

Appointing Pro Vice Chancellors in Pre-1992 Universities: The Myth of Managerialism?

Introduction

In challenging economic times and a fast-moving and globally competitive higher education environment, the quality of university management – especially at executive management team (EMT) level – has arguably never been more important. The role of Pro Vice Chancellors (PVCs) is of pivotal importance in this regard. They perform a distinctive and vital role as facilitators of the Vice Chancellor's vision and as catalysts for action (Smith, Adams & Mount 2007). Moreover, they comprise the main recruitment pool from which future university leaders are appointed. They nevertheless remain an under-researched and under-theorised group.

Although attracting the best people to these senior posts is essential, there is little published research on the recruitment and selection of EMT members with the exception of Vice Chancellors (Goodall 2009, Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008). There is a need to extend this empirical work to PVC level and to examine the strengths and weaknesses of current recruitment approaches, including the utilisation of executive search agencies (ESAs).

The appointment of PVCs is an important policy issue given that successive governments have remained ambivalent at best about the quality of university leadership (Smith & Adams 2008). Although universities have performed extraordinarily well in a number of areas including research quality, student satisfaction and contribution to economic growth (Watson 2002), their management and governance has been an enduring government concern and a perception of "leadership deficit" remains (Watson 2008).

HE Management

The UK higher education sector has been transformed over the last thirty years with significant consequences for the management of universities. Under the pressure of the government's drive for a more business-like approach, the "consensual" model of governance in higher education has begun to give way to a more "corporate" one, focusing on the governing body and its relationship to the executive (Shattock 2002). Though not all universities have reacted in the same way, the general trend towards a more managerial approach has typically taken the form of the consolidation of departments into schools and faculties, the devolution of budgets, the streamlining of committees and the emergence of a stronger executive (Middlehurst 2004).

The role of the Vice Chancellor as Chief Executive and Accounting Officer has been more clearly defined, and the present incumbents perform a function not unlike that of their counterparts in the private sector (Bargh et al. 2000). The Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) is increasingly a full-time, sometimes permanent, post with line management responsibility for Heads of School or Deans of Faculty (Middlehurst 2004). The number of both DVCs and PVCs has been increasing and there is evidence that they are taking on more wide-ranging portfolios and line management responsibilities (Shepherd 2011 unpublished, Smith & Adams 2008).

The literature on academic identity suggests that EMT members are now regarded as a distinct interest group - "management" - and that many academics consolidate their own sense of professional identity through differentiation from this group (Henkel 2002). The prominence of academics in management roles has been found to have strengthened the divide between academic managers and other academics (Deem & Brehony 2005). For their part, academic managers have

been reluctant to identify wholeheartedly with “management” or the label “manager” (Johnson 2002), preferring to see themselves as providing intellectual leadership. Nevertheless, academic managers do draw on a managerial ideology to assist them “in maintaining relations of power and dominance” whatever their underpinning values (Deem & Brehony 2005, p. 231). It is this that permits them to assert their right to manage.

PVC Appointment Models

Whilst the ‘new’ universities externally recruit full-time and permanent career PVCs, pre-1992 institutions have traditionally utilised an internal secondment appointment model whereby PVC appointments are made on a fixed-term, part-time basis from amongst the professoriate. However, the binary divide appears to be weakening as an increasing number of pre-1992 institutions eschew internal secondment in favour of the post-1992 open competition model, whereby posts are externally advertised and the services of an ESA may be utilised (Shepherd 2011 unpublished).

Notwithstanding these recent changes to recruitment practice, it appears that the demographic and professional profile of PVCs has not changed significantly over the years (Shepherd 2011 unpublished, Smith, Adams & Mount 2007). This is despite the increased complexity of the management task, the evolution of the role (Smith, Adams & Mount 2007) and the perceived emergence of a more managerial culture (Deem 2000). Unlike in the NHS, where professional managers have been brought in at the most senior levels, in higher education it would appear that academics continue to fill the top management positions.

Research Aims

This study investigates the drivers of recent change to PVC appointment models in pre-1992 English universities and the consequences of that change – both intended and otherwise. In addressing this issue it has two overarching aims. The first is to ascertain whether this has been change for the better in terms of improving management capacity within the sector. That is, whether it has increased the likelihood that the ‘best’ candidates will be attracted and appointed from the widest possible talent pool.

The second is to explore the theoretical significance of the findings for the notion of managerialism, as a “set of beliefs” as well as management practices (Pollitt 1990, p. 4), in a university context. This will involve consideration of the extent to which change to PVC appointment models is symptomatic of a managerial ideology by reference to specific indicators derived from an ‘ideal’ model. It will also subject to critical examination the prevailing academic narrative - that managerialism has pervaded universities and that managerial authority is increasing in inverse proportion to the decline in academic authority – and what this implies for academic-manager power relations.

It will do this by means of a qualitative, mixed methods research design comprising a census, online survey and semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including Vice Chancellors, ESAs, PVCs and ‘next tier’ managers. Early findings will be presented and participant feedback invited.

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