

Governor Dialogues

07. Appointing a new vice-chancellor

In the Leadership Foundation's Governor Development Programme of events there has been much discussion on the question of how to increase board effectiveness, and whether boards are 'fit for purpose' in the new and complex world of diverse institutions and strengthened regulation. In this series of interviews LF associate, Mary Joyce talks to a variety of chairs of higher education governing bodies about their governance careers, and encouraging them to share their innovative practice and thinking about their own institutions and what they are doing to increase effectiveness.

EARLY DAYS AS THE NEW CHAIR OF COUNCIL

How long have you been chair?

I'm just completing my first year, but I was treasurer for four years beforehand. Here at Leicester the treasurer and chair work very closely together; the treasurer probably puts in as many hours as the chair.

What sort of board did you inherit?

A much better one than 14 years ago, when I joined the council in 2000. The size has reduced somewhat, and the calibre has definitely gone up, because we've used open advertisement, and attracted quite a lot of alumni who have an enthusiasm and keenness. They all have significant careers, make a very good contribution, and come from further away; they travel good distances. One problem, looking ahead, is the time commitment the university thinks is normal for a chair or treasurer to put into the university; they will need to live locally, otherwise it is really just not possible. As chair, I'm sure I'm here two days a week, on average, if not three.

Is that because you've been dealing with the appointment of a new vice-chancellor - will it change with a new vice-chancellor in place?

It may change with the new vice-chancellor, who may want a different way of working, and I'm quite prepared to discuss and talk about that. The two previous chairs of council had just as much time commitment as I am putting in.

What were your biggest challenges on becoming chair?

Before I became chair, to start on the selection and appointment process for a new vice-chancellor. I took over

as chair in August last year, but by January of that year we were already under way with the process of looking at the methodology for appointing a vice-chancellor, finding head-hunters, all those sorts of things, which to begin with I did in partnership with the chair at that time. We worked very well together. Then, even before I became chair, it became my committee to run, organise and to see the whole process through.

GOOD GOVERNANCE IN APPOINTING A NEW VICE-CHANCELLOR

Tell me more about your selection and appointment process.

A separate committee was set up for the appointment of the vice-chancellor, with four lay members from council, four members to represent the senate, and the president of the Students' union to represent students. Of course, the registrar was also a very significant person in assisting with all the management and detail of the process, but he remained silent at all times at meetings of the appointment panel to preserve his neutrality.

I'm fascinated by your process; I'm sure others will be too. I wondered whether you took advice on how to do it?

Yes. We had a lot of discussions about it - the registrar, the previous chair of council and myself - to work through and think about the process. I consulted the chair of council, who 15 years earlier had appointed the vice-chancellor, and we went through what the process had been, which helped one to think of the potential challenges.

“It’s very important to try and keep the appointing committee together, feeling like a group, and not divided with academics on one side and lay members on the other.”

We considered every detail in trying to integrate them - everything from putting out name plates so that they had alternated seating around the table, and had to talk to each other.

We also consulted with three vice-chancellors of significant universities to think more broadly about the process. So, a lot of preparation work, and of course then to choose the head-hunters, which was quite difficult. They all write almost identical proposals, which is not surprising, because the job they're doing is so very similar. Reading the proposals is quite helpful, in that again it gives you something more to talk and think about.

We interviewed two head-hunters, and there was very little between them on cost, so that wasn't an issue. It really becomes a question of which one do you think you can work with best? Of course, they'd done the process so many times before! But by having those interviews, you've cross-examined two lots, and again gained more information about how other people have run the process - and that's very helpful.

How long did your process take in all?

It was nearly a year. We did a huge amount of consulting with the whole university, and with groups from each academic college. It was a very extended process.

Is that normal or is it a particular feature of the way you chose to do it?

I don't know what's normal. I've never appointed a vice-chancellor before, and I suspect I won't appoint another. The process 16 years ago was before computers were part of that process, so we were able to take advantage of that capability.

“Any member of staff could express their opinion about what the university needed, what they expected of the next vice-chancellor, and the challenges they saw facing Leicester, and those comments went directly to the head-hunters.”

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EXTENSIVE CONSULTATION

Those were the questions you put to all staff, as part of your consultation process?

Oh yes. We had the head-hunters come here to meet quite large groups of people from each college, to give them the opportunity to have a discussion without my being present, so there was no pressure on them. They could say what they liked to the head-hunters, who recorded it, and then provided summaries to the appointing committee.

That was useful background for us. Later, we used a group of senior professors - not to interview, but to be available to answer the questions of the shortlisted candidates. That was an opportunity to involve another group of people, who then individually gave their views to me about the candidates.

Did you have a good response rate from the staff?

Yes. There was a very good response rate, and the head-hunters also interviewed all the members of council - that included all lay members who weren't on the appointing committee.

