

HEPI Policy Note 63

Gatenby Sanderson

Who leads our universities? Rethinking the recruitment of vice-chancellors

Tessa Harrison and Josh Freeman

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Foreword

Professor Sir Chris Husbands, former Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University

When I got my first job in higher education, I had no idea what a vice-chancellor did. The important person in my daily life was my head of department, who allocated my work, sorted out budgets, was the person I went to with problems and who, of course, told me off when I got things wrong. Even when I became a vice-chancellor, I routinely met people who had no idea what my job involved; some assumed (not unreasonably) that I was the deputy to the chancellor, whatever it was they did.

In one sense, that ambiguity is helpful: the job has changed out of all recognition in the last generation, and probably within the last decade, as UK higher education has completed a transition from a centrally-planned, number-controlled environment to one of intense market competition, and as budgets have tightened.

In this HEPI Policy Note, Tessa Harrison from GatenbySanderson and Josh Freeman at HEPI unpack the implications of the transformation of higher education for the recruitment and support of vice-chancellors. They show that the job has become more definitively the job of a chief executive, less overtly or obviously academic, but with some of the overtones of being a football manager – leading in the shadow of league-table performance. They show some important sector features: how the sector has remained resolutely conservative (and may have become more conservative) about the preferred background of successful candidates; and how it appears to be sorting itself by the previous mission group experience of candidates.

These features come at a price. While the evidence is, inevitably, not especially extensive, they highlight some indications that conservatism in hiring vice-chancellors has a negative impact on institutional performance. The strongest performance improvements were associated with those recruited from outside the sector, while those recruited from the Russell Group appeared to be associated with declines in performance – though overseas-recruited vice-chancellors seemed to struggle more.

Being a vice-chancellor is tough: I have led two very different institutions, and the distinctive combination of generic leadership challenges and the requirements for clear academic leadership was something I thought about a lot. It is not simply the long hours and multi-dimensional nature of the role, the need to balance the shortand the long-term, though they are a reality. There is also the intensity and often complexity of higher education decisions, very few of which are genuinely clear cut. There is the need to maintain and build relationships with a lengthening list of people, which includes students and staff inside the institution, policymakers and regulators, journalists, community leaders, donors, industry and sector and overseas partners. The vice-chancellor leads strategy but, perhaps as importantly, sets the tone for the university, leading it culturally as well as academically and strategically.

The appointment of a vice-chancellor is always a hinge-point in the development of any institution. It is costly and time-consuming, which means the stakes are high for both the university and the successful candidate. Chairs and boards are right to consult widely on what the institution wants and needs (though these are rarely the same thing). Tessa and Josh are right to conclude that too little is done to set new vice-chancellors up for success. However experienced newly appointed leaders may be, they are new leaders, with as much to learn as they bring. As a result, Tessa and Josh have deeply thoughtful things to say about how universities can recruit their leaders more successfully, securing the right appointment, and – easily overlooked – thinking about the experience of unsuccessful candidates. We expect a lot of our universities, and therefore of their leaders – which means we have to get the appointment and development of the sector's leadership right.

Executive Summary

This Policy Note sets out the state of higher education leadership today. We review the backgrounds, careers and performance of university vice-chancellors. Drawing on a new dataset of 153 vice-chancellors from across the UK and at different types of institutions, we explore their tenure, their previous roles and institutions, as well as considering trends in gender balance and performance in the role.¹ We also make recommendations for those involved in the recruitment of vice-chancellors.

We find that there has been significant turnover in leadership roles, with nearly half of current vice-chancellors having been appointed since 2022 and vice-chancellors changing jobs more quickly than FTSE100 CEOs. The vast majority – 115 of 153 – were already in a senior leadership position at a higher education institution before their current role, most commonly deputy vice-chancellor. A third of Russell Group vice-chancellors held a vice-chancellor job elsewhere first, the highest of any mission group.

Looking at vice-chancellors' previous institutions, around one-quarter of vice-chancellors, 38 of 153, were recruited internally. More vice-chancellors come from the University of Birmingham (5) than any other institution. There is very little movement of vice-chancellors between mission groups.

