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Citation for published version

Shepherd, Sue (2014) The Rise of the Career PVC. Engage, Autumn (36). pp. 10-13.

DOI

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The Rise of the Career PVC

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Pro vice chancellors play a pivotal role in university management but they have rarely been the subject of research in their own right. This article draws on findings from the author's doctoral study to explore recent changes to PVC roles and appointment practice and considers the implications of change for PVC careers and management capacity building in the sector.

Introduction

Higher education in the UK has been transformed over the last fifty years, with major implications for the management of universities. In an increasingly challenging and competitive environment it is essential that universities are well managed and it follows that they need to secure the best people for senior management jobs. This article focuses on PVCs, a term used here to include both deputy and pro vice chancellors, albeit with an acknowledgment that the two roles are becoming increasingly differentiated - a point I will return to later. It explores how the PVC role and appointment practice are changing in pre-1992 English universities and discusses the significance of these developments.

Despite the enduring nature and importance of PVCs, relatively little was known about how they are appointed or what they do until the seminal Leadership Foundation-funded study on the evolution of the PVC role between 1960 and 2005 (Smith, Adams & Mount 2007). My ESRC-funded doctoral research builds upon and updates elements of this work in relation to the demographic profile, professional background and appointment of PVCs. The article is based on findings from this research which comprises a census, online survey of next-tier managers and 73 interviews with key stakeholders, including VCs, current and aspiring PVCs and executive search agents. It also draws on an advertisement monitoring exercise for PVC posts covering the eight-year period between January 2006 and December 2013.

New types of PVC

The traditional notion of the part-time, fixed-term PVC with a floating policy development role is coming under challenge as new variants of the role are created. Firstly, there has been a growth in the number of full-time, sometimes permanent, deputy vice chancellors (DVCs) with a distinct role and more senior status to PVCs in what has been described as a "stretching" of the PVC management tier (Smith, Adams & Mount 2007). Whereas in 2005 the majority (59%) of pre-1992 English universities had an executive management team comprising an apparently undifferentiated group of PVCs, by 2013 most (73%) had both PVCs *and* one or more DVCs. In a few institutions this reflects the adoption of a president-and-provost management model along the lines of that found in the United States.

Secondly, an entirely new type of PVC has emerged: the PVC/Dean, typically combining a cross-institution policy role with the executive management of a faculty. According to the Association of Commonwealth Universities Yearbook, there were no such posts in 2005, but by 2013 there were 40 PVC/Deans, 18% of the entire PVC cohort. Thirdly, as recently observed by Middlehurst (2013),

some DVCs and PVCs are now assuming executive management responsibility for professional services functions. Finally, an examination of job titles reveals that the range of PVC portfolios has expanded well beyond the traditional ones of learning and teaching and research (Shepherd 2014a). PVCs in the 2013 census have portfolios in enterprise and engagement, the student experience, internationalisation and external relations and development.

Traditional policy PVCs are thus being joined by executive PVCs with significant budgetary and line management responsibilities in what can be seen as a movement towards a post-1992 executive management model. In some universities these two types of PVC sit side by side on the same executive team even though they may have been appointed by different means and/or on different terms and conditions.

Changing appointment practice

It is not only the PVC role that is evolving. An increasing number of pre-1992 English universities are also changing their PVC appointment practice. The traditional internal, fixed-term secondment model is being supplemented, or in a few cases replaced, by one of external open competition. Thirty three of these universities (73%) externally advertised at least one PVC post between 2006 and 2013, with an average of 3.4 posts per advertising institution. Moreover, the number placing a PVC advert has been growing year on year, with four more advertising for the first time in 2013. However, that is not to say that these universities externally advertise *all* their PVC posts. Rather, the large majority employ a mixed appointment model with some PVC posts opened up to external competition and others available only to internal candidates. Less than a third (27%) still utilise an internal-only appointment process for all their PVC posts.

The use of executive search agencies has grown rapidly and is now commonplace for PVC appointments, although it has not yet reached the virtually universal level for VCs (98%). Between 2006 and 2013 executive search agencies were used for 61% of externally advertised PVC posts and pre-1992 universities were just as likely to employ them as their post-1992 counterparts. The higher education executive search market is dominated by a small number of agencies (Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008). Four big players collectively accounted for an 84% market share of externally advertised PVC posts over the same eight-year period and Perrett Laver was the clear market leader, involved in almost half of these appointments. The sector's over-reliance on a few agencies raises a number of issues, including doubts about the 'freshness' of each search, potential conflicts of interest and the re-cycling of candidates (Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008).

