



Professors should provide intellectual leadership, but some incumbents have other priorities or misunderstand their role. **Bruce Macfarlane** asserts that universities must find a way to get the best out of the best, while, overleaf, others explain what the position means to them

# Command performance

I became a professor seven years ago, after working in higher education for 16 years. It felt like a big deal. I distinctly remember preparing for the interview that would determine whether I would be awarded the title. I anticipated being asked how I would see my role as a professor and so searched around for anything written about what professors are expected to do. I was to be disappointed.

What I found was plenty of guidance on how you become a professor – publish (a lot) in high-impact journals, get big research grants, attain an international reputation and so on. Achievements in teaching and service were mentioned but were subtly sidelined. To adapt a phrase from George Orwell, some bullet points are clearly more equal than others. But there was something almost wholly missing from the literature. What does it *mean* to be a professor (in the more selective British sense of this term)? In other words, what do you do when you become one?

A simple answer to this question is to just carry on as before: get more research grants, continue to publish, further build your reputation and esteem indicators. However, most UK professors, as I have subsequently discovered from my research on the subject, think it is more than a career grade. It is also a leadership role.

While *becoming* a professor may demand high levels of individual achievement, *being* a professor involves more collective instincts. A professor must help others to develop and act as a catalyst for their ideas as well as his or her own. This calls for a different, more selfless set of qualities. In short, being a professor involves intellectual leadership.

More than 40 per cent of UK professors hold a management role. But it would be a mistake to equate managerial power with intellectual authority – although ideally the two will go together. Professors are, of course, not the only ones who offer intellectual leadership in

a university. Other academics who are experienced, senior or simply talented can supply it, too. It is not the sole preserve of status.

Yet what is “intellectual leadership”? It is one of those phrases that is often invoked but rarely defined. Intellectuals are commonly portrayed as brilliant but egocentric iconoclasts who prefer to be outsiders rather than formal leaders. But we expect a leader to be sociable, personable and to have a capacity to listen and empathise. All of a sudden, intellectual leadership starts to look like a contradiction in terms.

If you go to the literature on leadership and management in higher education looking for an answer, you will be disappointed. It has nothing to say about intellectual leadership or what professors do as leaders. It focuses instead on formal role holders, such as heads of departments, deans and vice-chancellors. It is essentially about management, not intellectual leadership.

So, how exactly does a professor provide

intellectual leadership? I think there are several ways.

Conventionally, one shows this within the discipline or profession by being a “knowledge producer” associated with generating new theories, frameworks, critiques, analyses, models and discoveries. Such a person will, in other words, be known for something, not just for publishing a lot, and will have ideas that others draw on and are influenced by.

Then there are “academic citizens”, who look mainly to apply their disciplinary or professional specialism for the benefit of wider public understanding. They often use innovative teaching methods, occupy significant leadership roles within scholarly societies or engage strongly in public outreach work.

But there are also professors who do not see their home discipline as defining their role. These individuals can become “boundary

transgressors”, challenging the norms of established disciplines and developing new connections across fields of enquiry. They transgress the conventional and make forays into adjacent academic territories, often meeting opposition or even hostility in the process. Boundary transgression is the means by which the map of academic knowledge is being constantly redrawn.

In a final, small group are professors who act as public intellectuals by seeking to influence public debate on social, moral and economic issues through speaking, writing and campaigning. This role is controversial because professors are addressing issues beyond their immediate area of expertise. But its importance cannot be underestimated, especially in contexts where the role of university professors is significant in standing up for democracy and opposing oppressive regimes.

**“The importance of professors acting as public intellectuals cannot be underestimated, especially in contexts where their role is significant in standing up for democracy”**

### ‘THERE IS NO LONGER A CONSENSUS’

**Susan Bassnett, professor of comparative literature, University of Warwick**

When I started out as a young academic, the last thing I ever expected to be was a professor. Professors were all old, distinguished, often surly and arrogant because they knew all about everything. They were beings from another planet.

But in the 1990s, the world changed. Professors blossomed everywhere. Suddenly they were ten a penny, or so it seemed. Professorial titles were handed out for many reasons other than high-level scholarship.

The day I received a letter promoting me

to a personal chair was also the day a test confirmed that I was pregnant with my fourth child – two pieces of equally unexpected news.

Professors ought to be experts in their field of study; ought to set an example by working damned hard; ought to help students and younger colleagues; ought to work alongside colleagues within their own universities; and ought to take on leadership roles locally, nationally and internationally.

