

‘The University Rector’

**Introduction to the Role of University Rector
in Scotland**

‘The University Rector’

Introduction to the role of University Rector in Scotland

**In Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews,
“The rector ... shall preside at meetings of the University
Court ...”
(Universities (Scotland) Act 1889)**

Contents

- 1 Background
- 2 Definition of role – statute and interpretation
- 3 Brief history of Rectors and their activities
- 4 An institution under threat – at all the ‘ancients’
- 5 Restoring the ‘institutional memory’
- 6 The 21st century Rector
- 7 Selecting nominees – values and person spec
- 8 A Rector’s Charter
- 9 A meaningful election contest – components
- 10 Rector’s Assessor – role, selection, person spec
- 11 Celebrations!

1 Background

The aim of this ‘Introduction’ is to explain what the job of rector is all about, why it exists, why it is important, how it has survived the centuries, and how to ensure that it fulfils its potential. Whatever your angle, we hope it is of interest to you, whether you are a student leader, a student voter, a candidate being invited to accept a nomination, a Court member or a university manager.

Production of this ‘Introduction’ was prompted by the lack of easily accessible information on the post of the university rector - a key element in the institutional history and culture of the four ancient universities of Scotland (and of Dundee, which split from St Andrews in 1967). Little is published on the responsibilities of the role itself, but material is quoted, with the permission of the author, from books on the various rectorships by Donald Wintersgill.¹

¹ Donald Wintersgill (2005) *The Rectors of the University of Edinburgh 1859-2000*; Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh; Donald Wintersgill () *The Rectors of Glasgow University 1820-2000*; Donald Wintersgill (in press 2007) *The Rectors of the University of St Andrews*.

In reading this document, it is important to understand the distinction between governance and management. Management is about the actual running of the university. This is led by the Principal, a salaried appointee operating as the head of the institution or chief executive. Governance – the work of the Court - is about overseeing the management of the university with special reference to strategic leadership and accountability – see section 5.1 below. The Court comprises senior staff and a majority of unpaid, external, independent ‘lay’ members, meeting about five times a year. This is the place where all the big issues are decided – budget allocations, financial policies, academic policies, estate development and capital projects, staff and student provisions, and so on.

2 Definition of role – statute and interpretation

The role of university rector, confined to the four ancient universities in Scotland (plus a variation in Dundee) owes its origins to the founding of the first universities in the 15th Century, with clarification in Acts of Parliament in 1858, 1889 and 1966. These Acts give the rector the duty of presiding at meetings of the Court, the governing body of the university². Since 1858 the rector has been elected by the students (and in the case of Edinburgh by the staff as well).

In Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews,
“The rector ... shall preside at meetings of the University Court ...”
(Universities (Scotland) Act 1889)

The precise interpretation of the role of rector has changed with time, but its fundamental purpose hasn’t changed. The ancient universities were conceived as communities, in which the students were the main interest group. The best way to ensure that their interests were always at the forefront of the minds of those actually running the university was to allow the students to elect the leader of the governing body. This statutory right to choose a figure of great influence in the university is (or should be) of enormous value and importance to the student body. But it isn’t guaranteed in perpetuity. Any actions or omissions which place it at risk could jeopardise the interests of future generations of students – for ever.

3 Brief history of Rectors and their activities

Rectors have always been elected in acknowledgement of their public stature of some kind – initially as churchmen or civic figures who acted very much as a leading force in the affairs of the university.

St Andrews: Until the mid 19th Century, the rector had to be a minister of the Church of Scotland. Then, claiming that this was incompatible with their oath to elect a rector ‘of great worth and fame’, the students sought to break the mould by electing Sir Walter Scott in 1825 – an election which was immediately declared null and void.

Glasgow: From the Reformation until the late 17th century rectors were ministers from within the Glasgow area. During the 18th and early 19th centuries local

² It should be noted that this document relates chiefly to the four ancient universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews. The rector in the University of Dundee is a member but not chair of the Court.

landowners or Scottish legal or political figures filled the office. Two renowned rectors prior to 1820 were Adam Smith, the author of the Wealth of Nations and Edmund Burke, the orator and political philosopher.

Edinburgh, unlike the other ancient universities, was founded by the Town Council, rather than the church. It was one of the first post-reformation civic universities. The city's Lord Provost was for many years the rector of the university. During the mid-nineteenth century there were many arguments over the status of the university, and attempts were made to reduce professors of the university to the status of council employees, similar to teachers in the high school.

