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INTRODUCTION

In the last few years the term academic leadership has lodged itself very firmly in the higher education lexicon. Today it would be almost impossible to find a job advertisement and accompanying job description and person specification for a professorship in a British university that do not explicitly emphasise the need for the appointee to practise academic leadership. Yet whilst it is a ubiquitous term that has become indispensable to the discourse and the vernacular associated with higher education leadership and management - and indeed, the wider academic job market - it is also a very nebulous concept that is unclearly defined and consequently subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, but about which very little has been written. This opacity was, in part, the impetus for a study that I led of academic leadership as it is practised by UK-based professors. This was a study that focused not on the perspectives of professors themselves, but of those affected by, or on the receiving end of, professorial academic leadership: non-professorial academics, researchers and university teachers. It thus represented what, in the field of educational leadership and management, is a much-neglected perspective: that of 'the led'[1].

For the benefit of readers located outside the UK it is important to clarify at the outset that the term professor has quite a different meaning in many European countries from how it is used in North America. In the UK the title is conferred only on a minority (currently less than a quarter [HESA, 2013]) of academics – distinguished on the basis of research, and sometimes teaching, excellence – who equate to the North American full professor. Thus in the UK professor and its etymological derivatives, such as professorial and professoriate, refer only to those at the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy and are associated with high achievement, peer recognition, seniority and distinction; these terms are not used generically to refer to all academic staff. My use of them in this article is consistent with their current usage in the UK, denoting this minority group of the most senior academics.

The research reported below explored interpretations of academic leadership that were expressed as expectations and experientially-based evaluations of professors, and the article weaves an overview of these articulations of ‘the led’ into a sketch of how this constituency perceives UK-based professors and the professorial role. Yet it also incorporates two other related dimensions: it analyses these selected preliminary research findings within a framework that is shaped by my interpretation and conceptualisation of professionalism, and it then applies them to consideration of whether or not the role of UK-based professors has changed in recent years, whether it is likely to change in the future, and the nature of any such perceived or anticipated change(s). I begin by outlining details of the study.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Carried out over twelve months (2011-12) and funded by the UK’s Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE), Leading professors: professorial academic leadership as it is *perceived by ‘the led’* was a study of the extent and nature of academic leadership provided by the UK’s professoriate. Involving a research team of three –two qualitative researchers (of whom I was one), and a statistician - the study was designed to address the following research questions:

- What is the nature and extent of professorial academic leadership received by academics, researchers and university teachers?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do academics, researchers and university teachers consider themselves to be receiving the academic leadership that they: a) want, b) expect, and c) need from their professorial colleagues?

- What form of academic leadership – if any - do academics, researchers and university teachers think professors should be providing to junior colleagues?
- What factors are perceived as facilitating and impeding the nature and extent of professorial academic leadership?
- What is the emergent picture of professorial academic leadership – what models of good practice and examples of deficiencies are evident?
- What is the perceived impact of professorial academic leadership on academics', researchers' and university teachers' working lives?

Space restrictions preclude extensive presentation here of the research design and method; I outline its key features below, and refer readers to accounts that provide more details (Evans et al., 2013; Evans, 2014a).

Data collection phase 1

Online questionnaires distributed to around 5,000 non-professorial academics, researchers (research fellows and assistants) and teachers[2] employed in British universities yielded 1,223 largely complete responses, amongst which was a small proportion (<1%) of missing responses to some questionnaire items. Sample selection was directed towards securing the participation of as many representatives of 'the led' as was achievable with the limited resources, and during the life, of the study. Specific universities were first selected in a non-systematic manner, on the basis of their representing one or both of: geographical location (to ensure representation of all four UK countries), or institution type (e.g. pre- or post-1992 university[3], or specialist institution). One or more of an institution's departments were then selected in a similarly non-systematic manner and all or most of its staff who represented what, in the context of this study, were categorised as 'the led' were emailed a request to participate. Though laborious, this fairly automated process was used to generate around 30-

60 personalised email messages per day, yielding an estimated response rate of around 20-35%.

Data collection phase 2

Phase 2 involved follow-up interviews with 50 of the 336 questionnaire respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. This sub-sample was selected on the basis of representation of a range of variables, including: professional role/generic job category (i.e. academic, researcher or teacher); gender; seniority; mission group of employing institution (i.e. pre- or post-92); discipline and subject; and geographical location. The interviews were intended to uncover richer data than is generally achievable through questionnaires, such as insight into attitudes and emotional responses to experiences and situations recounted. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face; a minority were conducted by telephone. They were audio-recorded (with interviewees' permission) and the recordings were transcribed to facilitate analysis. The average interview duration was 65 minutes; the shortest lasted 25 minutes and the longest 80 minutes.

Analytical processes

Analysis of quantitative questionnaire data was effected automatically by the online questionnaire system and has so far been restricted to the generation of descriptive statistics. Qualitative data – both from open-ended questionnaire responses and from interviews – were (and continue to be) analysed manually, through an incrementally reductive process from which key themes (relevant to the research objectives and questions) emerged that illuminated people's experiences of professorial academic leadership and related issues, together with their emotional and attitudinal responses to these experiences, the bases of these responses, and the perceived effects on people's lives of their experiences of professors and professorial academic leadership, or the lack of it.

