Report

WHEN THE RECRUITMENT OF AN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIR GOES BAD: REFLECTIONS

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Abstract. *Recruiting senior academics from overseas to fulfil key leadership roles can be an attractive proposition to ambitious universities aiming to climb the world rankings; such leaders bring, besides their hard-won reputations, valuable experience, as well as elements of their own research infrastructures. However, this recruitment strategy targeting overseas leaders comes with risks, particularly if too much of the work is left to untrained and relatively unsupported faculty search committees. To avoid subsequent disappointment, it is vital that good practice is followed at each stage of the selection process, as these reflections from Arabia vicariously highlight. This article explores in-depth what went wrong during the recruitment of an anonymized individual at an unnamed university some years ago. This was for a Chair of English position. Practical recommendations to guide the work of faculty search committees in such circumstances are made, particularly with regards screening processes so that deeply unsuitable applicants who may initially look promising on paper can be eliminated. These recommendations extend beyond the recruitment of Chair positions by English departments comprised of specialists in diverse aspects of English literature, applied linguistics including English for specific purposes, and language teacher education, all perhaps pulling in different directions.*

Key words: *search committee, recruitment processes, Chair position, Department of English, Arabia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Partly to support their exercising of soft power, various countries in Arabia have invested heavily in international football teams such as Manchester City, Newcastle United, Paris St Germain. Such investment tends to bring goodwill, as does hosting international events and distributing humanitarian aid in times of crisis. Underpinning such efforts is a focus on improving infrastructure and education. However, investing in education seems to come, like investment in football, with a competitive edge. For example, while the over-riding ambition of the sponsored football team may be to become the best in the World, a key ambition of the countries' flagship universities would appear to be to rise as high as possible in the lists of the top 100/200/500 universities worldwide produced annually by *Times Higher Education* (THE) and *Quacquarelli Symonds* (QS). While such an ambition

is likely shared by many international universities, it is quite transparent in Arabia. Some universities in the region tend to place their position in whichever list of the world rankings is most favourable to them front and centre on their home pages for self-marketing purposes, so that the information is essentially unmissable to browsing visitors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this high electronic visibility of the university's (usually rising) status in the world rankings then tends to be reinforced through other local media. My own experience is that undergraduate students are likely to be aware (like football supporters exposed daily to league tables) of their university's current precise place in the list, most likely somewhere between 150 and 300 at best since the upper echelons have not yet been reached in Arabia.

In a regional context where, once goals are set, rapid results tend to be demanded (see, for example, the recent acquisition of a host of top footballers from European clubs to dramatically raise the international profile of the Saudi professional league), local universities are expected to climb the world rankings quickly. This target might be met through a combination of strategies, which themselves are likely informed by the criteria used by ranking agencies. THE, for example, base their judgements of universities on the following weighted criteria: teaching (the learning environment) 30%; research (volume, income and reputation) 30%; citations (research influence) 30%; international outlook (staff, students, research) 7.5%; industry income (knowledge transfer) 2.5% (THE, 2022, Oct. 5). Given the weighting in these criteria towards research, citations, and international outlook (total 67.5%), ambitious universities might accordingly aim to recruit and retain well-cited, research-active faculty capable of drawing project funding and collaborating transnationally on research initiatives. This insight suggests that, besides perhaps possessing long-term goals that relate to the nurturing of local talent amongst Arabian scholars, ambitious universities funded by petrodollars might seek, in the short-term, to recruit high profile academics from overseas, offering inducements such as research assistants and high salaries.

There is evidence that, whichever precise recruitment strategies are being used by Arabian universities, they might be contributing towards success. According to the chief knowledge officer at THE, the region's "leading universities are rising up the World Rankings as part of an exciting and dynamic new renaissance for the Arab World, driving the transition to a new knowledge and innovation-based economy" (Hall, 2023, Feb. 16). However, at a local level, there may also be risks in recruiting faculty for senior researcher positions from overseas. Reputations on paper might appear stellar, but in some cases the faculty concerned may arrive relatively untried and untested in the educational and sociocultural context of Arabia. In such cases, the judgement as to whether or not the candidate is a good fit for the post they have applied for can only really be made in the weeks and months after their arrival. Clearly, however, recruitment processes need to be sufficiently robust to minimize subsequent regrets. A bad appointment can have devastating effects. These reflections on the recruitment of a Chair of English within a College of Arts and Sciences (that no longer exists as a distinct entity due to organizational changes) at an unnamed university of Science and Technology in Arabia interrogate the processes that were followed in making the appointment, which was subsequently felt by many within the university community to have been a grave mistake.

