THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Principal and Vice-Chancellor

Consultation Report

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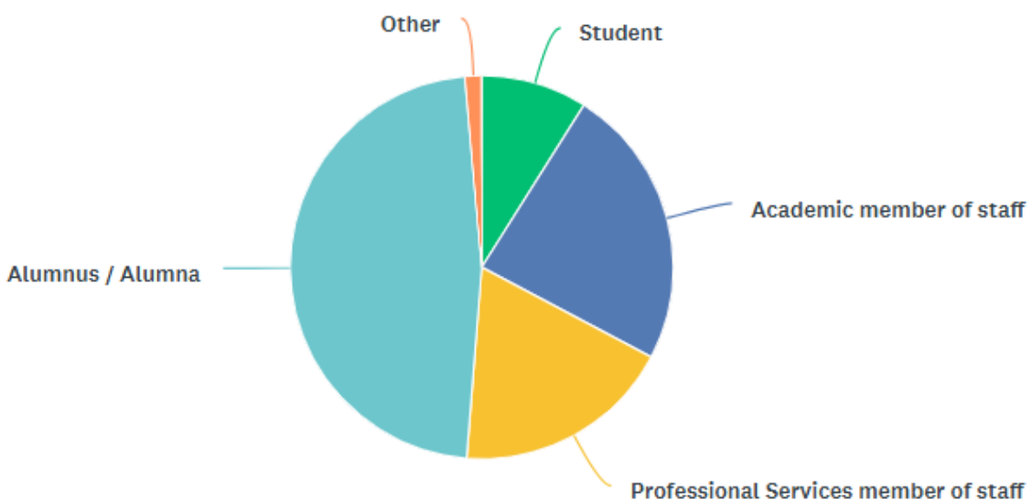
CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

Overview

The consultation process for the recruitment of the next Principal involved c700 participants from across staff, student and alumni communities. The process included:

- One-to-one briefing discussions with members of Court, SLT and the selection panel
- Three town hall sessions (two in-person, one online)
- Email responses via edinburgh@wittkieffer.com
- Consultation Survey (643 responses - statistics below)



Student – 9% (64 responses) *0.13% of the student community*
Academic member of staff – 24% (170 responses) *1.94% of the academic staff community*
Professional services member of staff – 18% (132 responses) *1.49% of the professional services staff community*
Alumnus/Alumna 47% (388 responses) *0.19% of the alumni community for whom we have contact details*
Other – 2% (10 responses)

The sessions focussed on three high-level questions which participants were asked to reflect on and respond to. These were:

1. *What skills and experience should the next Principal bring to the role?*
2. *What leadership qualities and style would you like to see in the next Principal?*
3. *What academic vision and priorities should the next Principal champion for the University?*

The responses have been distilled into seven categories which capture the main themes that emerged from the consultation in relation to skills, qualities, experience and priorities for the next Principal.

These are:

1. Clarity of vision and strategic direction
2. Visibility, communication and effective dialogue
3. Pragmatism, prioritisation and tough choices
4. Humility and accountability
5. Optimism, hope and ambition
6. Academic credibility
7. Additional observations

A summary of each of these broad themes is provided below.

1. Clarity of Vision and Strategic Direction

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of a Principal who can articulate a clear and compelling vision for the University's future, grounded in its core purposes of teaching and research. There was, perhaps unsurprisingly, strong sentiment that financial and operational decisions should be guided by, and supportive of, the institution's academic mission rather than becoming ends in themselves. Respondents had a strong preference for a leader who can both define a coherent long-term direction and align the University behind shared priorities that will deliver this. Strong and consistent advocacy for a distinctive 'northern star' is a highly sought after attribute for those who took part in the consultation.

The consultation also highlighted the need for this clarity through what is undoubtedly a period of transformation and uncertainty, both for Edinburgh and higher education more generally. There was a strength of feeling amongst participants that the new Principal will need to be able to explain the University's challenges effectively, distinguish immediate pressures from longer-term priorities, and provide confidence that University decisions are being taken within a consistent and clearly understood strategic framework.

2. Visibility, Communication and Effective Dialogue

Across all stakeholder groups there was a strong call for a highly visible and approachable Principal who is actively engaged with the life of the University. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of regular presence across campuses, engagement with schools, colleges, professional services and students, and opportunities for direct interaction outside formal communications.

Participants also placed a premium on a communication style that is clear and, for many, ideally two-way. They are looking for a leader who will leverage the significant capabilities that the university has to offer, listens as effectively as they speak, welcomes challenge from those around them and engages openly with Court, Senate, trade unions and students. Linking back to the first point around strategic direction, a number of participants highlighted the need for the Principal to connect difficult change and transformation work with a clear strategic direction.

