



Higher Education Policy Institute

Thirty years on: Leadership convergence between newer and older universities

Rohan Selva-Radov

HEPI Policy Note 37

September 2022

Introduction

In May 2022, HEPI published Policy Note 34, *Digging in? The changing tenure of UK vice-chancellors*, measuring the lengths of tenure of vice-chancellors at long-standing UK universities.

The year 2022 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), which granted university status to then polytechnics as well as Central Institutions in Scotland. Over the subsequent two years, 42 institutions were newly designated as universities, almost doubling the total.¹ Some of our readers highlighted the omission of these universities from the May 2022 paper, with Professor Peter Scott, Professor of Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education and former Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University, questioning whether ‘it is really reasonable to draw conclusions about the tenure of vice-chancellors based only on pre-1992 universities?’

This Policy Note extends our analysis of vice-chancellors’ tenures to these post-1992 institutions, using a similar methodology to our previous publication. A primary aim of the 1992 reforms was to end the old binary divide between vocational and academic education and allow for greater diversity in the university sector. While this Policy Note does not seek to evaluate the success – or otherwise – of the 1992 Act, we show that the tenure of vice-chancellors is one area in which differences between older universities and former polytechnics have narrowed. At the time of their conversion into universities, the polytechnics’ directors had been in post on average for 1.4 years longer than their vice-chancellor counterparts, while the gap in 2022 is just 0.25 years. We use two metrics to measure tenure: ‘current tenure’, the length of time that a serving vice-chancellor has been in post, and ‘full tenure’, the duration of a vice-chancellor’s term on departing their role.

The two headline conclusions from our earlier research remain broadly valid: we again found that vice-chancellors serve roughly eight years on average, and that tenure has had a long-term downward trend since the 1990s with a slight upward trend in the very recent past.

Finding tenure

One surprising challenge we encountered in this research was finding historical information about the newly-included institutions’ leaders. Wikipedia entries were few and far between, the universities rarely had a website section about their own history and none had a public record of vice-chancellors of the sort that Oxbridge proudly lists. It was striking that, even after asking several sector historians and former vice-chancellors, nobody was quite sure of where these data might be found, or whether they even existed.

Our main sources of information on past leaders were therefore *Whitaker’s Almanack* and *Who’s Who*.² Using these, we were eventually able to compile the full list of vice-chancellors,

which we have made available on the HEPI website. We hope this will allow any errors which may have slipped in to be identified, as well as being of use to anyone conducting further research in this area.

Measuring tenure

As we outlined in our previous Policy Note, the definitions and parameters chosen for the calculations of tenure require thoughtful consideration. Our decisions for this piece of research, and the rationale behind them, are set out below. This is only one approach, and different sets of assumptions may well yield contrasting results or insights which we have missed.

