

How Do Leaders Get Selected?

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Abstract

How leaders are selected matters. Yet the literature across disciplines is sparse. This is especially true of empirical work. In this paper I develop three ideas about how leaders are chosen. I blend statistical, interview and case-study evidence from research universities, which are an example of knowledge-intensive organizations. In a data-set comprising 165 university leaders, evidence is offered that leaders are selected deliberately because they differ from their predecessors – thus creating an alternating-leader cycle. From interview data with panel members of a vice chancellors selection committee, I raise questions about the process of choosing leaders. I ask: are leaders selected because they fit an institutional strategy or is the process merely arbitrary? Interviews with university leaders suggest the latter. Finally, I propose that governing boards may be failing in their role as the guardians of universities in the long-term.

Key words: Leadership selection and succession, strategy, alternating-leader cycle, governance, universities.

Draft Paper *Comments Welcome*

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Introduction

This paper attempts to generate new thinking about how we choose leaders. Drawing on a variety of evidence from UK research universities, I address three interrelated questions. First I ask: is there evidence that leaders may be selected because they differ markedly from their predecessors – thus creating an alternating-leader cycle? And if so, how might this pendulum effect shape organizational strategy? Second, using interview data with panel members of a committee to select a university leader, I examine how decisions about the person specification are made. The evidence suggests that the reason particular individuals are appointed into the top job may be arbitrary not strategic. Finally, I ask: if university heads design their institution's strategy, which, overwhelmingly, the sample in this study say they do, what role does the governing body play in mitigating against the propensity for strategy to change with every new leader? I conclude that governing boards, the guardians of universities, may not be fulfilling their role.

Universities are examples of knowledge-intensive organizations (Mintzberg 1979). They are populated by experts who generate and disseminate knowledge. In a world where competitive advantage arguably depends on intellectual innovation, not primarily on manufacturing, it seems important to develop a greater understanding of leadership in this area. Also, with the planet's climate changing in ways that few comprehend, possibly now more than ever, experts are required.

The focus in this study is on research universities, which are defined as those institutions that 'offer a full range of baccalaureate (under-graduate) programs, are committed to graduate education through the doctorate, and give high priority to research'¹.

The vast majority of universities around the globe are non-profit. Most are publicly assisted in that they receive a percentage of their financial support, often

accompanied by a disproportionate amount of control, from their respective governments. However, there are a sizeable minority of private universities. Indeed, many of the best universities fall into this category. For example, the top-10 US institutions (according to the popular ranking in US News and World Report), and arguably the world's top-10 also², are all private. With the exception of three or four institutions, the top 25 slots in most US rankings are occupied by private universities³.

Of the countries represented in this study, the United Kingdom (UK) has just over 130 institutions classified as universities, and in the United States (US) there are approximately 3,800. Only a small percentage of these would be classed as research universities. The average pay of university leaders in the UK in 2005-06 was £165,105⁴, and in the US, average compensation during the same period was \$374,846⁵. Heads of universities in the UK and US⁶ are spending on average 8 years in the top job, although length of tenure is trending down in the UK (Goodall 2006b).

Universities can be described as pluralistic organizations (Denis, Lamothe & Langley 2001) because they are made up of groups with divergent interests. For example, one group consists of faculty who are the knowledge-workers most closely aligned to the core business. The second dominant group in a university is made up of administrators and professional managers, without whom the organization could not function.

This paper attempts to introduce new ideas about how leaders are selected. It draws from a range of data, and uses simple analysis to present evidence in support of three interrelated propositions about institutional heads. Each proposition is presented below with a breakdown of information about the data, the method used in the analysis, and, finally, the results.

¹Definition from 'A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education' (1994), produced by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

² See Academic Ranking of World Universities (<http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking.htm>).

³ www.usinfo.state.gov

⁴ Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), February 22, 2007.

⁵ Chronicle of Higher Education, November 20, 2006.

⁶ American Council on Education, The American College President: 2007 Edition.

Proposition 1: Leaders are selected in part because they differ markedly from their predecessors, which creates an alternating- leader cycle.

“Many places seem to have a cycle of appointing a researcher and then a non-researcher. The selection committee that appointed me actually wanted a researcher to succeed the previous vice chancellor, who was not.” Head of a UK research university, interviewed for this study.

“Institutions often fail to take the long view. They oscillate between appointing different types of leaders who push the institution in different directions.” Head of a UK research university, interviewed for this study⁷.

As part of this study I interviewed a number of leaders of UK and US research universities. (The list of participants and the interview schedule are in Appendix 1). An interesting and potentially important idea was raised by two university heads in interview. It is that leaders alternate in character. This raises the question: are individuals being selected in part because they differ markedly from their predecessors? In the paper I test this hypothesis by examining longitudinal data on the characteristics of consecutive leaders in 55 research universities (see Appendix 2). The pattern I am looking to identify is whether a strong scholar -- ‘researcher’ -- appears to be replaced by a less-cited one -- ‘non-researcher’ -- and so on, thus creating an alternating-leader cycle.

A brief look at the data immediately throws up examples. Sheffield University has systematically swung in its choice of leaders. The first of the last four vice chancellors⁸ was an unexceptional researcher, in that he was rarely cited in academic papers. He was succeeded by an exceptional scholar and Fellow of

⁷ Statements were made by two university leaders interviewed for this study. (See list in Appendix 2.) In agreement with interviewees, no statements are attributed in this paper.

⁸ In this section I refer to the UK sample of university leaders as vice chancellors (VCs). This replaces other titles such as director or principal.

the Royal Society⁹ (FRS), who was then replaced by number 3, a return to a weaker scholar, only to be succeeded by their current vice chancellor who is, again, an eminent researcher and FRS. Similarly, the London School of Economics replaced the most highly cited scholar in my sample, Anthony Giddens, with a former civil servant who does not have a PhD and has never worked in a university. St Andrews, too, replaced an accomplished scientist and FRS with someone who has no research background; and there are many other examples.

