**Becoming a university president: An accidental meritocratic career trajectory**

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# **Abstract**

Achieving top leadership positions is a career goal for many, including those in academia. Despite the increasing size and importance of the higher education sector, the literature on university presidents` careers remains scarce. We interviewed 48 university presidents in three different academic models (UK, France, and Vietnam) to identify the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of their career trajectories. While the academic career model reflects characteristics of ‘new careers’, our findings support and expand several career theories. We identified a multi-stage career trajectory where progression to the next stage is contingent on meeting certain requirements. It is only from having achieved prior levels that the move to an executive leadership role becomes a consideration. Progress is largely informal, partly ‘accidental’, and sponsored by existing leadership and/or other colleagues. Furthermore, we observed similarities and differences in the enablers and barriers across national systems. Finally, we reveal the almost complete lack of HRM involvement in the process, providing implications for those responsible for people management in universities.

*Keywords*: Higher Education; university presidents; career trajectory, career path

# **Introduction**

Career trajectories refer to the patterns of advancement that individuals experience in their professional lives (Haak-Saheem et al., 2022). These trajectories can vary greatly depending on factors such as education, skills, experiences, interests, and opportunities (Withers et al., 2024). They often include milestones such as promotions, job changes, skill development, and personal growth. They may also involve significant shifts in roles, industries, or even entire career paths over time. Career trajectories can be linear, with steady progress within a single field or organization, or nonlinear, featuring shifts, exploration or transitions (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009).

Studying the career trajectories of leaders like CEOs and university presidents is crucial for understanding the factors influencing their leadership attainment. This knowledge informs executive selection, career development management, and the prevention of the professional violations, while shedding light on patterns and decisions toward career outcomes (Bennett, 2009; Flöthmann and Hoberg, 2017; Livingston et al., 2024). However, existing literature on the nature of and influences on top leaders' career paths remains limited. Many studies focus on analysing factors influencing career progression of top leaders at a single level, while only a minority investigate multiple groups of factors concurrently. Few studies apply contemporary career theories, such as the ecosystem career theory. Comparative studies, particularly involving non-western developing countries like Vietnam, are notably scarce. Executive leadership succession planning and internal talent development has been a concern for several decades within commercial organizations (Cavanaugh, 2017). Yet, practicing succession planning and talent development in HE has been less systematic. In Western HE, traditional pathways to the presidency are becoming unsustainable due to rising demographic and financial challenges (Briscoe and Freeman, 2019; Eddy and Garza Mitchell, 2017; Selingo et al., 2017). In contrast, Vietnam is experiencing a transition in its HE sector, underscoring the need for both professional and personal preparation for aspiring senior administrators and future leaders (Nguyen et al., 2014).

This paper examines the career trajectories of university presidents in the UK, France, and Vietnam (representing three different academic systems and institutional logics). Building on qualitative data collected from interviews with 48 university presidents, we explored their interpretations of their road to the top.

There are various reasons for examining career trajectories of university presidents. Contemporary expectations position them as multidimensional leaders who must navigate various challenges, often with a business-oriented background. Forbes (2024) investigated “why being a University President is the best job in the world” and found three jobs in one: academic leader, CEO of a complex, mid-sized organization and mayor of a small town. A deeper understanding of the factors shaping career paths towards the presidency is crucial, especially given the time-intensive and costly nature of recruitment (Stevenson, 2006). Additionally, knowledge of various pathways ensures that professional experiences align with the needs and culture of the institution (West, 2015).

Our three-country comparative study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, answering calls to study careers across the life course (Tomlinson et a., 2018), we present a multi-stage model of the Presidency career path. Each stage represents a threshold linked to specific requirements as an academic career progresses. We identify key skills indicative of success at the early career stage and those necessary for advancement to more senior positions. We extend career ecosystem theory (CET) (Baruch, 2015) by confirming the application of CET in the contemporary HE sector and across cultures. Our findings provide empirical evidence of a complex array of multilevel factors to make it to the top within academe.

The study is relevant to the field of management studies as it addresses the critical issue of upward career trajectories within universities. The comparative perspective highlights the variations in HE career paths across national and institutional contexts, a largely underexplored research area (Koch et al., 2017). We illuminate both commonalities and distinctions that are crucial for future research and practice. Practically, we provide specific examples of how peers, university HR departments, recruitment panels, and search agencies might better prepare and select the next generation of presidents.

# **Literature review**

Researchers have investigated career trajectories of top leaders in general management (Koch et al., 2017), public management (Einolf, 2022), and HE (Cooney and Martin Iii, 2021). These studies provide critical insights into the pathways (Blanco and Sastre Castillo, 2020; Mukhi, 1982), experiences (Flöthmann and Hoberg, 2017; Schmid and Mitterreiter, 2021), and characteristics (Booth et al., 2016) that define the progression to top leadership.

Yet, there is a lack of uniform approach to top organizational leaders’ career trajectories. Early research on top leaders' career trajectories often focused on specific sectors within a single country. Mukhi (1982) found that Australian CEOs often gained early leadership experience, worked long hours, had a finance/accounting background, and attended prestigious schools. They typically reach senior management by 33 and became CEOs by 40. Wessel and Keim (1994) observed that 69% of U.S. private college presidents followed an academic trajectory, while Roger and Marybelle (1994) noted that U.S. university leaders typically advanced through hierarchical roles like faculty member, department chair, or dean. López Zárate (2007) identified four career trajectories among Mexican rectors: insider, academic, professional, and outsider.

Later researchers explored ‘dynamic’ factors like career mobility and gender in influencing top leaders' career paths. Koch et al. (2017) found that Fortune 100 CEOs typically follow traditional paths with steady progression and limited firm mobility. Schmid and Mitterreiter (2021) observed that German DAX-30 managers had varied career paths, greater diversity and top-level achievement often delayed. Trangbæk (2023) found increased inter-ministerial mobility and political experience among top European bureaucrats. Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) highlighted the growing importance of gender in leadership trajectories, reflecting broader discussions on diversity and inclusion.

Regarding national differences in top managers' career patterns, Ishida et al. (2002) found that in Japan, employees must typically serve 10 years before promotion to lower management, with late promotions limiting further advancement. In the U.S., late promotions similarly hinder progress, while early promotions do not confer any advantage. University presidents in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are typically older males with different levels of international exposure (Shin et al., 2022). In Germany, an upper-class degree in any background is essential for CEO careers (Christoph et al., 2013), while in Denmark, an economic background is appreciated. However, cross-country comparative studies in this area remain scant.

Factors such as gender, education, age, mission focus, and sector-specific experience significantly influence executives’ pathways to leadership, especially for nonprofit CEOs (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2017) . Other studies highlight the impact of leaders' backgrounds, including prestigious education (Priest and Robert, 1985), family origins (Michael and Jerome, 1986), human capital (Salvato et al., 2012), international experience (Booth et al., 2016), and employer and industry diversity (Bonet et al., 2020). However, these factor impacts vary across different cultural contexts. For example, Blanco et al. (2021) found that in Latin American family firms, family CEOs advance faster than non-family CEOs. While a graduate degree delays advancement for family CEOs, it accelerates it for non-family CEOs. While staying within the same firm aids family CEOs, working for a single firm or attending elite education abroad has limited influence.