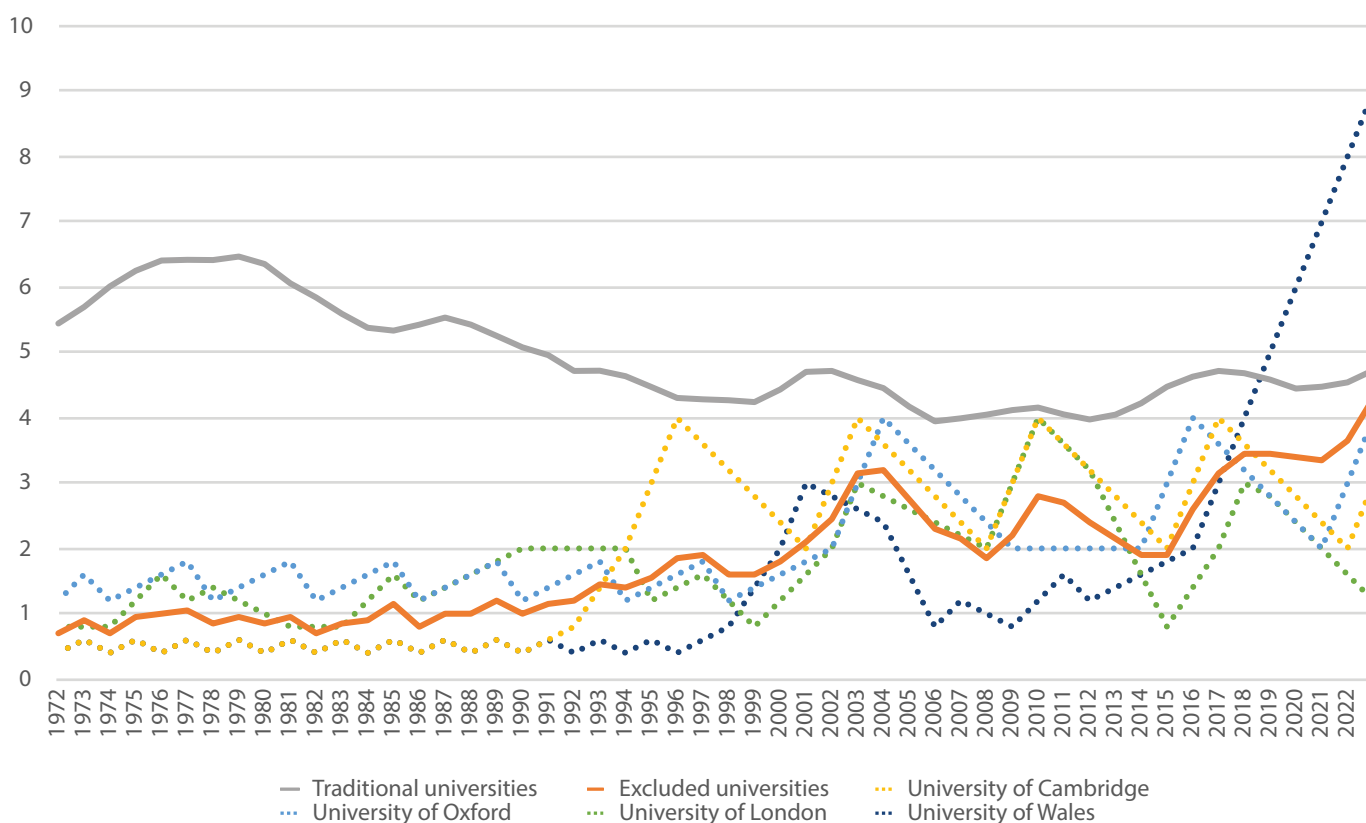
1. Which institutions to include: The motivation for only including ‘long-standing’ universities in our previous work was to enable the creation of a lengthy time series, allowing us to identify trends. That remains the goal of this research, which is why we have chosen not to include any universities which were formed after the 1992 reforms. However, the full set of institutions we consider has been expanded to include 99 universities:

- a. all 51 universities in our earlier research, referred to as ‘traditional universities’;
- b. five universities which had this status prior to 1992 but were founded more recently than 1966, the start of the time series for our previous work (the universities of Dundee, Salford, Stirling and Ulster, and the Open University) – for the purposes of this Policy Note, they are also classified as ‘traditional universities’, to distinguish them from the post-1992 cohort;
- c. the 40 institutions which became universities following the commencement of the 1992 Act;³
- d. the two institutions which gained university status in the early 1990s by Royal Charter (the Cranfield Institute of Technology in 1993 and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in 1994).

There has been a significant amount of structural change within the higher education system since 1992, notably mergers involving the former polytechnics or technical colleges. Some of these mergers were with neighbouring and longer established universities (for instance, when UMIST merged with the Victoria University of Manchester to form the University of Manchester in 2004); others merged with non-university higher education institutions (such as the creation of Glasgow Caledonian University from Glasgow Polytechnic and the Queen’s College, Glasgow in 1993); still others among themselves (such as the University of North London merging with London Guildhall University to make London Metropolitan University). In all these cases, we have included the original post-1992 institutions until they ceased to exist, after which we included their successor universities (so we include Guildhall and the University of North London until 2002 and London Met from then on).⁴

2. Which institutions to exclude: Oxbridge, the University of London and the University of Wales were all omitted from our analysis (and are collectively referred to as ‘excluded universities’ in Chart 1 below). This is because of their historic practice of appointing vice-chancellors with extremely short terms (for instance, at Cambridge, terms were limited to a maximum of two years until 1992).⁵ Many of the member institutions of the University of London are included individually. For Wales, we similarly count the University of Wales confederation’s member universities separately (even though some only became universities in their own right following a reorganisation in 2007).⁶