3. Pragmatism, Prioritisation and Tough Choices

Respondents are seeking a leader with sound financial judgement gained through experience of leading complex organisations of an appropriate scale. The ability to make difficult choices while safeguarding the University's long-term academic strength was viewed as critical to success in the role. There was a strong emphasis on evidence-based decision-making and robust financial stewardship. Participants would like to see the new Principal bring a willingness to scrutinise expenditure and pursue sustainable sources of income.

At the same time, those involved with the consultation wanted the next Principal to ensure that difficult decisions are accompanied by clear rationale and meaningful, inclusive consultation. 'Transparency' was one quality that many felt they would like to see in Edinburgh's next Principal. The preferred leadership model by many was one of decisiveness without being overly direct: a Principal who listens carefully, weighs evidence rigorously, acts when required and is comfortable taking responsibility.

4. Humility and Accountability

A recurring expectation throughout the consultation was that the next Principal should lead with humility, integrity and a genuine sense of stewardship of an ancient institution (this reference was often paired with a reflection that Edinburgh is also a modern and forward-looking University, but one with significant heritage). Participants placed considerable importance on personal qualities including honesty, respect and empathy. There was a strong desire for a leader who will engage in an authentic and constructive manner with colleagues and students at every level of the institution.

Respondents also placed significant emphasis on accountability. They are keen to attract a Principal who is willing to explain decisions openly and take responsibility for them regardless of their impact. This was often linked to a leader who is committed to transparency in senior leadership decision-making alongside developing a culture in which challenge and constructive disagreement are treated as valuable assets.

5. Optimism, Hope and Ambition

Participants expressed a strong desire for a Principal who can imbue confidence in others and create a shared sense of purpose. Many respondents wanted a leader who will articulate an ambitious future for Edinburgh while also providing reassurance that the institution's distinctive strengths and reputation will be protected. The next Principal is expected to champion the University internally and externally, and provide a sense of optimism among staff, students and external partners alongside ambition. This commentary was often linked to issues in wider society, and the need for our University leaders to provide clear, passionate and positive leadership through challenging times.

6. Academic Credibility

One of the most consistent themes across the consultation was the importance of the new Principal's academic credibility and standing. Whilst there were varying degrees within this theme, participants overwhelmingly favoured a Principal who understands the realities of and appreciates the distinctive culture within a research-intensive university operating towards the top of the global rankings. Many felt that this would be essential in relation to commanding the confidence of the academic community. Where there was appetite for those outside of mainstream academia, it tended to be for proven leaders in academic-adjacent organisations, rather than those from entirely different sectors. Some felt that direct experience of leadership in a university context would be fundamental to effective leadership of the institution.

More broadly, respondents were keen that the next Principal places academic judgement at the heart of institutional decision-making. A number of participants advocated strongly for a Principal who will recognise Edinburgh's disciplinary breadth, defend academic freedom and intellectual inquiry, and ensure that students and research remain at the heart of the University's priorities. While some participants were open to candidates from less conventional academic leadership backgrounds, the prevailing view was that any successful appointee must demonstrate a deep understanding of what makes a university distinctive and a proven commitment to protecting and advancing its academic mission.

7. Additional Observations

A number of respondents from all consultation fora expressed strong enthusiasm for a female appointee, and significant interest in developing as diverse a field as possible.

Whilst a small number of participants felt that candidates should bring prior knowledge of Scotland or Scottish higher education, most believed that good candidates could emerge without this. That said, all felt strongly that the next Principal will need to learn and bring sensitivity to the Scottish system.

A small cohort prioritised existing vice-chancellors above those without experience in the top role, though the majority were more open to the possibility that the next Principal might not have this experience. This often led to a discussion about the need for a modern approach, with some referring to the Principal leading a university of the future, which may require a different skillset than required for university leadership in the past.

A reasonable number of participants highlighted the importance of the Principal's role in relation to policy engagement and working closely with government at different levels. As a large employer in Edinburgh and the largest university in Scotland, it was felt that the Principal would need to provide leadership at the civic, national and international levels.

In relation to the selection process for Edinburgh's next Principal, respondents placed considerable value on transparency, meaningful staff and student involvement, rigorous due diligence and clear evidence that the consultation has shaped the criteria and selection process.

Conclusion

Participants want the next Principal to combine academic credibility with proven financial, organisational and change-leadership capability. They are looking for a leader who can make difficult decisions and secure the University's long-term sustainability, but who does so transparently, collaboratively and with demonstrable respect for staff, students and the University's governance.

A significant priority for those who participated in the consultation was the recruitment of a visible and accessible Principal who listens, communicates candidly, welcomes challenge and accepts accountability. They would also hope to attract a Principal who is able to provide the vision and strategic direction to position Edinburgh as an ambitious and forward-looking institution for at least the next decade.

The consultation also reflects staff and students' strong attachment to Edinburgh's distinctive identity as a globally connected and civic university. More broadly they would like to see their next Principal articulate a compelling case for the value of higher education to Scotland and the wider world.