The university in question was very young at the time of the events described here, having recently been created through a merger of three smaller universities with the aim of creating a world-class research-intensive institution. In such an environment, it was visualized that world leaders and critical thinkers in areas such as Aerospace, Energy,

Healthcare, and Information Technology would be produced. Treated in various ways as a junior entity in relation to the College of Engineering within the same university, the College of Arts and Sciences included various departments, such as Chemistry, Earth Sciences, English, Humanities and Social Sciences, Mathematics, and Physics. All these departments offered majors, except English, and Humanities and Social Sciences, and the role of these two departments was generally conceptualized as being to support general education requirements; apart from the Foundation Programme, these two departments, and English in particular, had the lowest status overall within the university.

As with many other universities in Arabia, there was an aspiration to move up the world rankings quickly. A key strategy implemented to achieve this aim, which was driven within the College of Arts and Sciences by the newly appointed Dean, involved confirming existing Departmental Chairs in acting roles, while searching for and then bringing in high profile academic leaders from overseas to replace them. The expectation was that these external appointments would bring parts of their own research infrastructures with them, including perhaps their own post-docs and ongoing projects, and their own networks which would help flesh out the departments they would lead with high calibre replacements for any less productive faculty members who would be phased out. To a certain extent this strategy proved successful, since the appointment of some Departmental Chairs resulted in the kind of dynamic change that the Dean was hoping for. However, with regards the recruitment of the Chair of English, the process has been questioned as having been potentially flawed, since it led to a disappointing outcome and speculation as to if and how this mistaken decision to hire could have been avoided. Using anonymized notes that I kept at the time as Chair of the search committee for this post, I have developed these reflections to focus on that selection process, with a view to learning from it. First, though, I review the literature on hiring practices.

2. RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

Poor hiring decisions can be costly, particularly if they involve senior posts, since the morale of subordinates and their productivity, as well as the standing of the department and relationships with other departments within the organization can all be negatively impacted (Loomes et al., 2019; Sutherland & Wöcke, 2011). There may be various reasons why poor hiring decisions are made. Survey data suggest that they can be attributed by regretful employers to candidates misrepresenting themselves, but factors such as the selection process being insufficiently rigorous or the applicant pool being inadequate are more frequently blamed (Nowicki & Rosse, 2002). It is crucial, then, that robust hiring practices are followed.

Various recommendations have been put forward to guide the hiring of faculty and academic leaders in university settings (e.g., Anderson, 2021; Loomes et al., 2019; The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2018). These recommendations include the following elements (Table 1):

Table 1 Recommendations regarding the hiring of faculty
and academic leaders in university settings

No.	Recommendations
1	Develop a focused position description that highlights all the essential attributes required for the role without being so specific that it discourages able applicants from applying.
2	Formulate a realistic search plan that includes decisions about where advertisements are to be placed and a timeline to cover the various steps in the process, including interviews and campus visits.
3	Appoint a balanced search committee that incorporates diverse perspectives.
4	Encourage consensus-building in the work of the search committee, confidentiality, and decorum.
5	Ensure that the records of the search committee are kept accurately, faithfully reflecting processes and committee members' views.
6	Be proactive in expanding the pool of candidates, for example through informal networks and contacts, since the alternative approach is 'post and pray'.
7	Develop criteria based on the essential attributes specified in the position description to assess applications.
8	Involve all search committee members in reviewing applications and screening them carefully.
9	Encourage search committee members to interrogate their own implicit biases during the screening process, and to consider how the candidates under review may be perceived by various others within the department and university community.
10	Develop a long list of potential candidates and invite search committee members to reread their dossiers carefully.
11	Meet to develop a shortlist of candidates to interview.
12	Design an interview protocol that includes a common set of questions that can be asked to all shortlisted candidates as well as questions tailored to each candidate.
13	Conduct the initial interviews in a professional way.
14	Check references.
15	Organize campus visits for shortlisted candidates that include meetings with faculty, further interviews, a presentation with questions, and a campus tour.
16	Meet to discuss feedback from campus visits and make recommendations.

In the following section, I consider the extent to which these criteria (Table 1) appear to have informed the decision-making in a particular case that took place over seven years ago. First, though, I would like to highlight that various strategies are employed in the narrative below to protect the anonymity of the participants. These participants include search committee members, now all either retired or no longer working at the same university, and applicants, all likely no longer seeking work. They are described in disguised terms, without reference for example to specific universities and countries and without the use of direct quotes that appear in Internet sources and would make them traceable. Given that the narrative below has been produced from an insider perspective, I have endeavoured to be as reflexive as possible.

