

ROUTE TO PRO VICE CHANCELLOR EDUCATION



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Executive Summary

This report marks the third in a trilogy of reports published by Berwick Partners examining the typical leadership portfolios of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Following on from our "Route to Pro Vice Chancellor Research" and "Route to Pro Vice Chancellor International" work, we now come to "Route to Pro Vice Chancellor Education" (PVC-E) where we examine the array of progression routes into the post, the backgrounds of those currently in position, the structure of the role, and key emergent themes we see across the portfolio.

Drawing on data from 108 UK-based HEIs which have a dedicated senior leader with institution-wide responsibility for the strategic and/or operational development of educational provision, we consider trends in gender balance, disciplinary background, ethnicity, and previous executive-level experience. Through qualitative interviews with a representative sample group of sitting Pro Vice Chancellors Education (PVC-Es), across all mission groups and sizes, we explore the parameters of the role; common values across the post holders; leadership skills endemic in the post; challenges facing the portfolio; career paths into the role; health of the talent pipeline; and advice for aspirant PVC-Es.

This report provides evidence to support popularly held ideas about the community of post holders. It also brings to the fore personal experiences and the values that resonate with the PVC-E community, and shines a light on the experience of post holders from minority backgrounds.



Introduction

We agree that the primary purpose of a university is to discover, disseminate, and develop new knowledge through research and education. Therefore, it is useful to understand the full breadth of one of the senior-most university positions responsible for a third of that purpose.

As with our previous White Papers, we were not surprised to learn that there was not a huge variance in the responsibilities of the PVC-E role. The job title does manifest in lots of ways, but on the whole, there are relatable aspects in all of the interviews that we undertook.

The most heartwarming content was without a doubt the passion that all post holders brought to their role. In straitened times it was a reminder of the contribution that graduates make to society and the willingness of the sector to endeavour to give them the best education possible.

Related to this was the fact that much of the jargon and metrics associated with the student experience did not feature in our discussions. In the main, the tone underpinning conversations was about ensuring students are exposed to a rich education that enables them to grow and develop critical thought. Yes, specific job-ready skills did feature, but this was very much about learning in the round, rather than hard targets related to graduate outcomes. For those who may worry about the commodification of the sector, this should be heartening news.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with sector-wide institutional data analysis to explore the structure, values, leadership skills, challenges, and career trajectories associated with the PVC-E role in UK HEIs.

Qualitative Interviews

A total of 30 interviews were conducted with current and former PVC-Es or equivalent senior leaders responsible for education, learning and teaching, or student experience. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted either via video conferencing or telephone.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit insights into:

- The structure and scope of the PVC-E role
- Leadership values and skills
- Strategic challenges
- Career progression and talent pipeline viability.

Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. Themes were iteratively refined and validated through cross-case comparison.



Institutional Data Analysis

In parallel, data was collected and analysed from 108 UK HEIs, focusing on:

- Gender
- Disciplinary background
- Ethnicity
- Direct previous experience
- Publicly available leadership biographies and role descriptions.

This analysis provided a sector-wide contextual backdrop to the interview findings, enabling triangulation and identification of structural patterns and variations across institutions.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent. Data has been anonymised where appropriate and no quotes are attributable.



What is the role?

The PVC- E role consistently encompasses (but not exclusively):

- Curriculum design and delivery
- Quality assurance and enhancement
- Student experience and outcomes
- Staff development vis-à-vis teaching and learning
- Some academic career pathways.

PVC-Es operate across faculties and services, often without direct line management, requiring influence through collaboration and strategic alignment. They invariably sit at the top table so have insight, access and input to strategic direction, but it is notably important that they understand what is happening “on the ground” in terms of the day-to-day experience of the student. More than one respondent commented that during their time in University, they had no idea who the Pro Vice Chancellors or Vice Chancellor were and they don't think that this should be the case. There was a palpable desire to be visible and heard, even from those individuals who were leading in very large institutions.

PVC-Es are champions of inclusive education. They lead initiatives that support widening participation, close awarding gaps, and ensure that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed. They oversee the design and delivery of curricula that are relevant, inclusive and responsive to student needs. This includes adapting assessment strategies to be more authentic, accessible and aligned with real-world skill demands.



