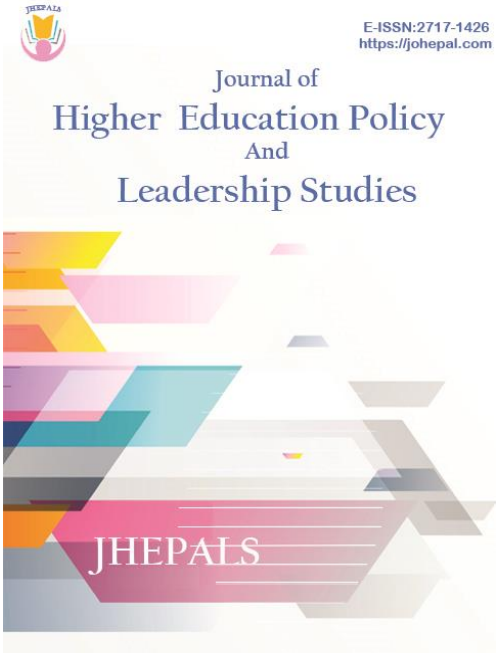
Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com



The Vice Chancellor in Australian Universities: Understanding Leadership Beyond 'Bad Apples' and 'Unicorns'

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Article Received **2022/02/07** | Article Accepted **2022/03/21** | Published Online **2022/03/30**

Cite article as:

Quinton, J., & Brabazon, T. (2022). The vice chancellor in Australian universities: Understanding leadership beyond 'bad apples' and 'unicorns'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *3*(1), 32-49. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.1.32

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.1.32]

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E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 3 Issue: 1
pp. 32-49
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.3.1.32

Abstract

Leadership in Australian higher education has confronted crises, threats, restructures, and embarrassment. From sexual harassment claims to nepotism, regulatory authorities have investigated individual Vice Chancellors and their behaviour. Such crises reveal the consequences of decision making and appointment processes. While COVID-19 demonstrated the institutional reliance on international students to ensure financial security, these weaknesses existed long before the pandemic. Through this troubled time, are there patterns or priorities that 'create' a Vice Chancellorship? How do researchers understand leadership in our universities, beyond 'a few bad apples' – to describe the excesses and improprieties – or the 'unicorns' that have trotted the golden path to success? This article arches beyond the individual cases that become tabloidized headlines. Instead, we probe if there are shared characteristics among Vice Chancellors, evaluating how career progression emerges in the higher education sector. This article also assesses the consequences of this leadership pathway on universities, particularly for building a post-pandemic future.

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Keywords: Higher Education; Leadership; University Management; Vice Chancellors; Australian Universities

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Introduction

Both writers of this article have occupied positions as middle managers in Australian universities. Both have moved, taught, and researched around the world during the last two decades. These experiences are important, as it has been a tough twenty years for the higher education sector. At the extreme – and horrific – end of this toxic history, academics have committed suicide because of the weight placed on them through workplace bullying and ruthless daily attacks from line managers with chaotic expectations. Good people and fine scholars have been structured out of universities in the interests of 'efficiency' and 'productivity.' Irrational, hyper-personal decisions have been masked through strategic plans, operational plans, and vision statements.

Watching the unpredictable decisions made through COVID-19 (Brabazon et al., 2020), the two writers of this article enrolled in a Master of Leadership degree programme. It is easy to talk about and critique leadership while holding a PhD, tenure and a (relatively) 'safe' academic post. However, it is much more challenging to understand leadership with expertise and research, rather than base an opinion on uneven experiences gleaned from a single institution's pathway through neoliberalism. Our personal and professional imperatives were to move beyond the anger. They must move beyond the rage. The goal is to locate meaningful models for university leadership and find a new way of understanding the Claustropolitan University (Brabazon, 2021a). Significantly, we wanted to discover a road out of continual crises, which predates but have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This alignment of the theoretical and empirical is important. As Anderson confirmed, "within weeks of its emergence, SARS-CoV-2 was galvanizing celebrity European philosophers and social theorists, most of them men in a vulnerable age demographic, to reflect publicly and plentifully on the meaning of the pandemic" (2020, para. 1). Most of the problems and flaws - including the financial reliance on international students, the treatment of academic staff by mediocre and often failing 'academic managers,' the marginalization of professional staff, inelegant research proxies for quality and impact, and technology-led decision making about teaching and learning – were already present and festering before the spreading virus switched a probing spotlight onto the sector. The challenge and meta-imperative of this article is to question how our universities can intensify and understand those concerns, to learn about leadership needs through and beyond the influences of COVID-19, and examine the institutional capacities to meet these needs.

Before addressing this trajectory for higher education, it is necessary to understand leadership as a pivot for change. Brabazon has published refereed articles on university leadership (Brabazon, 2016; Brabazon, 2020; Brabazon, 2021), demonstrating the profound errors made through decisions about online learning (Brabazon, 2002; Brabazon, 2008; Brabazon, 2013). Concurrently, the marginalization of women in Australian universities, and why they were and remain a minority at every level of seniority in Australian universities except the lowest of lectureships, remains a nagging, attendant issue (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020).

