How important is the role of the Chancellor in the appointment of Australian Vice-Chancellors and University governance?

Dr. Bernard O'Meara

School of Business, University of Ballarat

Email: b.omeara@ballarat.edu.au

Dr. Stanley Petzall

Deakin Business School, Deakin University

Email: petzall@deakin.edu.au

The role of the Chancellor in the appointment of Australian Vice-Chancellors.

ABSTRACT

Research into the recruitment and selection practices used to appoint vice-chancellors in Australia, undertaken as part of a Ph.D, yielded a wide range of useful material.

The research also exposed some unexpected surprises one of which was the role of the Chancellor in the appointment process.

Prior to this research it was evident that little research had been undertaken on the role of the Chancellor. While The Chancellor chairs Council the incumbent also presides over quite a complex selection process, including chairing the selection Panel, when the need to appoint a new VC arises.

The Chancellor not only appeared to lead these processes, as would be expected, but was viewed as the key, if not sole, person who determined the successful candidate.

It was found that the relationship between the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor was crucial and this was evident both in determining successful candidates and the decision for incumbents to seek a role elsewhere.

However in almost all cases the Chancellor made the final decision when appointing a new VC. In some cases it appeared that selection panels considered their role as being simply to assist the Chancellor to make a decision. This contrasted with the expectation that the panel as a whole would make a decision and recommend it to Council.

Thus understanding the role of the Chancellor is important when considering university governance and VC succession. This paper provides the findings of the research highlighting the significance of the Chancellor's role in the context of appointing a new VC.

Introduction:

In 2000, there were 39 universities in Australia with a funding base in excess of \$1,600,000,000. The role of VC has changed dramatically since the first university was established in Australia in 1850. The early universities were reactive and driven by social and economic trends, were conservative, small and steeped in academic colonialism (Andrews et al, 1999).

It was in 1904 that contemporary universities first enrolled students who could attend evening classes but, with an entrenched traditional culture, it was considered that students needed to be enrolled on a full-time basis even if they rarely attended classes. The need to cater for part-time students would be considered later (Anderson, 1990).

However the growth of alternative post-secondary education sectors and the diversion of government funding from universities to the growth areas of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE's) and the TAFE system in the 1960's, ensured that universities began to adopt a more open and entrepreneurial approach (DEETYA, 1993).

During this time the Liberal Party was dominant in Federal politics and it was not until 1983 that a Labour government won office during a time of economic decline. This period was dominated by the Dawkins era that saw mergers in the education system and the creation of 20 new universities between 1987 and 1994 (Dawkins, 1987: Task Force Report, 1989).

This was also a time of change in the role of vice-chancellors and universities. It was at this time that the unified system was introduced together with managerialism and a move towards the corporatisation of Australian Higher Education. An economic decline occurred which led to a significant decrease in recurrent funding for universities that were forced to seek long-term alternative forms of funding (Sloper, 1994).

Prior to the Dawkins era universities sought vice-chancellors (VC's) who were outstanding academics and were members of the professoriate, heads of schools or deans. Some were drawn from academic administration, government departments or instrumentalities and were leaders both in the academic community and community in general.

However, following the Dawkins era, universities were encouraged by the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) to become more entrepreneurial in seeking alternative funding and incentives were used to reshape them along the lines of private-sector organisations.

The competencies, knowledge and experience required of vice-chancellors now included the need for strong academic and non-academic leadership, strategic management, human resource and industrial relations skills and the ability to oversee the finances of a substantial business (Sloper, 1994).

VC's began to resemble Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) rather than playing their traditional academic roles and many took on the title of CEO in recognition of this changing role. While the academic role of the VC remained, it lost ground to business skills, and, as universities commenced their transformation from public-oriented education institutions, they became more like private sector organisations in shape, purpose and activities (Gallagher, 1994).

However throughout these changes the role of the Chancellor remained relatively unaltered, as did its importance in the appointment of new VC's. The role of Chancellor has variously been described as figurehead, distant from the university activities and a part-time role.

Yet the findings of this research portrays the roles of Chancellors as critical in determining appropriate leadership for universities, their strategic direction, mission statements and ultimately their performance. As the Chancellor is the key representative of the government

or owners, the role impacts heavily upon the governance of universities and upon the higher education system as a whole (DEST, 2004).