To my knowledge the possibility of a pendulum effect has gone unreported in the academic literature. The media have in the past highlighted differences between successive political leaders. For example, there was much editorial comment when John Major replaced Margaret Thatcher as the UK Prime Minister, the two appearing to be juxtaposed in many ways. Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, talks of the necessity for leaders, or princes, to have both fox-like qualities of wisdom and cunning, whilst also drawing from the strengths of lions to drive away wolves¹⁰. Machiavelli is referring to the need for dual qualities within a single person, which differs somewhat from the idea of oscillating individuals (Grint 1997).

Anecdote would have us believe that an alternating-leader cycle is common. Indeed, selection committees charged with appointing institutional heads often appear to be looking for 'a change', consciously or unconsciously. It is quite common to hear, in general conversation, how different the new head is from the old. This raises a number of interesting questions: what does it mean if difference can be shown to be a factor common in leader selection? Is an incoming leader's dissimilarity from his or her predecessor key to the requirements of the position, or merely the effect of a human tendency for variety? In short, how much of the new candidate can be explained by a reaction to the old? This issue is particularly poignant in relation to leadership, at a time

⁹ The title of Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) is only bestowed on individuals who are viewed as being among the top scientists in their field.

¹⁰ Thanks to Keith Grint for this suggestion.

when so much emphasis -- some would argue too much (Khurana 2002) – is placed on the notion of charismatic leaders.

If evidence of an alternating cycle is found, it also raises questions about how this form of selection might affect, adversely or otherwise, institutional strategy and organizational performance. For example, how much does a change in leader create a change in the direction of an organization?

Establishing whether leaders alternate is difficult. We need to be able to identify and measure what, exactly, might be alternating? One reason why universities are an interesting case is that, unusually for knowledge-intensive organizations, their leaders' technical expertise can be measured reasonably objectively.

Although the idea of leaders alternating has received little or no attention, management scholars have written extensively about the characteristics of CEOs, top team members and board directors. Hambrick and Mason (1984) first suggested that members of the top management team (TMT) will be influenced in their decision-making by individual and group demographic factors (such as age, education, functional track, TMT heterogeneity among others). The effect of 'outsiders' versus 'insiders' in CEO successions has been widely discussed in the literature, most notably by Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) who document that there has been a shift from promoting CEOs internally to appointing them from outside. The possible influence of CEOs' functional backgrounds (most commonly those from finance), on various aspects of company strategy, corporate power and cycles of control, have been examined extensively (see Fligstein 1978, Datta and Guthrie 1994, Ocasio and Kim 1999, among others). This substantial body of work has focused predominantly on manufacturing firms. Less thought has been paid to the characteristics of leaders in knowledge-intensive organizations¹¹.

¹¹ Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) interview a number of senior and middle managers in one R&D firm about leadership matters. They do not interview the head of the firm, or heads of firms. I would argue that their article focuses predominantly on management not institutional leadership.

Data

In this paper I present statistical evidence that there may be a pendulum effect in the selection of university leaders. My sample includes 165 leaders, or vice chancellors, who led 55 UK research universities three times in succession. Thus, I will focus on two changes of leader per institution. A small number of universities have had vice chancellors who have remained in the top job for many years. These institutions have been excluded from the data because there was only one change. Thus the data include two changes of leader in 47 research universities.

As suggested above, establishing whether leaders alternate requires being able to identify and measure which leader-characteristic or variable is changing. In this study I focus on how successful vice chancellors have been in their career as scholars. In academe, the technical expertise of individuals can be measured reasonably impartially by using bibliometric data, or citations. Given the centrality of research performance in many institutional mission statements -- expressed through the quality of research produced, and the scholarly reputation of staff -- it seems logical to focus on the academic ability of their leaders. Citation scores are used here as a measure of how research-active and successful a vice chancellor has been in his or her academic career. The lifetime citations of leaders have been hand-counted from data provided by ISI Web of Knowledge. To control for disciplinary differences, individual's citations have been normalized¹².

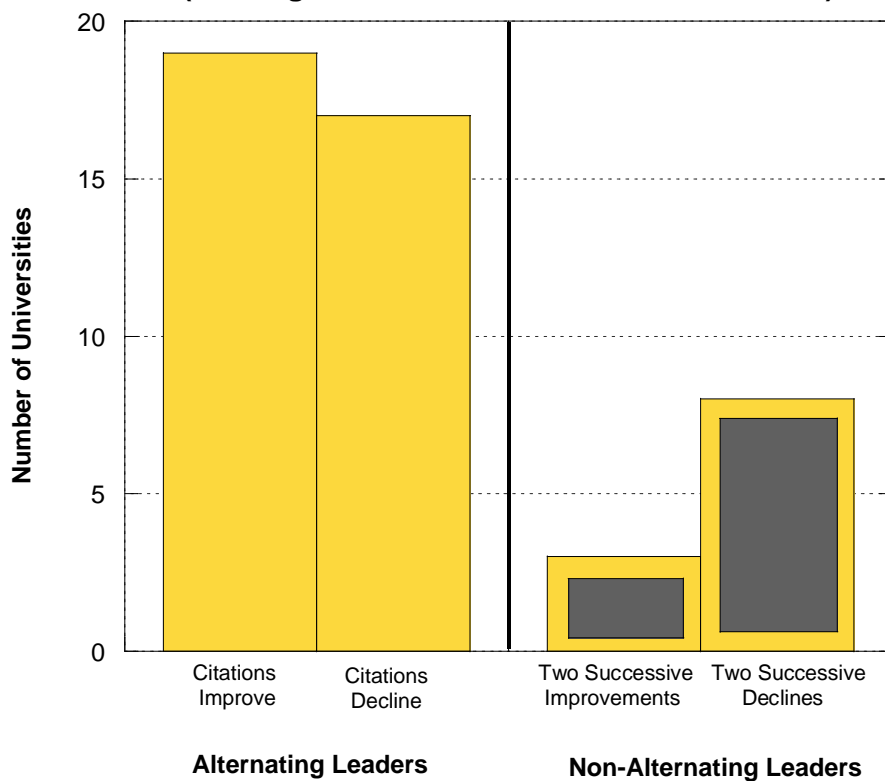
Results

Do universities tend to swing from having a highly cited leader to having a head that is much less cited, possibly someone who gave up research early in their career to become an administrator? In this section I attempt to discover whether

¹² Publishing conventions differ wildly across academic disciplines. Scientists publish many more articles, and subsequently they tend to accrue higher numbers of citations, whilst far fewer are assigned in the humanities. To adjust for this discrepancy each leader's lifetime citations are normalized. See Goodall 2006b for details of the normalization process. Data were collected in 2005.

universities choose successive vice chancellors who appear to alternate between a stronger and weaker scholar. To do this I test by calculating a Pearson's correlation coefficient, to identify whether a pendulum effect in vice chancellors is statistically significant, and if so, what the size of the effect of the change in leaders is. The citation scores of three consecutive leaders from 47 universities are collated, which generates data from two changes of vice chancellor per institution, producing a total of 94 changes. The change data are what appear in the analyses and results below.

