

Leading Professors: professorial academic leadership as it is perceived by ‘the led’ (0229)**Introduction**

It was Tight (2002) who, in the UK, seems to have been the first to raise the question of what a professor is, and what one 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.

There is a paucity of research on the wider role of a professor or professors’ leadership within the institutional context. This has led Rayner et al. (2010, p. 619) to identify the ‘mysterious case of the absent professor and the missing professoriate.’ The higher education research knowledge base needs to be augmented by studies on this under-examined topic: the working role, including the leadership responsibilities, of the university professor. This paper reports the preliminary findings from such a study.

The study: research design

Anecdotally, junior academics and researchers relate accounts of professorial leadership’s varying widely in kind and quality. Much of this professorial work might be classified as ‘academic citizenship’ (Macfarlane, 2007): contributing to the development of less experienced colleagues. Some professors, however, are perceived as providing minimal leadership and offering little time to others, focusing instead on sustaining and expanding their own research activity and enhancing their own profile. Our study surveys the silent majority in a university context: those on the receiving end of professorial leadership. Our purpose is to examine and analyse the perspectives of ‘the led’ and ‘the managed’: a much-neglected constituency in the study and scholarship of educational leadership in any sectorial context.

Funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education under its annual Small Projects scheme, our study uses two data collection tools – online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews – to address research questions that include:

1. What is the nature and extent of academic leadership received by academics, university teachers and researchers? – what might/does it look like in practice?

2. To what extent, and in what ways, do academics, university teachers and researchers consider themselves to be receiving the academic leadership that they a) want, b) expect, and c) need?
3. What do academics, university teachers and researchers perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of any academic leadership that professors provide?
4. What is the emergent picture of professorial academic leadership – what models of good practice and examples of deficiencies are evident?

This paper reports the findings and preliminary analyses to emerge (in relation to these questions) from phase 1 of our study: the online questionnaires. (The word limit imposed on this paper precludes our being able to detail the questionnaire design and our approach to distributing it. Similarly, we are able to provide only a brief indicative overview of the findings. More detail will be presented in the full conference paper that we shall distribute at the conference.)

The research findings

At the time of writing the online questionnaire has been in circulation for six weeks and over 700 responses have been returned. Since we have by no means completed questionnaire distribution we expect to have received over 1000 responses by the time of the SRHE conference, when we intend to incorporate updated findings into our paper.

Preliminary findings

Responses have been received from staff representing a range of work roles and disciplines/subjects within a range of pre- and post-1992 universities. We targeted academic, research and teaching staff, and requested that professors themselves did not participate since we wanted to represent the perspectives of ‘the led’.

Asked to indicate their views on what the role of a professor should involve, over 94% of respondents consider it a key requirement that professors should ‘demonstrate outstanding expertise’ in their subjects. Large percentages of respondents also consider it essential that professors should have outstanding international reputations for research and/or scholarship in their fields, and that they should be leading contributors to the advancement or development of research or scholarship in their fields.

Less than 40% of respondents are adamant that professors have a responsibility to develop or generate theory from their research, and also that they should demonstrate excellence in teaching. Around 30% of respondents did not feel that professors should have lighter teaching roles than non-professorial colleagues. One respondent offered the comment:

'I support the argument that professors should be actively engaged in teaching, including at undergraduate level, rather than farming this out to colleagues and graduate students. All too often professors lose touch with the bread and butter of teaching, in the pursuit of status enhancing research and the conference circuit. Teaching is a reality check.'

Another wrote: 'Professors may be either excellent researchers or excellent teachers - must be one or the other but not necessarily BOTH'.

In relation to the development of junior colleagues, 93% of the questionnaire respondents agreed that professors should 'have a responsibility to advise non-professorial colleagues and help them develop professionally'. Though it is early days, the picture that is emerging is one of mixed views and perspectives, but skewed towards negative evaluations of the part played by professors in the professional development of junior colleagues. In response to the question: 'Do you feel that you receive as much help and advice as you want or need from one or more of your professorial colleagues?' almost 55% of respondents responded negatively. 66% reported having no designated professorial mentor, and among those who did have one, several commented that the relationship was far from satisfactory. The following comments are illustrative:

'Some of our professors are preoccupied with their own image outside the institution and are not really interested in what the "little" people in the institution need, whether it be in terms of career or personal issues.'

'I don't find my professorial colleagues, on the whole, very approachable in terms of advising others. They're rather more focused on their own agendas.'

'I've rarely had access to helpful professors - even a formal mentor in my early career clearly had better things to think about than my research career.'

It will be interesting to see if this rather negative picture changes by the time we present our paper, when more data will have been analysed. We are also keen to ascertain if our findings ring true to those of the audience who are not themselves professors, and to hear how professors in the audience respond to our research.

References

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