

**MINUTES OF A TELEPHONE CONERENCE MEETING OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE GOVERNING BODY HELD ON THURSDAY 9 APRIL 2020 AT 16.00.**

**MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:**

Mr Andrew Saunders (Chair)  
Mr Brian Doran (Chief Executive)  
Mr Scott Alexander  
Mrs Teresa Campbell  
Mr Gordon Gough  
Mr Aidan McCormick  
Mr John Nugent  
Prof Gregory O'Hare  
Mr Tom Redmond  
Dr Eileen Stewart  
Mr Kieran Swail  
Mr Matthew Turner  
Mrs Nicola Wilson

**IN ATTENDANCE:**

Mr Keith Kilpatrick, Director of Curriculum  
Mr Terry McGonigal, Director of Finance and Planning  
Mr Raymond Sloan, Director of Client Services  
Miss Lindsay Armstrong, Secretary to the Governing Body

The meeting convened at 16.00.

Governors conveyed their best wishes to Mr Redmond and asked that he passes on their warm regards to his wife for a full and speedy recovery.

Members offered their sincere condolences to Mr Saunders and his family on the recent passing of his father-in-law.

Miss Armstrong stated that IT Services have informed that they will be contacting all Governors to provide guidance on accessing their SRC email account and assist them in joining Governing Body briefings remotely via Skype for Business.

**A01. APOLIGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Carson and Mrs Thompson.

Mr Saunders stated that it is important that governance arrangements, support and documentation remain in place for the College during this period of self-containment due to Covid 19 restrictions.

**A02. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

The Chair reminded those present to declare at the commencement of the meeting any conflict of interest held in matters to be discussed. Mrs Wilson declared an interest as an employee of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. The interest was noted and Mrs Wilson gave an undertaking to exclude herself from decisions that could potentially be perceived to cause conflict.

**A03. QUALIFICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT**

- Letter of correspondence from Principals
- Letter of correspondence from College Chairs to Minister
- Letter of response to Principals
- Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference

Mr Doran referred Members to Minister Dodds' update on assessment on 8 April and advised that there has already been misinterpretation on what was contained within her statement. He informed that a BBC post stating that the Minister has cancelled all summer exams and assessments for vocational qualifications is incorrect. Mr Doran specified that the statement should not be interpreted as a direction that all exams and assessments will be halted in the same way as GCSE and A level, and that a decision on the preferred position to assess vocational qualifications is yet to be taken.

Mr Doran advised that the Principals Group have previously highlighted concerns to the Department and on 31 March the FE College Principals wrote to the Director of Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education Division to express their grave concern at the lack of progress in resolving the current situation in relation to vocational qualifications.

Mr Doran referred Members to the letter of 6 April to Task and Finish Group Members regarding the assessment and award of NI vocational qualifications. He confirmed that the Task and Finish Group met on 8 April and advised on College representation. He also confirmed that Mr Kilpatrick and Elizabeth Shackles, SWC have agreed to support the work of CCEA in progressing the work of the Task and Finish group.

Members were referred to the letter of 3 April from College Chairs to Minister Dodds directing her attention to the lack of guidance and decision making for the awarding of vocational qualifications during the current emergency. Mr Saunders confirmed that he has not received a reply to date.

Mr Doran advised that College Principals have met with college representatives on the Task and Finish Group, Dr Malone and Dr Heggarty, to present a proposal for an approved position for essential skills. Governors noted the decision is a devolved matter and that it is within the remit of the Minister of the Economy to approve an agreed position.

Mr Doran stressed the need and urgency for clear decisive action and the necessity for the NI regulator to engage with OFQUAL to provide guidance as soon as possible.

Members acknowledged the difficulties many students experience with remote working and the additional pressures on those learners completing vocational qualifications. Mr Doran advised that he has written to staff to address any miscommunication that may have arisen and stated that although calculated grades may be awarded in a number of areas, this is not possible in some areas of competency and skills based assessment.

Mr Doran advised that College Principals have expressed concern regarding potential reputational damage to the FE Sector and have engaged Brown O'Connor should the need arise for the colleges to avail of their services in formulating a communications plan.

Mr Sloan left the meeting at 16.26.

Mr Doran advised that colleges have been approached by the media, and been in receipt of considerable communication from students and parents requesting clarity on the calculation of grades. Mr Doran stated that he hopes direction will be provided from OFQUAL in the next few days that will in turn inform the position for DfE.

Mr Redmond acknowledged the significant amount of work required of college lecturers when a decision on awarding qualifications has been made. Members voiced their appreciation that lecturing staff will be fundamental in providing assessments and expressed concern that a lack of decision making will prolong the process and have a vital impact on vocational students, and those closest linked to industry.

Prof O'Hare expressed the shared frustration of the Board on the lack of decision making and agreed it was appropriate for College Chairs to raise their concerns with the Minister. Prof O'Hare further stated that the absence of a timeline on decision making, especially given the autonomy that exists in Northern Ireland, is unhelpful in upholding the College's obligation to further education learners.

Mr Sloan returned to the meeting at 16.45.