Chart 1: Tenure of serving vice-chancellors in years (five-year rolling average)



3. What to do with initial tenures, ‘retreads’ and mergers: Despite being referred to as post-1992 universities, many of the polytechnics affected by the 1992 Act could trace their roots back to the nineteenth century. All but four moved their existing leaders into the new vice-chancellor role once they became universities (the exceptions being the universities of East London, Middlesex, Teesside and Abertay). To account for most vice-chancellors having prior experience at the helm of their institutions, we counted their tenures as commencing from when they were first appointed to the role of ‘Director’ (or equivalent) at the corresponding polytechnic. This is in line with our approach of not distinguishing between the different job titles variously allocated to university leaders (such as ‘Chief Executive’, ‘Rector’, or ‘Principal’).

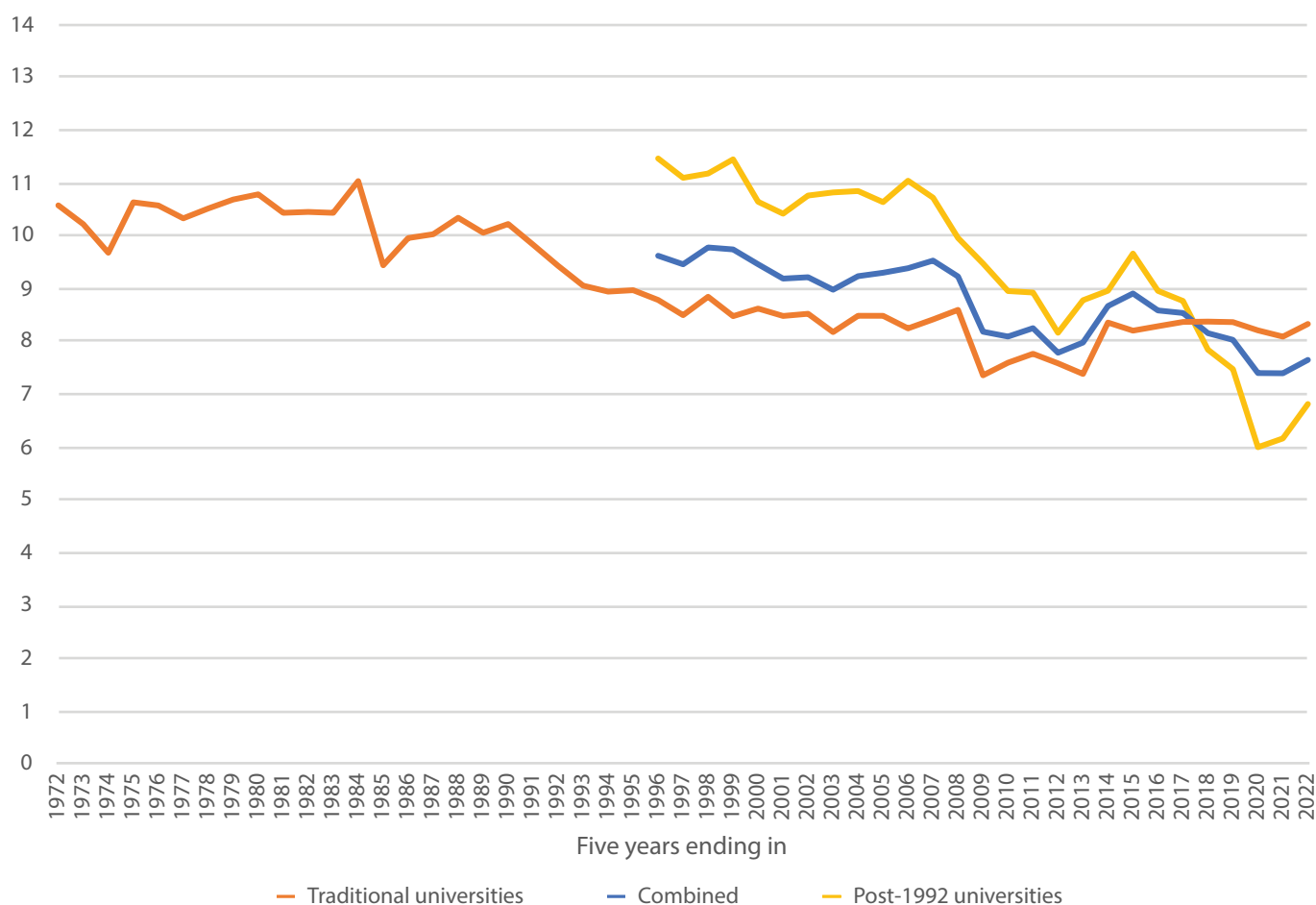
As already alluded to, not all of the post-1992 universities have remained in their initial institutional form. We have accounted for such mergers on a case-by-case basis, but we count the tenure of the new vice-chancellors as continuing to accumulate if they had been leading either of the institutions pre-merger. In all other instances where a vice-chancellor moved from one university to another, we count their terms separately – in other words, their tenure was reset to zero following the move. ‘Interim’ or ‘acting’ vice-chancellors have been excluded from our calculations unless they were subsequently appointed to a permanent role.