Figure 1.
Universities that Alternated Between Selecting
a Highly Cited Leader and a Much Less Cited Leader
(2 changes of leader in 47 universities: n = 94)



First I present the data in bar diagrams. In Figure 1 I separate the VC change data into four categories or columns: the first includes institutional changes in leader where vice chancellors have swung from those with higher levels of citations to those with low numbers. Thus, there are 19 universities in the sample that have selected leaders who alternate between a more accomplished scholar, and a much less accomplished one. The second category, or column,

shows that 17 universities made the alternative swing; a leader with low levels of citations is replaced by a more highly cited scholar.

Columns three and four in Figure 1 include data where no pendulum affect is found. The third column comprises 3 universities where leaders' research citations improved consecutively; for example, a good scholar was replaced by a better one. In the fourth column there are 8 universities with the opposite pattern; leaders with low numbers of research citations were followed by leaders with even lower numbers. Thus, there were two declines in a row.

As can be seen in Figure 1, among the 47 UK research universities in the sample, there is a tendency for predecessors to systematically differ from their successors. Therefore, it could be argued that governing bodies appear to be selecting leaders in part because they differ from those they follow into the top job.

Figure 2.
The Sample of Universities Aggregated into those that Alternate in University Leader and those where no Pendulum Effect is Found
(2 changes of leader in 47 universities: n = 94)

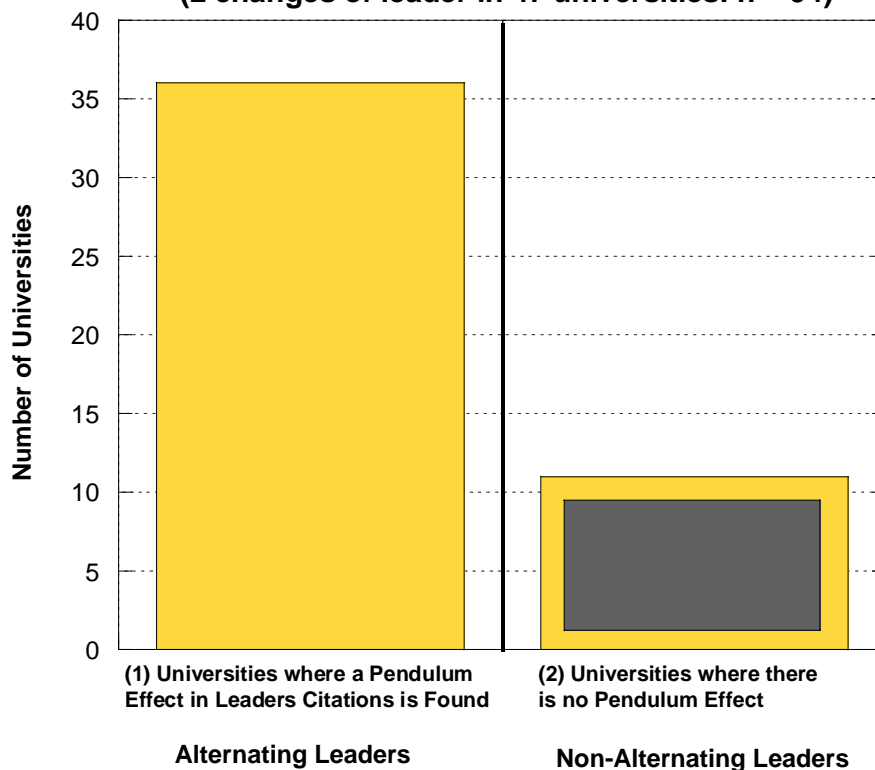
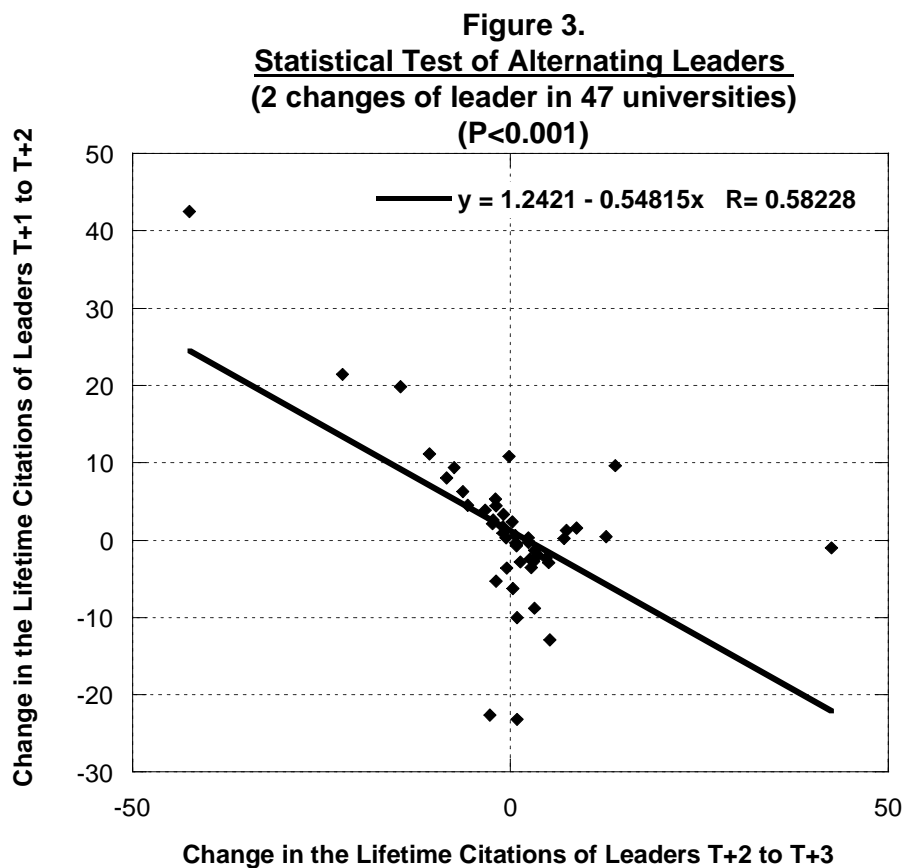


