



# Never a Dull Moment: The Role of the Registrar

June 2018

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### How we compiled this report

In February 2018, AHUA circulated an online survey to its 180 members across 135 institutions. The survey included a range of questions about their roles.

81 members completed the survey, giving their comments on a range of issues. The data was compiled by Pickle Jar Communications, a digital marketing consultancy specialising in HE. Commentary was added by Paul Greatrix, Chair of the AHUA Communications Working Group.

Our thanks to all members who took part in the survey for generously giving their time and thoughts.

## Introduction

The Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) is the representative body for senior university managers in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The AHUA represents the collective views of members on key issues and policies to the higher education (HE) sector, government and other stakeholders. It also brings together members to exchange information, share knowledge and experience, and develop colleagues who aim to fill senior roles in HE administration.

Part of this mission involves facilitating discussions through online forums, where members can discuss topical issues and learn from one another's approach.

In May 2017, Paul Greatrix, Chair of the AHUA Communications Working Group, posed a question in one such forum. He was interested in the tenure of Registrars and COOs within UK universities. The responses he received formed the basis of a short blog post that was published on the AHUA website in August 2017.

It was immediately apparent that members were interested in learning more - not just how long their peers had been in post, but about their backgrounds, key responsibilities and biggest challenges.

Simultaneously, the public seemed to be taking a greater interest in the role of Registrars. *The Guardian*, published a report titled *Running a tight ship: can universities plot*

*a course through rough seas?* (January 2018) based on in depth interviews with senior university managers. The Society for Research into Higher Education, also released a paper titled *Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education: the role of prestige* (January 2018). This reflected on the increasing number of Registrars coming to the role from careers outside of academia.

The outcomes form the basis of this report and show substantial commonalities in some dimensions and some divergence in others.

Looking at the roles represented there are two extremes: at one end of the spectrum some roles are highly governance-focused, with providing support for the governing body and associated activities forming a fundamental core of duties. At the other end some Registrars have very broad, often all-encompassing, managerial roles which see them leading all professional services. These latter posts were somewhat more common a generation ago but are now increasingly unusual. Most Registrars though occupy the space in between these two extremes and enjoy a wide range of duties which are described in more detail in this report.

We hope you find it an interesting insight into the roles of our members.

## What is the role of a Registrar?

AHUA conducted a survey of its members. The results reveal the diversity in the roles of Registrars across the UK, in terms of job title, position and responsibility.

The role of the Registrar is key to championing the vision and driving forward the strategic direction of an institution. Without the role and the professional services team that supports it, the administrative and governance functions that are vital to the running of an efficient and successful organisation would not operate in an effective and co-ordinated manner.

Although every institution is different, the traditional Registrar role encompasses three main areas: governance, advisory and operational management. In some institutions, these roles have been split between Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary.

Registrars usually act as Secretary to the University governing body and are responsible for its related sub-committees. They support the Chair and lead on legal, regulatory and procedural issues. They also seek to ensure that Councils do not stray into academic matters or become embroiled in issues which are more properly the concern of the executive.

Registrars are also almost always the main advisors to their Vice Chancellors (VCs). They must create and maintain good working relationships with their VCs, offering not only support but also challenge where necessary and ensuring that proposals and decisions taken are in the best interest of the institution.

Thirdly, Registrars are responsible for most, and sometimes all, of an institution's professional service functions. They will usually have the Directors of those functions, ranging from estates to HR, legal and planning, reporting directly to them. They will be responsible for developing those staff and giving them opportunities to progress in their careers.