Beyond a lack of expertise in leadership, online learning and inclusivity, there are even more urgent matters to address. While both researchers of this article lived and worked in Adelaide, Australia, public revelations emerged that former Vice Chancellor Peter Rathjen - from the University of Adelaide - had perpetuated sexual harassment against women at

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three Australian universities. He used his position to not only sexually harass women but activated that same seniority to minimize and mask his actions. Three universities in Australia allowed this culture to continue. The gossip and rumours were dismissed as institutional chatter. Women suffered, and institution after institution (after institution) in Australia minimalized their experiences. It took an Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) investigation to reveal the scale of, and the consequences of, the institutional failures in covering up the behaviour of empowered Vice Chancellors (ICAC, 2020).

Then, when an opportunity emerged to hire a new Vice Chancellor, perhaps even a woman, the University of Adelaide chose Peter Hoj as the replacement. Mired in controversy over 'close ties' with China, such a reputation and history were dismissed as irrelevant (Frijters, 2020). Instead of a fresh start and cultural change, the University leadership chose another man with another problematic legacy. Women, the 'invisible majority' (Baxter & Lansing, 1993) remained marginalized. The capacity for trans and non-binary identifying scholars and leaders to hook into positions of power and develop a career in such a culture seem distant at best.

It would have been easy for us to write an article deploying feminist theory to probe higher education leadership. But we wanted to move beyond what Honig (2021) described as "a feminist theory of refusal". Therefore, we think deeply about leadership, but move beyond the feminist lens for this project. It is simple to cite the statistics detailing how women dominate undergraduate degrees and yet remain a minority in university leadership positions. This version of identity politics creates ideological gaps and inelegant proxies. Being a woman and maintaining feminist politics are two different entities. While the life experience of being a woman may frame feminist consciousness, it is important to log that feminism is an ideology, a theory, and a form of politics. Ovaries do not determine politics. Simply because more women are in leadership positions, does not mean that feminist imperatives will follow them into chancellery buildings. Indeed, women leaders – typically - slot into masculine communities of practice (Burkinshaw, 2015).

Through this turn of events in Adelaide in 2020, we decided to take a step back from the hot emotions and the volatile injustices. We wanted to understand how this series of events could emerge, without defaulting to reified theories of neoliberalism or misogyny. Therefore, we deployed unobtrusive research methods and harvested existing information about Australia's Vice Chancellors to examine their characteristics. This dispassionate method of data collection and organization offered a careful alignment of epistemology, methodology and ontology. It also allowed a testing of the argument offered in Aronowitz's *Knowledge Factory* (2000); as he argued that university leaders emerge as a 'third stream' in universities, populated by scholars that had underperformed in teaching and research. This group then led and dominated the academics who were successful teachers and researchers. His argument was provocative at the time, but through the two decades since it was published, has moved from a dystopic theoretical and evocative monograph into a documentary of the post-pandemic university. Authentic leadership is impossible. Ford and Harding (2017) were right; but without any connection between the Goffmanesque 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in the construction of a Vice Chancellor (1959), there is no demonstrated capacity or strategy for believability, validity, rigour or competency. Why would academics see credibility in Vice Chancellors who are not research active, rarely

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teach, hold no educational qualifications, and continually demonstrate an inability to understand how learning and knowledge is created, and how research is designed and disseminated?

Leadership in Australian higher education remains subject to continual testing and evaluation. The research literature in higher education offers an array of models, tropes and metaphors to interpret the outcomes of these tests. Hughes confirmed 'zombie notions of leadership' (2021, p. 1). He described 'excessive standardization (2021, p. 2) in higher education, as the countervailing forces of business and government determine the meaning and purpose of education. Leadership is zombified – a strong metaphor - because it has been voided of content and predictability, and yet is still walking. COVID-19 only increased this zombified crisis (Betts 2021). Some studies of higher education leadership have been comparative (White & Özkanlı, 2010; Bagilhole & White, 2008). Others have evaluated the role of entrepreneurship in the increasing 'Executive Power' of Vice Chancellors (Blackmore & Sawers, 2015). Researchers have also questioned the changing roles and qualifications of university presidents and provosts (Lavigne & Sa, 2020). Gender has been a specific area of focus, with the under-representation of women in the ranks of Vice Chancellors recognized (White et al., 2011).

Other tropes and topic areas are less discussed, particularly those regarding heteronormativity and the disciplinary preferences that lead into a leadership appointment. Our focus remains on elucidating patterns or priorities that align with the Vice Chancellorship at this time. The Vice Chancellor remains a singular role within a university. Like a goalkeeper in an Association Football team, each institution has only one of them. But are there common variables, characteristics and attributes shared by these Vice Chancellors? Conversely, if patterns cannot be recognized, are Vice Chancellors atomized and individualized, and their group composed of 'Bad Apples' (Brabazon, 2020), that behave beyond acceptable academic behaviours, or unicorns, mythical creatures beyond the reach of reality? Our goal is to understand how someone becomes a Vice Chancellor in an Australian university through examining the characteristics of the Vice Chancellorship. Using public information, an understanding of their expertise in teaching and research will be revealed, to grasp how these leaders continue to be hired in Australia. This is an unusual study that delves into University Media and public relations, to reveal the stories that institutions construct and convey about their leaders, and how these stories are reported.

