

The Guardian Online: Higher Education Network
22 June 2015

Four myths about why women aren't getting the top jobs in universities

Don't blame lack of ambition, or malign the headhunters. Universities themselves are keeping a lid on female promotion



Janet Beer is one of only three women leading a Russell Group university. Photograph: Anna Gordon

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Despite the welcome news that [Oxford University has appointed its first ever female vice-chancellor](#), women remain in very short supply at the top of higher education.

Only 11% of English pre-1992 universities are led by a female vice-chancellor and just under one in four deputy and pro vice-chancellors (PVCs) are women.

Remarkably, in eight universities, including some of the country's most prestigious, the vice-chancellor and all the PVCs are male.

So what could explain this dearth of women in executive-level positions? Findings from my doctoral research into the appointment of PVCs have thrown up a few surprises that challenge some oft-cited ideas and explanations.

Myth 1: women are opting out of the top jobs

[Women](#), it is often said, lack the ambition to apply for the most senior roles. But I found no lack of ambition among female deans and heads of department. They are just as likely as their male counterparts to express the intention of applying for a PVC role in future and, indeed, to have put in an application for a PVC job in their own institution.

However, when it comes to PVC posts in another university, far fewer women than men have applied (9% compared to 22%), which may suggest geographical mobility is an issue.

At PVC level too, though women are fewer in number, they appear no less likely to aspire to the top job.

Myth 2: the pipeline of female talent is too small

Well, yes and no. According to the latest data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, women comprise 44% of academics and 38% of academic managers, directors and senior officers – so the potential talent pool is large.

In practice, however, 90% of PVCs are drawn from the professoriate, and leaks in the academic promotions pipeline mean that only 21% of professors are female. It follows that women are seriously under-represented in the candidate field.

Even so, the restricted pipeline argument alone fails to explain why a mere 15% of PVCs appointed to pre-1992 universities by means of external open competition are women – a worrying figure given the trend towards this recruitment method.

Myth 3: external open competition for posts enhances diversity

Actually maybe it's only me who thought this, but I was wrong. In reality I found that an internal-only PVC recruitment process is almost twice as likely to result in a woman being appointed (27% versus 15%).

My research suggests that a desire to find the best candidates – which vice-chancellors tell me is the key driver for moving to external recruitment – appears to be resulting in “safer” appointments, which means choosing the most experienced candidates. A talented, but less experienced, female candidate may thus appear too high risk.

Myth 4: the use of executive search agencies works against women

Executive search agencies have been accused of perpetuating narrow stereotypes of what a vice-chancellor, or PVC, should look like. They are thought to have a negative impact on the diversity of appointees – a view held by senior university figures I interviewed and commonly expressed in the sector.

In fact, the proportion of women appointed to PVC roles is slightly higher when an agency is used than when a university relies on external advertisement alone. My evidence suggests that search consultants are putting female candidates forward (as many universities are requesting), but they are often not viewed as sufficiently credible to make the shortlist.

Whatever the concerns regarding the use of executive search, there is no escaping the fact that the university is responsible for framing the posts, developing the person specification and making the appointment decisions. However tempting it may be to blame executive search agencies for the paucity of female senior appointments, to do so would be simplistic and misguided.

For too long, higher education has clung on to the reassuring belief that it is a meritocratic environment, in which the “best” person always gets the job. But, the perpetuation of a male-dominated executive management cadre in the face of the rising number of female academics – many of them in management roles – makes this claim untenable.

Surely, the skills and qualities required to be a PVC cannot be so disproportionately distributed in favour of male candidates (even though prior experience in the role undoubtedly still is)? University governing bodies urgently need to re-examine their appointment practices - and the attitudes and assumptions that underpin them.