The flexibility incorporated into the interview schedule, along with some interviewees' time constraints, resulted in some disparity in topic coverage. It was impossible to ensure that every interview addressed every component of every research question – this did indeed occur in some cases, but in others the interviewer took the decision to focus more narrowly on what emerged from the two-way conversation. This somewhat uneven coverage of issues makes it difficult, without misleading the reader, to quantify or otherwise indicate the weight of some of the evidence (presented below) of perceptions or attitudes. In some cases an issue was raised by only one or two interviewees, yet its exclusion from other interview conversations does not imply that it was of no concern or interest to those interviewees; similarly, some issues identified by many interviewees were pursued extensively and in depth in some cases, but in others were afforded only brief reference. Struck by its resonance with my own experiences and resultant difficulties in presenting my interview-generated data, I adopt as my own the explanation below:

> space prevents me from illustrating the representivity of the views across respondents, and for brevity's sake I have had to use quotations illustratively. I have, however, tended to draw more heavily from some interviews than others: as is usual, some interviews yield richer data than others, often because the individual has played a leading role in the processes under discussion, or because some colleagues are more articulate about social processes than others. (Moore, 2003, p. 309)

Whilst trying to indicate degrees of typicality, in places I nevertheless use non-standard indicators of scale or frequency - such as 'several', 'many', 'most' or 'often'; this may frustrate some readers, but the data gathered in this project are extensive, and achieving a level of analysis that has the capacity to represent (with reliable, quantitatively expressed, elucidation) the nuances, variations, and qualifications implied by the interview sample as a whole will take considerable time and has not yet been attempted. The findings presented below are therefore intended to convey what preliminary, indicative – but, as yet, imperfect -- analysis has revealed to be key issues in addressing the topic of this article: perceptions of the professorial role and consideration of how – if at all – it has changed or is changing.

The analytical process outlined above revealed an indication of how professors are perceived to go about aspects of their work that I equate to professorial professionalism, and which, as professionalism, may be perceived as representing any of several specific 'reified states' – a term whose meaning I clarify in the analysis and discussion that unfold below, where I present research findings as the representation of one such reified state: 'demanded or requested' professionalism, as it applies to professors in the UK.

CHANGING ROLES AND CHANGING PRACTICE: 'DEMANDED' PROFESSORIAL PROFESSIONALISM

The proliferation of the use of the term academic leadership in the academy may be interpreted as a means of articulating an anticipated or hoped-for distributed leadership dimension into higher education leadership and management, and, by extension, as a change initiative mechanism on the part of universities' senior management. Yet top-down change initiatives do not necessarily impact significantly - or indeed at all - upon people's working lives, and where they do impact upon them they do so to varying degrees; there is often slippage – recognised by several analysts (e.g. Borko and Putnam, 1995; Evans, 2011a; Evans et al., 1994; Hoyle and Wallace, 2007; Lipman, 2009) - between what change initiators want or expect, and what practitioners actually do, equating to what I refer to as the distinction between 'demanded or requested professionalism' and 'enacted professionalism':

two of four different ‘reified states’ of professionalism that I have identified elsewhere (Evans, 2008, 2011a). The mediating factors that determine the extent and nature of such slippage are multifarious and include, inter alia: institutional cultures, priorities, resources and practical constraints, and leadership and management, as well as individuals’ values, motivation, capacity and ability.

The well-documented changed and changing higher education context within which academics must now carry out their work (Bolden et al., 2012; Enders & de Weert, 2009; Fanghanel, 2012; Kolsaker, 2008; Teichler et al., 2013) represents in one sense a form of ‘demanded’ academic professionalism insofar as a competitive, highly focused and fluid climate imposes demands in the form of specific approaches to practice. This professionalism is effectively government-‘demanded’, since it is governmental policies – specifically, neoliberalism and its representation through new public management - that have influenced the climate and culture that define the academy as it currently is, not only in the UK, but across the developed world (though, more precisely, such professionalism may be considered market-, rather than government-‘demanded’ since, as O’Connor et al [2014, p.9] point out, ‘in a neo-liberal context, the state is effectively subordinate to the market’).

Yet ‘demanding’ or ‘requesting’ a particular form of professionalism is not the exclusive prerogative of employers and paymasters; ‘demanded’ professionalism may also be articulated by other stakeholders, such as clients, customers, or colleagues. Below, I draw out the perspective of ‘the led’ to illustrate one version of ‘demanded or requested’ professorial professionalism: a perspective on the (arguably, changed and changing) form and nature of the professorial academic leadership role. I use selected findings from the Leading professors study to sketch out the ‘shape’ of the professionalism that UK-based academics, researchers and university teachers evidently expect of their professors.

The ‘Shape’ of Professorial Professionalism as Perceived by ‘the Led’: Expectations and Experiences of Professors’ Academic Leadership

An unexpectedly voluminous source of qualitative data yielded by the Leading professors study were the comments provided by questionnaire respondents where the opportunity was offered. Negative assessments of professors’ attitudes or behaviours overshadowed and outnumbered positive ones (but it is important to bear in mind that those with negative experiences or views are likely to be more inclined than those who have enjoyed mainly positive experiences to participate in a questionnaire that allows them to vent their frustration or criticism). One interpretation of such negativity is that it is an extension or dimension of more widespread malaise evident within the UK academic workforce, whose work satisfaction scores were the lowest of those of 18 national academic workforces participating in a 2007 survey (Fredman & Doughney, 2012) within a multi-national longitudinal project focused on changes to academic working conditions (Teichler et al., 2013). Reflecting people’s tendency to see leadership as an agency with the potential for alleviating a ‘pervasive sense of helplessness’ (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992, p. 115), academics may reasonably look to their most experienced and senior colleagues for a steer in navigating their way through the minefield of performativity measures and managerialist practice that denote 21st century academic working life. If they find such support lacking – or indeed if they associate professors with or perceive them as the agents of neoliberalist practice, as was implied by some questionnaire respondents (e.g. ‘I would be tempted to describe most of what professors do as middle management [transmitting instructions from above]’ and ‘Another issue is the association of the professorial role to that of funding accessed, which further connects the role to a corporate mentality’) - their resentment may in extreme cases take on hostile or even vituperative, anti-professor, dimensions. The Leading professors questionnaire attracted comments that in some cases were critical of the professoriate en masse (e.g. ‘They are backstabbing assholes who take the credit for other people's work’ and ‘“Professorial” and “leadership” in my experience are a contradiction in terms’) and in other cases of specific (unnamed) professors (e.g. ‘the professors in my department do not display good leadership’ and ‘Any mentoring I've seen from our departmental professors has been useless or, at best, designed to serve their own research favourites which they aggressively protect even when they are completely incompetent.’).

