



Higher Education Policy Institute

Digging in? The changing tenure of UK vice-chancellors



Gatenby
Sanderson

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Introduction

It is unfashionable to express sympathy for university leaders, but – like other higher education staff – they have had a torrid couple of years. COVID, industrial action and policy uncertainty have meant a full in-tray of combustible material.

There is a limited number of issues on which populist commentators and the University and College Union (UCU) agree, but their criticisms of university leaders sometimes sound similar. These find an echo in much media coverage of the higher education sector.

The consensus is particularly clear when it comes to those at the top of the tree, whose job title is often 'Vice-Chancellor' – a term used in this paper to describe them all, though some are officially known by other titles instead or as well, including 'Chief Executive', 'Director', 'President', 'Principal', 'Provost' and 'Rector'.

Whether people have sympathy for vice-chancellors or not, there has been an expectation that the extra pressures on them – which come on top of major external changes, like greater marketisation, Brexit and (in England) a new interventionist regulator – could lead to a reduction in their average tenure.

This Policy Note measures the tenure of vice-chancellors at longer standing UK universities in four different ways. It shows that, possibly against expectations, the tenure of serving vice-chancellors has been rising and that, on average, vice-chancellors have served for a little over eight years when they stand down.

GatenbySanderson, an executive search firm and HEPI Partner, who specialise in recruiting vice-chancellors and chief executives for the public sector have separately compared tenure in different sectors. In health, average tenure for senior leaders is just three years. Before the pandemic, average tenure in local government was around eight years but turnover has shot up since the pandemic. Workload, burn-out and levels of public scrutiny are cited by many, resulting in a lack of talent in the pipeline.

GatenbySanderson recently explored the experience of recently appointed vice-chancellors, proving context is everything. Different institutions have different strategies and helping governors understand the nature and needs of their institution and how they get translated into honest expectations is critical. For now, vice-chancellors are staying in post longer, giving them more time to get under the skin of their institution as well as to implement new strategies.

Is there an ideal term of office? At key points of change, organisational strategies need to be reviewed and objectives established or reinforced. Those at the top must have the space and accountability to determine the vision and deliver the results. Too short a tenure results in either endless strategy development with little execution or permanent fire-fighting with no end goal and little impact. On the other hand, too little turnover can impede diversity and innovation.

Measuring vice-chancellors' tenure

Every few years, HEPI collects and analyses the data to see what has been happening to vice-chancellor roles and, specifically, how long people are typically filling them for.

Measuring the changing tenure of vice-chancellors sounds easy. The counting is. But the numbers can only be processed once you have set the terms of the calculation and this calls for lots of assumptions.

In the results below, we make no claims to have got every such judgement right; we simply explain how we have done it. Different methodologies might produce different results and we encourage others to look at the issue from other perspectives.

- 1. Which institutions to include:** To measure changing tenure over time, to see whether it is rising or falling, you need a lengthy time series. Yet many UK universities have not been 'universities' for all that long in historical terms. So we have generally concentrated on the subset of institutions that have had university title for many decades. As a result, our numbers cannot claim to provide a complete picture for the higher education sector as a whole. For example, the methodology excludes John Cater even though he is currently the longest serving UK higher education leader. Despite leading his institution since 1993, he misses out because Edge Hill did not become a university until 2006.
- 2. Which institutions to exclude:** We have excluded Oxbridge because of their past practice of appointing revolving vice-chancellors with short terms, meaning inclusion would disrupt the results. (This is a good example perhaps of the general rule that Oxbridge is often a red herring in sector-wide questions.¹) We also leave out the University of London for a comparable reason, although we do include some of its member institutions. In total, we consider 51 institutions (listed at the end).
- 3. What to do with 'retreads':** In politics, 'retreads' is the term applied to MPs who move from one constituency to another, such as Boris Johnson (Henley and Uxbridge & South Ruislip). We use it to refer to the many vice-chancellors who have led more than one institution.² Some current examples (with only their current institution named) are: Professor Dame Janet Beer (Liverpool); Sir David Bell (Sunderland); Professor Tim Blackman (the OU); Professor Rebecca Bunting (Bedfordshire); Professor Koen Lamberts (Sheffield); Professor Carl Lygo (Arden); Professor Craig Mahoney (Law); Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli (Glasgow); Professor Louise Richardson (Oxford); Professor Mark E. Smith (Southampton); and Professor Adam Tickell (Birmingham). Another example is Professor Hugh Brady, once President of University College Dublin, now the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol and soon to become the President of Imperial College.³ In our work, we do not add together more than one posting to equal one tenure. So, for example, we treat someone who has led two institutions in the same way as if two different people had led them.

