Governor Dialogues

06. A baptism of fire

Dr Juliet Williams CBE, chair of University of St Mark and St John talks to Mary Joyce about a baptism of fire, shaping the board for the future

In the Leadership Foundation’s Governor Development Programme of events there has been much discussion on the question of how to increase board effectiveness, and whether boards are ‘fit for purpose’ in the new and complex world of diverse institutions and strengthened regulation. In this series of interviews LF associate, Mary Joyce talks to a variety of chairs of higher education governing bodies about their governance careers, and encouraging them to share their innovative practice and thinking about their own institutions and what they are doing to increase effectiveness.

SHAPING THE BOARD FOR THE FUTURE

What are the governance issues that have preoccupied you as a relatively new chair of a church university?

Two come to mind, and the Leadership Foundation have asked me to talk about the ways in which we have, or haven’t, handled them.

The first is how we manage the issue of a church foundation and our relationship with the Church of England, which is a really key issue for more than a handful of universities. The other issue is how we get younger people to join our boards, because I’ve been quite successful at doing that.

As far as the Church is concerned, I think it’s an issue that a lot of the smaller universities, who more recently have gained university title, have had to deal with. There are some that are very much closer to the Church than others. Some are bound to the Church by the fact that the Church owns some of their land, and others, like us, tied in by virtue of the wording of the articles of association. We have no call on our assets or access to additional funding from the Church, but were founded by the Church for the training of teachers. Our articles restrict many of us quite specifically and we at Marjon (the University of St Mark & St John) are in the process of making the necessary changes. I’ve been requested by others to share our revision processes but we are not the first in having to deal with this. The precise wording of our present articles put me personally through a very, very difficult period last autumn when I was called upon to manage the recruitment of our first vice-chancellor. We are sharing our experiences with one or two others.

In our case, we have the issues of having to deal not only with the Church but with the National Society1, as indeed do a handful of others. Both the Church and National Society have to agree to any changes we make. One tries to create a non-controversial inroad, but that’s not easy. At the same time, what you want to do is to maintain the values and ways of working that are appropriate to a values-led foundation. As I say, there are few in the same boat.

NAVIGATING AUTHORITY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND REPRESENTATION

I’m trying to understand where the pressure points are for you in that relationship. Is it that the Church wants you as a board to behave in ways that you feel constrain you?

No, it starts with representation. A third of our board members, by virtue of the wording of our articles, have to be churchmen or Church nominees. Now, you can imagine what that means.

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Admittedly, since my arrival we have appointed many new independent members, but the board is unwieldy because we’ve got 25 on it, but eight or so of those are actually nominated by the Church. Sometimes, or rather far too often, they don’t turn up and their commitment isn’t the same as the others. Their interest is very blinkered and single-minded and they don’t necessarily have the skills we need.

So what did you do and where did you start?

The way in which I set about handling the board I inherited and which was not fit for purpose was to do a major skills’ audit, right across the board. Interestingly, it was well received and highly successful. In fact, it’s since been adopted by the Diocese of Exeter as they review the make-up of the Cathedral Council.
Putting together a skills’ audit is the sort of thing I do for a living as a management consultant. It isn’t exactly difficult for me. In the event, the skills audit revealed huge holes in the skills available to us around the board table and restricted what we were trying to do. Of course, I was completely hamstrung by the membership in not being able to make good deficiencies. It was Church representation that was the problem.

So, the only way to handle this is by changing the articles. It became very clear that that was important if the recruitment of a new vice-chancellor in the future was not to cause similar problems to those it had caused to me. The articles told us that the appointee had to be somebody of the Christian faith and a ‘practising Christian’. Well, what does that mean? What’s practising? Do they go to church every week? Do they go on high days and holidays? Do they actually ever set foot in a church? What meaning do we give to it? My personal version of Christianity rules the way I live my life, my values and to ‘do as I would be done by’. That turned out to be very different from the interpretation of the then Bishop of Exeter, for example. That became very difficult in handling the recruitment process in the autumn of 2012. Quite plainly, our sole purpose was to recruit the best and most suitable vice-chancellor we could lay our hands on. We didn’t need to be constrained. What would happen if the best candidate happened to be a Buddhist?