Across the whole sector, around one-third of vice-chancellors are women. Almost all current female vice-chancellors were recruited in the last five years.

In terms of performance, those from outside the sector and who have previously held the vice-chancellor role see the biggest improvement in rankings, whereas those who were previously a deputy vice-chancellor see a negligible or even negative change. Those from the Russell Group and from institutions based overseas perform the poorest in league tables compared with those from outside the sector and those in representative groups like MillionPlus and University Alliance. But we emphasise that this initial analysis is exploratory and further, in-depth research on vice-chancellor performance is needed.

Based on these results, we recommend that those involved in recruiting vice-chancellors should:

- 1. be clear about the role and requirements of the vice-chancellor;
- 2. appoint a balanced and skilled Selection Committee;
- 3. provide extensive training for the Selection Committee in conducting interviews and interpreting answers;
- 4. set clear decision criteria in advance to avoid deadlock; and
- 5. prioritise the candidate experience.

We encourage institutions to respond to the difficult times for the higher education sector with bravery, considering a more diverse range of candidates they might not otherwise have considered.

Introduction

As the UK higher education sector faces severe financial challenges, it has rarely been tougher to be a university vice-chancellor. Around three-quarters (72%) of English higher education providers are projected to be in deficit by 2025/26.² Dozens of universities, including several large Scottish and Welsh institutions, have announced rounds of redundancies which could easily surpass 10,000 job losses by the end of 2025. The UK Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, has called for 'wide scale reform' in the sector, including of governance arrangements.³

HEPI has written previously about the careers of senior leaders, including on vice-chancellor pay and their tenure in the top role.⁴ This work has never been more urgent. In this Policy Note, HEPI and GatenbySanderson (GS) return to the topic to consider the career trajectories of vice-chancellors:

- What kind of institutions and what roles have they come from?
- Do institutions recruit vice-chancellors from other institutions similar to them, from different institutions or from outside the sector entirely?
- What proportion of newly recruited vice-chancellors are women?
- Does where a vice-chancellor was recruited from affect their performance in the role, and if so, how?

In answering these questions, we hope to give constructive advice for those engaged in the process of recruiting a vice-chancellor.

This Policy Note is based on data on vice-chancellor appointments originally collated by GS Education Practice. It considers the careers of 153 vice-chancellors from institutions across the UK, including most members of Universities UK (UUK) and supplemented by many members of the mission group GuildHE and the larger private providers (see Table 1). The data is a snapshot of the situation in February 2025 and may no longer be accurate at the time of publication: for example, 13 institutions we considered were in the process of appointing a new vice-chancellor, though any new appointees will not normally begin until the start of a new academic year.

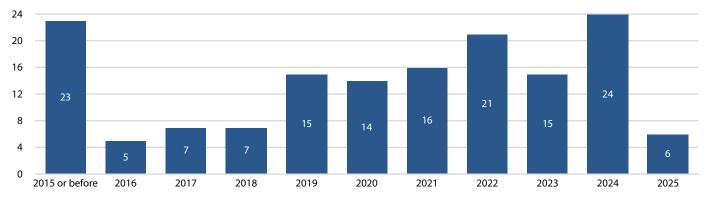
Table 1 Sample, by affiliation to mission groups*

Representative group	
GuildHE	21
MillionPlus	21
Russell Group	24
University Alliance	16
No affiliation	71
Total	153

When were today's vice-chancellors recruited?

There has been significant turnover of vice-chancellors in recent years. Nearly half of today's vice-chancellors (66, or 47%) were recruited in or since 2022. Twenty-three of vice-chancellors have been in post for a decade or more.