Research methodology:

The topic of the research was ‘The Recruitment and Selection of Vice-Chancellor’s for Australian Universities’ and therefore focused predominantly upon the processes used to appoint a new VC. Previous research by David Sloper (1985, 1994) was used as a template so that comparisons could be drawn.

Data was also collected from a variety of sources including

- Who’s Who in Australia (1960-2005)
- The AVCC Senior Staff Lists (1970-2005)
- Commonwealth Universities Yearbook (1960-2000)
- Other bibliographic sources such as *Contemporary Australians*
- Media releases
- Direct contact with University archivists
- Who’s Who of Executive Heads, 1998.

A survey instrument was constructed and administered to current and former Vice Chancellors, existing and former Chancellors and selection panel members.

The questionnaires were reviewed in a pilot study and approved by the AVCC. The questionnaires involved Likert scales, and included both open and closed questions. The questionnaires forwarded to the respondents were slightly different, depending on whether they were present or former VC’s, Chancellors or selection panel members.

The questionnaires forwarded to incumbent and previous VC’s and Chancellors asked for details such as age, gender, country of birth and discipline base. The remainder of the

questionnaire was divided into sections in relation to the position, the recruitment and selection processes used, and a blank section for comments from respondents.

While much of the questionnaire related to recruitment and selection methodologies data was also gained about incumbents and the role itself. The questionnaires were followed up by interviews with respondents (mainly former VC's and Chancellors) who were willing to be interviewed further about the matters raised.

The responses obtained are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of research methodologies involving interviews and questionnaires

	Number of questionnaires sent out	* Number returned but not completed	Number returned and completed	Number interviewed
Vice-Chancellors	39	6	15	8
Former VCs	38	6	15	12
Chancellors	39	3	13	7
Former Chancellors	37	9	7	2
Selection Panel Members	100	25	23	0
Consultants	0	0	0	2
AVCC	0	0	0	2

* A number of Universities returned questionnaires as their Councils' considered the topic too sensitive.

While the questionnaires provided much useful information, the feedback quite clearly indicated that the Chancellor is the most important person in the appointment processes and that this person determines the outcome of the selection process.

The data that was gathered was classified according to the university clusters presented in Table2. This allowed for comparisons between like universities as well as those in other groupings to detect any patterns that may exist.

Table 2.

Classification and List of Australian Universities

Group	Universities	Foundation Date
19th Century institutions	Sydney	1850
	Melbourne	1853
	Adelaide	1874
	Tasmania	1890
Early 20th Century institutions	Queensland	1910
	Western Australia	1913
Post war institutions	New South Wales	1949
	New England*	1954
	Monash	1958
	ANU*	1960
New institutions	La Trobe	1964
	Macquarie	1964
	Flinders*	1965
	Newcastle*	1965
	James Cook*	1970
	Griffith	1971
	Murdoch	1973
	Deakin	1974
	Wollongong*	1975
Post 1988 institutions	Bond	1987
	Curtin#	1987
	(Charles Darwin) Northern Territory*	1988
	UTS#	1988
	Charles Sturt#	1989
	QUT#	1989
	Western Sydney#	1989
	Canberra#	1990
	VUT#	1990
	Australian Catholic#	1991
	Edith Cowan#	1991
	South Australia#	1991
	Central Queensland	1992
	RMIT#	1992
	Southern Queensland#	1992
	Swinburne#	1992
	Notre Dame	1992
	Ballarat#	1993
	Southern Cross#	1994
	Sunshine Coast	1994

*Inaugurated earlier as an affiliated college of another university. #Established earlier as one or more colleges of advanced education.

Source: Adapted from Sloper, 1994, p 14.

The appointment processes.

Recruitment has been defined by Wooden and Harding (1997, page 3) as the first stage of a two-part process:

“ The first stage, recruitment, is generally defined as the process of searching for and obtaining job candidates in sufficient quantity and quality to meet organisational human resource needs”. They also point out that the type of recruitment method and the desired standard jointly determine the nature of the pool of applicants.

