![cdn College Development Network logo]

DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL CHARACTER

This self-directed module leads you to explore your college's educational character in greater depth.

A selection of activities are provided so that you can pick those most relevant to your learning journey.

CONTENTS

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A participant will be able to:

- participate fully in board discussions to shape the educational character of a college;

- assess developments in the Further Education sector to understand the drivers which may impact on educational character;

- articulate the importance of educational character and ethos of the college; and

- discuss the evolving educational character of the college and how this relates to the college strategy, mission and values.

2. HOW TO USE THIS PACK

Before you start reading this pack, sit down with your board secretary/governance professional and look through the exercises, which are indicated by this icon:

There are a number of exercises; it is up to you how many you work through. Look at the different topics covered and decide which you will complete. You should then read through all the materials, in readiness for your chosen exercises.

Once you have completed this module, go online to download and complete the reflective assessment. You will need the information you have gathered in this module to complete it.

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE MODULE

A college's educational character is defined by the nature of the college, the type of students or learners it recruits, and the kind of learning environment it provides.

Colleges exist in an educational environment of development and change. These changes can be brought about by changes to: national policy; educational systems, such as funding mechanisms, qualification requirements, inspection frameworks and requirements; the local economy; other local educational institutions etc.

As the educational environment changes, colleges are required to make planning decisions. Board members therefore need to keep well informed and up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves: 'How will this affect my college?'

Board members also have a key role in ensuring that decisions and developments fit the college's educational character. This is a key responsibility which cannot be delegated.

This module provides information and exercises on the educational character of colleges. It prepares the board member to participate fully in board discussions to challenge and review the educational character.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON EDUCATIONAL CHARACTER

The Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges states

A.4   *The board is responsible for determining their institution's vision, strategic direction, <u>educational character</u>, values, and ethos. Regional strategic bodies must also determine the regional strategy for colleges assigned to them. The board of an assigned college must have regard to the strategy determined by the regional strategic body. Board members have a collective leadership role in fostering an environment that enables the body to fulfil its mission and meet Scottish Government priorities, for the benefit of students and the community it serves.*

The governing body of a college is responsible for ensuring that the organisation's **educational character**, and hence the type, range and accessibility of its courses, meets the needs of the community it serves.

First of all, it is important to stress the intricate relationship between a college's mission, its strategic objectives, its values and its educational character.

A **college's mission** provides a clear sense of purpose and direction to the college and it directly influences the college's strategic objectives.

The key **strategic objectives** for a college will normally cover a period of three to five years and will typically set ambitions for learners, the college and the local community, including the local business community.

The **educational character** should also sit within the parameters of the college's values that are personal to the college and agreed by the corporation. Typically, a **college's values** may include concepts such as: excellence and ambition, cooperation and communication, equality, recognition and integrity.

5. WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN IDENTIFYING THE EDUCATIONAL CHARACTER OF A COLLEGE

This section of the module uses the learner's journey to identify the different aspects of educational character and how it can have an impact on every part of a learner's experience in the college.

At the end of each section there is an exercise to gather information on each aspect of a learner's

journey at your college, in preparation for the reflection activity at the end of the module.

1.   The curriculum offer

The different aspects of educational character

1. The curriculum offer
2. Recruitment of learners
3. The learning environment
4. Teaching, learning and assessment
5. The impact of the provision
6. Learner's next step

A college's curriculum offer is central to its educational character.

In developing a curriculum, college leaders need to plan the coverage, content, structure and sequencing of its provision, the board then needs to be given an overview of the curriculum so that it can ensure that it is effectively aligned to the college's educational character.

The content of the curriculum is made up of the different types of provision*:

- for young people on full-time courses aged 16-18 working towards main qualifications, such as academic, technical or vocational qualifications
- for learners aged 19+ studying part- or full time towards academic, technical or vocational qualifications or for those on non-accredited community-based courses
- traineeships for those aged 16-18, 19-24
- apprenticeships
- higher education

*Modules C6a and C6b talk through the various types of provision and levels of qualifications. Please refer to these for more information.

A college may not offer all of the above types of provision as it may focus more on some of the different aspects, such as age groups or levels or types of qualifications. This is how its curriculum offer gives

the college its educational character and identity to its stakeholders.

The content of the curriculum is also made up of the subjects offered within each of the types of provision the college offers. For example, a college may be known for specialising in technical engineering courses or have an excellent reputation for its provision in hospitality and catering.

✎ EXERCISE 1

Identifying your college's curriculum offer

Review your college's curriculum offer and consider the questions below.

- Does this information give you an overview of the college's educational character?
- Does the college arrange strategic away days for the board to review the curriculum in light of the college's educational character?

Consider how the curriculum offer may have changed over the past three to five years or so.

- Were these changes to the levels, subjects, or types of provision offered?
- Were there any specific drivers for these changes.

2. Recruitment of learners

The learners a college attracts are influenced by its reputation among parents, peer groups, local residents, employers, past students etc., and the college's cohort of students has a strong impact on its educational character.