Figure 1 Year that current vice-chancellors were recruited



University Alliance vice-chancellors have been in their role for the longest, for just under seven years on average. By contrast, Russell Group vice-chancellors were typically recruited the most recently, having been in post for, on average, around four and a half years. The sector average of 5.3 years, or around 64 months, is just under the average Chief Executive Officer of a FTSE100 company, where the average tenure is 65 months, but much higher than the average tenure of a football club manager of just 18.6 months.⁵

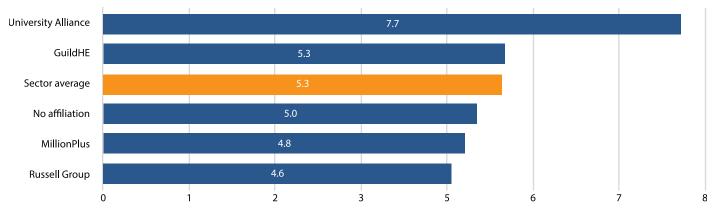


Figure 2 Average years in post

* The Russell Group describes itself as a group of 'research-intensive' universities; University Alliance as 'the voice of professional and technical universities'; MillionPlus as the 'Association for Modern Universities'; and GuildHE as an advocate for 'smaller-scale, specialist and non-traditional institutions'.

Previous role

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of pro-vice-chancellor roles and the emergence of the now-ubiquitous deputy vice-chancellor role.⁶ This section looks at the role held by current vice-chancellors immediately before they were recruited.

A significant majority of leaders, 115 out of 153, were already in a senior leadership position (vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor or pro-vice-chancellor) before they were recruited into their current role. Almost all the rest were in other leadership roles in higher education institutions, such as Dean, Provost and senior operations roles. Six were principals of other educational institutions and just eight were in roles outside of the higher education sector.

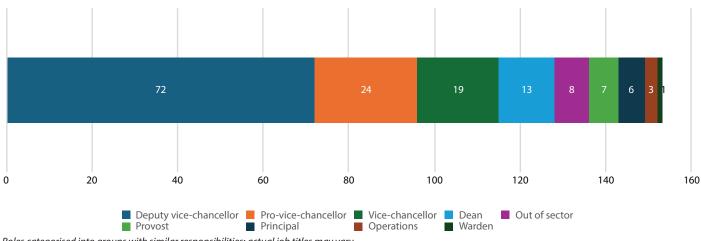


Figure 3 Role immediately before becoming vice-chancellor

Roles categorised into groups with similar responsibilities: actual job titles may vary

When broken down by sector representative group, the data reveal several key trends. Former vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors make up the majority of vice-chancellors in every mission group.

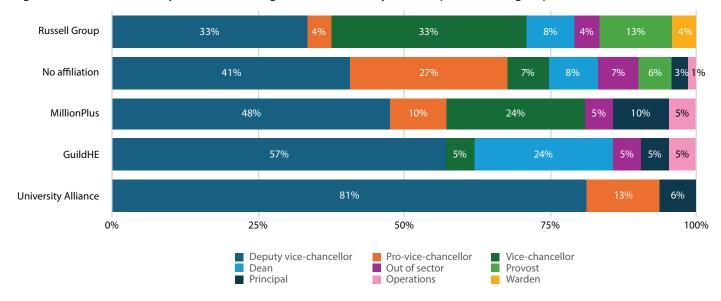


Figure 4 Role immmediately before becoming vice-chancellor, by sector representative group

The 24 Russell Group vice-chancellors arrived with the most experience, with eight having previously been vice-chancellors at different institutions. The 21 MillionPlus vice-chancellors and the 16 University Alliance vice-chancellors came almost entirely from senior leadership positions in the higher education sector. Of the 21 GuildHE institutions we looked at – only a minority of all the members of GuildHE – we saw a number of Deans, heads of school, alongside high numbers of deputy vice-chancellors.

A sizeable minority of GuildHE and MillionPlus institutions also recruited from less typical backgrounds, including candidates from further education, operations roles and roles outside of the higher education sector. Almost all the University Alliance vice-chancellors were recruited from deputy vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor roles in UK institutions.

The 71 non-affiliated institutions show the widest variety of recruitment patterns, attributable to the higher number and variety of institutions in this category. There is a fair representation of candidates from deputy vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor roles, but non-affiliated institutions also host many of the vice-chancellors who previously held a role outside of the higher education sector. Others were deans, provosts and people involved in university operations at a senior level.

Where vice-chancellors come from

Across the sector, around one-quarter of current vice-chancellors – 38 of 153 – were recruited internally, that is, from within the institution. Figure 5 shows this breakdown by mission group. It shows that GuildHE and University Alliance institutions are most predisposed to internal appointments, with more than a third of vice-chancellors at these institutions having been recruited internally. By contrast, the vast majority of Russell Group vice-chancellors (20 of 24) were recruited externally, from other institutions.