Organizations and social contexts significantly shape managerial career patterns (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). For example, in a large multi-country study, Andresen et al. (2020) found that societal context, particularly the human potential composite, negatively impacts the emphasis on financial achievements but positively influences proactive career behaviour. This relationship is mediated by career goals. However, studies examining the impact of organizational and social contexts on leaders’ career trajectories remain limited (Koch et al., 2017).

A limitation of research on the career trajectory of top leaders is the lack of attention to country-specific factors and contextual elements. Existing research has typically focused on the proximal social context (e.g. work environment), while societal and cultural perspectives remain largely overlooked (Andresen et al., 2020; Koch et al., 2017). Comparative studies, particularly those involving non-western developing countries like Vietnam, are rare. Research findings from one industry might not be applicable to others due to unique factors like strict promotion rules and rigid hierarchies (Biemann and Wolf, 2009). Stewart and Kuenzi (2018) call for future research about executive careers in different mission areas, while Vinkenburg and Weber (2012) advocate for industry-specific research. Given the quasi non-profit and mission-centred nature of public universities, understanding career trajectories within HE institutions presents a complex challenge (Musselin, 2021; Civera et al., 2024). Consequently, this study provides valuable insights by examining an underexplored area.

Additionally, exploring multiple groups of factors i.e. at individual, organizational, and national levels simultaneously, extends the field since most studies focus on only one level of factors influencing top leaders’ career advancement (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2017). Further, very few studies consider multiple factors across multiple international contexts, often relying on universalist assumptions about careers (Shen et al., 2014). However, variations in values at the country and cultural level are found to affect career goals and outcomes (Briscoe et al., 2021). For example, modern career theories such as protean and boundaryless careers (Briscoe et al., 2006) are representative of highly individualistic, agentic and largely western cultures. This study draws on CET, which incorporates elements of both protean and boundaryless careers, adopting a pluralist perspective in the career paths of university presidents. To address issues like unidimensionality, cultural bias, and objectivism in cross-cultural studies, Briscoe et al. (2021) advocate for incorporating perspectives from researchers within the cultures being studied. Accordingly, the countries examined in this research reflect the nationalities and/or countries of residence of the authors.

Finally, the literature on individual factors influencing top leaders' career paths has largely relied on quantitative methods (e.g. Dlouhy et al., 2024), posing a limitation (Civera et al., 2024). Davoine and Schmid (2022) emphasize the need for qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of how experiences, like education and career milestones, impact leadership ascent. Qualitative approaches not only elucidate the personal impact but also establish connections between individual traits and organizational contexts, including cross-country management transitions. To address this gap, our study analyses 48 interviews with university leaders to identify key individual factors driving career progression. Qualitative analysis enables us to reveal the motivations and experiences shaping career trajectories, providing a holistic understanding.

To address the identified gaps in the literature, we use CET as our framework and consider three key research questions:

1. *What are the characteristics of the career trajectory to being a university president?*
2. *How is the career trajectory of university presidents shaped by their individual, organizational and institutional contexts?*
3. *What are the commonalities and differences of university presidents’ career across different countries?*

# *Career Ecosystem Theory*

The Career Ecosystem Theory (CET), introduced by Baruch (2015) and expanded by Baruch and Rousseau (2019), provides a comprehensive framework that captures the complexity of careers across different levels. It explores the interconnectedness, interactions and interdependencies among stakeholders in the labour market, including individuals, organizations, national and global contexts (Donald, 2023; Paluch and Shum, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, career practitioners such as recruiters and head-hunters, alongside local and global agencies, also play roles within this framework.

CET offers a nuanced and multi-dimensional perspective on career studies. It enables the analysis of both opportunities and barriers to career advancement and mobility (Baruch et al., 2016). Nevertheless, studies often emphasize outcomes over the process of career evolution within labour market ecosystems. There is limited empirical evidence examining the applicability of CET across diverse cultural contexts (Niles and Harris-Bowlsby, 2017) and within specific professions (Donald, 2023). To bridge this gap, we investigate how various entities within the academic career ecosystem, such as countries, universities, the profession itself and individual academics, influence career progression to the presidency. Figure 1 illustrates the career ecosystem within the HE sector, with a specific focus on career trajectories to the top.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Using CET as a foundation, we explore individual, organizational, and institutional factors influencing the career paths of executive leaders, drawing on studies from the UK, France, and Vietnam. Table 1 summarises key findings from the literature.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We now present the institutional, organizational and individual factors. Starting with the institutional factors,various institutional logics, including state, market and profession can influence the career paths of university presidents. In HE, different governance structures among the state, market, and university create different mechanisms for the selection of university presidents. Although Latin American public universities are theoretically autonomous in appointing rectors (López Zárate, 2007), state and federal governments often remain actively involved in these appointments. Jeong et al. (2021) found that institutional pressures, such as professionalization and population diversity, influence changes in law school Deans' career profiles. Professionalization encourages organizations to standardize leader career paths, while population diversity creates diverse opportunities, resulting in varied leader profiles within organizations. The selection and appointment of university presidents are further influenced by the varying national HE contexts in the UK, France, and Vietnam.

The UK’s educational system, encompassing 135 public universities, has a longstanding tradition and is highly regarded internationally. These institutions differ greatly in size, mission, and history, functioning within a relatively decentralized HE structure (Civera et al., 2024). Governance is guided by regulatory frameworks (e.g., Office for Students), good governance codes, and institutional autonomy through University Charters and Statutes. Within the capitalist economic model, the academic labour market is dynamic and characterized by frequent career movements. There are no national laws dictating the procedures for appointing vice-chancellors. Decisions about appointments are made at the board level, after consulting relevant stakeholders (Civera et al., 2024).

Most French universities are public, comprising 67 state-funded institutions and five private Catholic universities. They are governed by official decrees and detailed regulations, established by law and upheld by tradition (Pilkington, 2012). HE in France is highly centralized, with significant government control. Academics are civil servants and are managed through national procedures (Musselin, 2013). The Higher Education and Research Law establishes the legal framework for the sector, detailing the roles, responsibilities, and selection processes for university presidents. The process includes stringent qualification criteria, and transparent election procedures requiring ministerial approval to ensure compliance with national policies and standards.

Vietnam has 242 universities, including 175 public and 67 private institutions. The HE system has traditionally been highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education and Training overseeing nearly every aspect, including senior appointments (Nguyen, 2020). University presidents are appointed according to strict government standards and procedures detailed in Decree 85/2023/ND-CP (Thủ tướng Chính phủ, 2023) and the Higher Education Law No. 34/2018/QH14 (Quốc hội, 2018). The appointment process involves formal succession planning, with rigorous procedures for selecting both local and external candidates. Appointments for public university presidents are closely controlled by the Communist Party Committee requiring approval from the relevant line ministry, typically lasting for 5 years. Reappointments are currently unlimited.

We explore institutional factors across these three countries, including government policies and academic labour markets, alongside organizational factors such as university contexts, individual roles and career scripts within the career ecosystem.

As for the organizational factors, specific university goals (e.g., research/teaching), contexts (e.g., private/public/established/newly founded), mission (e.g., national/local), and career management processes (e.g., succession planning/performance management/leadership development) and institutional goals affect career trajectories of university presidents. For example, if the goal of the university is to improve institutional rankings, an internal candidate - an “academic insider` may be preferred. This choice helps maintain the university’s historical culture (López Zárate, 2007). However, when fostering a more competitive and commercial logic, an external candidate - potentially a non-academic `outsider`- may be preferred. Additionally, promoting greater diversity in decision-making roles significantly increases the likelihood of women advancing to top leadership positions (Cook and Glass, 2014).

