



# **The University of Manchester School Governors Initiative – scaling the programme to address school governor vacancies nationwide**

**A report by Public First for The University of  
Manchester**

**July 2021**

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## Executive summary

Since 2011, more than 350 staff and 1,000 alumni from The University of Manchester have become school governors in a range of schools across the country. We were tasked by The University of Manchester to model what the impact of their School Governor Initiative might look like if it was run across higher education institutions in England and Wales.

We know that there is an overall shortage of school governors in England and Wales. In 2021, Governors for Schools had more than 4,300 vacancies registered with them – this is just a proportion of the total shortage. In 2014, the National Governance Association estimated that as many as one in ten governors' posts were unfilled<sup>1</sup> – on the basis of their own estimate of 250,000 governor roles within the UK, this would mean around 25,000 vacancies.

The problem is particularly acute in some areas of the country, with a third of schools in some regions reporting vacancies<sup>2</sup>.

As the National Governance Association highlights, strong and effective governance can have a vital impact on the success of a school. The higher education sector, by actively recruiting school governors from its students and staff, could therefore help support schools across the country to develop their governance and leadership.

In this report, we estimate that if all universities in England and Wales ran a similar governor recruitment and placement scheme to The University of Manchester's School Governors Initiative, **they could produce more than 2,400 new school governors each year. This would fill more than 50% of the current vacancies registered with Governors for Schools, and more than 10% of the current nationwide vacancies.**

We break down estimated governor vacancies filled on a regional level. Based on universities encouraging more staff alone to become school governors, we estimate that in the most populous region, 221 can be filled in London every year, down to 52 in the North East.

While we do not model precise numbers of 'cold spot' vacancies which can be filled, the geographical spread of universities across England and Wales, alongside the planned and directed element of The University of Manchester scheme to be replicated by other institutions, means they are perfectly placed to target volunteers into these 'cold spot' areas with shortages of governors

A more targeted set of initiatives aimed at certain universities – for example all large institutions, only those outside London, or those who have signed up to produce a Civic University Agreement – would also be possible, and we calculate numbers for these scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/exclusive-schools-struggling-fill-governor-posts-candidates-daunted-work-9555282.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/is-there-a-school-governor-recruitment-crisis/>

This estimate is based on the number of staff working at each institution, and the most recent seven cohorts of university students. It is possible that by mobilising their entire alumni networks, universities' potential impact is much greater – our highest estimate is that they have the potential to fill more than 10,000 school governor vacancies across England and Wales each year. However, this figure comes with a considerable degree of caution, and the 2,400 figure remains the central estimate.

## Section 1: Modelling and methodology

Data from The University of Manchester showed the number of new governors they had placed from their staff body and total UK student alumni each year since the School Governor Initiative started in 2011.

|         | <i>Alumni governors</i> | <i>Staff governors</i> |
|---------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 2011/12 |                         | 29                     |
| 2012/13 | 97                      | 50                     |
| 2013/14 | 201                     | 35                     |
| 2014/15 | 120                     | 32                     |
| 2015/16 | 175                     | 33                     |
| 2016/17 | 104                     | 37                     |
| 2017/18 | 76                      | 38                     |
| 2018/19 | 205                     | 27                     |
| 2019/20 | 81                      | 23                     |
| 2020/21 | 70                      | 21                     |

The University of Manchester asked if we could estimate the impact of what a School Governor Initiative might look like in different institutions<sup>3</sup> across England and Wales.

Using data from HESA and data from The University of Manchester where available, we created a model to estimate the scalability of such a programme.

Our model has three main variables:

### I. The total pool of applicants.

We draw from HESA data to input the current population of academic and non-academic FPE staff by HE provider, as recorded in the academic year 2019/20<sup>4</sup> (“staff”).

We then consider the potential pool of applicants among graduates of each university<sup>5</sup>. Here we have two options:

<sup>3</sup> For all the data and modelling, when we say universities, we include providers in England who are members of sector representative body Universities UK and who therefore meet UUK’s membership criteria as an eligible institution.

<sup>4</sup> HESA: Staff Numbers by HE Provider (All, excluding atypical) <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he#provider>

<sup>5</sup> We know that not all UK domiciled alumni will be eligible to be governors in England. Some will have moved abroad as graduates or moved to devolved nation within the UK after graduating. In the absence of any reliable way in which to account for this, we assume all those coded as UK domiciled students remain eligible - in other words, there is likely to be a slight over estimate. Given the range of figures produced in the modelling, we are confident that this slight overestimate does not materially change the estimated figures for each institution or across the sector as a whole.

- a. The total alumni pool of each university currently resident in the UK and therefore eligible to serve as governors. We have data from The University of Manchester as to their total pool of UK alumni. Based on current and recent historic student numbers, it is possible to construct an estimated alumni pool for each institution under consideration (“alumni”). This number is used for Model 2.
- b. The more recent alumni pool of university alumni. The weakness of the previous “alumni” number is that it relies on a heavily generalisable model of estimating total number of alumni, going back many years in some cases. Contrastingly, we have HESA records of first year students for each institution going back to 2014/15 (but no earlier). In other words, we have a comparable and rigorous number for the last seven years of first year student cohorts, of which six cohorts (first years in 14/15 through to first years in 18/19) will now be graduates and thus eligible to serve as governors in this model. For ease, and because such a scheme would not start immediately, we also count 19/20 first year students within the eligible pool even though they will not graduate until summer 2022 at the earliest. This group we term “recent alumni,” and this is the number used for Model 1.

