

# Becoming Vice Chancellor

April 2021

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# Introduction

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Higher education has been struggling with a leadership identity crisis since the deregulation of student numbers and increased marketisation. The pandemic has created a perfect storm where institutions must innovate or risk failing their students and the communities they serve. Market conditions, social restrictions and urgency in the need for more leadership diversity combined with Office for Students regulation and unsympathetic public scrutiny means that organisations must think more creatively about what good leadership looks like and how best to assess that skillset.

GatenbySanderson has been speaking with recently appointed Vice Chancellors to explore their experiences on the journey to becoming a Vice Chancellor. We are incredibly grateful for their candor and insights.



# Context

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In 2008, the LfHE (now Advance HE) published a report on The Characteristics, Role and Selection of Vice Chancellors.<sup>1</sup>  
*The objectives of the study were to:*

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1. Analyse the changing patterns in those characteristics of vice-chancellors (VCs) which are a matter of public record (i.e. largely socio-demographic data) and create an interactive electronic database to summarise these key data for VCs in post between 1997 and 2006

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2. Provide a more detailed examination of the characteristics (competencies, career structures and trajectories, training for management, and so on) and roles of VCs by interviewing a sample of serving VCs

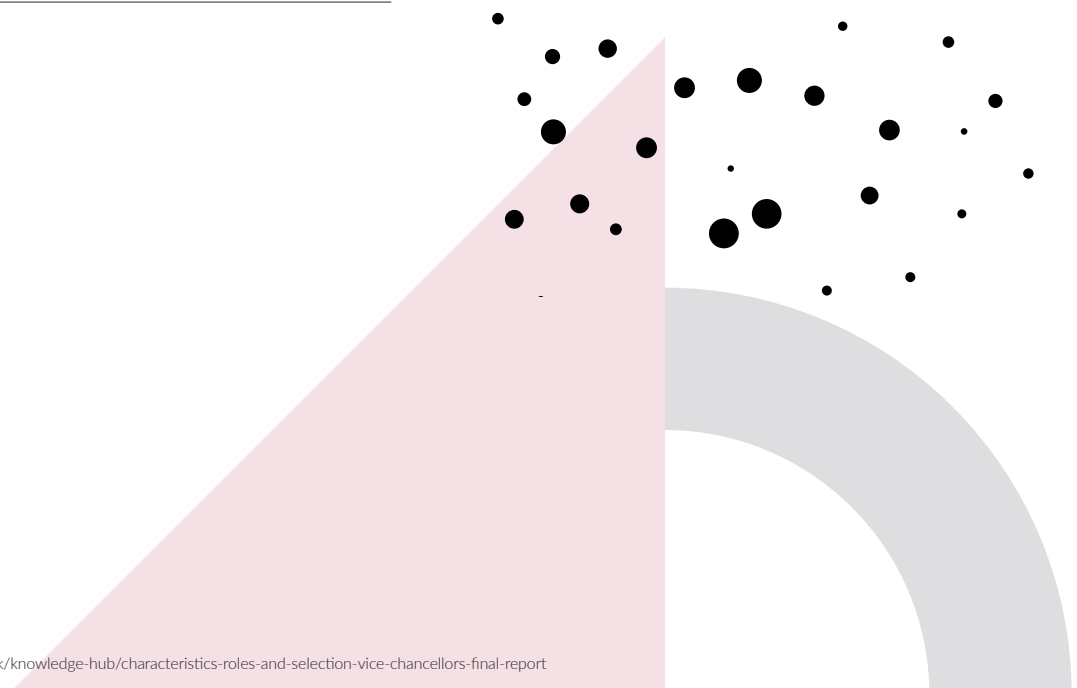
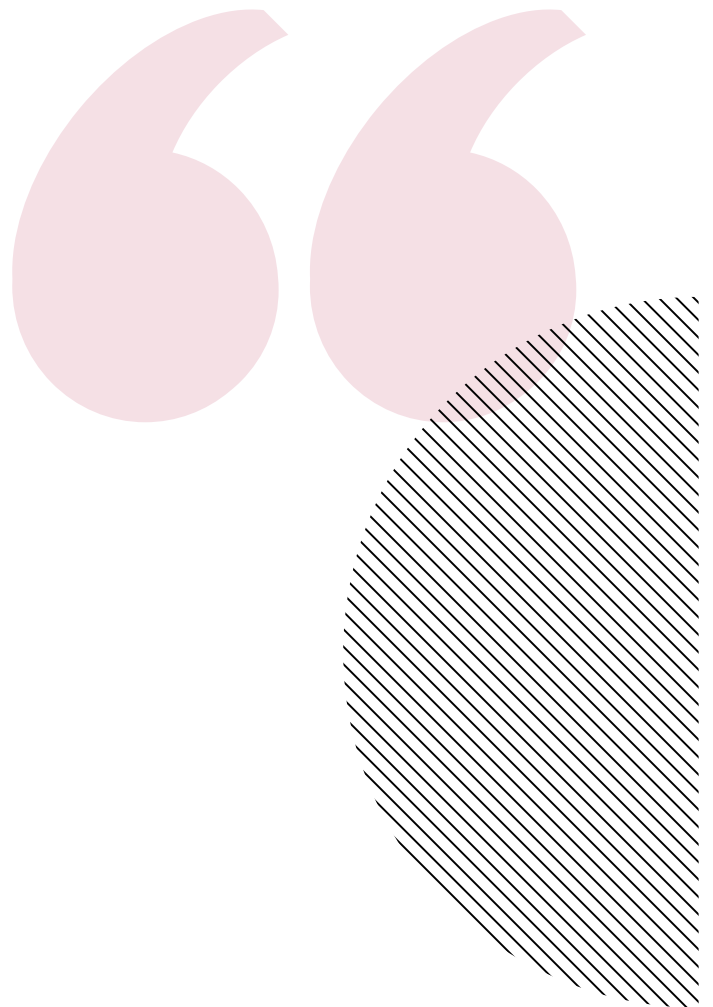
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3. Examine changes over time in the required desired characteristics of VCs – as reflected in job specifications and advertisements