Figure 2 presents the same finding, but this time the data are aggregated into two columns; those institutions where a pendulum effect is found, and those that appear not to move back and forth in their choice of leader. The first column in Figure 2 shows that in 36 universities, out of the total sample of 47, there has been a significant swing from leaders with high-citations to low, and vice versa. However, in the remaining 11 universities in column 2, no alternating-leader pattern is found.

The data in Figures 1 and 2 provide evidence that universities appear to select leaders who alternate between appointing a more established scholar and a less established one. It is now necessary to test whether the pendulum effect is statistically significant.



A cross-section regression is presented in Figure 3. In the scatter plot the two changes are represented on the X and Y axes. Using Pearson's correlation coefficient (r), the degree of linear relationship between the leader-changes is

tested, and shown to be statistically significant. For the data in Figure 3, Pearson's r is 0.582. The 1% critical value on a two-tailed test is 0.361. The size of the effect, measured by the coefficient, is 0.548 which means that the effect of the change is about half; in other words, leaders with an improvement in their citations, are followed by VCs with a reduction in their predecessors improvement of approximately 50%.

These simple tests demonstrate that university leaders appear to systematically alternate in at least one important set of characteristics, or variables – a vice chancellor's level of scholarship¹³.

Discussion

The idea that leaders may be selected partially in contrast to their predecessors seems somewhat logical. One leader pushes the focus in one direction which may result in other areas being neglected. Thus the incoming head readdresses the balance, and so on. But a problem may arise in an organization if a new leader is appointed every few years, being given quite substantial executive powers, but having different strategic priorities from his or her predecessor. What if a head proposes a substantial change for their institution, for example an acquisition or merger, or establishing a base overseas? In this case the institution could perhaps be pulled in a number of different directions over a ten to twenty year period. Potentially, some leaders may even choose strategies that can be achieved within their tenure of office but which may not be beneficial in the long-term for their institution. Arguably, a difference in emphasis between leaders at some level is warranted and desirable, but who ultimately is steering the ship?

In this section I have introduced the idea that institutions may, knowingly or unknowingly, create a cycle of alternating leaders. This raises the question: if there is an innate human bias towards selecting leaders who differ from their

¹³ It is important to note that some of the reported effect may be due to a statistical artefact or measurement error, caused by regression to the mean.

predecessors, is this process entirely rational for organizations? It may be that the change is good for organizational performance, or it may be that it is not.

Proposition 2 - The choice of particular leaders may be arbitrary not strategic.

“The person-spec came through the consultation process, mostly the head-hunters’ interviews. The university had no strategy.”

Member of a committee to select a UK vice chancellor.

Introduction

Here I focus attention on the related topic of how leaders are chosen. I ask: is the process of selecting a leader strategic or arbitrary? The example I use is once again the research university. Two groups of interviews are reported. First, I question 12 members of a panel responsible for appointing a leader to a UK research university, and then I present interview data from heads themselves about their appointment.

The interviews offer a rare insight into the process of selecting a university leader, in particular, how decisions are made about the type of person chosen, and how the process links with organizational strategy. Gaining access to members of a selection panel, although only a single case-study, throws open the lid on a procedure that has rarely been written about. The evidence, presented below, suggests that the process followed by the appointment committee might be described as arbitrary, insofar as they appear not to have been guided by a strategy.

Governing Universities and Appointing Leaders

Universities are governed by councils, or boards. Governing bodies are generally accepted in the literature as being ‘in charge’ of universities in the long-term (Birnbaum 1988, Bowen 1994, Freedman 2004, Hammond 2004). Chait et al. (2005) suggest that, in non-profit organizations, ‘... in theory if not in practice,

boards of trustees are supposed to be the ultimate guardians of institutional ethos and organizational values' (Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005, pp. 3). They go on to suggest that boards are 'charged with setting the organization's agenda and priorities, typically through review, approval, and oversight of a strategic plan' (Chait et al. 2005, pp. 3).

