

GatenbySanderson think differently.

Trustee Recruitment Guide for Independent Higher Education

About GatenbySanderson

GatenbySanderson is a leading executive search firm with deep expertise in trustee and board recruitment for the higher education sector. We have supported numerous institutions to build effective, diverse, and strategically aligned boards.

Our approach is grounded in sector best practice, regulatory insight, and a commitment to delivering excellent client and candidate experiences.

The Purpose of a Board and Regulatory Importance

A board of trustees is fundamental to the effective governance of any higher education institution. Its core purpose is to provide strategic direction, oversight, and accountability, ensuring the organisation fulfils its mission and operates in the best interests of its stakeholders—including students, staff, and the wider community.

With the increasing scrutiny from the Office for Students (OfS), boards must demonstrate robust compliance with regulatory requirements. The OfS expects boards to be clear about their responsibilities, ensure governance structures are fit for purpose, and evidence that trustees are both competent and committed to upholding the highest standards. This makes the recruitment of trustees with the right skills, experience, and values more important than ever.

Julia Roberts
Practice Lead & Partner, Education
julia.roberts@gatenbysanderson.com



Trustee Recruitment: A Step-by-Step Guide

1. Strategic Skills Identification

- Conduct a skills audit to assess current board capabilities and identify gaps, including diversity and representation.
- Align recruitment priorities with your institution's strategic objectives and regulatory obligations.
- Use tools like the Skills Audit Matrix, on page 6-7, to map competencies.
- Consider emerging skills (e.g., digital, AI, data, customer focus) alongside sector-specific knowledge.
- Clarify processes for devolved responsibility and board sign-off, and consider meeting formats and committee expectations.

2. Role Specification Guidance

- Develop a targeted role description and person specification, distinguishing essential skills (e.g., governance, finance, education, EDI) from desirable attributes (e.g., sector networks).
- Be explicit about responsibilities, expectations, time commitment, term of office, and any specific expertise required.
- Reference examples from sector recruitment packs to tailor descriptions to your organisational context.
- Plan the recruitment campaign with a structured timetable (e.g. a 12-week process from briefing to interviews), using a mix of advertising, outreach, and inclusive messaging.
- Assemble a diverse and aligned selection panel, including independent members.

3. Rigorous Assessment Methods

- Require a CV and supporting statement addressing motivation, time commitment, and relevance.
- Use structured, competency-based interviews and consider psychometric tools for leadership roles.
- Assess candidates' understanding of the distinction between executive and non-executive roles.
- Evaluate experience, behaviours, and judgement, and include informal engagement opportunities with senior leaders.

4. Selective Appointment Principles

- Avoid appointing trustees simply to fill seats; prioritise alignment with strategic goals and long-term contribution.
- Engage candidates genuinely motivated by the institution's mission.

5. Transparency and Inclusivity

- Publish clear application instructions and timelines.
- Offer informal conversations with board members and provide feedback to unsuccessful candidates.
- Ensure the process supports equity, diversity, and inclusion, with targeted outreach and inclusive practices.

6. Selection and Onboarding

- Use transparent and fair selection processes, including longlisting, shortlisting, interviews, and due diligence.
- Provide a structured induction covering governance, strategy, finances, and culture, referencing NCVO's induction guidance.

Skills Matrix Overview

The following matrix identifies key skill areas required for board members in independent HE institutions. Each skill area includes a description and guidance on the expected distribution across board membership.

This matrix should be reviewed annually and adapted to reflect evolving institutional priorities, sector developments, and board composition. It serves as a foundation for recruitment, development, and performance evaluation of board members.

Skill Area

Strategic Leadership

Governance & Compliance

Financial Acumen

Legal & Regulatory Knowledge

Curriculum & Delivery Experience

Sector Insight

Diversity & Inclusion

Stakeholder Engagement

Digital & Innovation

Emotional Intelligence

Change Leadership

| Description | Required For |
|---|---------------------|
| Ability to shape institutional direction and challenge constructively | All members |
| Understanding of HE governance, OfS regulations, and charity trustee duties | At least one member |
| Budgeting, audit, and risk management expertise | At least one member |
| Familiarity with HE law, contracts, and regulatory frameworks | At least one member |
| Proven experience in designing, delivering, and evaluating academic programmes aligned to student needs | At least one member |
| Experience in HE, FE, or related sectors | Majority of members |
| Commitment to inclusive practices and diverse representation | All members |
| Ability to engage with students, staff, and external partners | All members |
| Understanding of digital transformation and online learning | At least one member |
| Self-awareness, empathy, and team collaboration | All members |
| Experience leading strategic change and transformation | At least one member |

For further support

For tailored advice or support with your trustee recruitment, please contact:

Julia Roberts

Practice Lead, Education

GatenbySanderson

Email: julia.roberts@gatenbysanderson.com

Phone: +44 07834 869234