Everyone that we spoke to was very alive to the extent to which the student body is not homogenous, and it was clear that there are no “magic wands” in terms of making sure the “shape” of the institution meets need. Instead, there was an appreciation of the importance of the authentic student voice in decision making. This is seen as an ongoing endeavour, rather than ticking a box, and there is clearly thought and resource being put into making this meaningful.

Degree awarding outcomes or, more particularly, gaps therein are clearly a critical consideration. Data from Universities UK indicates that progress is broadly moving in the right direction¹, but respondents were in tune with the nuances within this. The use of data to understand the student demographic and subsequent success was notable, and it is apparent that s PVC-Es are on top of their brief, thinking and flexing with regard to how to deliver better outcomes.

Strategic Importance to the Institution

PVC-Es are responsible for maintaining academic standards and leading quality enhancement. They ensure that teaching and learning align with regulatory frameworks and institutional goals. As education becomes increasingly digital, PVC-Es are at the forefront of integrating technology into pedagogy. They lead on staff development, AI literacy, and the ethical use of digital tools.





The role bridges academic faculties, professional services, and external stakeholders. PVC-Es often lead on broader themes like sustainability, employability, and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). In a financially constrained sector, PVC-Es balance ambition with pragmatism, delivering high-quality education while managing limited resources, with bonus points for bringing the Student Union onside.

Interestingly, student recruitment very rarely sits with the PVC-E. In many respects this is unsurprising as this is often a cyclical, volume based, operational part of the world of academia. However, we can't help but wonder if there could be a more explicit and dynamic link between the strategic aspirations of the University vis-à-vis the quality of education and the levers that are used by recruitment teams.

Values-led Leadership and Cultural Influence

Many PVC-Es bring a deeply personal commitment to the transformative power of education. Their leadership is often grounded in empathy, collaboration, and a belief in the collective good. They mentor future leaders, support teaching-focused career pathways, and advocate for recognition of educational excellence. Whether responding to AI, post-COVID realities, or shifting student demographics, PVC-Es are key agents of institutional change.

In short, the PVC-E is a strategic, at times operational, values-driven position that shapes the heart of the university's mission: to educate, empower, and transform lives.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

“Mattering”

Interestingly, whilst the language related to students has traditionally focused on “belonging” the word “mattering” now features highly too. Therefore, the PVC-E holds the reins of a somewhat esoteric value that will mean different things to different communities and individuals.

“We should focus more on 'mattering' rather than 'belonging'... we all want to come to campus and matter.”

In a world where we consistently evaluate metrics such as student numbers, destinations and academic performance, the centrality of “mattering” serves to underline the transformative effect that university can have on people’s lives. There is little doubt that the PVC-E is central to this on account of the influence they have upon teaching and learning. One respondent talked about how she has worked hard to ensure colleagues see the students as individual people. Increased numbers have in some areas led to a less personalised admissions process and somewhat scant resource across the student journey.

Whilst the PVC-E may not be able to massively increase resource, they can inculcate the right culture that creates opportunities for students to succeed, rather than boundaries to hold them back.

One might argue that in smaller institutions, it is easier for the PVC-E to understand the real-time student dynamic and have closer proximity to the individual. Certainly, in Small, Specialist Institutions (SSIs), where



there is a narrower disciplinary focus, it is simpler, but often resources are more scarce and commonly, more responsibilities appear to be part of the portfolio. This can include digital transformation, which is often expensive and there may not be much technical support in play. We will talk about this in greater depth, but it is worth noting that it is an evolving subject that is firmly on the PVC-E's list of priorities.

A shared commitment to placing students at the heart of institutional strategy was evident across all interviews. PVC-Es consistently advocate for inclusive practices, equitable access, and the transformative power of education.



What does it feel like for students “on the ground?”

Research² has demonstrated that the proportion of students who live at home, rather than in shared accommodation or halls, is rising. Equally, there is a significant uplift in students returning to live at home in their second and subsequent years. These numbers increase still further in certain regions where the cost of living is particularly high (i.e. the Southeast).

Furthermore, the number of students in paid work during term time is rising swiftly. In 2020 only 42% of students were working; this has now risen to 69%³.

This creates a different learning dynamic as students have less spare time to study, may be undertaking a longer commute, and might not be able to commit to “regular” hours on campus. This study states that 34% of those who work say it has a somewhat negative impact on their studies. So how does the PVC-E “shape” a learning experience that balances quality and outcomes with the inclusion of students who are unable to operate within a traditional learning model?