“So there was extensive work done, because it's a vital appointment, and also one wants, as much as possible, to receive and hear the opinions, and have the whole community of the university, academic and non academic, feel that they have had an involvement with the process.”

Court members were written to; they could write back with their opinions, as could students. On one interview day when we'd got down to about four candidates, they met many different groups. That's where they met the group of senior professors, and they also met a group of students. They met on a one-to-one basis the present vice-chancellor, the registrar and myself, and they had a tour of the campus.

One wanted to give candidates the opportunity to learn as much as possible about the situation that they would take over.

Was there anything that surprised you in the feedback you got?

You get some eccentric letters, but one would expect that! I was very reassured by the determination across the board for striving for excellence, for a positive future, and that was most encouraging, because it made one feel that all this effort that was going in, which was very considerable - days and days of it - was worthwhile. It was what people were hoping for, to advance the university.

Was the appointment of a new vice-chancellor also an opportunity to have a fresh think about strategy for the university?

It's very difficult to say whether it's to think about strategy, or just to think about opportunities, which I would put at a lower level.

“I think one has to be very careful as chair of council; one is not in charge of creating strategy. There is an executive of the university, executive members, and there is a vice-chancellor.”

Although behind the scenes lay members of council may be having discussions with those people, I really think it is for the executive team to propose a strategy, and for the council to challenge it, to pull it to bits, to ask for various parts to be rewritten, and then finally to agree it.

I think as chair of council and as lay members of council, we have to be very careful about proposing strategy, whilst one is aware of choices that can be made.

So it's something more subtle, about glimpsing what the opportunities might be, so that they can be acted upon by the executive, in terms of proposing a strategy?

Yes. It's a very fine line, and it will differ at different universities, depending on size or the seriousness of the situation perhaps facing the university.

“I find it very strange, the mixture of things I do, and I think this applies in other universities; there is a whole area, which is not talked about much, which is to do with employment and discipline.”

If things become difficult in the employment area, suddenly lay members of council have a huge role. I don't know what other solution there is to that, but I do find it slightly strange, that suddenly lay members - who've been standing back and deciding on wide-ranging matters, are then called in to deal with the detailed employment of one employee, who has a grievance against the university. That wouldn't be so in a commercial company.

UNIVERSITY FUNDING AND THE CHANGING FACE OF GOVERNANCE

“There is something very odd about the structure of universities, in governance terms - possibly because of past levels of government funding, which of course are now declining considerably. It's as if the historic governance of a university via its senate has had superimposed on it a superstructure of charity governance,”

with lay people brought on because their 'external' viewpoint is seen as being useful in protecting public money, and will act as overseer and a 'brake' on the perceived extravagances of universities. We've ended up with, I think, a very strange structure, and I wonder if, going forward, it will change, because now Hefce money here is going down to about 15% - and yet so many things that we do still, at council, is 'Well, this paper has got to be passed today, because tomorrow it's got to be off to Hefce'.

That seems strange, because each university now is in a competitive position, and is also funding itself from its own resources, and the public money is rather at arm's length, through the student fees and the Student Loan Company.

You raise an interesting point about how governance in the higher education sector may develop in the future, given the decreasing amount of public funding coming through Hefce, and funding now following the student as 'customer'. In that context, what are your thoughts on the current draft CUC guidance?

Well, the draft guidance is, at least, shorter. They've gone for a checklist method rather than a narrative, and the checklist of

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course is simpler, but it will be to the joy and delight of internal auditors, and anybody else who will run through the list and ask universities why they aren't complying with all of these things.

Having said that, I think this university runs its basic governance well. I hope that's why so many people come to talk to us about governance. I'm not sure why we're being selected so much, but one hopes it's because we do the matter reasonably well.

When I looked at the new guidance, I did write a mass of comments on it, some based around my observation that the main driver seemed to be all about public money, and that is no longer the most important source of funding for this university.

“However, one has to recognise the political situation that we're in, and how the world views governance at this moment, and the huge entertainment the media get from anything that happens that's out of line at a university. So, such a protective document is necessary.”

You seem to be suggesting that the draft guidance appears to be a bit skewed, because so much emphasis is placed on what's done with public money, and governance is wider than that. What in your view are the key ingredients for good governance, and how do you create the optimum conditions for it on your board?

“Good governance in itself doesn't produce an outstanding university. I think the most important thing is to see the governance as a foundation, the framework within which one works. Once you feel it's running reasonably well, and you're within the guidelines, the thing to concentrate on is the purpose of the university.”

We're here to encourage outstanding academic research, good teaching and learning, to support students and help them advance. That's about the purpose of the university, and then looking at the university overall, its situation, where it should be expanding and putting its resources, and making those sorts of decisions about the future.