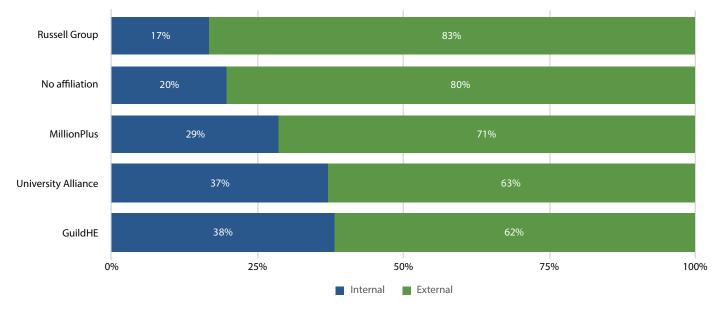


Figure 5 Proportion of internal and external appointments

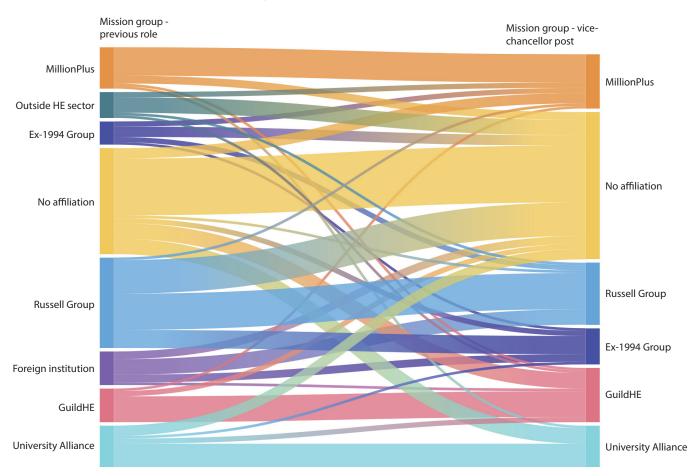
The 92 vice-chancellors recruited externally came from 66 different UK-based institutions, refuting the idea that vice-chancellors all come from a small number of institutions. Of these 66, 20 institutions were previously home to two or more current vice-chancellors and a small number were home to more than two (see Table 2). More current vice-chancellors came from the University of Birmingham (5) than any other institution.

Table 2 Where externally recruited vice-chancellors were in post before their current role

Previous institution	Number of vice-chancellors
University of Birmingham	5
University of Bristol	3
University of Greenwich	3
University of Nottingham	3
University of the Arts London (UAL)	3

Figure 6 shows vice-chancellors' origins by Mission Group. The left-hand side shows the mission group vicechancellors worked in the role immediately before their current vice-chancellor position; the right-hand side shows the mission group they now work in. Here, we included those institutions which were formerly members of the 1994 Group of research-intensive universities but which are now unaffiliated to any Mission Group (the 1994 Group disbanded in 2013).⁷

Figure 6 Where vice-chancellors came from, by Mission Group



Mission groups tend to recruit from other institutions in the same mission group. In every current mission group, at least half of the vice-chancellors were working at the same institution or a different institution in the same mission group. This does not apply to those institutions which were formerly part of the 1994 Group: these institutions recruit primarily from the Russell Group.

Russell Group universities strongly favour leaders with significant experience in high-ranking research-intensive environments. All but one of the Russell Group vice-chancellors (Larry Kramer from the London School of Economics, who was President of the Hewlett Foundation) recruited from other Russell Group or high-ranked research-intensive institutions within the UK, the US, Hong Kong and Australia.

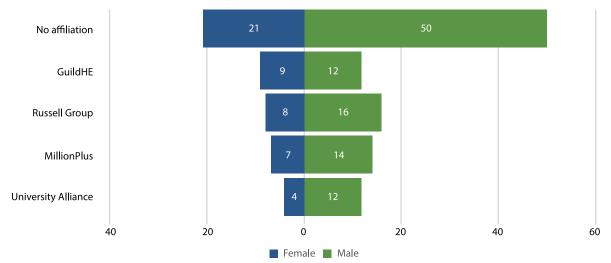
Appointments to MillionPlus and GuildHE include more movement from other mission groups, including deputy vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor roles at non-affiliated, University Alliance or ex-1994 Group institutions.