As we do not generally know for certain how long any existing vice-chancellor will be in post for, we have to decide whether to include those currently in post or only those who have already ended their time in charge. To get around this issue, we have measured the tenure of vice-chancellors in four separate ways.

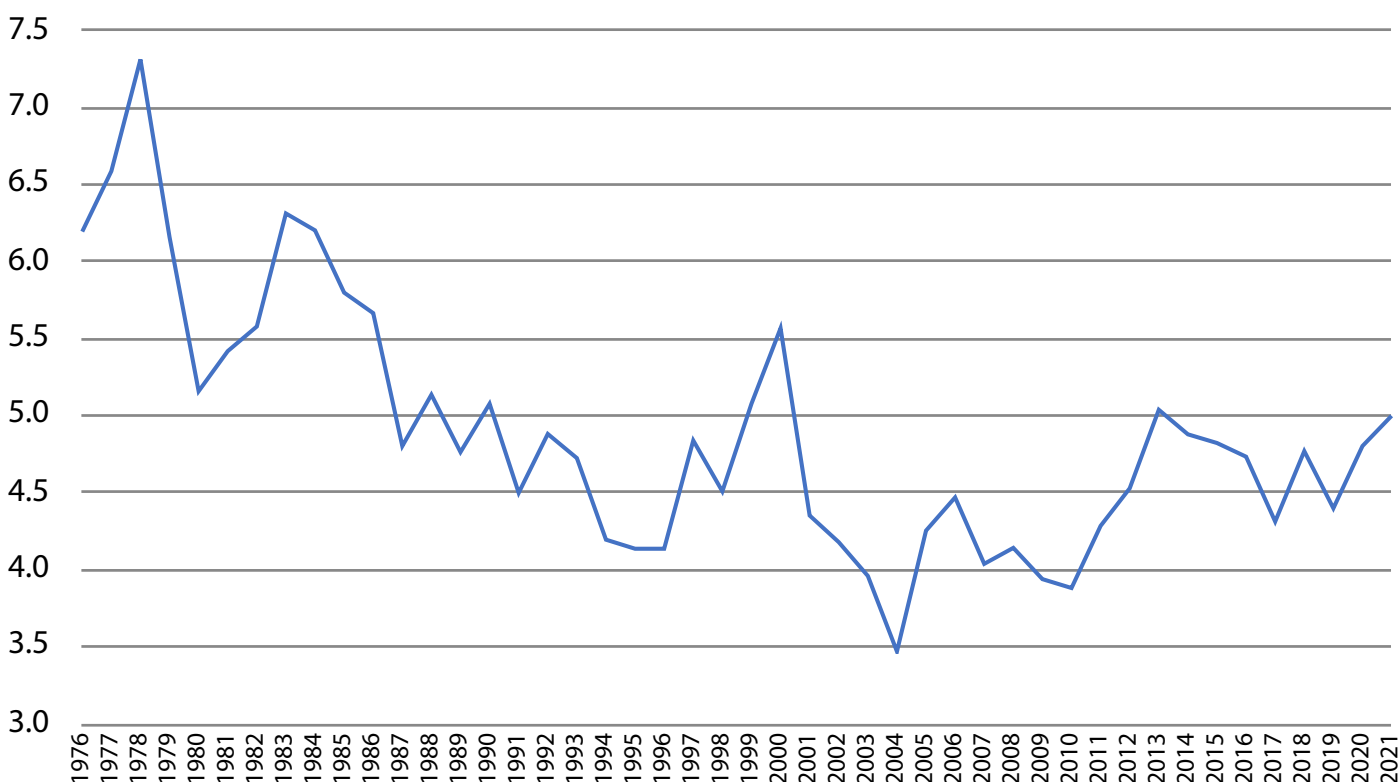
Results: current tenure

First, we have calculated the average annual tenure of current vice-chancellors, shown in Chart 1. This method shows some marked fluctuations from year to year as only a small proportion of vice-chancellors change each year and individual changes can make material differences to the annual average.