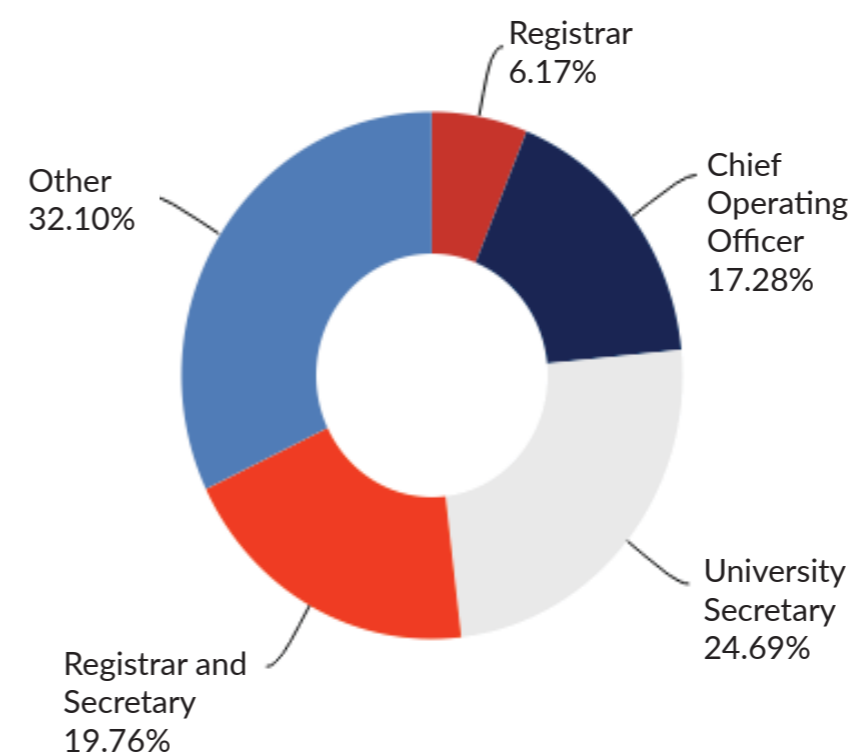
An effective Registrar and their team is key to supporting the delivery of academic objectives and enabling an environment where research, teaching and learning can flourish. They work hand in hand with the academic community to create an environment where students can develop and thrive. In terms of leadership, administration and governance, they are a vital element of what makes a successful and effective university.

### Job titles

Although this report is titled 'The Role of Registrars', the members of AHUA – and therefore the survey respondents – hold a range of roles, with a wide variety of titles and duties, and this includes a number of Deputy Vice Chancellors.

In fact, only 6.17% actually hold the title Registrar, with many others performing 'registrar-type' roles under different titles. A similar survey, had it been conducted three decades ago, would have found much greater consistency of title and more uniformity in roles performed. But there has been huge change in HE in this period and this has led to more diversity across the sector.

The largest proportion (32.10%) have a title that indicates the complex nature of their responsibilities. This may either suggest the breadth – bringing together two or more roles into a single title – or, by contrast, the specificity of their area of responsibility.



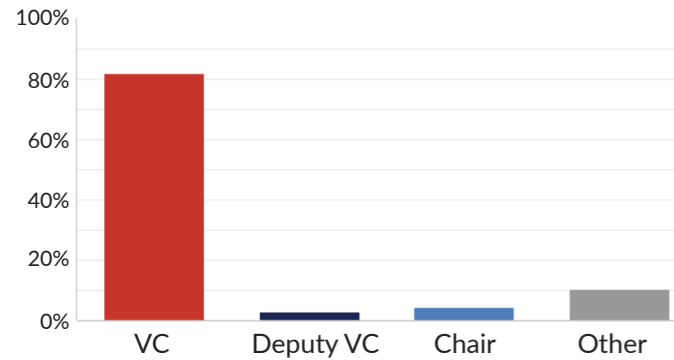
### Broad titles

- Chief Administrative Officer and Secretary
- Chief of Operations and Estates
- Chief Operating Officer and Registrar
- Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary
- Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary
- Clerk to the Governing Body
- Company Secretary
- COO and Secretary
- Registrar and Chief Operating Officer
- Registrar, Secretary and Chief Operating Officer
- Secretary to Court
- University Secretary & Chief Operating Officer

### Specific titles

- Director of Administration
- Director of Operations
- Director of Organisational Development
- Director of Planning & Academic Administration
- Director of Student and Academic Services
- Vice Provost (Operations)

## Position



The survey revealed that 80% of respondents reported directly to the Vice Chancellor (VC), with the majority claiming that this was appropriate and suitable.

Reporting to the Vice Chancellor is a significant indicator of position and status, but is also generally necessary for successful delivery in the role.

Many role-holders, where they are Secretary to the governing body, will also have a reporting line to the governing body Chair. This is particularly important in ensuring that the Chair and other governors have a source of impartial advice to help them in the execution of their duties.

“My dominant reporting line is to the Chair of the governing body, but day-to-day I work closely with the Vice Chancellor.”

“My role sits well in the structure as I am able to exercise independence from the Vice Chancellor and the Executive when governance requires.”

## Areas of responsibility

Job titles reflect the differing areas of responsibility allocated to individuals.