Aronowitz (2000) was accurate in his labelling of higher education in the year 2000. Universities have become Knowledge Factories. The 'third path' – administration – is founded on mediocrity in teaching and research. The Vice Chancellor profiles confirm that this mediocrity is denied through a lack of detail about qualifications and avoidance of any avenues for verification of experience or expertise (Brabazon, 2021b). The metrics, the KPIs and the 'standards' that are constructed for others, and not verified or proven through the demonstrated ability of the leaders implementing them, is presenting a visceral cost to the higher education sector. Stefan Grim is a well-known and publicized academic suicide. He had been issued a 'stretch target' beyond his grasp. He paid for his failure – that was a failure of leadership and a failure of universities - by killing himself and sharing a suicide note as a distributed email after his death (Parr, 2014). He was a successful scholar who was pushed beyond what was legitimate, possible, or fair. That failure by and of leadership must be logged, studied, interpreted and its learnings disseminated.

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The project

How does career progression occur in universities? Positions are filled either through external advertisement or, when salary savings are a focus, internal appointment. Internal appointments emerge through the occupation of 'dead man's boots,' whereby progression transpires through seniority or the best overall but sub-optimal match, dominated by the perspective of the one to whom they report. In the same way that formal educational qualifications are not necessary for university teaching, prior leadership training is not a requirement for appointment to leadership roles. Strange decisions emerge from appointment panels, particularly when it comes to selection of leaders. Appointments are selected because the appointee will not threaten the status quo or the leader to whom they will be reporting. The intra-university announcement most frequently is constructed as follows: after an exhaustive international search, the Senior Executive confirm the appointment of Professor John Smith, who is currently the Acting Deputy Director to the Provost (Learning Design). The mediocre internal appointment subsequently moves from acting in the role to permanence with the ease of Carrie Bradshaw changing shoes.

The leadership models that can apply to this context vary from mindful (Bunting, 2016) to authentic (Thacker, 2016) and servant (Greenleaf, 1991). Member exchange models also have value (Sparks, 2020; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Daniels & Daniels, 2007). Yet because so many leadership models were derived from corporate spheres and private enterprise, the translatability and transferability to higher education is questionable. Such a capacity to move models through diverse sectors should not be assumed, even though Vice Chancellors are increasingly deploying the nomenclature of President and CEO.

Archetypes circulate that 'explain' the failed leadership in universities. The narrative is as follows: Vice Chancellors are narrow-minded, megalomaniacal white men from STEMM backgrounds with some form of elite academic pedigree or connection with a tier-one university, the proxy of which is institutions listed in the *Times Higher Education* ranking of the world's top 100 universities. The typical pathway is expected to be through research and a Deputy VC (Research) role because research income is the dominant performance indicator of quality, which easily slips into an affirmation of entrepreneurship and business acumen. The women who occupy these roles have replicated this narrative, often with even more ruthless pathways to leadership. While the academic workforce – buffeted by restructures, instability, and fear – may wish to believe this story, is it true? Is there any accuracy in this folk tale of power and leadership? Put another way, what is the role of favouritism and nepotism, and their behavioural consequences (Mhatre et al., 2011) upon the capacity of the contemporary university?

The research question that focuses our inquiry probes if there exists a formula, narrative or pathway to become a vice chancellor. To change disciplines and metaphors, is there a Proppian folk tale that reveals the functions to and through promotion and success (Propp, 1968)? Is there a paint-by-numbers strategy for high office in higher education? These questions seem simple; however, it is important to pause and ponder for a moment: How are subjectivity and subject positions managed through this inquiry? What is required is a methodology that parks the heightened emotions of ruthless restructures and unfiltered neoliberal ideologies. To stave these emotions requires a series of questions with empirically derived answers.

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1. Are there any specific or noteworthy commonalities possessed by Vice Chancellors? If so, what are they?
2. Are there unique characteristics that allow VCs to be distinctive and separated from the academic workforce?
3. Are there any noteworthy characteristics that they do not possess? What is absent from their profiles?
4. What rationale exists for public perceptions of Vice Chancellors upon review of these characteristics?

The outcomes of these questions will allow researchers and citizens to ascertain the meaning and applications of leadership in Australian higher education. More importantly, this research project hopes to initiate a conversation that can inform Chancellors – the chairs of Academic Councils and Boards – about the homological protocols they are enacting in their appointment processes. Or – indeed– their lack of appointment processes. Diversity does not simply 'happen'. Homology and homogeneity will continue while the characteristics and attributes of leadership in higher education are rendered invisible and taken for granted. Research and teaching standards in our universities have never been more accountable, measured and monitored. Yet the freedom of Vice Chancellors – through neoliberalism and the incorporation of failed corporate business models – remains relatively unchecked as Chancellors continue to be appointed from private business, and Academic Councils, who critically determine the trajectories of universities, are populated by members with neither experience nor expertise in higher education.

Research Design

This article focuses on Australian Vice Chancellors. To approach the research questions, data sets were gathered about the 40 Australian Vice Chancellors leading universities in June 2021. To locate the required information, public data were sought from free information sources such as University web pages and newspaper articles. Wikipedia pages were also deployed, not for accuracy, but for the public presentations of the Vice Chancellor's career. Social media sites were also considered but limited to LinkedIn, ensuring access to the professional profiles of individuals, rather than deploying accidental disclosure of private information. These sites were used to quantify various aspects of qualifications, disciplinary literacy, leadership experience, and other prominent factors. This approach allowed commonalities to be identified and measured through how many of the VCs possessed and deployed certain characteristics. These include their country of birth, declared gender, ethnicity and race-based identity, and their disciplinary literacies. The latter of these determinations is placed into one of two categories, namely SS/H (Social Sciences and Humanities, including Education, Business and Law) and STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine). Attention is also placed on the trajectory into these roles, with specific focus on the position held by the Vice Chancellor immediately preceding their current appointment.