Interview data represent a much more balanced perspective on professors and their roles, with all interviewees echoing the experiences implied in a comment made by Maurice[4], a reader[5] in a pre-1992 university: ‘I think I can say I’ve seen the gamut of academic behaviour expressed by professorial colleagues from the, y’know, behaviour which I think has been impeccable, to behaviour which I think has been extremely bad.’ The point is that comments expressed, and tales and anecdotes related, convey people’s evaluations of professors and of how well they carry out their roles, which, in turn, indicate perceptions of what the professorial academic leadership role should involve. The Leading professors study revealed that role to be perceived as incorporating three key elements: distinction, knowledge, and relationality.

Distinction

Correlating with Tight’s (2002, p. 16) observation that ‘someone who has been judged worthy of appointment as a professor will presumably have “achieved outstanding eminence”’, for the most part, non-professorial academics, researchers and university teachers in the UK expect professors to stand out from the crowd in relation to research and scholarly achievement; 93.4% of questionnaire respondents selected ‘definitely agree – this should be a requirement of the professorial role’ as their response to the statement: a professor should demonstrate outstanding expertise in her/his discipline/subject, and 6.3%

agreed ‘to some extent’. Three-quarters of the sample (75.8%) ‘definitely agreed’ that a professor should be a leading contributor to advancing and/or developing research/scholarship in her/his field and a further 22.3% ‘agreed to some extent’. The majority (95.2%) of respondents agreed that a professor should have an outstanding international reputation for research or scholarship in her/his field (54.3% selected ‘definitely agree – this should be a requirement of the professorial role’ and 40.8% selected ‘agree to some extent’). This was one of the very few questionnaire items that revealed significant differences in relation to gender and institution type, with female respondents and respondents based in pre-1992 universities being more likely to agree with the statement.

It was observed that, in some disciplines, many professors who are justifiably considered academic leading lights and intellectual giants have unimpressive funding records that do not undermine or detract from their distinguished scholarship. Around one-fifth of the interviewees - in some cases without being prompted (the issue of the importance of professors’ funding records was not raised explicitly in every interview) – broadly echoed the sentiments of David (a lecturer in modern foreign languages at a pre-1992 university) on professorial credibility and the characteristics that make a ‘leading professor’: ‘it’s not necessarily funding capture – not necessarily having pots of cash. In some ways I’m suspicious of people who, kind of, repeatedly go for cash … it’s the output [that matters]’.

A small number (<10) of questionnaire respondents made similar comments:

> Whilst success in winning research funds is likely to be a major component of their [professors’] experience, [it] should not be regarded as more important than research expertise/ excellence and international reputation. Far too much time in academic life already is occupied with research grant applications.

> Professors should not be appointed solely on the basis of having been successful in getting grant awards but on the discernible academic record which demonstrates outcomes that contribute to the field.

The consensual view was that a key criterion for professorial credibility was distinctive intellectual or scholarly capacity – qualifications to this consensus were included in the observations of a small number (< 8) of interviewees representing the post-1992 sector, that, within that sector, some professors achieve credibility as administrators or teachers. When asked to identify the characteristics of 'leading professors', or to describe professors whom they considered excellent or exemplary, interviewees from both the pre- and post-1992 sectors invariably included reference to intellectuality and research achievement; William (senior lecturer in education at a pre-1992 university), for example, observed: 'I still see the key criterion for a professor is intellectual ability', and Nicole (lecturer in history and archaeology) identified what she perceived as the shortcomings of professors in her own post-1992 sector:

> I think that it's very important in academia that you're respected, and in order to have a profile you've got to have research, and to have that respect you've got to have research. And I know a lot of the professors don't really do much research here [in this university], because it's very much … you become a professor if you're head of department. But they're less able to support.

Correlating with such observations, questionnaire respondents offered comments that included: '[professors] have to be power thinkers and leading luminaries in their subject areas', 'Professors should be outstanding scholars, not just highly paid people at universities' and 'I think the generally agreed baseline [for professorial status] is outstanding scholarship'.

These 'leading professors' were those whose scholarly or intellectual contribution to academia had been influential on their specific fields and/or on other academics or researchers, affording them the status of what Churchman and King (2009) call ‘gold-class academics’ (p. 508) and ‘characters to be emulated’ (p. 507) within the workplace-focused ‘stories’ that, they argue, are instrumental in shaping academic identities. With only a very few (<4) exceptions, all interviewees referred to at least one professor whose influence on them had occurred early in their careers – often many years previously – but which still endured; indeed, it was not unusual for such influence to be identified as pivotal. Ken, a principal lecturer of sociology in a post-92 university, spoke of the professor who appointed him to his first academic post:

> I thought, intellectually, he was head and shoulders above the rest of them … and in the end he persuaded me to take the direction I did in sociology. … [He had] an enormous impact on me, intellectually.

Nearly all of the early career academics or researchers whom we interviewed – who evidently had fewer experiences of professors to draw upon than had interviewees who were older or more senior - acknowledged the formative influence of their former professorial doctoral supervisors, supporting Montagno’s (1996, p. 336) observation that ‘an individual’s expectations are often based on the socialization process he or she has undergone in the doctorate-granting institution’. Yet whilst a ‘leading professor’ was described as one who had made – and continued to make – a distinct contribution to the field’s knowledge base, s/he was also expected to demonstrate and utilise effectively a wider range of knowledge.