Results: full tenure

The first way we have measured vice-chancellors’ tenure is the average tenure of those who have given up their posts. Over the past decade, an average of 11 (11%) of the universities in our dataset have changed vice-chancellors in any given year. There is too much annual fluctuation in the tenures of departing vice-chancellors to make a meaningful year-by-year comparison between traditional and post-1992 universities (because of the relatively small number leaving their roles in any given year). However, when smoothed out over a five-year rolling average, a number of clear trends emerge:

- The post-1992 universities have historically had vice-chancellors with longer terms than traditional universities. In the five years from 1992 to 1996, the average ultimate tenure of the post-1992 universities' vice-chancellors was 11.5 years, compared with 8.8 years for traditional universities (a difference of 2.7 years).
- The gap was at its widest around the start of the millennium, reaching 2.8 years in the period from 2002 to 2006, and has consistently narrowed since then.
- Traditional universities' vice-chancellors have had a longer average tenure than post-1992 universities' since the 2014 to 2019 period, in an inversion of the historical pattern. The two values have coalesced since 2020 and now lie within 0.8 years of the combined average of 7.6 years.
- There has also been an overarching downward trend in tenure in both types of institutions. If we compare the years 1992 to 1996 with 2018 to 2022, we see a 20% fall in the combined average (from 9.6 years to 7.7 years).

Chart 2: Tenure of departing vice-chancellors in years (five-year rolling average)



Looking now at the post-1992 universities alone, some further patterns emerge about the tenures of individual vice-chancellors. In many cases, the first vice-chancellors were among the longest serving. The second-longest tenure in our data (after Charles Evans' 27 years at the 'traditional' Bangor University from 1957 to 1984) was Kenneth Durrands' 25 years at the University of Huddersfield (1970 to 1995) – yet only three of those years were during the period when Huddersfield had attained the status of University.

