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DOI:

[10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878](https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Bathmaker, A & Pennacchia, J 2022, 'Who governs and why it matters. An analysis of race equality and diversity in the composition of further education college governing bodies across the UK', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, pp. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878>

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To cite this article: Ann-Marie Bathmaker & Jodie Pennacchia (2022): Who governs and why it matters. An analysis of race equality and diversity in the composition of further education college governing bodies across the UK, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, DOI: [10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878](https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2126878>



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Who governs and why it matters. An analysis of race equality and diversity in the composition of further education college governing bodies across the UK

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about racism and race equality have been widely reported in the first decades of the 21st century, following the Black Lives Matter protests and campaigns such as 'Rhodes Must Fall'. Yet 'race' remains largely absent from policy debate and research concerning further education colleges in the four countries of the UK, particularly in relationship to leadership and governance. The focus of this paper is on who governs and why it matters. Governors and trustees play an increasingly visible and significant role in public, private and charity sector organisations, but diversity on governing bodies of further education across the UK remains patchy and is seen as a major challenge. The paper reports on what is known about the composition of governing bodies and what this tells us about the involvement of governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds at the present time, drawing on a three-year project which examined the processes and practices of governing in the four countries of the UK. The findings highlight the continuing absence of governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds on college governing boards and suggest that normative, invisible assumptions of how governing gets done persist, with black and minority ethnic governors often little more than a token gesture of adding diversity to the faces on the board.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 August 2022
Accepted 10 September 2022

KEYWORDS

Governing; further education colleges; equality; diversity; race; whiteness

Introduction

Highly visible protests and campaigns such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall have put race and race equality in the public spotlight in the 2010s. In the context of UK further education colleges, which are key providers of vocational and technical education, the Black FE Leadership Group (2020) has published a *10 Point Plan to ensure an Anti-Racist FE system*. As well as focusing on colleges' work with students, the plan includes recommendations for a part of the system that is often hidden from view in such considerations: college governing bodies.

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In all four countries of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales), college governing bodies have significant responsibilities. These include determining and developing the educational character and mission of their college and establishing the college's strategy and goals; holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance and quality of the college; and exercising effective control to protect funds and ensure that the organisation remains solvent.¹ Equality, diversity and inclusion form part of their remit. In relation to race and equality, governors can be expected to consider a whole range of issues, such as patterns of participation and achievement of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds, the employment and progression of staff, the ethnicity pay gap, as well as the work of the college in promoting equality and challenging racism.

However, diversity in the composition of governing bodies in colleges across the UK remains patchy and is seen as a major challenge. The focus of this paper is on who governs and why it matters; it speaks directly to the question of who participates in public life. Governors and trustees play an increasingly visible and significant role in public, private and charity sector organisations in the UK, and the composition and diversity of governing boards are a growing but also long-standing concern.

During the 2010s, following the 2010 Equality Act in the UK, the lack of diversity on governing boards and boards of directors has received renewed attention (see for example Davies 2011, 2015; FTSE Women Leaders 2022; Hampton-Alexander Review 2019; Holmes 2018, 2020; McMaster 2020; Parker 2017, 2022). While the 2010 Equality Act is intended to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity, elsewhere justifications for ethnic (and other forms of) diversity on boards range from emphasising a business case to focusing on inclusion and social justice. As might be expected, the private sector stresses the business case. The Parker Review (Parker 2017) into the ethnic diversity of private sector boards for example argues:

Many of us in business would attest that our experience on Boards that embrace gender and ethnic diversity benefit in their decision making by leveraging off the array of skills, experiences and diverse views within such a team.

(Parker 2017, 5)

In the public sector, the UK Government's public appointments action plan focuses on the culture change that can be achieved through a diverse board:

Having a diverse board at the top of an organisation can also send a powerful message to employees. Diverse leaders are strong role models. Having a diverse non-executive team can signal a commitment to creating a more inclusive organisation and help breakdown unconscious biases within existing board members.

(HM Government 2019, 5)

In the college sector specifically, there is an emphasis on the importance of reflecting the communities served by colleges, as noted in a report for Scottish colleges by the Equality Challenge Unit (2017), which suggests that a board

which reflects the local community (and is representative of the staff and student population) will be better equipped to make decisions that support the college's place within that community, benefitting the college and possibly also the wider community.