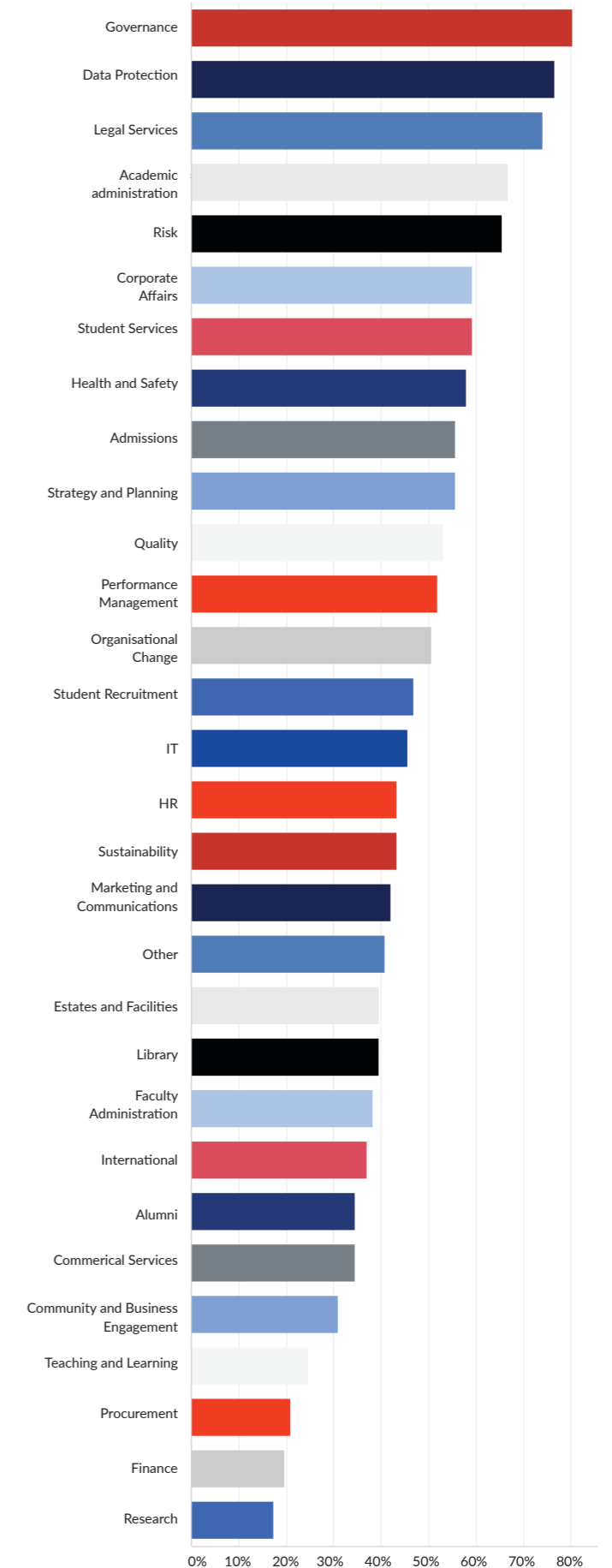
There is significant diversity here although governance, regulatory, compliance and legal matters are common areas of responsibility to most.

Over half of respondents were responsible for the following areas:

Governance	80.25%
Data Protection	76.54%
Legal Services	74.07%
Academic Administration	66.67%
Risk	65.43%
Student Services	59.26%
Corporate Affairs	59.26%
Health and Safety	58.02%
Admissions	55.56%
Institutional Strategy & Planning	55.56%
Quality	53.09%
Performance Measurement	51.85%
Organisational Change	50.62%

Members also stated a number of other areas:

- Accommodation
- Archives
- Catering
- Compliance
- Equality and diversity
- Employability
- Graduation
- Internal audit
- Partnerships
- Security
- Sport
- Student discipline
- Student experience
- Teaching and learning



## Tricky tasks

The role of the Registrar is a challenging one, involving various difficult and complex tasks.

Respondents rated the following challenges as being the most common:

Relating to internal stakeholders	38.96%
Managing people	15.58%
Managing resources	12.99%
Responding to policy	10.39%
Relating to external stakeholders	3.90%
Overseeing institutional activities	3.90%

Despite the various areas within their portfolio, 39% of respondents agreed that the most challenging aspect of their job was managing relationships with key internal stakeholders.

This included the need to manage relationships between various stakeholders, to 'manage upwards', and to form the crucial link between the top-level leadership and operational staff. One respondent commented: "My biggest challenge is understanding what the VC and Governors want, and trying to stop them from micro managing the organisation."

This was seen as far more difficult than managing relationships with external stakeholders, which only 4% saw as the biggest challenge.

As part of 'managing upwards', trying to ensure the Vice Chancellor and the governing body are not unduly distracted by unnecessary detail is seen by some as an important part of the role.

Given the range of responsibilities, the growth in regulatory activities and the increasing

scale and complexity of university operations it is unsurprising that several respondents commented that the biggest challenge was not one specific task, but the variety and volume of tasks. They commented on the difficulty of managing the workload, juggling multiple tasks, and achieving a healthy work-life balance.