Nonetheless, despite such noise, some things are clear from the annual data, including:

- a general downward trend in tenure from the late 1970s onwards, with the average tenure halving from a high of 7.3 years in 1978 to a low of just 3.5 years in 2004; and
- some stabilisation afterwards, with – for example – the average tenure not falling below 4.3 years or rising above 5.0 years between 2012 and 2021.

Chart 1: Average tenure of serving vice-chancellors in years (annual)

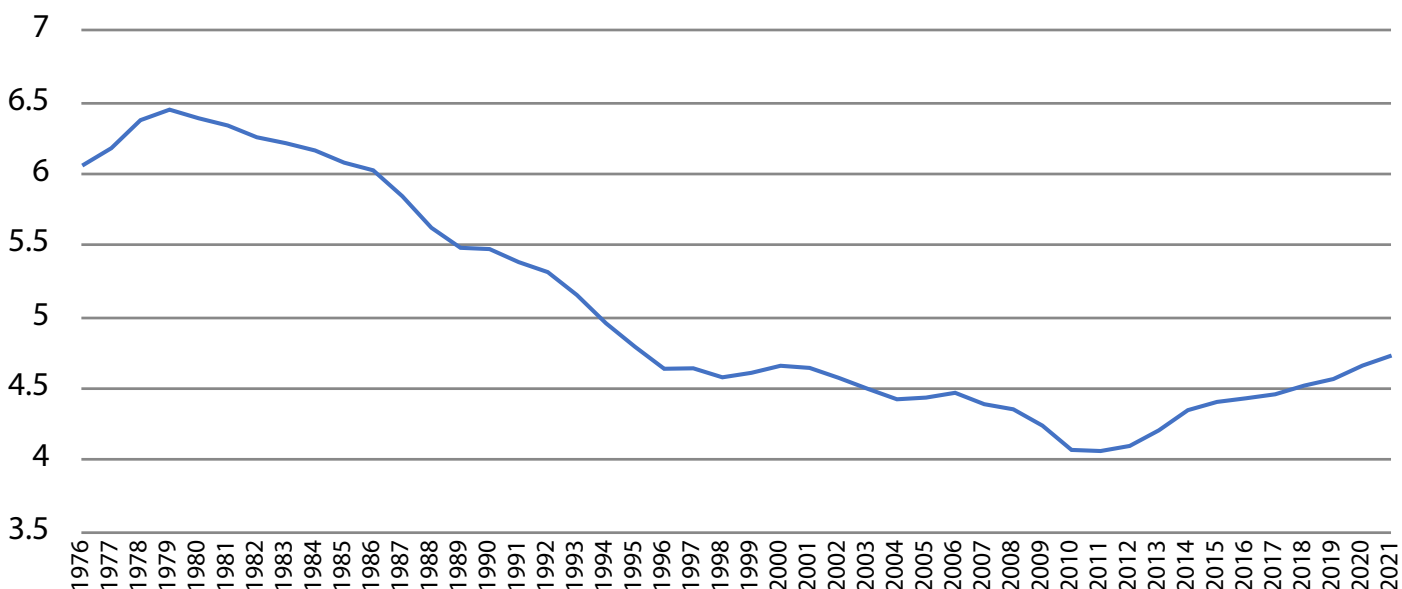


Secondly, to make more sense of the underlying picture, we look at the rolling 10-year average tenure of current vice-chancellors. So, for example, the first point on Chart 2 is the rolling average for in-post vice-chancellors between 1967 and 1976, while the final point is the rolling average for in-post vice-chancellors at the same institutions from 2012 to 2021.

Judged this way, the clearest trend over the past half a century or so is a downward one, covering the majority of the period, but with somewhat of a recovery during the 2010s:

- between the late 1970s and the end of the 2000s, the average tenure of in-post vice-chancellors declined from 6.4 years to 4.1 years (a 36% drop);
- however, since marketisation received rocket boosters in England during the Coalition years (2010-15), tenure has increased significantly and it is now approaching 5 years (an increase of 15% from its lowest point around a decade beforehand) and is at the highest level since the start of the turn of the millennium.

Chart 2: Average tenure of serving vice-chancellors in years (10-year rolling average)



One further piece of evidence suggesting tenure has been growing is that, back in 2010, just one vice-chancellor (2 per cent of our sample) had a current tenure of 10 or more years; in 2021, eight did (16 per cent).

