

The Efficiency Exchange

Appointing PVCs: are universities getting maximum bang for their buck?

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A desire to bring in fresh blood is encouraging universities to turn to executive search agencies for Pro Vice Chancellors. But Sue Shepherd argues that this is neither a good use of resources, nor effective in achieving the ambition of reaching the widest possible pool of candidates.

The amount of management time and money invested in the appointment of deputy and pro vice chancellors (PVCs) has risen significantly over the past few years.

Gone are the days of the tap on the shoulder from the vice chancellor or the gentle arm twisting of a reluctant professor. Instead, open competition has become the norm. Even in the so-called old or pre-1992 universities, where PVCs have traditionally been internal candidates on fixed-term secondment, more and more posts are being opened up to external candidates.



This change to appointment practice is being driven by what one vice chancellor describes as a “quest for the best”. In order to secure the best, the argument goes, universities must cast the net widely to enable them to select from the broadest possible pool of candidates. This means looking beyond the limitations of their own institution to attract “fresh blood” in the form of external candidates who can bring new ideas and perspectives and drive forward a change agenda to combat underperformance or inertia.

Logical solution

From this perspective, the adoption of external open competition is an entirely logical solution to a perceived need for better managers with increased external capital, i.e. knowledge and experience gained from working elsewhere. But how efficient and effective is this new approach to recruitment? My research in pre-1992 universities would suggest, not very.

Let’s consider efficiency first. Executive search agencies are now used for 61% of external PVC appointments in an attempt to bring increased rigour to the recruitment process and ensure a comprehensive breadth of search. However, despite vice chancellors’ stated desire to reach the widest possible pool of candidates, in reality a conservative and risk-averse recruitment approach means that appointees are drawn from a narrow field of experienced academic managers. Since many are PVCs or deans in peer group institutions, it is hard to imagine that it would take a team of researchers in an executive search agency to identify them. Indeed, given the continued predictability of appointment outcomes, it is debateable whether universities are either maximising the services of executive search agencies and/or obtaining value for money.

‘Career PVCs’

In fact, the capacity to reach a wide pool of potential candidates is not the main benefit universities derive from search agents; it is rather their ability to approach senior figures already in post elsewhere and persuade them to apply. Accordingly, there has been a recirculation of an existing hierarchy of senior academic managers and the emergence of ‘career PVCs’ moving from institution to institution. As some vice chancellors acknowledge, the adoption of external open competition has resulted in the appointment of safer and more experienced, rather than necessarily better, candidates.

Moreover, despite concerns about the lack of diversity at the top of universities, external recruitment is not leading to the creation of more inclusive executive management teams. There are very few PVCs from ethnic minorities and a significantly smaller proportion of women are being appointed through external competition than via an internal-only selection process: 15% compared to 27%. This is a concern both from a social justice and an organisational performance perspective.

Given these appointment outcomes, I would argue that current external recruitment practice for PVCs in pre-1992 universities is no more effective than it is efficient in terms of enhancing future leadership capacity. On the contrary, the creation of a competitive PVC recruitment market combined with the “tapping up” of existing post holders has contributed to the recent much-criticised salary escalation of top team members. For what better way is there to attract your preferred candidate than to offer them an improved remuneration package?

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