



Meet a... Board Member and Trustee

Professor Wendy Purcell
PhD FRSA

How would you describe your role?

I'm a Board Member Non-Executive Director and Trustee of EAUC and currently on academic sabbatical with Harvard University after some 8-years as University President Vice-Chancellor and CEO on the UK's greenest university. I joined the Center for Health and the Global Environment in the Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health and am supporting research and education in leadership for sustainability, as well as projects related to social enterprise and innovation ecosystems.

What does an average day look like?

Well, if you told me that being a Board Trustee would bring me to Harvard University – I'd have laughed in your face! But, I joined the Board of EAUC with a mission to move the sustainability agenda from the 'boiler room to boardroom' across higher and further education. There's no real 'average day', but joining the Board went way beyond turning up for a few meetings. It really has been wonderful to be involved in developing EAUC's new and ambitious strategy. We're 20-years old and confident about our achievements to date, but clear there is a lot more we can do to support our members across all the universities and colleges in the UK and Ireland. This is a period of disruption for our sector and we see how sustainability can be positioned as part of the solution to creating value around our teaching and learning, our research and innovation as well as driving efficiency and effectiveness in our operations and services. A key focus for us is empowering sustainability professionals and leadership teams to embrace higher level constructs around sustainable organisations. So, part of my focus as a Board Trustee is to ensure we are future-fit and our strategy sufficiently agile to support universities and colleges build resilience. So, from Board meetings and working with fellow trustees and our chair, to supporting and challenging the Executive as well as engaging with a host of other stakeholders and actors on a global stage is what an 'average' day looks like! Being a Board Trustee is fun and I'd recommend finding something you care deeply about and working with others to make the change you want to see happen.

What are the key skills and qualifications required for your job?

I think in order to be an effective Board Trustee you need to understand strategy and risk and you need to be able to both support and challenge the CEO and his/her Executive team. You're a custodian, a steward of the organisation and so you need to understand all the general workings such as finance and HR, but perhaps more importantly you need to feel energised by the challenge of creating change and value and be an ambassador for the organisation, by word and deed.



To help our members understand more about the roles in further and higher education institutions, we've created a suite of career profiles. These share the main responsibilities and skills and knowledge required of many of the key roles that play a part in embedding sustainability in a tertiary education institution.

View the entire suite at www.eauc.org.uk/meet_a_member





What training and continuous professional development do you require?

I like to keep up to date with governance best practice and focus on diversity to ward off 'group think' in Boards. I've seen first-hand some truly dysfunctional Boards that destroyed value in the organisation they were there to serve. So making sure you are aware of current thinking and of course charity responsibilities are my best advice.

What are your top three responsibilities?

My focus is on ensuring our strategy is ambitious, yet deliverable, is future-facing but current and is creating value in partnership with our members. Alongside that, I take a keen interest in understanding the disruption ongoing in the higher and further education sector and how we can help our members. I also pay strong attention to our staff team in terms of their development and support.

Tell us something surprising about your role that people may not know about?

Many people would see Board Trustee and read 'bored' Trustee – that's so not the case with EAUC. We are really energised about our roles and work well as a team, and the surprising thing is – it's fun!

What are the positives and negatives of the role?

Well, I think you'll get a sense of the positives from my replies to previous questions – being a Board Trustee is worthwhile, fulfilling, interesting and fun. In terms of the downsides, there are a few – battling competing diary commitments and making sure you allocate enough time to the role is always a challenge. When invited or elected onto a Board, whatever time they tell you will be needed – double it and then double that again – more time is required than they ever tell you! Time to read the Board papers is a given, but you need to do more, such as engage with stakeholders at various functions, and set aside time to do 'deep dives' in areas of concern or market opportunity.

Do you manage a budget, and what are your key priorities for this?

Well, we leave the actual management of the budget to the management of EAUC, but I am involved in allocation and budget scrutiny and making sure we can cover our costs and invest in our future while keeping member fees low.

What does the path to career progression in this role look like?