(note: illustrations are given here and elsewhere in this document from St Andrews, Glasgow and Edinburgh as examples)

The Universities (Scotland) Act 1858

This legislation made the post open to anyone who did not hold a teaching post at the university. The rector was to preside over a Court which included the Principal and Assessors appointed by the Chancellor, the Senatus Academicus and the General Council of Graduates.

St Andrews: One of the first rectors to be elected after the 1858 Act was John Stuart Mill, who helped himself to a concept of rector as 'honorary president' (more the intended style of the Chancellor's post), made one speech and then disappeared for all of his three year term. For the rest of the 19th Century, many of the rectors were senior politicians from conservative and liberal parties. Then there followed a succession of great public figures, including wealthy benefactors such as the Marquess of Bute and Andrew Carnegie; statesmen like Lord Avebury and the Earl of Rosebery; Field Marshall Haig during the First World War; writers such as J M Barrie and Rudyard Kipling in the 1920s; and Jan Christiaan Smuts and Marchese Marconi in the 1930s. These men increasingly adopted the style of J S Mill, appearing once only in their term as rector.

The appetite for a more engaged occupant of the role, regularly in touch with the university, chairing the Court and contributing fresh insights from the outside world, led eventually to the election of Lord Macgregor Mitchell in 1937, on a ticket as a 'working rector'. A new trend was set in 1970 with the election of John Cleese, followed by an almost unbroken series of other comedians and entertainers – Alan Coren, Frank Muir, Tim Brooke-Taylor, Nicholas Parsons, Nicky Campbell, Clement Freud – punctuated only by journalist Katherine Whitehorn, whistleblower Stanley Adams, advocate Donald Findlay and newspaperman Andrew Neil.

Glasgow: Glasgow's tradition right up to 1974 was the political rector, the elected politicians including 11 Prime Ministers, from Sir Robert Peel to Stanley Baldwin via Disraeli and Gladstone. Other rectors during the 20th century have included the President of France, Raymond Poincaré, during the First World War; Compton Mackenzie, author and Scottish Nationalist and the Rev Dick Sheppard, pacifist, in the 1930s; Sir John Boyd Orr, nutritionist in 1945; Albert Luthuli, anti-apartheid campaigner and Nobel peace prize winner in 1962; The Rev George MacLeod,

founder of the Iona Community in 1968; and Jimmy Reid, Communist shop steward in 1971.

Many candidates stood on a “working rector” ticket and from the 1930s many were successful, including Lord Reith, public servant, George Macleod, Michael Kelly, Lord Provost of Glasgow; and Johnny Ball, broadcaster.

Glasgow students have often voted on a principle of honouring heroes, resulting in the election of rectors who were not expected to chair Court or take an active part in the role as they have been unable to leave their country. Such rectors have included Poincaré, Luthuli, Winnie Mandela and Mordechai Vanunu.

Edinburgh: From the establishment of the rectorship as a directly elected post in 1859 until the end of the second world war, the Rectors tended to be Conservative politicians (including Gladstone, Baldwin and Churchill) or military figures including such as Lord Kitchener, Admiral Beatty and Field Marshall Allenby. A few liberal politicians did get elected including Lloyd George, but in the ‘rowdyism’ that accompanied the campaigns the conservative candidates tended to win out

In the 1950s the field broadened to include celebrities, such as Alistair Sim, Alexander Fleming and Malcolm Muggeridge. However the position of rector was changed forever when Jonathan Wills was elected in 1971, the first student Rector, on a ticket of directly challenging the secrecy and incompetence of the University Court. He was followed by Gordon Brown, who took the university to court on his choice of assessor, challenged the level of academic expenses and tried unsuccessfully to win places on Court for representatives of the local community, not the establishment.

The late 70s saw a swing back towards celebrities and politicians, though these were now local figures who were expected to work at the job, rather than absentee national figures like the Prime Ministers of old. Recent rectors include musicians, footballers and journalists as well as local Labour, Liberal and Green politicians.

The potential value of a good rector to the interests of students is hard to exaggerate. He/she can exert considerable influence in Court and in the body politic of the university. He/she can be well-informed about student issues and concerns, can champion their causes, and can make sure that these issues are fully aired in Court. History shows that celebrity may be an attractive feature, but it is not sufficient on its own to ensure a good quality rector. And every failure to elect a suitable person undermines the interests of students for decades to come. Persistent failure could easily lead to removal of the statutory role of rector, as frequently warned by key figures since the 1858 Act was passed. The very next year, the Principal of Edinburgh told the students that if they abused their votes “the legislature would not scruple to withdraw a power which has been abused”.

