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Executive Search Agencies in HE: “You Can’t Put the Genie Back in the Bottle”



Changing DPVC Appointment Models

Internal Secondment Model

Appointment by invitation

Part time

Fixed term

Return to academic role

Open Competition Model

Advertisement

Executive Search Agencies (ESAs)

Full time

Sometimes open ended

Research Design

Mixed method design utilising multiple data sources:

1. *Advert Monitoring Exercise (2006 – 2012)*
2. *Online survey of next tier post holders (Nov 2012)*
3. *Census of DPVC post holders (August 2013)*
4. *Semi-structured interviews (73): purposive sample of key stakeholders in those pre-92 universities that have advertised a DPVC post externally and ESAs active in HE sector (May to August 2013)*

Changing Appointment Practice

	Pre-92s n=45		Post-92s n=circa 87		Total
DPVCs	94	39%	149	61%	243
All EMT	188	45%	226	55%	414

- 94 DPVC posts were advertised by pre-92s
- A third of DPVCs (71 of 215) in pre-92s were appointed as a result of external advertisement
- Two thirds (29 of 45) of pre-92s externally advertised at least one DPVC post during period
- Most of these pre-92s have a mixed DPVC appointment model, combining internal and external open competition

Utilisation of ESAs

- Use of ESAs for DPVC posts is a relatively new phenomenon
- ESAs are used in 60% of cases where DPVC posts are externally advertised (56 of 94)
- Pre-92s are just as likely as post-92s to use ESAs for externally advertised DPVC posts (60% versus 59%)
- Four ESAs account for 88% of overall market share of EMT posts and 88% of DPVC posts in pre-92s
- Perrett Laver is the clear market leader with 38% share of all EMT posts in HE and 54% of DPVC posts in pre-92s

Why Use ESAs?

- To conduct breadth of search that university could not
 - Lack of time and/or capacity
 - Issue of neutrality
- To demonstrate rigour of the appointment process
- To outsource the process – and associated risk
 - Some universities are seen as “palming off” responsibility
- Seen by many VCs as the only viable option
 - Market is highly competitive
 - Cannot rely on an advert alone given perception that senior people are no longer willing to apply for posts directly
- As a matter of prestige/PR
- “Casual benchmarking”

Perceived Benefits

- Reaching those an advert could not
 - Those not actively looking or waiting to be approached
- Acting as advocates for the institution and seeking to persuade potential candidates to apply
- Playing an important intermediary role between the institution and candidates
- Providing useful source of advice/feedback for candidates
- Supporting equal opportunities
 - Actively seeking and encouraging female candidates to apply
- Giving an objective and astute assessment of candidates

Perceived Problems/Issues

- Variable quality
 - Don't always generate a good field or provide VfM
- Transparency/integrity of initial candidate lists
 - Genuinely “fresh” search or “usual suspects”
 - Potential conflicts of interest
- Potential harm to candidates
 - Encouraging inappropriate applications
 - Need to understand ‘the rules of the game’
- Failure to produce a diverse candidate list
 - Stereotypical view of what a DPVC looks like
 - Taking recommendations from a small, elite group
 - Issue of how non-traditional candidates get on the radar

Initial Thoughts

- Use of ESAs something of a self-fulfilling prophecy
- ESAs have contributed to:
 - Professionalisation of the appointment process
 - Creation of a “competitive waiting room” of candidates
 - Fuelling of ambition in would-be DPVCs and VCs
- ESAs have facilitated the recirculation of existing DPVCs (and VCs) via a “winkling out” process
- Use of ESAs has resulted in a widening, but not a diversification, of the candidate pool
- Tempting to blame ESAs for lack of diversity in DPVC appointments when it is universities that ‘frame’ posts, make appointment decisions and are responsible for the gender imbalance in the ‘pipeline’