There is limited movement into or out of University Alliance to the Russell Group. Movement from the Russell Group to teaching-focused groups (MillionPlus, GuildHE) almost never occurs. Likewise, there is very limited movement into University Alliance and Russell Group institutions from MillionPlus and GuildHE members.

Gender

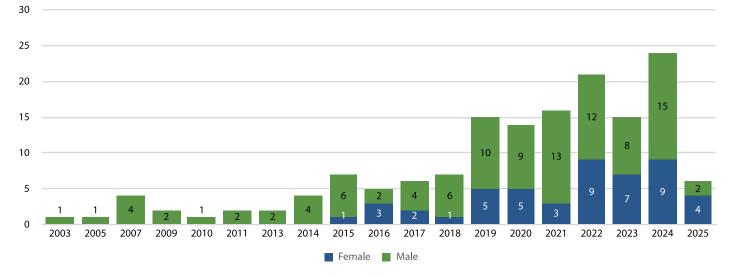
Across the whole sector, one-third (49, or 33%) of vice-chancellors are women. At the GuildHE institutions we looked at, around two-fifths are women, the same proportion as across the whole of GuildHE. A third of Russell Group and MillionPlus vice-chancellors and a quarter of University Alliance vice-chancellors are women.

Figure 7 Gender of vice-chancellors, by mission group



But this trend is shifting. Of those vice-chancellors who have been in post since 2015 or earlier, only one is female. But since 2022, closer to half of newly recruited vice-chancellors each year have been women. Overall, of the 66 vice-chancellors recruited since 2022, 29 (44%) are women. (However, vice-chancellors appointed after the February 2025 cut-off have been overwhelmingly male, defying this trend.)

Figure 8 When current vice-chancellors were recruited, by gender



As most female vice-chancellors have been recruited recently, they have been in post for an average of 43 months or three and a half years, compared to around 72 months, or six years, for the average male vice-chancellor.

Performance

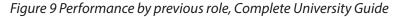
Finally, we look at the average performance of current vice-chancellors, by comparing the ranking of their institution published the year they took over with the most recent ranking. Rankings are only one basic measure of institutional performance; nonetheless, they can provide a useful indication of the general direction of an institution.

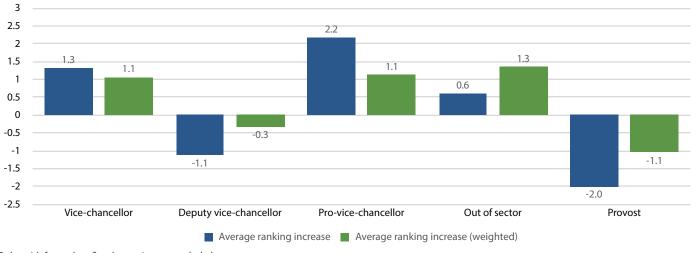
We emphasise that this analysis is exploratory: further, in-depth research on vice-chancellor performance is required to be confident in our findings.

In addition to the average improvement, we also weight the difference by the institution's position in the rankings: an increase from 4th to 2nd is more impressive than from 74th to 72nd, so we put greater weight on rises and falls near the top of the rankings. The exercise was conducted with the Complete University Guide rankings, which record a balanced range of characteristics including research, and also *Guardian* rankings, which focus more on teaching than other rankings do.⁸ Both include only UK-based universities. We also exclude vice-chancellors who have only been in post since 2024, as there has only been one published set of rankings since then.

In Complete University Guide rankings, those who were previously a pro-vice-chancellor perform best and those who were a vice-chancellor elsewhere perform well. After weighting, however, those from outside the sector

perform best, suggesting that they are better at achieving improvements higher up the rankings. Those who were previously deputy vice-chancellors or provosts, by contrast, see decreases in ranking places on average.





