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No room at the top? The glass wall for professional services managers in pre-1992 English universities

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ABSTRACT

Pre-1992 English universities are changing the way they appoint their deputy and pro-vice-chancellors (PVCs). Traditionally, PVC posts were filled by internal secondment from within the professoriate, but these days an increasing number are appointed by means of external open competition involving advertisement and/or executive search. So has this 'opening up' of PVC positions created new career progression opportunities for professional services managers? Findings from a census, online survey and interviews with a range of senior university managers suggest not. Despite the PVC role becoming more managerial, those getting the jobs remain overwhelmingly career academics. Professional services managers confront a glass wall, excluded from consideration by a non-negotiable requirement for academic credibility. Aware they have little chance of getting a PVC job, they are unlikely to apply. The continued monopolisation of PVC posts by academic managers represents a form of social closure that serves to maintain their elite status.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; leadership; selection; deputy and pro-vice-chancellor; glass wall; social closure

Introduction and context

The rapid expansion in the size of the UK higher education (HE) sector and the scale and complexity of its activities over the last few decades has required an upgrading of managerial capacity (Scott 1995). Universities that were once administered now need to be actively managed. Accordingly, the role of university leadership and management has been greatly enhanced (Shattock 2013). One key manifestation of this change has been the professionalisation of the administration (Middlehurst 1993) which has changed almost beyond recognition since the 1960s (Hogan 2014).

The traditional civil service model of administration, characterised by neutral administrators working in a supportive role to the priorities of the academic community, has largely disappeared. Generalist administrators have been supplemented by experienced specialist managers, such as those in marketing or estates, recruited from outside the sector (Lauwerys 2008). This new-look administration – or professional services as they have increasingly come to be known – operates in a support and advisory role to the executive rather than in the 'docile' service of the academic community (Scott 1995, 64). The boundaries between academic and administrative roles have arguably become less clear cut and the identities of administrators and managers have broadened, with implications for their future career development and aspirations (Whitchurch 2008a).

Nevertheless, until recently executive team-level career progression opportunities for professional services managers in pre-1992 universities (i.e. those institutions that had university status prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which brought the former polytechnics into the university sector) were limited to the posts of director of finance and registrar/head of administration. That is because the other core members of the typical executive management team – deputy and pro-vice-chancellors (hereafter described collectively as PVCs, albeit with an acknowledgement that the former may hold a distinct role and more senior status from the latter) – have traditionally been appointed on a fixed-term, internal secondment basis from amongst the professoriate (Smith and Adams 2008). PVCs have thus historically been career academics.

However, as the HE environment has become more challenging and competitive and the management pressure on universities has risen, so the nature of the PVC role has begun to change. Firstly, the collective PVC remit has broadened with the addition of policy portfolios, such as internationalisation and innovation, outside the traditional ones of teaching and learning and research (Smith and Adams 2008). Secondly, new types of executive PVC role have been created incorporating line management and/or budgetary responsibility for academic faculties – in the form of the PVC/Dean (Shepherd 2014) – and professional services

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(Middlehurst 2013). Thirdly, vice chancellors and PVCs themselves attest to the role having become both more demanding and more managerial (Shepherd 2015a). Consequently, the perceived importance of making a good PVC appointment – and, conversely, the perceived risk of making a bad one – has risen. In an attempt to secure the best possible field of candidates, an increasing number of pre-1992 university vice chancellors are opening up some (or, in a few cases, all) of their PVC posts to external open competition by means of external advertisement and/or the use of executive search (Shepherd 2015b).

In theory, this has raised the possibility of non-academic candidates applying for, and being appointed to, PVC posts. This article examines the professional background of PVCs in pre-1992 English universities to ascertain whether or not this outcome is being realised in practice. It also investigates the aspirations and agency of professional services managers with regard to applying for a PVC position and explores the views of vice chancellors on what is required in a PVC candidate. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings are then considered.

Methodology

This article draws upon empirical data from a study investigating the recent adoption by English pre-1992 universities of an external open competition process for PVC positions that has long been commonplace in post-1992 institutions. This underlying study investigates the drivers and consequences of this change for, *inter alia*, the demographic and professional profile of appointed PVCs, the career aspirations and progression of potential future PVCs and, more broadly, for the development of management capacity within the sector. Selected findings relating to professional services managers are presented here.

