

Scottish Women's Convention response to:

The Scottish Government's "Good College Governance" Consultation Paper

June 2017

The Consultation

The Good College Governance Task Group made a series of recommendations to improve the governance arrangements in Scotland's Colleges. The report also covers the equality impact concerning appointments to college boards, and states that any appointment must take into account the effect on a board's gender balance when selecting a candidate.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to the issues around the appointment of women to board memberships.

Question 4:

Should provision be made for highly regarded candidates for which there is no immediate position to be appointed without further open recruitment, along the lines proposed?

As an organisation, we commend the recommendation that more flexibility should lie within the recruitment process whilst also taking into consideration equality matters which may arise from this.

Men continue to be appointed to public boards because they tend to be at a higher level of employment than women, which can mean they are considered to be more 'committed' or able to do the job. It is well known that due to the glass ceiling, gender streaming and the gender pay gap, caring responsibilities and childbearing, women are unable to progress in the workplace at the same rate as men. This discrimination means they are even less likely to be able to progress to board level.

Another aspect of the application process is the confidence that women have in themselves and their abilities. Too many will underestimate their capabilities and only look at the negative aspects of a position, rather than the positives.

"A man will look at the key skills for a role and say 'I can do three out of five of those so of course I'll go for the position', whereas a woman is more likely to say 'I can only do three out of five so there's no point in going for it'. Confidence is key."

Flexibility is vital when considering all candidates. We would also recommend that any interview process for board membership takes a creative approach when assessing the skills that women can bring, rather than those just set out on paper. Caring experience, for example, could be seen as a highly valuable asset to the college governance process, the large majority of which is taken on by women. Taking this approach would not only ensure a board that reflects society proportionately, but would also ensure more women would be considered for the role.

Question 16:

We should welcome comments on whether the matters covered in the consultation paper raise any equalities issues that require to be addressed with respect to age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, ethnicity, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

The SWC welcomes the opportunity to comment on any issues that may arise concerning equality in relation to protected characteristics when discussing appointments to college boards. As an organisation, we have consulted extensively with women throughout Scotland on factors that may arise relating to women which would be considered obstacles to gaining board membership.

There are a range of reasons why women do not apply for positions and these need to be taken into consideration, along with the introduction of quotas, in order to challenge the culture which surrounds public appointments. Boards – whether public, company or voluntary sector – more often than not do not reflect the people they are appointed to represent. This needs to change.

One of the biggest barriers for women who want to become involved with public boards is the way in which positions are advertised. Not all appointments are advertised, due in part to the ‘old boys’ network which sadly still exists in Scotland. Business networking is too often carried out in traditionally male dominated activities, which can make it very difficult for women to access.

“If that were the case, we would already have women in these positions. The bottom line is this – you can’t get the best person for the job if they’re not given the opportunity to go for it.”

Specific consideration must also be given to women in rural areas, for whom issues such as childcare and public transport are exacerbated due to the geography of their local area. Women who currently are, or who wish to become, board members should be afforded flexibility in order to do so.

This idea of inequality is even more pronounced in the likes of disabled or BME women who often face even more barriers to accessing this level of responsibility. The SWC is of the belief that all protected characteristics be taken into account when appointing board members to be equally representative of society at all levels.

It is also essential that women are given relevant training when they are appointed to this type of position. They require as much assistance and guidance as possible so that they are able to fully understand and carry out the role into which they have been elected. It would be extremely helpful if training could include sessions with women who are currently on

College Boards, those who have been through the application process and those who write the applications.

The role of mentors must be considered. Women have spoken about the importance of having the support of other women across political and public life, employment, trade union involvement etc. The value of having someone who has already been there, who can guide others through the process and give advice, cannot be underestimated.

"It is the duty of women who are currently in these positions to encourage others to join them."

By ensuring that appointments to college boards reflects a true representation of Scottish society will go a long way in influencing how women are perceived and ensures all decisions made mirrors the makeup of the country's population.

Having women as vital parts in these hugely influential roles acts as an incentive for other women to become involved in the likes of board memberships and participate in decision making more generally.

It is vital that all interview panels for appointment on public boards have a 50/50 gender balance. This sends out a clear message that these organisations are serious about creating a gender balance in their governance.

"It would be quite intimidating to go into an interview with only men on the panel. Anything put in place to help women become involved would be made pointless if those making the decisions were all men."

Conclusion

The SWC welcomes and fully supports the inclusion within the consultation paper for equality issues to be taken into account when considering appointments to college boards. It is our view that any appointment to College Board membership must take into consideration the barriers that women face as a result of gender inequality. Assumptions around factors which directly affect women such as childcare access and other obstacles to prevention must be taken into account. Alongside this, attention must also be drawn to other protected characteristics in order to ensure that board appointments are not filled merely by women who are already in positions of power.

Equal representation of women and men on the boards of these, as well as many other organisations, will be more representative of society overall. It is hoped that these women's voices will reflect the issues, concerns and ideas of those upon whom decisions will impact. This, in turn, has the potential to significantly improve matters for college governance.

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The Scottish Women’s Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to mental health in Scotland.

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