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Becoming and learning to be a professor: Academic leadership preparation and development for the UK's professoriate (0268)

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Context

Today it would be almost impossible to find a job advertisement and accompanying job description for a professorship in a British university that do not emphasise the need for the appointee to practise academic leadership. Yet whilst it is a ubiquitous term that has firmly lodged itself within the discourse and the vernacular associated with higher education leadership and management, academic leadership is also a very nebulous concept that is unclearly defined and subject to a multiplicity of interpretations (Bolden et al, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012).

One of the issues to emerge from research carried out in 2011-12 into the nature and quality of professorial academic leadership (Evans et al., 2013) was that there is an absence of academic leadership preparation and development for professors in UK universities, despite the increasing expectation that they should assume roles as academic leaders. A questionnaire respondent observed: "Leadership development is not generally offered to new professors - an omission, given the focus of their work - and something that could make the role more effective", and this theme was taken up in her leader by the then editor of the *Times Higher Education*, where the study's preliminary findings were reported: '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' (Mroz, 2011).

This SRHE conference paper reports preliminary findings from a study focused on this issue. Funded by the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society, and carried out over one year, beginning September 2012, the research objectives were to examine the extent and nature both of a perceived need for, and any provision of, leadership preparation for university professors, with a view to identifying lacunae and shortcomings as well as examples of good practice. Using online questionnaires (which achieved responses from 1,282 UK-based professors) and follow-up interviews with 20 of these professorial respondents, it addressed the following research questions:
1. What level and quality of preparation – if any - for their various leadership roles is available to university professors?
2. What lacunae and shortcomings exist, and with what consequences?
3. What – if any - models of good practice (of professorial leadership preparation) exist, and what are the bases of their effectiveness?

Professorial professionalism

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There are clear expectations of professors – not only from university senior management, but also from 'the led' (academics, researchers and university teachers who are not themselves professors) (Macfarlane, 2012; Tight, 2002). These expectations represent what Evans (2011, pp. 861-2) calls 'demanded' or 'requested' professionalism: 'such as that reflecting specific service level demands or requests made of an occupational group or workforce'. This paper is located within a conceptual framework that – consistent with relatively recent developments in the sociology of professions (Evetts, 2003; 2013; Kolsaker, 2008; Noordegraaf, 2007) – is underpinned by recognition of the 'need to work with plural conceptions of professionalism' (Gewirtz et al, 2009, p. 3). With wider implications for understanding the complexity of the multifarious influences on leadership practice, the study's preliminary findings indicate how, by professors' trying to live up to the expectations of others, 'demanded' or 'requested' professionalism gradually becomes reified – at least in part – by becoming 'enacted' professionalism (Evans, 2011).

Outline of preliminary findings: Is there a need for leadership preparation and development for UK-based university professors?

In response to the question: *Do you understand what your institution requires of you as a professor (i.e. are its expectations of its professors in general - or of you specifically - clearly articulated)?* nearly one-fifth (18.7%) of pre-1992 professorial questionnaire respondents selected 'no' or 'not really/not necessarily', and almost 15% of post-1992 professors made the same selections. Figure 1 presents the combined (pre- and post-92) responses to this questionnaire item, indicating negative responses from over 18% of all surveyed professors.