Marketing and outreach work to schools and communities can also influence the makeup of a college's cohort of students. In particular, marketing and outreach initiatives can help increase the number of students from a specific target priority group of students.

✎ EXERCISE 2

Identifying your college's cohort of students

Gather information on the college's current students. Consider these questions as you look at the information:

- Who are the current students who attend your college?
- What is their diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, disability)?
- Which local wards or postcodes are represented the most?
- What are their prior qualifications and previous schools?
- Are there any significant differences in students' diversity and prior education according to the different types of provision, levels or subject/vocational areas?

To what extent does this information contribute to the college's educational character?

For example, is your college well known for enabling young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to university or high-level apprenticeships?

Or perhaps your college is particularly successful at widening the racial diversity of students studying in subjects traditionally attended by white students? Similarly, perhaps the data will show that your college is successful at attracting people with disabilities onto Higher Level courses. You should then consider whether the messages the data are giving you are aligned to the educational character and the college's mission. Remember to keep hold of your notes, as you'll need to use them for the reflective assessment.

3. The learning environment

The learning environment is made up of the buildings, the facilities, the equipment and learning resources on the one hand, and the social environment, including how safe all students are, on the other.

The first aspect covers the physical condition of the college's buildings, including any satellite sites, their state of repair and sustainability. The facilities will include the classrooms, library or study facilities for students and staff, canteen and recreational facilities, and specialist vocational learning facilities and workshops. Technology is included in the provision of technical and computing equipment, for use by students and staff. Learning resources relate to the provision of study resources and specialist industry-related resources and materials.

The social environment is often enhanced by the quality of the facilities and the space available to students and staff. It may also be influenced by the range of enrichment activities and work-related environments that involve and/or attract external partners.

The social environment also relates to how safe all students are, including when they are off site or at work/on work placement or at subcontractors and using online facilities. It is important to consider how well they are protected from discrimination, victimisation, extremism and radicalisation.

Both aspects of the learning environment have a significant impact on the college's educational character.

✎ EXERCISE 3

Identifying your college's learning environment

Explore the recreational and learning facilities for students and staff and ask about the specialist equipment or technology in the study areas and industry- related workshops.

Consider the following questions:

- To what extent does what you see have a positive or negative impact on the educational character of the college?

- Are there any specialist learning aids and resources for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities? Do all sites provide good access for all students, staff and visitors?

- What programmes are in place to address any deficiencies?

- What student support or pastoral care is offered? How effective are the safeguarding measures? Are students satisfied with this provision?

- How well does the social environment relate to the college's values?

Remember to keep hold of your notes, as you'll need to use them for the reflective assessment

4. Teaching, learning and assessment

Students' experience in the classroom, workshop, study areas and on work experience also make up the college's educational character.

It is therefore important to consider how the learning programmes are delivered. For example:

- what proportion of teaching and learning is done through lecturing, projects or assignments, or resource-based learning?

- what extent does the college provide its students with direct experience of the world of work to support their future development?

- how varied and stimulating is the range of learning activities to motivate all students and help them achieve their potential?

5. The impact of the provision and the learner's next step

The overall impact of the provision for students and how well they are prepared for their next step can often define a college's educational character (and its reputation). When students leave the college they take with them: the skills, knowledge, understanding and behaviours they have learnt or developed; the progress they have made since joining the college and the progress they have made towards achieving their personal goals and their career aims.

As students leave the college to attend other further and higher education institutions for further study, or to enter into employment, including as apprentices, they take with them the impact of the college's educational character and its ethos.

Students' time at the college will have had a significant impact on how well they are prepared for the next step in their careers. Universities, other colleges, and especially local employers will also know how well the college has prepared its students for their next step.

✎ **EXERCISE 4**

The overall impact of the college's educational character in preparing all students for

Consider the following questions:

- To what extent is the educational character of your college ambitious for all its students?

- Are the expectations of board members and leaders realistically high for all students and staff?

- To what extent are all students developing the skills, knowledge, understanding, behaviour and attitudes they need for the next step in their careers?

- To what extent does the college celebrate is students' achievements? their next step

Remember to keep hold of your notes, as you'll need to use them for the reflective assessment

6. WHAT PART DOES THE ETHOS OF A COLLEGE PLAY?

A critical aspect of the educational character of a college is its predominant ethos. In many ways this is about the core values that underpin the college. The following concepts are typically represented as key elements of a college's ethos:

- equality of opportunity for students and staff
- approaches to diversity
- levels of empowerment of staff and students
- relationships with the local community
- employer engagement
- approach to risk
- commitment to high standards and continuous improvement
- support for innovation and creativity
- leadership and management style
- commitment to partnership and collaborative approaches
- approaches to human resource management.

In exploring a college's ethos, it is important to take its underpinning values as a starting point. Typical values include excellence and ambition, cooperation and communication, equality, recognition and integrity.