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4. Explore the methods used to recruit VCs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/characteristics-roles-and-selection-vice-chancellors-final-report>

# Our Interviews

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During the last two months, Julia Roberts (Practice Lead, Education) and Tessa Harrison (HE Partner) at the executive search firm, GatenbySanderson, have undertaken a series of interviews with VCs who were appointed into their role since 2018 to examine some of these objectives again. *We found some similarities and some marked differences between the two. In 2008, the interviewed VCs pointed to four main competence areas:*

## 1. Academic-related characteristics

An emphasis on academic credibility, achieving influence and understanding how a university works.

## 2. Business-related characteristics

Being financially aware as an essential skill.

## 3. Managerial/leadership characteristics

The importance of playing a transparent and ambassadorial role internally, externally and locally. The importance of knowing how to build an effective senior leadership team and establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between the VC and members of the governing body were seen as critical.

## 4. Personal characteristics

Self-confidence; acting with confidence and instilling confidence in others; being 'thick-skinned'; being 'outgoing' and 'gregarious', able to enthuse about the institution, being a good communicator, having considerable intellectual and physical stamina. Having the capacity to be a 'visionary leader' was cited by every VC interviewed for the 2008 study.

The 2008 report also discussed the role of executive search firms in the recruitment of VCs noting that the market was then, as now, dominated by a small number of firms. The study concluded there was an immaturity in how executive search firms and institutional search committees worked together to really understand (a) the scope of the role specific to each institution, (b) the search to find appropriate candidates, (c) how to design effective candidate assessments.

# Our 2021 Interviews

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Since 2008 much has changed in HE. The external funding and regulation context is unrecognisable and the demands on university leaders have unleashed a bewildering plethora of articles, thought leadership pieces, podcasts etc. discussing the current state and future needs of university leadership all against a backdrop of strained industrial relations, louder calls for more diversity at senior levels, significant financial pressures on institutions post-Brexit and the global pandemic and the deepening consumerisation of higher education.

Our 2021 interviews with 9 VCs appointed since 2018 and two aspiring VCs who were actively involved in recruitment processes when we spoke with them were undertaken on the basis of semi structured confidential interviews. *The individual and organisational leadership challenges associated with the pandemic framed all of the interviews which addressed the following areas:*

Career to date and motivations for wanting to be a VC

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The recruitment process

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Leadership qualities, skills and experience

