

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of an online meeting of the **Governing Body of South West College**
held on Wednesday 29 April 2020 at 5:30 pm

PRESENT:

Mr Peter Archdale
Mr Zack El Marif
Mrs Joanne Lucas
Mrs Margaret Martin
Mr Michael McAlister (Chief Executive)
Mrs Patricia McCaffrey
Mr Seamus McCaffrey
Mrs Gillian McDowell
Mrs Monica McGeary
Mr Michael McGuckin
Mrs Joanne Moore
Mr Gerard O'Hanlon
Dr Nicholas O'Shiel (Chair)
Mr Michael Skuce

IN ATTENDANCE:

Dr Jill Cush, Deputy Chief Executive
Ms Claire O'Donnell, Secretary to the Governing Body

8.0 APOLOGIES

Apologies were recorded from Siobhan Breen.

9.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS

No declarations were made under this heading.

10.0 MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

PREVIOUSLY ISSUED to all members:

- Paper 10.01 Minutes of a Meeting of the Governing Body held on 11 March 2020
- Paper 10.02 Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Governing Body held on 08 April 2020

AGREED: that the above minutes be adopted as a true and accurate record and it was noted that there were no matters arising. These minutes were not signed as the meeting was conducted online.

11.0 CHAIRMAN'S BUSINESS

The Chair explained that Chief Executive had agreed to provide a detailed update on the Coronavirus situation at this meeting and that this would be the main focus of the

meeting. He assured governors that the College could survive this crisis, but added that there would be challenges to be addressed in terms of students. The Chair commended the work which had been done to date, particularly on the part of the principals group. In commenting on the short, medium and long term issues to be addressed, the Chair emphasized that the focus should remain on how it would affect students.

The Chair then apprised members that the Student Governor, Mr El Marif, would be interviewed on Radio Ulster the following morning at 7.15am. He offered any support Mr El Marif would require and wished him well for the interview. The Chief Executive extended his appreciation to Mr El Marif for representing the College in this way.

12.0 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS

12.1 General Update

The Chief Executive explained that currently, the College was in the second week back after the Easter break. Remote learning and assessment were continuing as before the break, he advised, and student numbers were reasonable. He added that staff were working with students to help them stay focused and engaged but some had gone quiet. The Chief Executive advised that the College had been regularly sending out messages to students to help sustain momentum and support services were in regular communication with students. Feedback from the sector he advised indicated it is very challenging for some groups. He explained that students finishing this summer were very focused. Work around assessment and grades was continuing and he advised that he would update later. He then invited Dr Cush to update on figures.

Dr Cush advised that the College had been tracking statistics and engagement very closely in this period of remote learning. Now in week 5 she explained the three main tools they had been using to track engagement were Canvas, Blackboard Collaborate and register marking/student attendance. In terms of Canvas she reported 3,000-4,500 engagements, noting that engagements increased as coursework deadlines approached. She reported 9,500 engagements on Blackboard Collaborate in week one which was dropping off slightly, but she assured members that this pattern was expected. Register marking and student attendance Dr Cush advised had been fairly steady, with 1,998 registers marked in week one, and 1,904 registers marked the previous week. Student attendance Dr Cush reported had been 79.7% in week one, and 73.3% the previous week, which she noted was very good in terms of normal performance. Dr Cush further apprised members that a new dashboard had been set up to track attendance in the remote delivery period. She assured members that the College was content with how the data was holding up and with their ability to track it.

Mr Archdale commented that he had observed through social media in particular that more people over the last week seem to have been affected by the lockdown and he suggested that the tracking information from the College would support this theory. He further suggested that there was now a requirement to be more proactive to sustain engagement. In response Dr Cush advised that the figures were broadly in line with what the College expected and that student services reported no more than a normal sense of 'weariness'. She added however that if remote delivery was to continue for a prolonged period of time the College would need to look at this issue.

Mrs Martin commented that this was particularly busy time of year for assignments and queried if students were finding the submission of assignments more difficult in the current circumstances. In response Mr El Marif advised that while the workload had increased, this had been anticipated and was manageable for students.

In relation to those students who had disengaged, Mrs McGeary then sought assurance that all students were in the right online classes so that they could receive the proper notifications and ensure continued engagement. She further queried if there were any distinct cohorts of students who had disengaged. The Chief Executive assured members that all students were recorded on the system through the consolidated data return which was linked back to DfE and he explained that this provided very good assurance that all students were engaged in the right classes.

Mr Skuce then queried if there were any IT or broadband issues and in particular if there was an issue around access to PC's. Dr Cush advised that IT issues were not very significant. She added that the College now had 100 laptops loaned out to students, with two anonymous donations of 10 and 20 laptops from local companies. She assured members that IT was not a significant inhibitor to engagement at this stage and that often a workaround could be found where it was an issue, for example, Level 1 students were currently having worksheets posted out.