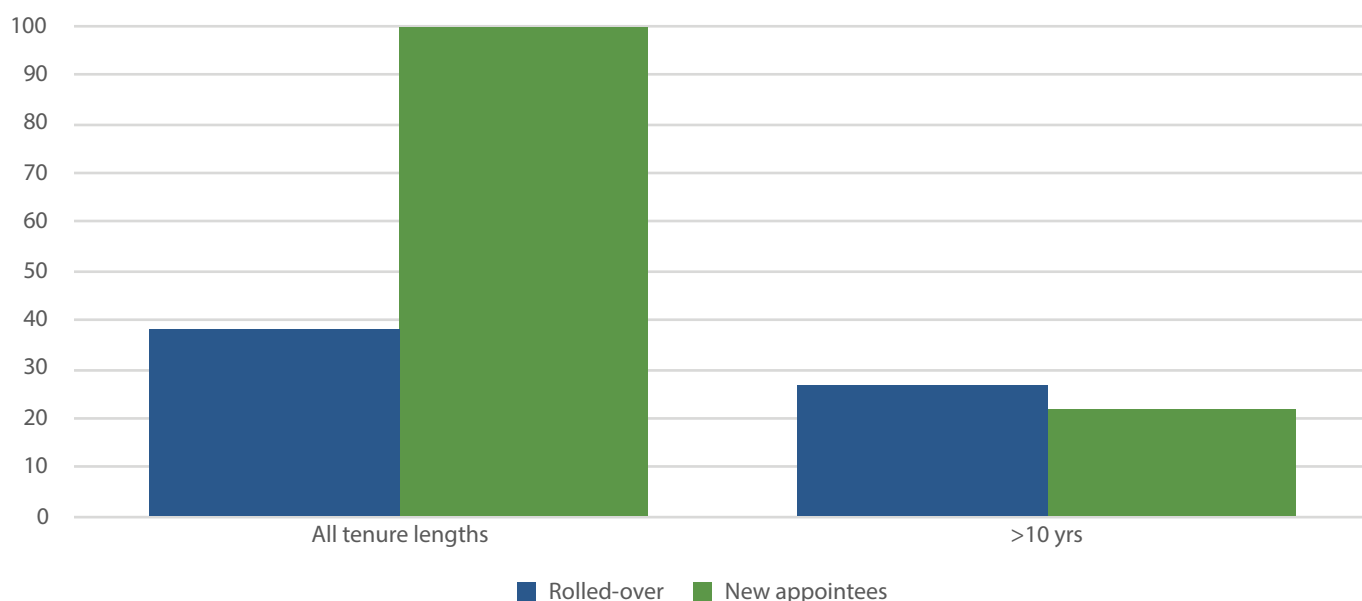
Similar observations can be made about other post-1992 institutions. We find that 'rolled-over' vice-chancellors (those who had led the institution as a polytechnic prior to it gaining university status) made up 28% of the total pool of university leaders, but a majority (55%) of those who led

their institution for over a decade. There are two possible explanations for their disproportionate representation among the longest-serving vice-chancellors (shown in Chart 3):

- as the first vice-chancellor, and the person who guided their institution through the transition to being a university, they were uniquely placed to serve unusually long terms; or
- the simple chronology of being the earliest vice-chancellors in the context of a downward trend in tenure means that those serving afterwards naturally had shorter tenures.

Testing either of these hypotheses is challenging. As we have shown, average tenure began to fall across the board around 2002, at a similar time to when many of the rolled-over vice-chancellors were giving up their posts. This means that the influences of these two different factors are not straightforward to untangle.

Chart 3: Number of vice-chancellors at post-1992 universities by appointment type and tenure length



One other notable characteristic of the post-1992 universities is the significant minority that were affected by governance or financial management scandals resulting in vice-chancellors leaving their roles. One widely-reported example was the travel expenses scandal at the University of Portsmouth in 1993 which ultimately led to the vice-chancellor's resignation.⁷ A subsequent report into the affair concluded that the university's rapid transition from polytechnic status had contributed to the lack of robust institutional safeguards, findings which were of 'significant interest' to other leaders of post-1992 universities.⁸ This could be indicative of the greater demands placed on new vice-chancellors from 1992, with university designation driving up standards and leading to a broader professionalisation of the former polytechnics.

Further research could capture the reasons for which vice-chancellors left their posts, in order to determine whether there is a significant difference between the proportion of acrimonious resignations in the post-1992 universities compared with the traditional ones. It could also explore the changing career background of their vice-chancellors. As Professor Michael Shattock of the UCL Institute of Education and Oxford Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) highlighted:

In 1992 many [vice-chancellors] had come straight to polytechnic Directorships from non-academic jobs or had inherited their posts from an FE background; now I should think they are only marginally distinguished from the pre-92s.

