

# Director recruitment update from the Board of Trustees

## Background

As everyone will be aware, earlier this year Anita tendered her resignation from the Director role at Ao Tawhiti. This resignation was very sadly received given the amazing work that Anita has done over the last three years, but ultimately triggered a search to find our next Director.

The journey through this recruitment process has been invaluable as it has forced the Board to look up from business as usual (as guardians of the special character) and renew our focus on where we see Ao Tawhiti in the future. This journey has highlighted three key points:

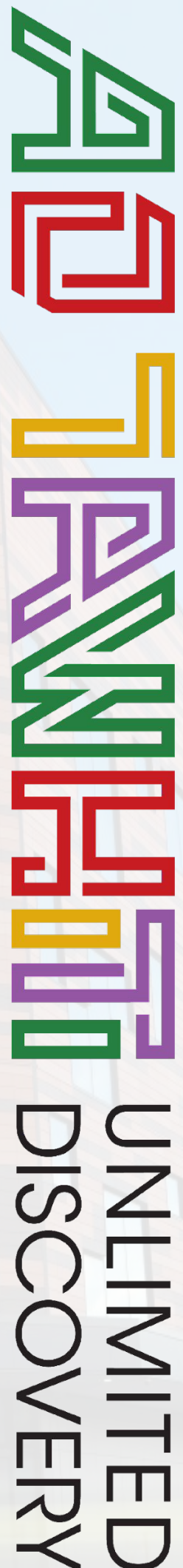
- **We have built strong foundations.** It is fair to say that the last three years under Anita's watch have required a significant focus on strengthening the foundations of the school. This focus has ensured that we are now financially sustainable, we have the right people in place to support the running of the school, and we have a collaborative culture across the staff and community.
- **We are ready to strengthen our special character.** With these foundations in place we are now able to move into a more aspirational phase for Ao Tawhiti. Our discussions as a Board (and wider community) about what we wanted from the Director in this next period were clear - our number one priority is strengthening the special character of the school.
- **Change is required to support this next phase.** It also became clear that the transition into this next phase won't happen without change. We can't just expect the Director role to have the time-and-space to execute this vision without first freeing them up from other tasks and putting the right support in place (across the whole school).

## Request from Anita to revoke her resignation

Last week, during our candidate shortlisting process, we received a request from Anita to revoke her resignation and replace it with an application for refreshment leave during Term 1 of 2024. This request was strongly supported by the Senior Leadership Team who had also been reflecting on the journey to-date, and what lay ahead.

While the Board was excited by the prospect of having Anita return, we were also nervous about the risks of accepting this request. Specifically, we wanted to understand:

- What led to the resignation in the first place, and what would need to change to prevent those situations from happening again?
- Given the shift of focus, did Anita have the vision to lead us out of the 'foundation building' phase and into this next phase?
- And, how would we successfully support a Term 1 absence?





Looking at how Anita got to the point of resigning, there were three driving factors:

- **Burnt out.** After three years of stepping into a Principal role for the first time, leading Ao Tawhiti through a gruelling rebuild phase, and navigating a pandemic, Anita needed a break to recharge. In assessing her options for how to achieve this, she was unwilling to put an extra burden on the team around her - so (incorrectly) assessed that resignation was the only option to achieve this break.
- **Feeling like she wasn't delivering.** The challenge of the work that needed to be done through this 'foundation building' phase is that it takes a lot of heavy lifting. Given where she wanted to be focussed (strategic initiatives), versus where she had been focussed out of necessity (operational initiatives), Anita felt like she wasn't being effective in the role. The actions triggered through the resignation provided feedback that helped her to see just how much progress had been made in the last three years and, importantly, how the school was now poised to benefit from that work as we moved into our next phase.
- **Insufficient support.** While Anita had put the frameworks in place to care and support for everyone around her, we as a Board had not done the same in our support for Anita. The review and planning work that the Board has done now (triggered by this resignation) is work that we should have done well before we reached this point - but will now ensure that we are ready to provide the right support to the Director role going forward.

The idea of taking a full term off to recharge has immediately given Anita the headspace to plan for what comes next. Hearing the passion and vision with which Anita speaks about this next phase of Ao Tawhiti's journey is inspiring - and is exactly what we set out to find through our recruitment process.

## **Next steps / Anita's return as Director**

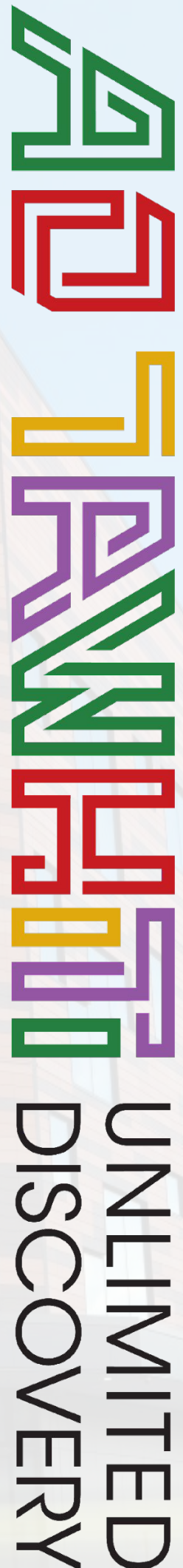
After a very careful and considered review, **the Board has accepted Anita's request to revoke her resignation**, and to approve her request for refreshment leave in Term 1, 2024.

Practically, Anita (with the support of the Board) has developed a clear plan for this journey - both for how we manage her absence, and how we move into and through our next phase. We are working through the required consultation around these plans and will communicate these in the very near future.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the candidates who applied for the Director role. This decision is in no way a reflection of their abilities - but ultimately is one made in the best interests of Ao Tawhiti at this moment in time.

We are very excited to continue working with Anita, and build on the great work to-date. Bring on 2024!

*The Ao Tawhiti Board of Trustees*







## A message from Anita

Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery is a fabulous school and I am grateful to the Senior Leadership Team, and the Board for giving me the opportunity to continue to have the privilege to serve as Director. I thank them for taking the time to ask me why I was resigning, and then to put the supports in place that enable me to stay. The last two weeks have shown me that I have incredible support, and that working together, I believe we can achieve great outcomes for the students at our school.

We have all worked hard to establish ourselves as one school, within a new environment, during a time of a pandemic, since the shift in 2019. This has been hard work for staff, students, families and our community, but it is exciting work. We have developed a strong foundation, as Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery, that strengthens our ability to effectively support our students to follow their passions and interests and work towards their goals, whatever their goals might be.

I value the unique position our school has on the educational landscape of Aotearoa. We offer opportunity to students that other schools don't offer, because our Special Character mandates that the child is central in directing their own learning, rather than the school directing students' learning.

When I applied for the job in 2020, I wrote the following in my letter of application.

*'I believe that a school's vision should focus on the importance of all students having equitable access to education, and this is a vision that struggles to thrive in a system that prioritizes a model of learning that is standardized for all. Equity can only exist when students, and families, are recognised as unique, and as such, success is personalised and can be experienced in a range of areas. Students and families should be empowered to have ownership over their learning, and I believe that this is a vision shared by Ao Tawhiti. I am committed to upholding the special character of Ao Tawhiti. I would be excited to have the opportunity to be the professional leader of your school'.*

This belief hasn't changed. Instead it has been reinforced over the last three years, working alongside the staff and families who are committed to providing the best outcomes for the students at our school. It is a privilege to be able to continue in this role, and I am looking forward, with renewed energy to 2024, and beyond.