

# Business school advisory boards: increasing engagement, adding value

**Sarah Hardcastle** investigates the inextricable link between advisory board member engagement and the value they add

**B**usiness school advisory board members tell us:

- they want to increase the value they deliver to their business schools
- they do not want to be tick boxes or ornaments on a business school mantelpiece
- business schools should ask for more help.

I want to share with you one specific School and Board that really stand out, particularly through their extensive interaction between meetings. Meet the Strategic Advisory Board at Birmingham Business School, the University of Birmingham, here in the UK. I've seen this Board in action on a number of projects and my thanks go to Chair Steve Hollis, Dean Professor Cathy Cassell and Corporate Relations Manager Andrew Miles for enabling me to highlight where and most importantly how this Board's valuable impact is being achieved:

*"The Advisory Board provides challenge to the Dean, challenge to the strategy and really invigorates relevance for the Business School. The feedback I'm getting is that it's helping them in their thinking, it's helping them develop a greater breadth and depth of insight to feed into their programmes and the way that they're actually interacting with the corporate world."*

**Steve Hollis, Chairman Sorbus Partners LLP, Chair Birmingham Business School Advisory Board**

The Advisory Board at Birmingham ticks many best-practice boxes including:

- a defined role as a sounding board, providing constructive challenge and using its expertise to provide more practical help
- clearly communicated expectation of active participation
- a broad mix of mindsets, diverse in many ways including age, ethnicity and gender
- establishing a Board reputation – people want to be asked to join
- a pipeline of potential board members with specific identified expertise
- tailored inductions and early introductions to academic staff in relevant departments
- a strong Chair who takes responsibility for his Board and the impact it has

*"If you look at the diversity of it, it's a great forum to really create a lot of innovative thinking. I make it absolutely clear that we're not here to run the School but to challenge constructively and bring our respective business expertise or whatever else to the benefit of the Business School and the Dean. My intention is always to try and make sure no one grandstands and to bring everybody's views in so everyone feels engaged."*

**Steve Hollis**





Most importantly, there is a School team that is receptive to new ideas and constructive challenge:

*"It's extremely helpful when Board Members share the changes they are seeing or making within their own organisations, particularly with regard to digital innovation. This provides us with an invaluable heads-up as to what we need to incorporate into our teaching to keep it cutting edge, changes in the skills that our students need to develop, and what new techniques and technologies we could build into our own operations and marketing."* **Professor Cathy Cassell, Dean Birmingham Business School**

The high levels of engagement are rooted in the particular closeness of the Board and the School. New Senior Leadership team recruits benefit from mentoring by Advisory Board Members.

*"Board members are drawn into the actual heartbeat of the School and that actually helps us bring more relevance through a much better understanding."* **Steve Hollis**

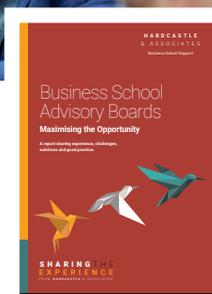
I have written before about the bridge builder – the person working alongside the Dean and the Chair – facilitating greater interaction between the Board and the School. At Birmingham, Andrew Miles carries out this role and works hard to balance member engagement, ensuring members feel appreciated and that each individual's valuable time is put to best use to help deliver the School's strategic goals.

Andrew uses task and finish groups to focus on areas such as School marketing or programme redesign. He utilises specific Board Member expertise to lead these reviews, update the Board and even test out the viability of advice stemming from other Board Members. Board involvement also gives greater credibility to project outputs in the different University approvals. These groups are then systematically disbanded after short focused periods to prevent Board Members being siloed.



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The University of Birmingham/Cappgemini Community Challenge ran in 2021 for the ninth year. This is a week-long, real-life experience where 25 students, placed in teams, work with consultants from Cappgemini



“This is a programme like no other which looks to provide real-world experience for students – working with real clients and learning from experienced consultants in the field. We have a long-standing relationship with the University and I really can’t praise them enough. The Business School engagement, led by Andrew Miles is first-class. Over the years they have proved themselves to be such collaborative partners and along with the University’s Careers Network, they have worked alongside us to improve the Challenge every year. I am constantly amazed at how much the students grow during the course of the week and the quality of the deliverables they produce always delights their charity clients. Running the Challenge is one of my favourite events of the year.” **Billie Major, Corporate Vice-President Cappgemini, CEO HMRC Business Unit, Advisory Board Member**

I have highlighted examples below where this Board particularly adds value:

### Elements of Differentiation

Two of the Business School’s leading initiatives stem from direct collaboration with Board Members: the University of Birmingham Cappgemini Community Challenge for undergraduates, and the Birmingham MBA Deloitte Consultancy Challenge: two week-long immersive consultancy training experiences.