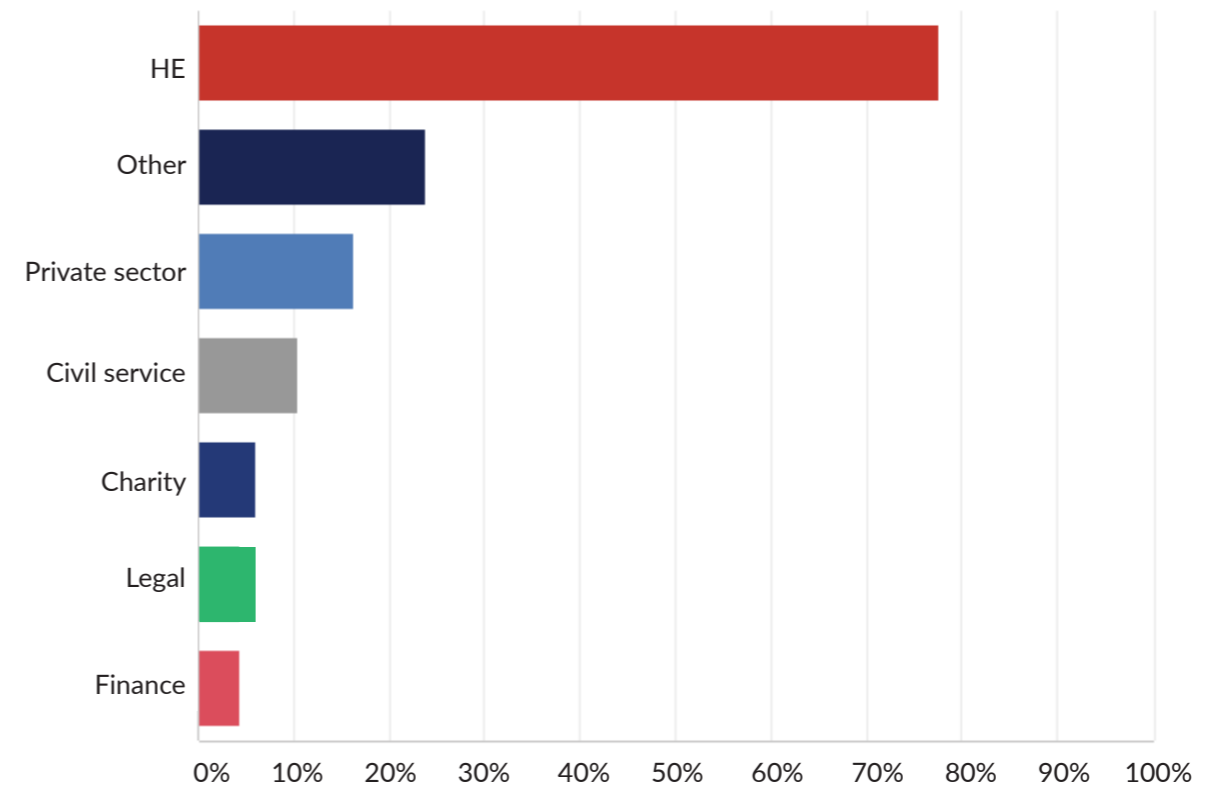
The sheer volume of activity clearly feels overwhelming to some and the comments from individual Registrars give a flavour of the weight of work and how it can manifest itself in the course of the working day. As one respondent commented: "The biggest challenge for me is managing the volume and breadth of work. Whilst I am no stranger to there being too few hours in the day, this is a new high!"

A more detailed exploration of these challenges can be found in a report published by the Guardian, titled *Running a tight ship: can universities plot a course through rough seas?* (January 2018).

"For me, the biggest challenge is managing a massive email inbox on top of a full diary."

## Career background

The precise range of a Registrar's duties is varied and challenging. Current incumbents come from a range of backgrounds.



### Background

Among those who selected 'Other', industries and organisations listed included the NHS, Royal Air Force, local government and the Further Education sector. Whilst a clear majority of Registrars have progressed from other roles in HE, the proportion being appointed to such roles from outside the sector has undoubtedly grown. Given the skills required, the nature of the role and the complexity of operations it is perhaps unsurprising that more appointments from beyond HE are being made.

Very few – less than 4% – came from the finance sector. This is perhaps unsurprising though given that financial matters are often the primary responsibility of the Chief Financial Officer or equivalent.

Reflections on the way this data has changed over time, and the implications, can be found in a report from the Society for Research into Higher Education, titled *Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education: the role of prestige* (January 2018).