Roles with fewer than five data points are excluded

When looking by previous sector representative group, vice-chancellors from most groups average a small fall in the rankings (partly because the number of institutions in the ranking increased over time). The exception is those from outside the sector, who lead their institutions to an increase on average, which increases after weighting.

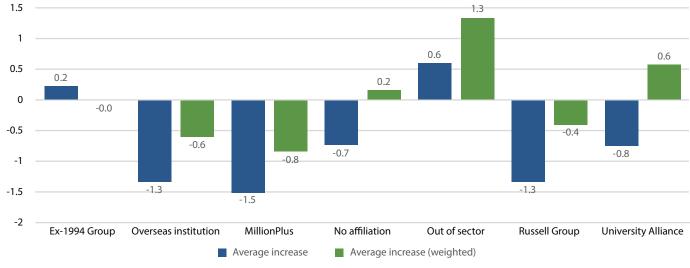
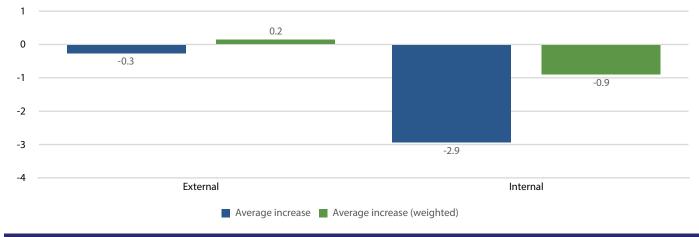


Figure 10 Performance by previous sector representative group, Complete University Guide

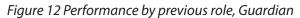
Groups with fewer than five data points are excluded

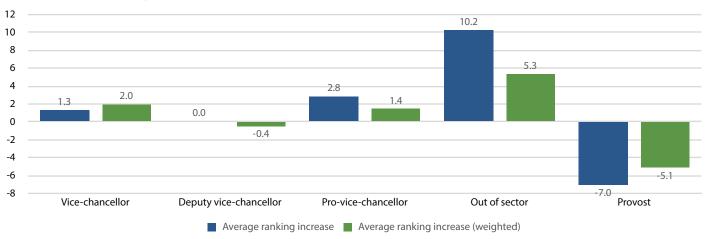
When analysed by whether they are an internal candidate (from within the institution) or external (from a different institution), external candidates perform significantly better before and after weighting.

Figure 11 Performance, internal or external candidate, Complete University Guide



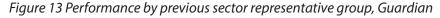
In *Guardian* rankings, which see larger year-on-year changes in institutional positions, those from outside the sector perform even better comparatively. As with the Complete University Guide, those who were previously vice-chancellors and pro-vice chancellors perform quite well and previous deputy vice-chancellors and provosts perform less well.

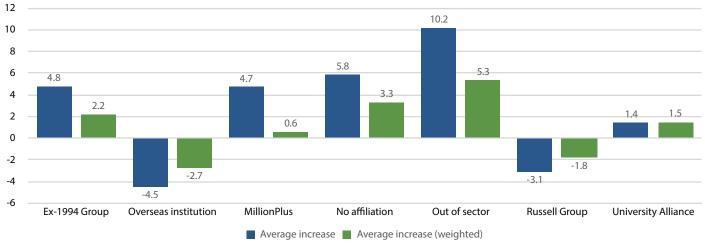




Roles with fewer than five data points are excluded

When looking at the institution they came from, those from outside the sector continue to have the highest performance which persists after weighting. By contrast, those from the Russell Group and from institutions based overseas see the poorest performance in ranking terms.

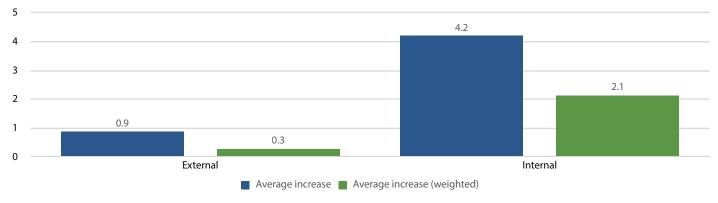




Groups with fewer than five data points are excluded

Unlike in the Complete University Guide rankings, internal candidates do much better than external candidates in *Guardian* rankings, even after weighting.