Figure 1: Questionnaire responses (expressed as percentages) to the question: *Do you understand what your institution requires of you as a professor (i.e. are its expectations of its professors in general - or of you specifically - clearly articulated)?*
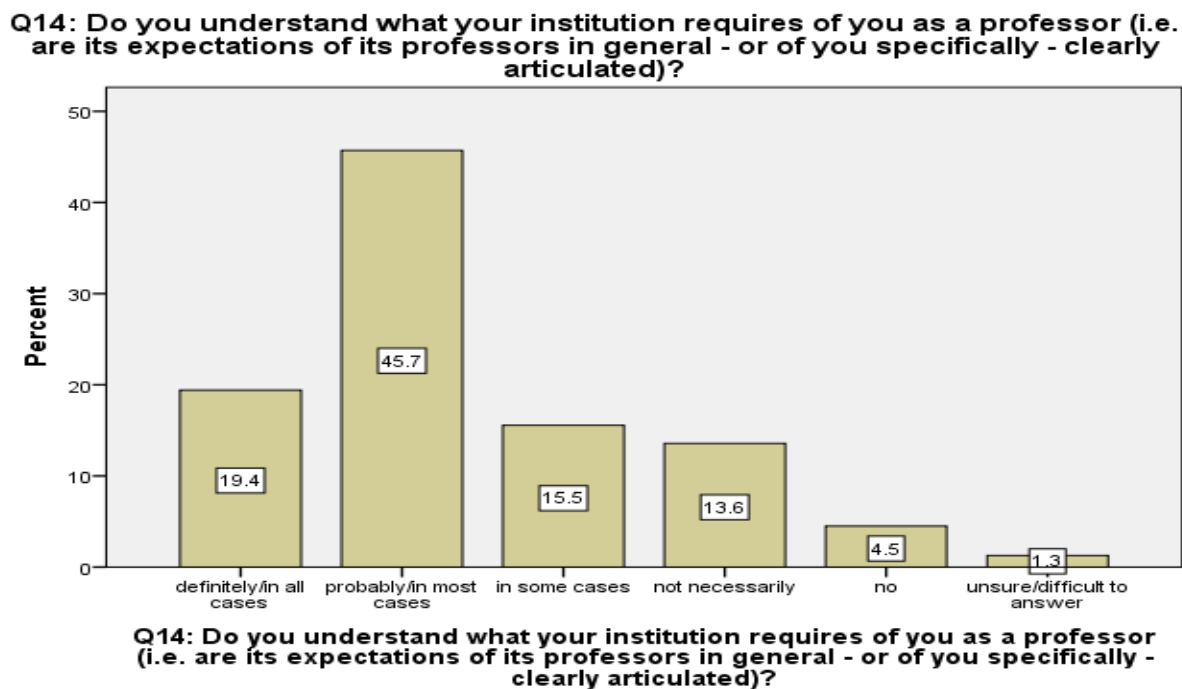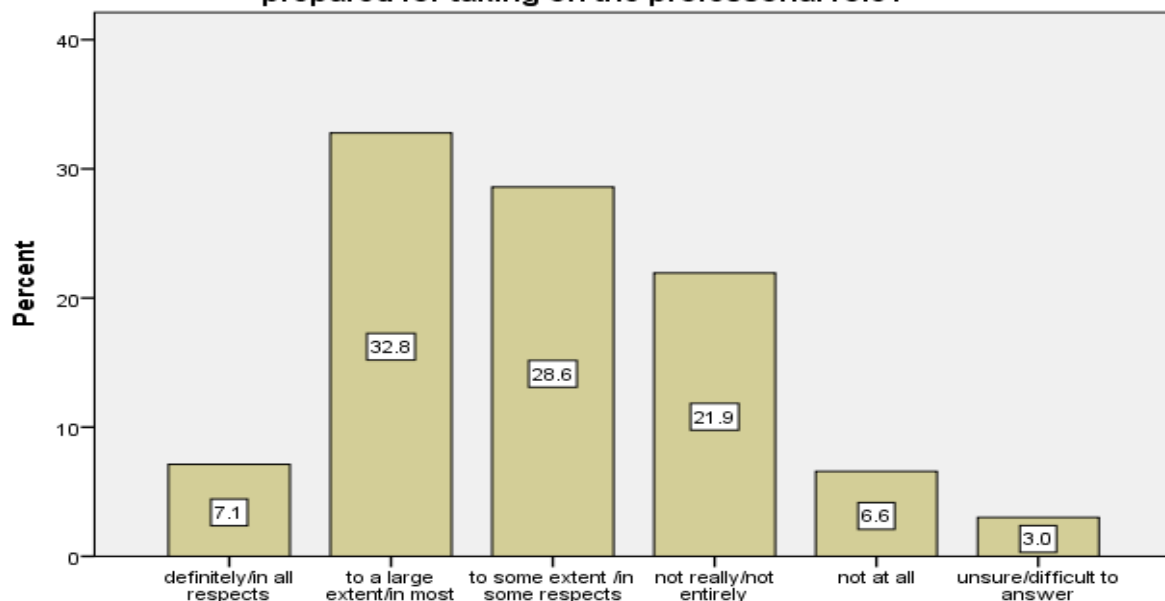

Rather more worrying, over 28% of all professorial questionnaire respondents reported having felt inadequately prepared for the professorial role in their earliest days as professors, and well over one-third (36.4%) gave negative responses to being asked if their current institutions had

adequately prepared them for the professorial role. Figures 2 and 3 present questionnaire data relating to these issues.