The following themes may be useful for exploring the extent to which a college's practices are underpinned by its intended ethos:

1. Seeking to improve retention/achievement for all groups of learners and in all types of provision

2. Seeking to widen participation by having an inclusive approach to recruitment

3. Contributing to local and national economic redevelopment

4. Working in partnership with other providers, communities and employers

5. Ensuring that all aspects of the learner's journey are learner focussed

6. Ensuring an appropriate balance between market driven and policy driven initiatives

7. Commitment to continuous improvement in standards

✎ EXERCISE 5

Responding to situations that may challenge a college's ethos

1 Consider the following case study

College A: Managers have recommended to board members the closure of the Construction Department as the achievement rates for qualifications are very low. Managers say that these results are pulling down the college's overall achievement data. The reason for the poor achievement rates is mainly because of the students' poor levels of English and maths when they join the college, and their poor attendance on college English and maths courses. Construction skills, especially in plastering and carpentry, are in high demand locally. Local employers have previously invested in the updating of construction facilities at the college by donating equipment and materials. They also provide good quality work placements.

The managers' current proposal is to turn the construction workshops into art, graphic design and media areas. Their rationale is that this is a growth area nationally and these programmes have high success rates and are very popular with the students. This means that this provision significantly boosts the college's overall achievement rates. However, students' progression to employment in these vocational areas is low. It seems that there is high competition for local jobs and apprenticeships as many other local providers also offer good quality art, graphic design and media courses. A high proportion of students therefore progress to HE courses in these subjects instead. This is good for the college's data on progression to HE. However, recent research has shown that only 30% of graduates in these subjects gain employment in the relevant industries. Almost 50% of them are deemed to be underemployed, i.e. working in jobs that require skills well below their qualification status.

2 This case study illustrates a situation where it is important for board members to examine the impact on the educational character and ethos of the college.

3 Select two of the above seven themes that you consider most relevant to the case study. Draft a few questions that would help you respond to the situation in light of your own college's values, educational character and ethos. (Note: You will need to make sure you have a copy of your college's values.)

7. POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Colleges exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change.

National policy can bring about change, sometimes at fairly short notice.

Board members therefore need to keep well informed and up to date with developments.

- Each year the Minister for FE, HE and Science issues a 'Letter of Guidance' to the Scottish Funding Council setting out their priorities for the year ahead. SFC Letters of Guidance

- Colleges Scotland issues regular policy briefings to the sector Colleges Scotland

  Colleges Scotland's Mission
  Colleges Scotland is the collective voice of the college sector. We will support and champion the sector by leading and influencing policy, enhancing and maintaining strong partnerships, and demonstrating the positive impacts of the sector.

It is also important for board members to keep an eye on the broader factors affecting the college, such as globalisation, economic recession and the move to a high-skill, knowledge-based economy; all have profound effects on the future direction and character of your college.

Board members need to review periodically the broad political, economic, social and technological environment, as well as local and national policy changes, and assess whether the college's mission, vision and objectives need to be reviewed in the light of these changes. These are useful points to consider at strategic awaydays for board members.

Board members also have a responsibility for the college's financial health. When considering changes to the mission, vision and objectives in light of local or national policy or priorities, board members must therefore consider the financial risks. Financial implications must be part of the process for considering any changes. Board members would need to consider whether it would be counterproductive to change the educational character of a college, if implementing the change meant that the resulting provision would not be sustainable due to financial risk or indeed the whole college would be at risk of insolvency.

✎ **EXERCISE 6**

Keeping abreast of the educational environment and broader changes.

No board member is expected to keep up to date singlehandedly with issues that emerge in the educational environment or with the local and national political, economic, social and technological environment.

Discuss with your Board secretary the different ways for you to keep abreast of developments in the FE sector and the local economy. You may like to discuss the availability and appropriateness of the following:

- the principal's regular report – which should cover trends in the wider environment, not just within the college;
- Colleges Scotland briefings
- the education press (Times Educational Supplement (TES), Times Higher Education magazine, education supplements of the daily newspapers, FE News);
- websites for Government departments
- attending conferences

8. SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Following completion of this module, board members should understand the importance of the following points when reviewing their college's educational character and ethos:

- how the educational character of a college reflects its mission, vision, ethos, values and strategy objectives

- that a college's educational character, mission and ethos/values should meet the needs of the community it serves and inform the direction of all the college's activities

- how a college's educational character relates to each key aspect of the learner's journey, from its curriculum offers, the students it recruits, the kind of learning environment it provides, how teaching and learning are structured and the impact of the provision of every student

- how the educational character may change as a result of planning decisions and board members' role in considering how decisions and developments fit the college's educational character and ethos, or in deciding whether the educational character should be reviewed in light of the changes

- that colleges exist in an educational environment of rapid development and change and board members need to keep well informed and up to date with developments and continuously ask themselves: 'How will this affect my college and its educational character and ethos?'

- that it is important for board members to consider any financial risks when contemplating changes to the college's educational character.

College Development Network