Sadly, many don't. There is no longer a consensus about what it means to be a professor. There used to be a small number of these elite beings; now there are thousands of mass-produced professors.

Of course, professors can take on more than one of these four forms of intellectual leadership, and much depends on whether they see their role in terms of their discipline or more broadly.

But sadly, many UK universities are wedded to a commercial model rather than an intellectual model of professorial leadership. They want professors to be knowledge entrepreneurs leveraging income from their intellect through research grants, consultancy fees and patents. The hollowing-out of what it means to be a professor is closely connected to the mantra of knowledge transfer.

It is to be hoped that some vice-chancellors are more enlightened. If they want to make better use of professors as intellectual leaders, there are ways to achieve this. Here are five suggestions.

### ‘LEAD WITH HUMOUR, PATIENCE, WISDOM’

**Avril Horner, emeritus professor of English, Kingston University**

Being a professor means researching and publishing at the cutting edge of your discipline – otherwise you quickly lose the respect of your peers. And if, like me, you are given research management as your administrative task, it also means providing research leadership.

This includes giving warm encouragement and advice to researchers who face conflicting demands and setbacks, as well as showering generous praise on those more confident and experienced souls who manage to garner prestigious book contracts with apparent ease.

It also means initiating and advising on bids for external funding and international contracts; overseeing PhD supervision in the department with tact and imagina-

tion while carefully nurturing your own post-graduates; handling research budgets fairly and transparently; cutting and thrusting on university committees and national boards; involving your colleagues in thinking through strategies for research assessment purposes rather than issuing dire threats about loss of funding in the dark days to come; writing a narrative for the RAE/REF that suggests that recent achievements have been due to careful planning rather than happenstance (whatever the reality).

And if, through all this, you can display a sense of humour, the patience of Job and the wisdom of Minerva while safeguarding the flame of knowledge against the draughts of internal reorganisation and the winds of political change, then you are in the right job.

### Expect all professors to contribute locally

One of the cardinal errors made by universities has been to appoint professors without making clear to them expectations about mentoring and other duties connected with academic citizenship. Professors are, by definition, cosmopolitans. Their main point of identity is outside the institution – within their discipline, and in international research groups and scholarly societies.

However, a university and its academic staff may feel short-changed unless all professors, including star names, act not only as cosmopolitans but also as “locals” who are committed to mentoring and contributing to the university as a community. This is partly about inter-generational equity. It is time to give something back and help build the careers of others.

Ideally, a professor is a “rooted cosmo-

politan”, serving both internal university and external professional and discipline-based communities. This is also how most professors see themselves, but many feel that institutions make insufficient use of their contributions as locals.

### Value creativity and originality over productivity

Professors represent probably the most expensive intellectual resource in an institution's budget. Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect quite a bit from them. Universities focus their evaluation of professors on the income they generate and the impact of their research outputs. Intellectual metrics are concerned mainly with academic productivity through refereed journal papers and the extent to which these have impact, measured in terms of citations.

Evaluating professors in this way may

increase productivity in a narrow sense, but it does little to promote creativity or originality. The emphasis on citations encourages individuals to follow a safety-in-numbers approach in popular sub-disciplines rather than to leave the pack and strike out in a new direction. It means that academics end up researching and writing about similar things, and trying to publish in a very limited and narrow range of journals.

Institutions discourage professors from pursuing work that is innovative and risky in other ways. Before considering the intellectual merits of a particular research path, professors are in effect required to consider the amount of funding a project is likely to attract or whether it fits into a university or government research council theme.

Although universities need to market their research activities coherently, it is also

### ‘A MIX OF WOODY ALLEN AND COLUMBO’

**Gary Thomas, professor of education, University of Birmingham**

At an interview for a professorial post about 10 years ago, I was asked what the academic leader should model. The buttons to press were vision, determination, intellectual excellence evidenced by research achievement, empathy and support.

I should have urged these, decisively. In fact, almost any melange of words from the leadership handbook would have done. Instead, what came from my lips, fatally, were the words “respect for uncertainty”. This was the wrong answer.

The physicist Wolfgang Pauli divided

incorrect answers into “wrong, very wrong, and not even wrong”. My answer was not even wrong. I'd hit the ball somewhere far into the Crab Nebula. The panel stared at me in sympathy. I didn't get the job (and I stuck to the leadership handbook at the next interview).

While the panel's genetically engineered academic leader would probably have been a hybrid of John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Stalin, mine is more of a cross between Woody Allen and Columbo.