Figure 4.
Model Explaining 'Ideal' Governance Structure

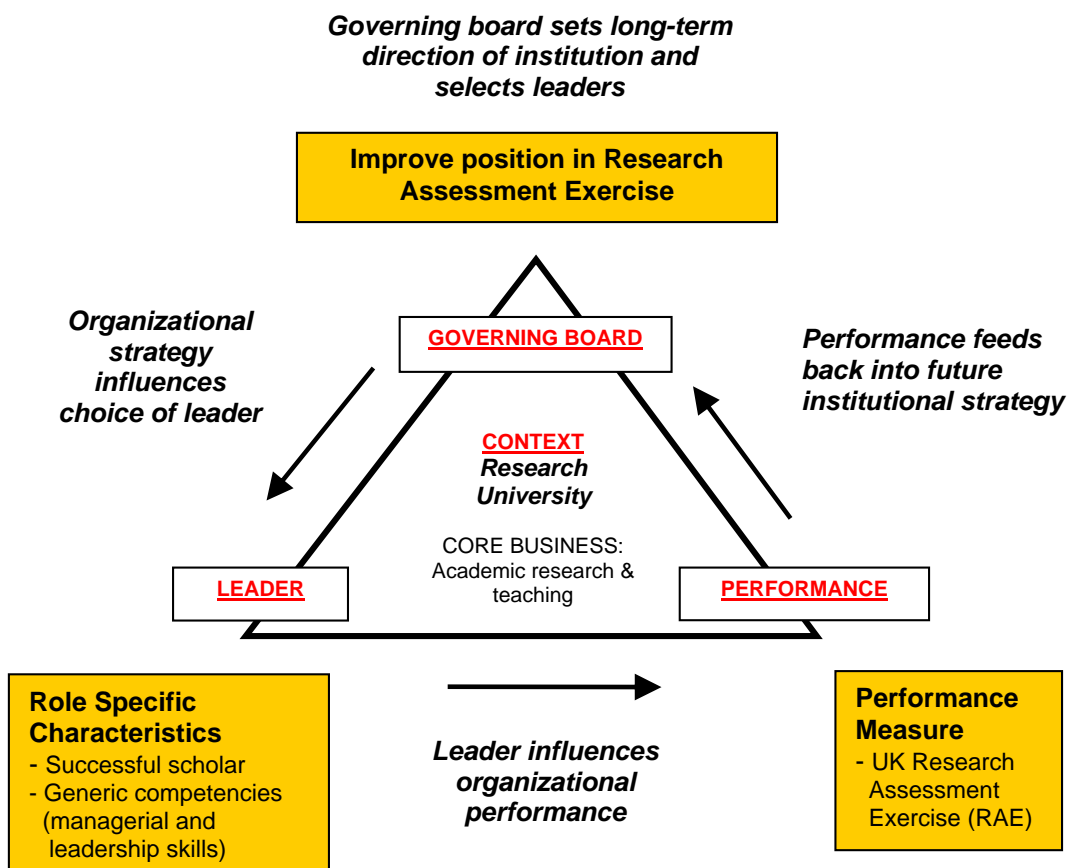


Figure 4 presents a simple model representing an 'ideal' governance structure in a university that wishes to raise its performance in, say, the Research Assessment Exercise¹⁴ (RAE). An obvious question emerging from this model is how many university governing bodies actually develop long-term strategies

¹⁴ The UK has had a scheme for appraising research universities since 1986, one that takes place every four to five years. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was designed to help inform funding bodies' decisions about how to distribute public money for research. Selectivity is focused on quality in that institutions that conduct the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant. Based on a system of peer review, the RAE provides quality ratings for research across all disciplines.

for their institutions? To change the direction of a research university perhaps takes many tens of years and, importantly, it also means being influenced by the strategy when appointing appropriate leaders. Of the sample of vice chancellors interviewed in this study, only one reported that his university had a strategy that would continue beyond his tenure as leader. Manchester University has a strategic plan that runs to 2015. Although, it is important to note that Manchester's vice chancellor reported in interview, that he was responsible for having designed the university's strategy in the first place (this issue will be discussed later).

Vice chancellor appointment committees in the UK are commonly made up of a combination of lay people and academics (with one or more non-academic administrators as observers). The process is typically organized and controlled by university governors, and led by the chair of council, usually a lay member, whose position is potentially vital. Ultimately, as suggested above, it is governing bodies who are the guardians of universities. Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect that those appointed into the post of vice chancellor (VC), might have been selected with a specific long-term perspective in sight. However, the extent to which this is central to the practice of VC appointments seems questionable from the data in both this single case-study, and the interviews with university leaders presented later.

In this section I offer evidence from interviews with members of a selection committee created to appoint a UK vice chancellor. Although the interview contributions below should be viewed as of limited generality -- because they consist of a single study -- they shed some light on the appointment process, raise some apparently interesting issues, and also open the way for future research. In the next part we hear from university leaders themselves.

Case-study of a Leader's Appointment

The key question I am trying to address in this single case-study is: was there a fit between the VC person specification and the university strategy? In other words, did the governors seek to appoint someone to follow a predetermined

path? To attempt to answer this requires us to uncover how the decision about the candidate specification was made, and by whom; and also, identifying what criteria was used by the selection panel in making their choice.

A little background information about the participant institution is necessary. The case-study took place in a research university in the North of England. The selection process involved a number of stages: the first being to appoint a search company or head-hunters. The head-hunters, who are London based, worked with the appointment panel to develop the selection and interview program. A central coordinator throughout the process was the chair of council, a lay member, who also chaired the appointment committee.

The second stage involved communication. The chair sent an email to all university staff asking them to comment on the type of leader the panel should be looking to interview, and also requesting potential names of candidates. Feed-back was then fed into the group. This was followed by a number of informational interviews, where head-hunters met with a cross-section of staff, students, academics, administrators, union representatives and council members. Interviewees were asked what they felt the university needed in its leader. Based on the ideas generated in these discussions, suggestions were delivered from the head-hunters to members of the panel.

There were 13 people on the vice chancellor's selection committee. Four of the panel were lay members on the university council (all are business people), one of whom was chair of council and also chair of the committee. There were three faculty members in the group, also one non-academic administrator, and a representative from the student union. Finally, in attendance, as observers only, were three more non-academic administrators. In this case-study I interview a number of panel members. They include: the chair and 6 other members of the appointment committee, 3 observers from the administration, the lead head-hunter, and the successful candidate (n=12). In agreement with the university involved, all participants and the name of the institution will remain anonymous.

The questions I asked panel members relevant to this paper include:

Who or how did you and the selection committee decide upon the type of person you were looking for? and How much was it a group decision, how much did it come from outside?

Interview material is presented below. Only the occupational position of participants is identified, and each statement presented below has been made by a different member of the committee (i.e. there is one statement per participant).

According to interviewees, the person specification was put together using information from the head-hunter's meetings with a broad range of individuals from around the university. This was explained by the head-hunter himself:

Head-hunter

- *“Input came from a bit of everywhere. We spent three days consulting with stakeholders in the university -- students, academics, administrators, union representatives, council members, and the email that was sent out from the chair of the selection committee.”*

The majority of committee members confirm this:

Faculty member (1)

- *“The most important impetus came from the head-hunter's one-on-one interviews with faculty. This is where the person-spec came from. There was never any agreement about it. A similar spec came from lots of sources.”*

Faculty member (2)

- *“The head-hunters interviews were very important and were condensed into a useful document. The chair's emails were also constructive. Feedback came from Senate and Council in an understated way. Head-hunters interviews were much more important. The research profile became solid later. “*

Senior administrator, observer (1)

- *“The person-spec came through the consultation process, mostly the head-hunters’ interviews. The university had no strategy.”*

Student union representative

- *“Head-hunters’ interviews with people one-on-one were very helpful. The head-hunters’ interviews outlined what people wanted for a VC. In the first meeting we chatted about feed-back. Not a lot of conversation about who we were looking for.”*

Senior administrator, observer (2)

- *“Input came mostly from two areas: from the senior academic community especially from individual interviews with the head-hunters, and also from the observers.”*

These comments, arguably, identify one of the potential weaknesses in the governing body’s approach to the VC’s appointment. It would seem that there was ambiguity about the person-spec insofar as the governing body appeared not to be marrying the applicant with a predetermined strategy (or we might expect a clearer candidate specification at the outset). Indeed, almost all of those questioned emphasised that input came mostly from interviews and emails with members of the university community.