In the UK, the selection and appointment of Vice Chancellors (VCs) follows a thorough and transparent process involving multiple stages. The university’s governing body initiates the recruitment by forming a Search Committee with diverse members including governing body members, senior academics, external experts, and sometimes students. Recruitment consultants (head-hunters) assist with job description development, advertising, and candidate identification. Shortlisted candidates are interviewed and assessed before the governing body finalizes the appointment.

The selection and appointment of university presidents in France is a structured process. An electoral body is formed by the board of directors and other councils with representatives from faculty, staff, students and external members. Senior academics submit letters of intent and CVs, present their vision, and participate in debates. The board votes in multiple rounds, requiring a majority decision. The selected candidate must obtain approval from the Ministry of Education, with appointments lasting four years, subject to renewal.

In Vietnam, universities adhere to strict appointment requiring candidates to meet political, academic, and managerial qualifications as defined by the Party and laws. Universities submit a request for appointment to the relevant competent authority, which must issue a decision within 10 working days. The appointment must be completed within 30 working days following approval. For local candidates, the selection follows a 5-step process that includes meetings and ballots. For external candidates, a 3-step process involves discussions and assessments before submission to the competent authority.

Lastly, moving to the individual factors, University presidents’ backgrounds, experiences, and career actions can shape their career trajectories and outcomes. For example, prestigious educational backgrounds aid career advancement for top leaders in the US (Michael and Jerome, 1986), UK (Bennett, 2009), and Australia (Mukhi, 1982). Early leadership experiences such as student union roles, can also positively impact initial career paths (Giacomo et al., 2020).

In UK universities, individuals maintain significant agency over their careers despite institutional and organizational constraints (Laudel, Bielick and Gläser, 2019). They adapt traditional paths by balancing personal interests with institutional expectations, creating flexible "concertina-like" careers (Whitchurch et al., 2021). Success relies on fulfilling promotion criteria, gaining leadership experience, building networks, and responding to external factors. Proactive planning and a good understanding of the institutional culture also enhance strategic career outcomes.

In French universities, securing senior positions involves a competitive and regulated process with limited personal influence. The ‘coconut tree’ metaphor describes this model (Altman and Bournois, 2004: 321) where each leaf is always positioned below as well as above another leaf`. Success depends on meeting promotion criteria, excelling in research and teaching, and gaining administrative experience. However, individuals can enhance their career prospects through proactive planning, professional development, and a thorough understanding of institutional and governance contexts (Baruch et al., 2020).

In Vietnamese universities, while institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and hierarchical norms play significant roles, individuals retain some personal agency. Excelling in research and teaching, gaining administrative experience, and participating in professional development can significantly impact career advancement. Navigating institutional policies, government regulations, and external influences affects the extent of personal agency in career progression.

To the above factors we incorporate the role of career scripts with relation to institutional, organizational and individual factors. Career scripts shed light on the interaction of individual agency and structural conditions of action in career decisions (Laudel, et al., 2019). They are insightful when assessing the facilitators or constraints of career progression, as framed by modern career theory such as CET. Acting as mediating mechanisms (Andresen et al., 2020; Laudel et al., 2019) they consist of norms, resources, and interpretive schemas that derive from broader institutional contexts. Laudel et al., (2019) term these mediators `collective scripts`; social constructs that influence career decisions. They predetermine the decisions that are likely to produce career sequences, depending on the circumstances and the institutional environment in which they are made. Organizations operationalise collective scripts in their structures through formal and informal processes (Dany et al., 2011).

Individual concrete actions to achieve career goals are grounded in realistic self-assessments of personal capabilities, and a consideration of available career opportunities. These actions may include career planning, skill development, and consultation with more senior colleagues (Andresen et al., 2020). Collectively, career scripts and goals form the “career meso-structure”, positioned between the wider socio-political structure and individual career actions. We examine career drivers, proactive career actions, career mobility, education, experiences, and the role of networks within the career trajectories of career presidents. However, we must also acknowledge the role of serendipity i.e. the interplay of chance and insight (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015 de Rond, 2014) as well as unforeseen circumstances or chance events (Bright et al., 2005; Scott and Hatalla, 1990) on career development.

Career scripts differ across countries/cultures, leading to divergent pathways to the role of university president. This has important implications for the potential variation in training and development required to attain this position. Generally, career scripts show how individual career paths are shaped by personal strengths, interests, commitments, and formal career structures. Hence, scripts are generated both internally and externally, with some exerting a stronger influence than others. The direction and rhythm of an academic career may not follow the linear pathway suggested by these institutional collective career scripts or templates (Whitchurch et al., 2021). This highlights the various paths to building a career, such as focusing on research, teaching, or service, with the emphasis on each area potentially changing over time (Baruch and Hall, 2004).

# **Methodology**

We collected and analysed 48 interviews using thematic analysis, inductive and theoretical coding to develop a data-driven model (Whittle and Reissner, 2024). This qualitative approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the motives, drivers, and emotions underlying career paths.

## **Sample**

To reach university presidents, we used professional networks and snowball sampling, achieving data saturation (Corbin et al., 2014). This approach resulted in a robust sample size (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) of 48 interviews (16 in the UK, 13 in France, and 19 in Vietnam). Interviews averaged one hour. We used a semi-structured interview protocol with questions based on career paths, willingness to become president, pro-active career actions, training, career boundaries, influential factors, networks, and competencies. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ national language (i.e., English, French and Vietnamese) and were fully transcribed and translated into English (Abalkhail, 2018; Point and Baruch, 2023). Table 2 provides an overview of the participants' characteristics.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

## **Analysis**

To ensure analytical rigour, we employed NVivo 12 to code the verbatim interview transcripts. We followed a traditional coding method, beginning with a first-order level (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Gioia, 2021), or first-cycle method stage (Saldaña, 2021) which aligns with an open coding strategy (Corbin et al., 2014). During this initial stage, one of the co-authors used a thematic analysis of all interviews, resulting in approximately 800 codes. NVivo facilitated the organization of all codes, enabling the use of memos and facilitating quick retrieval of information. Each transcript was carefully reviewed line by line to create detailed invivo codes from the data and a few theoretical codes based on literature and researcher insights. Consequently, this first stage was predominantly inductive, adhering closely to the principles of open coding (Corbin et al., 2014).

In the second step, the authors collaboratively discussed and organized the codes to refine the findings, moving back and forth between the data and the literature. This second-order level (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Gioia, 2021), or second-cycle method stage (Saldaña, 2021) enabled us to transition from data-oriented codes to theoretical codes. Ultimately, we identified two meta-categories that encapsulate the core of our research question: “internal career drivers” (including “motivation & intention” and “career norms”) and “external career drivers” (including “serendipity”, “social influence” and “institutional pressures”). To illustrate the challenges of moving from field data to theoretical understanding (Mees-Buss et al., 2020), we drew on quotes from the data to establish our main categories. Table 3 provides examples of these quotes. Following Gioia`s (1991) template (cf. figure 2), we adopted a hermeneutic perspective for our inductive approach, as recommended by Mees-Buss et al. (2020).