Knowledge

Professors were expected to be, and were valued as, repositories of knowledge and information: ‘academic’ knowledge (i.e. substantive knowledge of the subject or field, knowledge about research methodology, and related pedagogical knowledge about the teaching of the subject and the teaching of research methods); knowledge and information about the institution; and knowledge and information about the field's international research community and its practices. Many questionnaire respondents highlighted this expectation through general comments such as: '[A professor is] a leading authority, whether that be in their own subject area, or in the theory of learning & teaching' and '[A professor] should have a very broad range of knowledge in his/her field, rather than being known for doing only one thing (research-wise)'. Indeed, one respondent evidently harboured expectations of professorial polymathism: 'I think profs should also have a wider knowledge base. They should be learned outside their direct discipline area' – a prescriptive description that, Macfarlane (2012, p. 80) observes, is at odds with 'the modern conception of the university professor as a discipline-based specialist, rather than someone with a legitimate role as a public commentator and critic'.

A small number of interviewees similarly explicitly associated credibility as a professor with expert knowledge, identifying in some cases what is effectively a public intellectual role. Susan, for example - a senior lecturer in staff development at a research-intensive pre-1992 university - considered academic subject expertise the key criterion for professorial status:

> To me, if someone is a professor, then you would expect that … they can be a good sort of spokesperson for their discipline or their part of the discipline. You would expect them to be able to hold forth, with no notice, on, you know, the major issues in their field and to really know their stuff and be able to represent their discipline well in some way … to really know their stuff. … I do think the most important thing about being a professor is that you know your stuff. You look at what goes on in the media – you know, the professors that are wheeled out on Newsnight; they're

> not there because they’re a nice guy and can help people, are they? They’re there ’cos they can give you an expert point of view on something.

In addition to being an expert in her/his field, the ideal ‘leading professor’ was generally perceived as possessing extensive pragmatic, socio-cultural, institution-related, local knowledge of: who’s who in the institution; ‘rules’ and ‘regulations’ (often tacit or unofficial) and the procedures and processes that defined the way the institution operates (and how best to manage these and negotiate one’s way through or around them); and the history of its evolution into the kind of place that it currently is. Such knowledge was expected to go beyond what was freely available in the public domain; it involved being ‘in the know’ in a manner that combined knowledge derived from extensive experience as a senior academic and ‘elder statesman/woman’, and privileged ‘classified’ information that had not yet cascaded down to more junior staff. It also involved what Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) call ‘micro-political literacy’: knowledge and understanding of institutional micro-politics and power struggles and of how to manipulate situations and circumstances to one’s best advantage, and it included the ‘body of tacit knowledge or understanding connected with attaining a professorial position’ (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 55). A comment from interviewee, Ken, sums up the basis of expectations on the part of non-professorial staff in relation to this dimension of professorial knowledge: ‘The professors being what they are – certainly that generation of people – they know their way round institutions’, while research fellow, Ursula, speaking warmly of the professor to whom she reported, illustrated how such institution-related knowledge was shared: ‘I don’t even have to ask him sometimes; he just says, “You maybe don’t know this, but this is how it works here”’.

The knowledge-related dimension of effective professorial academic leadership was consensually perceived as also pertaining to the subject’s wider research community, beyond the institution. Professors were valued for their knowledge and understanding of how this community functions and of who its influential members are, and what is required to be accepted into, and taken seriously by, it; this essentially involves knowledge about how to develop a successful research profile and research-focused career. The vast majority of comments offered by questionnaire respondents evidently associated such knowledge – but only if it is shared - with good professorial academic leadership; as one respondent commented: '[An ideal professor is] someone colleagues can consult about research'. Questionnaire data highlighted an evident need or desire for such knowledge to be passed from professor to junior colleague through formal or informal ad hoc mentoring and advice, but a great many forlorn hopes and unmet expectations seemed to have prompted the vociferous criticism that I refer to above. Whilst there were certainly some reports of satisfactory or good professorial academic leadership through mentoring, many of these were qualified, and they were outnumbered by negative comments:

> I have had some advice about the nature and direction of my research; I would have welcomed more.

> I have found it daunting and disappointing not to have had academic leadership in the short time I have been in my post, even for basic things such as advice on publication. …There seems to be a culture of everybody finding their own way and keeping focused on that. As most junior staff have PhDs, there seems to be an assumption that we know how things work and are left to our own devices.

The research findings revealed a clearly expressed dominant perspective that, in order for their knowledge and the benefits of their experience to be passed on most usefully to their more junior colleagues, professors must engage and relate appropriately to them. Unsurprisingly, professorial relationality emerged as the single most significant issue (in terms of the degree of importance that research participants evidently attached to it) in delineating ‘demanded’ or ‘requested’ professorial academic leader professionalism.

Relationality

By ‘relationality’ I mean people’s capacity for relating, and the extent to which they relate, to others, and the nature of such relations and relationships - or, to paraphrase Cunliffe and Eriksen’s (2011, p. 1430) succinct explanation of relational leadership: people’s ‘way of-being-in-relation-to-others’, which encompasses ‘the character, judgment and personal values of leaders rather than [leadership] practices or processes’ (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, p. 1431). So-interpreted, relationality appeared to be the paramount concern of the majority of research participants – particularly the more junior ones – insofar as professors could be forgiven for being less distinguished within their fields than might reasonably be expected, and unimpressive gaps in their knowledge were tolerated or overlooked, provided that they demonstrated themselves to be good-natured, well-intentioned, approachable, and willing to spend time doing their best to help and advise others: colleagues and students alike. Professional altruism and collegiality on the part of so-called academic leaders – reflecting what Lapierre et al (2012, p. 766) describe as a ‘strongly relational identity’, which motivates people to ‘act in terms of a specific other’s benefit, and derive a sense of self-worth from engaging in appropriate role behavior with relational partners’ - were evidently greatly appreciated, while perceived selfishness, self-centredness and self-absorption were vehemently criticised.