3. What Happened?

My involvement in the case reported here began when the Acting Chair of English at an unnamed university in Arabia emailed the approximately 20 faculty members of the department inviting volunteers to serve on a search committee to review applications for a Chair of English, who would be externally appointed. I volunteered, as did five of my colleagues, and we were all appointed to serve on the committee, which I was then asked to chair. The Acting Chair of English explained that in line with university guidelines she would have no role in choosing her successor.

Prior to the search committee being formed, a position description had been developed at a higher level within the university and a search plan had been approved (Table 1, 1-2). However, when we commenced our work as a search committee, our first consideration was with the wording of the advertisement (Table 1, 1), and our initial discussions regarding this reflected both balance in the composition of the search committee, with different perspectives represented (Table 1, 3), but also indicated that consensus-building might prove challenging as some committee members declared from the outset their entrenched positions (Table 1, 4).

As noted above, the university had very recently been formed as the result of a merger. This merger had not been entirely smooth, and sometimes heated discussions involving different members of the department had taken place over the previous few months regarding how the courses previously offered in the institutions that had just been merged could be aligned. One camp, with a background in literary studies, conceptualized the work of the English Department primarily in terms of American liberal arts education, with English courses focused on rhetoric, composition, and technical writing, informed by interest in English literature and the humanities more broadly; this curriculum would help participants develop critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, the other camp, with a background in (language teacher / higher) education mostly in Europe and Asia, conceptualized the work of the department more in terms of developing critical study- and workplace-related English communication skills through varied tasks and projects, supported by (peer) mentoring, with a view to enabling participants to subsequently flourish in multi-cultural professional environments.

Reservations that were immediately raised about the advertisement by a committee member from the second camp (one who had very extensive experience in higher education in Asian contexts) included limitations in what was said about the department, the job description, and the person specification. Regarding the department, for example, the committee member highlighted that nothing was said in the advertisement about teaching students for whom English was a second or additional language. Moreover, regarding the person specification, the requirement was for a doctoral degree in English or a related field, which seemed too restrictive, since perhaps only applicants with an English literature background would apply. The committee member suggested that the requirement was widened to 'English, Applied Linguistics, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or a related field' to attract a broader pool of applicants. Other committee members pointed out too that the person specification seemed excessively restrictive and ambitious in other ways. The position description required extensive experience at the level of Professor, including five years in a leadership role, managing, and guiding scholarly activity and research, within at least 12 years' experience overall of teaching and supervising postgraduates in higher education. While the wording was somewhat verbose (including long sentences that made rereading necessary), the implication we drew was that what was

most essentially required was a full Professor, ideally with at least five years' experience at that rank and as a Departmental Chair. While the literary scholars on the search committee (the first camp) seemed less bothered by the wording of the advertisement, some other members were concerned that, unless the wording were modified, we would not receive many qualified applicants. For example, there are very few full Professors of Applied Linguistics or English Language Teacher Education working in the UK and even fewer with substantial managerial experience. A suggested rewording was put forward to the Dean. He agreed to add 'Applied Linguistics' to the advertisement, but not 'TESOL', since the term conjured up for him teachers with Masters' degrees working on the Foundation Programme, while in contrast he wanted a very high-level internationally renowned scholar. In the event it was too late to change the advertisement, which was already live.

The search committee met to discuss the criteria that would be used to assess applicants initially, and differences of opinion reflecting a range of ideological positions immediately became apparent. Two committee members from the second camp highlighted the need for the successful candidate to possess substantial experience of teaching and researching English for Specific/Academic purposes in an English as a Second Language (ESL) higher education context. This was because such work was the primary focus of the department. In contrast, two committee members from the other camp made it very clear that they principally wanted a literary scholar rather than someone with a background in education. While one of these colleagues conceded that ESL experience would be beneficial, the hope was also expressed that this would ideally be in relation to the American liberal arts tradition of providing rhetoric and composition courses. As Chair of the search committee, I sought consensus, emphasizing that our department embraced a range of perspectives and discourses and that the successful candidate would be managing faculty with Literature, Applied Linguistics and TESOL backgrounds and would need to be able to lead them all harmoniously.

