

# Guidance note: Recruitment of Principal and Senior Team

*This guidance note is initially aimed at Chairs and members of search and governance committees, but will be of interest to all governors.*

- Have your governors discussed how they will approach the appointment of the principal and senior team, including the clerk?
- Do you have the necessary interviewing skills for making the principal's appointment?
- How is the recruitment of senior staff included in the college's succession plan?
- In what way does the governance training and development plan address the need to appoint senior staff?

## **Introduction**

Further education colleges are complex organisations, many with substantial budgets and a large workforce of teaching and support staff, both full and part-time. Learner numbers may be in the tens of thousands following academic and vocational programmes at all levels of ability from foundation courses for people with learning difficulties to directly funded higher education programmes leading to a degree qualification. The Education Act 2012 extended further the freedoms colleges have in managing their affairs. Government is explicit in its demands of the sector in driving forward the national skills agenda. The inspection regime is rigorous. All has to be managed in the context of reducing financial contributions from the public purse. The job of a principal has never been as challenging as it is in 2014.

As a result, the appointment of the principal/CEO of a college is arguably the most important task the governing body will undertake. She/he will be the person with the prime responsibility for leading the college to success in achieving its agreed vision.

## **The requirements of the governing body**

The first requirement of a governing body when appointing the principal must therefore be clarity about the college's vision, mission and values and a full understanding of the leadership qualities and competencies required. This will require discussion by the full governing body before progressing to the actual appointment process. Where succession planning is in place the task becomes easier

The Articles of Association provide the statutory framework for appointing the principal and other senior staff. Under the terms of the 2008 Instrument and Articles the appointment of the principal cannot be delegated and must proceed as follows:

'Where there is a vacancy or expected vacancy in a senior post, the Corporation shall—

- (a) advertise the vacancy nationally; and
- (b) appoint a selection panel consisting of—
  - (i) at least five members of the Corporation including the Chair or the Vice-Chair or both, where the vacancy is for the post of Principal ; or
  - (ii) the Principal and at least three other members of the Corporation, where the vacancy is for any other senior post.

The members of the selection panel shall—

- (a) decide on the arrangements for selecting the applicants for interview;
- (b) interview the applicants; and
- (c) where they consider it appropriate to do so, recommend to the Corporation for appointment one of the applicants they have interviewed.

If the Corporation approves the recommendation of the selection panel, that person shall be appointed.

If the members of the selection panel are unable to agree on a person to recommend to the Corporation, or if the Corporation does not approve their recommendation, the Corporation may make an appointment itself of a person from amongst those interviewed, or it may require the panel to repeat the steps specified in paragraph (2), with or without first re-advertising the vacancy'.

Whilst the majority of colleges continue to operate under the terms of the 2008 I&A, the Education Act 2012 has relaxed many of the requirements. Whilst the appointment of the principal remains non delegable, the appointment and promotion of staff may now take the following form:

'Where there is a vacancy or expected vacancy in a senior post, the Corporation shall put in place an appropriate recruitment process for any successor appointment as determined by the Corporation, including the formation of an appointment panel consisting a minimum three Governors' (extract from a revised set of I&A under the terms of the Education Act 2012'.

There is no longer a requirement for senior post-holders to be defined which means a Corporation could relieve itself of all senior appointments other than that of the principal. Given the importance of some senior posts e.g. finance director, or deputy principal, governors may wish to retain a legal requirement for their direct involvement.

Governors have direct responsibility for appointing the clerk.

### **The Process of appointing the principal and other senior staff including the clerk.**

A college is not obliged to appoint consultants to manage the process and can use its own HR department. In practice many corporations do use external consultants to support them in the appointment of a principal in what has to be a detailed process designed to find the right person for the position. Mistakes at the highest level can be expensive. There are a number of companies that specialise in the appointment of senior staff. The first task of the appointment panel is to agree a job and person specification which, with other documents describing what is required, forms the basis of tendering for external consultants. The panel will normally short list a small number of consultants and invite them for interview. Networking around this process can be valuable; a telephone call to another college or colleges that have used consultants is often helpful. The kind of offer a firm might make will include the following:

- **Scoping the project** at the earliest stage by meeting with governors and the panel, to be clear about the specific nature of the vacancy so that a campaign can be agreed leading to a clear proposition to take to the market. Good consultants will know what the market is like for principals. In practice it is very competitive, so appointing consultants who know the people likely to be interested in the vacancy is an important priority.
- The appointment will need **a marketing strategy** and consultants will be able to help in developing a creative advertising campaign that spells out the distinctive nature of the position. The role is best promoted by a well-informed advertising campaign through the press and on-line advertising, with a bespoke recruitment microsite
- **An Executive search** that will actively seek out individuals who present a strong match to the brief. This might include informal approaches to targeted individuals encouraging them to apply
- **Managing the response**, including the handling of all enquiries leading to recommendations for long list interviewing of applicants. This will follow a professional screening of candidates against the specification
- **Long listing** on behalf of the college by a rigorous assessment of candidates possibly undertaken by sector specialists. Detailed reports will be prepared for each candidate so that governors will have all the information they require to invite candidates to the final interview
- **Assessment and selection** including guidance at the final panel stage to help governors through the assessment process. This will include time-tabling and pre and post event candidate management. Support can be given to design exercises as part of the selection process and to conduct any psychometric tests required
- **Post appointment procedures**, once a candidate has been selected, ensuring that the offer is made in the correct way (the final appointment will be for the whole board to agree). Ensuring that unsuccessful candidates receive positive feedback. This may well enhance the reputation of the college in the sector, making sure that all candidates have a positive experience.

The cost of such a process will not be insignificant and governors must feel confident with the organisation they are proposing to appoint, which may not necessarily be the lowest price tendered.

### **Appointing the selection panel**

This will be subject to the I&A, advice on which will come from the clerk or the HR department. Interviewing is an important art and any governor appointed to the panel must have previous experience or be given the appropriate training beforehand. The questions put need to be carefully designed to give the panel the information they need. Supplementary questions can sometimes be the most informative. Inviting a former principal with experience and credibility to be a member of the panel can also be helpful. The Chair needs to be rigorous throughout the process but not to the point of cutting a line of enquiry that might give further valuable insights.

### **The appointment of other senior staff including the clerk**

As indicated above, cost may be prohibitive to appoint external consultants to the appointment of other senior positions, including the clerk. In this case, the principal and HR department should be well placed to provide the necessary advice and support throughout the process. However, bearing in mind the extreme importance of some senior positions including the clerk, governors may well consider the money well spent.

### **Governors leading the process**

It cannot be over-emphasised how important it is to ensure that the college has an outstanding principal, senior leadership team and clerk. This takes time but Governors can take the lead in this vital process by ensuring that there is a comprehensive succession plan in place. Making the right decisions at the top of the organisation will save governors undue time and anxiety in putting a wrong decision right.

### **Additional resources**

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has a range of advice

AoC Create, the commercial arm of the Association of Colleges has a well-known executive recruitment package or members

Governance Training Module 10 has specific advice on the appointment of senior staff

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