Mr Skuce further queried how the trades would be assessed in the current circumstances. In terms of apprenticeships, the Chief Executive explained that the College had been very forensic in collecting evidence before the break. He added that there would be flexibility for continuing students, but for those who were finishing their course, a methodology had been developed and was currently being worked through.

Mr O'Hanlon then expressed concern that students were missing out on an element of their learning by not having face to face delivery in terms of engagement and also queried what level of engagement the College would expect from the full cohort of students. Dr Cush advised that lecturers reported back to Student Services on students who fail to engage. Student Services then contact these students directly. Those who fail to engage after four or five attempts will be considered disengaged. She noted that sometimes students will dip in and out of learning depending on their individual circumstances. She further advised that there was no benchmark for remote student engagement but over time this would evolve and could be improved upon. The Chief Executive added that since Blackboard Collaborate was designed for teaching it had been set up to deliver a lesson and therefore to be more engaging than some other platforms.

Mrs Moore then queried the sociality aspect of remote learning in the College to ensure engagement with peers. In response Mr El Marif advised that connectivity through phones was well established in his experience.

Mr Archdale then queried what was being done to monitor teaching standards online. The Chief Executive advised that the Quality Team were very focused on statistics. Quality assurance of online classes had he advised been ongoing for the last nine years, something which the inspectorate were very interested in. He assured members that quality was being looked after in the classroom and through the quality team.

12.2 Certification

The Chief Executive advised that the Task and Finish Group was now up and running and Principals were now meeting on a daily basis to discuss some of the issues. The Task and Finish Group had sent a submission to the Minister on 22 April 2020 providing general advice for the award for vocational outcomes in the summer of 2020. The Minister then announced on 23 April that vocational awards would be made using a calculated approach with four or five strands. A supplementary approach (adapting) would be used for students who didn't have enough natural evidence accumulated. This he advised was the most problematic area. The Minister had also advised that delay would be used as a last resort. He advised that CCEA regulation had been instructed to work with the 89 awarding organisations in NI to agree the details as soon as possible. This process he advised was now ongoing.

In response to a query about the additional lecturer workload attached to the calculated methodology, the Chief Executive advised that all staff reported that workload had now increased. He explained that this new way of working was a big commitment for both students and staff. In response to a further query about lecturer hours, and the intensity of online hours, he explained that lecturers would be contracted to have a certain number of classroom hours as well as additional duties. He acknowledged that this was difficult but assured members that the College had systems and procedures in place to support staff. Mrs Martin expressed concern about the additional workload and enquired how staff were coping with this. The Chief Executive advised that the Health and Wellbeing Team were very active in encouraging staff to look after their mental health and well-being. He also advised that initiatives such as an online College quiz helped to keep the College community alive and allow staff some down time. Dr Cush added that HR issue two initiatives per week to support mental health and well-being and resilience. She acknowledged that the longer remote learning continued, the more need there would be to focus on this issue.

The Chief Executive finished by advising that some qualifications were classified as a license to practice (e.g. electrical, plumbing) which cannot be substituted and therefore must be delayed. Essential skills he advised was getting particular attention as it was very important for a lot of students in terms of progression.

The Chief Executive then updated members on the CCEA working group, which included the SWC Head of Quality representing the six colleges. To date this working group had identified work strands, set out details in terms of confidentiality, and aligned with Ofqual. The five key principles for this work he explained were banking existing data, a forensic internal moderation process, teacher estimation, historical data and the stability of the award. The working group were preparing a paper for the task and finish group this week (which was chaired by DfE) and hoped that decisions on the way forward would be issued early the following week.

Mrs McGeary then queried if sickness/absence levels were an issue at the moment. The Chief Executive advised that this information was being recorded in the sector. He noted that absence levels were not significant at the moment.

12.3 Budget

The Chief Executive advised that last year's final allocation was £26,082,000. This he explained came in the form of £23m secured funding initially and was followed by a very onerous process, consisting of four monitoring rounds, to make up the remainder

of this funding. The Chief Executive then explained that the indicative allocation for 2020/21 was £27,560,000, an increase of almost £1.5m which would cover pay increases and rates pressures. He cautioned that there was still a shortfall in the sector which would need to be addressed. The College he added had estimated the rates pressure at £650k, of which £347k remains unsecured. The Erne Campus rates bill was estimated at £350k.

12.4 Easements

The Chief Executive then advised that Department were seeking easements from all colleges to fund Covid-19 related pressures. College Finance Managers he advised would be putting a return into the Department the following day on how much they think they can surrender. He further advised that the Department had asked colleges to identify the impact of any loss of revenue due to Covid-19.