These arguments for ethnic and other forms of diversity on boards run alongside the legal requirements of the 2010 Equality Act, and the associated public sector equality duty². The Act and the public sector equality duty require further education colleges to not only address discrimination but to positively work to promote equality. This includes encouraging people from groups protected by the Equality Act to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low³. During the 2010s, there has been considerable policy and wider activity focusing on governance in further education colleges in all four jurisdictions of the UK (Association of Colleges (AoC) 2013; Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2015; ColegauCymru 2016; Department for the Economy Northern Ireland 2021; Humphreys 2011; Scottish Government 2019). However, even though diversity in the composition of governing bodies was identified as an issue of concern nearly twenty years ago (Ahmed et al. 2006; Foster 2005), it remains a major challenge for governance at the present time (see for example Association of Colleges 2019). Moreover, the 'turn' to diversity bundles together different social categories and their histories (Ahmed and Swan 2006), so that inequalities and absence of, for example, governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds,⁴ are obscured through a focus on a different protected category such as gender or disability. Whereas Ahmed et al. (2006) found that participants in their study during the early 2000s almost always spoke about race when they were asked about diversity, in our work, we found that diversity was regularly interpreted as the diversity issue seen as the most important in a particular location, which therefore received the most attention, allowing other forms of inequality to become hidden from view.

The paper is part of a three-year project (2018–2021), which examined the processes and practices of governing in the four countries of the UK⁵ (Watson et al. 2021). Here, we report on what is known about the composition of further education college governing bodies and what this tells us about the involvement of governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds at the present time, based on available data in each of the four nations of the UK and data from eight colleges (two in each of the four nations of the UK) who participated in the project. What this analysis reveals is a very limited picture about what is known, unease around issues of race, and no clear understandings of why it matters. Nearly twenty years on from the last in-depth work on race, diversity and leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector (Ahmed et al. 2006; Lumby et al. 2007, 2005), this paper takes up once again key concerns raised by these authors and others, in particular the persistence of normative, invisible assumptions of how governing gets done, which mean that appointing black and minority ethnic governors is

assumed to jeopardise the skillset required for good governance and is therefore simply a gesture to adding diversity to the faces on the board.

Renewed policy declarations of change: continuity and change

The 2010 Equality Act and the public sector equality duty, and more recent developments in countries of the UK such as *An Anti-racist Wales* (Welsh Government 2022) and Northern Ireland's *Racial Equality Strategy* (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Northern Ireland 2015) suggest renewed policy efforts in different nations of the UK to tackle race inequalities in the 21st century. However, there are also significant tensions in work to address these issues, indicated clearly in the highly controversial conclusions of the report by the UK Conservative Government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (Sewell 2021), which claimed that disparities experienced by those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are not evidence of systemic or institutional racism.

Turning to the further education context specifically, there are public statements about addressing racial diversity, such as the Welsh Government's (2020) strategic vision for the Post-Compulsory Education and Training Sector, and in England policy documents that make explicit reference to further education governance. A recent White Paper on further education and skills in England (Department for Education (DfE) 2021) announces support for increasing governor diversity, promising:

we will provide more support for college corporation boards to develop their capacity and build a diverse membership that better reflects their local areas. [...] This will include identifying groups currently under-represented on college boards, including people with disabilities, and people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds.

(DfE 2021: 56)

These developments reiterate previous commitments to action towards achieving more ethnically diverse governing bodies in colleges (Department for Education and Skills 2006; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2013). However, as surveys in England and Scotland make clear (Association of Colleges 2019; Scottish Government 2019), in practice cautious interest in the diversity of *backgrounds* of members of boards is often overshadowed and downplayed by concerns about the level and diversity of *skills* that governors bring, which are often seen to be in opposition to one another. Despite the apparent policy commitments cited above, confronting and addressing race inequalities, including representation and participation on college governing boards, remains an enduring challenge. We consider the long-standing nature of this challenge in the next section, looking at what is known about diversity in

leadership and governance in the UK's further education sector from previous research and surveys.

