

## **Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times: the professoriate's perspective**

### **Introduction**

A recent study funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) examined what non-professorial academics, researchers and teachers in UK universities think of the nature and quality of academic leadership provided by professors. Professors, it revealed, are considered a heterogeneous group manifesting a wide and diverse range of attitudes and behaviour - some praiseworthy, some despicable. Data included many reports of professors being too self-absorbed, power-seeking, manipulative, arrogant, unapproachable, incompetent, insensitive, or intellectually inadequate to provide effective academic leadership. Conversely, there were also accounts of motivational professorial leadership that has had an immensely positive impact on people's professional and career development, as well as examples of what are considered smaller and less significant, but helpful, interventions from professorial colleagues. Informative though these data are, they inevitably represent only one half of the story. To redress this imbalance, this SRHE conference paper presents findings from a different LFHE-funded study: one that presents the 'other side of the coin' perspective. We present preliminary findings from the questionnaire phase of our study, 'Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times: the perspective of the professoriate'.

### **Aims and objectives**

The study is aimed at examining UK-based professors' perspectives on the professorial academic leadership role.

Within this aim, in its entirety, the study's objectives are to:

1. construct a picture of how the professoriate sees the nature and quality of professorial academic leadership at a time of unprecedented pressure within the HE sector;
2. examine the degree of congruence between professors' perspectives and those of 'the led' (a key issue in the study of leadership);
3. uncover the factors that are facilitators and motivators of, and barriers/impediments to, professors' capacity or willingness to engage in academic leadership;
4. uncover 'leading' professors' 'secrets'; precisely how they go about providing effective academic leadership;
5. examine the implications of 1-4, above, for university leadership policy and practice, and for capacity building and succession planning in institutions, the wider disciplines and research communities.

### **Research design**

The research in its entirety addresses the following questions:

- a. What is the nature and extent of academic leadership currently practised by the professoriate – what are its key strengths and weaknesses?
- b. What factors do professors identify as facilitators of and impediments to their capacity and willingness to provide (effective) academic leadership?
- c. What makes a 'leading professor'?
- d. How do professors envisage academic leadership evolving in response to changes to the economic and political context?
- e. To what extent, and in what ways, does the professoriate's perspective on issues a.-c. correlate with non-professorial perspectives, and what accounts for any discrepancies?

### *Methods of data collection*

Two methods of data collection are employed: online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This paper presents only the preliminary findings from the questionnaire data.

### **Preliminary findings**

At the conference in December many more data will be presented than are currently available. Preliminary findings reveal a range of views in relation to some issues, but much more consensus about others. In the full conference paper in December we shall present and analyse data relating to all 23 questionnaire items, which address issues such as: views on what is meant by academic leadership, and on the purpose of professors, as well as facilitators and hindrances to carrying out the professorial role, levels of morale. We shall also discuss our findings in relation to key literature in the field, such as Evans (2012), Macfarlane (2011; 2012) and Bolden *et al.* (2008, 2009), and compare the findings to those of the study that examined the views of 'the led' on professorial academic leadership. In this paper space considerations restrict us to presenting only a narrow range of indicative findings: how our sample of professors has responded to specific statements made by non-professorial colleagues.

### ***Responding to non-professorial colleagues***

One of the purposes of our study is to allow professors to respond to views expressed about professors by non-professorial academics, researchers and university teachers – the sample in the LFHE-funded study (referred to in the Introduction) that examined the perspectives of 'the led'. In order to achieve this, several of our questionnaire items take the form of statements made in that first study by non-professorial academics, and professors are invited to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement. Below we summarise response patterns to date in relation to some of these statements.

*"A professor should help junior academic colleagues to develop their own careers in both teaching and research"*

84.6% of professorial respondents selected 'definitely agree' and 15.4% selected 'agree to some extent'. These data reveal professors to hold rather different views on their development-related roles and responsibilities from those attributed to them by many of their non-professorial colleagues. They also reveal a lack of correlation with the reported experiences of non-professorial academics, researchers and university teachers, over 50% of whom had indicated that they do not receive as much advice and help as they need or want from their professorial colleagues.

*"Generally, professors are promoted on the basis of their research and are not interested in leadership"*

Responses to this comment were wide-ranging: 46.2% of professors 'agree to some extent', 7.7% 'neither agree nor disagree', 23.1% 'disagree to some extent' and the same percentage selected 'not sure/difficult to answer'.

*"I think it's important that professors are physically present in the building"*

Somewhat surprisingly, most professors agree with this statement: 30.8% 'definitely agree', 61.5% 'agree to some extent' and 7.7% selected 'not sure/difficult to answer'.

*"Professors are pursuing their own agendas; if you don't meet or help meet that agenda, they have ... little interest in your work"*

This controversial statement prompted a range of responses. Although none of the respondents selected 'definitely agree', 23.1% selected 'agree to some extent', though, conversely, 38.5%

selected 'disagree to some extent'. 30.8% selected 'definitely disagree' and 7.7% selected 'not sure/difficult to answer'.

*"Most professors are a waste of space ... most do not have wide expertise in their fields and many use their positions to avoid the general run of academic work - lecturing, tutoring etc."*

This inflammatory statement did not incite unanimous refutation. Certainly, none of the respondents selected 'definitely agree', but 15.4% agreed 'to some extent'. 61.5% selected 'definitely disagree', while 15.4% disagreed 'to some extent' and 7.7% selected 'not sure/difficult to answer'.

### **Concluding comments**

It was Malcolm Tight (2002) who, in the UK, seems to have been the first to raise the question of what a professor is, and what s/he does. The role, like the term, is unclearly defined; not only is there diversity on a global level about what is understood by the terms 'professor' and 'professorial', but even within the UK higher education sector there are differences (between institutions, between disciplines, and between individuals) in expectations of what a professor should be and do. As Ann Mroz wrote in a *Times Higher Education* leader in 2011 (Mroz, 2011):

What it means to be a professor - and more importantly what others think it means - is magnificently opaque. There's plenty of advice on how to get there, but little once you've reached your destination. There's no global job description, no template, no handbook, only the example of those who have gone before. There is no consensus: definitions vary by country, institution and mission, and it is unclear whether professors are there to improve research or teaching.

Our paper examines the perspectives of the UK-based professoriate on the professorial role, and the day-to-day realities of being a university professor in turbulent times.

### **References**

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