

Risk, Reward, and the Shifting Priorities for Vice-Chancellor Selection

A 10-YEAR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
VICE-CHANCELLOR RECRUITMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

JAMIE CUMMING-WESLEY | 2025



Recent Dynamics in UK Higher Education

UK higher education has undergone myriad changes over the past decade, experiencing significant turmoil and volatility. Most recently, changes to immigration policy and international student recruitment more generally have required universities and their leaders to adapt quickly and respond decisively. There is arguably now more scrutiny than ever on universities and their leaders.

As higher education evolves, it is no surprise that the leadership at the helm is changing, too. At a recent dinner with chairs of university governing bodies and several vice-chancellors, I shared my observations about shifting priorities in academic leadership selection — a perspective initially met with healthy scepticism. This conversation crystallised what I had been witnessing across 30 VC appointments that I supported over the past decade: a re-ordering of leadership priorities that transcends institutional boundaries, with the pandemic accelerating rather than initiating these changes. This shift represents an evolution in how universities identify and select their VCs, with implications for both institutions and aspiring academic leaders.

The evolving criteria for leadership selection are evident across numerous dimensions: first, the ability to partner effectively and strategically with an institution's local and regional ecosystem has become an essential requirement. The ability to lead both cultural and operational change within an academic context is also seen as increasingly vital, alongside an expectation that VCs will have a deeper understanding of strategic finance. Furthermore, renewed focus on partnerships, collaboration, and non-traditional funding sources requires VCs to be able to communicate the institution's vision to an ever wider range of external stakeholders. Finally, and perhaps most presciently, these VCs need to be confident dealing with risk.

While these criteria were certainly important prior to 2020, chairs and selection committees have placed a premium on these traits, particularly in recent years, demanding deeper engagement with these attributes during the hiring process compared to the period prior to the pandemic. These trends have pervaded the entire sector, regardless of the size or mission group of the institution.

Research Framework: A Decade of Vice-Chancellor Appointments

In order to bolster these market observations, WittKieffer completed a proprietary analysis of vice-chancellor appointments at UK higher education institutions over the past decade, examining 40 leading UK universities (Times Higher Education Rankings, 2025). Utilising publicly available data, this study examined the educational backgrounds, research areas, and career paths of all VCs appointed in the five years prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (defined as Era 1: from January 2015 to December 2019) and the five subsequent years (defined as Era 2: from January 2020 to January 2025), which comprised 50 VC appointments in total.

The mission groups defined for this dataset were: Russell Group; non-Russell Group research-intensive; and non-Russell Group teaching-led. Non-UK universities were categorised in the most relevant of the categories, based on rankings, research intensity, and/or membership of specific defined mission groups in the university's geography.

This data provides a statistical basis for showing the shift in risk appetite of selection committees for VC appointment between Era 1 and Era 2, and notably provides a nuanced picture of the changes that have occurred to date. The results and corresponding analysis reveal three significant shifting priorities in VC selection criteria: increasing risk aversion in the selection process, the persistent influence of institutional reputation, and the growing importance of international leadership experience.

Shifting Priority #1:

The Selection Process is Becoming More Risk Averse

Looking across both eras combined, 30% of appointments had existing VC experience. However, looking more closely at these profiles unearths some insights surrounding risk appetites of selection committees.

In Era 1, 44% of appointed candidates with prior experience as a VC moved from one mission group to another. This compares to just 17% in Era 2. Looking at the entire picture of appointments throughout the time periods, 40% of VC appointments involved a change of mission group for the successful appointee in Era 1, compared to just 28% in Era 2.

This suggests that familiarity with the specific requirements and nuances of universities within distinct mission groups has become an increasingly relevant consideration for selection panels. The results indicate that hiring someone who understands and can tackle the complexity associated with a specific mission group, with experience in a highly comparable environment, is now a more important consideration.

So previous VC experience, it seems, is no longer the key differentiator it once was. Of course, demand still remains high for this small pool of individuals, but for the VC hires overall, this trend indicates that “sector-specific” experience (in the context of mission group) is viewed as more relevant than being an incumbent VC.