Results: departing vice-chancellors

The third way that we have measured the tenure of vice-chancellors is to look at the average tenure of those who have given up their posts. This way of looking at the numbers produces big year-on-year changes: again, this is because only a small proportion of vice-chancellors give up their posts each year and each individual change has the potential to make a big difference to the annual average.

Judged this way, it looks like the level of short-term fluctuation has calmed down over the years: for example, in the single year between 1984 and 1985, average tenure fell from 13.8 years to 7.9 years, whereas in the most recent seven years, from 2014 to 2021, it has hovered within a range of just 7.3 to 9.5 years.

Chart 3: Average tenure of departing vice-chancellors in years (annual)

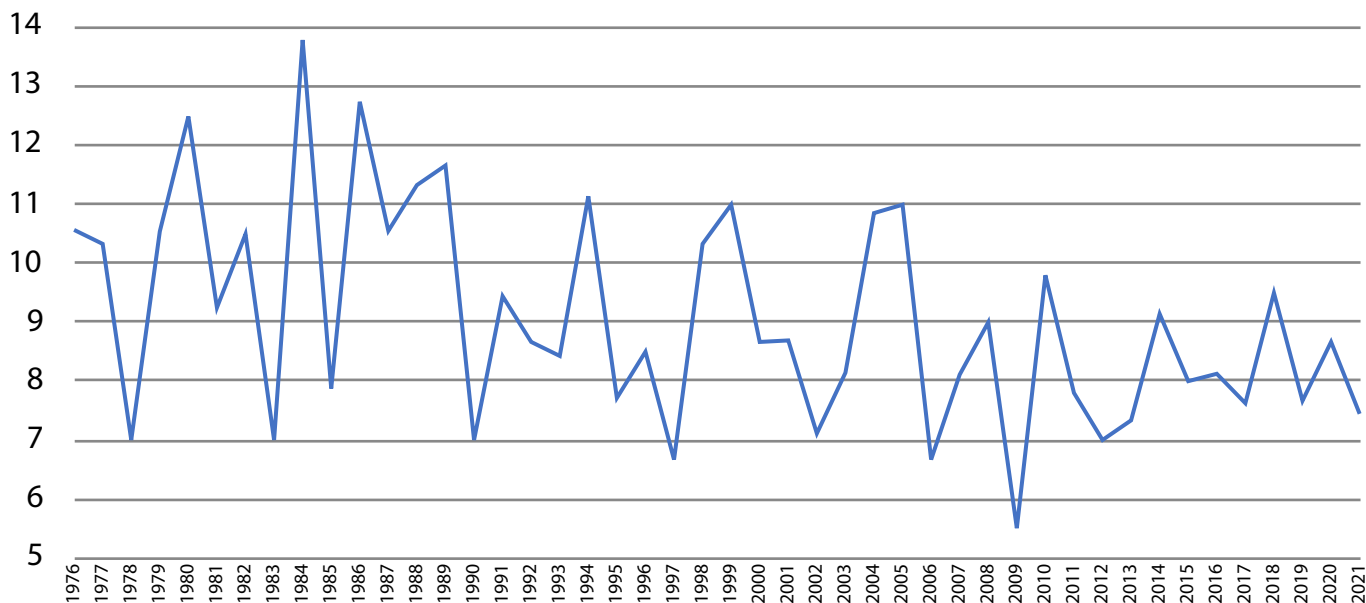
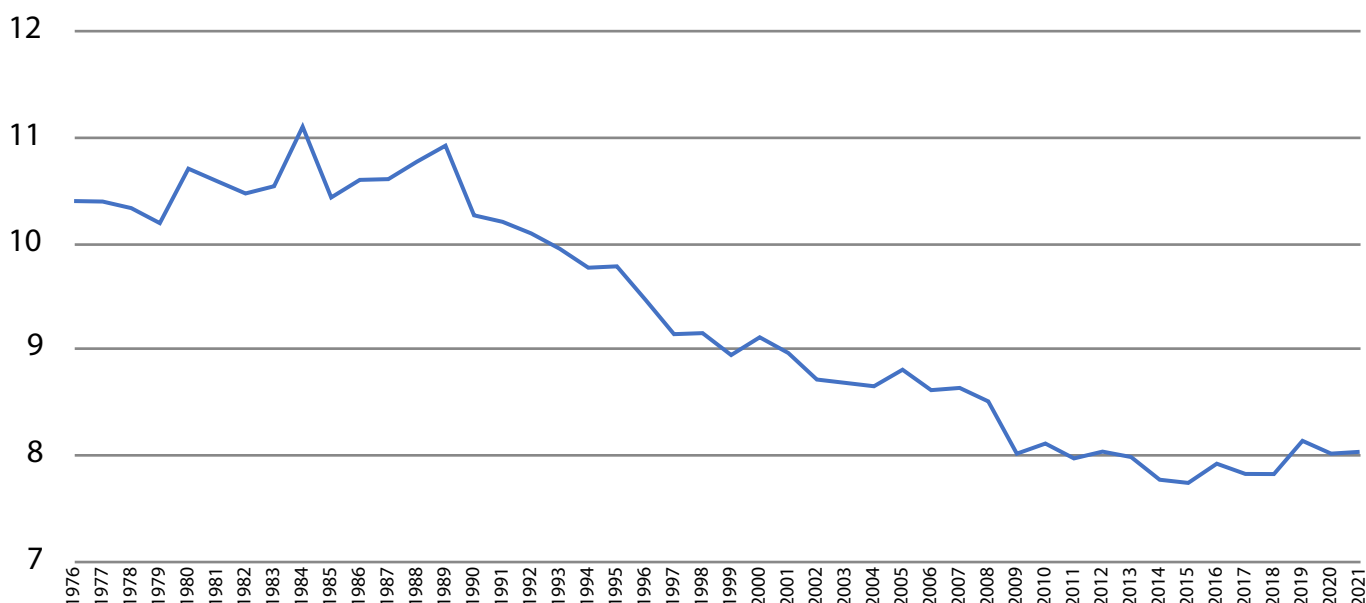