Results: current tenure

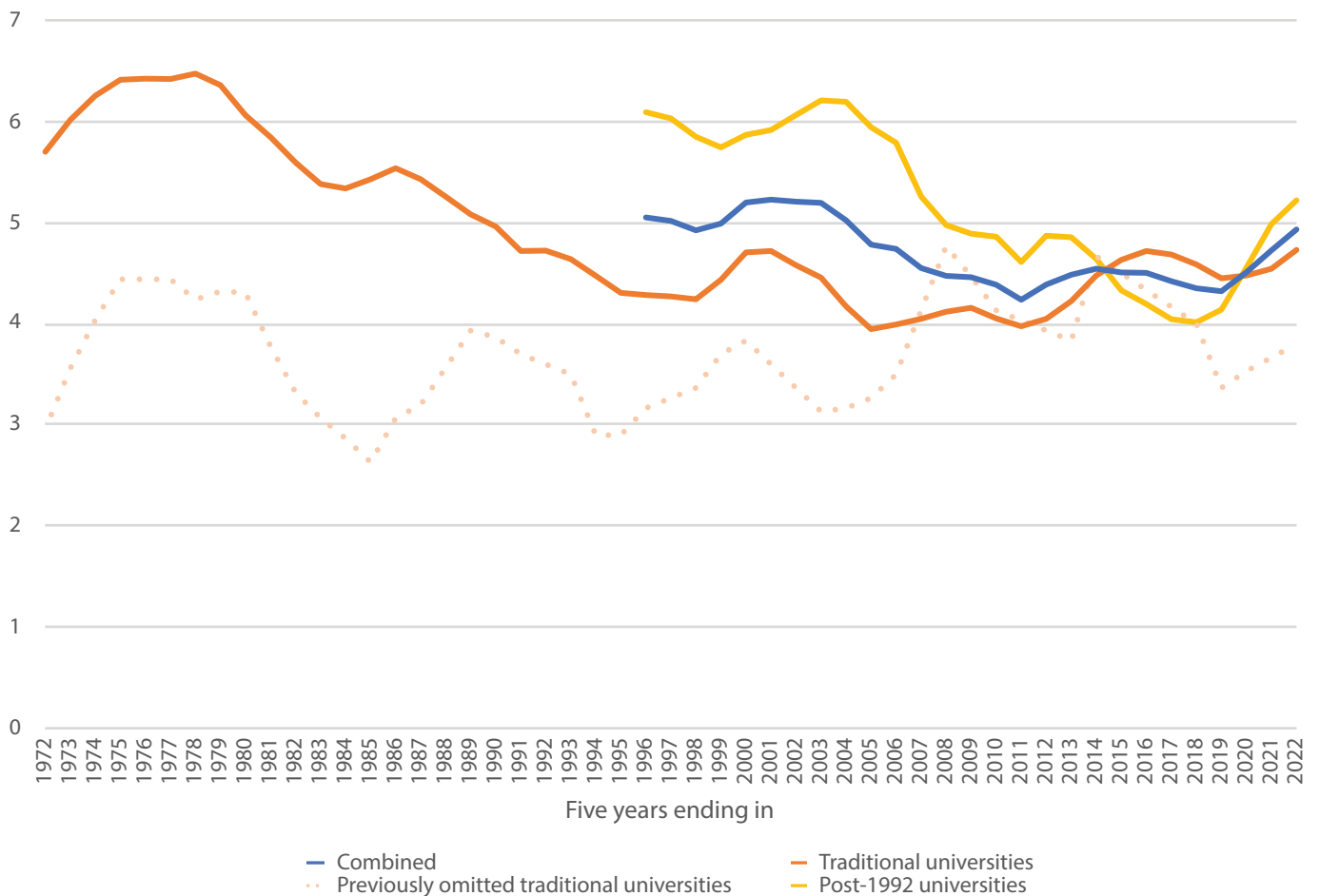
Another way to measure tenure is to look at the average tenures of serving vice-chancellors. This produces a figure for the typical amount of in-post experience they hold, and can allow trends to be identified earlier than with the full tenure (since the annual numbers for departing vice-chancellors are necessarily about those who took up their posts a long time ago and have since left).

On an annual basis, despite some expected fluctuation, a similar picture emerges as with the data on full tenure.

- At their point of conversion into universities, the polytechnics' directors had been in post for on average 1.2 years longer than traditional universities' vice-chancellors (6.1 years versus 4.9 years).
- In 2022, the vice-chancellors of post-1992 universities have an average tenure of 5.6 years, a fall of 0.5 years (8%) from 1992.
- This compares with the average of 5.3 years for traditional universities, an increase of 1.2 years (25%) since 1992.

Smoothing of the data with a five-year rolling average makes it easier to identify underlying trends. One which stands out is the period of inversion during the 2010s (where post-1992 universities' serving vice-chancellors had shorter terms than those at traditional universities), but the small sample size means this may well be statistical noise.

