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Universities and Academic Leaders

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The London School of Economics did not. Cambridge did. Manchester may.

I think Cambridge will be shown to be right and, although I would love to have Howard Davies, the incoming head of LSE, come to a summer dinner party at my house, I think LSE got it wrong when it appointed him as its new boss. The reason is straightforward: leaders need instinct.

When you are sailing into to the Bermuda Triangle, it is better to have a cussing tatoored skipper with a lifetime of salt water in her rum-soaked veins than a reliable and charismatic captain who is a brilliant organiser, gorgeous figurehead and savvy harbour-party public speaker. Instinct does not come in tablet form and you cannot read it up in a manual when the clouds go grey. Instinct bubbles through you and is cut into you by years of listening and seeing and making mistakes and biting your lip through triumphs and foolishness and black times and white times.

Therefore universities should be run by academics, not professional managers. The reason is that universities are not normal business organisations. Unfortunately, my sense is that Britain is going to have to learn this the painful way. Of course it is natural, at first glance, to think that because running a university is a large organisational task then your Vice-Chancellor search committee should seek out a large organiser who can make cogs whirr on time. But your committee should not.

First, universities are about unusual kinds of people and special kinds of ideas. Those who have not been university professors and lecturers do not understand what makes these egotistical nomads tick. Academics care little for money. They care an extraordinary

amount for rigour and intellectual beauty. Now there are a couple of concepts to baffle the normal citizen. I bet that even the most eminent professional manager in the United Kingdom has no idea what rigour and intellectual beauty mean. That is why managers are best blocked from becoming Vice Chancellors.

Second, professional managers have an unstoppable urge to think that what matters is excellent publicity for their product. They value a mention in the Financial Times or the Independent far above a mention in the Journal of the Royal Society of Nuclear Sociology. They do so for the most natural of reasons (from their perspective): almost nobody reads the JRSNS.

But thinking like that is a mistake. University scholars are in the business of saying small dull things that are definitely right. They are not in the media business, which is about saying big interesting things that are often wrong.

Third, managers normally feel deep down that good ideas are ones that contribute something tangible. In university life, however, most good ideas achieve nothing that can be weighed and touched. Routinely the best ideas are so forward-looking and abstract that they look worthless to a non-specialist.

Fourth, in a university, professional managers stress the importance of teaching too much. This is a mistake made all the time by parents, too. Universities are not grown-up high schools. A country's universities are primarily about research – about discovery not pedagogy. The most important researchers are our real teachers, even if they mutter in lectures and get dire teaching evaluations from undergraduates, because indirectly what they do when they get back into their offices and labs is to rewrite the school textbooks of tomorrow. That is the main teaching function of a powerful university. It educates the people of the future.

Fifth, professional managers come from, and indeed have prospered in, a world where workers are cheery when organised into hierarchies and given well-defined tasks to do. University lecturers and professors think that hierarchies suck. They get exceptionally grumpy when given well-defined tasks to do. They would sooner

have no tasks. And if they must have tasks, they would like to define those tasks for themselves.

In short, professional managers will always find universities bewildering, and they will stress the wrong things. They should not be allowed to be at the helm.

Vice Chancellors need good instinct. Instinct cannot be taught; instinct just is. That is why universities should be run by expert ex-professors not expert ex-professionals.