The study has a mixed-methods design utilising a combination of what may be considered quantitative (census and online survey) as well as qualitative (semi-structured interview) research methods. This research strategy was employed to produce different types of data from different perspectives and thus to obtain a more complete understanding of the research phenomenon. Furthermore, it offers a means of methodological, as well as data, triangulation. Three data collection methods were used in sequence. Firstly, a census providing a snapshot in time of the demographic and career profile of the 215 PVC post holders in English pre-1992 universities as of August 2013. Data were collected from publicly available sources, primarily university websites. Secondly, an online survey of all academic and professional services managers at the third tier of university management, that is at the level immediately below PVC, for whom email addresses could be found ($n = 661$ with 132

complete responses). Thirdly, 73 semi-structured interviews with vice chancellors (19), PVCs appointed by means of external open competition (26), academic and professional services third-tier managers (17), registrars (8) and executive search agents (3).

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted for the interviews whereby participants were selected on the basis that they had something to contribute to the research topic. In this case, the executive search agents were drawn from agencies active in the HE market and the university participants from the 30 pre-1992 institutions that had externally advertised at least one PVC post between January 2006 and December 2013. Specifically, the sample group of 115 individuals was formulated according to the following criteria:

- (1) The vice chancellor from each of the 30 institutions.
- (2) One PVC appointed via external open competition per institution. Where there was more than one such post holder, selection was made by alphabetical order of surname, with preference given to women to ensure their adequate representation.
- (3) Third-tier managers selected on the same basis as (2) from amongst those online survey respondents who had volunteered to be interviewed.
- (4) Registrars from those institutions in which no PVC appointed via external open competition was currently in post (i.e. the appointment was pending) or in which no third-tier managers had volunteered to be interviewed.

A respondent validation approach was taken to data analysis allowing interview participants to have a say in how the data they provided were interpreted. They were offered the opportunity to review an interview summary (capturing the salient points and short verbatim quotations) and to correct any inaccuracies or delete anything they believed might risk accidental disclosure of their identity. Three-quarters of participants took up this option and just over half (53%) made minor amendments. This process helped to ensure that the research findings fairly and accurately convey the views of participants and protect their anonymity. With this latter aim in mind, quotations in this article are not personally attributed. Rather, participants are identified only by job type: i.e. vice chancellor (VC), PVC, professional services third-tier manager (PSM) and executive search agent (ESA).

Professional profile of PVCs

The census reveals that PVCs in pre-1992 universities are still overwhelmingly career academics, with 94% of the cohort coming into the role from an academic post. The typical career route remains unchanged from that observed in Smith et al.'s (2007) seminal study of PVCs between 1960 and 2005, i.e. via

progression up the academic management hierarchy from head of department to dean.

The recent change in the PVC appointment method has had little impact on the professional profile of successful candidates. Comparison of two sub-groups within the overall PVC cohort, i.e. the 'externals' appointed by means of external advertisement and the 'internals' appointed by an internal-only process, reveals that the opening up of posts to external competition has not increased the proportion of non-academic PVCs (Table 1). On the contrary, a slightly higher proportion of 'externals' than 'internals' are professors (94% versus 89%), indicating a firming up of the traditional recruitment path.

Only four non-academics were appointed to PVC positions following external open competition: two professional services managers recruited from another university, a manager from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and one from the private sector recruited to a PVC (Enterprise) role.

Applications and aspirations

One reason for the dearth of non-academics amongst the 'externals' is the fact that very few professional services managers appear to be applying for PVC jobs. Only 2 of the 47 third-tier professional services managers responding to the online survey had actually submitted an application (Table 2) – both unsuccessful.

Not only are professional services managers significantly less likely than their academic counterparts to have already applied for a PVC post, they are also less likely to be considering doing so in future (Table 3).

The most common reason professional services managers give for not applying is the fact they are not academics:

As I am not an academic I don't think I'd get a look in! (PSM)

I am not an academic and I think that's a major barrier. (PSM)

These roles are invariably steered towards academics even though I fully match the skillset required and head hunters often ask my advice on suitable ACADEMIC candidates. (PSM)

Although the prospect of becoming a PVC within their own specialist portfolio is seen as an attractive career

Table 1. Professional background of PVCs according to the means by which they were appointed (2013).

	'Externals' (n = 71) appointed via external advertisement		'Internals' (n = 139) appointed via an internal-only process	
	Number	%	Number	%
Professor	67	94.4	124	89.2
Career academic	67	94.4	132	95.0

option for some professional services managers, it is nevertheless perceived to be an unachievable ambition.

There's no realistic option to become a PVC. (PSM)

The opening up of PVC posts to external competition is not thought to have benefitted professional services managers.