Research into race in/equality and diversity in college leadership and governance

Data on the composition of governing bodies

Our search for data on race equality and diversity in the composition of further education college governing bodies across the UK found no readily available baseline data in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. In England, a number of surveys have been undertaken since 1993, when colleges became independent corporations, as shown in [Table 1](#). These surveys have not been undertaken by national government. Rather, the college member organisation, the Association of Colleges, has played a key role in the commissioning of all but one of the reports. We were unable to locate copies of reports on the 1996 and 2005 surveys as they no longer appear to be available in the public domain, and the percentages given below are based on citations from other reports.

The percentage of governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds over the last twenty years suggests very slow and limited change. While it appears that

Table 1. Surveys conducted on composition of governing bodies in England 1996–2021.

Year of survey	Governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (%)	Publication (author)	Commissioned by	Available in public domain 2022
1996	0–19	A National Survey of College Governance: Membership, Organisation and Development of the Board (Kedney and Hawkins 1996)	The Joint Associations (ACM, ACRA, AoC, APC, APVIC and the FEFC)	No
2002	5	The Changing Face of College Governance (Davies 2002)	Learning and Skills Development Agency	Yes
2005	8	Board Diversity in Further Education Colleges: a survey of clerks (Landman 2005)	Network for Black Managers, Association of Colleges and Centre for Excellence in Leadership	No
2013	7	The Composition of English Further Education Corporations and College Governance Frameworks (Godbold)	Association of Colleges	Yes
2015	10	The Composition of English Further Education College Boards and College Governance Frameworks (Godbold)	Association of Colleges	Yes
2021	?	The Current Status of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the Further Education Sector in England (Leitner)	Association of Colleges	Yes

some progress was made between 2013 and 2015, it is unclear whether that progress has continued, as the most recent report published by the AoC in 2021 does not provide any comparable data. What has remained unchanged are the reported perceptions and understandings of diversity in governing bodies. Proposed solutions for change have been repeated regularly during this period, in the reports listed above and elsewhere (see for example Collinson, Collinson, and Turner 2007; Ellis and Brewis 2006; Greatbach and Tate 2018; Schofield, Matthews, and Shaw 2009) but appear to have had little impact on practice.

Research into the experience of diversity and leadership in colleges

Apart from the surveys identified above, research that examines race, diversity and leadership in UK further education colleges remains scarce. While there has been an increase in wider research that addresses race and educational leadership during the past ten years, this work mainly focuses on schools or higher education. The key exceptions to this are three research projects from the 2000s which focus on the English context in the wake of the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000): *Race, Diversity and Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector* (Ahmed et al. 2006); *Leadership, Development, and Diversity in the Learning and Skills Sector* (Lumby et al. 2005) and the *Integrating Diversity in Leadership Project* (Lumby et al. 2007; Maringe et al. 2007) (see also Mackay and Etienne 2006). These studies draw attention to the problematic nature of practices to engage with diversity in the context of college leadership and governance and identify issues that are of continuing relevance to understanding the lack of ethnic diversity on governing bodies nearly twenty years on.

Lumby and colleagues' research found that diversity (covering different categories such as gender, ethnicity, disability) 'was a matter of indifference to many, was understood in multiple and often confusing ways, and that action to achieve it might well have the opposite effect to that planned.' (Morrison, Lumby, and Sood 2006, 284). They report that the understanding and definition of diversity were not always thought out and clearly articulated on an agreed basis, even within each provider organisation, and perceived pressure to consider 'diversity' and 'inclusion' varied from provider to provider (Morrison, Lumby, and Sood 2006; Morrison 2006). Their findings cast doubts on whether there was widespread support for a more diverse and inclusive leadership, and if there were, whether it would be effective (Lumby et al. 2005, 2007).

Ahmed and colleagues' research project included a strand that looked specifically at college governors and racial diversity (see Turner 2005, 2006a, 2006b). They found little progress on the ground and attributed this in part to the changing context for the sector over the previous ten to fifteen years, in particular the way in which the sector in general was becoming increasingly geared towards the needs of the economy at the expense of other purposes. They found that the responses of colleges to the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act which framed

the context for their study were not uniform, nor were the approaches to increase representation of BME governors. Colleges tended to recruit people who were in their own image, reproducing the dominant profile of governors as white and male. There was a perception that people from BME backgrounds were on the governing body through a 'quota system' rather than the skills they could bring to the board. They concluded that when diversity and equality are linked to the reputation of organisations, then signs of inequality that would 'damage' this reputation are concealed (Ahmed et al. 2006, 9).