# **Findings**

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

## *Stages in career progression*

The first question explored respondents’ career paths. Across countries, three main career stages emerged: being an academic, taking on administrative ‘service’ positions, and becoming presidents.

### *Being an academic*

Most respondents began their careers as a postdoctoral research fellows or lecturers. In France, many focused on teaching and research, intentionally developing their academic skills. A minority (especially in the UK) gained early career experience in industry before fully transitioning into academia.

### *Taking administrative positions*

At the second career stage, most respondents undertook intermediate administrative positions such as director of studies, discipline head, research team leader, department head, or dean. In accordance with national promotion norms, they transitioned to university wide leadership roles internally e.g. being a vice president (Vietnam and in France). Sometimes this transition involved changing institutions (in the UK and Vietnam).

In France, as respondents evolved to become Professor, they were required to take on significant administrative responsibilities as part of their career progression. In Vietnam, most university presidents undertook administrative responsibilities early in their careers.

In the UK, respondents advanced by moving to new institutions, often taking on senior administrative roles.

### *Becoming presidents*

In the third stage, respondents transitioned to the role of university president. In France, this progression is often anticipated, particularly for those who have previously held a senior governance role. This appointment occurs through an election (Presidents are appointed by the Assembly of the three councils; the scientific council, the training council and the board of directors). In Vietnam, individuals progress through many management positions before being appointed as Vice Rector (or President). In the UK, accessing top positions with responsibilities (such as Deputy) is often considered as an open door to being Vice-Chancellor.

## *Career drivers for university presidents*

Figure 2 represents our data structure, following Gioia (2021).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

### *Individual factors 1: drivers*

#### A real passion for academia

At this early career stage, some respondents, particularly in France and Vietnam were motivated by a real passion for academia, as a natural vocation. In the UK several respondents underlined academia as a vocation after a transition from industry, indicating the academic career can begin rather by “accident”. Some of our respondents revealed a passion for research.

#### Early administrative success

The motivation to advance to the top position at a later career stage appears influenced by earlier successes, particularly through the effective undertaking of administrative responsibilities, in academia or elsewhere. In other cases, it reflected the prevailing career norms. Assuming greater responsibilities and assuming administrative roles often serves as a precursor to attaining higher level university positions.

#### Contribution to society and higher education

Many respondents were motivated by personally defined criteria, often expressing a desire to make a meaningful contribution to higher education or to society at large. They articulated their motivation to contribute at various levels, including local (university) or national (education or economy) levels.

### *Individual factors 2: knowledge and skills*

In being president, respondents cited the knowledge and skills they perceived were required in the role.

#### Academic expertise

At the early career stage, knowledge and skills include academic expertise (14 respondents**)**

#### Management capabilities

At the second stage, incorporating taking administrative position, participants stated management skills as critical. These included task management (decision making, strategy implementation), stewardship (designing/refining a vision, building trust), interconnection (i.e., having good relationships or inter-relational skills), and soft skills (such as learning abilities, communication skills, and value creation) as well as passion.

#### Political skills

At the third stage in being president, respondents highlighted politicking and gaming

referring to political manoeuvring and strategic tactics, if not by the respondents themselves, by others as their career evolved.

### *Individual factors 3: Family influence*

Most respondents mentioned family influence as an important factor for their career decisions or as a means for providing advice or support. Additionally, respondents were influenced by their perception of how they would be viewed by others. For example, in the Vietnamese context, by living up to the expectations of family members. However, this might also represent a barrier to career aspirations for some individuals.

### *Organizational factors: peer recognition and leader’s recognition*

#### Peer recognition

Respondents also mentioned the importance of recognition from their peers, perhaps due to their scientific expertise or teaching ability.

#### Leader’s recognition

In public universities, a candidate for presidency must go through multiple selection steps regulated by the Vietnamese Communist Party and Government before being appointed.

#### Mentoring & networking

While some respondents stated they had no formal mentoring provided by their institution, 21 respondents underlined having a kind of mentor to become president. For most of them (n=15), it was a peer, i.e. vice chancellors or former presidents, senior administrators (n=2) and Professors (n=2). Six mentioned they did not have a mentor because they are too old (FR8), or have another kind of support (UK1, VN6) or just simply because they feel they don’t or didn’t really need one (UK9, UK10, VN15). Informal mentorship was particularly prevalent in France.

Networking capabilities appear to be of high importance in the career trajectory. As such, “l’entourage” and having the “right” network is often perceived as a luck factor and a key dimension in the career trajectory.

### *Institutional factors: National selection process*

*Recruitment agencies.* In the UK external agencies (head-hunters) played a crucial role in the process of identification and selection of presidents.

*Political Party.* In Vietnam, being a member of the Communist Party was a decisive factor in becoming president.

*Union participation.* In France, involvement or having a strong relationship with the union was considered an important factor, as election is set by individual voting.

### *Serendipity*

In all countries and for most respondents, the career trajectory for reaching the top university leadership position is characterized by non-linearity and a lack of premeditated planning. Most reported that they never thought about being the leader of a university earlier in their academic career, having no specific career plan. Moreover, an element of luck is arguably evident, as some respondents described their careers as "fortunate" or "unexpected". However, since these chances were acted on, they rather reflect serendipity; a mix of chance and insight. It is sometimes a matter of being in the right place and/or at the right time.

For selected respondents (mostly Vietnamese), luck does not exist and “Sometimes it feels lucky, but as people say, you make your own luck.” (UK4). Therefore, “There is nothing accidental” (VN13), “Actually, nothing happens by chance.” (VN7), “Like in Vietnam, people often say "destiny" (VN17).

# **Discussion**

In response to our research questions concerning the career trajectory of university presidents, we identified a three-stage career trajectory, with each stage serving as a critical threshold building upon the previous one (Figure 3). The first stage involves establishing oneself as a competent academic. This typically requires strong academic expertise, (e.g., having a PhD), a genuine passion for academia, and significant achievements, typically research related (e.g. publications, grants). In the second stage, these high-potential academics undertake administrative roles, where early professional and/or administrative successes and strong management capabilities (e.g., being visionary) are essential. In the third stage, those identified as successful in their administrative roles (e.g. Dean) move to the top leadership position. This progression is often driven by a desire to contribute to HE and wider society. At this final stage, political manoeuvrings and effective use of power are crucial. For example, transitioning from ‘being an academic’ to ‘taking administrative positions’ stages necessitates peer recognition, while moving from ‘taking administrative positions’ to ‘becoming presidents’ stages demands leadership recognition. Throughout all three stages, the career is facilitated by family influence, mentoring and networking, and serendipity.