As with many complex problems, there is no easy answer. Each institution has flexibility with regard to their timetables and levels of support but, as ever, resources have their limits and for some courses there are accredited aspects to learning that have to be respected. Doing the best with what is there is key to the PVC-E role but so is ensuring that colleagues appreciate the contemporary student dynamic.

“Assumptions breed inequity. It is easy for academics to assume that their experience as a student is the same as it is now. It isn’t, and the PVC Education needs to build an understanding of this at all levels of the institution.”



Advocacy

The PVC-E is the person who portrays this altering student dynamic at the top table. Therefore, they have to advocate for changes in approach to teaching and learning. In some more traditional settings, the notion that students shouldn't work so that they can devote more time to their studies still prevails. It can be about emphasising that without paid work, students cannot afford to study. So, how can PVC-Es make that a possibility without diluting their education?

Some of this is structural through hybrid learning, micro-credentials⁴ and, to a much lesser extent, boot camps⁵. This is, of course, a vast departure from how academia has operated in the past, thereby demanding that the Pro Vice Chancellor takes colleagues on a journey. This is a big ask.

The 2021 report by Education Support "Supporting Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education⁶" states that individuals working in Higher Education are at high risk of work-related stress and poor wellbeing. This is no doubt compounded by the current financial precarity of the sector and successive rounds of redundancies. Therefore, the appetite to work in different ways to acquire new methods of pedagogy is unlikely to be front and centre of colleagues' minds. The PVC-E has to use their power of influence to ensure the student agenda maintains momentum.

Clearly the Teaching Excellence Framework is a critical measure for institutions, but as a subject, it came up surprisingly little. There is no doubt that league tables matter in terms of driving student recruitment, but again, they did not come across as being "the tail that wags the dog."

Indeed, it was striking how often interviewees described their leadership style as values-led and driven by a belief in the transformative power of Higher Education. Each PVC-E we spoke to alluded to a deeply humanistic and mission-driven approach to leadership. These leaders are educational stewards, committed to equity, inclusion and the transformative potential of Higher Education. Their work is grounded in empathy, collaboration, and a belief in the collective good, shaping institutional culture and student futures alike, rather than chasing positions on league tables.

"PVCs for Education will tell you they're not ambitious for themselves, it's about the collective good."



The shape of the workforce

Growth in student numbers has, of course, made a rise in teaching-only contracts necessary in UK Higher Education. The 2023 HEPI report⁷ authored by Celia Whitchurch, Associate Professor at the Institute of Education at UCL, analysed HESA's datasets and summarised:

“the number of staff in teaching-only roles increased by 80%. Thus, the proportion of total academic staff with contracts described as teaching-only increased from almost 25% to almost 35% between 2010/11 and 2021/22. Of those staff who do teach, at the start of this period 32% were on teaching-only contracts, a figure that increased to 45% in just 12 years.”

Many of our interviewees talked about what they perceived to be a growth in interest from staff with regard to teaching/teaching and scholarship routes (as opposed to traditional teaching and research). Here, colleagues were genuinely driven by the opportunity to educate others, and it is felt that this is driven in no small part by the tone that is set by the PVC-E.

"A facet of my role is to infect others with the commitment and enthusiasm for the student experience in its totality."



That said, there are many moving parts to teaching and learning, even in a relatively modestly sized environment, which means that PVC-Es need to be excellent at spinning plates.

“As a professional, time is my biggest headache.”

There is a lot that is measured and regulated, but often decision-making needs to balance long-term vision with short-term pragmatism, particularly with regard to market-driven activities such as student recruitment.

Here, interviewees talked about how they have built their internal channels of communication and checks and balances to enable good decision making in a timely manner. Several respondents talked about the extent to which the pace of an institution is not in line with the dynamics of student demand and expectation. This underlined the extent to which the role of PVC-E is a dynamic one and perhaps aligned less closely with what is the perceived ‘traditional model’ of academia.

“You have to be willing to make decisions based on imperfect information, and make people feel safe.”



The digital space

"COVID was a really useful burning platform; it made us all leap forward in the use of our digital technologies and innovate. AI is similar in moving people's ideas forward on assessment."

As with many other parts of the economy, Higher Education is trying its best to navigate the onslaught of AI. One might argue that within academia, the pursuit of knowledge is as important as attainment of knowledge, which could make AI abhorrent!