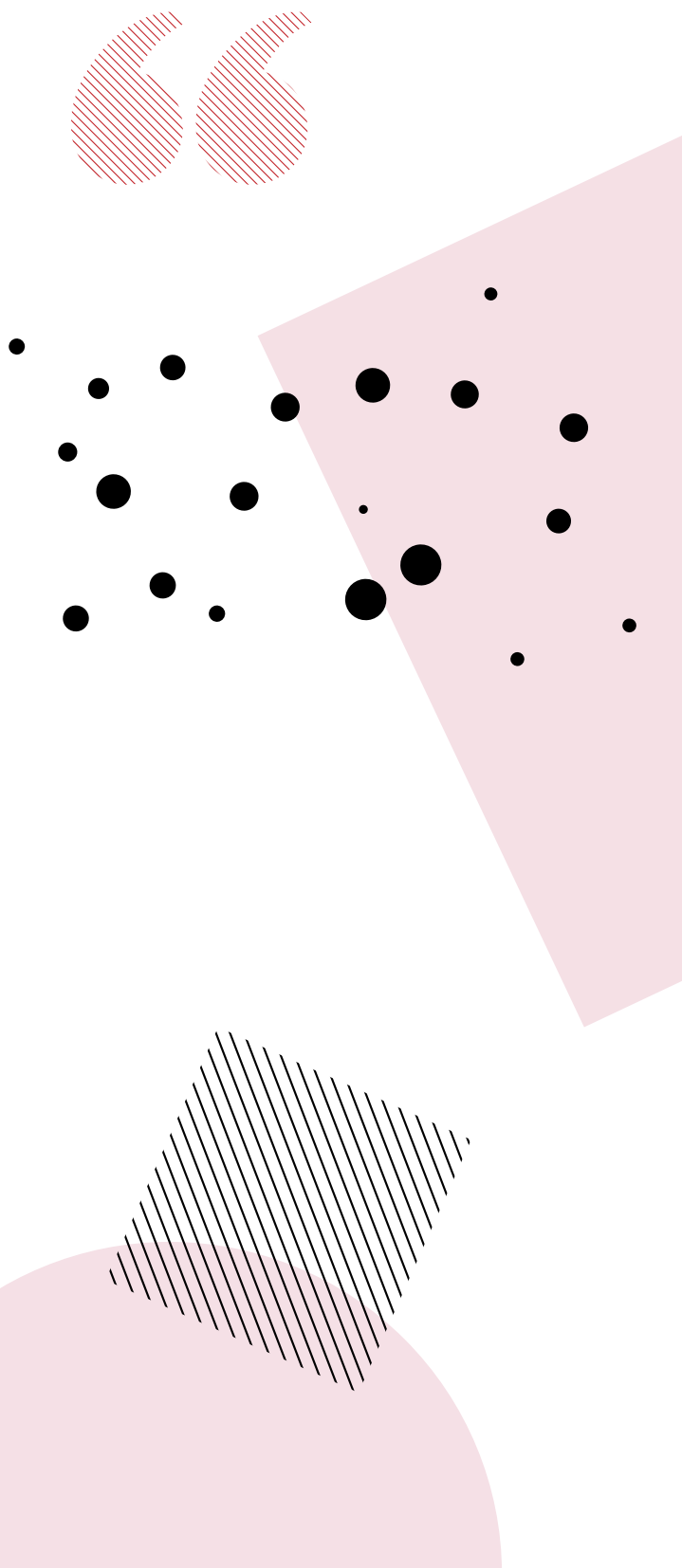
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Building the leadership team and the leadership pipeline

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Relationships with the governing body

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# Career to date & motivations

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Of the VCs and aspirant VCs we interviewed all but two had come up through the recognisable academic route. Some found they had a natural aptitude for and interest in leading as they progressed through their leadership careers; others were motivated by seeing others doing the role less well than they increasingly felt they could do themselves and others were being regularly told they were ready for it by others including head-hunters who 'built expectations on your behalf.'

## The recruitment process

Interviewees reported variable experiences of the recruitment processes they had been involved with.

*They key themes arising from our conversations were:*

### Candidate care

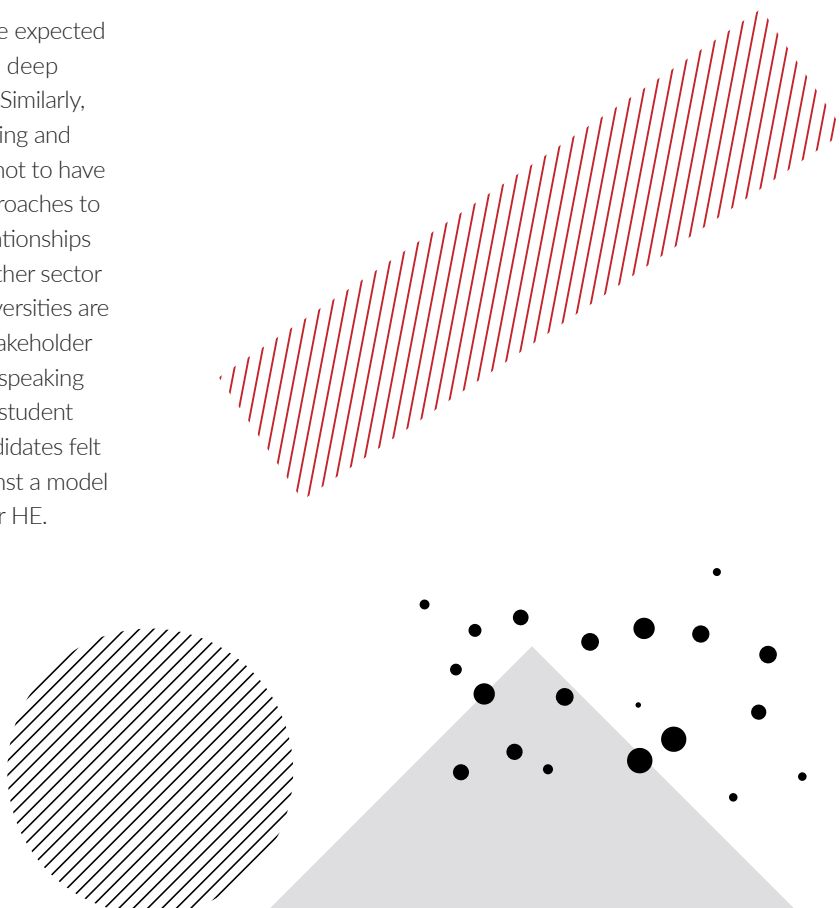
Although the basic executive search process is essentially the same across the firms used, the candidate experience is hugely variable and even 'random' with candidate care for unsuccessful candidates almost non-existent leaving candidates with a sense of being 'dropped like a stone'. We were told of instances where there had been little communication with candidates throughout a process and little human empathy for the emotional effort, time and sheer exhaustion involved in applying for such a senior role. We heard of many instances where relatively junior level consultants undertook perfunctory interviews with candidates who felt their principled based responses to questions just 'went into a void'.

