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Narrowing the field

Despite the market reforms, senior managers remain most likely to be white, male dons.

When academics gather, the conversation invariably turns to the tyranny of “managerialism”. As universities become more business-like, the argument goes, private-sector practices are imposed in place of academic values and culture. A growing managerial class, including a new breed of non-academic professionals recruited from the private sector, is to blame. But is this really the case? Initial findings from my research into the appointment of deputy and pro vice-chancellors in English pre-1992 universities suggest it is not.

The demographic profile of pro vice-chancellors remains predominantly white, male professors. Only 2 per cent of pre-1992 university pro vice-chancellors come from outside higher education, including just one individual from the private sector.

The continued bias in favour of the academic ranks is particularly notable in the context of otherwise dramatic changes. Higher education’s transformation over the past 30 years has meant a major shift in the scale and complexity of university management and in the role of the pro vice-chancellor. The job now tends to be full-time and increasingly managerial. Appointment practice has been overhauled. More than 70 per cent of English pre-1992 institutions have externally advertised at least one pro vice-chancellor post in the past eight years. Executive head hunters are more frequently involved in appointments. Yet a greater diversity of appointments has not followed. Why not?

The risk associated with pro vice-chancellor appointments has increased alongside the scope of the role. To try to limit the chances of choosing the wrong candidate, experience is used as the main indicator of quality. Executive head hunters approach candidates in other universities and persuade them to apply. As a result, 40 per cent of pro vice-chancellors appointed by open competition hold, or have previously held, a pro vice-chancellor post. This is nearly double the number appointed using an internal recruitment process. And only 15 per cent of externally advertised pro-vice-chancellor appointments are women, compared with 28 per cent of internal-only appointments.

Managers with experience in higher education but no research background are reluctant to apply for pro vice-chancellor jobs. This is because academic credibility remains an essential prerequisite. Without it, vice-chancellors argue, a pro vice-chancellor could not command the respect of the academic community. There is also widespread scepticism about the relevance of management experience gained outside higher education.

Conservatism and continuity in pro vice-chancellor appointments reflect a tendency to select “people like us”, as one vice-chancellor put it. Academics are effectively ring-fencing pro vice-chancellor positions to the exclusion of other occupational groups. Pro

vice-chancellors are taking on wider briefs and, in some cases, line management responsibilities for professional services departments. But rather than surrendering the role to professional managers from the private sector, academics are consolidating their authority.

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