Final report to the LFHE

LEADING PROFESSORS: EXAMINING THE PERSPECTIVES OF ‘THE LED’ IN RELATION TO PROFESSORIAL LEADERSHIP.

Project leader: Dr Linda Evans, University of Leeds
Other project participants: Dr Matt Homer, University of Leeds; Professor Steve Rayner, Oxford Brookes University

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED THROUGH THE COURSE OF THE PROJECT

The project has:

- generated a substantial quantitative and qualitative database on perceptions of university professors and the nature and quality of their academic leadership, and on the professorial role generally;
- raised awareness, through media reporting and dissemination within the academic community in the UK and overseas, of the need to examine the professorial role and how academic leadership is perceived by those on the receiving end of it;
- given a voice to ‘the led’ (non-professorial academics, university teachers and researchers) in the UK higher education sector, which may inform leadership policy and practice;
- served as the first phase in a wider study of professorial academic leadership, which will be achieved through both the LFHE-funded follow-up study (Evans, Homer and Mercer) and the LFHE-commissioned stimulus paper on the purpose of professors (Evans).

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT AGAINST ITS AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the project was to examine the nature and quality of academic leadership provided by the UK HE sector’s professoriate, as perceived by ‘the led’, for the purpose of highlighting and disseminating models of good practice, identifying weaknesses and lacunae, and making recommendations for improved policy and practice.

This has been achieved by means of a research project that involved:
- two phases of data collection:
  - an online questionnaire was launched during the project’s first quarter (April–June 2011) and yielded a total of 1,223 largely complete responses from non-professorial academics, teaching fellows and research fellows and assistants (but amongst these...
there was a small proportion [<1%] of missing responses to some questionnaire items;
- one-to-one interviews with a sub-sample of 50 the questionnaire sample;
- preliminary analysis of the data generated - due to the volume of data, analysis remains on-going at the end of the project;
- oral dissemination as specified below.

**Progress in relation to meeting each specific objective is detailed below**

1. to elicit academics’ perceptions of the nature and quality of academic leadership provided by their professorial colleagues

   This was achieved through the data collection referred to above.

2. to examine the concept of academic leadership and how it is interpreted, with a view to better defining it and delineating its features

   We are still formulating our own definition of academic leadership and its dimensions, guided by our research data. Our findings reveal that the term is unclearly defined and subject to a range of interpretations. We deliberately avoided presenting our questionnaire respondents and interviewees with a stipulative definition of academic leadership, in order to allow their own definitions and interpretations to emerge.

   A small minority of research subjects seemed to equate academic leadership (at least in part) with formal management or leadership roles within universities, such as head of departments or deans of faculty. The majority of our sample seemed to interpret it more broadly, as ‘intellectual leadership’ of the kind that leads the research agenda within, and which contributes towards defining the boundaries of, a subject and to influencing the predominant knowledge base. Many also combined this interpretation with one of leadership as mentoring, assisting or guiding others – particularly early career academics – through passing on knowledge and information and helping to acculturate junior colleagues into institutional and/or disciplinary or subject communities. For many of our research subjects, academic leadership was perceived as incorporating an interpersonal dimension; it was expected that academic leaders would – at least to some extent – engage with others in order to lead them. A minority of senior research subjects (readers and principal lecturers) also accepted that academic leadership could in some cases be effected by gifted intellectuals who lacked people skills but whose academic accomplishments allowed them to lead the field. There was talk, for example, of tolerating ‘the almost autistic, but brilliant, professor’ on account of what s/he brought to the university or the field in terms of advancement of knowledge.

3. to interrogate the nature and bases of: a) what is perceived as effective academic leadership, and b) what is perceived as ineffective or inadequate academic leadership

   This has been achieved and - like any analysis of ideas – remains on-going.

   Our research subjects’ perceptions of effective and ineffective academic leadership were, predictably, influenced by their definitions or interpretations of academic leadership. For those who equate it with formal management or leadership roles, effective academic leadership was perceived as that which was instrumental in creating and communicating - and motivating people to buy into - a vision. It was perceived as incorporating a concern for
people’s well-being and welfare, and as effecting an efficiently run organisation/department that fulfilled its purpose. Ineffective academic leadership was perceived by this minority of research subjects as the opposite of effective leadership: as being characterised by cynicism and self-interest, inefficiency, and, in some cases, poor interpersonal relations that created low morale, stress, frustration and dissatisfaction.

For the majority of our research subjects, the ‘ideal’ – and hence ‘effective’ - professor as academic leader was one who, variously:

- had time for junior colleagues and helped them develop;
- demonstrated ‘citizenship’ within the institution and/or wider discipline;
- manifested intellectual distinction;
- served as an exemplar of good practice or as a role model.