### Assessment

As the Chief Accountable Officer, VCs would have expected more testing around their financial acumen and deep understanding of running complex organisations. Similarly, given the importance placed on external networking and the VC's ambassadorial role, VCs were surprised not to have been asked more about their experience and approaches to building positive sustainable partnerships and relationships within the sector and beyond it, especially with other sector leaders in the cities and regions within which universities are based. There were some excellent examples of stakeholder engagement in the selection process with Chairs speaking with all candidates; candidates meeting staff and student groups etc. There were also examples where candidates felt the point of the exercise was to be assessed against a model of leadership no longer appropriate or relevant for HE.

### Internal candidates

Getting the recruitment and onboarding process right for internal candidates can be difficult. Sometimes internal candidates can suffer from being included in a process because no-one in the institution wants to tell them not to apply; the process can feel like a disengaging tick-box exercise especially when there is a preferred pre-determined view of the successful candidate. Being completely honest with internal candidates was felt to be a critically important role for executive search firms to play. Often institutions didn't themselves know how to treat internal candidates often making assumptions about what they knew or didn't know about the institution and treating them differently to external candidates.



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### Skeletons in the cupboard

We heard about the challenge of finding the 'skeletons in the cupboard' that had not been identifiable throughout the recruitment process; another said they wished they'd known more about the unsaid things and that there had been more honesty about what hadn't been achieved and what the difficulties really were. One VC attended an open day incognito as part of their recruitment process which provided a unique perspective they were able to draw on in the formal stages and to shape their priorities for change.

### Psychometric profiling

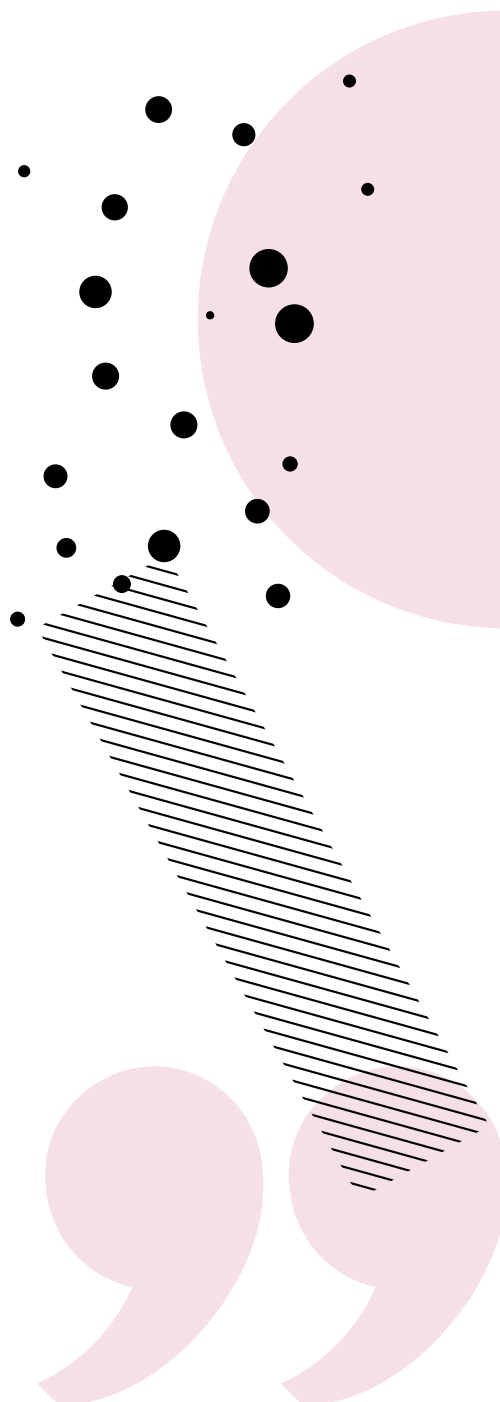
Is variably used in the recruitment process but may not be being translated or rolled forward into the setting of developmental objectives for the appointed VC. One VC noted the importance of ensuring profiling tools are testing/exposing the right things for HE leadership with one example relating to the use of tools more suited to a manufacturing environment.

### Chemistry

A high degree of emphasis is placed on the chemistry between applicants and the institution throughout a VC recruitment process (or courtship process) while at the same time there appeared to be little discussion of individuals' values and principles with a tendency to focus more on the future – how would you do/deal with type of questioning.

### Bias

It wasn't clear that the current approaches to recruiting VCs tackle issues of recruitment bias (unconscious, confirmation, conformity etc.) noting the comment above about chemistry and importance of the euphemistically called 'culture fit'.



