

## An education puzzle: Why are there so few educational researchers in PVC Education position in higher education institutions? (0289)

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### 1. Introduction

“People often think that if you’re Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, education is your specialty. In an academic sense, that’s not true for me.” It is with these words that Professor Sally Mapstone opens her introductory video on Oxford’s website. Professor Mapstone is not an exception in not having an educationalist background. In fact, as of July 2015, there was only one educationalist Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Education<sup>1</sup> among Russell Group universities. Why is that? Do managerial skills or academic pedigree take precedence over expertise over one’s PVC remit? Does a PVC Education’s background matter in developing the student experience and advancing teaching quality?

Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education form, with a number of other Pro-Vice-Chancellors, the second-tier of universities’ leadership and report directly to the Vice-Chancellor (Smith, Adams and Mount, 2007; Shepherd, 2011). Specifically, they are responsible for developing their institution’s learning and teaching strategy, overseeing the implementation of education policies, and supporting the Vice-Chancellor in providing institutional leadership (University of Cambridge, 2013). Although PVCs play an integral role in the leadership of UK universities, they remain under-theorised and under-researched (Smith and Adams, 2008; Shepherd, 2011).

Our research builds on two strands of research: on the one hand, the burgeoning literature on the management of higher education institutions’, and specifically its most senior ‘academic-managers’ to use the term coined by Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007), and, on the other hand, the substantial research on leadership characteristics and performance. Our research questions are threefold:

1. Who leads learning and teaching in UK higher education institutions?
2. What skills and/or backgrounds are needed to lead teaching and learning in UK higher education institutions?
3. Does the profile of PVCs Education matter in terms of various indicators of teaching and learning?

### 2. Literature Review

Since the publication of the Jarratt Report in 1985, the management of universities has taken an increasingly important role and arguably makes the quality of university management more vital than ever. Although at the time of

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education’ to denote the executive leader of a university’s subordinate in charge of learning, teaching and the student experience. Other terms may include Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching or Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience and Academic Standards.

the publication of the report very few universities had Pro-Vice-Chancellors, all currently have at least one if not more. In 1960, there were only 0.39 PVCs per higher education institution while 45 years later this number has jumped to 2.41 (Smith and Adams, 2008), although this change has been found to have little to do with the Jarratt Report and more with structural changes in higher education (Smith, Adams and Mount, 2007). Surprisingly, little research has specifically focused on Pro-Vice-Chancellors, let alone PVCs for Education, with the exception of a Leadership Foundation report on the “Changing Role of Pro-Vice-Chancellors” by Smith, Adams and Mount (2007) of which a shorter version was published in 2008 (Smith and Adams, 2008), Shepherd (2011, 2014, 2015) and Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007) who touch upon the role in the context of ‘New Managerialism’ in UK higher education. Interestingly, none of these studies differentiate between the various PVC roles that universities often present. Indeed, the majority of universities tend to have at least three PVC portfolios: one for research, one for teaching and learning, and one for business engagement and/or internationalisation. This suggests that although the roles involve different responsibilities the skills required to perform well are comparable and therefore there is no reason to believe that there are differences in profile between the different PVCs.

Most interesting to our research is which characteristics and skills PVCs see as most important. Smith, Adams and Mount (2007, p.3) find that there are essentially three characteristics seen by post-holders as needed to perform well: 1) Engagement with the academic life; 2) Imagination to extend boundaries, envisage changes; and 3) Alignment with the academic / institutional enterprise. When asked about how they might acquire these skills, they consistently highlighted prior experience of leadership (e.g. head of department or dean of faculty) and ‘learning-through-doing’ over any type of formal training. As one PVC at pre-1992 university noted

‘It would be ‘impossible’ to be a PVC without having been a Head of... [Department]. Because you need to have developed the right skills, in diplomacy and people management, and you need to understand how the institution functions or you won’t be able to achieve anything. It would be very difficult to come into leadership at...as an outsider because of this need to understand the system.’

(from Smith, Adams and Mount, 2007, p.31)

Preliminary findings from the available literature suggest foremost that one reason why so few educationalists are found in PVC Education positions is that the skills and attributes that seem to matter most in getting the position are academic credibility and some leadership experience rather than specific academic expertise for that portfolio. Another potential reason is that VCs are often chosen from the pool of current PVCs. Thus, in line with the first point, we would expect PVCs to exhibit academic credibility and generic leadership abilities, attributes that are also essential to become VC, rather any particular educational expertise.

However, several studies (Goodall 2006, 2009’ Goodall, McDowell and Singell 2014) have found that in knowledge-intensive industries, the leaders of institutions operating in such industries should be experts themselves. These

insights seem to suggest that having an education background might matter for the PVC for Education role. The empirical research to date appears to provide little answer to the normative question of whether an academic background in education is desirable in terms of performance outcomes, however measured (for example, teaching quality, student satisfaction, student-body diversity, enjoyable student experience).

### **3Methodology**

The first research question is answered by describing a database we compiled in the summer of 2015 on the background of PVCs for Education at Russell Group universities and post-1992 ex-polytechnics. For the Russell Group, only one VC has a background in education as a discipline and a first (incomplete) analysis of the post-1992 group shows a similar pattern. To explore the second question, we will interview six Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education in order to better understand which skills they believed were most important for their position. We will also interview six senior educational researchers (Heads of Education Departments) to comprehend the paucity of educational researchers leading higher education institutions.

### **4.Discussion.**

We expect our findings to contribute to wider debate about the importance of core technical and generic skills in leadership in higher education and general leadership.

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