Professors’ physical presence in the department was generally considered reasonably important, but was not highlighted as a key ‘requirement’ or expectation. Although several questionnaire respondents expressed (sometimes facetious) disapproval of professors who are seldom present (e.g. ‘I would suggest that a collective noun for professors should be “an absence"' and 'many [professors] are conspicuous by their absence'), only 36.8% 'definitely agreed' that it should be a requirement that 'a professor should maintain frequent physical presence in the department', and 35.9% 'agreed to some extent'.

It was their approachability, rather than their physical presence, that professors were evidently judged on; even if they were frequently absent, provided that they readily and willingly responded to junior colleagues' requests for information, help or advice, they were considered to be providing satisfactory academic leadership. In response to my asking: 'What makes an ideal professor?', key characteristics identified by interviewees invariably included: approachability, having time for colleagues, and readiness to give advice and guidance. Oliver, for example, expressed glowing approbation of his professorial line manager:

> I have an extremely good relationship with Professor [X] … and he's been tremendous - absolutely tremendous! He's a fantastic, sort of, star at [our university]… er … and, internationally, certainly has a big name. And any time I want to, I can sort of pop in and chat about this and that and the other, and he's there. (Oliver, staff development lecturer, pre-1992 university)

But it was chemistry reader[5], Alan, who, in speaking of the first professor with whom he had worked as an academic, and who had mentored him, pinpointed the basis of academics' appreciation of professorial colleagues' interest in and finding time for them:

> He gave me advice in terms of managing research groups; how to … y'know … how to deal with difficult situations in the lab … y'know, people … people fighting … and friendship … social … y'know … we'd go out for lunch reasonably often, get invited to his house for dinner … . Those things sound trivial, but they're not, are they? … So perhaps the most important thing was … I felt that he felt I was important … and that I was an important part of his … working life.

From the perspective of ‘the led’, relationality is highly rated on account of its generative and facilitative capacity: its link to professorial knowledge and skills that junior colleagues may emulate or learn from. Yet as the comments presented above of interviewees Alan and Oliver imply, being noticed, being taken seriously, being befriended or mentored by a colleague who, by virtue of his or her professorial status, is manifestly a high achiever who enjoys the distinction of being located at the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy, is gratifying on account of the boost to self-esteem that it carries with it. ‘Leading professors’, through their relationality, coupled with the credibility derived from their distinct achievements, have the capacity to fuel feelings of self-efficacy in others.

Elsewhere I delineate specific professionalisms (Evans, 2011a; Evans and Cosnefroy, 2013) by sketching out their ‘shape’ as represented by evident spread across, or extent of concentration of, specific dimensions that constitute what I present as the componential structure of professionalism. The ‘shape’ of professorial professionalism in the UK as it is perceived by non-professorial academics, is, however, very elusive, since the overarching consensual observation to emerge from the *Leading professors* study is that the professoriate is heterogeneous: professors, as an anonymous questionnaire respondent expressed it, ‘are a mixed bag’. The shape of professorial professionalism viewed from this vantage point is thus difficult to discern because – to borrow Lumby’s (2012) evocative metaphor of a kaleidoscope’s shifting patterns – it is continually reforming itself: reflecting one professor’s perceived enactment of it, it takes on a certain form, then, as another professor with different priorities or competencies enacts it, it refashions itself, only to shift and reshape again to reflect yet another professor’s enactment.

Since there appear to be very few (if any) comparable studies, it is difficult to gauge how typical are the *Leading professors* findings – and hence how accurate a picture they represent of the perceptions and evident attitudes of UK-based academics, researchers and university teachers. I am aware of only two published empirical studies (other than my own work) that focus exclusively on professors (Hoskins, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012) and two predominantly non-empirical analyses (Rayner et al., 2010; Tight, 2002), none of which examines the perspective from 'below' - that of professors' junior colleagues. Moreover, perspectives of 'the led' or 'followers' are greatly under-represented within the scholarship of educational leadership and management (Evans, 2011b; Küpers & Weibler, 2008), making it difficult to find comparable studies to draw upon in this broader field. The collegial relationships, status-related hierarchies and power dynamics at play in the context that was the focus of the Leading professors study are quite distinct from any that might feature in studies of staff attitudes to their leaders and managers; the implicit, rather than explicit, nature and form of academic leadership expected of or provided by professors, outside any portfolio-specific leadership responsibility they may hold, is in many ways unique.

A CHANGING ROLE FOR UK-BASED PROFESSORS? WHAT, IF ANYTHING, HAS CHANGED?

What academic leadership role for professors, then, is implicit in the professionalism 'demanded' or 'requested' of them by their non-professorial colleagues? The aggregate of the dominant preferences, needs, and expectations of this constituency -'the led'- delineates a multiplicity of professorial roles: intellectual pioneer and trailblazing scholar; subject expert; networked and influential member of the subject research community; competent teacher; and, above all, mentor and advisor. The problem in the case of UK-based professors is that generally there is no clearly defined role for the professoriate, sui generis – an issue addressed by Malcolm Tight (2002). Yet without a consensually accepted, explicitly defined, role for them, professors will inevitably be judged on the basis of potentially wide-ranging, subjectively-determined, perceptions of how they fulfil whatever collection of tasks others believe they should be performing, and how they discharge whatever list of responsibilities others consider it reasonable for them to carry, for the term academic leadership is unclearly defined and variously interpreted (Evans, 2014b). The danger is that, through the sum of these expectations, professors will be called upon to be all things to all people, and assigned an ever-expanding list of multifarious responsibilities demanding superhuman capacity. A minority of research participants referred to the unreasonableness of such a situation; one questionnaire respondent commented: '[P]rofessors are outstanding individuals - but they are not "Super Woman/Man" and demands need to be realistic if a good work/life balance is to be maintained'. There is a danger, too, that, if/as the list of potential professorial academic leadership responsibilities lengthens, the inevitable diversity that it (the list) must represent will fail to take account of individuals' different temperaments, talents and skills, for as Tight (2002, p.17) observes, 'It is abundantly clear that professors – like academics in general – are not a homogenous, equitable bunch' - a point that was implicitly echoed by a great many research participants.