## ***Theoretical contributions***

Our study was informed by and supported the CET (Baruch, 2015; Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). CET emphasizes the critical role of interconnectedness, interactions, and interdependencies among various actors within specific sub-labour markets. It offers insights into career progression to top positions in higher education (HE) systems. Differentiated career ecosystems exist alongside each other, including the academic career system (Quigley et al., 2024). The ecosystem includes key actors such as individuals (the presidents), organizations (the university, and other agencies), and countries. These each contribute distinct inputs and enabling factors depending on the context. In managerial career ecosystems, the system ‘contains a large number of loosely coupled (interconnected) actors who depend on each other to ensure the overall effectiveness of the system’ (Iansiti & Levien, 2004, p. 5). Our findings illustrate how CET stands as a holistic, comprehensive and intricate theory for capturing the multi-level dynamics of actors within the field of career studies.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Our study of the career trajectory of university presidents reveals the complexity and relevance of various interrelated and interconnected factors influencing progression to the top. We illustrate how these factors vary by country. In the UK, ‘head-hunters’ play a pivotal role in identifying potential future presidents; in France, peer recognition and elections are critical; in Vietnam, political alignment remains essential. These findings provide empirical evidence for CET. They illustrate how the interconnectedness of the various actors’ function to reach a sustainable system.

### *Family influence, mentoring and networking:*

Our findings highlight the significant role played by family members as external factors. Many respondents considered their family as crucial sources of informal support in their career decisions (Parker et al., 2008). Such support contributes to achieving a harmonious work-life balance (Kraimer et al., 2019). Mentoring may be a fruitful way of opening wider networking opportunities (allowing access to networks of networks) which may help in the later career stage as well as once presidents are in post. Mentoring remains a well-established mechanism for facilitating career progression, particularly in academic settings (Briscoe and Freeman, 2019). Respondents also emphasised the importance of how they were perceived in in post. Having positive affirmation from colleagues seemed to provide them with a feeling of legitimacy and of doing a good job.

### *Serendipity*

We identified the significant role of chance events, though these were not necessarily considered as career shocks. Chance event theory in vocational development recognizes the role of unknown or uncontrolled factors in careers (Bright et al., 2005). While career entry maybe deliberate, it often evolves as the result of unforeseen circumstances or events (Scott and Hatalla, 1990). Many respondents suggested their rise to the top included being in the right place at the right time (Mayrhofer and Gunz, 2023). For others, luck was associated with key networks or making pivotal choices in the early career stages (Heffernan, 2021).

Chance events also appeared to influence the intermediate career stage. For others, it was deemed present throughout their career. This corroborates the work of Wiseman, (2004) who purports an element of luck to be a key condition in the career trajectory. Career progression requires being open to unexpected opportunities and taking advantage of such chances – seeing bridges where others see holes (de Rond, 2014). However, some respondents felt that their route to the presidency was not attributable to luck. Rather, they credited their achievement to their active agency. Conversely, several Vietnamese respondents put their achievement down to their destiny.

Our results suggest that career progression does not solely rely on complete luck or natural destiny nor full self-control; rather, it exists on a continuum that encompasses serendipity, an interplay of chance and insight (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015). Success in this context requires openness and readiness to unexpected opportunities, flexibility and proactive skill and network development to maintain an advantageous position. For universities, our study highlights the importance of cultivating an environment that allows for such opportunities to be recognized and acted upon.

### *Marginal role of HRM*

In terms of the role of the organization (university), we identify the marginal role of HRM, compared to the role played by more informal mechanisms such as mentoring and sponsoring. This contrasts to extant research in the HRM field which evidences HRMs critical and relevant involvement in managing careers (Bagdadli and Gianecchini, 2019), This challenges the notion that organizations exert a substantial influence over career behaviour (Inkson et al., 2012). Flexibility can help leaders advance through chance and peer support, but the lack of structure may disadvantage those without similar networks or serendipitous opportunities. Consequently, organizational HRM interventions could create a more systematic, competence-based promotion system. We call for universities to reconsider their HRM strategies to better support aspiring academic leaders as well as their considering implementing optimal succession plans.

### *Institutional logics*

Our three-country context enables broader research and comparative analyses in leadership development within HE, addressing the need for stronger evidence bases (Leal Filho et al., 2020). We observed both similarities and differences between the enablers and barriers across national systems. For example, we observe the influence of head-hunters in the UK, political party involvement in Vietnam, and the entrenched top-down system in France where University presidents are elected. This aligns with previous work that illustrated the role of career scripts within the French context (Dany et al., 2011) vs. career dynamics in the Anglo-Saxon model (Baruch and Hall, 2004). Career scripts also reflect three distinct institutional logics that underpin the progression to the role of university president (Wright et al., 2024). This is represented in the Anglo-Saxon logic by a ‘jungle survival’ metaphor (O’Brien and Hapgood, 2012). In France it is represented by the “coconut tree” metaphor, which illustrates the highly centralized career management system at national level (Altman and Bournois, 2004). For the Vietnamese the ‘mould’ metaphor emphasizes adherence to a clear path ruled by the political system (Duong, 2021).

Our study reveals how UK HE institutions influence university presidents’ career agency. Individual agency, combined with external interventions (by head-hunters) plays a key role in career advancement.

In France we highlight how individual agency is weaker than in the UK. The embedded structural mechanisms in the French university system provide a strong frame for guiding career trajectories, creating a competitive environment with limited flexibility for alternative career development paths (Atlman and Bournois, 2004). This is due to the centralized and hierarchical academic system characterized by a high degree of government control.

As one of the five remaining single-party socialist states espousing communism, Vietnam's "moulded career" path typically emphasizes a combination of political loyalty, reliability and professional competence. The characteristic university president in Vietnam is often a male Communist Party member who has completed doctoral training overseas. He typically holds the title of Associate Professor or Professor and ascends to the presidency from a vice president role. These individuals are generally around 50 years old having spent their entire academic careers at the same university. While there is no strict preference for educational background or academic discipline, presidents often specialise in fields that align with the university's established traditions.

Table 4 summarises key factors that affect career advancement of university presidents in UK, France, and Vietnam

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

## ***Managerial and practical implications***

*At the individual level.* Key requirements for advancing to higher positions include academic competence, networking, the development of a strategic perspective, a personality reflecting ambition, values and management competence. An early professional academic background is a crucial prerequisite for achieving a leadership role in HE institutions in the different international contexts under study. Regarding recruitment and selection, no significant changes are necessary for appointing junior academics. Once in the role, motivation, willingness and flexibility facilitate career adaptability and transition (Akün, et al., 2023). However, there are implications for later stage career development particularly in terms of building social capital. Informal mentoring and sponsoring by senior colleagues play a critical role. Consequently, individuals aspiring to presidency should be actively encouraged and supported in seeking appropriate mentors and sponsors throughout their career. Curious, competent, and confident individuals who engage in career developmental require nurturing (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Concurrently, they should seek new challenges and opportunities to develop task (project and operational) management skills. Essential activities and abilities include resource allocation, information analysis, decision making and implementation, delegation, budget management, and fundraising. Decision making and analysis were emphasized as the key competencies of task management.

Further, some university presidents attribute their ascent to the top position to being ‘in the right place at the right time’. Yet, proactivity and visibility were important to turn ‘luck’ into serendipity, in defining their destiny. Serendipity may occur at any stage of the career trajectory. This highlights the importance of acknowledging and embracing chance events. It requires sensitivity, preparedness, openness to new directions and opportunities, and a willingness to question and challenge existing ways of thinking (e.g. Paterson et al., 2024). It also requires a focused commitment to acquiring the knowledge, skills, and abilities identified as contingent at different stages within our multi-stage model.