The second stage of the process, Selection is therefore defined as follows:

“ Selection is the process of gathering, collating and evaluating information about the knowledge, skills and abilities of individual job applicants in order to determine who seems to be the best suited, and thus should be hired, for particular positions” (Wooden and Harding, 1997, page 3).

However due to the changing and evolving nature of the role of the VC the preparation for the recruitment and selection stage can occur 18 months or more prior to the position being vacated (Sloper, 1989).

In 2000, fifty-four percent of Chancellors reported commencing preparations 6-12 months early while 58% of former Chancellors commenced 12-18 months earlier. Thirty-eight percent of Chancellors commenced 12-18 months earlier and eight percent commenced 18 months or more beforehand.

The respondents reported that the type of preparation undertaken included forming the selection panel, determining the appropriate recruitment and selection strategies, setting the necessary timelines and determining appropriate selection criteria.

However, it was also noted that the Chancellor and Council often review the strategic direction and operational imperatives of the university. This allows the Chancellor, in concert with the Council, to determine the strategic direction of the university and to then set about finding the appropriate individual to lead this in the future.

It was noted that at times the Chancellor and Council will wish to pursue a new strategic direction for the university and will identify a person who is sympathetic with, and skilled in, this direction. While this may not happen in each instance it became apparent that the Chancellor plays a dominant role in both governance and operational issues.

Thus, to some extent, the Chancellor seeks a person who can implement and maintain council's vision for the university. The appointment of a new VC is a critical function of Council but especially for the Chancellor. This is irrespective of the knowledge of academia possessed by the Chancellor.

The role of the Chancellor.

The Australian Oxford Dictionary (1989, page 1270) defines the term 'Chancellor' as being "...state or law official of various kinds...non-resident head of university...chief minister of the state".

In Australia the role of Chancellor is created by the relevant university legislation. An example of this is the Victoria University of Technology Act 1990 (now Victoria University). Section 7 of the Act creates the role of Chancellor while Section 15 states that the Chancellor shall 'preside over the Council'. While other sections prescribe the tenure of the Chancellor, pecuniary interests and how the incumbent may resign there are no other references to what the incumbent actually does (Victoria University of Technology Act, Section 15, page 9).

This vagueness about responsibility, authority, role and function appears common throughout research regarding universities and legislation. Yet the same legislation dictates that “Council is the governing authority of the University and has the direction and superintendence of the University”. Thus Council is the supreme governing body in all aspects of university activities and the Chancellor is the chair of this body (Victoria University of Technology Act, Section 7, page 5).

The Act also sets out the composition of the Council, the number of meetings to be held and other areas related to the process and structure of Council. Members can be appointed by the Governor in Council or the Minister and can also be removed accordingly.

However the legislation remains imprecise regarding the actual role of the Chancellor. The ambiguous nature of the role has also eluded clear definition in Britain. “It would be hard to obtain any authoritative statement of the qualifications and role of the Chancellor” (Moodie and Eustace, 1994, p 91).

Moodie and Eustace (1994) then go on to discuss the notion of the Chancellor as the ‘Honourable protector’ with access to influential members of the political system. This is particularly important in times of a highly competitive funding scheme. They also note that in recent times leaders in industry, scholarship or the arts are being appointed to the role rather than politicians and titled people.

They do state, however, that the absolute requirement of a Chancellor is public honour. This is seen as critical as the person must be impartial, honest and committed as they continue a high profile public life. It is also useful in times of crisis when the Chancellor needs to be seen as distinguished, honourable, impartial and able to act in the best interests of the institution.

Thus while some of the desirable characteristics of Chancellors may be outlined above this is not an exhaustive list and it still does not specify the role of the Chancellor. “The Chancellor plays a dual role, that of the titular or ceremonial head of the institution and ‘Chair of the Board’ (the Chancellor chairs the meetings of the governing body which performs the legislative functions, amongst others)” (Meek and Wood, 1997, p38).