In the event, we found and hired the best candidate we were presented with because I fought for it. But in the end, it will be about redrafting our articles in such a way that that can’t happen again. We found a vice-chancellor who will protect our values and Christian foundation regardless of their personal interpretation of the faith.

You said you had to fight to get the candidate you wanted. What did that mean in practice?

It all came about by the National Society who had two board nominees, being set up in concert with the diocese to ask the questions that ensured, and required, that the articles be obeyed to the letter. That was horrendous to manage, was detrimental to the process and should not have been allowed to happen if, as a board, we were to do our job in the best interests of the university. The chairs of the Cathedrals Group of universities met during the synod that followed, and I didn’t keep quiet. I wasn’t going to be treated like that and nor was my university. It deserves the best candidate that we can find.

So, I was determined that we were going to get the best candidate that we could - it just meant that at the end of the day, I had to do my best to get around the issue. One thing I did was to invite a senior churchman within the bishopric, and who had impressed me during my own recruitment as chair, to work with me on the final recruitment panel. As it happened, I had written the advertisement myself, [and] then, working with a higher education head-hunter, found 70 candidates! That was an unbelievable response for a new university like us - two candidates putting themselves forward were already vice-chancellors! In the end our churchman helped us and it worked. Because he saw the difference in the person we should recruit, and actually then he fought the battle for me. But it wasn’t easy all the same, with others less willing to compromise taking subsidiary roles in the process.

You mentioned discovering ‘huge holes’ in the board when you did your skills audit. What were you looking for that you didn’t have?

Essentially they were high-level requirements that I didn’t have: youth, commercialism and enough regional representation. There were too many people from London and elsewhere outside the South West. I didn’t want to be parochial, but there wasn’t enough parochialism! There was certainly insufficient academic representation with university experience - I think you should always try to have a retired VC from another university for a couple of years sitting on your board when setting out as a university for the first time. After that, it would be good if one could ring the changes and obtain whatever academic assistance was required at the time. I think that would be brilliant - overall there wasn’t enough flexibility to provide for what was needed over time. Those were broadly the kind of areas that were needed, but to do a really good job [we were] hamstrung by the articles and the Church.

I’ve now got three people under 35 on my board and am gradually building it because I believe that’s where we need to be to create the variety of interests that we need. Actually, young people are our market.
I’m not saying that all board members need to be young - well, they won’t be if I’m around! But the point is that one needs variety. I’ve got, at the moment, a young managing director who happens to be managing director of Wave Hub, which is the Brussels-funded initiative in Cornwall harnessing tidal and wave power. She’s a brilliant contributor to the board. Brilliant.

**THE SIZE OF THE BOARD**

Because we also want to reduce the number of people on our board, the nominations committee said, “We won’t appoint anybody else at all until such time as we know what the new articles say.” We have actually filled some of the missing categories through wastage and resignation.

This is an interesting area, going to a smaller board. Tell me a little more about your thinking on that.

You can’t engage everybody in the board’s activities if the board is too big. Some [members] don’t think they need to turn up because there are so many people, and that nobody will notice that they’re not there. I think we’re going for 18 instead of 25. Broadly, just under the same percentage of Church people, but the key issue is that you’ve got to have sufficient to be quorate at every meeting, either board or standing committees. You’ve got to have enough to man your committees. We reckoned 17 or 18 members was about it. Twenty-five is just far too many. The Church will be able to make nominations as before, but the nominations committee will now have to make sure the nominees have the skills that are appropriate and required before they can be approved. If they don’t, the Church will have to go back and find another candidate or, if not, the committee can recommend their own.

When you first took up your role as chair of the board, you described it as ‘a baptism of fire’ - it certainly seemed like a turbulent time with the principal leaving, followed by the clerk and the head of marketing, and then the director of HR going on maternity leave. I think there’s another story that would be interesting to hear, about how you operated during that time and your leadership of the board.

One of the reasons I did a major skills audit was partly because I wanted everyone involved with the university to recognise that everybody had a place. Neither the board nor the senior team were fit for purpose. With everything up in the air, it was important first of all to make that sure the institution had a rudder; the composition of the board had to take second place. The board at that stage wasn’t actually as important as making sure the organisation was running day-to-day.

**Students’ Union**

He made excellent contributions and that’s one of the reasons why he’s now on the board. We appointed him as he left the presidency.

