



Consultation on Implementation of the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018

Introduction

Colleges Scotland wishes to express our support in principle for the Scottish Government's proposals to improve the representation of women on the boards of Scottish public authorities. We recognize that the objective of 50% of non-executive members being women is a key step towards achieving equal representation in Scottish civil society.

Key Points

Whilst we have chosen not to respond to each individual question set out in the consultation paper within our response, we do wish to communicate some of our views with regards to what the consultation may entail for the structure of boards in the college sector, and with regards to the representation of women who are currently serving on college boards across Scotland.

We recognise the importance of improving the representation of women on the boards of Scottish public authorities, and subsequently we agree with the objective established in the Act that 50% of non-executive members are women. Public authorities in Scottish civil society should be reflective of the citizens they represent, and equal gender representation would go a long way to supporting this ideal in practice.

Looking more specifically at the college sector we would raise the point that there has been unequal gender representation with regards to the number of women acting as college board chairs. This is an area where we believe that improvements in representation could be made. The appointment of college chairs is a responsibility currently held by Scottish Ministers, so we would encourage those Ministers to consider the importance of equal gender representation when making decisions on those appointments.

We believe that it is important that persons and public authorities responsible for making appointments should report on the activity they have undertaken to encourage applications from more women. It is important that those organisations who are operating in the public interest, such as colleges, should demonstrate how they are working towards developing boards that are representative of the public at large, in order to both maintain and increase public levels of trust in the governance and running of those organisations.

Similarly, we believe it is correct that those making public appointments should - if the gender representation objective has not been met - report on the details of any other steps taken with a view to achieving the gender representation objective by 31 December 2022, to evidence their commitment to ensuring equal representation on their boards, and the actions that will be taken to achieve this in practice.

We would suggest though that there should not be any increased reporting requirements on those authorities, including Colleges, that are already achieving gender diversity on their Boards, so that the focus can be on those areas and/or organisations where there is a need to increase gender representation.

Conclusion

We believe that all the above actions would play a valuable contributory role to wider moves to increase diversity within public boards, of which gender forms a key component. We recognise diversity as a basic requirement of any board wishing to harness a range of experiences, abilities and perspectives. However, in practice achieving diversity can be challenging as there are many more dimensions than can be measured, recorded or accommodated in a single board.

We say this because we know that diversity is about much more than gender representation. It is important that we collectively do not lose sight of that and consider ways in which we can address that - with a keen eye on the very real benefits of diversity.

Having a diverse board can facilitate both stronger discussions and more innovative problem-solving and robust decision-making. Having a wider degree of representation on boards enables our member organisations to have greater access to a broader range of stakeholders. This insight gives greater credibility to the actions of college boards and enables colleges to have a greater impact in their individual learning environments, and the wider communities in which they are located across Scotland.

Colleges Scotland
August 2019