*At the organizational level.* While in the commercial context employees may often aspire to become CEOs right from the start, leading a university requires a clear understanding of the academic system. Career structure is traditionally rooted within a specific academic hierarchy, typically comprising three levels – assistant, associate, and full professor. The aspiration to become a university president emerges only at a later stage within the academic career structure. At first, the focus is on research and teaching, followed by broader engagement in academic responsibilities to develop academic professional expertise. Only then is there a potential impetus to reach the top position.

Apart from a few cases, we found a marginal role of HRM in facilitating university presidents’ career trajectory. The identification and support for fast-tracking certain individuals came from managers/leaders at higher levels, recognizing potential and supporting those they deemed promising. Further, in Anglo-Saxon contexts, universities commonly use executive search firms to recruit senior staff. While effective, this approach incurs significant costs and shifts control over the candidate pool to these firms (Loomes et al., 2019). Succession planning also highlights the important role an outgoing president can play (Briscoe and Freeman, 2019). Formalizing this process could enhance leadership development via tailored career management and mentoring initiatives to structure support for aspiring senior leaders.

Active agency influences academic`s career paths (Hirschi et al., 2018; Tams and Arthur, 2010). However, the traditional path to university presidency may not fit the growing complexities of the role. We suggest a more supportive environment for those aspiring to the presidency role will become crucial, albeit challenging. Moreover, institutions may need to implement transitional support programs that address the growing complexities associated with reaching this final career stage. Additionally, those transitioning to the presidency may benefit from coaching in self-presentation strategies, ensuring that they can effectively communicate about their skills.

Institutions, particularly their HR departments, must recognize the significance of serendipitous opportunities and the importance of managing for serendipity (Kindsiko and Baruch, 2019). Individual and collective sensitivity to recognize the potential value of serendipitous opportunities as well as the capability to respond constructively to challenges, requires more consideration and development. From a structural perspective, institutions should promote a work atmosphere that supports openness, initiative, and questioning, thereby creating conditions where serendipitous actions can thrive. At an individual level, training opportunities to challenge, motivate and inspire individuals can provide advantageous experiences along their route to the top.

*At the international level.* In their trajectory to the top, university presidents in all three countries followed a common multi-stage process. Institutional logics, shaped by national or cultural systems, moderated this trajectory. These logics caused different factors to manifest in distinct ways, with certain external and internal drivers (as well as barriers) consistent across contexts. However, career norms remained country specific. In the UK, university presidents often benefit from high remuneration, with their appointments frequently facilitated by external agencies e.g., head-hunters; and moving between universities is a common practice. French university presidents do not receive substantial remuneration for their tenure, with motivations more aligned with a sense of duty, as well as status. Vietnamese public university presidents’ supplemental income can range widely, influenced by the Communist Party controlled succession planning (Dickson, 2014). Ongoing reforms led by the Government and Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam, aimed at granting greater autonomy, will necessitate the development of leadership and managerial expertise at the institutional level. This constitutes a challenge since many Rectors and Vice-Rectors were promoted from the ranks of lecturers, and not all good lectures make good leaders (Nguyen et al., 2014).

Overall, our findings align with the literature revealing the existence of career scripts (Dany et al., 2011; Whitchurch et al., 2021) that vary across countries. These national career scripts reflect unique career ecosystems within a broader global ecosystem. Aspiring university presidents should reflect on assumptions about the qualities of a successful president. For scholars considering an international academic career, it is also important to consider how transferable career trajectories may be across different cultural contexts. To advance their careers, individuals should develop a realistic career plan and implement career actions that are aligned with those examined within our study.

## ***Limitations and future research agenda***

As with any study, our work suffers certain limitations. First, it covers only three international contexts. Second, we employed a single `qualitative` methodology. Adding a quantitative approach to assess relationships between constructs may offer further insights. Nevertheless, our methodological approach has produced data that is rich and in depth making it well suited to understanding complex realities. We acknowledge biases could occur in our transcription process (Point and Baruch, 2023) like any other qualitative study.

Future research on academic careers might look more deeply into how the multifaceted complexities within the academic leadership role might be facilitated given the contemporary HE environment. We have concluded that unplanned and serendipitous events were very commonly perceived to influence career decision`s (Schlosser et al., 2017). As such, we suggest further investigation into the role of serendipity in career progression. Lastly, we did not focus on gender differences in career trajectories and on differences in careers between public and private institutions, which we acknowledge may warrant future investigation.

# **Conclusion**

In studying university presidents’ careers, we identify not only the ‘what’ – the descriptive trajectory, but also the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of their career trajectories. We distinguished similarities and differences across three national contexts. Our findings support and expand several career theories and offer practical implications. We present a multi-stage career model that delineates how the trajectory of university presidents is facilitated through informal processes, and highly influenced by serendipity. We provide insight as to how national systems vary and how different national institutional norms play an influential role. We afford thoughts as to how to enhance the trajectory to the role of president. Our study has the potential to inform an understanding of career trajectories to top positions within other sectors including the trajectory of CEOs in the commercial domain. Finally, we found the marginal role of HR departments in the process, which, as management scholars, we found to be a disappointing revelation.

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# **Figure 1: The academic career and labour market ecosystem**

Nations

Universities

Academics

Interconnectedness

Interactions

Interdependencies

# **Figure 2: Data structure**

A real passion for academia

**First order level**

*Personally, I have a passion for teaching as the essence of teaching is to persuade others, which I think is not simply a matter of expertise, but also Art.” (VN18)*

**Quotes from Presidents**

**Serendipity**

**Interpersonal enablers**

**Individual drivers**

*“I had no aspiration to become a vice Chancellor (UK16)”; “I did not have any plan, purpose, or desire to get the position, but I still got it. (V17)*

“*So far, I haven't been unlucky and that's it. So maybe there will be a chance somewhere else*”(FR3)

*“In Vietnam, when you want to appoint a principal, the Board of Directors had to nominate the candidate to the Party Committee” (VN8)*

*“There's a careful balancing act which you've gotta get, and some people you know in a role like mine. If you come across as too uncertain or dithering, then people won't have any confidence in your leadership” (UK2)*

”*I think the family factor and the sharing and understanding about my work also help me best prepare for this role*.” (V7)

*“You can't reduce the role of the president to an administrative one. It isn't. It's a more political role (FR3)*

“*I definitely think the people skills are the most important*” (UK13)

*“if you become a principal, you must have a PhD.” (VN4)*

Contribution to society

*“I must complete the assigned tasks very well, have outstanding contributions that are recognized by the organizations from many activities: professional and other activities (teaching, research, management,)” (VN8)*

Early professional administrative success

…”*If that if the if the thrust that question is do I think I've had a successful career? Yes, I would say that. Do I think I've failed in any of the jobs that I've done,* No I don't” (UK10).