# Leadership qualities, skills & experience

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We invited interviewees to reflect on how they defined their leadership qualities before and since becoming a VC and what they would have said before and now about the most important skills and experiences for a VC to have. *The key themes arising from the interviews were:*

## Personal resilience

The stress levels of being a VC are remarkably high, none more so than during the last 12 months. The management of multiple spinning plates, the relentless examination and public scrutiny requires an ability to cope with the highs and lows of the role more evenly. Underestimating the need to keep the breaks between work and home when you are effectively on call 24/7 was recognised. One VC was advised by a much more experienced VC that in management the first six months of being in role something will test your capacity for leadership and self-management – all the VCs we spoke to are still leading their institutions through the pandemic with some dealing with additional high pressure crises.

## Leadership style

Learning how to lead when you're not an expert requires an openness to learn and ability to draw on the expertise of others to inform and make decisions. In this way VCs have to understand their role as creating the environment for others to have ideas and create the solutions to problems. Surrounding yourself with great people requires a degree of humility and commitment to setting a context for open and action learning together. The importance of 'human-ness' (emotionally intelligent); being authentic (walking the walk of your values and ethics); admitting vulnerability and letting 'people feel they can know you as a person and trust your motives' came through strongly as key leadership qualities for the C21st VC.

## Skills

Whereas in 2008 the emphasis was on characteristics we explored the skills needed to do the job of being a VC. Key skills were highlighted as financial management, understanding how to read and use numbers and data; people and culture transformation; risk management; strategy and the capacity to see the strategic direction through strong analysis of the possibilities of the future. Communication skills were identified as possibly the most important of all. For one VC the role didn't require new skills but the skills they did have were 'on steroids' requiring energy to keep up the momentum and keep the pace moving. Asking candidates to 'tell me what x would look like and use examples from your experience to date' was seen as being too superficial place to start the conversation from; what is needed are more challenging questions about what candidates understand about the institution, its locale and its culture.

## Loneliness of the role

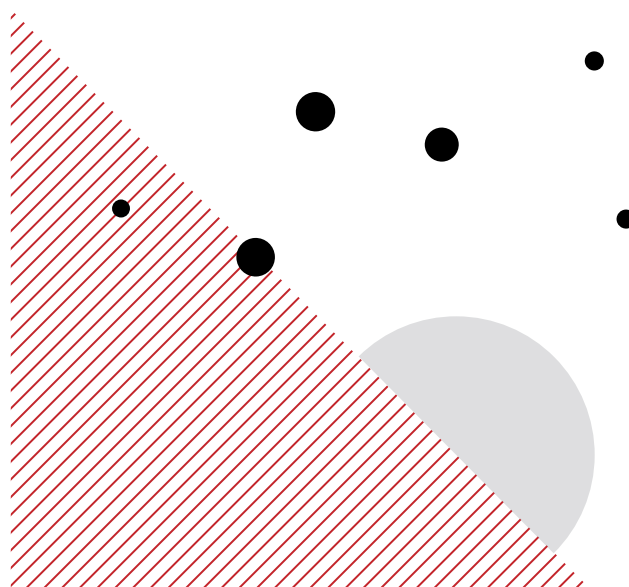
Being a VC was described by most but not all as a lonely role even when there is a strong leadership team in place. One VC described the role as like 'being the goalkeeper facing a penalty'. VCs talked about feeling like the only one who is thinking about the whole picture with everyone else looking only at their bit of it. Several of the VCs referenced action learning sets they belong to as being invaluable spaces for sharing and appreciated the candour and support of other VCs who despite the increasing sector competitiveness remain generous with their time and advice.

## Imposter syndrome

For VCs without the traditional academic background the imposter syndrome associated with the lack of an academic career path can weigh heavy. Conversely, leading large scale transformation programmes from the position of being a professional services director or chief operating officer was suggested as being arguably better preparation for the change management challenge ahead of most UK VCs.

## Year 2

The second year of being in role was identified as a key transition point. After sorting out your first 100 days, settling into the rest of your first year, year two can feel odd as you ask yourself whether you're making a difference, whether anyone is noticing, whether the culture is changing etc.





# Building the leadership team & leadership pipeline

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The first thing a new VC has to get to grips with is whether they have the people around them they can trust, who have a common purpose and are speaking with one voice and the necessary culture of empowerment and personal responsibility and accountability. We invited interviewees to talk to us about the changes they had or were considering making to their senior teams and also to reflect on the state of their leadership and talent pipelines. *Key themes were:*

## Integration

VCs talked about joining institutions where roles and structures reinforced hierarchies and silos making co-operation difficult. Many of the VCs we spoke to are involved in modernising their structures to address the centre (them) and departmental (us) mindset preferring to create larger academic units to improve integration and leadership career progression opportunities. The need for a blended approach of cross cutting teams working on cross cutting problems was highlighted as needing different leadership approaches. One VC referenced a performance framework they had put in place in which an agreed set of shared integrated KPIs across the leadership team has been developed and that there would be no pay rises if those KPIs aren't delivered.