While Lumby and Morrison (2010) point to the absence of diversity as a theme in mainstream theories of leadership, Ahmed et al. (2006) use critical race and feminist theory in their work to interrogate the reproduction of structural inequalities related to race, using the concept of 'whiteness' as a lens for their analysis. 'Whiteness' is used by researchers on race inequalities to focus on the structures and social dynamics that produce white privilege and power. In contexts from the local to the global, whiteness theory focuses on how white people gain advantage through societal norms, traditions, and institutions, which involve taken-for-granted cultures and ways of doing and being that see white as a neutral or non-category. Owen (2007, 206) and Rollock (2014) emphasise how 'whiteness is largely invisible to whites', it is simply the natural order of things, providing a way of normalising how things are, and of making sense of the world.

Ahmed and colleagues' study draws attention to the ways in which 'whiteness' permeates college cultures and practices. They argue that 'We need to examine whiteness itself as institutional' (Ahmed et al. 2006, 73), and the failure to challenge the whiteness of colleges as organisations should be understood as a form of action that reproduces whiteness and perpetuates racial inequalities. Inaction, they emphasise, represents a form of action:

Organisations become white through what they do and do not do, where 'not doing' should be seen as a form of action.

(Ahmed et al. 2006, 8)

This includes rehearsing narratives of social justice that are not matched by meaningful actions, as noted elsewhere by Applebaum (2005, 278), who observes: 'it is especially when white people believe themselves to be good and moral antiracist citizens that they may be contributing to the perpetuation of systemic injustice.' For DiTomaso (2015), white people can perceive themselves as antiracist but remain immersed in everyday interactions that favour whites. She explains whites help other whites, because whites live with other whites, go to school with them, and mostly work with them. Whites are much more likely to know other whites, to feel a sense of obligation to them, and to recognise when opportunities could be matched to their needs. She emphasises that it is a combination of cultural, cognitive and structural processes that make transforming existing social relations exceedingly difficult (DiTomaso 2010, 102). In this paper, we draw on these ideas to enable us to make sense of what we

found. In the next section, we outline the methodology for our study, before presenting our findings on race diversity on college governing boards in the UK at the end of the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s.

Methodology

The data for this paper originate in an ESRC-funded project *The processes and practices of governing in further education colleges in the UK*. The overall aim of the project was to examine how governing boards contribute to achieving the strategic aims of colleges in meeting the needs of learners, employers and labour markets, by examining the practices that constitute governing. The research involved eight colleges, two in each of the four countries of the UK. An important aspect of governing practices concerns the composition of boards. This paper focuses specifically on race and diversity in relation to board composition. The paper reports on numerical data on governing board diversity at national level in each of the four countries of the UK; numerical data at local level gathered from the eight colleges in the project; and qualitative data from fieldwork in these colleges, where questions of board diversity were addressed.

We searched for national-level data through internet searches for published reports, and by contacting government and national member organisations in each jurisdiction. In the following sections, we use the most recent data available to provide an overview and summary of what these data tell us about race diversity on governing boards. We asked each college in the study for data on the composition of their governing body, and we report on what was provided. Our fieldwork in colleges included observations of boards in action during the academic year 2019–2020, which were video or audio recorded. Our analysis of this observational data involved looking for evidence of discussion about governor diversity and understandings of what diversity in the composition of governing bodies involved.

In the section that follows, we first look at what is known at the present time – the end of the 2010s and early 2020s – about the ethnic composition of governing bodies in each of the countries of the UK. We then consider the composition of governing bodies at individual college level. We draw on ideas about whiteness to consider both the absence of *data* on ethnic diversity on college governing boards, and the absence of *diversity* in the composition of boards.

Limited data on limited ethnic diversity

National data

Up-to-date national data on college governing board diversity is extremely limited across all countries of the UK except England, and a key finding of this

paper is the lack of available baseline data. In each country data are collected by different organisations and vary in content. We present a summary of what is known, or not known, below.

In England, the Association of Colleges, the colleges membership organisation, in collaboration with the Education and Training Foundation has published two Board Composition surveys (AoC 2014, 2015) and completed a third survey in 2021 (AoC 2021). The 2015 survey aimed to provide a detailed picture of governing boards, and addressed issues such as size of board, types of governor and numbers of committees as well reporting on the composition of boards by gender, ethnicity, age and disability. The 2021 findings are not reported at the same level of detail. The only available publication is an executive summary, which quotes data from the survey, but does not offer the finer-grained detail provided in previous reporting⁶.