This initial design offers a proof of concept for subsequent nation-based research projects in higher education leadership. Because Australia's university sector is small – in relative international terms – no sampling of Vice Chancellors was required. Instead, all VCs

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– from the public and private universities – can be researched deploying unobtrusive research methods. This research design also activates University Media Studies, a post-disciplinary discussion of the media used by increasingly corporate universities, to 'sell' education. That is why – through the research questions guiding this study – a recognition of the absences in the signifying systems of university media interfaces is also a key part of the research.

Observations and Perceptions

Recent public posts and newspaper articles have focused on Vice Chancellor salaries (StBarth, 2017; Bolton, 2020). This emphasis and priority is by no means limited to Australia (Barradale, 2020) but Australian VC salaries are relatively higher than most nations, particularly in comparison with the United Kingdom. In particular, the $1M+ salaries obtained by Australian Vice Chancellors make them amongst the highest paid public servants in the nation. This is deemed to be a significant issue (Rowlands & Boden, 2020; van Onselen, 2020) as they are paid more than many company CEOs, federal and state ministers (including the Prime Minister), government officials, and other public servants. This is of sufficient concern, but they achieve these salaries in the face of staff underpayment and redundancies within the institutions over which they officiate (Sainsbury, 2020; Dobson, 2018).

Covid-19 and the budgetary implications from lockdowns on university closures and the ability of international students to travel have led to large cutbacks across the sector. Notably, 17 VCs stepped down from their positions between the beginning of 2020 to the end of 2021, mapping over the period of the pandemic. Salary sacrifices made by VCs in response to budgetary impacts imposed by COVID-19 have seen three out of every four of them take voluntary pay cuts (Ross, 2020). Universities that adopted these pay cuts included:

- Swinburne (30%)
- Deakin, UTS, CDU (25%)
- Bond, CQU, Griffith, JCU, LaTrobe, Monash, RMIT, Adelaide, Divinity, Melbourne, Notre Dame, UQ, UniSA, UWA, Wollongong, UNSW, WSU (20%)
- CSU, Curtin, Federation and Victoria University (10%).

Some other avenues to mitigate pandemic budgetary contractions in the face of the high salaries of VCs – and the public attention to the high salaries of VCs – included seeking donations from staff to establish benevolent funding to offset budgetary cutbacks, or the promise of no pay increases for VCs in the next few years. Noting the need for short term correctives through the pandemic, there is considerable pressure in the sector on University Chancellors to correct this issue (Dodd, 2020b).

Noting the domination of salary discussions in public discourse, trying to form conclusions across the multiple variables and characteristics of Vice Chancellors is challenging due to a lack of biographical disclosure and literature that has surveyed them. The VCs appear to be a collection of unicorns, with each having a unique skillset and experiential pathway into their current role. This is consistent with the limitations in looking for causal links in qualitative research, as described by Bell and colleagues (2019). Depending on their background, most VCs appear to have some experience at a senior academic level

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prior to becoming VC, which is quite understandable, but it is surprising to see that a few have entered academia at the very top level without higher education experience beyond the studying their own degrees many years prior to their appointment.

To quantify the various aspects of qualifications, disciplinary literacy, leadership experience, and other prominent factors, a methodology was employed for identifying relationships and measuring them. Commonalities were identified through measuring how many of the 40 VCs exhibited a certain characteristic. The data were collated into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. From this collation, our imperative was to aggregate, and then reveal the average and standard deviation (where sensible) to determine trends that may exist across the collection of Australian Vice Chancellors.

Results

Number of VCs: There are currently 40 Australian Vice Chancellors, the majority of whom have been appointed into their current role since 2018 (Figure 1).

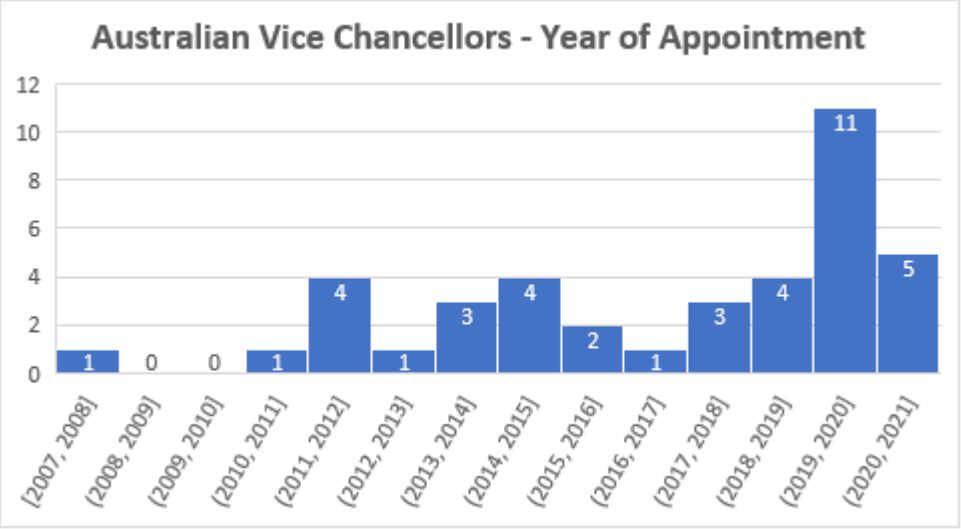


Figure 1. Australian Vice Chancellors - Year of Appointment

Country of Origin: Tracing the country of origin, 17 (42.5%) are Australian; 14 (35%) British; 2 (5%) USA; 2 (5%) Scandinavian; and one Vice Chancellor (2.5%) originated from each of the following nations: France, Canada, Bangladesh, Slovenia, and South Africa (Figure 2).