The Leading professors study revealed the professorial academic leader professionalism delineated by 'the led' to be not only 'demanded', but also extremely demanding, in terms of magnitude and scope, on those expected to enact it. But do these findings – does this 'demanded' professionalism - indicate or herald a new or changed role for professors? Addressing this question involves consideration of two key issues: how well the 'demanded' professionalism translates into 'enacted' professionalism; and the extent and nature of any consequent change to professorial practice. I address each in turn below.

Professorial professionalism: 'demanded' or 'enacted'?

Elsewhere (Evans, 2011a) I refer to professionalism as being thought of in relation to different 'reified states' - by which I mean professionalism considered on the basis of how ‘real’ or authentic it is. I have distinguished between four such ‘reified states’, which may be applied to the professionalism of any given occupational group: professionalism that is demanded or requested (such as that reflecting specific professional service level demands or requests made of an occupational group or workforce) and to which I refer above; professionalism that is prescribed (such as that reflecting professional service levels envisaged or recommended by analysts); deduced or assumed professionalism (which, distinct from prescribed professionalism since it does not involve prescription, represents reasoned deduction and/or assumption or speculation about the nature of a specific professionalism) and professionalism that is enacted; that is, professional practice as observed, perceived and interpreted (by any observer—from outside or within the relevant professional group, and including those doing the ‘enacting’). The key point is that only the fourth of these may be considered to represent ‘reality’ – albeit a phenomenologically defined reality. So, no matter what ‘shape’ (Evans, 2011a) or nature of professionalism is ‘demanded’ by employers, or ‘prescribed’ or ‘deduced’ or ‘assumed’ by analysts and commentators, it is ‘enacted’ professionalism that represents the only meaningful conception of professionalism – that which practitioners/professionals are actually seen to be ‘doing’. The other three ‘reified states’ remain nothing more than visions, representing insubstantiality ranging from articulated ideology to wishful thinking.

Yet expectations that others hold of one’s performance may, depending on the circumstances – and, certainly, mediated by individual agency - act as a powerful spur to live up to those expectations that are considered reasonable. When this occurs in the case of professionalism, the result may be that what is demanded or requested ends up becoming enacted – at least in part. That this can occur with university professors is evident from the findings of another of my research projects. Also funded by the LFHE, Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times presents the ‘other side of the coin’ perspective by focusing on professors’ views and experiences. It secured the participation of 1,282 UK-based professors as questionnaire respondents, from whom a sub-sample of almost 50 interviewees was selected (see Evans, 2014a for details of the research design and method).

Particularly interesting were responses to the questionnaire item: ‘Since becoming a professor, have you ever felt the need to change any aspect of your practice to meet other people’s expectations?’. Almost two-thirds of the sample answered in the affirmative: 34.7% of respondents selected ‘to some extent/in many respects’; over one-fifth (21.3%) selected ‘quite significantly so/in most respects’; and 9.2% ‘very much so’; (19.9% and 12.3% selected ‘a little/in some respects’ and ‘no’ respectively, and 2.7% ‘not sure/difficult to answer’). Similarly, Tight (2002, p. 28) reports one of the professors in his small sample speaking of ‘a strong sense of expectation to live up to’.

It seems then that many professors are eager to please or impress, or feel pressured to acquiesce with other people’s perceptions of what the professorial role involves. This may be explained by social identity theory – specifically, as professors’ attempts to consolidate their professorial identity: ‘when a social identity is salient (activated) and attended to … [g]roup members act to match their behavior to the standards relevant to the social identity, so as to confirm and enhance their social identification with the group’ (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 232). Yet for whatever reasons, by the process of changing aspects or elements of their practice, professors begin to re-shape - however slightly - the behavioural component of their professionalism, and the knock-on effect may be a similar re-shaping of the attitudinal and intellectual components (see Evans, 2011a for an analysis of the componential structure of professionalism). Although much may be lost in its translation, by this process, ‘demanded’ professionalism becomes ‘enacted’ professionalism, as what others want or expect of professorial academic leadership is taken one step nearer to being realised, or – to retain my term - reified.

What changes to the professorial role are implied?

The professorial academic leadership role, then, is evidently a demanding, multifarious one. One of the questionnaire respondents in the study of professors' perspectives, Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times, observed: 'it is an all-encompassing fluid role that has to be flexible. The problem is that it's just too big, and doing any of it requires compromises elsewhere' – a sentiment that was paraphrased and reiterated time and again by interviewees and respondents alike. But what, if anything, is new about this situation, and this role? Has anything changed for professors in the last two or three decades – or more recently?

Many of the questionnaire respondents in the Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times study highlighted changes – sometimes profound – to academic working life and the role expected of and demands placed on professors:

> I have been a professor for many years, and the changes are immense, demands are higher, but output has fallen … universities get in the way of you doing your job.
>
> I have felt well supported and well prepared but expectations have grown and I am expected to take on more and more.
>
> I was relatively young when I became a professor and I modelled myself on other more senior professors I knew. 20 years later, the role of professor has changed significantly.