We developed a checklist for reviewing applications, based on the advertisement, and informed by the discussion reported above and efforts to find harmony. For example, the third criterion, after 'relevant doctoral degree' and 'minimum of 12 years of university teaching and research experience', was 'experience of teaching ESL/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners (e.g., through Rhetoric/Composition)'. The other criteria included 'Full Professor', 'Minimum of 5 years' experience supporting scholarly activity and research, demonstrating leadership and interpersonal skills and organizational abilities', 'scholarly publications', 'successful funding applications', and 'excellence in teaching'. The next column in the checklist was for source of evidence, e.g., curriculum vitae, letter of application, and (for scholarly publications) book reviews, Scopus, Google Scholar. We also included a column in the checklist for indicators to consider. For example, was the relevant doctoral degree from a high-ranking university, which the Dean had explained was important? Was there any experience of being head of department, of recruiting faculty, of managing teams, of mentoring, of Masters' and PhD thesis supervision? Were there articles in high-ranking journals and high-quality books and monographs? How many citations were there in Scopus and Google Scholar, and what were the h-indices (factors also important to the university)? How many successful funding applications had there been and for how much? Were there teaching awards? There was a column in the checklist to supply these details, and another column in which we could indicate whether each of the criteria was met.

After thoroughly developing criteria in this way (Table 1, 7), we agreed that all search committee members would be involved in the initial screening of all applicants (Table 1, 8). As Chair of the search committee, I had all applications sent to me, and I then forwarded

them to committee members immediately, and, as soon as possible, started reviewing them myself. However, as soon as it was clear that an applicant was obviously unqualified, for example if they had interpreted 'Professor' in the French sense 'teacher', or if they thought, as a lecturer or newly graduated PhD holder, that they were applying for an 'Assistant Professor' post, it was requested that whoever noticed this first should inform the rest of the committee immediately to save their colleagues time in processing the application.

Only 41 applications were received and, of these, 36 were rejected almost immediately and unanimously since the applicants were clearly unqualified. The pool of possible candidates was too small, not only since the advertisement had set the bar very high (Table 1, 1), but also because the search committee was inactive in trying to expand the pool of candidates to avoid a 'post and pray' situation (Table 1, 6). In retrospect, this is my biggest regret. Why did we not think of this strategy of reaching out, embrace it, and try to encourage qualified applicants from around the world to apply? As suggested above, there were issues with the advertisement, with our terms of reference (which had not included such proactivity), and with all the uncertainty that accompanied the establishing of a new university and merged departmental components that did not yet seem to entirely fit. How confident were we that taking the post would be a good career move for anyone we had reached out to (perhaps asking them to give up tenure for what might still prove a risky, albeit in the short term lucrative, venture)? We were also perhaps less than desperate, since we had no idea what lay in store for us.

Initial screening was quite rigorous but was complicated by committee members' initial reactions perhaps being shaped by inherent biases (Table 1, 9). For example, before looking very deeply into his curriculum vitae, one of the literary scholars on the search committee was immediately very enthusiastic about shortlisting Candidate A, a film critic who had produced books, journal articles, and film reviews for prestigious literary publishers. Something about Candidate A's career trajectory, however, struck me as odd. This candidate had graduated from an Ivy League university and had then taught at a top university in the American mid-West. However, after then moving to a much less prestigious job within the same country, he had then found work teaching in a small provincial European town. Was there anything on the Internet that could explain this unusual trajectory? A quick Google search revealed that his reputation was as a notorious plagiarizer; he was currently being sued in the US for apparently fabricating the last ever interview with a famous film director before this director's death (an interview which rather than being original was subsequently found to have been cobbled together from earlier published interviews). The Internet had caught up with this candidate and he had left his last teaching post. Over a dozen of his publications had been retracted and online articles suggested that perhaps nothing he had ever written had been completely free of plagiarism. I shared this information with the committee.

Meanwhile, the application of Candidate B was initially welcomed by a committee member with a background in language teacher education and applied linguistics. The curriculum vitae was well-written. Most of Candidate B's previous jobs listed, though, had only lasted one or two years, which raised suspicions. I then noticed that, over a decade earlier, Candidate B had worked at a British university that I had later worked at, and the name rang a bell. Of course! When I had joined that British university, Candidate B was notorious, and, though he had left, colleagues were still discussing his lack of collegiality and his cynicism. For example, anecdotal reports suggested that his approach to giving lectures had been to enter the lecture theatre with his most recent book in hand, sit at the front and read from it, while the students, with their copies, followed. This would supposedly tend to occupy

about 40 minutes of the session, leaving approximately 10 minutes for questions at the end, a pedagogical approach which, at the very least, sounds teacher-centred and self-absorbed. Moreover, while he had taught several different courses, the content may have been nearly identical in each of them; a feedback sheet left by a student who had taken two of his courses had complained that they seemed to contain the same material but in a different order (and nothing had been left with the administrators in the course files to suggest otherwise). Yet he produced a very well-written curriculum vitae, and no doubt interviewed well. I had already heard anecdotally that after leaving the British university referred to above, he had secured top positions at two other British universities, at the second of these serving as the Dean, before relocating overseas. This trajectory suggests that references had not been fully checked by employers throughout his time in the UK, leaving students, faculty, and the departments he had enjoyed senior roles within to potentially suffer. In different ways, the applications of Candidates A and B demonstrated the need for careful review (Table 1, 8) and a self-questioning of implicit biases (Table 1, 9).

