**Still too male and white at the top? Don’t blame headhunters**

15 January 2015

Consultants often boost the number of shortlisted women, but universities must fight their own ‘people like us’ mindset, says Sue Shepherd



A number of female pro vice-chancellors say they would not have put their names forward without a headhunter’s support

Like them or loathe them, headhunters are now widely used for senior university appointments. Some vice-chancellors see them as essential in securing the best candidates, others are less convinced, and a few are downright cynical.

Critics say headhunters have a stereotypical view of what a vice-chancellor or pro vice-chancellor looks like, and help to perpetuate the appointment of the same kind of people at the expense of “non-standard” candidates. According to Sir David Watson, principal of Green Templeton College, Oxford, headhunters help to create a “[competitive waiting room](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/alarm-at-lack-of-players-in-v-c-hiring/311279.article)” that is less and less diverse. Simonetta Manfredi, professor of equality and diversity management at Oxford Brookes University, has proposed that the academy draw up a code of conduct for headhunters, as has happened in the private sector (“[Lead by example](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/leadership-goal-more-women-at-the-top/2017631.article)”, *Times Higher Education*, 1 January).

It is true that the profile of those getting the top jobs has changed little over time. They remain predominantly white, fiftysomething male professors. At English pre-92 universities – the focus of my research – ethnic minority representation at executive management team level is minimal and only 11 per cent of vice-chancellors and 24 per cent of pro vice-chancellors are women.

So are headhunters responsible for the paucity of senior female appointments? My research into the appointment of deputy and pro vice-chancellors, involving more than 70 interviews with vice-chancellors, current and aspiring pro vice-chancellors and headhunters, paints a more complex picture.

That is not to say that the use of headhunters is unproblematic from a gender-inclusiveness perspective. By their own admission, headhunters tend to focus their search on people in next-tier jobs, such as dean or head of school, and those with a national role or profile. They are thus fishing in a relatively small, male-dominated pool and it may be difficult for non-standard candidates to get on to their radar. Moreover, headhunters typically seek recommendations from a fairly narrow range of sources, including current heads of institutions. As one vice-chancellor notes, since people “tend to reproduce themselves”, it is unsurprising that an “unrepresentative elite group” fails to produce a more diverse candidate list. Arguably this part of the search process is merely a new incarnation of the old boys’ network.

On the other hand, headhunters play an important role in encouraging women to apply. Several female pro vice-chancellors say they would not have put their names forward without a headhunter’s support. And headhunters are actively seeking female candidates, not least because they are encouraged to do so by vice-chancellors conscious of the lack of diversity in their own executive management team.

Some female candidates are making it on to the headhunters’ initial lists. But even though headhunters say it is more than their professional reputation is worth to recommend any candidate who is not up to the job, my evidence shows that often clients do not consider the women put forward as sufficiently credible to be shortlisted. This is where universities’ role in the appointment process warrants closer scrutiny.

Most vice-chancellors tell me they use headhunters to reach a wider pool of well-qualified applicants than is possible via advertisement alone. In practice, however, the principal benefit headhunters offer clients is their ability to persuade candidates in similar posts elsewhere to apply. The recirculation of “career PVCs” reflects a conservative, risk-averse approach that favours the appointment of “people like us”.

Only 15 per cent of pro vice-chancellors appointed via external competition are women, compared with 27 per cent via internal recruitment. But the use of headhunters is not the critical factor here. Indeed, the proportion of women getting such jobs is slightly higher when headhunters are used than when an institution relies on external advertisement alone: 17 versus 12 per cent.

We should thus resist the temptation to blame headhunters alone for the lack of diversity in senior appointments. University appointment panels, not headhunters, are responsible for framing the posts and making the selections, and they should not be let off the hook.