# Key skills

The survey asked: ‘What key skills do you think are important to succeed in your position?’ Here are the four top responses.

## 1. Resilience

Resilience was the trait most commonly mentioned.

Respondents referred to the need for:

- Tenacity
- Determination
- Persistence
- Resolve
- Stamina
- ‘A strong backbone’
- Emotional strength

Building on these attributes several respondents used the same phrase:



Although Registrars would not get very far in their roles if they had the temperament to match!

## 2. People skills

Many respondents referred to interpersonal skills.

Some focused on the management of individuals and teams talking about:

- Fostering collaboration and teamwork
- Delegating effectively
- Motivating and empowering others
- Building partnerships
- Engaging stakeholders
- Networking

Others spoke about emotional intelligence, citing the need for:

- Empathy
- Confidentiality
- Inclusivity
- Skills in coaching and mentoring

One respondent commented: “You need to be someone that people can turn to for support and advice.”

Connected to people skills, written and verbal communications skills were both commonly mentioned.

This included the need to communicate effectively with staff at a range of levels, along with the need to explain and advise succinctly and authoritatively.

## 3. Leadership

Unsurprisingly for a role that sits within an institution’s senior leadership team, people commonly mentioned leadership skills. These included:

- Having and sharing a clear vision
- Having good judgment
- Making clear decisions

The definition of a good leader extended beyond the skills needed to lead from the front, and included personal traits such as:

- Being trustworthy and trusted
- Acting with integrity and openness
- Being accountable

Responsiveness, openness to other perspectives and collegiality were common themes, along with transparency and honesty.

One respondent commented: “It’s important to have the ability to confess to not knowing.”

Several people specifically mentioned that a background in, or past experience of, change management was an asset.

## 4. Political acumen

Respondents commonly referred to the need for political acumen or ‘nous’. Having a nuanced understanding of the political complexities of the institution, and the political climate beyond it, are seen as crucial.

In particular, in a turbulent time of unprecedented levels of government reform and change to HE policy, the role of the Registrar is to keep their institution informed, sensitized and able to respond.

Comments also commonly included the mention of:

- Tact and diplomacy
- Strategic thinking, including planning, analysis and problem solving
- Influencing and negotiating skills
- The ability to translate complex policy documents into decisions and actions

Whilst people did refer to specific skills, alongside these a Registrar needs to be versatile. In line with comments elsewhere in this report about the current climate of change and uncertainty, the ability to be flexible and adaptable are crucial.



## Supported by a skilled team

Registrars are commonly supported by a team of specialist staff with responsibility for different areas of the Registrar's portfolio.

Many respondents commented that the skillset required by their team members was very similar to that they required themselves.

In addition, respondents emphasised that the most important skill needed from team members was expertise in their specialist area. This included detailed knowledge, significant past experience and any associated technical skills.

Beyond this, the following four skills were deemed to be most crucial for team members:

### 1. Team player

Someone who is co-operative, not egotistical, and is willing to collaborate with others to work for the good of the team and the institution.

### 2. Communication

This particularly included the need for writing skills to produce business documentation.

### 3. Management

Respondents commonly referred to the fact that they required members of their immediate team to manage other teams and individuals, often taking the bulk of line-management and performance-management related tasks.

### 4. Leadership

Registrars value team members who are committed to the mission and values of the institution, and who are able to influence others.

Whilst all of these skills would apply to good team players in many different contexts, in working in an HE environment respondents also commonly referred to the need for:

- Honesty and openness
- Clear, strategic thinking
- Creative problem-solving
- Big picture thinking that cuts across silos
- Independence and autonomy

These skills and attributes, combined with a strong awareness of and empathy with the fundamental purposes of HE are the things which really make a difference to working as part of the Registrar's team.

Not all Registrars have a team for which they are responsible – two survey respondents specifically commented that they did not have a team to assist them.



## Challenges ahead

The HE sector is facing a turbulent time. This was evident in the responses we received to questions asking about the forthcoming challenges.

### Sector-wide challenges

We asked, 'What major issues do you think will face the sector in the coming years?'

There were many points raised which were of significance to institutions and their staff and students. Here are the eight issues that were most commonly referenced.

#### 1. Financial pressures

This included concerns about the external environment – reduced funding, the fees and funding review, the value for money agenda, pension disputes – and the consequent internal challenges this causes, including the need to diversify income streams and the increased internal competition for budget and resources. All of these pressures will have an impact on investment, operations and staff and require creative responses from Registrars and other senior colleagues.