Of the 41 applicants, only three remained (Candidates C, D and E, see below) and the search committee met to discuss them (Table 1, 10-11). Opinion was quite deeply divided regarding two of these candidates, and the recommendation I put forward to the Dean was that the job advertisement be re-posted, preferably with the requirements slightly eased, for example with two years' experience at full Professor level rather than five. However, due, he said, to administrative procedures that had already been set (Table 1, 2), the Dean made it clear that he needed a shortlist of three, and therefore all the surviving candidates would go forward, regardless of what the search committee thought of them. We were suffering from having a tiny pool (Table 1, 1). The three candidates would be interviewed initially over Zoom by the Dean, myself (as Chair of the search committee), and the Acting Chair of another department, who in the event was unavailable and did not attend. In preparation for the Zoom interviews, I shared the search committee's notes on the three candidates with the Dean and developed an interview protocol with the support of other members of the search committee (Table 1, 12). The interviews went ahead (Table 1, 13). I discussed the candidates with the Dean afterwards.

The surviving applicant who the search committee thought the weakest was Candidate C, and the Dean was also unimpressed. This candidate had a relevant doctorate, in Drama, and seemed to have some experience of teaching English overseas. One of the search committee members had consulted the 'Rate My Professors' website and found positive feedback from students which suggested he may have been a popular teacher. He was probably the nicest of the candidates. However, much on his curriculum vitae was very vague, and he was also very vague in his response to interview questions. He had no obvious experience of administration or mentoring, and it was also unclear if and when he had been promoted to full Professor before leaving teaching (he was no longer attached to a university). The Dean indicated that he could not imagine senior management in the university finding anything sufficiently dynamic about him that would make him seem a good choice. So, his candidature did not seem promising.

Candidate D divided the search committee most of all. His lengthy curriculum vitae, highlighting his accomplishments as a prize-winning nonfiction writer, novelist, and literary critic, quoting rave reviews of his work that had appeared in prestigious literary magazines and including links to video extracts of several of his talks, deeply enthused the two literary scholars on the search committee. However, it was highlighted by other committee members that while his teaching experience included that in international contexts, it

seemed to focus primarily on American literature and culture within the humanities more broadly; there was no experience listed of teaching rhetoric and composition courses or of working with ESL learners, while no administrative responsibilities connected with the senior positions he had held were listed. Two committee members had explicitly not wanted him to be shortlisted.

While preparing the questions I would ask when interviewing him with the Dean, I immersed myself in Candidate D's curriculum vitae in more depth. Candidate D had produced hard-hitting literary criticism, describing one famous novelist as uselessly robotic; in one videoed talk he had refuted the suggestion that he was any kind of linguist, describing himself as a literary and cultural scholar; in another talk, he compared himself to Einstein. I rewatched the video clip several times. There was no hint of humour. The audience reaction may have been primarily nonverbal. In the talk, Candidate D tersely repeated his assertion and then asked rhetorically why a literary scholar could not be seen in the same light as Einstein. And this was a video link he included in his curriculum vitae! During the interview I conducted with the Dean, Candidate D side-stepped the questions I had prepared regarding his teaching and administrative experience and management of cultural sensibilities. The Dean's view was that he came across as arrogant, aloof, and could potentially intimidate the department. "Try to find out more about him", the Dean asked: "What do other people say of his work?"

I started by hunting down the rave reviews, snippets of which had been quoted in Candidate D's curriculum vitae. I quickly discovered that he would quote someone quoting him. So, if the blurb of his book claimed that he had provided "extraordinary insights", and the review negatively highlighted that he claimed he had provided "extraordinary insights" but instead had produced "tepid analysis", then the review would appear in the curriculum vitae quite shamelessly edited down, as a positive endorsement of the "extraordinary insights".

At the same time, I took the Dean's advice to look beyond the referees Candidate D had listed (a co-author and contributors to a book he had edited, but not obviously erstwhile colleagues from the same institution) and reached out to senior academics he had worked with several years earlier. I quickly received a response from the Director of a research institute in Scandinavia, who informed me that Candidate D: had worked there but was misrepresenting the position he had held; had been a productive researcher but an awful colleague, ingratiating with superiors but mean, insulting and exploitative with subordinates; could not be recommended for any academic position anywhere. A few hours later, the Professor and Chair of an American university emailed to inform me that Candidate D was known through requesting a visiting position but perhaps had never visited the campus and certainly had never worked there; there was an unexplained two-year gap in his curriculum vitae.