Mrs McGeary pointed out that the College had already significantly cut back on its offering and that even with this indicative allocation, the core offering would remain reduced from previous years.

12.5 Ministerial Press Release

The Chief Executive apprised members that Minister Dodds had issued a press release that afternoon commending further education colleges for supporting learners during Covid-19. He welcomed this press release, adding that it had been circulated to staff and had given them a lift. The Chairman echoed these sentiments.

12.6 Erne Campus Update

The Chief Executive advised that the Erne Campus was due to complete on 6 August 2020. However, on 27 March 2020, the site had closed as a result of Covid-19. Initially this closure had been for one week, subsequently extended to three weeks and more recently extended by another three weeks. There was, he explained, a potential for Tracey Bros to reopen on 11 May 2020 subject to the necessary in-feeds.

The Chief Executive further advised that new CPD guidance meant retention would not be released in its entirety and would have to be regulated by the ICT and would also require Tracey Bros to have an open book examination.

The Chief Executive then explained that the Erne Project Board had been looking at various scenarios and explained that, at present, the best case scenario would be completion and handover before Christmas.

In response to a query from Mr McGuckin the Chief Executive advised that responsibility for health and safety rests with the ICT team, but that the College as a client, would continue to ask questions.

In terms of costs of closure, the Chief Executive outlined a variance between Tracey Bros estimation and that of the Project Manager. He added however that the Investment Decision Maker had indicated that a figure of 10% of the remaining project costs would be deemed to be a reasonable estimate and that the Department would continue to support the project.

In response to a query from Mr McGuckin the Chief Executive confirmed that Fairview running costs were also being accounted for.

13.0 FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE REPORT

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED to all members:

- Paper 13 Minutes of 08 April 2020 Finance and General Purposes Committee Meeting

In presenting the report of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on Wednesday 8 April 2020, Mr McCaffrey, Committee Chair, advised that Covid-19 had been discussed but that a more up-to-date report had presented at this meeting. He advised that through the Management Report, presented by Mr O'Donnell and Mrs McGrath, the Committee had received assurance that the College would remain within target and on budget for both the calendar financial year and for the College financial year ending on 31 July 2020. He noted that the budget for 2020/21 was being prepared. He also noted that while lecturing costs had decreased significantly, student feedback remained positive. Mr McCaffrey advised that the Committee were awaiting a report from BES following which it would be discussed. Mr McCaffrey also outlined a presentation from Mr Black, Head of Business Development, following which members had requested an opportunity to be briefed more fully on this area of work and had suggested a future committee meeting be scheduled in the Cookstown Campus to facilitate this.

AGREED: on the proposal of Mr McCaffrey, seconded by Mr McGuckin, adoption of the minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting and the recommendations therein. These minutes were not signed as the meeting was conducted online.

14.0 UPDATE ON BUDGETS

See items 12.3 & 12.4

15.0 ERNE CAMPUS DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

See item 12.6

16.0 DECLARATION OF ANY HOSPITALITY OR GIFTS RECEIVED OR OFFERED

No declarations were made under this heading.

17.0 ANY OTHER RELEVANT BUSINESS

17.1 Meetings/Communications during Lock Down

The Chair suggested that committee and Governing Body meetings should continue to take place online and business should be as normal as possible. He noted that the next Governing Body meeting was scheduled to take place on 24 June 2020 and asked if members would be content with this level of communication, adding that if anything very significant arose a special meeting would be called.

AGREED: on the suggestion of Mrs Martin, seconded by Mr McCaffrey, that an update report would be issued to all governors at the end of May 2020.

17.2 Meeting Notes

The Chair then asked members to note that this meeting was being recorded, with the recording to be destroyed once the minutes had been agreed. He thanked Ms O'Donnell for arranging the meeting and asked the Chief Executive to convey his appreciation to IT staff for their support.

Finally, the Chair apprised members that Mrs Fiona McCauley, Secretary to the Governing Body, would be returning to work after a period of maternity leave on Friday 1 May 2020.

18.0 REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

It was noted that the update report from Alan Strong would remain as an outstanding action which was unlikely to be completed by June 2020.

Ms O'Donnell advised that Claire McClelland was scheduled to attend this meeting but as the 14-19 Project had been stalled this was no longer required.

In response to a query from Mrs McDowell, the Chief Executive confirmed that the switchover to the new payroll system had went well.

Mrs Moore extended her appreciation to all College staff for their hard work and effort in challenging times.

The meeting concluded at 7:24 pm.

CONFIRMED BY THE GOVERNING BODY AT A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE 2020

CHAIRMAN _____

DATE _____