

Academic Staff Member Election 2022

Lesley McAra

The voice of academic staff on the University Court matters more than ever because of the challenging contexts of higher education in general, and our own institution in particular. Whoever is elected to the Court at this critical juncture, will have a great trust placed in them, and I hope to demonstrate through this personal statement how I would endeavour to be worthy of your trust.

Challenging contexts: While the University should rightly be celebrating the research successes of REF2021, the wider contexts of higher education place, what often feels like, irreconcilable demands on academic staff. There are challenges posed by the fall-out from Brexit, impacting student recruitment, academic mobility and limiting access to European funding opportunities. Career trajectories are less certain, with precarity of contractual status for many early career scholars, which, coupled with workload pressures from necessary adaptations to the pandemic, risk losing some of the brightest and best from the academy. And the political and financial pressures on HEIs, both the underfunding and increased commodification of education, mean that academic life has become less of a vocation, and more a daily battle to juggle competing imperatives.

Opportunities: Staff and students are the life-blood of the University. I am enormously proud that the University has infused Strategy 2030 with a values-based approach. In taking forward this Strategy, it is vital that institutional values are given effect through deeds and not through words alone.

What I stand for and relevant experience: I have been a member of staff at the University since 1995. Over this time I have taken on a range of leadership roles –Course Leader, Senior Tutor, Dean of the Law School, Assistant Principal (AP) Community Relations, Director of the Edinburgh Futures Institute, and (from August this year) Director of IASH.

I know the importance of building a strong sense of identity and belonging across our scholarly community of staff and students and I am deeply committed to mentoring and coaching as key elements of academic leadership. My various roles have given me practical knowledge of setting academic vision, strategic planning and change management, and of finance and budgeting: experience which lends power to the academic staff voice at Court level. In my capacity as AP and as Director of EFI, I have worked across all Schools in the University, with skills such as brokering and negotiating, advocacy and influencing, being to the fore. My nominators for this election come from all three Colleges.

Finally, I have always held to a vision of the University as a transformative civic institution. As AP, I am proud to be academic lead for the University's Community Plan, setting 32 commitments in support of social impact including: tackling homelessness; supporting digital inclusion; and addressing multiple deprivation.

In conclusion: Leadership that nurtures and strengthens academic community is fundamental. Having the opportunity to place my experience in your service would be an exceptional honour. Thank you for reading this, I hope that you will consider voting for me.