## Self-actualisation

Coaching to support aspirations and build belief at every level of the leadership pipeline was recognised as being an important institutional responsibility. Often the conversation about leadership potential happens too late especially at the point of transition to the critical Head of School/Department.

## Professional services leadership

VCs talked about the importance of drawing together the strengths of the whole team and especially drawing positively on senior administrators recognising the strategic importance of the enabling strategies to deliver the academic core mission of a university.

## Academic leadership and management

The historical approach to rotating academic department heads is changing and leading to more open competition and refreshing of leadership roles through external appointments and the use of executive search firms. The need for more consistent approaches to academic management and building confidence in academic management skills at every level is going to be critical to organisational success and sustainability.

## Inclusion

It was suggested to us that the focus on the leadership pipeline is perhaps too narrow. Many institutions are paying attention to improving leadership diversity through their academic career frameworks, but some VCs were clear that recruiting diverse candidates must go hand in hand with a focus on building a inclusive culture and that people from diverse backgrounds shouldn't have to work harder than everyone else to progress -

## Out of sector candidates

There is still much to do to challenge the inherent conservatism and 'limited mindset/frame of reference' around out of sector candidates with evidence of continuing reluctance on the part of governing bodies to risk 'getting it wrong'.

# Relationships with the governing body

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We heard a great deal from interviewees about the relationship with their governing bodies and the impact of that relationship on them personally and on the wider institution. One VC suggested that 40% of the VC's role was spent working with the Board and that preparation for this mission critical element of the role was limited. We invited interviewees to reflect on how their relationship with their governing body had changed since they became VC and on what support they thought their governing body would need going forward. *Key themes were:*

## One size doesn't fit all

Different institutions are in very different places in terms of their strategies and priorities. Some of the VCs we spoke to were concerned that Boards may not always understand what the real academic mission priorities are of their institution and how these shape the requirements for finding the next VC. Governors need to be helped to understand that running a university is not as straightforward as the organisations many of them will have come from and to recognise the influence and importance of academic autonomy and curiosity. Helping governing bodies to understand the nature of the university, what the university needs and how that gets translated into a set of expectations is critical.

## What good looks like

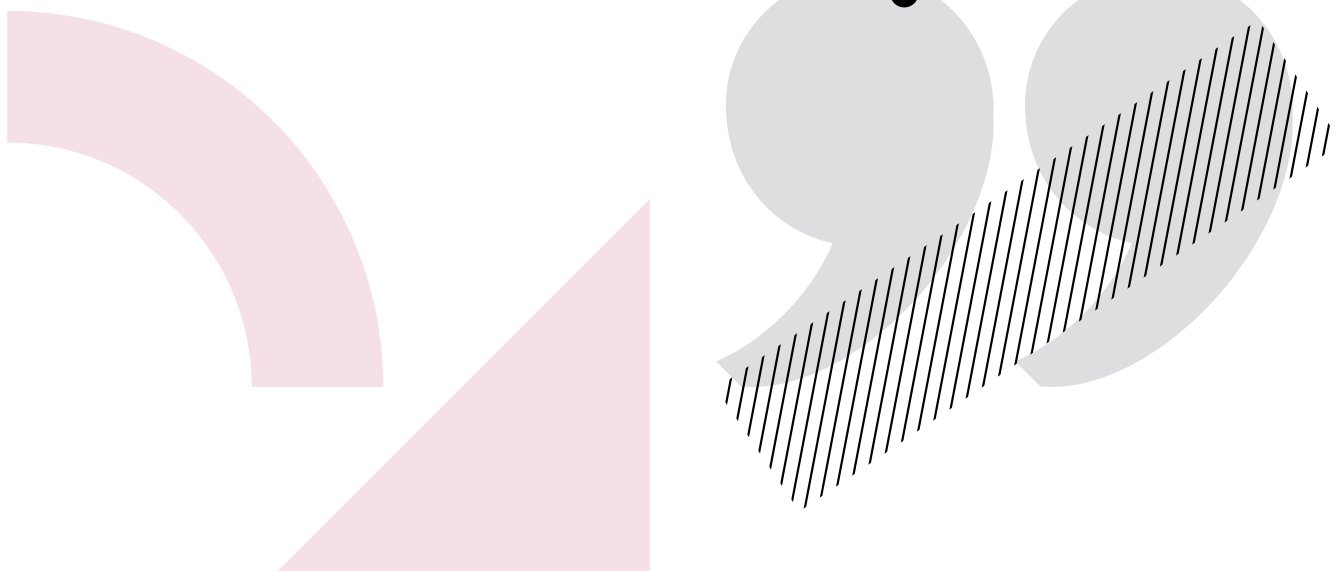
Governing bodies' knowledge about what a good VC looks like often comes from working with the previous VC as a result of which they may be clearer about what they don't want than what is actually required at a particular point in time. Different universities need different leaders at different times – understanding the experience and qualities required of a VC is critical and a better understanding of the job to be done could lead to some opening up of traditional assumptions about where the next VC might come from (for example a model in which the CEO is a non-academic with a Chief Academic Officer who is an academic might work in some circumstances).

