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Are vice chancellors the new football managers?

Although as a rule I tend to steer clear of footballing metaphors, the wall-to-wall coverage of the World Cup on our TV screens over the last few weeks has got me thinking about how certain aspects of higher education management are starting to resemble 'the beautiful game'.

Recently there has been a collective gnashing of teeth about the exorbitant salary levels of university leaders. This has made me wonder whether vice chancellors might be the new professional football managers: highly paid and on insecure short-term contracts with no guarantee of renewal.

While I'm not suggesting for a moment that vice chancellors are operating in the brutal hire'em, fire'em world of the football manager, there is a degree to which higher education appears to be moving in that direction. Just like professional football, university management has become a more results-oriented business. Vice chancellors are under increasing pressure to perform and have to work hard to keep the chair of the board happy. There is increasing job insecurity: the average term of office is declining and there have been two or three early baths over the last few years.

My [research](#) shows that a similar pattern is emerging at deputy and pro vice chancellor level. Though increasingly well remunerated, these top team posts are becoming riskier. Exit strategies at the end of a fixed term of office can be tricky given that a return to an academic role is often neither desirable nor feasible, especially for those who are no longer research active. Moreover, these post holders are reliant on the continued patronage of the vice chancellor who appointed them and may become vulnerable when a new leader comes in, wanting to choose his or her own backroom team.

Now that more of these deputy and pro vice chancellor jobs are being opened up to external competition, a management transfer market is being created - a development which is also acting as a salary escalator. The use of head hunters has facilitated the poaching (tapping up?) of talent from other clubs - sorry, universities. This has led to a recirculation of senior managers, some of whom are moving from job to job usually to an institution higher up the university league table.

More pre-1992 universities are now buying in their managers rather than nurturing home-grown talent. Vice chancellors have long been recruited from outside the institution, but this is relatively new at deputy and pro vice chancellor level. The move to externally advertise these posts is being driven by "a quest for the best" that reflects their perceived importance and the recognition that a good appointment can add real value, and vice versa. However, as the stakes get higher so the selection of candidates becomes more risk averse, with a flight to experience. And who can demonstrate experience more effectively than someone already doing the job elsewhere? Head hunters may then embark on "a campaign of persuasion" on behalf of the university to lure these individuals away.

One vice chancellor I spoke to likened this approach to recruitment to that of the top football clubs buying in star players from rival teams rather than developing youngsters from within their own academy. The danger in transferring this model to higher education is that we end up with a self-

perpetuating hierarchy of the same few (predominantly white male) managers leading our universities, making it difficult for a more diverse group of aspiring leaders, home-grown or otherwise, to break through.

Adopting football-style recruitment may thus be “a sticking plaster” solution to a short-term management need that does nothing to support longer-term leadership capacity building in the sector.

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