

Transform student life for the better

Students' association at UWS is seeking a multi-skilled leader and trustees to take the organisation to a new level, reports **Graeme Andrews**

THERE are important points to clarify for candidates attracted to what is one of the more unusual chief executive roles, as operational leader of the Students' Association of University of the West of Scotland (SAUWS).

Be in no doubt that this is no sinecure, nor a cap-doffing exercise towards the university senior management.

Independent of thought, enterprising in spirit and efficient in providing to its members useful services – though frequently in constructive collaboration with its provider of both higher education and enabling block grant – it is a separate registered charity. It will take pride in its own brand of professionalism.

The proposition poses some interesting questions on SAUWS's future design and aspiration, having elected to conduct structural change and redefine focus and ultimate impact. New external trustees will also be sought.

Interim director Audrey-Clare Burns reports to a "turn-around"

board, the aim of which has been to steer the association through a change process that will culminate in these new appointments and altered shape.

"The organisation has indeed been going through a period of change," Burns says. "It has developed a new constitution that will, it has been agreed with the University of the West of Scotland, take them forward – a large part of that is governance.

"Instead of having students only on the trustee board, the constitution includes the ability to have external trustees who have expertise and can bring additional rigour to the board.

"Because the officers can change

'The opportunity is to reshape the organisation ... make it relevant for the students'



SHAPE THE FUTURE: The students' association at UWS is seeking dynamic and forward thinking candidates to drive its new five year strategic plan.

every year – they can stay for up to two years if re-elected – it means it is quite a transient situation and consequently the organisation needs a bit more stability. That's in line with other student unions.

"At the same time as strengthening the board, they felt they needed a chief executive to be able to report to the board, run the organisation operationally, and give it strategic direction."

The professional background of candidates for each role may be across a range of disciplines, but implicit is the ability to bring to the table a contribution that enhances the practical capacity of the association in representing a broad spectrum of student interests.

Burns agrees it may be an unusual seat to occupy, but the search task is far from being a mission impossible. "It is unusual. The background that chief executives for student unions have can be quite varied. Usually there is a business perspective. Third sector understanding will be needed – because it's a charity – and an appre-

ciation of governance; (the candidate must) be able to support the Trustees.

"The business element is also varied, everything from running bars and shops, to sports teams, administering clubs and societies and looking at the collaboration with the university around teaching and learning."

Asked about any particular challenges that lie ahead, Burns turns the question on its head – but in a matter-of-fact style rather than to deflect from any hidden agenda.

"I think the challenge is really more of an opportunity," she insists. "The challenge has already occurred – getting this new (system of) governance in place. The opportunity is to pick-up on that and reshape the organisation, maximise student engagement, make it a very relevant organisation for the students."

SAUWS President Jack Douglas sits on the University Court with another association colleague. They represent students at every level in the university.

As inferred, there is significant

collaboration between the students' association and the university – although they underline their separate status. That is fundamentally about creating the best student experience, a natural target, given the influence of student opinion on university reputation.

The new chief executive will have operational conversations and relationships with senior managers and senior representatives of the university.

In return, a university senior manager sits on the board, but in an advisory rather than managerial role.

Douglas predictably welcomes the new moves, given the likely benefits to be accrued for the student body. "We are looking for trustees to serve a term of a couple of years and who have in-depth knowledge of finance and governance to take the organisation forward," he adds.

"SAUWS has around 14,000 members and at the moment – as a charity – we are really in a developmental stage. We will be creating a new strategic plan for the next five

years so it is vital we have trustees with experience to help drive us through this process.

"For our new chief executive we are looking for a dynamic and forward thinking candidate to help shape a very exciting future.

"[That person] will lead on creating a new vision for the association; develop a strategic plan and re-shape the organisation to deliver relevant and engaging membership services and activities, whilst refocusing and building efficient commercial activities to complement the membership offer – with student engagement and representation at the core."

The president admits the office culture is relaxed but underlines that its key platform is based upon a professional, pragmatic and potentially innovative approach.

"The working environment is relaxed; at busy times throughout the year that can quickly change. I believe the post holder will need to have a higher level of gravitas, especially when building successful relationships with seniors at the university.