## The Chair as line manager

The role of the Chair as the VC's line manager is perhaps not as well understood or executed as it might be and may not be being tested when Chairs themselves are appointed. Attention needs to be paid to the recruitment of individuals who were described to us as 'serial collectors' of the Chair role especially at a time when the role of university governing bodies has become more complex and under more scrutiny.

## Governor experience and expertise

There was a widespread view that it was important to get better at drawing on the experience and expertise of governors. One VC has 1:1s with each individual member of their governing body to support them with their role. The governing body is a team in its own right with its own requirements around team formation, behaviour and culture change. It was suggested that for some universities to be the universities they want and need to be there will need to be a wholesale shift in governor recruitment.



# Advice to aspirant VCs

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We invited interviewees to tell us what advice they would give to aspiring VCs. *Their advice was:*

## Patience

Take your time, don't try and get there too early. You're ready when you're ready. Becoming a VC should be the highlight of your career. The step up from being in a thematic PVC role to VC is massive and so a period as DVC was thought to be the best preparation for aspirant VCs to provide time to learn how to do the bigger role and also to shape your own leadership narrative and motivation for becoming a VC.

## Personal values

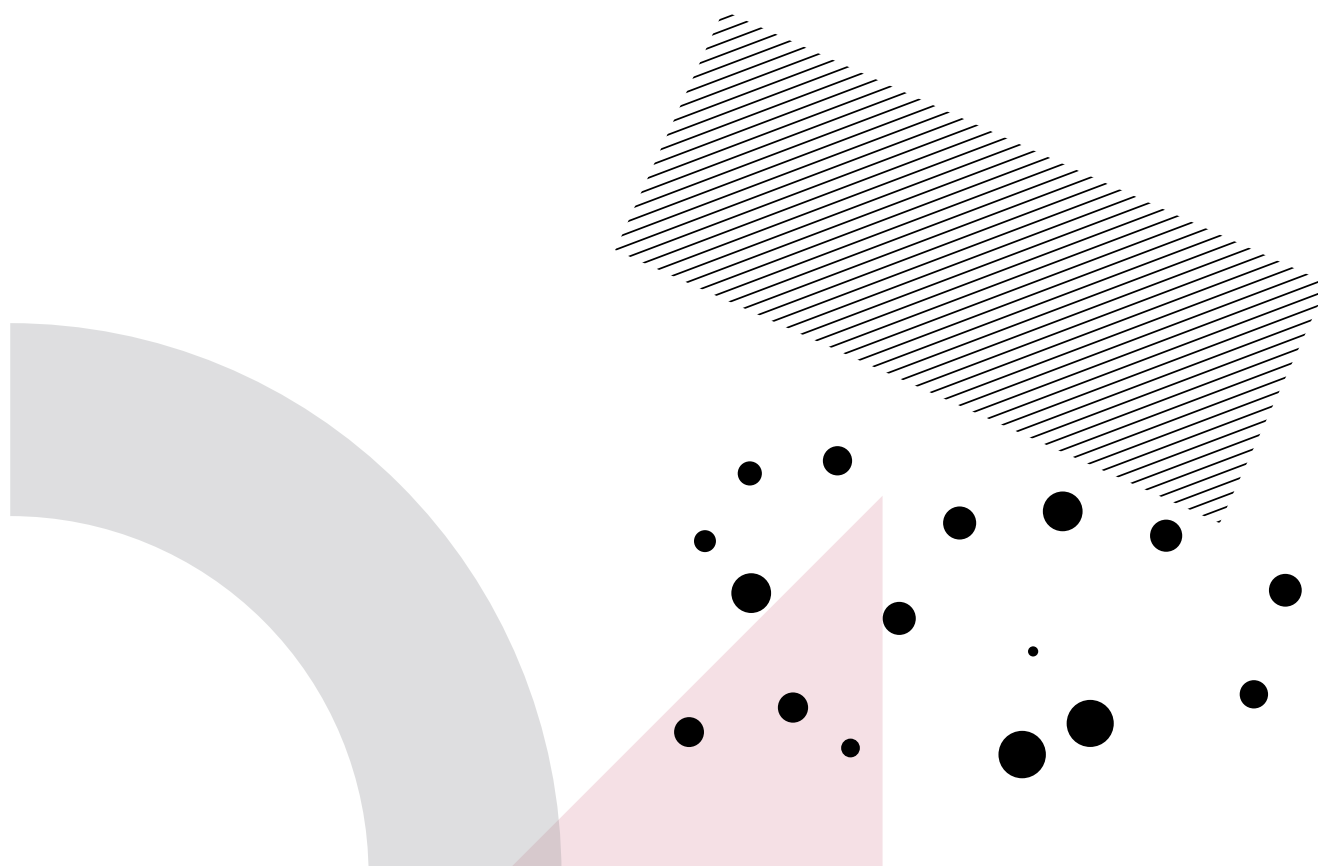
Understand your own values and principles – these will guide everything you do, every decision you make as a VC – do your values and principles align with those of the institution you are applying to lead? How does the institution look through these – aligning your personal values with the corporate values is more important than you might think. Use your values and personal principles to develop your personal brand – who you are / how will you express who you are and what's important to you – one VC went as far as to suggest that “if you don't know yourself you can't run an organisation of the size and complexity of a university”. Be selective about which VC roles to apply for; don't apply for every role going.

