

JOB DESCRIPTION**VICE-CHANCELLOR'S OFFICE**

Job title: General Counsel and Executive Director of Governance, Risk and Assurance

Grade: Senior Management

Responsible to: Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive, with a direct professional relationship and independent advisory responsibility to the Chair and the Board of Governors

Date: October 2026

Role purpose: The General Counsel and Executive Director of Governance, Risk and Assurance is a senior member of the University's leadership team and a trusted adviser to the Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive, the Executive Team, Chair and Board of Governors.

This inaugural role reflects the University's growing maturity as it enters its next phase of development, including its ambitions for Research Degree Awarding Powers and the continued growth of research activity, contracts and associated compliance requirements.

It also reflects the increasingly complex legal, regulatory and governance environment in which universities operate, including evolving regulatory responsibilities, increased exposure to disputes and litigation, and activities across the UK and other jurisdictions.

The role provides strategic leadership across the University's legal, compliance, regulatory and governance functions, ensuring that the University activities are conducted within a clear and effective framework of accountability, regulatory compliance, effective stewardship and intelligent risk management.

As General Counsel, the post-holder is the University's principal legal adviser, providing authoritative, pragmatic, commercially aware, proportionate solutions focused advice on legal risk in supporting the University to achieve its strategic objectives and deliver its Mission, Vision and Values.

As Executive Director, the post-holder leads the University's governance, legal and compliance functions, including line management of the Head of Governance Services and the Head of Legal and Compliance. They will ensure that the Board and its committees receive high-quality, independent advice to support effective governance, accountability in the discharge of their responsibilities.

The post-holder will combine sound professional judgement with a practical, collaborative and values-led approach, enabling the University to manage complexity and risk appropriately while remaining ambitious, innovative and responsive to opportunities.

Key responsibilities

Legal leadership

1. Act as the University's principal strategic and operational legal adviser, providing pragmatic and contextual advice across the full range of the University's activities.
2. Lead and oversee the provision of legal services, ensuring that advice is timely, proportionate, high quality and aligned with the University's strategic priorities.
3. Advise on significant commercial, investment, contractual and corporate matters, including strategic transactions, partnerships, subsidiaries, joint ventures, start-ups and new ventures, intellectual property, property and major projects.
4. Provide senior legal and governance leadership and oversight in relation to the University's growing research and innovation activity, including research contracts, collaboration and funding arrangements, intellectual property, commercialisation and associated legal and commercial risk.
5. Provide strategic advice on student, employment, academic, regulatory and other legal matters, including leading the University's legal approach to significant disputes, litigation and investigations.
6. Lead the University's approach to the appointment and management of external legal advisers, including where specialist, transactional or litigation support is required, ensuring appropriate use of external expertise and value for money.

Governance and Board effectiveness

7. Act as General Counsel and Executive Director to the Board of Governors, providing high-quality strategic, legal and governance advice.
8. Advise the Chair, Vice-Chancellor, Governors and senior leaders on governance, constitutional matters, delegated authority, conflicts of interest and the effective discharge of their responsibilities.

9. Through the line management of the Head of Governance Services, oversee the maintenance and development of the University's governance framework, including its governing instruments, Scheme of Delegation, policies and committee structures.
10. Through the Head of Governance Services, support the effective operation of the Board and its committees, including Board and committee effectiveness reviews, governor induction and development, and the continuous improvement of governance practice.
11. Attend all meetings of the Board of Governors and work closely with the Head of Governance Services (as Secretary to the Board), to ensure that Board and committee decision-making is clear, evidence-based, appropriately challenged and supported by effective assurance.

Regulatory, compliance and institutional assurance

12. Provide strategic oversight and advice on the University's legal and regulatory obligations, including those arising from the Office for Students, Charity Commission and Fundraising Regulator, as well as requirements relating to consumer protection, Prevent, freedom of speech and expression, academic freedom, data protection and other relevant areas.
13. Undertake horizon scanning on legislative, regulatory and policy developments and advise the Vice-Chancellor and Board on their implications for the University.
14. Support the Board and Executive in maintaining effective systems of risk, compliance and assurance, providing independent challenge where appropriate.
15. Work collaboratively with colleagues responsible for risk, audit, information governance, data protection and other assurance functions to ensure that responsibilities are clear and institutional risks are appropriately managed.
16. Oversee the University's corporate policy framework, ensuring policies remain current, proportionate, consistent with regulatory requirements and supportive of effective governance.