The great biologist J. B. S. Haldane talked of the rationalist's “duty of doubt” – this, I think, is what the intellectual leader should model.

**“One cardinal error made by universities is to appoint professors without making clear to them expectations about mentoring and other duties connected with academic citizenship”**



important that they foster creative scholarship. Corraling professors into research clusters associated with university-level research themes does not provide an environment conducive to controversial and innovative thinking. A balanced approach is to adopt a support framework around non-themed or blue-sky research, as well as themed research.

#### Make better use of emeritus professors

When I launched an initiative at one of my former institutions to make more use of professorial expertise, the vice-chancellor asked me why on earth I planned to contact someone who was already retired. I replied that this person was an emeritus professor of the university and was keen to continue to contribute to the institution. This anecdote illustrates how few UK universities have

given adequate attention to the role of emeritus professors.

The academic profession is ageing and, in the UK, the compulsory retirement age has been abolished. The global expansion of higher education means that there is a shortage in many countries, such as Australia, of adequately trained and qualified young academics to replace those heading towards retirement. This situation provides a very practical reason for thinking more clearly about how the knowledge and skills of emeritus professors might be better utilised.

Some of the most influential professors in the modern world are emeritus in status, such as Germaine Greer, Richard Dawkins and Noam Chomsky. UK universities can learn from US institutions that have established emeritus colleges. These offer retired academics the opportunity to continue

to contribute to teaching and research activities.

Developing a strategy to involve emeritus professors is also important for another reason: to ensure that junior academics can continue to progress and are not blocked by the reluctance of senior professors to retire.

#### Nurture and guide professors

It sounds all too obvious. Yet it needs to be said. Like anybody else, professors, especially new ones, need guidance and development to help them fulfil their roles.

The assumption is often made that an academic who has met the criteria to be appointed a professor will be instantly able to perform as an intellectual leader. But there is no evidence to support the assumption that professors are born, not made, just as there is no evidence to support the idea that some-

one who possesses a doctorate necessarily makes a competent teacher.

What form might professorial leadership development take? I am not suggesting lengthy, compulsory courses of formally certified training and education. This is impractical. But there is a case for short courses and targeted development focused on small groups or individuals.

This should not be an anodyne induction into university "processes and procedures". It needs to engage professors in how they articulate their role. This ought to include responsibilities such as working in support of under-represented groups in the professoriate, notably women. Whatever form this training might take, it is important to emphasise that the role extends well beyond the pursuit of personal publication and income generation.

#### Expect all professors to be intellectual leaders

Producing a list of criteria for appointing professors is not enough, and not good enough. A role description linked to intellectual leadership is also needed. The lack of such a description sends the clear message that becoming a professor is a career end-point, not a new beginning with a fresh set of expectations.

In detailing these expectations, it is important to not drive a wedge between those with organisational power and those with intellectual authority, or between teaching and research. Encouraging the unbundling of the professorial role through nomenclatures such as "research professor" or "teaching and learning professor" only further hollows out what it means to be a professor.

Being a professor is not about being a "knowledge entrepreneur". It is about balancing the

privileges of academic freedom with the responsibilities of academic duty. Generating income may be part of this. But if the professors who have been appointed in your institution are not regarded as intellectual leaders, this calls into question why they were made professors in the first place. Universities that are serious about offering intellectual leadership need to better articulate what they want from their professoriate beyond productivity and income generation. ●

**Bruce Macfarlane spent five years as a professor of higher education at two UK universities and is currently associate professor for higher education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. His book *Intellectual Leadership in Higher Education: Renewing the Role of the University Professor* is due to be published in February.**

### 'TITLED, BUT NOT ENTITLED ANY MORE'

**Thomas Docherty, professor of English and comparative literature, University of Warwick**

For me, to be a professor is to be, literally, "entitled" to profess the discipline. When I started, the professor was one who was entitled to speak for the discipline as a whole, and also therefore to speak beyond her or his personal specialism. They had earned the privilege to head a department because of their overview of whole disciplines: the entitlement also demanded that the professor "profess"; and it legitimised the academic freedom that we know as the work of the public intellectual.

However, with very few chair professors, they simply became part of an establishment

and, in the UK at least, no substantial critical speaking-out ever happened. Now, though, we have many professors, but they have titles such as "professor of something extremely specialised and narrow".