## **II. The contact rate for each institution**

Whether working from the total alumni pool (whether all alumni or recent alumni), we model estimates for how many alumni each university is estimated to be in touch with and who could therefore be targeted by efforts to encourage them to become school governors. We model a number of scenarios, which we term high (80%), medium (60%) and low (40%) estimates for the % of total alumni for whom the universities hold up to date contact information. For staff, universities have 100% contact rates and we model this as a fixed amount.

## **III. The conversion rate**

The third variable is how many of the alumni or staff each university contacts who agree to become governors. Again, our central estimate is The University of Manchester’s historic conversion rate based on their programme, which is 0.29% for staff and 0.05% for alumni. As well as the rate above based on data from The University of Manchester, we included an “optimistic” (Manchester +50%) value and a “pessimistic” value (Manchester -50%) to reflect the potential variance in success for institutions implementing their own School Governor Initiative Schemes.

Taking these variables together, we model a range of governor recruitment estimates for universities collectively. It follows logically from the variables within the models that are a total of 18 different output numbers, depending on the model and combination of variables chosen. The example calculation tables below show how these are generated:

**Example tables from which we generate estimated numbers of governors:**

| Table 2.1 Estimated number of school governors placed each year from English and Welsh universities, using “staff” and “recent alumni” (Model 1) |   |                        |               |                        |
|--|---|------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
|  |   | Conversion Rate        |               |                        |
|  | % alumni with active contact details held | Pessimistic (UoM -50%) | Central (UoM) | Optimistic (UoM + 50%) |
| Number of new governors (per year)   | High (80%)                                |                        |               |                        |
|  | Medium (60%)                              |                        |               |                        |
|  | Low                                       |                        |               |                        |

| Table 2.2 Estimated number of school governors placed each year from English and Welsh universities, using “staff” and “alumni” (Model 2) |   |                        |               |                        |
|---|---|------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
|   |   | Conversion Rate        |               |                        |
|   | % alumni with active contact details held | Pessimistic (UoM -50%) | Central (UoM) | Optimistic (UoM + 50%) |
| Number of new governors (per year)  | High (80%)                                |                        |               |                        |
|   | Medium (60%)                              |                        |               |                        |
|   | Low                                       |                        |               |                        |

We make a decision from which combination of variables the numbers are most plausible – in other words, is it more robust to consider the total pool of potential governors as all alumni and staff, or more recent alumni and all staff? On balance, we tend to believe using the last seven years of alumni yields the more accurate predictions. This is for a number of reasons:

- Most importantly, we have little way of accurately estimating total alumni pools for all other universities. We know from The University of Manchester data that “recent alumni” make up approximately 15% of the “alumni” pool, but we have no way of accurately checking whether this is likely to be a similar proportion for other universities. There are many variables – not least recent growth of institutions – which mean there could be large variations in numbers.
- We have less of a sense as to whether contact rates and conversion rates would be consistent across older alumni to younger alumni. On one hand, we might expect contact rates and conversion rates to be lower when alumni have less loyalty and affiliation to their alma mater. On the other hand, we know from national age profiles that older people are more likely to become governors.

**We therefore present all modelling (unless specified) from now on based on Model 1 – presenting a range of nine numbers based on the variables within that model.** This therefore represents the lower limit of the potential universities could have in tackling the school governor shortage – the impact of mobilising their total alumni base is potentially greater.

## Section 2: Findings – overall central estimate

Our model shows that, **if every English and Welsh university ran a School Governors Initiative, on the basis of contacting all staff and 80% of eligible recent alumni, and with the same conversion rates as Manchester, they could place 2,468 school governors in state schools in England and Wales each year.**

| Table 3: Estimated number of school governors placed each year from English and Welsh universities staff and most recent alumni cohorts (14/15-19/20) |  |                        |                        |                   |
|---|--|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
|   |  | <i>Conversion rate</i> |                        |                   |
|   | <i>% alumni with active contact details held</i> | <b>Pessimistic</b>     | <b>Manchester rate</b> | <b>Optimistic</b> |
| <i>Number of new governors (per year)</i>   | <b>High (80%)</b>                                | 1234                   | <b>2468</b>            | 3702              |
|   | <b>Medium (60%)</b>                              | 1044                   | <b>2089</b>            | 3133              |
|   | <b>Low (40%)</b>                                 | 855                    | <b>1709</b>            | 2564              |

Table 3 shows the calculations for the number of governors who could be recruited under the different variables. The range is large – from more than 800 governors on the most pessimistic set of assumptions (where every university can only make contact with 40% of its alumni pool of the last seven years and where conversion rates are 50% lower than Manchester’s) to almost 3,700 (where we assume an 80% contact rate and a conversion rate of 50% greater than Manchester’s).