Whether this evident prevalence of work intensification is a relatively recent or a more long-standing feature of professors' working lives is very difficult to ascertain. Temporally-based comparison is always problematic when attempted through retrospective analysis that lacks a reliable database; anecdotal recollections and impressions make for vague and contestable – often conflicting - evidence, where well-documented records, maintained over time, would inject more precision and specificity into the process and increase the credibility of its findings. This methodological problem is exacerbated in the case of a temporally-based comparison of the professorial role because it is a role that, in the UK, appears to have always been unclearly defined, making it very difficult to glean any sense of what it historically involved. How can one compare one thing with another, without any clear, consensually accepted, evidence of what shape or form one of them took?

We have little, readily available, compelling evidence on the provenance or evolution of the notion that professorship involves a distinctive role: whether it is a 21st century or turn-of-the-century innovation, or whether its history may be traced much further back. Anecdotal impressions are the main tools at our disposal, and these were conveyed by several research participants – from both of my studies. Some of these impressions related to academia more widely, and took the form of heralding or identifying a trend, while others were more narrowly focused on observation of what had occurred or was occurring within individual institutions. Yet whilst they invariably support the notion that the professorial role has changed or is changing, they also present a confusing picture. On the one hand, some identify the emergence of a more altruistic type of professor who has time for others and accepts responsibility for advising and mentoring. Non-professorial questionnaire respondents in the Leading professors study described this newly-evolved professor as someone who was collegial, approachable and committed to developing the next generation of academics:

> A new breed of professor gradually seems to be emerging across our institution as a whole - one who does nurture and support others. The old traditional style of professor who just concentrates on their research and tries to avoid all contact with

> university life in general is still there, and indeed some people still refer to them as the “real” professors, but they do not have the internal influence that the new type has.

> My sense is that the culture within pre-1992 institutions is changing and that there is an increasing recognition of the need for professorial colleagues to be visible among the undergraduate and postgraduate student populations.

Whilst some research participants discerned the rise of a professoriate that was less self-focused and self-absorbed than its predecessor of a few years ago, others reported the proliferation of quite a different animal: an increasingly bureaucracy- and administration-focused professor. S/he was a creature of her/his era, whose priorities and agendas were driven by universities and fuelled by the neoliberal, competitive culture that has taken hold of academia in the developed western world:

> My understanding was that professors were the top of their research field and had exemplified this through citizenship inside and outside of the university. The role now seems to be secured simply by sitting on committees, knowing the right people inside the university, and agreeing to do huge administrative roles and/or going on leave for long stints, none of which speak to the idea of the professor I always held.

> Our institution has redefined the professorial role as being an executive and managerial one rather than an academic/intellectual/disciplinary/personally-enabling one.

> Earlier in my career professors were worthy academics. This type no longer fits into the corporate university. It's all about economics now. Quality has been sacrificed for the goal of gaining the maximum economic return for the minimum effort. My department is actively recruiting corporate professors. The worthy have left.

Addressing the question, then: What, if anything, has changed for professors and their roles? is clearly an extremely imprecise exercise that is fraught with difficulties: contradiction, contestation and conjecture. In the concluding section below I sum up the key elements of the empirical evidence discussed above, and – necessarily avoiding prescription, due to space restrictions - speculate on the future role and status of the professoriate in the UK.

THE JOURNEY TRAVELLED AND THE JOURNEY AHEAD: SHAPING THE 21st CENTURY UK PROFESSORIATE

Evidence-based consideration of whether, and to what extent and in what ways, the professorial role in the UK university sector has changed over the last and into the 21st century is inconclusive. Since the professoriate is almost entirely unresearched (Rayner et al. 2010; Tight, 2002), there is no reliable or significant research-derived knowledge base of what the role involved – or even if the concept of a distinctive professorial role existed – several decades ago. The only studies that appear to have been focused exclusively on professors and their work (Evans et al., 2013; Hoskins, 2012; Tight, 2002; Macfarlane, 2012) – have all appeared within the last twelve years. The history of professors' working lives and roles, in the form of qualitative data that convey something of how they go about their work and how this impacts on them and those with whom they interact, is only now beginning to be chronicled through such research, so there is no similar temporally-based comparative evidence to draw upon.

What we do have are ‘living history’ accounts of people who report having experienced and witnessed the evolution of, or more abruptly-applied change to, academia, and, by extension, the nature of professorship. These memories – not necessarily of a dim and distant past, but in some cases of more recent events and circumstances - form the basis of a relatively rich and informative oral (or, in the cases of questionnaire respondents, written) history that is in many respects illuminative. Yet it is also anecdotal and impressionistic, tempered by its inevitable subjectivity, which injects into it divergent and conflicting interpretations, descriptions and explanations.

There are therefore multiple permutations of accounts, reflecting multiple perspectives: those claiming that professors have become and are becoming more accessible, collegial, sharing and altruistic than was previously the case; those that claim almost the opposite – that professors are becoming more hard-nosed, self-serving and corporate; those that dispute the very notion of a distinctive professorial role; those that recognise a distinctive role for professors as a relatively new idea; those that maintain that academics across the board have had to contend with and adjust to increased workloads and new ways of working, and that professors are no different from any of their colleagues in having a harder time of it that was the case a decade or two ago; and other, subtly different, slants on each of these. Of course, what this variation may very likely reflect is not flawed recollection or skewed interpretation – subjectivity at its most unreliable – but a diversity and variability that is inherent in an academic culture that represents sectoral pluralism and highly individual human agency, and which precludes normalisation and standardisation. By this reasoning, there is no such thing as the (singular) UK-based professor, and to try to delineate her or his role, purpose, or enacted professionalism – much less analyse its metamorphosis - is an endeavour that is destined for the limited success that approximation and sketchy outlining represent. Rather, the most we should perhaps hope for are multiple delineations of multiple roles, purposes and professionalisms.