Corporate and institutional governance

17. Provide oversight of the University's corporate structure, including subsidiaries, partnerships, joint ventures and other significant relationships.
18. Ensure appropriate governance and accountability arrangements operate across the University group, including in relation to the University's online provision and activities in other jurisdictions.
19. Advise on significant institutional decisions, investments, transactions, partnerships and new ventures, ensuring that legal, governance, regulatory, commercial and reputational considerations are appropriately understood and addressed.
20. Support the University in maintaining high standards of integrity, probity, transparency and public accountability.
21. Promote a culture of ethical decision making, accountability and good governance across the institution.

22. Maintain strong and effective relationships with Falmouth Exeter Plus and the University of Exeter Legal Services, which provides legal services to Falmouth Exeter Plus, ensuring clear and effective communication, collaboration and coordination on matters of shared legal, governance or regulatory interest.

Leadership and strategic contribution

23. Be a trusted adviser and constructive critical friend to the Vice-Chancellor, Executive Team, Chair and Board.
24. Contribute as a senior member of the University's leadership team to the development and delivery of institutional strategy.
25. Lead, develop and empower the University's governance and legal capability, creating a culture of high standards, professional confidence, continuous improvement and collaborative working.
26. Provide calm, authoritative leadership during significant incidents, disputes, regulatory matters, investigations and other situations requiring rapid and robust decision-making.
27. Represent the University externally on governance, legal and regulatory matters and through relevant sector and professional networks.
28. Line manage the Head of Governance Services and the Head of Legal and Compliance, providing clear leadership, coaching, support and strategic direction.

General duties and responsibilities

29. To perform to high professional standards.
30. To manage independently any errors or concerns at the earliest opportunity, or notify a senior member of staff as appropriate.
31. To use initiative in order to determine priorities, work with autonomy, and work effectively with senior colleagues.
32. To be responsible for your own continuing self-development.
33. To undertake other duties not specifically stated above, which from time to time are necessary for the effective performance of the University's business without altering the nature or level of responsibility involved.
34. To work in accordance with the University's policies relating to equality and dignity and freedom of speech and academic freedom.
35. To participate in the University's Annual Performance Development Review Process.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

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Attributes	Essential requirements	Desirable requirements
Education and qualifications	A recognised legal qualification and substantial post-qualification experience. A qualified solicitor.	
Experience and knowledge	Significant senior-level experience in legal, governance or a closely related role within a complex organisation, ideally within higher education or another highly regulated environment. Strong understanding of corporate governance, legal risk, regulatory frameworks and effective decision-making. Significant experience of providing senior legal advice across complex commercial and contractual matters, with experience of disputes and litigation and the effective management of external legal advisers. Significant experience advising boards, governing bodies, chairs and senior executives. Experience of leading and developing professional teams and influencing across a complex organisation.	Experience as a University Secretary, General Counsel, Director of Legal Services or equivalent senior governance/legal role within higher education. Experience of working within a charitable or public interest organisation. Experience of working with the Office for Students or equivalent higher education regulator. Experience of leading organisational change and developing modern, effective legal and governance services. Experience of advising on research, innovation, investment and/or commercialisation activity, ideally within higher education or another research-intensive environment.
Skills and personal requirements	Excellent judgement, discretion and the confidence to provide constructive challenge at the most senior levels. Ability to translate complex legal, regulatory and governance issues into clear, practical advice and recommendations.	

	Strong commercial awareness and the ability to balance risk, opportunity and institutional ambition. Excellent communication and relationship-building skills, with the credibility to operate effectively with academic, professional, executive and non-executive colleagues.	
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