Our central estimate of 2,468 governors assumes a contact rate of 80% – given Manchester’s estimate that they are actually in contact with far more than that, especially of more recent alumni – and a conversion rate equivalent to Manchester’s. This is because despite running for ten years, the conversion rate for Manchester has been consistent throughout this period, including in early years.

It is worth noting that under Model 2 – where we model contact with and conversion of all estimated alumni, not just the most recent ones – the impact is even greater. Here, we estimate that if universities are able to utilise their total alumni body at a similar rate to The University of Manchester, **6,000–8,500 school governors could be placed in schools across the country each year – with the potential for this to increase to more than 10,000 at its most optimistic.** However, as noted above, there is a very wide confidence interval around this number, and it does not become our central estimate for this reason.



| Table 4: Estimated number of school governors placed each year from English and Welsh universities staff and estimated total alumni cohorts (Model 2) |              |                 |                 |            |
|---|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------|
|   |              | Conversion rate |                 |            |
|   |              | Pessimistic     | Manchester rate | Optimistic |
| % alumni with active contact details held   | High (80%)   | 5175            | 11210           | 16815      |
|   | Medium (60%) | 4316            | 8633            | 12949      |
|   | Low          | 3028            | 6056            | 9084       |

### Section 3: Findings – other scenarios

We know that not every institution might have the available resources or expertise to support a new initiative such as this. Our final analysis therefore looks at three groups of institutions who might be best placed to run a programme on a similar size and scale to The University of Manchester. It's clear that even among these narrower groups, there is significant potential to address the national governor shortage.

We model three further scenarios:

1. Russell Group institutions.
2. Large institutions, defined as those with more than 6,000 new students each year.
3. Universities that have made a pledge to develop a Civic Universities Agreement as part of the civic universities network, which encourage higher education institutions to work collaboratively with local partners, including schools, to solve local issues and help in areas of need.

| Table 5: Impact of different institution groups (assuming that a high (80%) level of contact details are held), based on staff and "recent alumni" cohorts` |                              |                 |                 |            |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------|
|   |                              | Conversion rate |                 |            |
|   |                              | Pessimistic     | Manchester rate | Optimistic |
| Number of new governors (per year)  | Russell Group institutions   | 379             | 758             | 1137       |
|   | Large institutions           | 733             | 1466            | 2199       |
|   | Civic Universities Agreement | 592             | 1185            | 1777       |

## Section 4: Findings – regional impact and cold spots

As we outlined in the introduction, governor vacancies are not concentrated equally across the country. However, universities are well placed to support governor recruitment across the country.

We know that graduates don't necessarily stay in the same area they go to university in, nor do they return home. A 2016 report by the Centre for Cities estimated that **a quarter of all new graduates from UK universities worked in London six months after graduation**<sup>6</sup>, an area which often has a surplus rather than a shortage of volunteers for school governor roles. Estimates from the National Governance Association indicate that in the West Midlands, South West and East of England, around a third of governing boards have two or more vacancies<sup>7</sup>.

However, one of the key benefits of running governor recruitment programmes in universities is their geographic spread across the country, and their broad diversity. This means their alumni populations often include people who are from – and who stay in – the local area, as well as those who are more mobile. In particular, with the data universities have about their staff and alumni populations, they are well placed to target resources at recruiting people who currently reside in localised 'cold spot' areas. We estimate that even when excluding institutions from London and assuming that only 40% of a non-London based institution's alumni are able to be contacted about the project, **1,000 governor vacancies outside the capital could be filled each year**.

Furthermore, a university's staff population is likely to remain more geographically fixed to a certain area. Modelling for staff data alone shows the impact a School Governors Initiative could have over the next ten years in each UK region, excluding the additional governors created from more geographically dispersed graduates and alumni:

| <b>Region</b>        | <b>One year</b> | <b>Five years</b> | <b>Ten years</b> |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| North East           | 52              | 259               | 517              |
| North West           | 111             | 555               | 1109             |
| Yorkshire and Humber | 82              | 412               | 825              |
| East Midlands        | 56              | 282               | 564              |
| West Midlands        | 69              | 345               | 691              |
| East of England      | 77              | 383               | 766              |
| South East           | 138             | 689               | 1378             |
| South West           | 82              | 409               | 818              |
| London               | 221             | 1106              | 2213             |
| Wales                | 54              | 272               | 544              |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>942</b>      | <b>4712</b>       | <b>9425</b>      |

<sup>6</sup> Swiney and Williams (2016) The Great British Brain Drain: <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/great-british-brain-drain-where-graduates-move-and-why/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/is-there-a-school-governor-recruitment-crisis/>

## Section 5: Conclusion

Our modelling shows that greater recruitment of school governors from the higher education sector could help tackle the school governor shortage across the country. The passion, skills and knowledge of higher education staff and students, and their diverse make up, means that by working collectively universities could help support school leadership in their local communities and more widely across the country. Crucially, by harnessing the data universities have about their staff and student populations, this support could be targeted at the schools most in need.