That's what matters, and I find this total concentration on governance rather exasperating, because what's exciting about universities is what they're contributing to society, and they contribute in so many ways. When I look at our research here and what difference the medical research is making - the astrophysics, the genetics and on and on, all sorts of other areas too - that's what matters.

“When you see the students arrive, full of anxiety and doubt, whilst looking quite cheery on the surface, their lives, the opportunities that they're going to get, and the possibility of their future careers, through studying here, that's the important thing.”

I want to talk about that, and what we can do to enhance all of those things that make for an outstanding university, an outstanding experience for students, and outstanding academic research.

GOVERNANCE AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Although I studied politics and administration and have chaired various boards and been trustee of many charities, I do find the process interesting in itself, because, in essence, it's about how is power distributed. So often we don't talk about that;

“we talk about how many members we've got on the board, how you select them, how you get them to talk, and all those sorts of things. It's not about that; it's about power, and making decisions to a purpose. It's the purpose that makes it all worthwhile. Otherwise, I wouldn't be bothering!”

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Could you elaborate on that a bit more? I imagine there's an element that is about how people are in a board meeting and whether you've got the right people to make the right decisions, but it sounds as though you are using a wider concept of power and university governance.

“A university is a very unusual place, in that you've got outstanding academics who are not going to be directed in their research in a way that you might direct people in a business.”

Their ability, imagination and research will develop new areas. Genetics came to be so important at Leicester through one man. Therefore, you can't, from a senior level, decide what the shape of a university is going to be. It will depend on academic individuals and teams of individuals, who will, through their inspiration, develop an area that will expand. The university has to be ready to acknowledge what's happening and put the investment behind that.

That could be described as 'bottom up', but it really does happen in universities, and needs to be encouraged. There is also of course the 'top-down' approach, in looking outside the university - what's happening in society, what areas are developing, what do students want? Their anxieties, at the moment, are all about getting jobs, so courses have to be developed that will reassure them that this would be helpful, and useful, as they progress along into the world of employment. Fine-tuning has to be thought of, from a senior level, about those courses - that could bring a clash, but usually,

“power links to money, and the choices of investment; those choices are very difficult in a university; how much should you be putting into new buildings, into IT infrastructure, into recruiting a whole raft of professors in a certain area, to develop that area?”

Those are very difficult choices, and academics are very good at arguing; it's their training. They will put a good case for their area, and not everything can be done. A vice-chancellor, along with their core team, must make those choices, and preferably those decisions should be part of a strategy that council has agreed. I do think the suggestions have to come from the vice-chancellor's team, because they can see the balance between all these choices. Then they should present them for council to make the final decision.

“If you're asking me if I think a chair of council, a treasurer or lay members of council are powerful, I'm not sure. I don't really think so.”

This university is a large institution with a turnover of nearly £300 million. One individual, as the vice-chancellor, can have a considerable impact;

“a chair has to be careful to not get at odds with the vice-chancellor. That would be most unfortunate. So yes, discussions can take place behind closed doors, and that would be the best way for a chair who was not comfortable with the direction the vice-chancellor was going in, to discuss it.”

I was wondering what thoughts you have about how you will build your relationship with the new vice-chancellor?

Yes, that's a good question. We've already had considerable conversations, through the three-stage interview process, which included a one-to-one for an hour and a half, and then later meetings after his appointment. So I think we understand each other's style, which is the first thing - to understand each other's personality and personal style and have confidence in each other.

Through the interview process one gets to know a candidate's ambition for the institution. I suppose we're going to have lots of meetings on a one-to-one basis; at present I have those meetings with the vice-chancellor once a month, but we meet on numerous other occasions. Because we're attending so

many meetings, it's possible to have a private conversation after a meeting, and the vice-chancellor is very receptive to meeting at any time to have a conversation. Going forward, one knows from experience that if we both have the purpose of the university in mind, the relationship is going to work.

WOMEN ON UNIVERSITY BOARDS

You are one of the few women chairs of a university board. I'm wondering how aware you are of that in your role, and whether you think you do things differently?

I'm not really aware of it, because it's personally not unusual to me.

“When I was in business, I was very often the only woman in the room, the only woman on the board of directors, so one became accustomed, as perhaps my generation did, to always dealing with men, and very rarely meeting women in a business setting.”

Then, I chaired the board of a large charity, which was the other way around, and was entirely women, as it was the Girl Guides. I suppose I've had experience of being a chair and of being in a mainly masculine setting.

“I do think universities, at a senior level, are surprisingly male dominated. I don't feel uncomfortable with it, I'm just surprised that in 2014 that is still the situation.”

Universities, although they're full of cutting-edge research, and the very latest of everything, are actually very conservative in how they run. It will change; I was only once shocked by the situation. I was interviewed to be the chair of the university council, sitting in this room here, and there was a row of ten people to interview me - every one a man. I hadn't really felt enthusiastic about the job until that moment!