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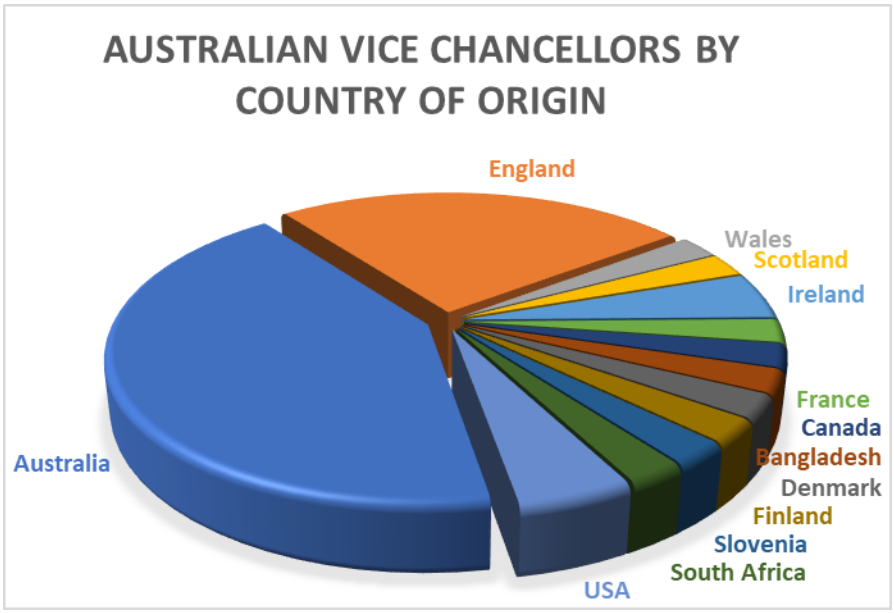


Figure 2. Australian Vice Chancellors by Country of Origin

While there is some diversity in ethnicity across the countries of origin, it is noteworthy that 97.5% of VCs identify as white. Only one person out of the 40 VCs identified as non-white. None of the Vice Chancellors declare First Nation or Indigenous identity in their public profiles. We note however that our research is reliant on public presentations of nation, race, ethnicity, and indigeneity and measures against the information disclosed. It does not mean that diversity is not present, but simply that diversity is not declared. This analysis also does not capture dual nationalities. Significantly, these personal declarations about race and ethnicity are not affirmed as valuable, as signified by their absence within university media.

Gender: in 2017, the ratio of men to women by percentage was 76:24. Although far from parity, this ratio has improved to 70:30 in 2021 (Figure 3).

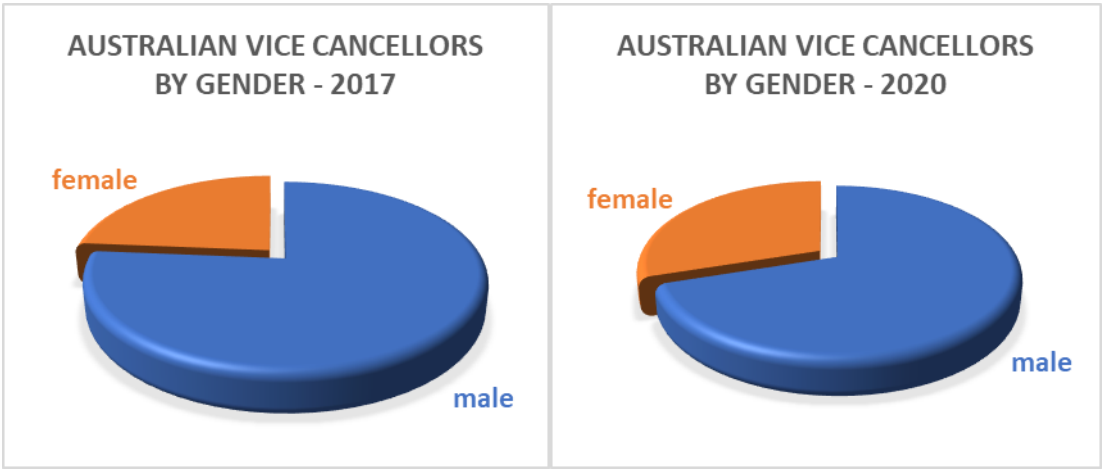


Figure 3. Australian Vice Chancellors by Gender

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Disciplinary Expertise: Breakdown by expertise in STEM: SS /Humanities as percentages is 54.8:45.2 which is slightly overbalanced in favour of STEMM related disciplines, but surprisingly not too far from parity, dispelling the myth of STEMM-domination of the Vice Chancellors. However, further breakdown into subject areas, noting that certain disciplines may exist within different classifications than those chosen, reveal that there is a domination of a few disciplines: Science and Engineering 35%, Medicine 12.5%, Nursing and Health Sciences 10%, Business, Government and Law 22.5%, Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences 7.5%, and Education, Psychology and Social Work 12.5% (Figure 4). The perception of an underrepresentation by high humanities and nursing disciplines is indeed correct. What is important to recognize – and probe – in this data set is the under-representation of disciplines that would be of most intellectual benefit to Vice Chancellors, namely Education and Law/Public Policy.