In terms of governance the Council clearly is the legislatively endorsed overseeing body. This is chaired by the Chancellor. However, Council takes advice on the specialist academic issues from the Academic Board or Senate and it is usual for the VC (CEO) to be a leading member of both Council and Academic Board/Senate (Birt, 1997). Thus, if neither the Chancellor or the external members of Council have an academic background they rely heavily on the VC for advice. Yet final decisions rest with the Chancellor and Council.

It is the VC who oversees daily activities and sets the strategic direction for the university within guidelines discussed with, and approved by, Council. The Council can delegate authority and responsibility for specific areas to the VC, boards and committees where it deems it appropriate. In this way Council adopts a role of overseeing university activities but leaves the implementation of policy and strategy to the VC and other senior officers (Gamage and Mininberg, 2003).

As an example, Section 19 of the Victoria University of Technology Act 1990 states:

The Council may delegate all or any of its powers, authorities, duties and functions, other than-

- (a) the power to make Statutes; and
- (b) this power of delegation-

to a committee appointed by it, a member of the Council or a prescribed officer of the University. (Victoria University of Technology Act, 1990, p20).

The Chancellor needs to be abreast of operational and strategic directions in order to ensure appropriate delegation to the VC occurs. In the appointment process the Chancellor must be satisfied that the appointee can assume this delegation and work in concert with directions approved by Council. The role of the Chancellor becomes critical to the appointment process.

The role of the Chancellor is therefore more than ceremonial, chairing meetings and fulfilling legislative requirements. As the chair of the governing body the Chancellor must ensure that the university has adopted appropriate strategies, goals and objectives and that these are in accord with Council policies and governmental directives. The Chancellor advises the Governor and the Minister on appointments to Council and must ensure that staff appointments, policies, practices and conditions are appropriate (National Governance Protocols, 2004).

While the VC seeks agreement from Council on strategic imperatives and activities it is the Chancellor who acts as the main interface between Council and the university executive. “Should the Vice-Chancellor become unbalanced or some other private scandal occur, the value of a distinguished, disinterested, yet concerned, head in whom to confide could be great, especially to the chief actors who cannot advertise their difficulties” (Moodie and Eustace, 1994, p 92).

It is useful to outline some of the key characteristics of Chancellors to better understand those who are appointed to this role. A snapshot of Chancellors in 2005 shows that 86% were male and their average age was 67.5 years while the average age at appointment was 62.3 years. In contrast in 2005, 74% of Vice-Chancellors were male, their average age was 58.75 years and on average were 53.56 years when appointed.

The average age of Chancellors when appointed indicates they had all established their careers and reputations and they had the maturity, knowledge and experience needed in the role. This would also be expected of persons holding the role of chair of the Board in the private sector but is also consistent with the view of Moodie and Eustace (1994) that the Chancellor needs to be a distinguished well respected individual.

Table 3 shows the backgrounds of Chancellors and it is surprising that only 18% of incumbents had an academic background immediately prior to being appointed Chancellor. However, all incumbents were leaders in their fields ie, former state Governors are included in the 'Government' category and the 'Industry' section includes Managing Directors, Chairs of Boards... Thus in all categories incumbents were leaders in their fields as would be expected.

Table 3. Background clusters of Chancellors.

Background Cluster	Percentage
Industry	44%
Academic	18%
Law	13%
Government	13%
Military	5%
Health	3%
Other (Religious...)	4%

Thirty-six percent attended a private school, forty-two percent attended a public high school and 22% did not list any education details. In 2005 there were 39 Universities however one university had an acting Chancellor while another position was listed as vacant leaving 37 Chancellors in office at that time. Nineteen percent had a PhD while 54% had a degree.

This tends to suggest that university councils seek out high profile leaders with transportable generic management and leadership competencies that will add-value to the university. It would also appear that a proven track record is considered more important than familiarity with university structures, governance and operations. In terms of qualifications it appears

that natural talent, profile, knowledge and experience are also more important than formal qualifications.

This contrasts with the appointment of a new VC who generally must have a Ph.D and a strong academic background. While the modern VC must now also have the skills of a CEO he or she is still the chief academic of the university and must oversee all academic activities as well as all business and commercial activities (O'Meara and Petzall 2005).

Table 4 shows that the majority of Chancellors have been publicly recognised for their contribution to society and their chosen fields by being given an Australian award. This recognition increases the profile and may identify persons considered appropriate for the role of Chancellor within the context of excellence and performance in their careers.

