

Too few academics are putting themselves forward for the top jobs. **Amanda Goodall** argues that we must nurture talent, value achievement and pay more if we want to fill the empty chairs

Turning on the leading lights



Universities need leaders – and leaders who are good academics. Yet in the UK there is no long queue of potential applicants. The pipeline is thin. The sad truth is that we do not value our vice-chancellors and heads of departments enough. Aspiring heads need to be encouraged – and talented leaders paid more.

If you ask 99 per cent of faculty whether they want to be a university leader they reply: “Why would I? I’m an academic, not an administrator.” But if you informed the same folk that the government has decided to hire business people and professional managers to run our universities – because too few academics are throwing their hats in the ring – most of the 99 per cent would look on in horror.

Most faculty have an ambivalent attitude to leadership. If asked whether they believe that universities need to have vice-chancellors, rectors, pro vice-chancellors, provosts and deans, they might respond yes. If then we asked, “Do you think your department requires a head?” we would likely receive a vehement “Yes, of course”. Our proximity to things increases our understanding of them, including organisational matters. When Professor X can no longer escape the electrifying prospect of “the chair”, he or she really starts to think about leadership.

The core business of universities is research and teaching. My own research has found that scholar-leaders outperform heads who are non-academics or those who gave up research and teaching early in their careers. Leaders who are scholars have a deep understanding of the core business and, therefore, are more likely to create the right conditions under which other scholars and teachers will thrive. Similarly, professional managers will create the conditions for other managers. Importantly, humans tend to hire others who look like themselves.

Universities have become more managerialist. In UK universities between 2003-04 and 2008-09, the number of managers employed rose by 33 per cent. During the same period, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the number of academic staff increased by 10 per cent and student numbers by 9 per cent.

There is an oft-repeated claim that academics are incapable of managing and leading. I believe this is wrong. Imagine that 100 nurses and the same number of lawyers, chefs, advertising executives, engineers, journalists and academics are randomly selected. Will we find that one group or profession stands out as natural managers? Is it not more likely that management skills are learned through experience and training, and that the propensity to manage is approximately evenly distributed across all trades and professions? (Leadership may be somewhat different.) Those at the tail of the distribution may fare less well. But I find it hard to accept that academics are, by some natural force, less adept. After all, they have led some of the most famous and oldest institutions in the world.

So why don't more academics take up the leadership mantle? Let's consider pay. Vice-chancellors receive a lot of attention and

criticism because of their pay, not least in the stream of letters to *Times Higher Education* each year. Vocal complaints about salaries will inevitably put off would-be academic leaders. However, in all areas of life, chief executive salaries have risen. Some have arguably become obscene.

We are told that many vice-chancellors earn more than the prime minister. This is only shocking because of the low salary of the PM, a fact that might explain why we have the landed gentry once again running the country. In 2008-09, the average salary of a UK vice-chancellor was £208,000: 12 institutions spent more than £300,000 on their vice-chancellors' pay and benefits.

Based on my time working with two heads of UK universities, I would estimate that vice-chancellors work, in an average week, between 70 and 80 hours. Some top academics also work these hours, but this includes much time spent on research, which for them is the good stuff. Vice-chancellors are different. They attend social events on numerous evenings, regularly take gruelling long flights and are present at more meetings than is healthy. Any economist would argue that people should be paid for what they don't enjoy. Unquestionably, what academics enjoy is research – which is why so few want to go into administration, even with this level of pay.

So is their pay too high? Disparities in university salaries have widened over the past 25 years. The market has intervened. Those most in demand receive the highest pay and salaries are linked to performance. It is often

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said that academics are not motivated by money. This is not entirely true. If it were, then faculty salaries would not have risen as they have. Academics go into leadership positions for a mixture of (selfless and selfish) reasons. Money will inevitably be one of them. When a typical university has a turnover of around £300 million a year, bitching about plus or minus £50,000 seems irrelevant, particularly at a time when we have a shortage of academic leaders.

Apparently in ignorance of the shortage of candidates, one letter published last year in *THE* suggested that all vice-chancellors should set their salaries at £100,000. If the person who wrote the note is genuinely willing to live a vice-chancellor's life for this salary, then I suggest a headhunter should talk to him. If, as I have argued, we need good scholars to lead our universities, then there is a strong chance that suitable individuals are already earning a relatively high salary.

We do not want "average" people in leadership positions; we want the best people to defend and represent us. Leaders who have demonstrated their deep commitment to academe are more

THE SHELL GAME: TO KEEP A SPECIAL ORGANISATION GOING IN THE LONG TERM, LEADERS MUST BUILD TRUST

Two topics have dominated management studies in the past few years: innovation and leadership.