The 2015 survey found that governing boards were predominantly white British, as shown in Table 2.

Ninety-one per cent of chairs of boards were white British, and the AoC (2015 paragraphs 51–56) also reported that across the college sector over 90% of chairs of core committees were white British. It is only amongst student governors that a noticeably higher percentage are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The AoC's most recent survey in 2021, published in an executive summary, found that the composition of nearly all boards remains predominantly white. However, no data or additional analysis are reported apart from an observation about the number of governing boards with at least one member from a black or Asian background:

Asian/Asian British and Black/Black British ethnicities were the best represented minority groups here, with 68% and 49% of Boards, respectively, including at least one member from these groups.

(AoC 2021, 4)

In Northern Ireland members of governing bodies are public appointments, generally made by a government minister to the board of a public body

Table 2. Ethnicity of governors in England (2015).

Type of governor	Asian/ Asian British	Black/Black British	Mixed/Mixed British	White British	White other	Other
Chair of Board of Governors	1%	4%	1%	91%	4%	1%
Independent/external governors	5%	3%	1%	88%	3%	0%
Executive (ex-officio) governors [member of SMT]	4%	2%	1%	86%	6%	0%
Staff governors	4%	3%	1%	91%	2%	0%
Student governors	13%	10%	3%	70%	3%	1%

Source: Adapted from AoC (2015), figure 14, p.17 and figure 15, p.18.

(Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2020, 6), and data on governors of colleges are included in the annual public bodies report and public appointments report of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in conjunction with the Central Appointments Unit of the Executive Office (Northern Ireland). The most recent report is for 2017/18 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2020). The data published in this report include a breakdown by gender, ethnicity, age, disability and community background. Data on ethnicity are separated out from data on 'community background', which in the context of Northern Ireland refers to whether individuals are from, or were brought up in, the Protestant or Catholic community. In 2017–18, 1% of those holding public appointments who reported their ethnicity were from minority ethnic groups (ethnicity was known for 53% of all appointments) (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2020, 20). This compares with 2% of the population of Northern Ireland aged 18 years and over who belong to a minority ethnic group in the most recent census (2011). However, these data refer to all public appointments, across nine different government departments, and do not differentiate between public appointments to different types of public body.

Scotland and Wales publish no data on the ethnic diversity of college governing bodies. In Scotland, the colleges membership organisation Colleges Scotland gathers annual data on boards of management (governing bodies) in the sector. However, the data are only broken down by gender, and these data are not published outside of the organisation. Colleges Scotland does not currently collate any other data on the diversity of college boards, and no other organisation in Scotland collects and reports data on governor diversity in colleges⁷. We could find no reports that include governor diversity for Wales. While colleges have a statutory requirement to provide the Welsh Government with an annual report on equality and diversity under the 2010 Equality Act, colleges only provide data on students and staff and no national data are gathered or reported on regarding governor diversity.

The local level: ethnic diversity on the governing bodies of individual colleges

The limited availability of national data on the ethnic diversity of college governing bodies was replicated in the colleges that participated in fieldwork for our study. In our observations of board meetings during the year in which we undertook fieldwork in colleges (2019), we saw nine governors from black or minority ethnic backgrounds across all the eight colleges in the study. All eight chairs of governing bodies were white. One governance professional was from a minority ethnic background.

Only one college in our sample collected and made publicly available data on the diversity of their governing body. None of the colleges in Northern Ireland and Scotland were willing to provide us with any diversity data on

membership of their governing bodies. In Northern Ireland, we were told by one college that they had no control over the diversity of the governing body, as the Department for the Economy appoints members of the board. In Scotland, one college monitored across all characteristics protected under the 2010 Equality Act but told us: 'We undertake to retain this information in the strictest confidence, and given the small numbers involved, this includes any anonymised data.' Another college only collected data on gender and did not undertake any wider equality and diversity monitoring. A member of this college explained:

This has been discussed a few times, but the conclusion has always been that there are issues with the provision of data such as this as the sector is small and it is likely that individuals would be identifiable as a result.