Ineffective academic leadership was perceived as failure to do the above, and as self-interest or self-absorption, as exemplified by professors who, to quote anonymous questionnaire respondents: ‘ploughed their own furrows’ and ‘aren’t interested in the “little people”.’

4. to synthesise data and formulate models of good practice (identify features of ineffective or inadequate practice)

This has been achieved, and, due to the volume of data, remains on-going. Building on the information that we outline above, in relation to objective 3, we have identified from our interview data specific examples, or vignettes, of what are perceived as good and, conversely, as inadequate practice. These were conveyed through interviewees’ reminiscing about positive experiences of professorial colleagues or recalling negative ones. These have featured in our oral dissemination, and have been/will be included in our written dissemination.

At one level, effective practice of professorial academic leadership, as perceived by ‘the led’, is that which meets their (the led’s) expectations of what a ‘leading professor’ is. The yardstick against which professors were measured was often people’s positive experiences of their doctoral supervisors (where these had been professors) or of professors who had mentored them during their early careers. Our on-going analysis is so far (and this is subject to modification as we continue analysing) revealing models of good practice to be perceived as variously incorporating or involving:

- a demonstrable concern for (non-professorial) colleagues’ development, welfare and well-being;
- the capacity to advise, assist and mentor colleagues (who need or want it);
- continued and consistent achievement that is justifiably internationally recognised as outstanding;
- an interest in the institution/department and disciplinary field;
- role modelling or exemplifying professional behaviour and/or performance that is exceptional;
- approachability.

Models of unsatisfactory or ineffective practice were perceived as variously incorporating or involving:

- self-absorption
- self-centredness
• incompetence
• unwillingness to pull one’s weight (e.g. through taking on citizenship-related tasks or roles)
• lack of empathy
• bullying or aggressiveness
• laziness.

5. to raise awareness of the impact on academics and academic communities of professorial academic leadership and, in particular, of the benefits (potential) of good leadership practice

This has been achieved in our oral dissemination – which will continue for at least the next two years - where we have drawn on qualitative questionnaire and interview data to present quotes that illustrate the far-reaching and long-term (sometimes career-defining) influence of effective academic leadership from professors on individuals’ professional lives and careers and their development, acculturation and well-being.

6. to disseminate models of good practice in the professorial leadership role using both traditional and innovatory forms of participatory and self-sustaining continuing professional development.

To our great disappointment, this has been only partially achieved. We had hoped to disseminate widely across universities in the form of professional development-focused events; we envisaged working with university academic development units or senior management to develop and present workshops that were geared towards meeting their institutional needs, on a ‘bespoke’ basis, directed at: potential or aspiring professors; serving professors; recently promoted professors; women professors, etc. Several university academic development units manifested much interest in our proposals to work with them in this way, and specific plans were made to visit the following universities: Bath, Strathclyde, Queen’s Belfast. Cardiff, Leicester and Cambridge also expressed an interest, but have so far failed to follow up. At Bath the programme was organised – focusing on the development of the professorial role at the university. But, as indicted in the 4th quarterly report, these events were cancelled due to lack of take-up. The difficulty seems to be that no (or few) professional development courses or workshops are provided at institutional level, in-house, specifically for professors or for those who aspire to them. Any events that we tried to organise under this ‘umbrella’ prompted little interest. The only venue to which we have disseminated to a captive audience of professors has been at De Montfort University. We have not given up on this and intend to pursue other ‘leads’ and to follow up on the interest shown by Cardiff, Leicester and Cambridge. We would also welcome the opportunity of presenting professional development-focused workshops under the aegis of the LFHE’s programme of events.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

In addition to the impact afforded by coverage in the national press, the project has yielded much academic benefit, which is set to continue as we extend our dissemination activities
beyond the end-date. It has widened the parameters that delineate the scholarship of educational leadership and management, forcing the inclusion within the research agenda of consideration of: leadership and management in the context of higher education; professorial academic leadership; and, the perspectives of ‘the led’ (in higher education) – all of which have hitherto been neglected areas within educational research. It has kick-started what we anticipate will be an incremental process (with this first project being followed up with Evans, Homer and Mercer's LFHE-funded study of professorial academic leadership from the perspective of professors, and Evans's LFHE-commissioned stimulus paper on the purpose of professors) of examining the role and work of professors in UK universities, and feeding into the policy discourse and informing institutional and national policy and practice.