Yet herein lies a problem, for is it not reasonable that those appointed to a specific work role or given a specific job-related title should understand what it is intended to entail, and what is expected of them? Likewise, should not this information also be available to those who aspire to the role or title, or those who are, to some extent, affected by how its incumbents relate to and interact with them and potentially impact upon their working lives? This does not necessarily occur, and where it does occur it represents the communication of non-standard, often localised, information. Comparable to the ‘persistent fuzziness’ that Mitchell (2013, p. 5) ascribes to the role of programme leader in higher education institutions - and identifies as the basis of variation in its enactment - the professorial role is vague and imprecisely articulated and understood. There is no general, sector-wide, unanimity on what a professor is, should be, does, or should do, nor on what degree of experience or what level or quality of achievement the role or grade requires or demands. These issues can depend upon which sector (pre- or post-92), which university, which faculty or department, and which subject or discipline the professorship is affiliated with. In this respect the UK is distinct from many other European countries, where the appointments and delineation of the roles and responsibilities and expected achievement records of professors are often more standardised and, in some cases, centrally controlled.

I do not advocate centralisation per se; the French higher education sector – an example of a highly centralised system – has its own problems (Evans and Cosnefroy, 2013) that I would certainly not wish to transfer to the UK. Yet its standardised procedures for conferring professorial status (involving the aspirant’s preparation of a habilitation à diriger des recherches), and its national culturally-based norms that underpin and influence how professors discharge their responsibilities, arguably make for less ambiguity and confusion than may persist in the UK. We can perhaps learn something from this practice and adapt it to our own context for the purpose of demystifying the vagaries of professorship.

On the other hand, perhaps we should follow a different path – one that takes us towards an erosion of the hierarchically-determined distinctions (which, again, evidently vary depending on institution, discipline, and individual personalities) between academics of different grades. If – as was suggested by a very small number of questionnaire respondents in the Leading professors study - we got rid of the title ‘professor’, would anything change? Would academia remain as competitive a work environment as it is generally considered to be? And would individual academics continue to drive themselves to extremes, to produce whatever nature and quantity of work output are esteem-indicators, if there were no - arguably, prestigious - job role label to serve as a reward for or recognition of their efforts? If anything, the UK is moving in the opposite direction from such hierarchy-flattening; a growing number of universities now differentiate between grades or classes or categories of professors, with associated salaries, but which are not generally ‘visible’ outside the institutions. Oxford University has for several years distinguished between titular and statutory professorships (the latter – effectively, named chairs - being the more prestigious), while Manchester University currently has five professorial grades. Other universities – including Newcastle, Birmingham and Leeds - have followed or are following suit, but with fewer ‘zones’ of professors, as Leeds euphemistically calls them.

If this trend becomes commonplace it risks encouraging yet more self-imposed pressure amongst those individuals who strive to excel and to attain the highest achievable levels of recognition within academic circles, as they focus on advancing through the professorial ranking system. It may also – particularly if and as professors’ grades, and their significance, become increasingly known outside their own institutions – create a hierarchy within the professoriate that will inevitably end up being skewed in favour of those subjects and disciplines that are the most marketable: the highest grade categories are likely to be represented predominantly by top scientists, medical researchers, mathematicians and engineers who can demand high salaries and status-related conditions of service, than by social scientists and arts and humanities professors. And since the former are more likely to be men than women, by extension, this situation will have gender balance implications.

What does it mean to be a professor? asked Malcolm Tight (2002) over a decade ago. In the UK there is no straightforward answer to that question; it very much depends on how others perceive and what they expect of professors, and the extent to which – if at all - professors are influenced by those perceptions and expectations. Whether those perceptions and expectations have changed over time is impossible to ascertain; whether they are set to change in the future may only be conjectured; and with the advent of institutional policies that risk fragmenting the professoriate by introducing multiple layers and levels of ‘professorialness’ the answer is likely to remain as elusive as ever.

Notes

[1] Within analyses and examinations of leaders and/or leadership roles I use the term ‘the led’ as a concise, generic label for those who do not hold the officially recognised leadership role being analysed/examined and are subject to the effects and impact of its enactment. I select it in preference to the more commonly used ‘follower’ because it implies a lesser degree of choice and agency in the relationality of leadership. I fully accept the point made by analysts of distributed leadership, such as Gosling et al. (2004), that the term ‘follower’ – and, implicitly, similar labels, such as ‘the led’ – fail to incorporate consideration of the quality of engagement of everyone involved in an initiative or organization. Nevertheless, the concept of leadership is predicated on acceptance that it is a relational position – without someone to lead, the term would be redundant – and I use the label ‘the led’ principally to make a distinction on the basis of leadership relationality between one (or more) holding a specific leadership role and those who are not the holders of this very same, specific leadership role.

[2] Concerned to avoid implying or conveying a narrow interpretation of professorial academic leadership that is focused only on research-related activity, we included in the sample those whose job titles (e.g. teaching fellow; associate tutor) or webpage information suggested that they were not research active but were involved in teaching.

[3] The binary divide in the UK that distinguished universities from polytechnics was abolished in 1992, when the former polytechnics were permitted to become universities. In reality, however, a status-related division persists between the ‘old’, pre-1992 universities, which are traditionally research-focused, and the ‘new’, more teaching-focused institutions that did not gain university status until after 1992.

[4] Pseudonyms are used in all references to the research sample.

[5] A readership is an academic grade midway between senior lectureship and professorship. A reader is considered a senior academic likely to be promoted to a professorship. Some UK universities have now dispensed with the grade.

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