Table 4. Chancellors with Australian Awards

Officer of the Order of Australia (AO)	28%
Companion of the Order of Australia (AC)	23%
Member of the Order of Australia (AM)	18%
Medal of the Order of Australia	3%
None Listed	28%

The role of the Chancellor in the appointment processes.

The previous sections give an insight of the role of the Chancellor and it is evident that in Australian higher education the role can have a dramatic impact upon university governance. Yet it is in the appointment of a new vice-chancellor that the role of the Chancellor has its greatest impact. As one former VC commented during an interview for this research "...the Chancellor told me that the main function he had was to appoint a VC" (O'Meara, 2000).

The role of the Chancellor was generally seen as critical in the appointment of a new VC (Birt, 1997). This view was further supported by another former Chancellor who stated that

“...some Chancellors would make the decision themselves and then go about making it happen”. This was confirmed during an interview with a Chancellor who stated that he met a particular candidate and wanted to appoint him to the role of VC. The Chancellor then set about ‘selling the candidate to Council’. The candidate was subsequently appointed to the role (O’Meara, 2000).

There were only a very small number of examples where Council did not appoint the person nominated by the Chancellor. It was again noted that because Council members come from a variety of backgrounds including non-academic and that Councils generally takes their lead from the Chancellor. The resignation of Don Mercer as Chancellor of RMIT University in 2003 illustrates the point that Council and the Chancellor can and do disagree. It was reported that Mr Mercer was in a ‘power struggle’ with the VC regarding the University’s finances and effectively support by the members of Council was split (Ketchell, 2003).

It was also not uncommon for university councils, when a VC left a university, to set the strategic direction, mission, vision, goals and objectives of the university before setting about finding candidates to realise their vision. This would be under the leadership of the Chancellor.

As the chair of council the Chancellor played a significant role in setting these strategic initiatives and in the majority of cases the Chancellor also chaired the selection panel to which was delegated the responsibility to identify suitable candidates. The Chancellor would then be in a position to identify the person who could operationalise the plans set by council.

The Chancellor sits on the line that separates owner representation and control (Governance) and moves between both and influences both. The Chancellor influences board composition, management and leadership as well as corporate values and may even influence

organisational performance. The Chancellor is therefore in a unique position to determine an appropriate CEO (Bhasa 2004; Kakabadse, Kakabadse and Kouzmin 2001; Thomsen 2004).

Thus despite most Chancellors not having an academic background or knowledge and in some cases lacking formal qualifications, they have been pivotal in determining the strategic direction for a university and finding the right person to implement this. In doing so the Chancellor has set the governance agenda, university priorities and has even influenced staffing, funding priorities and performance. In the private sector the Chancellor would be considered the chairman of the board (Birt, 1997).

While the VC will be the person who implements policy it is necessary to have the backing of the Chancellor. Otherwise the relationship between the two becomes untenable and this impacts upon the entire organisation (Gamage and Mininberg, 2003).

In order to identify suitable candidates, Chancellors have used a network of contacts and in fact this research showed that 92% of Chancellors used networks for this purpose. One former VC noted that he was aware that the Chancellor had written to other Chancellors and VC's requesting comments on those who may be considered suitable for the role (Sloper, 1989).

The network of contacts became an informal method of determining suitable candidates prior to advertising. The Chancellor could then 'invite' certain people to apply for the role. Thus prior to the selection process being initiated, preferred candidates could be identified. This could raise a question of objectivity but also occurs in the private sector.

Interestingly, when selection panel members were surveyed regarding who made the final decision regarding the successful appointment of a new VC, 57% of the 23 respondents believed Council made the final decision, 39% believed the selection panel did and 4% believed the Chancellor in consultation with the Council made the final decision.

When former Chancellors were asked the same question, 86% stated that Council made the final decision and 14% stated the Chancellor in Consultation made the final decision. The responses from extant Chancellors showed that 69% stated that Council made the final decision and 31% stated the selection panel did. However as the Chancellor chairs Council and generally chairs the selection panel as well, the influence of the Chancellor is evident (O'Meara, 2000).

