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### **Introduction and Context**

The transformation of higher education over the last thirty years has had profound consequences for university management. As the scale and complexity of the management challenge grows, so does the need to appoint the best people to university executive teams. However, despite being identified as an important policy issue (Deem 2000), there is little documented research on the recruitment and selection of executive team members in the UK and it has been recognised that this is an area worthy of further investigation (Middlehurst 2004). The relatively little empirical work undertaken to date has focused on vice chancellors (for example, Bargh et al 2000) and, although PVCs fulfil a distinctive and vital management role – as well as forming the main recruitment pool from which future vice chancellors will be selected - they remain an under-researched and under-theorised group (Smith, Adams and Mount 2007).

My recent doctoral study into the appointment of PVCs addressed this research gap. It found that an increasing number of 'old' (i.e. pre-1992) universities are moving to appoint their PVCs by external open competition – an approach that has long been the norm in the 'new' (i.e. post-1992) universities. However, this opening up of posts to external candidates has, counter intuitively, led to a narrowing in the gender and professional profile of successful candidates who remain predominantly white, male professors (Shepherd 2013). These findings raise the important question of whether this same outcome is being mirrored in the 'new' universities and, if not, why not?

### **Research Aim and Objectives**

This study, funded by an SRHE Research Prize, provides an empirical evidence base to answer this question. Its specific objectives are:

- To map the socio-demographic and professional profile of the PVC population across both 'old' and 'new' UK universities and, in so doing, provide a baseline from which to measure change/progress
- To investigate current PVC appointment practice in a sample of 'new' universities and compare this with recent interview data from 'old' universities in order to ascertain any differences in approach
- To identify examples of good practice and any lessons that 'old' universities embarking upon an external open competition process for PVC posts can learn from the experience of 'new' universities (and *vice versa*)
- To make recommendations, with reference to this and other relevant recent research, about how appointment practice may be improved to help universities appoint the 'best' PVCs drawn from the widest possible talent pool.

Based on these findings an evaluation will be made as to whether the 'old' universities are moving in the right direction in adopting an external open competition PVC appointment model and whether there is anything they can learn from the experience of their 'new' university counterparts. Examples of good practice will be sought and a set of proposals drawn up to support higher education practitioners improve the quality and diversity of their

senior management appointments. This is vital if universities are not only to meet their obligation to funders – whether students or tax payers - to be effectively managed, but also to fulfil their equality and diversity responsibilities via the appointment of an executive management team that is representative of its stakeholders, in particular staff and student communities.

### **Methodology**

The research adopts a mixed methods approach with two distinct phases and data collection methods: a census and semi-structured interviews. In Phase One data is collected from the websites (including corporate pages, press releases and staff profiles) of Universities UK members on the demographic and professional profile of their PVCs. Non-university online sources, such as LinkedIn, are also utilised to fill any gaps in data. This type of census is an effective means of obtaining a macro-level view of the PVC population as it offers the required breadth of coverage (estimated at a minimum of 90% of the target population) and permits the collection of a structured and consistent data set.

Phase Two comprises ten semi-structured interviews with vice chancellors from post-1992 institutions identified from Phase One data as having a relatively diverse PVC team. Interviews will explore the institution's approach to PVC appointments, perceived pros and cons, issues arising and any lessons learned. The findings will be analysed in the light of recent interviews on PVC practice with vice chancellors from pre-1992 institutions. Interviews have been selected for the micro phase of the study as they provide arguably the best means to explore respondents' views on complex phenomena in accessible via other methods.

### **Findings and Analysis**

This presentation will report the empirical findings from the study together with an analysis of their implications for current and future higher education management capacity. Feedback will be invited from conference participants on these and the preliminary recommendations to improve PVC appointment practice.

### **References**

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