#### 2. Regulation

The creation of the Office for Students prompted a range of comments about the increased need for compliance, alongside the increased regulation of the sector. Comments revealed a perception of increased government interference and reduced autonomy for individual institutions. Mitigating the most burdensome impacts of external regulation on institutions and academic staff was seen by many as a key priority.

#### 3. Increased competition in student recruitment

There is a heightened sense of competition within the sector, with a 'battle for students' underway. As UK institutions attempt to grow their student numbers, overseas providers are also increasingly making appealing offers. Coupled with the introduction of new, non-traditional modes of study and competitive alternatives to HE, universities have an increasingly difficult job to maintain and increase the number of UK, EU and international students that they recruit each year.

#### 4. The political agenda

External volatility was commonly cited as a major challenge, with changes in government and regular changes to policy making it harder to keep up. The introduction of a new regulator, new framework and a raft of new policies make for a turbulent backdrop to university activities.

#### 5. Brexit

Brexit is a major source of concern for individual institutions, and for the sector as a whole. The continuing uncertainty around the on-the-ground impact of the UK's departure for the EU make it difficult for institutions to prepare for, or even forecast for, the coming year. Issues around funding, overseas partnerships and visas for staff and students are major sources of concern.

#### 6. The public perception of HE

There is clearly a shared feeling that HE is struggling to be trusted and seen as credible by the public. This was blamed on distracting headlines generated within the sector including senior remuneration, freedom of speech, industrial action; and generated beyond the sector including political reforms, tuition fee debates and marketization. This causes universities a harder task around individual reputation management, as well as fragmenting the sector and pitting individual institutions against each other.

#### 7. Marketisation of the sector

Several responses referred to the 'value for money' agenda. The definition of students as consumers, and their increasing demands to see a concrete and quantifiable return on their investment, is forcing universities to more clearly articulate their value.

#### 8. Recruitment pressures

Connected to increased competition, many felt the sector was facing a battle in relation to staff and students. Increased demand for higher recruitment, particularly of international students, and retention, particularly of staff, is only likely to continue in the coming years, in line with demographic changes. The strongly-worded response from one participant is evidence of how keenly this is felt: "A major issue is the battle for students."

"The biggest challenge is financial pressures, with a delightful Brexit icing on the cake."

"Concentrating on our own priorities and not allowing the external environment to squeeze out space for us to pursue them."

"I think it's the achievement of strategic change in the face of budget constraints and external volatility."



## Challenges faced by individual institutions

Within their own individual institutions, half of respondents claimed that their most significant issue was financial pressure and noted that this will inevitably have an impact on investment opportunities, approaches to operational delivery and require responses which are more creative.

The external political climate was also cited as a major challenge, with an increased workload around compliance alongside preparations for both REF and TEF.

The need to maintain high performance in research, teaching and the student experience is a commonly cited issue.

20% of responses mentioned forthcoming changes within the leadership team, including the appointment of new Vice Chancellors and succession planning for new Registrars or other key senior appointments. Connected to this, a similar number of responses referred the development and implementation of a new university strategy. All of these developments were seen to offer opportunities as well as challenges.

Sixteen respondents mentioned that their institutions were already undergoing major transformation projects that would affect processes, cultures and structures. Many of these were connected to an ongoing pressure for greater organisational efficiency. These projects pose a challenge as they result in the need for effective change management, often in an environment where there may be anxiety about the impact of transformation and organisational inertia or resistance.

People also mentioned a range of other hurdles they are currently facing, including:

- Brexit
- GDPR
- Student expectations
- Strikes
- Major capital projects
- Building new partnerships
- Mergers and closures
- Increased competition
- Internationalisation
- Digital transformation
- Portfolio review
- Re-accreditation
- Performance management

All of these changes will have a significant impact on university staff, and on the Registrar in particular.

You can find some of AHUA's members discussing the challenges they are facing as individuals, institutions and as a sector on the AHUA YouTube channel.

## Preparing for the future

We asked what new skills might be needed from registrars and their teams in order to face these challenges.

20% feel that the most important skill is agility, to enable rapid responses to external pressures and creative problem solving. Alongside this, horizon scanning and change management skills were identified as important.

A further 10% of individuals felt that the key was to become increasingly resilient, at an individual and an institutional level.

In stressing the need to stay focused on the core strategic aims and key priorities, respondents also identified the risk of being blown off course. One respondent commented: "We need to develop longer term strategic thinking and not being swayed by the latest political lurch or nudge."

Other skills listed included:

- Specific digital and technological abilities
- Commercial expertise
- Data-analysis skills
- Experience of compliance issues
- Customer focus
- Willingness to work across silos

A key theme was the need for individuals, institutions and the sector as a whole, to rise to the challenges ahead. Respondents felt that this was the time to be braver and more creative. As one respondent put it: "We need the skills to cut through all the compliance and bureaucracy in order to provide sufficient time for creativity and institutional development."