The case for change

In deciding to open up PVC posts to external competition, VCs are primarily motivated by a desire to secure the best person for the job - an approach characterised by one VC as "a quest for the best". To get the best, VCs say they must be able to select from the widest possible pool of candidates and that this can only be achieved by opening up the positions to external competition.

"The whole thrust has been to attract the best calibre person from the best pool of applicants."

PVCs are now seen as "high risk appointments" and considered "too important to leave to the vagaries of who is available internally."

"PVC positions are now much more exposed with a much higher level of risk and so the appointment process has to be different."

The decision as to whether or not to open up a particular PVC post to external competition is generally a pragmatic one, made by the VC on a case by case basis. A key determining factor is the

size and quality of the internal candidate pool: where VCs perceive there to be no, or too few, suitably qualified internal people they are likely to externally advertise the post. And even when there are strong internal candidates, many VCs still believe it is important to open up the posts to external competition in order to test internals against the field. This is seen as beneficial both for the university and the successful candidate since appointment via external competition is believed “to validate the individual who comes in” and give that person “increased credibility” and “more of a mandate.”

A desire to bring in an external candidate is another driver of change. External appointees are seen as bringing fresh ideas and perspectives and “offering the opportunity to look at the institution via a slightly different lens.”

“I want PVCs who will force us to think through what we’re doing.”

In some cases, an external appointment is seen as necessary in order to bring in “fresh blood” and avoid “going stale.” This is particularly true where the institution is perceived as too introspective or where there are long-serving executive management team members. VCs are also more likely to appoint an external candidate when they are looking to drive forward a change agenda or combat inertia. Internal candidates may be seen as having vested interests or as resistant to change. Indeed, where underperformance is an issue, internal candidates may be perceived as part of the problem.

What VCs want

VCs are setting the bar extremely high in terms of what they require from PVC candidates.

“We do want the very, very best.”

They point to a number of reasons why only the best candidates will do. Firstly, the job is seen as increasingly complex and demanding and there is “a certain expectation of performance” from incoming PVCs and an “ever more insistent search for greater skills”.

“What’s being asked of managers is radically different and they are just not the same roles.”

Secondly, the pressure on PVCs “to do more with less and quicker” means that VCs say they “can’t afford to take people who’ll be learning on the job”. Thirdly, the role is being taken more seriously and it is acknowledged that a good PVC appointment can make a real difference for the better, and *vice versa*.

VCs are looking for people they can work with and trust and who are prepared to demonstrate that they really want the job.

“We want people to put their head above the parapet.”

It is VCs who “call the shots” not only regarding the choice of appointment method but also the selection of the successful candidate. Most VCs believe they “must have the final say” over who is in their executive team since they are the ones who are ultimately accountable for the delivery of the institutional strategy. A few made it clear that they expect both council and senate to “go along with” their choice of PVC.

“The chief executive needs to have the team he wants. The VC can ultimately do what they like.”

Impact of change

Despite the evolution of the PVC role and the increase in the demands and expectations of post holders, the profile of those getting the jobs has changed little over time. PVCs remain predominantly white (96%), male (76%) professors (90%), although the proportion of women has risen slightly since 2005 from 21% to 24%.

So what impact, if any, has appointment method had on the profile of successful candidates? As of August 2013, approximately one third of the PVC cohort had been appointed by means of an external competition process, whether or not the appointee came from inside or outside the institution. The table below provides a comparison of the profile of this sub-group ('externals') with that of PVCs appointed by means of an internal-only process ('internals').

Comparison of PVC profile by appointment method

	'Externals' (n=71)		'Internals' (n=139)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Female	11	15.5	38	27.3
Ethnic Minority	3	4.2	5	3.6
Non Professor	4	5.6	15	10.8
Non Academic	4	5.6	7 [^]	5.0

[^]These are registrars and other senior professional services managers whose posts have been re-titled as PVCs

The table shows that the adoption of external open competition has had little effect on the ethnicity, but a significant effect on the gender, of appointed PVCs. Only 15% of 'externals' are women compared to 27% of 'internals'. Moreover, the change of appointment method has not led to an increased likelihood of non-academic managers, either from inside or outside higher education, securing a PVC job. On the contrary, it has led to a firming up of the traditional academic management route into the role: a higher proportion of 'externals' than 'internals' have previously held some kind of academic manager post, generally at a higher level of seniority.