In general the Chancellor is responsible for overseeing the development of selection criteria, matching the needs of the university with necessary characteristics of candidates, the position description, remuneration and benefits, performance criteria and even the questions to be asked during interviews. This is in-line with private sector processes where organisations match their antecedents with candidate competencies, knowledge and experience (Datta and Guthrie 1994, 1997; McCanna and Compte 1987)

Many incumbent and former VC's reported having private meetings with Chancellors as part of the process. Also where Chancellors are themselves former VC's their involvement may be still deeper again. However irrespective of background the Chancellor is involved at all stages in the appointment of a new VC.

The role of the Chancellor not only impacts dramatically on the appointment of vice-chancellors but also in the form the relationship between the VC and Chancellor takes. Throughout the research respondents commented upon the importance of this relationship to the point where it could determine successful performance by a VC.

Ultimately the VC is responsible to Council and therefore to the Chancellor and if the relationship between these two becomes untenable then the VC's standing can be diminished and can result in resignation by the VC or termination by the Council (Birt, 1997). Also it is

generally the Chancellor who conducts the performance review of the VC where this exists as well as determining if performance-based salary increases are appropriate.

These points were highlighted in case studies undertaken as part of the original research. The first case study involved a large multi-campus university located in the CBD of a large Australian city. In 2000 the university had over 50,000 students, 3000 staff and an annual turnover of \$400 million.

In this case the Vice-Chancellor (Foundation), 12 months prior to the expiration of his contract, told the Chancellor of his intention to resign. It was the Chancellor who then informed Council of this decision and Council then delegated authority to the Chancellor to oversee all aspects of the appointment process for the new VC. The Chancellor was then to provide a recommendation to Council on suitable applicants.

The Chancellor chaired the Selection Panel and the Council then noted that an existing committee would be charged with determining an appropriate remuneration package once the Chancellor had made the final recommendation. University documents state: “The supervisor (in this case the Chancellor) will determine the composition of the (selection) panel.”

The document clearly lists the Chancellor as the direct supervisor of the Vice-Chancellor, rather than Council, and it was the Chancellor who gave final approval on all aspects of the process.

Consultants were contracted to seek out likely candidates through advertising and networking, while meetings were held with the Chancellor to determine how the working relationship between the new VC and the Chancellor could be optimised.

The Chancellor therefore became the pivotal point in the process and clearly was the most influential person who determined the make-up of the selection panel, linked the strategic direction of the university with desirable characteristics of candidates and made the final recommendation to Council.

Prior to appointment the Chancellor and the new VC met to discuss priorities and these two agreed on a performance-based contract where the Chancellor would undertake a review of the VC's performance annually. The case study reinforced the central role of the Chancellor and his influence in appointing the new VC and the important impact this has on all aspects of a university.

Conclusion:

While the role of the Chancellor is created by legislation it is still ambiguous and perhaps understated somewhat like the role of the Prime Minister under the Australian Constitution. The Chancellor's influence critical at all stages in the appointment of a VC and indeed in determining the role, tasks and priorities of the incumbent.

The Chancellor has influence on all aspects of a university including strategic direction, effective governance, staffing and funding, despite sometimes lacking an academic background. Clearly Chancellors do much more than merely presiding in a dignified manner over Council meetings and graduation ceremonies.

Chancellors will frequently use a network of contacts to source potential VC's and can then take on a mentoring role till the VC becomes better acquainted with the expectations and priorities of the Chancellor and council.

Yet while the Chancellor plays an important role in all these areas it is difficult to identify the role in detail, legislation not being explicit. It appears that there has been very little research undertaken in this important area.

Each of Australia's universities is the equivalent of a medium to large private sector organization and headed by a chief executive officer (CEO) or VC. Yet we know little about the Chancellor, the equivalent of the Chairman of the Board, being the person to whom the CEO, the VC, reports through Council.

This paper has attempted to shed some light on the role of the Chancellor particularly in the context of sourcing and appointing VC's. While the importance has been demonstrated questions have also been raised regarding the Chancellor's wider significance for the university. Much more research needs to be undertaken into this important issue in university governance.

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