4 An institution that has been under threat

As time has gone by, Universities have become bigger and more business-like, and newer universities have been established with modern governance structures reflecting a more accountable approach. At the same time, it could be argued that – perhaps due to complacency and a decline in political activism - elections have sometimes yielded rectors less likely to play a serious role in the governance of the

university, although they may have successfully brought a welcome dose of fun, excitement and profile. Concerned by the risks to good governance, the university authorities of the ‘ancients’ have made a number of so far unsuccessful attempts to remove the right of the rector to chair the Court:

- 1950s** An attempt, by the then government. Defeated in the House of Lords.
- 1963** The Robbins Report into Higher Education proposed repeal and replacement of the legislation governing Scottish Universities, including threats to the role of rector. Many of its proposals were implemented in the 1966 Act, but the role of rector was not changed.
- 1989** An attempt to abolish the right of the rector to chair the Court, as a clause in the Self Governing Schools (Scotland) Bill. This was prompted by election at Glasgow University of Winnie Mandela who was unable to attend court at all, leaving the Court to be chaired by the Principal (Sir Alwyn Williams). He was rightly concerned that it was inappropriate for the chief executive to chair the governing body. The Conservative government (Malcolm Rifkind MP, Sec of State for Scotland) proposed to amend the legislation ‘so that meetings of the Court of the four ancient universities will be presided over by a chairman *elected by all the members of the Court* from among those members who do not hold an appointment in, and are not students at, the university’.

This was opposed by many notables, contributing to a very effective campaign run by the SRC bodies of the universities. Signatories included: Katherine Whitehorn, Malcolm Bruce MP, Tim Brooke-Taylor, David Steel MP, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh, The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, Menzies Campbell MP, and Donald Dewar MP.

A Motion in Westminster Parliament on 15/3/89 deplored the measure as ‘**an attempt to change the universities from independent, democratic, consensus-based communities into centrally managed business institutions.**’ It was also pointed out that the initiative confused two issues – the question of whether the rector should chair the court, and the separate question of whether, in the rector’s absence, the chair should pass to the Principal. The clause was dropped.

- 1992** An attempt to secure agreement that the rector should not chair the court, following advice to Edinburgh University by management consultants Coopers Lybrand, supported by the court at Edinburgh (but without criticism of the rector, Donnie Munro). The proposal was rebuffed unanimously by the Scottish Rectors’ and Presidents’ Group and failed to secure the required consensus (required by the Privy Council) from all four ancient universities before an amendment could be considered.
- 1997** A recommendation by the Garrick Report (part of the work of the Dearing Commission) to scrap the role. It said Courts should elect their chairs, observing (in the words of one its members) that “*instead of a chairman carefully chosen for his or her business experience or leadership qualities, governing bodies were at the mercy of the whims of a student electorate.*”

Brian Wilson MP, Minister of Education at the Scottish Office, announcing the government decision to turn down this proposal, said rectors were an important part of the Scottish educational tradition, whose power should not be weakened. *“The particular role of the rector as chair of the Court carries great weight. I do not wish to diminish that role by removing the right of rectors to chair the Court. Rather, I would prefer to see greater democratic representation in all of our universities.”*

2003 A similar proposal made by university authorities in Scotland; discussed informally but reportedly dropped following advice from the Scottish Executive.

5 Restoring the ‘institutional memory’

In the above cases, justifications made for proposals to change the rules have included:

- 1 Current governance good practice;**
- 2 A conflict of interest - Chairmanship vs advocacy of the student cause;**
- 3 Concerns that inappropriate people may get elected;**
- 4 Opposition to the election of the chair by one stakeholder group;**
- 5 Concerns at the low turn-out at rectorial elections.**

This analysis offers a useful insight into the risks which must be addressed. These five points and their counter-arguments are considered below, touching also on the positive factors which ‘reform’ proposals have tended to ignore.

5.1 Current principles of good practice in governance

It will be noted that the 1889 Act used the word ‘preside’. However, as illustrated in the ‘brief history’ section above, custom and practice has been to refer to the role of the rector as ‘chairman’ of the Court. Indeed, as recently as 2004, the advice of the Committee of University Chairmen was that the rector has “the right to chair the Court” whilst “between meetings of the Court, the senior lay member is responsible for governance of the institution and chairs the Court in the rector’s absence”.