It might be fair to conjecture that it is unlikely that the CEO of a private firm, with a £400 million turn-over, would be selected by inviting comments from all staff about the type of leader the board should appoint. Instead, one might expect a governing body to look for a leader who fits, generally, the criteria that they believe are necessary to develop further the university’s long-term strategy. Indeed, this is built into the roles and processes of private sector boards which have selection and recruitment as a formal part of their responsibilities (having sub-committees with this as their sole purpose).

The chair of the selection committee and a second lay member both reported that the type of person the institution was looking for was identified at an earlier stage.

Chair of committee, and chair of university council

- *“We had quite a clear model of the type of person we wanted. This was created in advance. Of course humans don’t all fit models exactly. We had a long list of what we were looking for. The input for the list and model came from Senate discussions and with Council members who were singing a similar song -- researcher, researcher, researcher!”*

Lay member

- *“It came out of the discussion beforehand. That’s where the ideal type was decided. But you can’t stick to boxes. We wanted a strong researcher.”*

These accounts conflict with the committee members statements above. It may be that the benefit of hindsight has contributed to their clarity; there was a gap of approximately 2 months between my interviews with panel members and their final meeting to decide the new vice chancellor. But even if these two members were clear in their mission, it still begs the question, why was the message not communicated to the whole committee?

Interestingly, the candidate selected to be vice chancellor also believed that she was selected according to a clear strategy by the university.

The selected candidate

- *“I felt that there was unanimity in terms of what they were looking for. I felt that I fitted a template of being research active -- that the university had a clear strategy.”*

What Were the Selection Committee Looking for in a Leader?

Overwhelmingly the desired characteristic identified by most on the selection panel was that the candidate should be an academic with a strong research background. According to group members, the decision to select an esteemed scholar stemmed from discussions within the committee, from feedback from head-hunter interviews, and from emails to the whole university inviting comment by the chair.

Senior administrator, observer (3)

- *“The feedback invited from the community was very helpful. A lot of people tell you what they don’t want. Strong academic came out of head-hunter interviews with academics, and in the emails.”*

Faculty member (3)

- *“A highly respected researcher was the first choice.”*

Administrator, member

- *“We were influenced by the quality of leaders and their experience. The main information came from academic members – strong research focus and credibility. Balance between academic and leadership.”*

If the desire to appoint a top scholar was so widely agreed upon, then why did the panel select someone quite different as their runner-up candidate? Although their second choice had come from a traditional academic background, the applicant was not an accomplished researcher. Indeed, the lifetime citations of the runner-up candidate are substantially below the average citation score of the 165 leaders included in this study. Yet the candidate selected for the position of VC has a score well above the average among the same group. Thus, if the panel decided to select a strong researcher after a lengthy consultation process, why was their second choice so dissimilar?

In relation to the first section, about alternating-leader cycles, it is interesting to note that the scholarly vice chancellor chosen by the committee contrasted substantially with the outgoing VC, who stopped research early to become an academic administrator.

Discussion

This small case-study raises two important issues: first, the evidence suggests that the selection committee chose a leader in a somewhat arbitrary fashion, as opposed to making a choice that fit with a predetermined university strategy. It is clear from selectors responses above, that information about the type of leader felt to be appropriate came from many sources. Indeed, the most common place was from discussions between the head-hunters and a broad cross-section of the university community. This, perhaps, means that, in practice, a university leader might be chosen based on random opinions of university staff and various stakeholders, instead of being selected according to criteria that link to the long-term aims of the institution.

Second, with regards to the dominant characteristic or leader-type finally identified through the above process, the term 'researcher' appears in panel members' statements most. In previous work I have argued that top scholars should be appointed to lead research universities (Goodall 2006a & 2006b). Indeed, with supporting evidence I suggest that the performance of a university will improve under scholar-leaders. The appointment committee in this case-study did eventually appoint a distinguished scholar, but the fact that the runner-up candidate had such a weak research background stands out in contrast.

What do University Leaders Say About Their Selection?

It is interesting now to hear from those who were selected by governing bodies to lead universities, to try to understand more about the selection process. Here I present a small number of statements from leaders of research universities. In agreement with the individuals who took part, names have been excluded from the statements. Thus only titles are given. Each statement is attributable to a

separate leader. No one gives more than one account. (The list of participants and the interview schedule are in Appendix 1. UK leaders only were asked the questions pertaining to this section.)

It is responses to the questions below that appear in this section.

Taking you back to your appointment process, were you aware of what the selection committee was looking for in terms of a candidate?

It was then followed up with:

Did you feel that you sold the panel a strategy, or alternatively did you fit a predetermined type that they were looking out for?

The VCs were also asked who was on their appointment panel.

The ambiguity highlighted above in the case-study interviews appears to be replicated in the leader's statements. Most reported that the panel members who appointed them were not entirely clear about the type of person they were looking for, nor the strategy they may be asked to follow. Two examples are:

Former UK vice chancellor -

- *“With both chair and the committee, neither had a strategy but they had a view about what was wrong. There were 50% academics and 50% lay members plus a lay chair.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“The selection committee were very keen to have certain things – someone with a public profile, engagement in public policy, knowing how to manage a complex organization. Beyond that it felt quite unclear.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“The job requirement was not precisely defined.”*

In some ways the confusion about whom to choose as university leader is clear from the next statement. The context is a top research-oriented university. It attempted to appoint a civil servant as leader, who did not take the job. The university then went on to choose an extremely distinguished scholar. Regarding the alternating cycle suggested above, it is interesting to note that the vice chancellor selected to succeed the scholar-leader was again a civil servant.