Academic expertise

**Individual knowledge and skills**

**National selection process**

Leadership recognition

Un-planned career

Luck factor

Political Party

*“You know that fear of failure would have stopped me applying for something unless I was certain. And I think having the approaches from head-hunters” (UK15)*

External agencies

**Organizational recognition**

Peer recognition

*“it was actually to see that the stuff I was doing had value to my to my wider physics peer friends who would then recognize the role” (UK11)*

Mentoring and networking

“*And the counter point of that was that my predecessor, who was quite a mentor to me*” (UK11)

Family or partner influence

Political skills

Management capabilities

**Second order level**

# **Figure 3: Career trajectory of university presidents**

***Nation***

***Institutional logics***

***Family influence***

***Mentoring and networking***

**EXIT**

***Academic expertise***

***A real passion for academia***

***Political skills;***

***Contribution to society***

**Becoming Presidents**

**Taking administrative  
positions**

**Becoming an academic**

***Peer******recognition***

***Leadership******recognition***

***Management capabilities; Early professional/administrative success;***

***Career scripts***

***Serendipity***

# **Table 1: Factors affecting career advancement of university presidents in UK, France, and Vietnam**

| **Factors** | **UK** | **France** | **Vietnam** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Institutional**  *National university governance and structure of presidential appointments process in UK, France, and Vietnam* | * Long-standing tradition and international reputation of the UK’s 135 public universities within a decentralized system. * Governance shaped by regulatory frameworks, good governance codes, and institutional autonomy. * Vice-chancellor appointments made at the board level with stakeholder input, without national laws dictating procedures. | * Public universities in France, including 67 state-funded and 5 private Catholic institutions, governed by official decrees and regulations. * Highly centralized higher education system with significant government control and academics managed as civil servants. * Legal framework for university presidents defined by the Law on Higher Education and Research, with stringent selection processes and ministerial approval. | * 242 universities in Vietnam, with 175 public and 67 privates, operating in a highly centralized system. * Strict appointment procedures for university presidents defined by Decree 85/2023/ND-CP and Higher Education Law No. 34/2018/QH14. * Formal succession planning and rigorous selection, with appointments controlled by the Communist Party Committee and requiring line ministry approval. |
| **Organizational**  *Recruitment and selection procedures* | The selection and appointment of Vice Chancellors (VCs) at UK universities is a thorough and transparent process involving multiple stages:   * *Formation of the Search Committee*: Initiation by the governing body, with diverse members. * *External specialist recruitment consultancy assistance in Recruitment*: Assistance with job description development, advertising, and candidate identification. * *Candidate interviews and final Decision*: Interviews and assessments of shortlisted candidates followed by the final decision by the governing body. | The selection and appointment of university presidents follows a structured process:   * *Electoral Body Formation*: Managed by the board of directors and other councils with representatives from faculty, staff, and students. * *Candidacy* and *Election*: Senior academics submit letters of intent and CVs, present their vision, and participate in debates. * *Voting and Appointment*: The board votes in multiple rounds, requiring a majority. The selected candidate must receive Ministry approval for a renewable four-year term. | In Vietnam universities must follow highly structured and regulated appointment processes and key selection criteria:   * *Request for Appointment*: Universities submit a request for appointment, which must be decided within 10 working days and completed within 30 working days after approval. * *Standards and Conditions*: University presidents must meet political, academic, and managerial requirements set by the Party and laws. * *Appointment Process*: For local candidates, a 5-step process includes meetings and ballots. For external candidates, a 3-step process involves discussions and assessments before submission to the competent authority. |
| **Individual**  *Structural mechanisms (institutional/organizational) versus agency in career choice within career trajectories* | * *Balanced approach*: Individuals in UK universities have significant control over their careers, moderated by institutional and organizational contexts. * *Flexible**Career**Adaptation:* Academics balance personal interests with institutional expectations, creating adaptable "concertina-like" careers. * *Success**Factors*: Success depends on navigating promotion criteria, gaining leadership experience, building networks, and proactive career planning. | * *Structural mechanism dominated approach*: Securing senior positions in French universities is competitive and regulated, with limited personal influence, akin to the 'coconut tree' model. * *Limited Career**Agency*: Individuals improve their career prospects through proactive planning, professional development, and understanding institutional and governance contexts. * *Success**Factors*: Success depends on meeting promotion criteria, excelling in research and teaching, and gaining administrative experience. | * *Tendency towards structural mechanism dominance but with some agency:* Individuals in Vietnamese universities have limited control over their career progression, with the strong influence of institutional structures and regulations. * *Structural mechanisms dominate*: Success in research, teaching, administrative roles, and professional development are vital for career advancement. * *Success Factors:* Success depends onhow well individuals navigate institutional policies and adapt to external factors. |

# **Table 2: Sample characteristics**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No | Country | Uni type\* | Uni size  \* | Age | Gender | Total Number of Boundary Crossings (Institutional, Geographic &/or Sectoral Moves) |
| UK1 | UK | Post 92 | Medium | 50s | Male | 3 |
| UK2 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Male | 9 |
| UK3 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Male | 3 |
| UK4 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Female | 7 |
| UK5 | UK | Post 92 | Large | 50s | Female | 3 |
| UK6 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Male | 9 |
| UK7 | UK | Post 92 | Medium | 50s | Female | 6 |
| UK8 | UK | - | Medium | 50s | Male | 10 |
| UK9 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Female | 6 |
| UK10 | UK | - | Large | 60s | Male | 8 |
| UK11 | UK |  | Medium | 50s | Male | 6 |
| UK12 | UK | Post 92 | Medium | 60s | Male | 4 |
| UK13 | UK | - | Small | 60s | Female | 3 |
| UK 14 | UK | Post 92 | Medium | 50s | Male | 7 |
| UK15 | UK | Post 92 | Medium | 50s | Female | 8 |
| UK16 | UK | - | Medium | 60s | Male | 3 |
| FR1 | FR | State | Medium | 50s | Female | 0 |
| FR2 | FR | State | Large | 40s | Female | 0 |
| FR3 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR4 | FR | State | Large | 40s | Female | 0 |
| FR5 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR6 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR7 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR8 | FR | State | Small | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR9 | FR | State | Medium | 40s | Male | 0 |
| FR10 | FR | State | Large | 60s | Male | 0 |
| FR11 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| FR12 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Female | 0 |
| FR13 | FR | State | Large | 50s | Male | 0 |
| VN1 | VN | private | Medium | 60s | male | 2 |
| VN2 | VN | state | Large | 60s | male | 0 |
| VN3 | VN | state | Small | 50s | male | 0 |
| VN4 | VN | private | Small | 40s | female | 1 |
| VN5 | VN | private | Medium | 60s | male | 2 |
| VN6 | VN | state | Large | 60s | male | 0 |
| VN7 | VN | state | Medium | 50s | male | 0 |
| VN8 | VN | state | Large | 50s | male | 1 |
| VN9 | VN | state | Medium | 50s | male | 0 |
| VN10 | VN | state | Large | 50s | male | 3 |
| VN11 | VN | state | Medium | 40s | male | 0 |
| VN12 | VN | state | Medium | 40s | male | 0 |
| VN13 | VN | state | Small | 50s | male | 0 |
| VN14 | VN | state | Small | 50s | male | 0 |
| VN15 | VN | private | Medium | 30s | female | 5 |
| VN16 | VN | private | Small | 70s | female | 1 |
| VN17 | VN | state | Medium | 40s | female | 1 |
| VN18 | VN | private | Small | 60s | male | 1 |
| VN19 | VN | state | Medium | 40s | female | 0 |

Notes:

\* Size: Small: up to 10K; Medium: 10-20K; Large >20K

\* Type: In the UK – post-92 are new universities (formerly polytechnics with typically a greater emphasis on teaching expertise compared to research); In France – all were state, public universities; In Vietnam some were public and some private.