This is the most powerful message of the findings and a real signal for the future.

"The biggest challenge will be workload and stress."

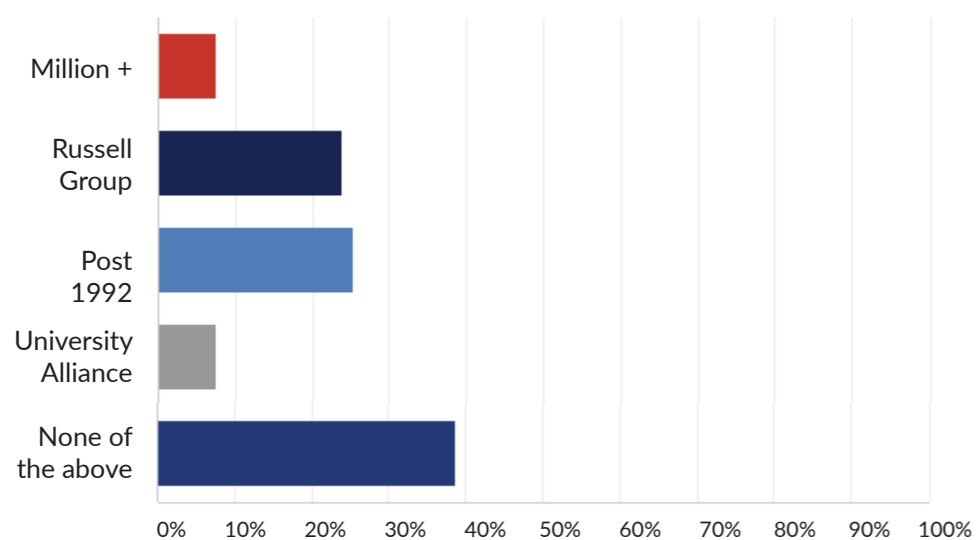
"We need to curb our enthusiasm for random (non-core) activities."

"We need to be braver in challenging the status quo in order to help the institution."