Chart 4: Tenure of serving vice-chancellors in years (five-year rolling average)



For the post-1992 institutions:

- Following a low of around four years (in the period from 2014 to 2018), average current term has now increased to 5.2 years in the five years to 2022.
- However, this is still 0.8 years (13%) shorter than average in the five-year period after they became universities.
- The recent increase in average current term means that vice-chancellors at post-1992 institutions once again typically have longer tenures than at traditional institutions.
- Despite these fluctuations, the gap in current term more than halved after 1992, in line with the long-term trend of convergence between traditional and post-1992 universities (for the most recent five-year period, the gap stands at 0.5 years, compared with 1.8 years for 1992 to 1996, a reduction of 73%).

Another notable finding is the difference between the newly-included 'traditional' universities, and the 51 which formed the basis of the original research. Numbering only six, there is a large amount of annual fluctuation in their data for full tenure, which remains even after taking a rolling average. That said, for our current tenure measure, it is clear that these newly-included universities had vice-chancellors who were in post for less time than the other 51. From 1971 to 1975 the average term for vice-chancellors in the new group was 4.4 years, 2.2 years (33%) shorter than in the original group. This difference has largely remained, albeit reducing over time. In the five years to 2022, the new group's serving vice-chancellors have an average term of 3.8 years, 1.0 years (21%) shorter.

Conclusion

This Policy Note has shown that the significant disparity between pre- and post-1992 universities' vice-chancellors' tenures has narrowed considerably during the past three decades, with the gap now negligible. This convergence fits in to the broader erosion of differences over time, with the 1992 dividing line becoming increasingly artificial. It is not simply that the former polytechnics have become more like traditional institutions, but that there has been a cross-pollination of culture and leadership structures. The movement of vice-chancellors and other senior administrators between traditional and post-1992 institutions is now more common. Recent examples include Professor Dame Janet Beer, who has led Oxford Brookes University and the University of Liverpool and Sir David Bell, who has led the University of Reading and the University of Sunderland.

Mike Ratcliffe commented that the management structures now seen at many traditional universities were first introduced by polytechnics:

Much has changed since the time of Laurie Taylor's columns [in Times Higher Education] satirising the contrast between businessman-like post-1992 vice-chancellors, and the comparatively academic ones at traditional institutions. Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Education Reform Act gave freedom to polytechnics, with a stronger role for senior leadership teams in their governance frameworks. These types of management structures have now been copied over to older institutions.

With the recent upward trend in vice-chancellor tenure, and the recent downward trend in ministerial tenure, the tendency of university leaders to remain in post for far longer than senior government ministers is one that continues. In July 2022, Britain had three Education Secretaries in as many days (Nadhim Zahawi, Michelle Donelan and James Cleverly).

It remains an open question what the ideal term length of a vice-chancellor is. The long-term decrease in tenure may well reflect the greater importance of a vice-chancellor's position today, with the greater day-to-day demands and media attention that come with the job. A faster turnover of university leaders would potentially make space for a more diverse generation of vice-chancellors to take up their roles, but it would also increase turbulence and disruption.

Endnotes

- 1 The University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) and Cranfield University received their own Royal Charters so did not change status as a direct result of the 1992 Act.
- 2 We are very grateful to Mike Ratcliffe for suggesting that we use *Whitaker's Almanack*.
- 3 In England, these were the 34 polytechnics and technical colleges; in Scotland, Glasgow Polytechnic, Napier Polytechnic, Paisley College, the Dundee Institute of Technology and the Robert Gordon Institute of Technology; and in Wales, the Polytechnic of Wales.
- 4 The University of Manchester is kept within the 'traditional' classification.
- 5 The Oxbridge vice-chancellorships have grown in importance and responsibility and are no longer served in a revolving manner by colleges' Principals, but rather are permanent positions. The past four Cambridge vice-chancellors each served a seven-year term, while Oxford and London have also had longer-serving leaders since 2000. In Wales, the current Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, Medwin Jones, has been in post since 2011 (a post he holds concurrently with the vice-chancellorship at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David).
- 6 The universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor and Swansea fall into this category.
- 7 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/call-for-more-to-resign-in-portsmouth-expenses-row/95604.article>
- 8 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/portsmouths-model-bid/100088.article>



Higher Education Policy Institute

99 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 6JX
admin@hepi.ac.uk
www.hepi.ac.uk