However, there is an undeniable reality that it can make our lives easier and, crucially, make organisations more efficient. Furthermore, students expect digital capability to be core to their personal experience and to what they learn. Indeed, they are using it already and want to do so responsibly. In HEPI and Kortext's 2025 Student Generative AI Survey⁸, only 13% of respondents felt that their institution encouraged them to use AI and a mere 36% believed they had been given support to improve their AI skills. This indicates that there is still a distance to go, and it is invariably the PVC-E that leads from the front.

Interestingly, most interviewees felt that colleagues in their institution do have an appetite for change and recognise that AI can bring benefits to teaching and learning. Yet they also felt that for many (maybe particularly those who research and teach), their discipline is their priority, rather than the student, which slows the willingness to change at pace. A recurrent theme throughout conversations, and





indeed, this report, is the extent to which teaching and learning can play second fiddle to research. There is a genuine surge of opinion that this balance is realigning, but sadly not perhaps as quickly as it could do.

Of course, AI is only one part of the story, and the good news is that according to JISC⁹, 83% of students rated their university's online learning environment as excellent, good or best imaginable. Clearly, online learning environments have been part of the picture for a longer time than AI, but it does prove that teaching and learning is evolving, and students are engaged in that journey.

But equity is one of the most complex issues that a PVC-E will face. Access to data, functioning Wi-Fi, availability of suitable devices and an appropriate environment to work in were all subjects that came up in said JISC survey. These are granular questions that often relate to socioeconomic demographics and geography, once again demanding the PVC-E's ability to develop structures that can respond to a student's individual needs.

"Digital Education is Education, and Education is Digital"



Career Path to PVC Education

None of the interviewees we spoke to described a rigid or pre-planned trajectory into the PVC-E role. Instead, their careers evolved through a combination of opportunity, recognition, and responsiveness. Clearly an early and sustained interest in students and educational inclusivity was there, but rarely was it recognised as being the key career pathway.

Interestingly, a surprisingly large number of interviewees had careers outside of academia prior to joining a university. Whilst further research would be required as to the prevalence, what was notable is the extent to which those individuals drew upon skills from outside of the sector.

From joining academia, PVC-Es' career progression often involved moving from course/programme leadership in the earliest days of management, through to School or Departmental-level roles, followed by cross-institutional leadership roles, with increasingly strategic scopes. Words that came up frequently in our conversations include; "visible," "opportunistic," and "values-driven" in that these qualities enabled them to be recognised for their contribution and passion.

"Get stuck in, do the things that are out of your comfort zone and do your best. That's what gets you known and out of your own sphere of influence."

Several interviewees noted the challenge of balancing or transitioning from research-focused roles to educational leadership, especially in systems where research was historically valued more highly than teaching. As mentioned previously, it does feel as though this culture is changing, although HEPI and Professor Nicola Dandridge's 2023 report¹⁰ on the relationship between teaching and research in UK universities underlines the fact that the two activities are becoming increasingly separate from each other, which might perpetuate the perceived status of teaching as opposed to research (despite the sentiment we sensed in our interviews).

Assessment of the Talent Pipeline

Some interviewees expressed confidence in the availability of passionate and capable individuals who could step into the PVC-E roles. Indeed, the sheer delight that most respondents have for their job convinced us that they would be superb advocates to lead this portfolio as a career objective.

"It's a brilliant job, the best job I've ever had. This isn't the second-best option, it's the best."

Interviews also suggest that the talent pipeline is increasingly supported by sector-wide initiatives, mentorship and leadership development programmes, like those offered through Advance HE and also those located within institutions.

However, once again, there is concern that traditional academic pathways and institutional cultures may not adequately support or recognise those pursuing teaching-focused leadership. Whilst most agree that we are far better advanced with regard to the perception of teaching, some interviewees reflected on the importance of recognising non-research-led profiles, especially within Russell Group institutions.