Before he took up the post of secretary of labor in US president Bill Clinton's first cabinet, Robert Reich wryly observed that writing about the importance of corporate leadership was most emphasised at the very times when those expected to display it were failing to deliver results.

That does not mean, however, that we should ignore important questions about the nature of suitable leaders for our organisations, especially our universities. In the wider field of leadership, we see words such as "visionary", "coach" and "exemplar" being used, as well as notions of being results-oriented and both effective and efficient.

In this context, universities are in many ways strange entities: some have been around for a long time and follow a governance style that reflects the zeitgeist of the time they underwent radical change or when they were founded. Indeed, the longevity of some universities is itself rather surprising.

When Arie de Geus, the former head of strategic planning at Shell, coordinated a study for the group's 100th anniversary, he looked for inspiration to companies that were older than Shell, that were as important in their industry as Shell was in its own, and that had successfully kept their corporate identity intact. He found few companies that met all three criteria.

So why have some universities survived so long? Perhaps one analogy and one observa-

tion from the Shell study might help to explain.

In the early part of the past decade, there was substantial interest in computer-based artificial intelligence, in particular genetic algorithms. Behind this was the idea that software, instead of being created by a person writing elegant code, could be produced through an evolutionary variation-selection approach.

The process would begin with a basic "naive" procedure into which variations would be introduced at random. The most promising results were selected and used to start the process again.

After many repetitions, this produced a piece of code that was at least as effective as the much neater and tighter work from an expert analyst. If you looked inside, however, you discovered a procedural mess built up

from many iterations of "what worked", but with multiple overlays when a procedure had been found not to work – not unlike the governance process in ancient universities.

So what has this got to do with the leadership of universities? When it comes to processes, it is important to start with what you have and to focus on where it is not working well; try to change only that element while avoiding excessive and radical change for its own sake.

At the heart of the Shell study is the observation that "history has something to teach us". It tells us that successful and enduring companies require a patient build-up of their human capital. Much care and thought needs to go into the relationship between the members of the com-

munity in order to reach the required levels of trust. It is only trust, the report says, that "allows the mobilisation of the internal brain capacity that the company needs for renewal and survival".

When it comes to leaders, their role in building that trust and maintaining commitment is vital. But what background should they have? Must they be scholars? The skill of gaining and building trust is often absent from the short-term, results-oriented culture of many boardrooms, but it is not necessarily to be found among all our senior academic colleagues, either. Track record is important, but so is performance on the right type of track.

None of this should be taken to suggest, particularly in these challenging times, that

universities can avoid developing and maintaining crucial administrative and financial skills. These skills are not key for a leader, but they should be present in the top management team and appropriately distributed throughout the organisation. Borrowing from the lexicon of leadership studies, universities should be seen as good examples of distributed leadership.

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likely to protect universities.

Humans desire status. Status in our world comes through attaining success in scholarship and instruction. Arguably, it is desirable for our vice-chancellors to acquire their status prior to becoming leaders in order to negotiate, and not merely comply with powerful bodies such as government.

What would happen if a vice-chancellor has to hire a top medic who is demanding in excess of £100,000? A colleague recently applied for a head of department position. I advised her to secure the highest salary possible. Hiring outstanding staff is a large part of her job. To offer others salaries that are much in excess of her own might affect the quality of her decision-making and negotiating stance.

"People who feel good about themselves produce good results," suggests David Watson, the former head of the University of Brighton.

Given the hours and general unpleasantness of the job, why do academics become university leaders? I asked a small number to explain what motivated them.

George Bain, the former head of Warwick Business School, London Business School and Queen's University Belfast, was drawn into leadership largely because others asked him to represent them from an early age, and this carried on through school, his time in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, and at university, as student and scholar. Bain had family role models who held leadership positions in local government, the Canadian Communist Party and trade unions.

He says: "Without consciously seeking office (at least in my early days), I seem to have got involved in running things. When I realised that I could run things reasonably well, I probably did begin to more consciously seek out leadership roles or, at least, respond to invitations positively."

Henry Rosovsky was dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Harvard. He did not want to become a dean "and that is what all academics need to claim", he suggests. But like Bain, he always sought to become involved in everything related to the university: conflicts, committees, chairmanships and so on. "My 'revealed preference' was obvious," he says.

Rosovsky became dean immediately after a 1960s crisis of authority at Harvard. "I knew that unifying the faculty was absolutely critical and believed that I could do it better than any other plausible candidate. I did unify the faculty and the resulting peace lasted for a long time. In accordance with the Peter Principle, I rose to the highest level of my incompetence." Rosovsky had no desire to become a university president and never pursued the offers he received. He "remained a faculty man".

