Statement would be presented to the Board on 4th June for approval.

External Board Review Timeline

10.2 The Board received the timeline for the External Board Review which was taken as read. The Chair of the Search and Governance Committee provided an overview of the process and emphasised the importance of governor participation.

11. Governance

Governance Update.

11.1 The Board noted that prior to the meeting the Head of Governance had shared an update to the 'FE and sixth-form college corporations: governance guide,' which now included a link to the local skills improvement plans statutory guidance and updates to the accountability agreements and local needs duty in 'Duty to Review provision' section.

MINUTE
NO.

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RESOLUTION

Corporation Seal.

11.2 There were no uses of the Corporation seal.

Policies for Approval.

11.3 The Board approved the following policies:

- Attendance, Punctuality and Absence Management Policy.
- Corporate Ethics Policy.
- Professional Conduct Policy.
- Residential Student Accommodation Policy.
- Sustainability Policy.

12. AOB and Date of Next Meetings.

12.1 There were no items raised under any other business.

Upcoming meetings.

12.2 Next meeting: Tuesday 30th April 2024, Guildford College.

12.3 Governance & Strategy Day: Tuesday 14th May 2024.

12.4 A schedule of Governor training and engagement opportunities were provided in the meeting book. Governors were encouraged to attend the events and advised to contact Clerk@Activatelearning.ac.uk for any support.

The meeting closed at 19.10.

Chair

S I Surgeon

Date Friday 3rd May 2024



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