I’m still mentoring him and he’s now at Queen Mary doing a job there in the area of the student experience. I’m really pleased about that. He’ll go far in that area.

**Yes, you needed a vice-chancellor.**

Exactly. I was very, very lucky in having an absolutely excellent deputy principal [before the university title was granted]. She was not only the finance director but a very good general manager. So, it wasn’t that difficult to put the university into a pretty safe pair of hands to begin with. However, that’s only one dimension. Someone who comes from a financial background normally has a tendency to be a treasurer as opposed to a trader, but what I found was that by working with her in partnership, we could make good the managerial elements. Together we worked very well.

**Student Leadership**

The key bonus was the president of the Students’ Union. He, at 23, was incredibly mature for his years, made enormous contributions, and I invited him to virtually all of the major meetings that we had.

I believe in giving students authority. Of course, I care whether the contribution of the student leader is weak or strong, but in my view it is really important to give the students a voice in the management of the organisation. They are who we’re there for.

University management is a three-legged stool. Not enough institutions recognise that fact or make sure that the Students’ Union participates. The new president taking over has already asked for help from his predecessor. So I think their engagement works.
Were you effectively in an executive-chair role for a while?

I would say it was much more of a critical friend role. I would not have interfered with the way in which the past deputy principal, now deputy vice-chancellor, was doing the job of managing the university, but rather was much more about adding value as chair to the person sitting in the interim role. As far as I was concerned, I was a critical friend, which she allowed me to be. I’m a marketer but HR is in my blood. I come from having run one of the 100 best companies to work for in the UK back in the ’80s. If you have that in your background, you know that you’re good at bringing people together, offering opportunity and creating a positive culture.

Despite being a marketer, my key skill is general management - to me it’s about selling solutions to problems, providing opportunities and introducing openness to a workforce. In this case, the university wasn’t used to open communication. They weren’t used to a chair who wandered round the campus, walked into the students’ union and so on. In fact, I don’t think my predecessor had ever wandered into the students’ union. Certainly the previous principal hadn’t, which is curious to me. The staff and students just weren’t used to seeing those with any kind of authority walking around except on specific business.

So you were more visible?

Much more visible, but this has had an interesting knock-on effect because now we have a vice-chancellor. This is her first job in charge of an institution. But, can you imagine how difficult it is for somebody coming into a scenario where as chair of the board you have created a relationship with the deputy vice-chancellor and the president of the Students’ Union? That’s tough. So, we have to somehow balance the fact that she’s in a very difficult position alongside the fact that there are certain ways of working that we need to maintain. But she has all the credentials we needed, which was essentially a research background, together with the ability to be a good ambassador. She’s very good at that.

The shared leadership dynamics of that situation could be potentially difficult to manage. I’m wondering how you recalibrated your role as chair?

I had to be quite careful to make sure that I wasn’t actually swallowing her up as a strong character in my own right. We are still working through that. The vice-chancellor has been with us for a year now. The reason, I think, for our period of adjustment has been because we’ve been through almost a year-long strategic planning process. This is about asking “who are we as a university? What role are we there to play?”

REPOSITIONING THE UNIVERSITY

It’s been quite divisive at times between members of the board, members of the strategic management group, and so on. We have now come out with a plan that everybody has now bought into. It takes risks but I think perhaps you need to go through some of the traumas associated with these periods to come out the other side fitter and stronger.

What it’s meant is that I’ve had to handle some of the more vocal members of my board, who thought that they knew best by having been around a long time. But it’s about managing that whole scenario, so that you’ve got everybody with all their different, vested interests happy, whilst not allowing anyone to divide and rule, and actually ensuring that all conversations are open. So, it has been an interesting year from that standpoint. I fully understand why we have had the problems that we have had in creating an appropriate but demanding and controversial plan but, in many respects, I think we’ll look back on it and say it was a good thing. It’s been painful all the same.

What made your strategic planning process so difficult?