In England and Wales, only one college collected data on the diversity of their governing body. In this college, data on governor skills and diversity was gathered on an annual basis using an audit and diversity monitoring form sent out to governors. A summary analysis of the data was reported to one of the Corporation's committees each year and made public through their minutes. The data collected included a breakdown by ethnicity as well as other protected characteristics (including gender, disability and sexual orientation). In this college, 8 of 21 governors were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Although only one college collected data on diversity of the governing body, there was evidence that diversity of board membership was an issue discussed in other colleges. In one college, the question of board membership and recruitment was noted in the papers for one of the board meetings, where a commitment to promoting equality and diversity involved aiming to achieve a membership that reflected the communities served by the college. At the same time, the college emphasised the need for governors to have the necessary skills. When someone from a minority ethnic background was subsequently recommended to the board, a governor commented: 'I did not know that being from an ethnic minority was a skill'. The tension between skill and background was apparent elsewhere, with another college stating that when recruiting governors, skill set took precedence. Another college explained that membership of the governing board was based on recommendations made by the clerk to the board, as a result of invitations sent out through professional networks. The challenge here, as noted by Ahmed et al. (2006) and DiTomaso (2015) is that those networks are likely to be mainly white and therefore favour the appointment of more white governors. Only one college reported a concerted strategy to diversify their governing board, by using their community liaison group to identify and encourage people from black and minority ethnic communities to consider applying to join the governing body. They saw this as an opportunity to grow their own governors. This example stood out as an exception. More

typically, ethnic diversity of the governing body was deemed highly sensitive by colleges, with the exception of the above example and the one college that could report a favourable picture of diversity.

Discussion: caution leading to complicity?

What we have presented in the previous section indicates a continuing absence of governors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds on college boards across the UK. But what is also very apparent is the very limited publicly available data on diversity of college governing bodies at the level of both national jurisdictions and individual colleges. As a result, the absence of black and minority ethnic governors on boards is hidden from view by the absence of published data that can establish any form of baseline understanding, let alone a way of measuring change – or absence of change – over time.

There are both similarities and differences across the four countries at national level. There is no consistent commitment to monitor the ethnic diversity of college governing bodies in any of the four jurisdictions of the UK, whether from within, through the work of member organisations such as the AoC, Colleges Scotland or ColegauCymru, or from without, at the direction of government departments such as the Executive Office in Northern Ireland or the Department for Education (DfE) (previously DBIS) in England. We were told by one college member organisation that the absence of any national statutory requirement leads to an absence of monitoring and reporting on governor diversity. For while colleges have a duty to report on equality regarding students and staff under the Equalities Act, reporting on diversity of governing bodies is not a statutory duty. In England, for example, reporting governance and internal control in the annual accounts is a funding agreement requirement, required in the accounts direction and a requirement of the Association of Colleges Code of Good Governance. Reporting on diversity is not. Because colleges are independent corporations, any requirements in codes or guidance need to explicitly relate to statutory requirements.

There are differences in how appointments to governing bodies are made in different jurisdictions. Governors are appointed by individual colleges in England and Wales, but in Northern Ireland, they are public appointments approved by a government minister, allowing responsibility for diversity to shift away from individual colleges. Specific country factors also come into play. In Wales, proficiency in Welsh is a concern and is noted. In Northern Ireland, reporting on ‘community background’ is of great importance given the significance of relationships between Protestant and Roman Catholic communities. At the same time, the recording of these data demonstrates that jurisdictions and organisations make choices about what to collect and report and these reflect particular priorities.

Turning to individual colleges, it became clear in the process of compiling data for this paper, that colleges perceive a tension between finding governors with a diversity of skills and appointing governors from a diversity of backgrounds, despite apparently strong commitments to promoting equality. Ideas on 'whiteness' from research into race inequality point to how those deemed to have the necessary skillset tend to be similar to those already in place (Ahmed and Swan 2006), and those already in place tend to be white and tend to be male. These ways of thinking involve normative, invisible assumptions of who has the skills to govern, which result in practices that associate skill with white 'people like us' (DiTomaso 2015). Ethnic diversity on the governing body then becomes not only a challenge that is difficult to resolve but a risk to good governance. These ways of doing and being become embedded in the culture not just of individual colleges, but across the sector, which enables the sector as a whole to become complicit in accepting the lack of diversity in governing bodies as an intractable problem, which further contributes to the difficulty of achieving visible change.

