University of Aberdeen

Appointment of Principal and Vice-Chancellor

Consultation Summary Report – December 2017
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Perrett Laver has undertaken an extensive number of meetings and telephone conversations across the University including with Court, Senate and General Council members, senior executive staff, open staff forums (at OA and Foresterhill), AUSA sabbatical officers, and students via a survey coordinated by AUSA. The following report documents a high level summary of the major themes emerging from these consultations. It should be noted that there was a high degree of consistency from all stakeholders on the view of the challenges and opportunities facing the University and therefore what was required in the next Principal.

Reflections on the current context for the University of Aberdeen

Respondents were in agreement that there is much to be celebrated in terms of the University, which were as anticipated and included:

- World-leading, world-class centres for research;
- Breadth of subjects – “A-Z” offer, good student experience and high quality teaching;
- International, diverse student and staff population;
- Sense of tradition and heritage as an ancient university, but with a focus on the future;
- Committed, loyal staff and a collegiate culture;
- A university which plays an important role in the region.

Themes going forward and future challenges

Financial constraints

Operating under a particular set of contextual challenges, the creation of financial headroom will need to be a priority. Having undergone cost-cutting exercises and voluntary redundancy schemes, with significant impact on morale, there is general acknowledgement that a strategic assessment of current activity, while identifying and maximising alternative funding streams, is required.

Taking fundraising to the next level with a large scale public campaign is identified as a significant opportunity given the extraordinary latency and capacity that exists within Aberdeen’s alumni base internationally. The next Principal will clearly need to be comfortable being personally involved in this and developing potential high value relationships.

Political context

The combined risk around Brexit and a possible second Scottish Independence Referendum places an acute focus on the sustainability of Aberdeen’s research grant capture and ability to flourish in research. It also raises obvious fundamental
questions about the student base and continued access to international student markets. One anticipates, of course, that this broad area is unlikely to play out in the worst case scenario. However, navigating these uncertainties is going to be extremely important over the next period and will require an incoming Principal with a strong evidence base of making strong contributions to the political, strategic and tactical implications.

In terms of national politics, it is clearly important in the Principal to find someone who understands and is sophisticated in their approach to local (and national) political process and who can work with the grain of that as much as is reasonably possible, while also being a powerful advocate, both in Scotland and for Scotland, around the importance of having a research-intensive university in the North-East, with all that this offers in terms of social, education, cultural and economic advance.

**Articulating distinct vision/offer**

In an ever more competitive market, Aberdeen would benefit from articulating a more distinct vision. The opportunity to co-create a new strategic vision with a distinct Aberdeen “flavor” should be attractive to potential candidates. The size and scale of the University should allow it to be quite agile in seizing opportunities and being creative in how it positions itself.

**International**

The University’s vision for its international profile and relationships can evolve strongly from its current context. There appears to be an opportunity to continue to strengthen the University’s presence in key student markets, albeit with the obvious caveats to this. The AFG Qatar partnership is an exciting development and there is the opportunity to develop a further expression of international collaborations and partnerships. While bottom-up academic institutions rightly are sceptical of imposed institutional partnerships, there is a clear trend among peer universities for bespoke international tie-ups which seek to generate value across a range of fronts, and which articulate the partners as being part of a small group of high-quality peers.

**City and Region**

The civic role of the University will continue to be imperative and there seems potential for even greater scale of vision between the City and the University. The City has a superb set of assets available to students and staff that will combine to benefit the University overall. The willingness of the City authorities to engage in a discussion around the vision for the knowledge economy as well as cultural and educational outputs that can be derived through working closely with a university such as Aberdeen is an important factor for the future.
Current organisational structure

The recent abolition of the College structure was commented upon quite considerably and there is a general feeling that it has inadvertently created competition between Schools and that colleagues need to feel more empowered within the structure. There was also a description of a “them and us” sentiment both between academic staff and professional services, and between staff and “management”. Whether this culture could be addressed, in part, by a further review of organisational structure, may be a consideration for the next Principal.

Values and experience sets of the next Principal

While there was a spectrum of views on the interpretation of academic credibility, there was absolute agreement that an industrialist would not be a credible leader for an institution such as Aberdeen, with a strong preference within the body of the staff for an academic from a research intensive environment. Those that were personally more agnostic about the requirement of academic pedigree concluded that, in order to build trust and get buy-in from the academic community, someone with a background in higher education would be preferable.

Similarly, there was agreement that because of its size and scale, demonstrable leadership experience of an institution with a similar footprint was required, in particular the ability to evidence devising and realising a strategic vision. While the ability to navigate the political situation is clearly essential, there was not a strong sense that direct experience in the UK, indeed nor prior links to Scotland, was necessary.

Significant attention was paid to the personal attributes and values of the next Principal with common themes being: transparency and openness; outstanding communicator; dynamic; listening; data-led decision making; collegiate, empowering and visible leadership style; engenders trust; consistent; low-ego; realistic; political nous.