I didn’t think it was going to be as difficult as it has been. I mean, I assumed that the process would work in much the same way as it had always worked in any organisation I’d ever been involved in. That would mean that the executive team came up with an outline plan of the direction of travel and that the board would then interrogate it. There would be a couple of days of off-site strategic interrogation, and we’d come up with a collegiate solution that would then be fully documented. When I chaired the board of the South West Regional Development Agency (RDA), I spent a lot of time negotiating huge injections of European funding for Cornwall, and despite other counties being unable to access similar funding, I somehow managed to keep everybody happy. But with Marjon, it is impossible to keep everybody happy because funds are so limited and much depends on the university’s ability to grow income. So, I think the challenge was the management of the cost of investment, in our case, the cost of investment in research. At the beginning, I think that people automatically thought research sort of happened. We have no track record and need to support the leading parts of our curriculum with academic research and invest in those who can lead its development.

We are a sport, teacher-training and creative-arts-led institution. Teacher training, for example, is changing rapidly and is now being undertaken in a totally different way. It is in order to give credibility to our teaching in all of our leading subject areas that we do need to embark on serious research. We need our staff to be going beyond their teaching in order to give us our credibility.
We can’t go mad. Research costs a lot to introduce. We’ve always produced a surplus and have never got into serious debt. So, it’s a case of, yes, we have to protect our covenants and when faced by a very low turnover that is tough. Unfortunately, we’re one of a few universities that didn’t enter the REF this year. So it was a case of how we introduced research at a cost-appropriate time for the institution. How would we manage the income in order to be able to pay for it? How would we maintain our covenants, if we were to go into deficit?

MANAGING AN APPETITE FOR RISK

Our life as a board is all about risk and its management. The board needs to be able to measure progress against a set of milestones and key performance indicators. All of us are honest enough to accept that we are challenged by it. But we do have to take our chosen path. It’s not so much I would say ‘divisive’; rather a process that needs to be informed by knowledge that is at times alien to those around the table. So it’s been an education to all to put together a plan that works in investment terms. But not only that - we have had to make sure that, despite the constraints, the senior staff team are content with the result and believe that they can work with it.

Everybody has accepted that the plan has risks, but with regular progress monitoring we must be able to make sure that nothing can go off the rails without us really knowing about it.

This is what I mean by changing direction; a repositioning of the institution if you like. That is always going to be difficult and a challenge for those who have been around for a long time, remembering that board members can be there for up to eight years with two terms of four years each. There are also a lot of staff who have been at Marjon, man and boy. We have had to harness the enthusiasm of the total complement of the staff for the proposed change in direction - the support staff quite as much as the academic staff.

CHRISTIAN VALUES AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Is there any conflict at all between the distinctive Christian values and ethos of the university with what you’ve been trying to do?

We’re currently fourth in the UK for the quality of student experience. Now, that tells you all you need to know in my book. In the same way, I might say that

That may be a somewhat abstract view, but for me, it’s very powerful. Our Christian ideal has to be the way in which we treat our students and staff; the way in which we engage them; the way in which we actually make them fit for their life within and beyond university. I’m not sure how many governing bodies would see things that way. However, we are entering uncharted waters to some extent and change is going to put new demands on our culture.

BOARD EFFECTIVENESS AND VISIBILITY

To what extent would you say that you’ve now got an effective board in place?

I believe that we’ve now got people round the table who can really make a contribution. Most recently, the quality of the debate within the strategic process has improved out of all recognition. For example, there is a digital marketer and a specialist in e-commerce sitting on the board and their application of these areas to education is brilliant - one is in the process of becoming a brilliant adjunct to the marketing department department. I’ve also got somebody working with our sustainability team. The board is now beginning to add the value we wanted and the senior management team would now not dream of not asking them to help.

How do you think the board is seen generally in the university now?

Board members play significant roles within the broader community and they are respected for those roles. Take our Wave Hub MD and the work she’s doing with sustainability in Cornwall. She also has experience of huge government funding. This particular MD is young, but at the same time, well experienced and approachable. We also have a retired Russell Group registrar. There are now people around the table who are there for the respect they’ve engendered from the roles they’ve undertaken elsewhere. I don’t think it’s about having to sell them. What I mean is, they are people who actually come from a wide variety of backgrounds but with local, regional and national connectivity.

Christianity to me is the way in which I live my life. For me, it’s actually the kind of experience students have with us that speaks volumes about our practice of Christian values and ethos. From student security through to their employability, all of these things are wrapped up in the values that in my view we, as a Christian institution, should be seeking to permeate the organisation.
WOMEN AND BOARD LEADERSHIP

You’re quite unusual in that you’re one of the few female chairs of boards in the sector, with a female vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor. Are you aware of it making a difference to the way in which you work and do things?