The Cappgemini Community Challenge ran in 2021 for the ninth year. This is a real-life experience where five teams of students work as consultants, with support from Cappgemini, to provide tangible business solutions for local charities.

### Programme Design

Some Board Members actively engage in design and delivery of assessed programmes, enhancing them with real-world content that directly impacts student employability.

*“HSBC was delighted to work hand in hand with the UoB to design the new module that was relevant in a business context, in real day, work-based scenarios and interesting for the students. It was great to involve HSBC staff in the delivery and interactive aspects working directly with the students. A really successful collaboration for both parties.”* **Paul Szumilewicz, Programme Director for EMEA HSBC Paris, Advisory Board Member**

## Research Impact

Birmingham have utilised their Advisory Board to help deliver and measure research impact, creating a new impact culture:

*"A large section of the Board has helped the School develop its REF 2021 impact cases. It's been fascinating – we've gained a better understanding of the School's research output and given detailed advice as to how it can be applied to create change and make its mark beyond academic journals."* **Steve Hollis**

*"All our impact cases are presented Dragons' Den style, in person to different Board Members, who challenge the output and extent to which it has been, or could be, tested. The draft cases are reviewed later, with Members providing written feedback on how succinctly and effectively the academic has conveyed and evidenced the impact. We have seen cases move to a 4-star rating due to these interventions."* **Andrew Miles, Corporate Relations Manager, Birmingham Business School**

With the 2021 REF submitted, the School's Impact Lead and a Board Member are critiquing the process and identifying how the Board can engage from the outset of the next REF cycle.

*"It's useful to ask the Advisory Board where they think the opportunities for real impact might lie, as some academics might want to incorporate that into their research."* **Andrew Miles**

Most recently, Board Members have been involved in the launch and dissemination of the School's Fathers in the Workplace Toolkit worked on with policy makers, and evidentially helping employees to navigate the options and considerations of shared parental leave.

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## Academic Consultancy

The Advisory Board proactively finds opportunities for external tenders both with their own companies and more widely:

*"I was keen to put Birmingham Business School forward for a tender to undertake a review of the ESC's board effectiveness, and was delighted when our chairman chose Birmingham in the face of stiff competition from other business schools. The report was a game changer for the ESC – providing 16 recommendations for improvement and constructive challenge and interaction between the executive team and the NEDs. More importantly, the report sent a clear message to Innovate UK and the government to reconsider the funding policy for Catapults having identified that the current policy hindered ESC's risk-taking behaviour. As a Board member it's a great thrill to be able to put the School forward for opportunities and witness the quality of its objective research rigour and delivery."*

**Marc Stone, CFO KEW Technology (former FD Energy Systems Catapult), Advisory Board Member**

## Quality and range of advice available

Whilst Birmingham define a three-year term of membership, rather than specifying a maximum number of terms, they strategically manage the membership of their Board to ensure the optimum quality and variety of expertise is available when required. Some Board Members have served for many years and still contribute effectively, so the School doesn't want to lose them. Active management comes into play when a member's contributions have either dwindled, or there is someone in the pipeline that can bring new perspectives and/or expertise. It will come as little surprise that two of the Board's more recent recruits are digital change specialists.





I also believe that you should not underestimate the magic of chemistry: a team of board members who respect each other's views and really know that they're doing something worthwhile.

*"It's a real testament to this Board, that they truly value interaction with each other. At our October meeting they arrive early to network, attend our Advisory Board Guest Lecture, meet students and have dinner together before the Board meeting the next day. The Board itself has become quite a unit."* **Andrew Miles**

*"This is one of the few boards I am on that I genuinely look forward to. It is extremely well run, for a start, which in itself reflects on the school. We interact with the students when we can and are dedicated to their success. The quality and calibre of fellow board members, from virtually every walk of relevant business life, is second to none."* **Anji Hunter, Senior Adviser Edelman, Advisory Board Member**



Board Members frequently speak to students about their:

- areas of expertise
- challenges faced and solutions delivered
- styles of management and leadership.

### **So what is actually different about the Strategic Advisory Board at Birmingham?**

The Chair, Dean and Corporate Relations Manager set a tone of real enthusiasm and clear expectations; Board Members all know that they are expected to deliver.

*"We try to identify possible new recruits in advance and engage them in other activity to understand their level of interaction and build a rapport with them, before inviting them to join the Board."* **Andrew Miles**

And finally leaving the last word to their Chair:

*"It's not about promoting your own career or satisfying your ego, but really making a difference to an organisation who are engendering responsible leadership globally through their international degree programmes and research. You can see some of the mistakes they're making and can actually learn a lot from them too. There's an emotional engagement because you're dealing with interesting people who want to make a difference and it's exciting to help them. It's a nice chemical composite that just works and people enjoy doing it."* **Steve Hollis**



#### **About the Authors**

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