## Role complexity and balance

Prepare for the multi-dimensional nature of the role and the relationships needed to make a university work and learn how to prioritise. Building the confidence of the internal (senior leadership team; students; trades unions; wider staff group), the governing body and the external (place-based leaders, politicians, other sector leaders) is a constant balancing act and one which requires your time and energy.

## Executive search

Learn how to work with executive search firms. It wasn't always clear what questions could be asked of head-hunters and when during the processes that VCs had been involved with; whether informal conversations with search consultants were really interviews and what judgements were being formed that could impact on career prospects. The role of executive search has evolved to become as much about individual career development and supporting clients with the development of their leadership pipelines as running the traditional search and selection process.



## Concluding remarks and next steps

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We are incredibly grateful to the VCs and aspirant VCs who gave us their time and candour. Without exception we met highly motivated, passionate advocates of the transformational powers of higher education. Some of the challenges facing recently appointed VCs are disappointing in their persistence. The issues of over complexity, lack of performance management, under-developed leadership pipelines and lack of diversity have been discussed as challenges facing HE leadership for many years now.

The diversity of the HE sector creates the space for different leaders and yet there remains much to do to broaden and diversify the pool from which university leaders are selected. Very few VCs are recruited from within their institutions with the tendency still being to use executive search firms to look outside institutions to find their next VC.

In 2019 Michael Spence (then VC of the University of Sydney and since January 2021 the Provost of UCL) wrote in THE,<sup>2</sup>

*“it is an odd characteristic of our sector that we have traditionally asked people to manage incredibly complex institutions ... with little formal preparation for the challenges that they will face. [At Sydney] ... we have focussed very closely on leadership development to ensure that our academic leaders have a clear understanding of their work in strategy, talent management, philanthropy and external engagement; to equip them with the technical skills that they need to do their jobs ...”*

*The key conclusions from this research are:*

### Leadership Pipeline

Put simply if our HE institutions don't invest in leadership at every level there won't be any leaders in the future.

### Assessment

Recruiting the best leader means knowing exactly what you are looking for and aligning your search and assessment strategies to what your institution needs at the particular moment in time you are looking. The executive search firm's role is to provide the space from the very start of scoping the leadership role to challenge assumptions and biases.

### Candidate Care

It matters how an organisation and its preferred executive search firm treats candidates. Candidates must feel better about themselves coming out of a search and selection process regardless of the outcome.

<sup>2</sup> THE, September 2019

# The leadership experts

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GatenbySanderson is the UK's leadership expert spanning Education and broader public services. We work within complex markets that are subject to high degrees of governance and public scrutiny and organisations at the heart of social and policy change.

Our reach and networks extend across Central and Local Government, Health, Defence, Housing, Not for Profit, Regulation, Faith organisations and the wider Education sector. We build long term, intelligent relationships and provide outstanding people care to support strategic corporate and academic leadership appointments at Board and Executive Level.

Whether identifying your next Vice Chancellor, devising top team or board development programmes, creating more inclusive teams or driving through organisational change initiatives, we partner with organisations to provide future ready leadership, improve board performance and accelerate change. We provide positive challenge, creative strategies and a rigorous process to those organisations looking to introduce or develop new talent, while managing risk.

We deliver diversity with one of the largest track records of senior diverse appointee - under-represented groups make up 60% of all appointees. Our focus upon intersectionality, lived experience and social background offers a more nuanced approach to inclusive search strategies, where we adopt a creative, lateral approach to access influencers and shapers.

We achieve some of the highest levels of candidate and client care within the industry. Using the globally recognised customer service metric of Net Promoter Score (NPS), we achieve a 'world class' rating putting us in the top quartile of professional services industries globally.



Julia Roberts  
Practice Lead, Education  
[julia.roberts@gatenbysanderson.com](mailto:julia.roberts@gatenbysanderson.com)

Tessa Harrison  
Partner, Higher Education  
[tessa.harrison@gatenbysanderson.com](mailto:tessa.harrison@gatenbysanderson.com)

## **GatenbySanderson Offices**

### **Leeds Office**

14 King Street, Leeds, LS1 2HL  
Telephone 0113 205 6071

### **London Office**

WeWorks, 8 Devonshire Square,  
London, EC2M 4PL  
Telephone 020 7426 3960

### **Birmingham Office**

New Oxford House, 16 Waterloo Street,  
Birmingham, B2 5UG  
Telephone 0121 644 5700

[www.gatenbysanderson.com](http://www.gatenbysanderson.com)