No. I think that it has helped in some ways. At the beginning, it was ideal that the DVC and I got on well, but that would be the same if it had been a man. It wouldn’t make any difference. I have tended to be the first, or only, woman to do my job at every point in my career. I was, for example, the first female RDA chair and the only one at the beginning.

Gender wasn’t something that you consciously paid any attention to?

It never has been [an issue] with me because virtually every board I’ve ever sat on, I’ve been the one and only and first female, always. In the City and everywhere else. I’m so used to it. Having other women around is quite interesting. So I don’t think about it. But I think that maybe we’ve got to take a lot more care in choosing the chairs of governing bodies, and the way in which they see their responsibilities. I was lucky in the sense that I’d chaired a public sector institution and there can’t be that many chairs who have. Perhaps it’s about understanding the nuances of the public sector, the challenges of higher education and what sits behind some of the decision-making processes. In short, the way in which you manage change in an environment that actually is change averse.

BOARD EVALUATION AND PERFORMANCE

What thoughts do you have about appraising yourself and your board?

I’ve got to do it. Every year my board members go through it whether they like it or not and we try to do 360-degree feedback too. There are three elements to it: the individual’s view of the working of the board, their view of me, as the chair of the board, and their view of their own contribution. So, preferably, all three parts to be answered online. There are a couple of people who aren’t computer literate so they get hard copies. I go through the outcomes with members and we publish the overall findings. This has enormous benefit.

Is there a board discussion about the process and the outcomes in the context of board effectiveness, a report that you look at?

Yes. Every year we publish the outcomes of the board effectiveness survey. I put together and publish a bulletin once a month, which is available to everybody. We all make contributions to that - students make a contribution, staff, the VC and DVC. I’m the editor. It’s never more than two or three pages. Contributions like the effectiveness survey and the outcomes of questionnaires with newsworthy matters are published in the bulletin. The bulletin is for the governors but we are now embarking on a newsletter to staff from the board and posters for students.

To have an active board is never an easy board to chair. If your board is easy to chair, then for me it’s not performing to its full potential.

The board needs to challenge you as chair as much as they need to challenge the issues that are on the agenda.

The university board is more of a challenge to chair than the RDA was. There’s no doubt about that. I may have pursued a need to introduce representatives of our total society but in the end we are one institution, one set of issues. It’s not complex. Complexity makes chairing much simpler actually.

REMUNERATION

Finally, what’s your view about the remuneration of governors?

I certainly think that for the chair there ought to be, as with the old RDAs, reward for commitment of a specific number of days a month with a basic fee for board members. Why not, other than higher education perhaps not being able to afford it? In today’s economic environment, this may well be the best way of attracting the best people to these roles.
A baptism of fire

ABOUT THE GOVERNOR DIALOGUES SERIES
Governor Dialogues are a series of interviews with senior governors, in which the issues facing governors and how they are dealing with them are considered.

We hope that Governor Dialogues will provide governors and those interested in governance with ideas for best practice.

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   Dr Bridget Towle, University of Leicester

DR JULIET WILLIAMS CBE, CHAIR OF UNIVERSITY OF ST MARK AND ST JOHN
Dr Juliet Williams became chair of governors in May 2012. Juliet has been a teacher, publisher, journalist and Editor of The Geographical Magazine and taken three companies through the struggle for survival to growth and profit. Since 1991 Juliet has run her own business consultancy, Strategic Management Resources. Her CBE came in 2009, principally in recognition of her having changed the face of the management of UK tourism with the birth of VisitEngland. Oxfam and VisitBritain are among Juliet’s many non-executive directorships.

MARY JOYCE
Mary Joyce is a leadership and organisation development consultant. She is founder of Leading Minds Consulting and a LF associate. She specialises in working with teams and boards that are leading and managing change, particularly the psychological impact of change on group behaviour and organisational performance.

She has held senior leadership roles in the education and health sectors, which has included: clerk & university secretary, first clerk to the Hefce council, governor on a university board, trustee of an independent hospital, and currently, trustee of a mental health charity.