Modern governance and accountability standards now require rather more clarity about exactly who is responsible for key decisions at Court. In particular, current good practice is that discussions regarding strategy, resources and accountability are chaired by the person who is responsible for governance of the institution as a whole - the senior lay member, elected by the governing body itself.

In practice, rectors have normally acknowledged this in their conduct of Court meetings, inviting the senior lay member to lead on relevant parts of the agenda. But it can be argued that the language used to describe the role of the rector is in need of updating to reflect this practice and to conform to modern standards.

In this respect the Court of the University of St Andrews proposes, with the support of the Rector, a clarification of the distinction between the roles of the Rector and the senior lay member (‘Senior Governor’), the latter being elected by the governing board from its members (including the Rector) who are not employed by, or students

at, the institution. The Senior Governor is responsible for the governance of the institution between Court meetings and has particular responsibilities that include conducting appraisals of Court members every two years, convening and chairing the main business committee of the Court, representing the Court at the Committee of University Chairman and to the Scottish Funding Council, and on behalf of Court performing certain line functions in relation to the Principal. The election of the Senior Governor by a distinct, transparent process involving the independent Court members significantly contributes to the credibility of the particular functions that (s)he must fulfil.

The St Andrews proposal is that the Rector should retain the role of President of the Court, but that it is both appropriate and in line with good practice in the public sector for the Senior Governor, so elected, to chair those items of business concerned with policy, resources, accountability and performance review. The Rector plays an important role in the conduct of the meetings. He/She has direct influence over the agenda and minutes, convenes and sets the tone for the meeting, and invites the Senior Governor to take the lead for discussions of the business items described above, without prejudice to the overall position of the Rector presiding at the meeting. In this capacity as President, the Rector moderates the discussion on the rest of the agenda, which will include issues such as the student experience and others topics central to the ethos of the University, which often attract lively debate.

This model seeks to accommodate good governance practice with the special status traditionally associated with the Rector.

5.2 A possible conflict of interest between the Rector's role as president of the Court and the Rector's advocacy of the student cause.

The Principal of Edinburgh noted in the Dearing Commission proceedings that "*the rector has an important role as the ombudsperson for students. It could be difficult to do that as chairman, who has to be disinterested and independent.*" This common misunderstanding arises from a reversed interpretation of the role. The rector's main job, defined in the statute, is to preside at meetings of the Court, not to be an ombudsman for the students. Good governance demands, as indicated correctly in the quote above, that the role of chairman (and indeed president) is undertaken impartially, without prejudice in favour of one group or another, in the interests of the university as a whole.

This must be made quite explicit in the job description of the rector. The right of the students to elect a rector does not entitle them to expect him/her to represent them in the meetings of the Court. There are two or three student representatives to do that. However, it should provide them with the important safeguard (see item 5.4 below) that these representatives will be fairly heard and that students' interests will not be overlooked. Any pastoral activity should be entirely informal and subject to the proper conduct of the Rector's primary role as president, not *vice versa*.

5.3 The election of inappropriate people as Rector

Occasional past reports of triviality, autocratic behaviour, chronic absence, vanity or indifference on the part of the rector are damaging to the reputation of this office, serving only to emphasise the importance of taking care to select good candidates.

However, as illustrated in the detailed histories described in a series of books by Donald Wintersgill³, the overwhelming impression is one of great success, lending valuable strength, personality and colour to the life of the whole university.

Student bodies themselves are clearly to blame if they have neglected the responsible exercise of their rights, but university managers have responsibilities too. For example, have they helped the student body, when asked, to take the right steps?

With an election every three years, three quarters of undergraduates will encounter an election only once in their university career, unless they proceed to postgraduate studies. It's easy to see how, unassisted, the student body can lose touch with the institutional memory of the meaning, significance and value of their statutory right to elect the rector. In this event the Court Office could assist by drawing the attention of student electors to this 'Introduction', explaining the serious nature of the post and advising on candidate selection procedures, without in any way interfering with the actual choice of candidates or the election campaign itself.

5.4 Election by only one stakeholder group

. The interests of students are traditionally the *raison d'être* of a university. The refusal of a series of governments to change the role of the rector, in the face of some pressure to do so, emphasises a continuing commitment to keep the interests of students at the forefront. So the statute remains unequivocal about the exclusive power of the students (and the staff in the case of Edinburgh) to elect the rector.