Chart 3 also suggests there has been a slight but gradual downward trend over time. This is confirmed when we calculate the tenure of retiring vice-chancellors on a rolling 10-year basis.

Looked at from this perspective, the average tenure fell from 10.4 years in 1976 to 8.0 in 2009, since when it has been remarkably stable, never falling below 7.7 years or rising above 8.1 years.

Chart 4: Average tenure of departing vice-chancellors in years (10-year rolling average)



Given the data presented in the two charts in the previous section, which show an increase in tenure among serving vice-chancellors, we might expect the average tenure of departing vice-chancellors to increase in coming years.

A blip or a trend?

The last time we calculated the data on vice-chancellors' tenure, which was pre-COVID, we said the increase in tenure that we identified 'may be a blip or it may be the start of a trend. It is too early to say.'⁴ Despite its limitations, the evidence presented here, especially in Chart 2, which suggests we are currently seeing the longest average tenure for a generation, makes it increasingly clear that it is a trend.

While we do not regard the data presented here as definitive, it is notable that – against expectations – vice-chancellors' tenure appears to be increasing rather than falling, despite the enormous pressures and (sometimes) personal abuse faced by those who fill this important role. However, on average, tenure remains shorter than in the more distant past.

It is hard to know what, if any, lessons to draw from this analysis. But it may indicate at the very least that university governing bodies have no less faith in today's generation of university leaders than in the fairly recent past, despite the extra demands of the job. Perhaps vice-chancellors are getting more things right than wrong.

It seems unlikely that tenure will go back up to the levels of the distant past, when the vice-chancellor role was arguably less demanding and a small number of individuals stayed in post for decades. Bangor University had only two Principals between 1927 and 1984 and the first Vice-Chancellor of Essex (Professor Sir Albert Sloman) was in post from 1962 to 1987. In contrast, the longest serving current leader included in our fieldwork is – by some distance – David Latchman, who has been leading Birkbeck since 2003.

The future

It is worth noting that a number of vice-chancellors have recently announced their departure after many years of service, including: Professor Dame Janet Beer (Liverpool); Professor Iwan Davies (Bangor); Professor Pamela Gillies (Glasgow Caledonian); Professor Susan Lea (Hull); Professor Nick Petford (Northampton); Professor Louise Richardson (Oxford); Professor Stephen Toope (Cambridge); and Professor Andrew Wathey (Northumbria).