So an innate bent towards leadership and responding to requests from others to take the reins seem to be quite common.

Grace Neville, vice-president for teaching and learning at University College Cork, moved into leadership because she wanted to see if she could "survive outside my comfort zone, ie, outside the familiar research and teaching zone which had been my cocoon for decades". She also had a desire to put into

practice some of her ideas. Loyalty to UCC was also a strong motivator: "I love the university I work in – it changed my life by giving me a generous scholarship that financed my studies when I was 16. So I felt that this was payback time."

Anthony Giddens' desire to lead was similarly driven by his feelings for the organisation: "I wouldn't have been interested in being the head of any institution except the London School of Economics. The LSE has a special significance for anyone working in the social sciences, and also is an object of affection for many, including me."

Glynis Breakwell, vice-chancellor of the University of Bath, says she discovered she was "a really bad follower". Breakwell is motivated by "the desire and challenge to build strong teams, to solve problems and to see those solutions put into practice".

Christine Ennew, pro vice-chancellor at the University of Nottingham, was also driven by a sense of responsibility not just to deliver teaching and research, but also to contribute to the management of the academic process.

"I don't think I ever had a Damascene moment," she says, "but when I started in my first academic post in 1987 there was always a very clear message about the importance of 'service' as part of the academic role."

There are similarities between professional service firms, made up of lawyers and accountants, and universities. For 10 years Anthony Angel was firm-wide managing partner at the law firm Linklaters. He says: "Managing partners are motivated by a desire



WORDS OF WISDOM: MOTIVATION, DELEGATION AND REASSURANCE

Advice and observations on leadership from some pre-eminent members of the faculty.

"Remember what it is that motivates academics to want to do good research. Always try to foster that desire."

Glynis Breakwell, vice-chancellor, University of Bath

"Lead more, manage less. Delegate extensively. Focus your efforts. And appoint the best people."

George Bain, former head, Warwick Business School and London Business School, and former vice-chancellor, Queen's University Belfast

"Don't be a faceless bureaucrat. Be someone visible to staff and students who exemplifies the values of the intellectual work and

scholarly commitment that is the *raison d'être* of a university."

Anthony Giddens, former director of the London School of Economics

"My one piece of advice applies to all levels of university administration: look at the 'Ethics of the Fathers' from the Mishnah: 'Do not separate yourself from the congregation. Appear neither naked nor clothed, neither sitting nor standing, neither laughing nor weeping. Man should not appear different from others in his outward deportment; he should always regard himself as a part of the whole.'"

Henry Rosovsky, former dean of faculty of arts and sciences, Harvard University

"Find a leader you really like and respect, and try to get close to him or her

to see how they did it. I would also advise they try to protect some (BlackBerry-free) time away from the job."

Grace Neville, vice-president for teaching and learning, University College Cork

"When you don't know how to take the big steps, take the most sensible next little step."

"There is no difficult letter that cannot be improved by eight hours' sleep."

"Don't pretend to know when you don't (you will always be found out)."

David Watson, former vice-chancellor, University of Brighton

"Don't underestimate the relational dimensions of leadership. Remember that, commonly, leadership is not what you do yourself but what you enable other people to

do. Don't be afraid to give those you work with the space and support they need to develop their ideas. Give them credit for success, and advice and reassurance when things don't work out."

Christine Ennew, pro vice-chancellor, University of Nottingham

"I will give you two pieces of advice. Integrity first – people are willing to accept leaders with all sorts of shortcomings, but they will never follow you willingly and for an extended period of time unless they believe that you have integrity. Moreover, integrity can be lost only once, so you should guard it as your most precious asset."

"Second, I would recommend that you praise in public, punish in private."

Larry Singell, associate dean of social sciences, University of Oregon



Jack Butterworth
Vice-chancellor,
1963-85,
University of Warwick
 Warwick's founding vice-chancellor is widely regarded as having shaped the university's character. Jack Butterworth united academics with industry and was determined not to rely overmuch on government funding. Warwick was established as one of the new "plate glass" universities set up in response to the Robbins report,

which recommended an expansion in the number of university places. Butterworth, previously a dean and bursar of New College, Oxford, was admired for his skill in selecting professors who went on to become international academic stars, his determination to build links with the local community and industry, and his formidable fundraising abilities. Lord Bhattacharyya, the director of Warwick Manufacturing Group, said in an obituary for Butterworth, who died in 2003: "There is no doubt that Jack put a huge imprint on the institution, enabling us to develop at a rate and in a way that has been quite staggering in such a short time."