However, there is more to this than meets the eye. The meaningful chemistry of this power, and the subtle way it addresses the challenge of representation in the specific case of a university, is too easily overlooked. Election of the president of Court by the students (in the case of Edinburgh, students and staff) helps to achieve three important objectives:

a) independence of the president of Court from the University executive;

b) equality of access to representation. Despite being the most numerous of the stakeholders, and most directly affected, students are the least able to exert powerful influence. Their representatives on Court have a number of disadvantages:

- Youth and lack of authority: the youngest members, by several decades;
- Inexperience: little prior exposure to governance and committee procedures;
- Minority: occupying only two or three places in a Court of about 25 members;
- Brevity of term of office: usually serving for one year – ie four or five meetings – providing little opportunity to settle in and develop their role.

Student reps, however competent, are therefore vulnerable to being overlooked, intimidated, or otherwise inadequately heard. By comparison, other stakeholders, such as staff and alumni, are represented by experienced and long-standing participants who may serve for 3-15 years or more in several different capacities. Election by the students obliges the president to familiarise and connect with the student experience, better equipping him/her to ensure a level playing field of debate.

³ See footnote, page 1

c) an obligation of responsibility. The power to elect the president of Court binds the students into a more adult and responsible role in the governance of the university than the mere participation of its representatives on Court can confer. This in turn strengthens the sense of community, of mutual regard between staff and students, which is often quoted as a key attribute of the ancient universities, safeguarding them from the very real risk that their place in the university is reduced to mere ‘customers’ with no ‘ownership’ of the life and community culture of the institution – a state of affairs often witnessed in other parts of the HE/FE sector.

In other words, the statute, far from perpetuating an anachronism, actually achieves three desirable outcomes in one measure. These benefits would be lost if the rules were changed. Like other arrangements for electing a president, this one isn’t perfect, but its merits should not be overlooked. History has shown that good rectors can bring great credit to the institution, and students are perfectly capable of electing them.

5 Low turnout

The credibility of any election outcome may be undermined in the event of a low turn-out, especially if it falls below 30%. Rectorial elections are not alone in this; other features of Court democracy may be even less robust in the face of scrutiny. That said, there have been periods when the turnout for a rectorial election has indeed been disappointing. However, recent elections have shown considerable improvement, with a renewal of lively interest in the benefits of candidates who are appropriately competent, committed, and available. Nevertheless, this criticism of past experience should stand as a warning to all student bodies that the outcome of the rectorial election depends for its credibility on a relatively high level of electors exercising the franchise.

6 The 21st century Rector

It has been said that ‘celebrity’ is the one attribute which will attract the vote of the ignorant. It’s often a help in drawing attention to the election itself, but it isn’t a good enough qualification for rectorship. Some candidates are said to have accepted their nomination as an indulgence of personal vanity, and have failed to deliver the goods. Rectorial elections should be the stimulus for a lively debate on the relative merits of rectorial candidates, and on the significant contribution which the rector can make to the University.

‘Use it or lose it’ quite aptly summarises the options for the student body in relation to these rights which are a rare privilege; in the whole of the UK, only in the four ancient Scottish universities is the president of the governing body elected by the students (and staff in the case of Edinburgh).

So what are the key competences which will make this role a success? Essentials include relevant experience in high level committees, stature in their background, and the ability to exercise influence where it matters. The 21st century rector is likely to be a ‘working rector’, available and able to take a close interest in all aspects of the university, not jetting in for a Court meeting and disappearing until the next one.

When considering whom to elect, students must also be aware of the informal, pastoral role that the rector plays. The rector can open doors and help to release log-jams where the formal arrangements for resolving issues appear to fail. A rector with the time, sincerity and commitment to get to know the student body and engage with their issues, and the skills to influence effectively, can make a valuable contribution to the student experience, as well as to the life and reputation of the whole university.