Who replaces these departing figures will, in due course, influence the future average tenure of vice-chancellors but could also affect other important things like the gender balance in university leadership. While around 57 per cent of students at UK universities are female, only around 30 per cent of institutions are currently led by women.⁵ We are some distance away from smashing the glass ceiling in the UK higher education sector.⁶

Serving vice-chancellors are unrepresentative of their students and wider society in other ways too. For example, while 72 per cent of UK-domiciled students are White and 8 per cent are Black, 90 per cent of the most senior managers are White and just 1 per cent are Black.⁷

Conclusion

One possible explanation for the average increasing tenure of serving vice-chancellors is that, in challenging times, changes at the top may seem to governing bodies like an unnecessary risk. Moreover, many vice-chancellors may well have felt an obligation not to walk away from their institution in turbulent times. Even assuming such conjectures are correct, however, it is not inevitable that tenure will continue growing as the sector stares into the face of growing funding pressures, continuing industrial relations problems and fallout from the so-called 'culture war'.

If lengthy tenure is regarded as a sign of stable leadership, then it is worth noting the tenure of vice-chancellors compares well to other professions. The average tenure of a Premier League manager is two years and one month.⁸ The average tenure of senior government ministers is also around two years.⁹

In fact, there has only been one top-level government minister with responsibility for education who has come anywhere near the eight-year tenure of the average retiring vice-chancellor: Sir John Eldon Gorst was Vice-President of the Committee of the Council on Education for just over seven years between 1895 and 1902.¹⁰

- England has had 12 different Secretaries of State for Education (though the post has sometimes had different names) since New Labour came to office in 1997.
- Scotland has had 10 incumbents in the comparable post since devolution in the late 1990s and Wales has had eight, while Northern Ireland has had five (as well as periods of direct rule during which five London-based Ministers were in charge).
- Between 2010 and 2020, the post of Minister for Higher Education in England has changed hands eight times (though two people, Chris Skidmore and Jo Johnson, have held the post twice).

No university could have coped smoothly with so many leadership changes in such a small space of time. Indeed, any institution with so many changes at the top would surely be widely regarded as failing.

Annex: Institutions included in this research

1. University of Birmingham
2. University of Bristol
3. Cardiff University
4. Durham University
5. University of Edinburgh
6. University of Exeter
7. University of Glasgow
8. Imperial College London
9. King's College London
10. University of Leeds
11. University of Liverpool
12. London School of Economics
13. University of Manchester
14. Newcastle University
15. University of Nottingham
16. Queen Mary University of London
17. Queen's University Belfast
18. University of Sheffield
19. University of Southampton
20. University College London
21. University of Warwick
22. University of York
23. University of St Andrews
24. University of Aberdeen
25. St George's, University of London
26. Royal Holloway, University of London
27. SOAS University of London
28. Birkbeck, University of London
29. Royal Veterinary College
30. Aberystwyth University
31. Bangor University
32. Swansea University
33. University of Wales
34. University of Reading
35. University of Hull
36. University of Leicester
37. University of Sussex
38. Keele University
39. University of East Anglia
40. Lancaster University
41. University of Strathclyde
42. University of Kent
43. University of Essex
44. Loughborough University
45. Aston University
46. Brunel University London
47. University of Surrey
48. University of Bath
49. University of Bradford
50. City, University of London
51. Heriot-Watt University

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge-Report-107-FINAL.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/retreads/>
- 3 For further information on serial vice-chancellors, see Mike Ratcliffe's blog at <https://moremeansbetter.wordpress.com/2016/12/01/serial-vice-chancellors/>.
- 4 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/06/06/brave-leadership-in-think-tanks-politics-and-universities-and-some-new-data-on-vice-chancellors-tenure%EF%BB%BF/>
- 5 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_chancellors_and_vice-chancellors_of_British_universities
- 6 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Mind-the-Graduate-Gender-Pay-Gap-HEPI-Report-135_FINAL.pdf
- 7 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>; <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he/characteristics>
- 8 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveprice/2022/03/22/premier-league-managers-are-lasting-longer-in-the-job-than-european-counterparts/?sh=24f498902acb>
- 9 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/government-reshuffles.pdf>
- 10 One clear exception to the typical short tenure of Education Ministers is Nick Gibb MP, who was Minister for School Standards from 2010 until 2012 and again from 2015 until 2021. Additionally, he held a different post in the Department for Education from 2014 to 2015. However, he has never been the top-level minister for education nor has he ever had responsibility for higher education policy.



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