There are many potential causes for this: the challenges facing institutions without mission groups may be becoming more idiosyncratic; the (typically large) selection panels are placing an increased premium on evidence of successful leadership in a highly comparable — rather than distinct but transferable — setting; and — with some notable outliers — the sector as a whole has become more risk averse in its selection of its leaders. This increased risk aversion and subsequent conservatism in selection appears attributable to the increasing and significant financial pressure faced by the sector. Anecdotally,

the final line-up for selection panels often comprises two appointable, but distinct, profiles: a “high risk, high reward” profile and a more traditional choice. The latter is chosen in the majority of cases, and this phenomenon has perhaps increased in recent years.

A further indication of a risk-averse approach may be implied by a noticeable shift in the academic research backgrounds of the appointed VCs: in Era 1, 55% of VCs had a background in STEM or a quantitative subject; this rose to 68% in Era 2. This shift could well be attributed to the increasing popularity of quantitative degrees and the high-impact, (typically) well-funded research in this area. However, it also could be another facet of this move towards risk aversion, prioritising a mindset of “success via statistics”.

Furthermore, although often discussed at the early points of VC selection processes, candidates from outside higher education are rarely appointed and, in practice, rarely make the shortlist. This is unsurprising, given the risk aversion exemplified by this preference for experience with mission group specificity. In my experience, voices calling for non-traditional or out-of-sector VC candidates have become comparatively weaker to prior to the pandemic.

One facet of the hiring process that has remained consistent between Era 1 and Era 2 is the sheer size of selection panels. Innovative selection methods including split panels and psychologist-observed stakeholder sessions may have become somewhat more common, but the composition and scale of selection panels has remained consistent. These groups often include non-executive members of the board alongside representation from the university’s academic community. These two distinct groups can have different priorities and this variation requires awareness that a “compromise candidate” who mollifies both groups may end up being chosen over a bolder and more radical appointment.

Shifting Priority #2: Institutional Reputation Seems to Play a Crucial Role

There are, of course, many formal and informal mission groups and communities of universities across UK higher education, from the well-established Russell Group to the more informal Wesley Group. Although each mission group brings a unique set of strengths in terms of research output, teaching, and student experience, our analysis showed that there is a significant premium placed on academic leaders from Russell Group institutions in the selection of a new vice-chancellor.

As outlined above, hiring a VC from outside a university's mission group is becoming increasingly rare. However, our analysis over the past decade revealed that when first-time VCs are appointed at a university within a different mission group, 100% of these appointments moved from a Russell Group institution to a non-Russell Group research-intensive university. Scale of leadership and both domestic and international rankings are key considerations for selection panels, something that theoretically can be evidenced by specific mission group membership — though even within the Russell Group there is huge disparity in relation to those two criteria.

Although market experience and conversations have not necessarily revealed experience at an institution from a particular mission group to be an active check-list item, an amount of store is placed by selection committees on the reputation of the institution where a candidate is currently operating. The data supports the notion that this factor has a greater influence relative to other important considerations — and, notably, this has remained consistent throughout the past decade.

Academia internationally has historically been strongly rooted in tradition and established institutions. Arguably, prestige, name recognition, and institutional reputation remain especially pronounced in the UK. Press releases, university promotional materials, and other media outreach may potentially reward an appointee from a specific mission group, but a particular mission group background as a criterion in and of itself, without further scrutiny, is arguably a less relevant consideration than possession of the specific leadership attributes needed for a specific university.

Shifting Priority #3: International Leadership Experience is a Key Emerging Consideration

If institutional reputation plays an increasingly significant part in selection decisions, how might an international dimension play into this narrative? Having high-quality, appropriately skilled candidates from well-ranked institutions based in other parts of the world on the shortlist is undoubtedly a good thing, and can make a selection panel feel proud to have attracted such a broad and global field. There has been a recent tradition of appointing new vice-chancellors from Australian institutions, namely with appointments at the University of Manchester, King's College London, University College London, Aston University, and Birkbeck, University of London.

The data suggests that international leadership experience has become an increasingly important criterion. In Era 1, just 24% of VCs had leadership experience at a university outside of the UK. In Era 2, this figure increases to 40%. There are a number of reasons why universities may favour a VC appointment with international experience. Effective leadership in a different geographical context can bring fresh approaches to the UK. For example, the ability to lead pan-institutional change appears more credible when one's skills have not been developed "within the system". Furthermore, a strong focus has been placed by UK universities in recent years on increasing recruitment of international students and faculty — an institutional priority that an internationally-appointed VC would surely align with. The trend outlined above towards hiring from Australia appears to be a result of it being a geography where leadership characteristics essential for leading large institutions are developed within a comparable higher education system, at least in the eyes of selection panels considering candidates from that part of the world.