# **Table 3: Examples of quotes**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Findings** | **Example of quotes** |
| *Taking administrative positions* | “And from 1989 to the present day, I've been at the University of XXX as a lecturer, then as a professor. (...) I've always been very involved in the running of the university. I was on various boards of directors, scientific councils, and student councils. So, in addition to my studies, my teaching and my research, I've always had elective mandates as well.” (FR10) “I'd spent the first 10 years of my career in London, I then moved to University XXX and focused on being a senior research fellow initially and then a head of our Research Centre. And then I progressed to reader and then my first professorship was at University of YYY. (…) then moved to be a Dean in ZZZ.” (UK 15) |
| *Becoming presidents* | “In 1998, I was recruited to be a lecturer at XXX University, and I have been working there until now. I’ve been through many management positions before being appointed as the principal of the university in 2020.” (VN9) “I've realized now it was an enormous privilege again to work with X in that trusted role of his deputy. But also I feel it was a fantastic apprenticeship to be a vice chancellor. So, the more I worked closely with him, the more I realized that I was doing a lot of the work of a Vice Chancellor.” (UK13) |
| A real passion for academia | “I became a `teacher-researcher` for teaching originally. The taste for research came with my thesis with the DEA thesis at that time, years ago. And then by the research activity that I`ve always had, but that I don’t do much now. So, it was really teaching and that motivated me for the academic career.” (FR3) “Personally, I have a passion for teaching as the essence of teaching is to persuade others, which I think is not simply a matter of expertise, but also Art.” (VN18)  “I always knew I wanted to be an engineer, but as I said I think I would be easy to describe my career in academia as accidental” (UK13)  “I've never had any intent to do, you know, I never had any career plan to do this, so after sponsored degree and going back to industry, I felt bored in the industry and I realized that I loved research work, so I did a PhD.” (UK13)  “I always knew I wanted to be an engineer, but as I said I think I would be easy to describe my career in academia as accidental” (UK13). |
| Early administrative success | “That is, from the beginning, being the head of the department is for political reasons, then the promotion to the vice-dean was probably because I deserved it, I'm enthusiastic, and in general, the students loved me, all kinds of things.” (VN16) “Positive experience or around the environment for the staff to work in as well.” (UK5)  “Very quickly, I was led to take on responsibilities within the faculty. Very quickly, in my career... For me, it was normal, it was logical to take these responsibilities, it also interested me” (FR4).  “I became Dean of the Faculty of Information Technology and held this position for one term until 2013. When I started my 2nd term, from 2013 to 2018, perhaps then I had the thought of joining the university management board of XXX” (VN9) |
| Contribution to higher education or wider society | “Better to enable students to achieve better outcomes, but also enable universities to have greater reach and impact. And really to contribute to wider society and economy”. (UK15) “The university is a university where everything is based on the will of people. You give yourself to work — that's pretty much how you see it — and you create yourself the opportunities for responsibility that you want to have. So, I had a temperament where, frankly, work didn't scare me so I spent a lot of time on it.” (FR11)  “First, I research out specific professional works to contribute to society. I also want to lead the organization so that many people can contribute to society.” (VN3) |
| Academic expertise | “OK, you know, get a PhD. I needed to do.” (UK1) “Depending on the level of the university, the rector must graduate with a doctorate degree from a university in a developed country or somewhere else.” (VN7) |
| Management capabilities | “What is expected of a president, in any case in France, is obviously to develop a vision and to demonstrate a capacity for conviction to implement a strategy “. (FR5) “Listening but the ability to make decisions in a timely fashion.” (UK12) |
| Political skills | “Above all, universities are increasingly becoming players in local public policy, with exchanges with the metropolis, the region and employers.” (FR2) |
| Individual factors 1. *Family influence* | “The most influential people in my choice were my family (...) When I became a dean, I consulted my family” (FR3) “It's been a joint decision with my wife as to where we go and what things we do.” (UK11)  “My father encouraged me from a very young age. My grandfather, my great-grandfather, considered me one of the most important people in the world (…) I think the family factor and the sharing and understanding about my work also help me best prepare for this role.” (VN3) |
| 2.Peer recognition | “I think that one of the first qualities of a university president is to be recognized by his peers. That is to say that he must be a scientist who has produced something.” (FR13) “When I was 28 years old, I was nominated by my superiors and colleagues to be the leader of a teaching group. Since the age of 35, I have worked as a deputy dean and faculty dean.” (VN12) |
| 3. Leader’s recognition | “The president at the time, of the University of XXX, renewed his mandate. He came to ask me to become his first vice-president … at the end of his term he suggested that I run for the presidency, which I did”. (FR 13) |
| Mentoring & networking | “I had some very good mentors who were Vice chancellors in the sector, and I think they were really helpful in in helping shape.” [UK5]. “The network, making networks work. A strong lobbying capacity, going to speak at the right time, to the right person.” (FR8)  “I think networking is important and you know, I guess I was fortunate to be part of the Deputy Vice Chancellors network.” (UK13) |
| *Recruitment agencies.* | “Once you get in a leadership role, you get the head-hunters after you all the time.” (UK13) |
| *Political Party.* | “I think, in Vietnam, it is impossible to exclude political factors because of the leadership of the Communist Party. …That is the foundation and the communist party’s leadership is a contributing factor.” (VN5) |
| *Union participation.* | NA |
| *Serendipity* | “I had never considered, when I was younger, a career, how, as a university president” (FR13). “I have never thought of becoming a rector, nor have I considered it a career goal. Actually, the job chose me.” (VN6)  “It's almost the last thing that I would have imagined, going into academia and becoming a Vice Chancellor when I left school at 18.” (UK5)  “Well, I think serendipity is always there, isn't it? The right opportunities, or the wrong opportunities come up at the wrong or right times… to make a difference and to contribute, but apart from that, I think it's just. It had just been, you know, as events opportunities arising.” (UK12).  “Then, the job opportunity from XXX University accidentally came to me at the right time.” (VN17)  “I mean I feel very lucky. I feel in some sense I've. I've been very fortunate in terms of the people who supported me.” (UK8) |

# **Table 4: Differences in institutional, organizational, and individual factors that affect career advancement of university presidents in UK, France, and Vietnam**

| **Factors** | **UK** | **France** | **Vietnam** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Institutional logics** | Influence of head-hunters | Presidents elected to their roles | Political party involvement |
| **Organizational Career management** | Rhetoric: key role of HR department; in practice, HR is irrelevant. | Within the institution | Succession planned and controlled by the Communist Party |
| **Individual (Career) agency** | Strong | Weak | Weak |
| **Use of external agencies in recruitment process** | Yes- specialist headhunters | No | Yes- Government |
| **Recruitment pool (from inside and outside of recruiting university)** | Internal and external recruitments | Internal recruitment only | Internal & external recruitments but must be `Party` members |
| **Political credentials** | Not required | Not required | Communist Party member |
| **Career mobility** | Typical | Absent | Limited |
| **Age** | Between late 40s to mid-60s | Early 50s to early 60s | Around 50 on average |
| **Gender** | Majority men, but significant number of women presidents | Majority men with a growing number of female presidents | Mostly male |
| **Academic ranks** | Professor | Professor | Associate Professor or Professor |
| **PhD Training** | Mostly UK but also global | French | Overseas |
| **Previous role** | Deputy Vice chancellor reporting to President (Vice Chancellor) or having already completed a term of office in the role of president | Research responsibilities and Vice President | Vice President |

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