7 Selecting nominees – values and person specification

Values attached to the ancient tradition of Lord Rector and President of the Court include:

- 1 **independence** informed by an **external perspective**; and very clear about the **difference between governance and management** responsibilities;
- 2 commitment to the **university as a whole**, and to upholding the **egalitarian aspiration** of the ancient Scottish universities as **communities**, with the interests of students at their heart;
- 3 ability to **ensure a fair hearing for all voices** in Court whilst remaining **impartial and non-partisan**;
- 4 familiarity with the **views of the student body**, and ability to **intervene with authority** on their behalf if necessary, outside the proceedings of the Court;
- 5 willingness to **champion a cause**, without fear or favour;
- 6 commitment to the resolution of issues within the university through open, honest, respectful and timely use of the **normal decision-making procedures**;
- 7 experience in the **conduct of the affairs of a large institution**, and its relations with the wider world;
- 8 committed to **teamwork with senior lay member and Principal** in conducting Court meetings in a well-informed, fair and decisive manner;
- 9 **available** to attend the university regularly.

8 A Rector's Charter

SRCs and Student Associations are strongly advised to encourage rectorial candidates to read this document and to sign-up to the following Charter (agreed by the Scottish Rectors' Group⁴ 2007), before the nomination is accepted. This can be used to make them aware of students' expectations; to secure and publicise candidates' commitments for the benefit of campaign material; to expose these commitments for scrutiny in debates and hecklings at the election; and for monitoring and review throughout the rector's term of office.

I (*name of candidate*) **confirm my commitment, if elected as rector, to:**

- give a minimum of time to the university (*candidate to specify no of days per month*);
- get to know the university in the round - students, academic, non academic, estate;
- be available to meet/liaise with students, in societies, residences, academic settings;
- hold regular surgeries/opportunities for direct consultation (preferably at least one monthly);
- attend all Court meetings if at all possible (*candidate to specify minimum percentage*);
- preside impartially, all voices being fairly heard;
- ensure student views not overlooked, in and out of Court;
- use my best offices in the service of good governance - open, fair, accountable;
- appoint an assessor (with specified commitments – see 'The University Rector - An Introduction');
- liaise with rectors of other Universities in quarterly meetings of the Rectors' Group to address shared issues;
- act as advocate for the universities with rectorships;
- act as advocate for the post of Rector as President of the governing body;
- attend and be accessible to the SRC and sabbaticals as required;
- promote and act as advocate for the role of rector to the student body itself

Signed.....Date.....

⁴ Scottish Rectors' Group comprises the Rectors and their Assessors, together with SRC or Student Association Presidents, from Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews.

9 A meaningful election contest – key elements

As a general rule, the role of rector is about the university and the student body, and their mutual success. It's important to highlight what attributes the candidates have to facilitate this, not merely who they are.

Pre-nomination:

Appointment of student officer or committee with special responsibility for the rectorial election campaign, including:

- Early publicity – a year in advance
- Seminar for student proposers by student body and Court office
- Provision of this document ('The University Rector – an Introduction') to all interested parties including students and possible candidates - and as pdf file on the university website
- Thorough exploration of rector role in student media (newspaper, magazines, radio...)
- Surgeries for proposers
- Full information on university website for nominees
- Briefing of potential nominees by court office/ SRC/ student association
- Check of skills/commitment/time availability of nominees by student body, through Rector's Charter

During campaign (miss these and your candidate is a loser)

- Manifesto – what commitments beyond the charter?
- Hecklings – scrutinising manifesto and charter commitments
- Debating Society – any relevant topic
- Visits - to residences, Court office, key student interest groups, Principal, Senior Lay member of Court, schools, facilities, etc
- Media appearances – student, community, regional, national
- Plenty of exposure, debate, raises awareness of electorate in significance of the role, importance of voting, and key issues to inform the vote.

10 Rector's Assessor – role, selection, person spec

St Andrews: The Rector's Assessor is a full member of Court. Appointment of the Assessor – invariably a student – is within the gift of the elected rector. Recent tradition has been for the rector to advertise, interview and appoint his/her Assessor – an arrangement most likely to deliver a harmonious and effective working relationship.

Glasgow University has not had a Rector's Assessor on Court since 1981. It was changed by Court Ordinance 182 (Change in Court Composition). In exchange for the loss of the Rector's Assessor, SRC Representation was introduced in the form of the President and an assessor nominated by the President of the SRC.

Edinburgh: The rector appoints the Rector’s Assessor after consultation with student representatives. The Assessor may attend court, but only has a vote if the Rector is not present. While the vote passes to the assessor, the chairing responsibilities do not. Clearly, the definition of this role is up to the rector. The Assessor may be expected to act as the rector’s resident representative in the university – answerable to the rector, and managing routine business for him/her. Even if the RA does not have a seat on Court, the role can be crucial to the rector’s success.