Figure 14 Performance, internal or external candidate, Guardian



The key finding that holds across both rankings is that vice-chancellors recruited from outside the sector perform very well compared with previous vice-chancellors and those from the Russell Group and elite overseas institutions. This striking result should be treated with caution for the reasons discussed above. But it lends tentative support to the conclusion that those recruited from outside the higher education sector can be at least as effective, if not more so, than those recruited from within it.

What explains this finding? It could be that those from outside the sector tend to have a particular set of skills that are useful for running a large organisation, but which may be harder to acquire in academia. It could be that institutions that are struggling are more likely to take a risk on a different kind of leader, and these institutions have more room to rise up in rankings – though the weighting should account for some of this. Or it could be that lacking a vested interest in the processes and procedures of institutions, those from outside the sector feel more able to make more significant changes that tend to pay off.

The other significant finding, common to both rankings, is that those who were previously deputy vice-chancellors – by far the most common role for those who go on to be vice-chancellors – do not reliably secure increases in rankings for their institutions. In fact, their institutions tend to decrease slightly in rankings. Unsurprisingly, those who were previously a vice-chancellor elsewhere do quite well.

While the two rankings generally paint a consistent picture, occasionally they show contradictory results. The Complete University Guide rankings suggest that candidates recruited externally do better, while the teaching-focused *Guardian* rankings find that internally-recruited candidates perform best. One possibility is that internal candidates are more effective in improving teaching but less effective in other areas, such as research.

Conclusion

This Policy Note serves as a starting point in considering who is appointed to vice-chancellor roles and their performance there. It shows that the guiding principle when appointing vice-chancellors appears to be 'safety first'. Boards like appointing senior higher education leaders from institutions which look very much like their own, invariably from a small set of roles. Perhaps the largest shift in recent years has been in the growing recruitment of women vice-chancellors, but while this is welcome, they have very similar professional backgrounds to the men recruited to the top jobs.

But for the small number of institutions that employ a different kind of person, the results are different. The initial evidence presented above suggests those who recruit from outside the sector get more positive results. Of course, there is a lot more to running an institution well than moving up university rankings, and there may be other factors at play. But this suggests there are reasons to consider recruiting from outside the sector.

Seen in the context of the great challenges faced by the sector, this evidence is a clear argument for greater diversity in sector leadership – both in terms of protected characteristics (gender, ethnicity and so on) and experience gained from different sectors. Despite these challenges, there continues to be a reluctance to consider those without an academic background. For institutions facing severe financial challenges, it may be riskier not to try a new approach. The longstanding assumption in the sector that academic credibility is the most important qualification for leadership undervalues the diverse experiences and skills that leaders from other sectors might bring and limits the sector's ability to find new solutions to its challenges.

Recommendations

We recommend that those involved in the recruitment of vice-chancellors should:

1. Be very clear about the role and requirements of today's vice-chancellors to widen the pool of potential candidates

- Define the Vice-Chancellor as the chief executive responsible for institutional strategy, financial sustainability, institutional performance and reputation.
- Define the evidence needed to make decisions at every step of the process. Be clear about this from the outset.
- Challenge assumptions about who can lead institutions do not confuse academic credibility with being credible with academics.
- Take the time to clearly define what the role is meant to achieve and what kind of person is best suited for it. Focus on the real results the role should deliver, especially in terms of the institution's goals, finances and culture. Make sure the required skills and experience directly support those outcomes. Be open to challenge and different perspectives.

2. Consider membership of the Selection Committee very carefully

- Balance the need for a collegiate, consensus-driven approach with appointing members who have the skills
 to select a vice-chancellor. Collegiate processes prioritise consensus and continuity, but fundamental change
 more often requires bold, sometimes unpopular decisions. A selection committee focused on preserving shared
 values may, for example, resist 'outsider' candidates with the vision and authority to challenge entrenched norms
 at a time of crisis.
- Be clear with the wider community as to the role of the Selection Committee and how and when decisions will be made.
- Balance institutional knowledge with fresh perspectives, not just from Council, Senate and the students' union, but more broadly from other sectors and stakeholders, such as leaders from industry, the wider public sector or government bodies, community organisations and alumni with leadership experience or expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