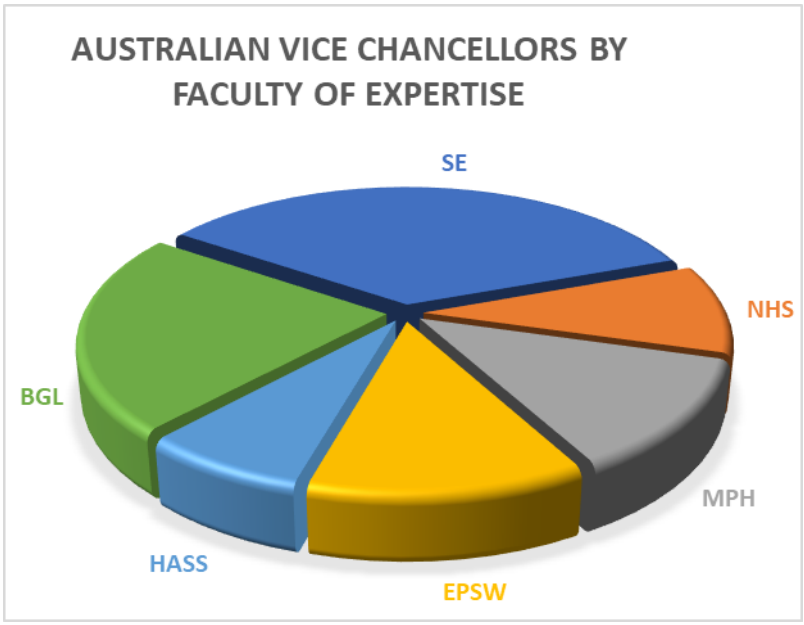


Figure 4. Breakdown of Australian Vice Chancellors by Disciplinary Background.

The STEMM categories are SE (science and engineering); NHS (Nursing and Health Sciences); MPH (medicine and public health); and the Humanities categories are EPSW (Education, Psychology and Social Work; Humanities and Social Sciences; and BGL (Business, Government and Law)

Salaries: Taking the publicly available salaries of VCs (Hare 2017), the average salary in 2017 was $889k (males $902k; females $848k). In 2020, gathered from a multitude of sources – with factors of error that may be present through divergent accounting of this income - the average salary is $1.069M (constituting a 20% overall increase). The average for males is $1.082M (20% increase) and women is $1.049M (23% increase). Most notably, the variance in salaries has more than doubled, as evidenced by the change in standard deviation of each salary data set. In 2017, the variation was 27.2% (men) and 20.3% (women) of the mean salary value. In 2020, it was 53.7% for each of the two specified genders. The increase in average and variance implies that there is a considerable change in the disparity between the greatest and smallest salaries paid to VCs (Figure 5).

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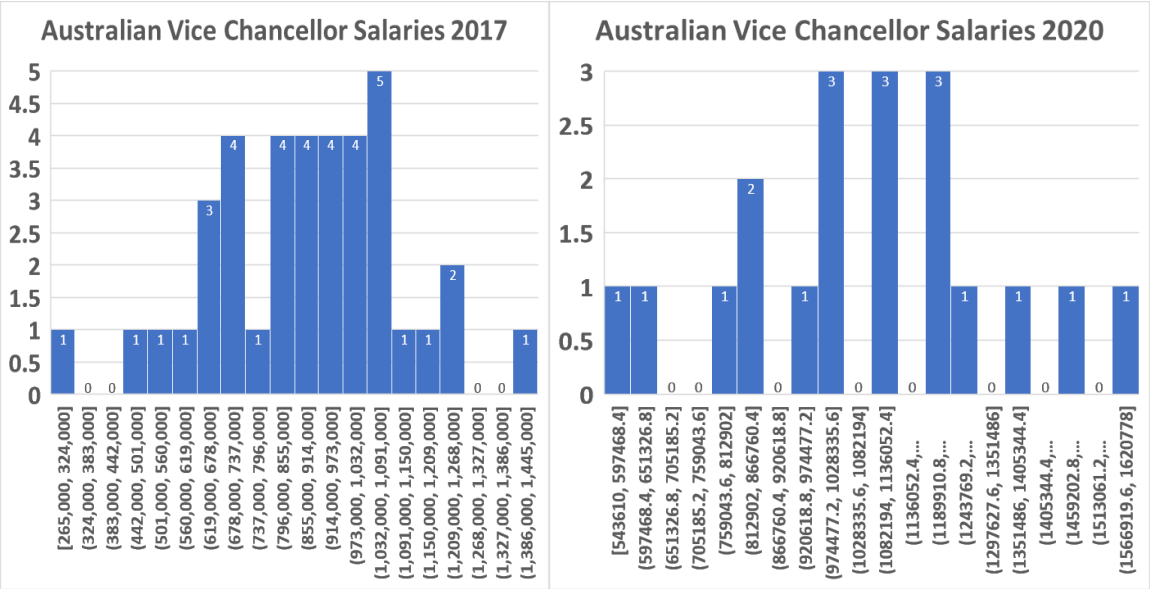


Figure 5. Vice Chancellors Salaries 2017 and 2020

The gender imbalance is most prevalent through the gap between relative average salaries. In 2017 (76%:24% male: female) this difference was ~$50k (6.3% of total) more per annum on average for men. In 2020 (70:30) this has reduced to $34k (3.23%). This is a strong trajectory to observe when it comes to reducing the pay gap between genders in the workforce, but there is still more to do as VCs must lead by example when it comes to eliminating the gender pay gap. Notably, the onset of COV-SARS-2 has created a pivotal moment. Seventeen VCs have stepped down since the beginning of 2020. Of the 15 replacements, 11 (73%) were men and 4 (27%) were women (Devlin, 2021). It will be interesting to see whether the gender discrimination, marginalization and disparity that is exhibited aligns with the need for salary correction after the pandemic, reducing the disparity between men's and women's salaries. Once more, we wish to note that non binary and trans identifications were not present in the public presentation of this salary information.

