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The changing role of PVC

Wonkhe website

by [Sue Shepherd](#) on March 18, 2014

Things are changing for deputy and pro vice chancellors (PVCs) in pre-1992 universities at least. [My research](#) has been investigating pro vice chancellors, and whilst they sit near the top of decision-making in today's complicated and highly-charged higher education environment, it is important that their roles are better understood.

Colleagues of a certain age working within the 'traditional' part of the sector will remember those halcyon days of "donnish dominion" when the pace of academic life was slower and universities were administered rather than managed. Back then, being a PVC was something a senior professor might do for a few years before retiring or returning to the day job. A tap on the shoulder from the vice chancellor was the usual appointment method and an honorarium the normal form of remuneration. The role itself was essentially one of policy development, with a spot of occasional trouble shooting or gentle arm-twisting.

A lot has changed since then. Being a PVC these days tends to be a full-time job, rather than a part-time role. New PVC portfolios are springing up outside of the traditional ones of learning and teaching and research. There are now PVCs for internationalisation, external relations and the student experience, to name but a few. A number of 'executive' PVC posts have also been created with responsibilities for professional services directorates or faculties. One of the most notable developments in recent years has been the emergence of a new type of combined PVC/Dean role. PVC/Deans didn't exist until a few years ago, but by 2013 there were forty – nearly one in five of all PVC posts.

Given these developments, it is perhaps not surprising that there are a lot more PVCs than there used to be. In fact there's been a 44 per cent increase in PVC numbers since 2005, more than one additional post on average per institution. But, contrary to popular belief, that doesn't mean that senior management jobs have been proliferating; it's rather that more of these posts now have 'PVC' in the job title. The new PVC/Deans are the most obvious example, but there are also a handful of senior administrative posts, such as registrar, chief operating officer or director of finance, that have been re-titled, usually as deputy vice chancellor.

And that highlights another important recent development: the tendency for institutions to have what David Smith termed a "stretched second tier" whereby there are both pro vice chancellors *and* a deputy vice chancellor, with the latter a distinct and more senior role. Over 70 per cent of pre-1992 universities now have this 'deputy-plus-pro-vice-chancellors' model, compared to just

over a third in 2005. This may in part reflect the changing role of vice chancellors and the additional support required to ‘mind the shop’ whilst they are engaged in external relations or fundraising.

So as well as more PVCs, there is a greater diversity in the types of PVC role. Alongside the more traditional ‘floating’ policy PVCs, there are the PVC/Deans, ‘executive’ PVCs, and deputy vice chancellors. These latter executive-style posts, with direct line management responsibilities for academic and sometimes professional services departments, are akin to those found in the post-1992 sector.

And pre-1992 institutions are adopting post-1992 management practices in other ways too. The traditional ‘old’ university internal, fixed-term secondment PVC model is being replaced by – or, more commonly, supplemented with – the typical post-1992 one of external open competition via external advertisement and, in many cases, the use of executive search agencies.

But despite changes both to the nature of the PVC role and the way appointments are made, the profiles of the people getting the jobs has remained largely unchanged. PVCs are still overwhelmingly white (96%), male (76%) professors (90%). The apparent continuity in demographic and professional profile does, however, hide some interesting differences between the career paths and motivations of today’s PVCs compared to those of yesteryear.

Many serving PVCs, especially those appointed by means of external advertisement, made a conscious decision to take an academic management career route. They tend to be individuals who enjoy the challenge of management. The days of what Rosemary Deem called the “reluctant manager” are largely a thing of the past at PVC level (although there are still some heads of department who may fit this description), not least because vice chancellors are looking for people who “really want the job”. Many PVCs could more accurately be described as “career managers”.

This new breed of PVCs have been willing to “put their heads above the parapet” and take on what is a challenging role at a point of tension between management and the academic community. This is not always a comfortable place to be. Having crossed the Rubicon onto the senior management team, a PVC is increasingly perceived by the academic community as ‘one of them’ rather than ‘one of us’.

It is ironic that, although in the pre-1992 sector at least, you still have to be (or have been) an academic in order to be selected as a PVC, once in post the likelihood is that you will have to sacrifice your research career. Most PVCs tell me that there is “no going back” to an academic role, either because this is no longer feasible or because it is no longer an attractive option, or both. Finding a suitable exit strategy from a PVC job can be tricky.

Academic colleagues would thus be well advised to consider what they are giving up, as well as what they are gaining, in becoming a PVC. It is a role that carries an increasingly high degree of personal risk and the escalating salaries at this level are, I believe, in part a reflection of the short-term, high-risk nature of the job. PVC appointments are still usually made on a fixed-term basis and, even where PVCs are on an open-ended contract, they are nevertheless reliant on the continued support and patronage of the vice chancellor. So, if the vice chancellor is about to leave, it might just be time to dust off that CV.