Former UK vice chancellor (who is a distinguished scholar) -

- *“I was only appointed because their first choice turned them down – he was a civil servant.”*

From the above statements it might be fair to ask how much lay council members understand research universities. Many, if not most, university councils and boards are chaired by people who have not come from academia. A number of university heads interviewed for this study said that they felt their lay council members had very little understanding of the core business of universities. Yet these bodies perform a central role in appointing university leaders, as mentioned above.

UK vice chancellor -

- *“Regarding the Council and how much they know, we interviewed our council members and some interesting stuff came out about how little they do know. For example, one didn’t even know what the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was.”*

This view is repeated by another vice chancellor:

UK vice chancellor -

- *“Lay members of council and especially business people profoundly do not understand the culture and business of a university. I think that lay members’ judge by character not by using objective evidence.”*

The comments of a non-academic leader who came from industry are interesting. He said he felt surprise at being given the job of vice chancellor, and he believed the decision to appoint him had been favoured by the chair of the university's council, who had himself come from industry. This suggests that the chair may have appointed a person who was, somewhat, in his own image. A comment about private universities comes from a former president in the United States:

Former US university president -

- *“Private universities are much better at selecting boards. They choose people who are only deemed to be good for the university.”*

This statement implies that the selection of governors onto boards in public universities may be subject to other pressures. Arguably, public universities are prone to outside interference, especially from governments¹⁵. This may result in the selection of board members for reasons other than their suitability to the position.

The final section of this paper moves onto the direct question of strategy. Again, drawing from interview data with the same sample of university leaders (see Appendix 1), it attempts to address the issue of who, ultimately, is responsible for university strategy.

Proposition 3 – The guardians of universities’ long-term strategy may not be fulfilling their role.

“We had an interesting exchange about strategy, when I made it clear that I decide the strategy for the university.” Vice chancellor of a UK research university.

¹⁵ About the UK, see for example Lord Robert May's comments in Nature (Vol. 447, 28 June 2007).

Introduction

Does the long-term future of a university lie in the hands of the governing body? Should it be assumed that it is the university council who is looking out for the lasting development of the institution? This raises the important issue of 'governance as leadership' (Chait, Ryan & Taylor 2005). The interview data above suggests that leaders are not necessarily selected according to a predefined strategy. Nor was there much evidence that university councils design their institution's strategy.

So, Who is in Charge of Strategy?

University leaders interviewed for this study (see Appendix 1) were asked the following question:

Whose role do you believe it is to write or construct the strategy for the university?

There was little or no hesitation among respondents, who, with overwhelming unanimity, stated that it was the responsibility of the leader. A small number of interviewees' comments are presented (again, each statement is from a different participant):

UK vice chancellor -

- *"The VC sets the agenda and tone – this is where the VC makes a difference... The VC is the only person who can ask 'where are we going? What is our strategy?' You are validated to put ideas forward and design strategy. No one else can do that. The VC can articulate the university's ambition."*

US university president -

- *"I am very involved with the nuts and bolts of deciding the overall strategic direction of ... I also decide the policy level direction."*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“We had an interesting exchange about strategy, when I made it clear that I decide the strategy for the university.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“I determine the shape of strategy. It is rare for me to have a decision rejected. Debates will emerge out of the top team but it is the responsibility of the VC to finally say yes or no about an area of strategy. The buck stops with me.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“I really didn’t want the job unless I could have carte blanche to do something very new. I sold them a strategy more than the other way round.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“The final draft has to come off the VC’s PC. It is the role of the VC to put it together and then to get it approved and negotiate the details. It is not the job of any committee.”*

UK vice chancellor -

- *“The VC should have the leading voice regarding the strategy and should draft the vision statement. The VC has most interest in the strategy.”*

It is clear from these statements that the institutional heads believe they control university strategy. If a strategic void exists at the board level, as suggested above, then it is reasonable to assume that the leader’s statements may well represent the truth.

A natural next step would be to move the discussion onto the issue of how much power leaders of universities actually have, in comparison, say, to heads of private or public companies. There is not the space here to properly address

this, nor to reference the large body of literature about the subject of power, but one statement from an experienced university head-hunter is revealing:

- *“There is no doubt that leaders have an enormous amount of power in universities -- more than in many other organisations where the long-term strategy is firmly laid out. For example, in the civil service, or at the other extreme in Asda/Walmart where the leader is a motivator for the ‘troops’ but has very little say about the strategy of the business. That is all mapped out long before in somewhere like Ohio.”*

That heads need power and authority to lead is, arguably, uncontentious – even in contentious intellectual fields such as leadership and strategy. I would also argue that universities need powerful leaders, but governance mechanisms should be functioning properly. The interview evidence presented in the case-study leaves doubt about how involved university councils are in the long term strategy of their institutions. Concomitantly this also implies that governors may not be well-positioned to arbitrate between the desires of university leaders, on the one hand, and what might be best for the institution in the long run, on the other. But it is important to note that these assumptions can only be indicative in their analysis, because the data presented in this paper are limited.

Conclusion

This study raises some important questions about the appointment of leaders and the potential weaknesses of university boards. Although the research is undertaken on universities, an example of knowledge-intensive organizations, the findings may be relevant more broadly.

Drawing from a blend of statistical, interview and case-study data, I present evidence supporting three interrelated propositions.

The first suggests that leaders may be selected in part because they differ fundamentally from their predecessors, which, I argue, creates an alternating-

leader cycle. To demonstrate this I examine longitudinal data on the characteristics of leaders in 47 UK research universities, focusing on two changes of vice chancellor per institution. The evidence suggests that universities swing from appointing one kind of leader to another; a strong scholar is replaced by a less-cited one, and so on. The data show that consecutive leaders, in 36 universities out of the 47 institutions in the sample, alternate: on average a university that picks a better scholar as VC in one period, retrenches by approximately half in the next choice of leader. This pendulum effect seems not to have been documented in the research literature. Yet the implications raise questions about whether this form of selection might affect, adversely or otherwise, organizational strategy.