3. Train the Selection Committee

- Provide a comprehensive briefing on the changing higher education landscape.
- Examine case studies of successful and unsuccessful vice-chancellors at comparable institutions.
- Develop skills in identifying evidence of systemic thinking versus tactical responses by providing examples of high-quality versus superficial answers to key questions about:
 - strategic positioning, mission and impact;
 - delivering financial sustainability;
 - driving institutional performance;
 - sustained culture change;
 - sector leadership; and
 - working effectively with a governing body.
- Provide training in inclusive interviewing techniques specific to the context of leading in higher education and aligned to the values of the institution.
- Develop techniques for probing beneath polished interview performances to evaluate authentic leadership styles versus rehearsed responses and distinguish between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation experience.

4. Avoid deadlock

Establish clear decision criteria and weighting with a transparent and structured scoring system. Agree on a contingency plan for split decisions before the final selection stage interviews begin.

Designate a neutral facilitator for selection discussions to free the Chair to participate in the discussion. Ensure the Chair has a casting vote mechanism in the case of a tie-break.

5. Put the candidate experience front and centre

Always remember that this is a two-way process and the best candidates have choices. They are assessing institutions as much as institutions are assessing candidates.

Finally, be brave. The higher education sector is facing an unprecedented challenge or, as the *Financial Times* put it recently, 'the UK's academic recession is in full swing'.⁹ Now is the time for identifying a broader field of candidates, bringing in greater diversity and thinking laterally, even when a simpler or 'safer' option may seem the more obvious strategy.

6. Support the successful candidate

When recruiting a step-up candidate, put appropriate support, coaching and mentoring in place to enable the appointed candidate to be successful.

Endnotes

1 We also recognise the importance of analysing ethnicity, but this was not possible as this report was based on desk research and the ethnicity of vice-chancellors is not always publicly available.

2 Office for Students, 'Bold and transformative action' needed to address financial sustainability – OfS, 15 November 2024 <u>https://www.officeforstu-dents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/bold-and-transformative-action-needed-to-address-financial-sustainability-ofs/</u>

3 Debbie McVitty, 'Bridget Phillipson has set out the government's priorities for HE reform', *Wonkhe*, 7 November 2024 <u>https://wonkhe.com/blogs/</u> <u>bridget-phillipson-has-set-out-the-governments-priorities-for-he-reform/</u>

4 Lucy Haire, Because you're worth it: Are vice-chancellors worth the pay they get?, HEPI Debate Paper 33, August 2023 <u>https://www.hepi.ac.uk/</u> wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Because-Youre-Worth-It-Are-Vice-Chancellors-Worth-the-Pay-They-Get.pdf;

Nick Hillman, Vice-chancellors are sticking around for longer – and, on average, they stay put for more years than any Secretary of State for Education ever, HEPI Blog, 25 May 2022 <u>https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/05/26/vice-chancellors-aresticking-around-for-longer-and-on-average-they-stay-put-for-more-years-than-any-secretary-of-state-for-education-ever/</u>

5 Russ Mould, FTSE 100 boardrooms show more stability than football club dressing rooms in 2023, AJ Bell, 4 January 2024 <u>https://www.ajbell.co.uk/articcles/investmentarticles/270376/ftse-100-boardrooms-show-more-stability-football-club-dressing</u>

6 Sue Shepherd, 'The changing role of PVC', *Wonkhe*, 18 March 2014 https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-changing-role-of-pvc/

7 Simon Baker, '1994 Group disbands', *Times Higher Education*, 8 November 2013 <u>https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/1994-group-disbands/2008862.article</u>

8 Complete University Guide, *University League Tables 2025* <u>https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings</u>

Guardian, 'The best UK universities 2025 – rankings' <u>https://www.theguard-ian.com/education/ng-interactive/2024/sep/07/the-guardian-universi-ty-guide-2025-the-rankings</u>

9 Glen O'Hara, 'The UK's academic recession is in full swing', *Financial Times*, 10 March 2025 <u>https://www.ft.com/content/0ec7120a-5b78-43da-8016-0415dca99073</u>

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