The move to external advertisement has not enhanced the chances of non-academics getting a PVC role. It's a closed shop. (PSM)

On the contrary, it is argued that there is a 'discriminatory' approach to PVC recruitment that limits the roles to those from an academic background.

There's a preponderance of academics at top team level. They don't view professional services people as credible candidates for a PVC role. (PSM)

Academic credibility

The perception that professional services managers are not regarded as viable candidates for PVC posts is borne out by the evidence from vice chancellors – the key drivers of the recruitment and selection process. With one or two notable exceptions, vice chancellors believe that PVCs must 'first and foremost' be academics since only fellow academics are deemed to have 'a shared set of values', 'complete familiarity with the core mission' and 'credibility in making decisions in an academic environment'. Executive search agents confirm that their university clients are not interested in appointing non-academic managers.

A pre-92 is very unlikely to be interested in a non-academic or someone from outside HE. (ESA)

HE is inherently conservative and people are suspicious of those from outside the academy. (ESA)

According to the advertisement rhetoric, a track record of research excellence is usually a prerequisite for a PVC position in a pre-1992 institution, regardless of the policy portfolio. In practice, however, executive search agents suggest that management experience may well take precedence. Yet, even if the requirement for research excellence is negotiable, that for academic credibility is not. The latter remains an essential part of

Table 2. Number and percentage of applications for a PVC post made by academic and professional services third-tier managers (2013).

Location of PVC post	Academic managers (n = 85)		Professional services managers (n = 47)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Own university	13	15.3	1	2.1
Other pre-1992 university	16	18.8	1	2.1

Table 3. Likelihood of applying for a PVC post in the future by academic and professional services third-tier managers (2013).

Likelihood of applying	Academic managers (n = 85)		Professional services managers (n = 47)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Very likely	20	23.5	2	4.3
Somewhat likely	18	21.2	10	21.3
Somewhat unlikely	13	15.3	10	21.3
Very unlikely	28	32.9	21	44.7
Would rather not say	2	2.4	2	4.3
Don't know	4	4.7	2	4.3

the identity construction of the PVC role (Smith and Adams 2008) and a prerequisite for candidates since it is believed that without it appointees would be unacceptable to the main internal constituency over whom leadership is to be exercised, i.e. rank and file academics (Bargh et al. 2000).

Conventional wisdom has it that 'academics are more willing to believe and trust someone who has a demonstrable academic track record and hence may be more likely to "follow" them' (Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling 2008, 8)

You could not stand up in front of academic colleagues if you hadn't done the job yourself. You've got to have credibility. I've earned this even if my time is spent on other things. (PVC)

Even though academics sometimes see a suit when talking to me, they know I have done an academic job. (PVC)

In reality, academic credibility is unlikely to derive solely from a current reputation as a cutting-edge researcher since it is very difficult for academics on a senior management career track to maintain an active research profile. In fact, as some interviewees acknowledge, PVC candidates are more likely to be trading on past research and an already established reputation.

It's more about what you were than what you are. (VC)

Nonetheless, even though the positional power of the modern PVC is increasing, expert power in the form of academic credibility remains critical to securing a PVC job. Non-academic candidates are thus effectively excluded from serious consideration.

Social closure

These findings reveal the imperviousness of the PVC profile, even in the face of transformational change to university management. They are consistent with previous studies which show that the recruitment pattern of senior university managers has remained remarkably predictable over time and that, contrary to expectations, government pressure for universities to operate in a more business-like manner has not resulted in the appointment of non-academic

managers (Bargh et al. 2000; Smith, Adams, and Mount 2007). Unlike in the NHS, where professional managers have been brought in at senior executive levels, in HE academics still hold the top management jobs. This is despite the increased complexity of the management task, the evolution of the PVC role and the perceived emergence of a more managerial culture (Deem 2000).

As yet there has been no successful resolution to the problem of how to combine a desire for more professional management with the continued requirement for academic credibility (Smith, Adams, and Mount 2007). This is in contrast to the experience of some other professions where the dominance of managerial-professionals appointed on the basis of their professional reputations, rather than their management competence, has come under serious challenge (Laffin 1998). The fact that this has not been the case in academia suggests that social closure remains strong. This may reflect academics' early socialisation into the culture of a disciplinary 'tribe' that helps them 'define their own identities and defend their own patches of intellectual ground by employing a variety of devices geared to the exclusion of illegal immigrants' (Becher 1989, 24).