That's an interesting question for a Board Trustee. I don't think we think about a 'career' in that way. But it is the case that as you continue to support a Board, you may assume responsibility for oversight of key projects, or as Chair of a Sub-committee. I've done both, taking responsibility for our project on governance and helping university and college boards better understand the importance of sustainability in building a successful organisation. And, I've just agreed to Chair the People and Performance Sub-committee of the Board.

What is the minimum and maximum salary band for this role?

Again, that's interesting! All my work as a Board Trustee is pro bono; there is no remuneration or stipend associated with the role. Sometimes, our expenses are covered but usually we throw those in as in-kind donations too!

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What advice do you have for graduates and other potential candidates who are considering joining?

I do think that diversity on Boards extends to age as a factor – so, I'd encourage graduates and younger students to think about how their talents and skills might support a Board. Indeed, the EAUC Board extended its membership to include the student voice, creating a distinct category of Board member for students. That's been so important in 'sensing' into our community of students across higher and further education and I know the students themselves have benefitted from being involved.

For institutions without a Board of Trustees – what 3 aspects of your role do you think are the most important for any institution's sustainability journey?

As a Board Trustee for EAUC, I think that an institution's sustainability journey can be accelerated and de-risked by being one of our members – so do please join us if you're not already a member. That'd be my number 1. In terms of a second, I'd say that any journey starts with a single step – baby steps are fine, so just begin and work at your own pace – drawing on the resources of EAUC and its global members. And, my 3rd point would be to support leaders at all levels in understanding how sustainability can help them tackle their inbox and in-tray and be more successful for the organisation they serve.

What department do you and your line manager sit in? Which departmental interactions are vital for your role?

As a Board Trustee, we're outside the normal organisational framework and this independence is prized and essential to good governance. But we reach into organisations at different levels, so some of my fellow Trustees are sustainability professionals themselves while others focus more on academic, student or leadership functions – so we can appreciate all parts of our members' organisation.

What opportunities and challenges does working in a post-16 education institution bring?

Wow, that's a really BIG question! The opportunities are huge. In being part of a university or college you are really shaping society one student, one graduate, and one learner at a time. And, now with higher and further education being so critical to societal and economic success, you are part of an ecosystem that prizes community engagement and place-making. You're also creating, disseminating and applying knowledge in new ways. It's the very best job in the world – in my humble opinion. But, that's not to say it's not tough. Battling the policy landscape, understanding how the various forces of disruption – from technology to student expectations and market forces – really are challenging. And I think we see that the academic community and the professional services community can sometimes be at odds with one another, rather than feeling part of one organisation. That can make change tougher, and I think that's where we see EAUC adding value as we help member organisations in becoming more agile, more connected and more resilient through shared sustainability endeavours.

How do you communicate the outputs of your role to the wider institution, and what does this include?

As Board Trustees, we rather reserve our 'voice' for the Board and our Executive team. That's not to say we are isolated, rather we leave the main communication efforts to the management team. And, in the case of EAUC, we really do celebrate the stories or success coming out of our members. We are there to support them and take pride in their outputs.

What are the unique opportunities to embed sustainability in to this job?

As a Board Trustee with EAUC, it's a constant learning opportunity as we get to see the very best ideas for embedding sustainability through our Green Gown Awards and the stories from our member organisations. And it is the case that as a Trustee you are a conduit to your own network for the ideas presented to the EAUC and that's wonderful.

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How has EAUC Membership helped you in your job and within your institution?

Being part of EAUC, first as leader of a member organisation and now as Board Trustee has really added value to my work as an academic leader and as a Non-Executive Director with other organisations. I've been exposed to new thinking and new ways of working, the Green Gown Awards showcase best practice in the sector and encouraged me to network with other organisations to learn more. I've also really learned a lot from being part of the Annual Conference, and not just in the formal sessions – the social side of the conference is very important too. And, I think as we launch our new strategy we'll see EAUC step forward into becoming a champion and thought-leader in sustainability for and on behalf of our members. So, if you're reading this and not yet a member – sign up, and fast!

How can other Members contact you?

- Email: wpurcell@hsph.harvard.edu

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