In contrast to the other candidates, Candidate E seemed relatively unproblematic. While he had a background in education, he had also taught English in high school. Admittedly he had not taught English at university, which bothered one of the literary scholars on the search committee, but, I emphasized, his teaching in high school must have been of Literature, an interest which was reflected in his list of publications, some of which concerned the teaching of English. Candidate E had also taught ESL briefly as a very young man overseas, and while, it was pointed out, this was hardly comparable to the university level English for Specific/Academic purposes teaching we were engaged in, at least it was a partially relevant experience of the kind that the other candidates may have lacked. The big weakness, from our perspective, was a lack of management experience; his letter of application very clearly

stated that he had never sought a Departmental Chair position. Although there was experience of chairing university committees and experience of mentoring, Candidate E had never been responsible for recruiting, managing or appraising faculty, and had no experience of representing a department. Despite this, given the limited field, the search committee unanimously agreed that he should be interviewed. During the interview, Candidate E argued that he was open minded, flexible, an approachable mentor and an excellent listener, and, when prompted, gave some accounts of interpersonal experiences which suggested these qualities. His research looked interesting, his research agenda sounded plausible, and the Dean's view was that he was "a solid academic". He had worked at the same top American university for two decades, and a check of his references (Table 1, 14) turned up no skeletons in the closet.

Following the Zoom interviews, the search committee met with the Dean. In this meeting, I reported back on the interviews (Table 1, 13) and checking of references (Table 1, 14), which drew gasps in relation to Candidate D. "You seem to have saved us a considerable amount of grief!", said the Dean. With Candidate D eliminated, it was unanimously agreed that Candidate E be invited for a two-day campus visit (Table 1, 15).

This visit progressed quite smoothly, although some concerns, which seemed relatively minor at the time but afterwards grew in significance, were raised informally by faculty about Candidate E. One associate professor, for example, commented in private after his presentation that Candidate E would be a better fit for Chair of the Foundation Programme than of English (given the ESL focus of his discourse dwelling on experiences gained forty years earlier), while another faculty member was bothered by an obviously exaggerated self-reported accomplishment. Candidate E also snapped at one of the assistant professors during meetings with faculty, using words which suggested an autocratic stance not otherwise in evidence. Too generously perhaps, this ill-temper was ascribed by the search committee afterwards to likely fatigue after a flight from halfway around the world followed by intensive meetings. On balance, considering the publication record and academic profile and the lack of suitable alternatives, we agreed there was enough to recommend hiring Candidate E (Table 1, 16). The Dean took this forward, ensuring that the official recommendation to hire memorandum was sufficiently glowing to convince the human resources committee, including none of the search committee's deliberations.

We realized that it was a bad appointment in the incoming Chair's (Candidate E's) first week. For example, he revealed rather stubborn parochial views and practices. When a faculty member indicated that he had been published in the 'International Journal' of something, the new Chair immediately dismissed as questionable the reputation of all journals that included 'International' in their title regardless of other factors; when scheduling was discussed, he indicated that he would refuse to cooperate with other departments in the sharing of faculty and slyly indicated that he would punish faculty who had engaged in inter-departmental cooperation in the past. In some ways his practice ran directly counter to the approach he had said, during interviews in the hiring process, that he would adopt. For example, while he had indicated that he would listen to faculty and try to form a clear picture of the learning environment before intervening in any way, instead he immediately started making sweeping, ill-informed generalizations about the students, who he had not yet met. He used his first departmental meeting a few days after starting to deride the main courses run by the department (one more rhetoric and composition, and the other more project-based communication) as 'basic English', and then, in his first class, got his students making and flying paper aeroplanes. At the time of the first departmental meeting, he had

clearly not yet read the curricula documents but announced to the 20-plus faculty members in the room, together with approximately 300 years of accumulated teaching experience in Arabia and relevant research (see, for example, Ayish & Deveci, 2019; Brandt & Dimmitt, 2015; Deveci & Nunn, 2018; Nunn et al., 2018; Wyatt & Nunn, 2018, 2019), that everything was being done wrong. He wanted to tear up the curriculum immediately, seemingly unaware of the consultations and administrative steps that would be required.