Social closure has been defined as 'the capacity for, and strategies of, social groups to exclude, or usurp, other groups in a struggle for control of scarce resources, valued social locations, and their associated privileges and status' (Flynn 1999, 22). It is thus an exercise of power 'in which one group secures its advantages by closing off the opportunities of another group beneath it that it defines as inferior and ineligible' (Murphy 1984, 548). Murphy argues that, by implication, closure is a means of domination. Within organisations, this is often achieved through the monopolisation of positions. The effective exclusion by academics of other occupational groups – notably professional services managers – from PVC positions is a prime example of social closure.

Issues and implications

It is not the purpose of this article to argue that universities *should* appoint professional services managers as PVCs, nor that if appointed they would necessarily do a better job than their academic colleagues. However, it is appropriate to question the two seemingly taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the current PVC appointment process in pre-1992 universities: firstly, that non-academic managers are not (and cannot be) viable candidates and secondly, that an academic career is the best preparation for a PVC role.

The first of these shows a lack of appreciation and respect for what professional services managers have

to offer, including a deep knowledge of, and commitment to, HE coupled with management credentials, skills and experience.

Universities don't respect the disciplines and expertise of their professional services directors. They still have amateurs in charge. If you wanted work done on your house, you'd get a builder. (PVC)

Professional services managers aspiring to a PVC position confront a 'glass wall', i.e. an invisible barrier between the two occupational groups, which prevents them moving across from a management role to what is conceived as an academic one. The metaphor of a glass wall is preferred here to that of glass ceiling since the latter is used to signify a barrier to advancement *up* the hierarchical leadership structure that applies to a particular demographic group (typically women). In this case, the barrier is first and foremost one of vertical rather than horizontal segregation and applies to an occupational (i.e. non-academic management), rather than a socio-demographic, group.

Nonetheless, the presence of the glass wall also has the effect of inhibiting hierarchical advancement for professional services managers who have to move out of HE in order to gain promotion. This results in a loss of talent to the sector. A few senior figures within the pre-1992 university sector are beginning to question this state of affairs. One former registrar, for example, has argued that professional services managers 'must be able to see the possibility of progression to the most senior posts in universities' (Lauwerys 2008, 5). Although in the minority, one or two senior academics in this study agree that the exclusion of professional services managers is to the detriment of university management.

It's regrettable that universities don't get a mix of talents. There's no question that there is a vested interest in preserving the difference between academics and non-academics. (VC)

This study finds little or no evidence at the PVC level of the blurring of academic-administrative domains and identities identified by Whitchurch or the emergence of the 'new, generic form of *third space* professional' that she envisages (2008b, 387). On the contrary, it highlights a clear occupational delineation, or glass wall, between academics and professional services managers – one that is essential to the realisation of social closure.

The second assumption informing PVC recruitment decisions is that the required management experience can be taken for granted as part of the typical 'career pathway to the top' (Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2008, 43) for academics who 'already have much of what they require in terms of experience, knowledge and skills relevant to undertaking their management role

in their new career field' (Deem 2006, 219). In the absence of management credentials, a candidate's eligibility for selection as PVC is more the product of their membership of a particular community of practice (Smith, Adams, and Mount 2007). Aspiring PVCs are thus heavily dependent on their social capital, i.e. networks and contacts accessed through membership of this group.

For manager-academics, whom they know may become more important than what they know. (Deem 2006, 220)

However, once in the role, PVCs need a broader set of skills than simply academic ones, for example political nous. Indeed, serving PVCs point out how different this role is from their academic one and how different the required skill set is. This implies that an academic background may, in fact, be a poor preparation for a management role, echoing the findings from earlier research showing that academics do not necessarily have the right skills to be effective managers and may find themselves promoted to a position of authority for which their expertise is inappropriately matched (Yielder and Codling 2004).

Nevertheless, academics will continue to be appointed to PVC posts for as long as the current 'reproductive technology' (Blackmore, Thomson, and Barty 2006, 297) prevails, whereby the job criteria reflect the background and achievements of incumbent PVCs and the vice chancellors who select them. Unless and until fixed perceptions about what is required in a PVC candidate – and, thus, who is deemed to have legitimacy in the role – are challenged, the professional 'apartheid' between academic and professional services managers will remain (Beer 2015, 42). The status quo is unlikely to change, however, since the exclusion of non-academic managers from consideration for PVC posts is both unquestioned and unproblematic in the eyes of senior academics, for whom it also serves as a means of maintaining their elite status.

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