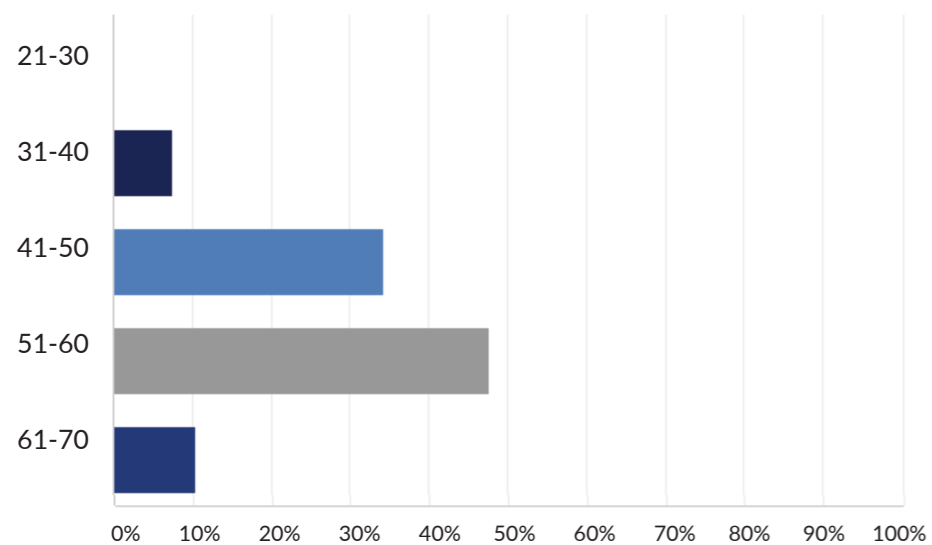
## About the survey respondents

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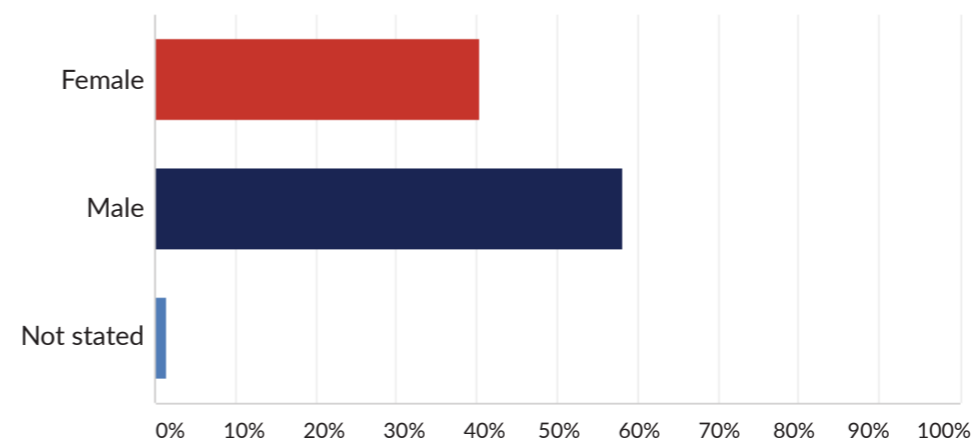
### Institution



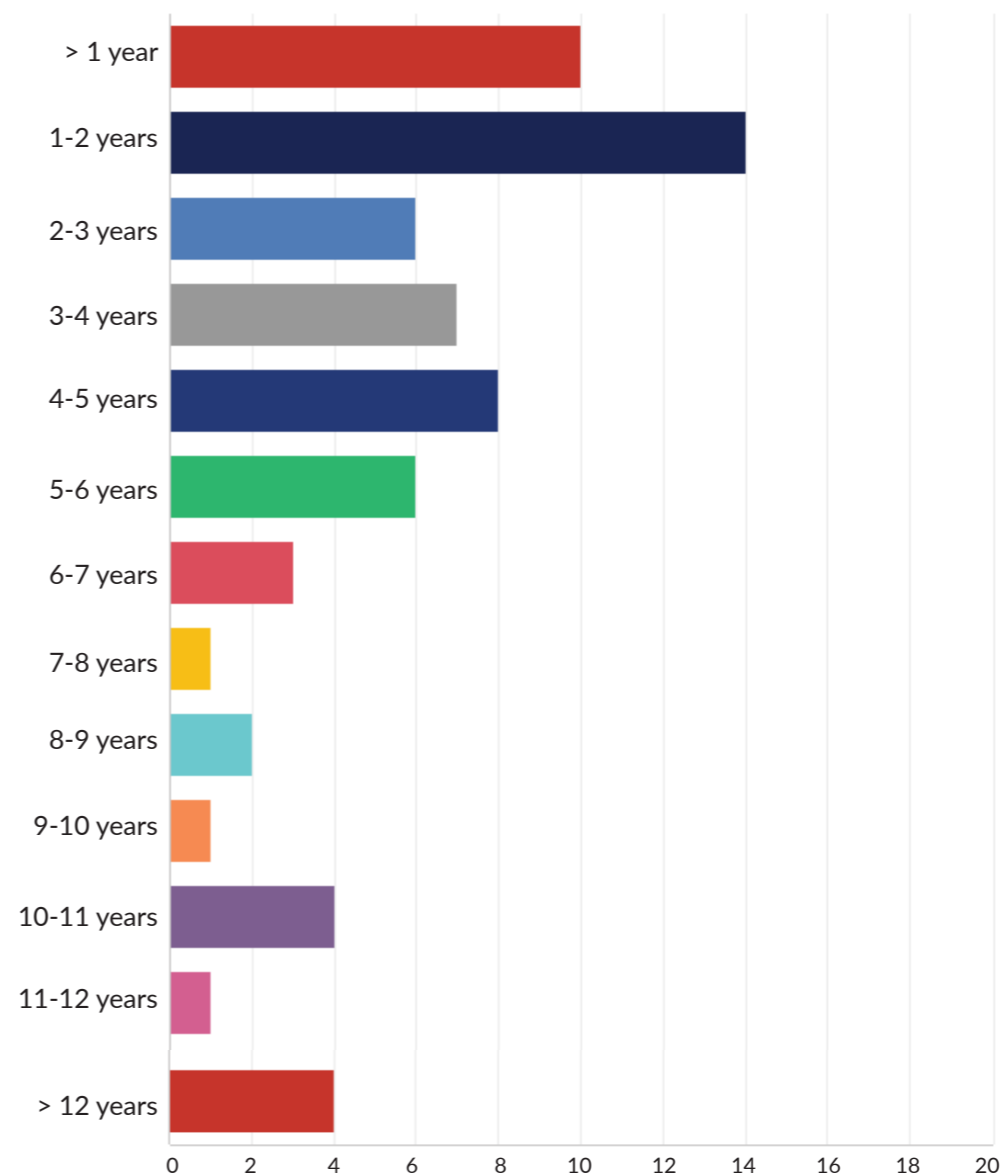
### Age



### Gender



### Tenure





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