In dealing with faculty, the new Chair exploited existing differences in views and sought to create cliques; he engaged in gaslighting and weaponized the appraisal and promotion processes. Clearly disliking having his views challenged, he side-lined senior members of the department, and focused recruitment efforts on hiring early career assistant professors he may have felt more comfortable with and who may have been more susceptible to bullying. Rather than building up the English Department, he weakened it within the university, openly disparaging faculty in the presence of senior university leaders and refusing to provide the courses for final-year students that the College of Engineering requested. "We are an English Department", he declared; "we can do what we want". In meetings across the university, there were frequent outbursts of ill-temper, peppered in meetings with faculty by unjust accusations, and one consequence was that several faculty members were so upset that they filed official grievances, for example for bullying and harassment. Eventually the Chair left, having partially shaken up the curriculum but also having unnecessarily alienated the department to such an extent that not one faculty member chose to publicly thank him and wish him good luck after his last communication. "When I arrived, the students were learners of English", the Chair grandiosely declared in his parting email; "now they are users of English". Continuing to write, he confessed, in a book chapter published a year after he left, that he had long been regarded in academia as a contrarian, but he also claimed that he was a misunderstood genius, like Galileo. It seems that we had dodged Einstein (Candidate D) but had hired Galileo instead. Sometime after the Chair left, the Department of English was closed.

4. WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?

Once it became clear that the Chair of English (Candidate E) had been a bad appointment, recriminations began, aired informally within the College of Arts and Sciences. Negative comparisons were made, particularly between this Chair and a newly appointed Chair of Humanities and Social Sciences, who seemed affable and supportive, listened respectfully, and provided thoughtful guidance, who in short possessed the kind of interpersonal qualities that the Chair of English so obviously lacked. The assumption was made that the search committee, and particularly the Chair of this committee (me), had selected the wrong candidate. Why had we not found someone better? These criticisms intensified over the next few months, particularly after one member of the department located the Chair on the 'Rate My Professors' website and shared the link with others. Postgraduate students from different cohorts in the Chair's previous institution had commented unfavourably on his manner (making negative generalizations about groups of students; making unkind, offensive, or inappropriate comments about individuals; refusing to listen to others' ideas; refusing to question his own judgements even after it had been politely pointed out to him that he was wrong), his unrealistic expectations, his outdated pedagogy, his broken promises to provide feedback, his peremptory demands, his chaotic organization. Faculty members in our department read the various stories on the website and concurred that the evaluative

comments from the Chair's former students seemed to sum up the way in which he worked in our context quite accurately, allowing differences for time and place. So, in which ways was the recruitment process flawed?

Firstly, as noted above, the candidate pool was too small. This was partly due to the advertisement for the post being too verbose (with unnecessarily long sentences), too unappealing (in saying too little about the work of the department), too restrictive (in the qualifications required), and too ambitious (in demanding more extensive experience in some ways than would have been needed by a candidate with the appropriate qualities). We recognized this problem and tried and failed to get the job advertisement modified; we were working with an imperfect instrument. However, notwithstanding this and although it was outside our terms of reference, in retrospect we really needed to be proactive in head-hunting potential candidates to avoid a 'post and pray' scenario. So, there was a failing here. Given uncertainties at the university, we may have lacked self-confidence in taking the initiative in this way. We were also under the illusion that it might be possible to extend the advertising period.

Secondly, our initial screening could have been more rigorous. Of only five apparently qualified candidates (of 41 applicants), four proved to be awful in different ways, while the other (Candidate C) seemed nondescript. That we had such a concentration of awful candidates does underline the dangers of having an insufficiently broad pool. It also highlights the need for thorough screening. Bad candidates with well-written curriculum vitae can slip through the selection process. Candidate B had fooled several British universities before applying to us, securing high-level roles that he did not hold down for any length of time; Candidate D had fooled, amongst others, the research institute in Scandinavia whose director had written, warning us not to employ him under any circumstances. After not being shortlisted by us, Candidate A, it seems from checking I have conducted recently, gained a post at a university in southern Europe. His history of serial plagiarizing then came to light a few months later and he was dismissed, a story which was reported in the country's English language newspapers at the time. Recruiting from overseas carries risks.

How could our screening have been better? With hindsight, the curriculum vitae produced by the various candidates were probably not interrogated thoroughly enough, with too much of what was self-reported being taken at face value on the assumption that candidates would not lie or shamelessly distort their records. Implicit biases were consequently allowed to play a role. For example, the literary scholars on the search committee expended considerable energy in advancing the case for Candidate D because they were attracted to his profile, without, however, necessarily examining the claims made in his curriculum vitae in any depth. Meanwhile, a search committee member in the other camp checked the 'Rate My Professors' website for Candidate C, a Literature professor of whom he was suspicious, and found positive feedback. Unfortunately, he did not check the same website for Candidate E, whose background in educational research had made a more favourable impression on him. If, as a search committee, we had been aware of the extremely negative reviews of his teaching provided by Candidate E's former students, we may have avoided a terrible mistake through being better armed for the next phase of the search process.