Ostensibly, it is a democratising good that we have many professors; yet it is actually a symptom of the atomisation of disciplines and a consequence of the deeply conservative modularisation of all intellectual work. The result is that the professor is increasingly regarded as "irrelevant" to matters of public concern: many may gain the title, but as a whole we lose our entitlement, losing authority and becoming delegitimised as public intellectuals in the process. Once, we didn't speak out; now, we can't.

### 'THE OBLIGATION IS WIDE'

**Ian McNay, emeritus professor of higher education and management, University of Greenwich**

The main issue is the sense of obligation to live up to the title. When I first got a chair, I giggled intermittently for two years. Professors are pillars of the academic establishment; I am a rebel, a contrarian. But I settled down and after several years believed I merited the title. My mother was proud; my father was more interested in the salary level.

The obligation is wide. We owe it to students to open new ways of seeing, knowing and understanding.

We owe it to colleagues to support their efforts and their professional career development, mainly, but not exclusively, in research. For senior colleagues, I tried a workshop approach to continuing

professional development activities to make a change from the didactic, transmissive academic tradition.

We owe it to the wider academic community to give of our expertise and time. I get many emails from people seeking advice or details of publications. I have acted as an external examiner in more than 25 universities, and much of that work has also involved input to curriculum review or approaches to research projects.

We must also give back to the general community. To label myself a "public intellectual" would also cause disbelieving giggles from some I know, but as a researcher on higher education policy, I do try to speak truth to power (which does not listen) and to present the research that should underpin and inform policy decisions.

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### 'REDISCOVER LEADERSHIP'

**Stephen Curry, professor of structural biology, Imperial College London**

The most immediate sensation I felt on becoming a professor was relief at no longer being a reader – a position unknown outside academia. "I'm a reader too," my seven-year-old had proclaimed. The title of professor may be well established in the public mind, but there is still a lack of understanding about what it entails.

Inside academia, the title is viewed primarily as a reward for research success, rather than for achievement as a teacher or thinker. There are few expectations that your role should change, other than that you should continue to be funded and maintain an international research profile. That focus probably reflects the economic pressures

that appear to be overwhelming higher education.

Outsiders, though, still expect professors to be different. My parents kept asking me what would change about my job when I was promoted. At first I was puzzled by the question. Similarly, the notion that professors should be "intellectual leaders" probably seems worthy but rather quaint to most insiders. Perhaps it harks back to a time when there were fewer professors and the currency of the title had higher value? However, I think it would be a good thing to rediscover. The notion meshes well with louder calls for the academy to do a better job of conversing with the public about its work and, dare I say, to think more deeply about the societal impact of research.



### 'WE ARE THE SQUEEZED MIDDLE'

**Valerie Sanders, professor of English, University of Hull**

When I first became a professor 10 years ago, a colleague told me there was no specific job description. Apart from providing "academic leadership", it was up to us to develop a role for ourselves and to balance the assumed commitment to research with some tangible usefulness to the institution. Grateful for my chair, and eager to please, I cheerily agreed to be head of department. How simple and antiquated that model now looks!

Professors are fast

becoming the "squeezed middle" of academia. We are expected to Exchange Knowledge, form global networks, advise the government, adapt our interests to research council themes, and ensure that our research has "impact" – while not being too grand to teach first-year modules.

Maybe it was always thus in some fields, but with the privileging of "applied" research, and concentration of funding, the future role of arts and humanities professors outside the elite academy is looking even more uncertain than it did in 2001.



### 'PRESSURES AND PAYOFFS'

**Nigel Duncan, professor of legal education, City University London**

As a recently appointed professor, my experience is limited, but it already encompasses a variety of interpretations of "academic leadership". I have more committee and management responsibilities and have become programme director of a postgraduate course.

Expectations of me are affected by the fact that my chair is in legal education rather than my substantive discipline – law. The drivers are ultimately financial as opposed to commercial, and we make a real effort to achieve financial goals through intellectual means. I spend more time focusing on the research excellence framework, assessing colleagues' research and exploring how we

develop their research and writing capacity. I have run staff development workshops and improved support for new researchers on our virtual learning environment. The pressure to publish REFable work is up. My teaching commitment is unchanged.

Being a professor has raised my profile. It has eased the development of contacts within the profession and in other law schools. I am better able to establish a community of practice in my core interest: the pedagogy of ethical professionals.

My school is supportive and values the enhanced profile that the project provides. Resources, particularly those aimed at releasing time for purely intellectual advancement in specialist areas, are however very limited in the modern university.