In this pivotal role, recommended elements are:

- a significant time commitment, and dedication to working with all parts of the university’s community.
- advising the rector on matters in the university and student body,
- evaluating day to day what the rector should or should not be concerned with, in accordance with his/her general wishes, as well dealing with issues independently, and liaising with individuals and groups on the rector’s behalf.
- organising the rector’s engagements in the university (perhaps in liaison with the Court Office for staff and management side issues) including rectorial surgeries, attendance at functions of student societies, student halls of residence, local events, and meetings with other student groups, university staff, and other organisations or bodies, locally and nationally.
- ensuring that the rector connects with as broad a cross section of the student community and student interests as possible.
- keeping the student body up to date with the activities of the rector, through as many media as are relevant and accessible to students.
- researching issues important to the student body,
- contributing to meetings - as a full member (in St Andrews, Edinburgh, Aberdeen) - of the university’s governing body, the Court
- liaising with the Students’ Association, Court Members and other relevant groups as the need arises.
- taking responsibility as a governor of the university (if appropriate), tackling issues that are not just student-related.
- participating in periodic meetings of the Scottish Rectors’ Group

The following are recommended attributes for the Rector’s Assessor:

Matriculated student	Mature attitude; well connected	Articulate; able to speak in public
Able to work as part of a team and independently	Efficient, organised and with good time management	Well informed
Good interpersonal skills	Committed to success of Rectorial position	Working knowledge of university
Versatile, multi-tasking	Preferably starting in second year	Interest in issues in Higher Education
Diplomatic	Time commitment required: Estimated 7-10 hours per week average	Able to attend 5 Court meetings per year (if appropriate)
Time available to do proper justice to the role	Experienced in committee work	

11 Celebrations! Traditions and Ideas

Rectorial ceremonies can add historic pageant, colour and publicity to the life of the university. Here are some examples:

St Andrews: The rectorial elections are held at the end of October. Installation ceremony is held in Younger Hall, St Andrews, in February or March, with the afternoon declared a teaching holiday by the Principal. The newly installed rector delivers an 'Improving Speech' as the keynote of the ceremony. The Principal acts as host of a formal dinner for 150 guests, held in the evening in Lower College Hall in honour of the new rector. The day before the Installation is filled with student-led celebrations under the title of 'The Drag'. The rector is 'delivered' into town by a novel form of transport, and is then drawn in an ancient carriage, pulled by university Blues, to a series of 12-15 hostelrys where student groups, clubs and societies are deployed to introduce themselves and their activities, buy him/her a drink, and offer a relevant gift as a memento of the occasion. The Drag ends with a reception at the Student Union Building, followed by a night-time torchlight procession from St Salvator's Quad to the end of the pier, and indefinite further revelling in the town's bars.

Glasgow: Classes are suspended for students to attend the Installation Ceremony and hear the rectorial Address. This is held in the Bute Hall, the University of Glasgow's most famous venue, and all students, staff and guests are invited to attend. Celebrations vary with each rector but previous festivities have ranged from a large formal dinner for 150 guests to a small more relaxed dinner followed by a ceilidh, to which students are invited.

Edinburgh: Some of the more hair-raising traditions around the rector and his or her election have toned down over the years. A 'battle' involving the throwing of flour and dried peas was held in the Old Quad on polling day. The 'rowdiness' only stopped when the Principal appeared with a placard indicating the result of the election, which was then paraded around town by the winner's supporters. The installation address was also an opportunity for general mayhem; Lloyd George's address was disrupted by fireworks and a live hen being thrown from the gallery. Thankfully, although the election campaigns are still keenly fought, the hooliganism has disappeared. One tradition that remains is the chairing of the rector, now limited to a circuit of the Old Quad in a sedan chair-like apparatus, lifted by the rector's campaign team and supporters. The Rector's Address is also a lower key affair, and is followed by a lunch.

Further reading:

Guide for members of Higher Education Governing Bodies in the UK (including a Governance Code of Practice) (Committee of University Chairmen, November 2004)
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_40/

The Rectors of the University of Edinburgh 1859-2000; Donald Wintersgill Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh 2005

The Rectors of Glasgow University 1820-2000: Donald Wintersgill (details missing)

The Rectors of the University of St Andrews Donald Wintersgill (in press) 2007

Famous Rectors of St Andrews: Greg P Twiss and Paul Chennell, Alvie Publications
1982