It was the qualitative research data (interview-generated data and comments left in the online questionnaire) that provided elucidation on the factors influencing the extent of professors' preparedness for their academic leadership roles. These data – which will form the bases of

Figure 2: Questionnaire responses (expressed as percentages) to the question: *Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?*

Q15: Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?

| Response	Percent
definitely/in all respects	7.1
to a large extent/in most respects	32.8
to some extent /in some respects	28.6
not really/not entirely	21.9
not at all	6.6
unsure/difficult to answer	3.0

Q15: Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?

vignettes and analyses presented to the SRHE conference audience - also shed much light on the development processes that professors undergo at all stages of their careers, revealing that becoming a professor by no means signals the end of one's professional development

Figure 3: Questionnaire responses (expressed as percentages) to the question: *Has your current institution done all that you would want or need it to do to prepare you for the professorial role at that institution?*

Q16: Has your current institution done all that you would want or need it to do to prepare you for your professorial role in that institution?
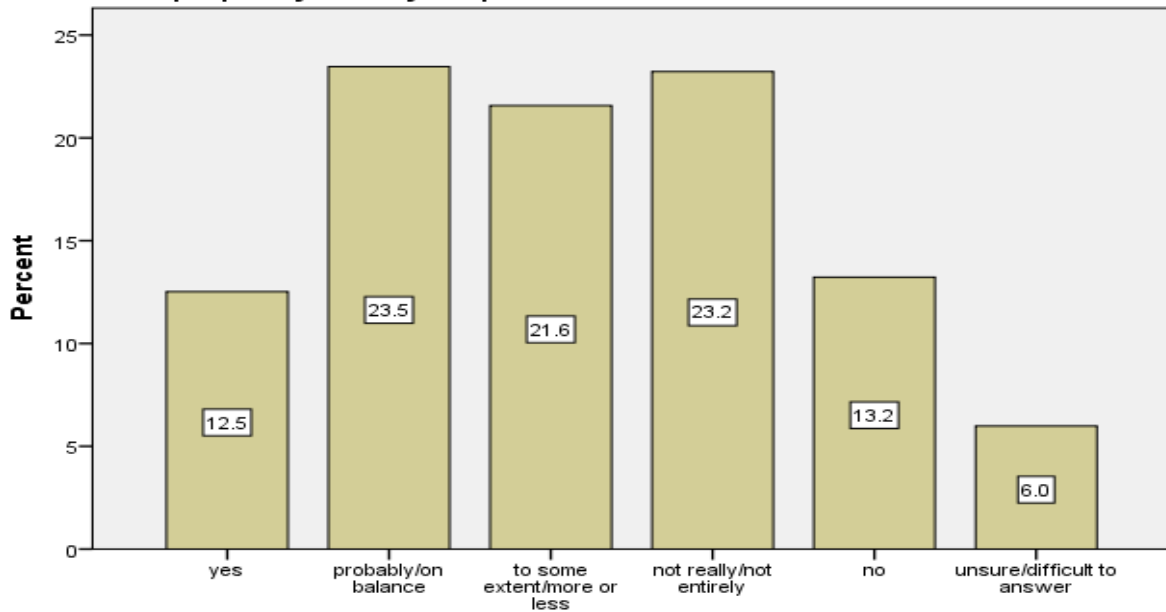
Q16: Has your current institution done all that you would want or need it to do to prepare you for your professorial role in that institution?

experiences. Indeed, in many cases it marks the beginning of a steep learning curve, as newly-promoted academics find themselves in what many consider a new role, with quite distinct responsibilities and duties.

Underpinning this learning and development is lack of clarity. A recurring complaint from professorial questionnaire respondents and interviewees was that the job of being a professor was too vast, too all-encompassing, and, in many respects, unmanageable. A potential cause of this is that, with no clear definition or stipulation to guide them of what their academic leadership role ought to involve, professors try to be all things to all people, and find themselves chasing unachievable targets and struggling to cope with the diffuseness of a job that is delineated by competing demands imposed by an ever-expanding array of expectations. No academic leadership preparation or development programmes for professors in relation to their professorial roles (as opposed to generic HE leadership development programmes) seem to be provided at any UK universities - except one: the *Unpacking your chair* programme at Newcastle University. Evidence from my research suggests that there is a strong case for filling this gap in provision. Perhaps the most useful initiative that universities could take to support professors would be to prepare and develop them for their roles by engaging with all parties – leaders and led alike – in order to explore what each understands by 'academic leadership' and how those expected to deliver it may do so effectively.

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