Mr McCormick stated that he is supportive of the Governors' statements and mindful that there is only six weeks after the Easter break for the education sector to respond to direction. He enquired about clarification on when the working group will report back.

Mr Kilpatrick informed Members that he met online with the working group on 8 April and advised that further education representatives voiced their concern on the lack of activity. He stated that emphasis at the meeting was placed on fairness, reducing burden, the impact of the awarding qualification and driving down uncertainty. Mr Kilpatrick expressed unease that if decisions are not taken properly the impact may be felt in several areas for a number of years.

Mr Kilpatrick advised that further consideration must be given to prioritising decision making, consideration of further pressures put on staff, the challenge on technology and then need to consider the requirement of specialised software. He placed emphasis for clarity on communication.

Mr Kilpatrick expressed concern for any delay in progressing outcomes, including essential skills. He communicated confidence that SRC can assuredly predict a large number of grades due to a robust tracking system in place.

Mr Doran relayed the latest statement from the Secretary of State for Education in England to OFQUAL confirming the process of calculated grades. He advised that should the NI regulator issue similar advice that this will assist in a substantial amount of awarding for full time further education learners at SRC.

Mr Alexander noted that applying different standards across the four nations could create disadvantage and delay the progression of apprenticeships. Mr Kilpatrick stressed the need to plan for assessment to enable progression to employment.

#### **A04. REMOTE LEARNING**

- **Audits – levels of engagement and analysis of remaining assessment by course**

Mr Kilpatrick advised Members on details of audits taking place across various programmes. He informed on online engagement surveys conducted across faculties evaluating the percentage of lecturers engaging, and the effectiveness of contact with students through individual calls, emails and class emails, Skype for Business, O365 and Moodle.

Mr Kilpatrick informed on a high level of engagement with learners and a large amount of online activities created. He advised that faculties are currently identifying what assessments are outstanding on a course by course basis and expressed satisfaction that staff are making all efforts to contact learners individually to encourage them where possible to continue in remote learning.

Mr Sloan advised that the learner support coordinators are continuing to track, monitor and provide support to the student body remotely.

Mrs Campbell left the meeting at 17.32.

Mr Doran stated that management are very conscious of the potential for staff and student to experience stress and anxiety in this difficult time and have support arrangements in place.

#### **A05. SUPPORT FOR HEATH SERVICE**

- **PPE distribution**
- **Production of face visors**

Mr Doran referred to the previously distributed communication updating the Governing Body on staff efforts to provide various PPE equipment including face respirator masks, forensic suits, aprons, gloves, goggles and hand wash which have been distributed to Daisy Hill and Craigavon Area Hospitals, care homes and the ambulance service.

Mr Doran paid tribute to the staff involved and informed that SRC engineering and computing teams are currently working in conjunction with QUB on plans to produce face visors.

Members asked that their thanks be conveyed to staff for their wonderful and generous efforts to assist in the fight against Coronavirus.

## **A06. ESTATES PROJECT**

- **New build openings**
- **Vesting agreements**

Mr Doran advised Members that the opening of the new builds has inevitably been affected by the Government lockdown guidance.

Mr McGonigal stated that the College are following CDP and Cabinet Office advice, making payments to suppliers and securing furniture and equipment through vesting agreements and certificates.

Mr Turner enquired on when the College's warranty on goods comes into effect whilst still in storage. Mr McGonigal stated he will make enquiries and feedback to the Governing Body.

Members were advised that there has been no decision relayed to the College on the Craigavon judicial review.

Mr Nugent provided assurance that the Estates Project Board continue to meet to review plans in depth.

## **A07. GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS**

- **Audit Committee**

Mr McGonigal informed that the internal audit contract is due to end this summer, that Grant Thornton have previously indicated that they will not be requesting another year's extension and the sector had planned to go out to tender.

Mr McGonigal advised that NRC are providing the lead in requesting that Grant Thornton reconsider accepting a year's extension as the sector's Internal Auditors. He advised that the College are in contact with Price Waterhouse Cooper in regard to the external audit strategy.

Mr Nugent stated that he is keen to progress with audit committee meetings as scheduled. Mr Saunders confirmed that he is supportive for all committee meetings to proceed with targeted agenda items.

Mr Doran advised that the return for the College Development Plans has been extended to the end of June.

Mr Sloan enquired if the scheduled meetings could be rearranged to facilitate discussions during daytime hours.

## **A08. APPLICATION AND ENROLMENT PROCESS**

Mr Doran reported on communication and promotion activities for new applicants.

He advised that work continues to further contingency plans, giving consideration for the potential to open in September and scenario planning should a second wave of infection occur in the autumn term.

## **A09. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Mr Saunders informed that the Department have offered a nine month extension to his tenure to January 2021, and confirmed that he has accepted.

He thanked the Governing Body for their continued support and guidance and relayed his best wishes for a good Easter.

Mrs Wilson offered her congratulations to Mr Saunders and on behalf of Members expressed her thanks that he continues to lead as Chair of the Southern Regional College Governing Body.

The meeting concluded at 17.57.

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