Thirdly, I should self-question the interviewing of Candidate E. Were the questions I asked in the Zoom interview too soft or weak? Looking at these questions, I can see that I did seek to probe without causing offence. In the interview, I had sought to explore difficult situations, for example, where he had needed to provide leadership, and the stories provided had seemed plausible, presented in a way that highlighted qualities we were looking for:

keeping cool under pressure, cooperating, collaborating, mentoring. Of course, though, if the interview panel had been larger, the questioning may have been more rigorous.

To a certain extent, we were the victim of more powerful forces. The university's aspiration to climb up the world rankings fast was intimately connected to a strategy of making big money signings, of bringing in high-profile Departmental Chairs within the College of Arts and Sciences to drive progress. However, corners were cut in the process; there could have been consultation in the wording of the job advertisement; there could have been flexibility in the timeline to allow the development of a robust shortlist; there could have been greater consideration of reservations raised during the campus visit. Unfortunately, the appointment was rushed through, and we were left with regrets. Yet, amongst these regrets, there was the flimsiest of silver linings, despite the ineffective work of the search committee overall. As one of the literary scholars who had been on that committee told me a few months after the Chair had taken up his post: "I know he's a monster, but my choice was someone (Candidate D) who would have been even worse".

5. CONCLUSION

When I reflect on the experiences described above, I have an over-riding sense that the search committee had an extremely difficult job. Most of us had quite extensive prior experience of serving on search committees for faculty, but, without further guidance and training, this may have been inadequate preparation for the situation reported here. Recruiting the Chair of English was a high-stakes decision not only for the university, which was desperate to rise in the world rankings and could have benefited from a functional Department of English, but also for the Dean, who was ambitious to make an impact, and also for faculty within the department, whose careers all suffered in the event, either when appraisal and promotion processes were fractured and disrupted and/or when the weakened department was closed. What are the implications for practice?

It is increasingly difficult to externally recruit suitable university leaders through job advertisements (Loomes et al., 2019) and a viable though expensive alternative strategy may be to enlist the help of executive search consultants. Given the alarming costs of failing to recruit appropriate candidates (Sutherland & Wöcke, 2011), such specialized help may be highly worthwhile. However, executive search consultants most effectively operate alongside faculty search committees, supporting them rather than replacing them (Anderson, 2021). Consequently, targeted help for academics serving on search committees that would include support in self-questioning implicit biases and welcoming diversity may be needed.

For the search committee working with a pool of applicants, it seems vital to interrogate the curriculum vitae of each apparently qualified candidate thoroughly. This means going beyond the key criteria and any quantifiable indicators for each criterion that may be important to an institution. In the case reported on above, because the university was only interested in graduates from the top 200 universities in the world who had also worked at institutions of a similar standing, we checked these statistics, and others that were deemed important, including h-indices in Google Scholar and Scopus. However, we discovered (sometimes in retrospect) that it was also very helpful to:
- Focus on career trajectory. If this seems unusual, is it worth investigating through a Google search (as was employed with Candidate A)?
- Look closely at the length of appointments. If these seem short (as was the case with Candidates B and D), what might explain such a phenomenon?

- Use personal contacts informally to learn more about candidates of interest early in the process. Candidate B, for example, had worked at a university that I had later worked at, and had I not already heard much about him, I could beneficially have learned more from emailing a colleague who had worked with him.
- In the case of candidates who have provided vague information about university rank at different timepoints (and if this is important), check their publications from the same period. For example, through one of his publications, I discovered that Candidate C had been an Associate Professor in 2010. I found no evidence from subsequent publications that he had been promoted to full Professor and so still had doubts.
- Scrutinize the information candidates provide about their publications and other research activities carefully, for example watching any videos of presentations, webinars, or lessons they have given that are available online, and reading both their work and any available reviews of it. Through such strategies, I discovered that Candidate D had manipulated book reviews and had compared himself to Einstein, while in Candidate E's writing, published after he left the institution, I found the acknowledgement that he had long been seen as a contrarian (not necessarily a desirable quality) and I learned that he compared himself, as a misunderstood genius, to Galileo. During the selection process, I had actually read and admired several of his earlier academic articles, and perhaps I should have sifted through more of them, focusing particularly on reflective pieces for useful insights.
- When checking references, look to go beyond the list provided, particularly if the referees offered have collaborated on research publications but not necessarily taught in the same institution (as was the case with the academics on Candidate D's list), since the relationships can be so different.
- Do not recommend hiring unless fully confident, regardless of any external pressure to do so. In the case reported on here, one of various internal candidates could have served reasonably harmoniously as Acting Chair of English while the ideal external candidate was sought.

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