Conclusions: Political arithmetic and the work that data can do

There is a need for caution in focusing on data collection as the key to addressing race inequality and ethnic diversity in the composition of governing bodies specifically. It is possible to use the collection of data and generation of paper trails to avoid getting to the heart of what is a highly sensitive issue for colleges (Ahmed 2007). As Ahmed (2012, 17) emphasises, problems follow when equality becomes 'a system for counting' and a performance indicator that places central emphasis on paper trails. At the same time statistical analyses can play a role in struggles for social justice (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018). We would argue that the lack of baseline data (which includes the loss or disappearance of earlier reports and data from the public domain), makes it possible to ignore how little has changed over the past 20 years. We share Khan's (2020) view regarding what data can and cannot do:

Without data we cannot understand, much less respond to, social phenomena, including long-standing and extensive injustices such as racism. But the persistence of racism and other injustices shows why data by itself cannot tackle those injustices.

(Khan 2020, 229)

What we have presented in this paper suggests a lack of traction in any promises to address patterns of diversity in the composition of college governing bodies across the UK. And this is important, as the comment by Khan indicates above, not just as a gesture to having faces of colour on the board, but to provide a vital demonstration of commitment to creating a college sector that addresses racial injustice and is open to the transformative potential of

a diverse board to help diminish inequalities, by changing organisational work practices, norms, routines and interactions (Benschop et al. 2015).

In this context, political arithmetic becomes an important tool for change. The Black FE Leadership Group (2020) recommends that all colleges annually publish governor profile data by ethnicity, including actions to address identified gaps, and all regulatory bodies, funders and membership groups publish governance profile data by ethnicity, including actions to address gaps. Their recommendation chimes with one of the five key changes put forward in the McGregor-Smith (2017) review of Race in the workplace in the UK, which proposes setting targets and measuring progress:

Given the impact ethnic diversity can have on organisational success, it should be given the same prominence as other key performance indicators. To do this, organisations need to establish a baseline picture of where they stand today, set aspirational targets for what they expect their organisations to look like in five years' time, and measure progress against those targets annually.

(McGregor-Smith 2017, 7)

The data and absence of data presented in this paper expose the enduring gap between words, avowed good intentions, and deeds. The significance of this is not only that taking action on ethnic diversity makes a difference but that *not* taking action contributes to 'mechanisms that reproduce inequality in everyday interactions and then become enduring in the embeddedness of social institutions at both the individual and the collective levels' (DiTomaso 2010, 100).

Notes

1. The UK's Office for National Statistics has reclassified colleges in all four countries on several occasions, shifting their legal status between public and private. At the time of writing, colleges in Scotland and Northern Ireland are public entities, while those in England and Wales are private (Not for Profit Institutions Serving Households). This results in college governors working with differing accountability regimes and varying control over funding. See Hill and Husband (2021) for further details of the legal and regulatory framework of colleges in the four nations of the UK.
2. The 2010 Equality Act covers further education colleges in England, Scotland and Wales. There is parallel legislation covering colleges in Northern Ireland.
3. Race is one of nine protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. It is against the law to discriminate against someone on the basis of any of these characteristics.
4. We recognise that terms including 'black', 'minority ethnic', 'race' are contested. In this paper we use these and other terms that are in current use in England. We also note that using the term 'black' can be useful in highlighted shared experience of the effects of racism, as stated by the Black FE Leadership Group in the UK: 'black' is an inclusive definition for people from ethnically diverse backgrounds who share a lived experience of the effects of racism. <https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/the-black-fe-leadership-group-looking-to-the-future-antiracism-in-action/> (Accessed May 2022).

5. The project *Processes and practices of governing in further education colleges in the UK: How governing boards realise the strategic aims of the organisation* (2018–2021) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/R00322X/1].
6. There is no record of the full survey details of the data collected for the 2021 survey. (Personal communication with the AoC, July 2021).
7. Personal communication with Colleges Scotland, September 2020.

Acknowledgements

The project *Processes and practices of governing in further education colleges in the UK: How governing boards realise the strategic aims of the organisation* (2018–2021) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/R00322X/1].

Disclosure statement

The authors report there is no conflict of interest to declare.

Funding

The work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/R00322X/1].

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