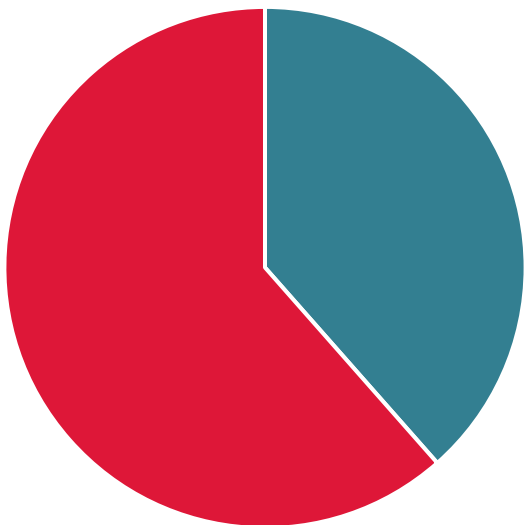


Demographics

Drawing on data from 108 UK-based HEIs which have a dedicated senior leader with institution-wide responsibility for the strategic and/or operational development of the educational provision, we have considered trends in gender balance¹¹, disciplinary background, ethnicity¹², and previous executive-level experience.

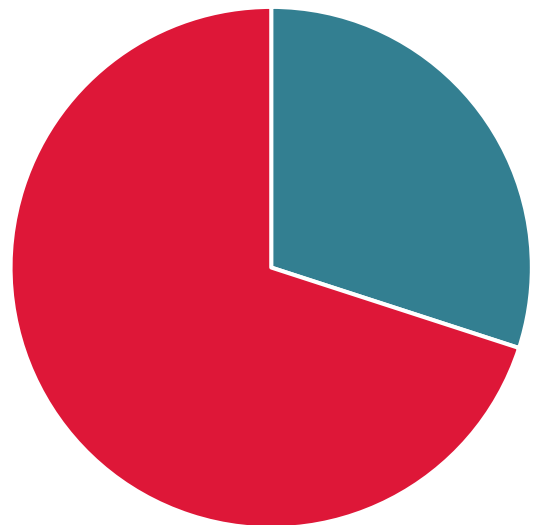
This data was current as of July 2025, and includes two PVC-Es who are in a job share. Much of the data supports popularly held ideas about the make-up of the PVC-E community; it is majority female and draws predominantly on academics from Humanities disciplines.

Gender Distribution of PVC-E Staff



■ Male ■ Female

Disciplinary Background



■ STEM ■ Humanities



Across the general population, 70% of PVC-Es come from a Humanities background, versus 30% from a STEM background. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the single most common discipline across the whole cohort was Education, which accounted for 17 female and five male PVC-Es.

But a closer inspection of the data raises important questions about how selection panels are assessing the strength of PVC-E candidates from a global majority background. 89.9% (98) of sitting PVC-Es are white, compared to 10.1% (11) from a global majority background. Out of the global majority PVC-Es, 45% have a STEM background, compared to 30% in the general population. Breaking it down further, four out of the six global majority female PVC-Es have a STEM background.

And even more interesting is the data that emerges when we look at the number of post holders who are in their first PVC-E level position: for 71 current PVC-Es, this is their first PVC or other institution-level position. Of those who have held a similar level position prior, 28 are white, and six are from a global majority background. This means that within the white population of PVC-Es, 29% are in their second or subsequent PVC-level position. Within the global majority population of PVC-Es, 55% are in their second or subsequent PVC-level position.

Taking an even closer look at this, we find that four out of six (67%) female global majority PVC-Es are in their second or subsequent PVC-level position, compared to 32% white female PVC-Es.

This does raise some questions:

1. In a system that debatably values STEM disciplines higher than the Humanities, are those values disproportionately applied when assessing the strength of a candidate from a global majority background for a PVC-E role?
2. From an intersectional perspective, are female candidates from a global majority background having to prove the seriousness of their candidacies two-fold? Firstly, through their disciplinary background and secondly, through direct previous experience in the role?



Conclusion

Whilst such huge questions of funding and viability hang above UK Higher Education, it is easy to lean towards despair. Whilst it would be improper to not highlight the seriousness of the situation, it is also important that we recognise the exceptional transformational power of universities with regard to their students.

There is no doubt that the role of PVC-E is a tough one. Multiple competing demands operate against a backdrop of ever-increasing demand from students who are themselves struggling with considerations related to their own financial situation, mental health, the future of the planet and of course, the job market. Yet the positivity that radiated from our conversations was palpable. The role of PVC-E is inextricably linked with the culture of an institution and has a loud and clear voice related to equity and the importance of the student experience.

If you would like to ask any questions about this report or about finding your next leader in Higher Education, please email the Higher Education leadership team.



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