Alumni: Of the 40 VCs, 4 (10%) of them are alumni or have risen to DVC or greater within the institution of their first academic post. Considering the mobility of higher education – or the rhetoric of internationalization and universities – this cycle of internal appointments is intriguing and noteworthy. This characteristic confirms homological patterns. Chancellors and search committees hire within the parameters of their organizational context and knowledge.

Order of Merit: Considering their stature in education, citizenship and the community, public awards would be expected from Vice Chancellors, granted through their career. For meritorious service, 15 (38%) have some form of Order of Merit from their country of origin or nationality. This public number may be smaller than the actual figure. But such awards would be expected to feature in public profiles. It would be intriguing to compare this

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percentage with those of Vice Chancellors in prior decades, when public service rather than corporate acumen was more highly regarded. This current study offers a snapshot. Longitudinal comparisons are possible.

Wikipedia profile: Perhaps surprisingly, 25 (62.5%) of the Vice Chancellors have a dedicated Wikipedia page. However, of the 15 that do not, 12 of them have been appointed since 2019. This lack of an entry suggests that the Vice Chancellor – before their appointment – did not reach a level of public importance in research, teaching or public profile to warrant this recognition. Certainly, Wikipedia is not a site of peer review or academic credibility. It is a site where anonymous, online users create consensus-based information on people and topics. If there is a lack of a profile, then that suggests that the Vice Chancellor has not reached a level of public awareness or consciousness to merit an entry.

LinkedIn: 35 of the 40 VCs (87.5%) have a LinkedIn profile. Again – and significantly - the question is why the remaining Vice Chancellors do not have a profile. LinkedIn is a professional social networking site, with highly controlled audiences for posts. It is a safe and manageable interface for public engagements with an array of stakeholders.

Prior Senior Academic Roles: Out of the 40 VCs, 34 have had prior experience at senior academic leadership levels, with 14 having already been a VC prior to their current role. This is a predictable result. More intriguingly, six of them have had no prior Dean or DVC level experience. Eleven VCs have held two of these positions and one VC has held three of these senior academic roles prior to their current VC role.

Discussion

The Vice Chancellors are a collection of unicorns, and clearly not subject to a normal distribution. For example, their 2020 salaries have a standard deviation more than 50%. The shape of each salary histogram presented earlier does not demonstrate a normal distribution, but the data have too few samples to render it a statistically valid sample set. This means that the standard deviation offers little by way of real meaning beyond the notion that there is a significant difference between the greatest and smallest salaries paid. However, the scale of the spread of salaries demonstrates that neoliberal ideologies of individual – and individuated – negotiations have taken place. This research was shaped around four research questions:

1. Are there any specific or noteworthy commonalities possessed by Vice Chancellors? If so, what are they?
2. Are there unique characteristics that allow VCs to be distinctive and separated from the academic workforce?
3. Are there any noteworthy characteristics that they do not possess? What is absent from their profiles?
4. What rationale exists for public perceptions of Vice Chancellors upon review of these characteristics?

This research project has been built from the data that VCs and Universities are willing to disclose. The gaps in the information – regarding personal life, leisure interests, research

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or teaching expertise – are important and are probed in a parallel study (Brabazon, 2021b). What these absences confirm is that information is tightly controlled around Vice Chancellors. No component of private lives is performed in public. The lack of Wikipedia entries demonstrates that the leaders of universities possessed little profile in their research or teaching excellence before their VC role to demand or enable public interest in their educational career. This absence matters, as leaders require credibility. For senior academics, modelling is important. They must demonstrate the skills, knowledge, and profile – the standards – against which they demand their staff must perform. These information sources are not available.

The greatest array of publicly available information is with regard to Vice Chancellor salaries. The range and scale of these salaries have increased through the pandemic. Even the qualifications they hold are not disclosed by the majority of Vice Chancellors. Some research interests are mentioned, but teaching expertise - and qualifications – are absent from the available sources. What is significant is that the Vice Chancellors have been able to rephrase and reorganize an academic career in a way that activates corporate vocabularies around funding, entrepreneurship, board membership and community 'partnerships'. This translation of teaching and research into – to summon Aronowitz's title (2000), a Knowledge Factory – is clear. Also, the greatest node of commonality between Vice Chancellors is that most have held previous roles as VCs or DVCs. Once occupying a senior leadership position, they maintain this status, even as they move between institutions.

The next stage of this research will investigate the availability of public Google Scholar profiles for Vice Chancellors and publicized national teaching awards. Also of further interest is the credentialling and accountability of the leadership capacity of Vice Chancellors. As Tim Dodd noted in September 2020, 'Universities are being challenged from all directions. But governance and leadership are two things they can't ignore' (Dodd, 2020a). Assumptions about leadership are not sufficient. These protocols must be public and verified, as the pandemic has demonstrated that universities were too leveraged – too reliant – on the variability of international student fees.