Because you saw an opportunity to change things?

Not so much an opportunity to change things and how they are done particularly. It's just the fact of a woman being the treasurer, a woman being the chair of the university, and it just being perfectly normal, and people becoming adjusted to the fact that it's perfectly normal.

Do you think you do things differently?

It's hard to say, because I haven't done them as a man! I know I'm a more brisk chair than my predecessor, who was an exceptionally pleasant, nice, kind man. Maybe women who chair boards of men have to be brisk.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THE BOARD

How do you, in your role as chair, get the most from your board?

The first thing I've done is to try and encourage discussion.

“There are so many items on the agenda for the council meeting, which are routine, or things that have to be approved but don't require discussion, that it's necessary to identify on the agenda areas where we're really going to pause and have a discussion.”

That requires a little bit of preparation beforehand, and I don't mean having pre-meetings, I don't believe in that at all, but making it perfectly clear from the chair that one wants contributions at the meeting, and in particular, I think one wants contributions from the academics. Because of this structure there is a danger that so many of the academic members of council have had the discussion several times over already, at a meeting the vice-chancellor is chairing, a management meeting. It's very difficult for them, because if they disagree with the paper, they're disagreeing with their employer. Also, they're going against what they have already agreed to in a meeting previously, but one still wants to hear their comments and views, because it helps explain the situation and the reasons for it more fully to the lay members, who inevitably don't understand some of the subtleties of an academic institution.

Do you think you've been successful in managing that? It's a bit of a tightrope isn't it?

Yes, it is. We have had fuller discussions; take the financial forecast, a very significant paper. We view it twice: once in an early draft stage, when a very full discussion can take place, and changes from that discussion are still possible. Then it comes to the following meeting in, I think it's June, and although we can again have a discussion (and we did), in the end, from the chair, one is going to say, 'So, you all agree, then, that we now approve these, and we send a copy to Hefce?' The answer has to be yes.

One could ask, 'So why did you have 20 minutes of discussion beforehand, because you're not going to change anything?' I've noticed, over years of sitting on the council, that the academic members in management roles do listen very carefully, and will take notice, and the discussion will flow into future occurrences.

The representatives of senate, who are usually professors, and might be a head of department, will not have been part of the discussions that the senior team will have had. They will bring a different perspective and will often relate what is being proposed to their department, and how it will impact on that department. You could say they're not speaking as a council member - a trustee role, they're speaking as an individual from their department. But it's quite helpful, in that their alarm about how this policy is going to impact on their department is very useful to lay members in order to understand the consequences, because

“one can so easily be swept along in making wonderful overarching decisions of a wondrous nature, without realising the significance of how it will make a difference in a department.”

Are there any particular governance issues that preoccupy you, and that you continue to think about?

One thing that continues to interest me when I look at our, and every university's council, is where are our external experts on higher education? None of us seems to have cracked that, because surely that's who we should be having on our boards. If you look at the membership of council and then you think of a business, whether it is telecommunications, chemicals or oils, you would have on the board some external people, and you would have the senior management, but the externals would

be people who had something to offer directly, immediately, to the particular industry. They would have some knowledge that connected through.

I've thought about this quite a lot. Of course, as we become more competitive, you've got the difficulty that universities are very gossipy, and if we, for example, have somebody from another university, even if they've retired, it's not without its difficulties, so perhaps that wouldn't work as a solution.

I really do wonder, long term, whether the structure of the board is right. You can make it work, and we do make it work, and the lay members are good people; they have a range of skills, but nobody who really strengthens us from an external higher education viewpoint. That's maybe something to think about for the future.

ABOUT THE GOVERNOR DIALOGUES SERIES

Governor Dialogues are a series of interviews with senior governors, in which the issues facing governors and how they are dealing with them are considered.

We hope that Governor Dialogues will provide governors and those interested in governance with ideas for best practice.

DR BRIDGET TOWLE CBE, CHAIR OF UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

Dr Bridget Towle CBE joined the university council in 2000. She served as the university's treasurer between 2009 and 2013 and was appointed chair of council, in August 2013. Bridget is currently a trustee of the RAF Benevolent Fund and also of the College of Optometrists as well as being vice president of Girlguiding UK. She was awarded the CBE in 2001 and holds honorary doctorates from the Universities of Exeter and Loughborough.

MARY JOYCE

Mary Joyce is a leadership and organisation development consultant. She is founder of Leading Minds Consulting and a LF associate. She specialises in working with teams and boards that are leading and managing change, particularly the psychological impact of change on group behaviour and organisational performance.



She has held senior leadership roles in the education and health sectors, which has included: clerk & university secretary, first clerk to the Hefce council, governor on a university board, trustee of an independent hospital, and currently, trustee of a mental health charity.

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