A DETAILED BREAKDOWN OF ACTUAL AND PROJECTED DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

Oral dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual events</th>
<th>date</th>
<th>location</th>
<th>presenters</th>
<th>focus/nature of event</th>
<th>audience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading Professors: professorial academic leadership as it is perceived by “the led”</td>
<td>09.12.11</td>
<td>SRHE annual conference, Celtic Manor resort, Wales</td>
<td>Evans &amp; Rayner</td>
<td>conference paper: presentation of questionnaire only</td>
<td>academics and researchers of HE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading Professors: professorial academic leadership as it is perceived by “the led”</td>
<td>03.02.12</td>
<td>SRHE HQ, London</td>
<td>Evans, Homer &amp; Rayner</td>
<td>seminar: an overview of the emergent research findings</td>
<td>academics and researchers of HE</td>
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<td>‘Backstabbing a***holes’ or ‘a mixed bag’? University professors as perceived by ‘the led’</td>
<td>23.02.12</td>
<td>Centre for Applied Educational Research, University of Central Lancashire</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>invited seminar</td>
<td>academic and research staff and postgraduate students at the University of Central Lancashire</td>
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<td>Professorial professionalism: what might it look like at De Montfort University?</td>
<td>09.03.12</td>
<td>De Montfort University: in-house professoriate day</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>invited keynote: drawing upon the research findings to examine implications for professorial development</td>
<td>De Montfort University professors and pro-vice chancellors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading professors: academic professorial leadership as perceived by ‘the led’</td>
<td>15.03.12</td>
<td>Leeds University</td>
<td>Evans &amp; Homer</td>
<td>seminar within the open seminar programme</td>
<td>Leeds University academics and</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Focused on their own agendas’ and ‘not interested in the “little” people’? Faculty perceptions of the role of full professors in the development of junior colleagues</td>
<td>17.04.12</td>
<td>Vancouver, Canada</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>paper at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association</td>
<td>international academics and research students</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Forthcoming events: invitations issued &amp; papers accepted</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The professor, academic leadership and systemic reform in the English university: futures, visions or an irrelevance?</strong></td>
<td>July 20\textsuperscript{th}-22\textsuperscript{nd} 2012</td>
<td>Midland Hotel, Manchester</td>
<td>Rayner &amp; Evans</td>
<td>paper at the annual conference of the British Educational Leadership, Management &amp; Administration Society (BELMAS)</td>
<td>international academics and research students</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Leading and managing academic professional development in higher education</strong></td>
<td>July 20\textsuperscript{th}-22\textsuperscript{nd} 2012</td>
<td>Midland Hotel, Manchester</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>paper at the annual conference of the British Educational Leadership, Management &amp; Administration Society (BELMAS)</td>
<td>international academics and research students</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Misleading’ professors: cautionary tales of ineffective and damaging academic professorial leadership in the UK</td>
<td>Sept. 18\textsuperscript{th}-21\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>University of Cadiz, Spain</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>paper within a symposium on leadership &amp; management in HE, at the European conference on educational research (ECER)</td>
<td>international academics and research students</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Projected/planned events (some titles are provisional and may change)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The role of professors in developing junior colleagues in higher education</strong></td>
<td>Nov. 2012</td>
<td>Aston University, Birmingham</td>
<td>Evans</td>
<td>paper at the annual conference of the International Professional Development Association</td>
<td>international academics and research students</td>
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<td><strong>Perceptions of professorial</strong></td>
<td>t.b.a.</td>
<td>Oxford Learning</td>
<td>Rayner</td>
<td>Invited paper within the</td>
<td>academics and</td>
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Written dissemination

This has only recently begun, since analysis of data and writing for publication in leading academic peer-reviewed journals takes considerable time. Over the next 4 years we expect to publish around 5-6 papers in total that disseminate the project’s findings. The following has been achieved:

- A revised version of the conference paper presented at the SRHE annual conference in December 2011 has been submitted for publication in Educational Management, Administration and Leadership, the UK’s leading peer-reviewed academic journal in this field. We await a decision.
- A report on the project and its preliminary findings appeared in the Times Higher Education in November 2011. The THE has evaluated this as one of its leading reports of 2011, attracting over 10,000 hits on its online version. The project was also referred to in the Leader of the same issue.
- The LFHE-commissioned stimulus paper, The Purpose of Professors, to be written by Linda Evans, will draw upon the project’s findings.
- Subject to securing a publishing contract, Linda Evans plans to write a book that will disseminate the findings, and analyse policy and theoretical implications, of the Leading Professors project, together with those of the LFHE-funded follow up study, Professorial academic leadership in turbulent times: the professoriate’s perspective.

In progress:

Linda Evans is revising the paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association in April 2012, with a view to submitting it for publication in a leading peer-reviewed journal.

All dissemination outputs (oral and written) have gratefully acknowledged the support of the LFHE, and future dissemination will continue to do so.
A FULL BREAKDOWN OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff time: Evans</td>
<td>£5578.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff time: Homer</td>
<td>£956.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff time: Rayner</td>
<td>£2868.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel and subsistence to conduct fieldwork</td>
<td>£327.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio recording equipment</td>
<td>£170.36</td>
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<td></td>
<td>£9900.00</td>
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