Clark Kerr
President, 1958-67,
University of California
 Clark Kerr is credited with creating the blueprint for public higher education in the US and with championing the principle that every student should have access to college regardless of ability to pay – which eventually led to the introduction of Pell Grants for the poorest students. He established the University of California as a three-tier, multi-campus system, ranging from academically elite

institutions such as Berkeley through to community colleges. In *The Uses of the University* (1963), a key text on the Anglo-American academy, Kerr emphasises the research mission and contribution to economic and social development. He refused to crack down on student protesters in the 1960s and was the target of an FBI attempt to get him fired, before he was driven from office in 1967 by California's newly elected governor, Ronald Reagan. Alison Wolf, Sir Roy Griffiths professor of public sector management at King's College London, described Kerr, who died in 2003, as "the only vice-chancellor I can think of who was a global legend in his lifetime. Maybe the only one to be a legend, full stop."



Derek Bok
President, 1971-91
and interim president,
2006-07,
Harvard University
 The only person to twice serve as Harvard president, Derek Bok led the university's response to the huge challenges of falling government funding and soaring costs, including the undertaking of a \$350 million fundraising drive. He tried to increase the number of female undergraduates by introducing new financial

aid policies, and worked to recruit more female and ethnic minority academics. Amid growing unhappiness with Harvard's general education course, Bok oversaw the creation of a core curriculum that became the framework for undergraduate education. After the departure of the controversial Lawrence Summers as president, Bok was called back to the helm of Harvard as a steadying force. His six books on higher education include *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (2003), a critical analysis of commercialisation in three key areas of the US academy: sport, scientific research and education.

to improve their firm. Peer recognition is also a factor since these roles are generally elected, and securing the recognition of your peers – we are talking of partnerships – that you are the person for the top job is both an honour and a privilege."

Interestingly, most law firms do not bestow any extra pay or benefits on those who become leaders, which "fits the concept that partners have surrendered power to one of their own to enable him or her to lead the firm".

Janet Gaymer is currently Commissioner for Public Appointments in England and Wales, but she spent her career as a senior partner at Simmons & Simmons. She also believes that increased pay is not one of the motivating factors; indeed many managing partners may earn less than the big-fee earners. Instead, she says, a desire to lead may result from boredom with fee-earning or simply being flattered that someone has thought of them as "management".

George Gordon, emeritus professor at the University of Strathclyde, made the suggestion at a Society for Research into Higher Education conference last month that universities might want to consider becoming partnerships, a move that could induce far greater commitment from faculty.

Reference to a sense of service appears frequently in these leaders' remarks. This runs counter to the oft-repeated argument that academics feel no loyalty for institutions and only for disciplines. Most academic leaders begin on their incline from within the university in which they have spent most time. Yet in Britain it has become

rare for universities to appoint from inside. The reason given is usually that of the likelihood of internals being pressured by their own departments to favour them. Why then would this not apply to pro vice-chancellors or provosts? Might the desire to hire from outside result in the loss of that extra ounce of institutional loyalty gained by hiring from within? For this

In Britain it is now rare for universities to appoint from inside. Might the desire to hire from outside result in the loss of that extra ounce of institutional loyalty gained by hiring from within? Many US universities try to hire presidents with a past link to the institution

reason, many US universities try to hire presidents who have some past link to the institution.

How have executive search agencies, or headhunters, influenced the process of hiring leaders? Headhunters are engaged in 95 per cent of vice-chancellor appointments. Watson, in his book *The Question of Morale: Managing Happiness and Unhappiness in University Life* (2009) writes that search agencies made a positive contribution when they were first engaged by universities by professionalising the hiring process and widening the pool of applicants.

However, he argues that headhunters are now having a detrimental effect on appoint-

ments: they know little about universities – most have never worked in them – and less about actual leadership. The talent pool has become less diverse, argues Watson, probably because they are hiring in their own image.

Arguably, the small number of women leaders may result from the dominance of men in senior positions in executive search firms. Of the 133 member institutions of Universities UK, only 14 per cent are led by women, and that number drops to 11 per cent for "old" universities.

One dean I spoke to says that "universities pay search agencies twice: once when their academics give hours of free consultation to young, inexperienced headhunters, and again when we are charged a huge fee, normally a percentage of the salary of the new hire, for hiring someone one of us suggested".

Watson believes that universities need to reclaim the hiring process back from recruitment firms.

In any event, it is time we started to appreciate that the job of university leader is far more demanding than many of us have acknowledged; we should recognise and reward those who are willing to take on the responsibility accordingly; and most importantly, nurture the leadership talent within our own university walls. ●

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