In fact, almost four in ten 'externals' (39%) have already been a PVC compared to only 22% of 'internals'. A recirculation of existing PVCs is taking place, facilitated by the use of executive search agents who are able to approach people already in post elsewhere and persuade them to apply. This has led to the emergence of "the career PVC" moving from one PVC post to another, typically to a different or more senior PVC role in a bigger or better institution. This echoes what is happening at head of institution level with the appointment of second-time VCs (Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008).

Differing career paths and aspirations

In socio-demographic terms, the PVCs appointed via an external competition process match the traditional PVC profile. Indeed, one VC described the change of appointment practice as having resulted in "more of the same". However, this similarity in profile masks differences in the career routes and aspirations of this new group of 'externals' compared to the seconded PVCs of yesteryear. Typically the 'externals' have made an active decision to take "a management track". Although a few had management ambitions from the outset, for most the key decision point or "fork in the junction" came at the end of their term as head of department – a role described as "a test bed for a new career".

They were attracted to the PVC role by a desire to lead and manage others or "the being-in-charge angle" and, despite the demands and performance pressure, on the whole they are relishing the management challenge. For most, "going back" to the academic ranks is neither a feasible nor an

attractive option and they envisage their future in a management role. This is an extremely ambitious group and those who still have sufficient time before they retire are likely to aspire to become a VC.

Many have participated in the Leadership Foundation's Top Management Programme (TMP) which is seen as an important forum for "making connections that can get you a job" and for "enhancing your career".

"There is naked ambition on the TMP. There were some people with a very clear eye on the goal."

Taking part in the TMP is an important signal of management intent and a means of getting on the radar of executive search agencies. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the programme has become an integral part of the strategic career plan for academics with their sights set on the top job and "something of a rite of passage to becoming a VC".

Conclusions

The imperviousness of the PVC profile, even in the face of the transformation of higher education over the past few decades, confirms findings from earlier studies that the recruitment pattern of the most senior university managers has remained predictable despite significant policy change (Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008, Smith, Adams & Mount 2007, Bargh et al. 2000). However, the apparent continuity in the profile of PVCs appointed via external open competition disguises change to traditional career patterns and aspirations. These are individuals who have made a conscious decision to take a management route, enjoy management and are ambitious to progress to the top job. The majority could thus be characterised as "career track" rather than "reluctant" or "good citizen" managers (Deem, Hillyard & Reed 2007). Moreover, within this group of 'externals' a growing cadre of career PVCs is emerging who are making strategic career moves from one PVC post to another.

Although the adoption of external open competition for PVC appointments can be seen as a logical response to the need to attract the best managers, the way it is being implemented in practice is problematic and has resulted in some apparently unintended consequences – notably the narrowing, rather than the widening, of the candidate pool and the profile of those getting the jobs (Shepherd 2014b). A risk-averse and conservative approach to recruitment has led to the appointment of more experienced candidates, a large minority of whom were already in PVC roles elsewhere. Although such appointments meet VCs' stated desire for people who can "hit the ground running", a reliance on buying in experienced individuals is arguably a short-term fix, or a "sticking plaster, short-term solution" (as one VC described it) to the issue of improving institutional management.

The emphasis on prior experience precludes consideration of a more diverse candidate pool and is resulting in the recirculation of a self-perpetuating - predominantly male - elite of senior academic managers. This represents a form of bed-blocking for younger managers. Moreover, if external candidates are brought in at the expense of internal talent development and succession management, this may have a negative impact on longer-term management capacity building. On the basis of these findings, it would appear that the growing trend towards an external open competition PVC appointment model does not augur well either for the gender inclusiveness or professional diversity of pre-1992 university executive management teams. This should be a cause for concern both from a social justice and an organisational performance perspective.

Find out more about the author's research at www.sue-shepherd.co.uk or on Twitter @sueshepherdHE

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