However, I have observed that VC longlists — although, notably, not shortlists of larger and more prominent UK institutions — contain a great deal of geographical diversity, spanning candidates from all continents. The fact that these highly qualified leaders do not typically advance to the shortlist could be attributed to a number of factors that intertwine with the previously identified priorities mentioned above: the risk involved in operating within a different academic system and academic culture; reputational considerations surrounding ranking that surpass leadership ability; or a regrettable tendency from some advisors to lead a selection candidate away from a perceived "risky" shortlist to ensure a positive outcome. Incidentally, the current social and political climate internationally means the UK could potentially have its greatest opportunity in decades to attract talented leaders from overseas, and particularly the US, to its university leadership positions. The recent proliferation and rapid development of the Provost role at UK higher education institutions over the past decade would surely facilitate this further.

Once again, there is a potential reputational consideration, with attraction of talent from overseas and subsequent reputation as a global player viewed as a broader positive for the institution. However, it could be argued that most institutions — when it comes to selecting their shortlists for VC recruitment — have a narrow definition of what constitutes relevant international leadership experience. In some cases, candidates are viewed first and foremost through the QS ranking of their current institution without further scrutiny.

A More Radical Approach?

Recommendations for Vice-Chancellor Selection

These identified trends point to an opportunity for UK higher education to attract a greater range and diversity of leadership to its coveted vice-chancellor community with even a slightly higher tolerance for risk and a greater interrogation of a candidate's international leadership experience.

For selection committees looking to put this approach into practice, I recommend the following.

Redefining Selection Criteria:

- Prioritise demonstrated leadership ability and transferrable skills over institutional prestige, requiring concrete examples of transformative leadership regardless of institutional context.
- Deliberately deprioritise mission group alignment in favour of leadership capabilities that transcend traditional boundaries.
- Adopt more sophisticated competency frameworks that clearly articulate the specific leadership capabilities required to succeed in meeting a particular institution's unique challenges.

Expanding Candidate Pools:

- Ensure shortlists contain candidates from less traditional backgrounds, whether in terms of geography, academic background, or leadership experience.
- Extend the search timelines to enable thorough screening of international markets before examining UK candidates.

Restructuring Selection Processes:

- Redesign selection panels to enable calculated risk-taking, either through split panel interviewing or by reducing committee size.
- Appoint at least one external panel member with CEO experience from outside higher education to challenge conventional thinking.
- Implement robust psychological assessments that provide data-backed evidence to support appointments that may appear higher risk but offer greater potential reward.

Strengthening Post-Selection Support:

- Develop comprehensive, tailored onboarding programmes delivered by experienced advisors for newly appointed VCs, particularly for first-time VCs or international appointees.

These measures can help ensure that UK higher education can access the diverse and fit-for-mission leadership talent needed to navigate this increasingly complex and challenging environment. By embracing calculated risk rather than defaulting to conservative choices, universities can position themselves to thrive in the coming decade.

Embracing Bold Leadership for an Uncertain Future

Higher education in the UK stands at a critical juncture, facing unprecedented challenges and greater uncertainty. The data presented reveals a concerning paradox: whilst universities pride themselves on being centres of innovation in research and teaching, their approach to selecting vice-chancellors has become increasingly conservative precisely when the sector most needs transformative leadership. This disconnect threatens to undermine the ability of UK higher education to navigate the complex challenges ahead.

Looking toward the next decade, universities that thrive will likely be those willing to reconsider their approach to leadership selection and deliberately seeking candidates with diverse experiences and proven change management capabilities. For university boards and selection committees, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity to attract visionary leaders needed to reimagine higher education for the 21st century. UK higher education has long been defined by its creativity, innovation, and intellectual boldness; its approach to selecting the leaders who will shape its future could reflect these same qualities.

About Author

A Senior Partner in WittKieffer's Education Practice, **JAMIE CUMMING-WESLEY**, based in Edinburgh, brings significant experience advising and supporting universities and other research-intensive institutions on senior appointments at board, vice-chancellor, and executive levels. His knowledge and networks across higher education both in the United Kingdom and internationally enable him to source from global talent pools for the most senior roles. Jamie can be reached at: Jcumming-wesley@wittkieffer.com



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