

Recruiting in higher education: more than an academic exercise

By Helen Yallop

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Does headhunting have a role in the higher education sector?

I have been canvassing senior figures in academia to find out. Many respondents were sceptical, citing the strength of academic networks in attracting candidates. As natural networkers with a strong sense of their subject-centred professional identity, academics do indeed seem well qualified to conduct their own headhunting.

Are the academics right?

In practice, the DIY approach can lead to a degree of discrimination, while a third party might produce a more impartial list of candidates and, for example, gender equality might be enhanced. Institutions are sensitive to criticism that women and ethnic minority groups are under-represented at the highest levels. Headhunters can reach talent pools of under-represented groups and advise on how to court diversity through advertising and policy.

What else do they struggle with?

Some institutions lack the international research networks enjoyed by leading universities. For these, a professionally handled search doubles as a PR exercise, defining and strengthening their profiles. Some institutions might also struggle with interdisciplinary chair roles, as subject-focused networks might miss some suitable candidates.

Is it good use of academics' time?

Respondents were keen on the benefits of removing a time-consuming administrative burden, and of ensuring all candidates have a consistent experience. Negotiating a senior academic hire can be slow and using a consultant can keep the process moving.

What do candidates prefer?

Respondents tended to assume that candidates prefer to be approached by a fellow academic, but many conceded that this could be overcome by a genuine confidence in search consultants. Headhunters must demonstrate a thorough understanding of the field and the institution, use correct terminology, and be sensitive.

What about non-academic posts?

Respondents could see the value of search firms for administrative and commercial posts. There was concern about how "business people" make the transition into academia, adjusting to the complexities and pace, for example. Headhunters need to

screen for cultural fit and ways of working and offering quantifiable assessment where necessary.

What about leaders?

It has been standard practice to outsource the very top appointments – which are difficult assignments – to a headhunter. Appointments committees will often voice divergent views on what is required.

Are there horror stories?

Some feared that headhunters recycle candidates from previous searches, disregarding the needs of the client. Obviously we need to be transparent, explaining how research teams map the market for each assignment, regardless of the strength of our existing networks.