In the second proposition, I suggest that the reason particular leaders are selected may be arbitrary not strategic. I interview members of a vice chancellor's selection committee from a UK research university. The interview data from panel members offer a rare insight into the process of selecting a university head -- in particular, how decisions are made about the type of person chosen, and how the process, again, links with organizational strategy. Although it is a single case-study, it exposes a procedure that is rarely written about. The evidence in this paper suggests that the selection process followed by the appointment committee studied was somewhat random. The person specification appears not to have been informed by the strategic plan. Instead, the panel members reported that it was decided through a consultation process involving an assorted cross-section of the university community. Interview statements from university leaders, also included in this section, lend weight to this assertion.

That organizations and their governing bodies might want to consult with colleagues to inform the process of a leader's selection seems plausible. Indeed, a number of vice chancellors declared, in interview, that lay council members often do not have a good understanding of the core business of universities. Therefore, relying on advice from others in the institution seems important. But, arguably, this process cannot be efficient in the long-term, as it depends on providence instead of planning.

Finally, in proposition three, the focus is specifically on who sets organizational strategy. I argue that governors, who should be the guardians of universities' long-term strategy, may not be fulfilling their role. It is clear from the reported interviews with university heads, that they, and only they, are responsible for designing the strategy of their institution. This may well be right for their university, but what if the person in charge wants to steer the ship into shallow waters? Who will arbitrate between the short-term desires of leaders and the long-term success of the institution?

The process of choosing a leader is, no doubt, somewhat imprecise. Selection criteria will include many factors, and not all of them may seem rational. But it is questionable whether a private organization with a turnover of £400 million would select a leader based on the accumulated thoughts of a collection of members of staff. It also seems unlikely that the board of a successful corporation would not have a clearer strategy, both for the organization and its new leader, than appeared to be the situation in this study. The reason, I conjecture in the paper, for the seeming lack of clarity among board members, may be that public universities are encouraged, often by government, to take onto their board's individuals, mostly lay business people, who might not know a great deal about the business of universities.

As has been suggested earlier, the literature that focuses on the type of leaders most suited to knowledge-intensive organizations is sparse¹⁶. Nor, more broadly, has there been a great deal of empirical work on the process of selection. It is hoped, therefore, that this paper will make a contribution to future thinking about how we choose our leaders.

¹⁶ One example is my earlier work in Goodall 2006a and 2006b, and in a forthcoming book.

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Appendix 1 - Leaders Interviewed

	INTERVIEWEE*	POSITION	INSTITUTION
1.	Derek Bok	Former President	Harvard
2.	Kim Clark	Dean	Harvard Business School
3.	Amy Gutmann	President	University of Pennsylvania
4.	Patrick Harker	Dean	Wharton School
5.	Jeremy Knowles	Former Dean	Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard
6.	Henry Rosovsky	Former Dean	Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard
7.	Lawrence Summers	President	Harvard
8.	John Heilbron	Former Vice Chancellor	Berkeley, University of California
9.	Shirley Tilghman**	President	Princeton
10.	George Bain	Former Vice Chancellor	Queen's University, Belfast also Dean of Warwick Business School and London Business School.
11.	Glynis Breakwell	Vice Chancellor	Bath University
12.	Bob Burgess	Vice Chancellor	Leicester University
13.	Ivor Crewe	Vice Chancellor	Essex University
14.	Howard Davies	Director	London School of Economics
15.	Anthony Giddens	Former Director	London School of Economics
16.	Alan Gilbert	VC and President	Manchester University
17.	David Grant	Vice Chancellor	Cardiff University
18.	John Hood	Vice Chancellor	Oxford
19.	Andrew Pettigrew	Dean	Bath School of Management
20.	Richard Sykes	Rector	Imperial College
21.	Eric Thomas	Vice Chancellor	Bristol University
22.	Nigel Thrift	Vice Chancellor	Warwick University
23.	Bill Wakeham	Vice Chancellor	Southampton University

* Interviews were conducted in 2005 as part of a larger study.

** President Tilghman was asked to comment on my work (see Goodall 2005) for the newspaper The Princetonian. Statements from that interview in are included in the book.

Interview Schedule

(The questions that appear in bold are the ones that feature in this paper.)

1. What do you consider the most important element of your job?
2. Did you select your own top management team after you started?
3. Whose role do you believe it is to write or construct the strategy for the university?
4. How important do you consider the RAE to be? (UK VCs only.)
5. How much can a VC influence the RAE and generally raise the research quality of a university? (UK VCs only.)
6. How involved are you in investing/de-investing in academic departments? (UK VCs only.)
7. Taking you back to the appointment process, were you aware of what the selection committee was looking for in terms of a candidate? Did you feel that you sold the panel a strategy, or alternatively did you fit a predetermined type that they were looking out for? (UK VCs only.)
8. (Author explains her research and statistical findings about top universities being led by top scholars.) Why do you think the correlations exist?
<u>Note:</u> The interview schedule used with UK vice chancellors was expanded upon. This is because I interviewed the US cohort early in the research process. The questions became more focused as the study progressed.

Appendix 2 - Universities in the sample

1. Birkbeck College, London
2. Brunel University
3. City University
4. Goldsmiths' College, London
5. Herriot-Watt University
6. Imperial College, London
7. King's College, London
8. London School of Economics
9. Open University
10. Queen Mary and Westfield College, London
11. Queen's University, Belfast
12. Royal Holloway, London
13. UMIST
14. University College London
15. University of Wales, Bangor
16. University of Wales, Swansea
17. University of Wales, Aberystwyth
18. University of Aberdeen
19. University of Bath
20. University of Birmingham
21. University of Bradford
22. University of Bristol
23. University of Cambridge
24. University of Dundee
25. University of Durham
26. University Of East Anglia
27. University of Edinburgh
28. University of Essex
29. University of Exeter
30. University of Glasgow
31. University of Hull
32. University of Keele
33. University of Kent at Canterbury
34. University of Lancaster
35. University of Leeds
36. University of Leicester
37. University of Liverpool
38. Loughborough University
39. University of Manchester
40. University of Newcastle
41. University of Nottingham
42. University of Oxford
43. University of Reading
44. University of Salford
45. University of Sheffield
46. University of Southampton
47. St Andrews University
48. University of Stirling
49. University of Strathclyde
50. University of Surrey
51. University of Sussex
52. University of Ulster
53. University of Cardiff
54. University of Warwick
55. University of York