Conclusion

Leadership can be configured as a set of competencies (Quintana et al., 2014). Yet this article probes the variables that are the proxies for those competencies. These are the ideologies that validate particular genders, sexualities, qualifications, and the public omissions, erasures, or masking of a private life. The studies of leadership are dominated by qualitative and quantitative studies, yet the theoretical focus is lacking. The theory emerging after the Global Financial Crisis, post-Trump and (post)Covid provides a provocative frame around our research.

Oluo published *Mediocre: the dangerous legacy of white male power* in 2020. She explores "oppressive systems" (2020, p. 14), with particular attention to universities. She exposes the lie of meritocracy – that hard work creates success – and shows how historic barriers ensure that most of the population is never considered for leadership positions or of sufficient standing to occupy positions of power. She recognized the "nagging discrepancy between the promise and reality of white maleness" (Oluo, 2020, p. 20), which requires the blaming of those with less power for their shortcomings. This blame manifests in anger,

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aggression, fear, narcissism, and/or incompetence. These manifestations of mediocrity create what she describes as, "white men's assault on higher education" (Oluo, 2020, p. 95). Therefore, in challenging times, their power is protected. While women now occupy the majority of undergraduate and doctoral programmes, they remain the minority of full professors. Each successive stage of management features fewer women. Our results show that the proportion of women in Vice Chancellorships is increasing toward parity, but the feminine is not yet deemed a container for creditable leadership. But – and this is a highly significant caveat – being a woman does not confirm any commitment to feminism, social justice, inclusivity or institutional change. We do not offer a biologically essentialist argument. There is nothing 'in' a woman or the ideology of femininity that signifies a leader of quality, authenticity, accountability, and decency.

What remains clear is that the packaging of higher education leadership sits most comfortably in the body of a white man. The problem – as demonstrated by Oluo (2020) – is the assumption that these white men gained these roles through meritocracy and hard work. That is incorrect. Competitors for these roles were not granted opportunities because of colonization, class-based injustices, racism, ageism, a marginalization of particular disciplines and methodologies, a displacement of the value of specific life experiences and narratives, and the unstable positioning of women, trans and non-binary identifying academics in the history of higher education.

The question remains, what options are available to disrupt and dislodge this 'technique of neutralization' (Sykes & Matza, 1957)? Communities form, which naturalize and normalize languages and behaviours. These shared ideas justify unjustifiable patterns through language such as 'everyone does this' or 'most people think this way'. To disrupt such behaviours, bold and difficult questions must be asked. Our intervention returns to evidence, debate, discussion, alternatives and thinking to such a cascade of ignorance and xenophobia. That is the purpose of this article.

Ideologies are difficult to isolate, particularly in a time of political extremism. Leadership in higher education is a black box. It is hidden and only discussed openly at times of emergency. It is stuffed with assumptions, ideologies, mythologies, advertising, and obfuscation. The Vice Chancellor, as the President and often Chief Executive Officer of a University, occupies a singular and unusual role in the leadership literature. In Australia, controversies shadow the people in this role, including systemic and repeated sexual misconduct that was masked by institutions (Richards, 2020), and allegedly duplicitous relationships with foreign powers. Indeed, a recent Vice Chancellor was discussed in a Corruption and Crime Commission Report (2016), which discovered that he downloaded pornography on his work computer. The CCC was looking for widespread patronage in appointment processes. Instead, the CCC discovered pornography. In May 2021, a former Vice Chancellor, hired by Perth Racing, was removed from this role for misconduct (Kaur, 2021). This is not a question of 'bad apples' (Brabazon, 2020). This problem of leadership is in its definition and application.

With the reduction in public funding to Australian universities and a lessening in policy attention to the sector as an export market, the capacity of Vice Chancellors to negotiate with what Gurcan and Kahraman (2020) have described as 'disaster capitalism' must be assessed. What disciplinary expertise do they hold? What is their experience of social diversity? Do they hold teaching qualifications? What is their research focus? Finally – and

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perhaps most importantly – how do they define or perform 'leadership'? The key issue that frames these questions is how their personal experience and expertise meshes with the objectives of the contemporary university.

We started this article recognizing Aronowitz's work - *The Knowledge Factory*, published in 2000 (Aronowitz, 2000). He argued that leaders in universities had underperformed in research, underperformed in teaching, and occupied a third pathway to sustain and enhance their career: administration. This meant that the leaders in universities were managing the people who had succeeded in the core business of higher education, the areas in which the leaders had failed, or – at least - underperformed. In the decades since Aronowitz's monograph, September 11, the Global Financial Crisis, and the pandemic have intensified the crisis-driven higher education sector. This meant that the singularity of universities as a workplace was reduced. Universities – seemingly – have become just like any other business.

There is a gulf between the hopes and expectations of university leadership and the reality of Vice Chancellors that manage the finances and align their behaviours with the requirements of human resources rather than scholarship. It is no surprise that universities are now more aligned to any other workplace, instead of the institutions summoned in *Brideshead Revisited* or *Shadowlands*, where knowledge creation and ideas thrive, are discussed and debated, and have the potential to transform the world. Noting the waves of crises and restructures, nonreactive research methods park the more volatile interpretations, to understand the characteristics of value to the public presentation of a Vice Chancellor. This public presentation confirms how scholarship, teaching, learning, and research are leaking from our institutions.

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