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 safely 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 wide 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 transcend 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 away from 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.

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

But sadly, many UK universities are wedded to a commercial model rather than an intellectual model of academic leadership. They want professors to be knowledge entrepreneurs leveraging income from theirintellectual 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, University of Birmingham

Being a professor means researching and publish-
ing at the cutting edge of your discipline - and therefore you lose the respect of your peers. And the more you are seen as performing research management as your administrative task, the more you are perceived as having no time or interest in research.

This includes giving warm encouragement and advice to researchers who are facing difficult demands and setbacks, as well as showing genuine praise on those more confident and successful.

The departmental culture is such that professors are treated as ‘lifelong students’ and there is a strong culture ofкарт in the way professors are assessed and engaged with. This includes a lack of respect for those who are more successful.

This is a situation in which professors are expected to be at the cutting edge of their discipline. But this is not always the case.

Of course, professors can make contributions to the academic community in a number of ways. But the key to success is to understand the expectations of the academic community and to work within those constraints.

 Expect all professors to contribute locally

One of the cardinal errors made by universi-ties is to be perpetually impatient with professors 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 university - with their discipline, and in international research groups and societies.

However, a university and its academic staff may feel short-changed if 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 go something back and help build the careers of others.

Ideally, a professor is a “rooted cosmopolit-an”, serving both internal university and external professional and discipline-based communities. This is how most professors see themselves, but many feel that institutions make inefficient use of their contributions as locals.

Value creativity and originality over productivity

Professors represent probably the most expen-sive intellectual resource in an institution’s budget. Thus, it is unreasonable to expect quite a hit 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 original-ity in research. The university is not responsible for keeping its staff in line so that they do not think too much than leave the pack and strike out in a new direction. It means that academics end up feeling under pressure to produce the numbers and trying to publish in a very limited and narrow range of journals.

Also, the idea of professors from pursuing work that is innovative and risky or other work that does not fit existing intellec-tual metrics of a particular research path, professors are in effect required to consider the academic community as a home to attract or whether it is into a university or government research council theme.

Although universities need to market their research activities coherently, it is also important to recognize that professors are more than just the performers of research. They are also integral to the academic community and their role is to provide leadership and direction to the university.

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

Susan Bassnett, professor of comparative literature, University of Warwick

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

But in the 1990s, the world changed. Profes-sors blossomed every-where. Suddenly they were ten a penny. It seemed that Professorial titles were handed out to so many professors that there are now only a few top universities with more than five professors in the world.

The day I received a letter promoting me to a personal chair was the 11th February 1994. It was the day a test con-trolled car that I was going to drive was locked down with my fourth child - two pieces of really unexpected news.

Professors ought to be experts in their field of study. Ought to set the example. They ought to be role models. 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 profes-sor. There are a number of elite centres - some a small number of these elite centres - and there are thousands of mass-produced professors.

There is also ranking and advertising on bids for external funding and international contracts (overseas PhD super-vision in my field) - it’s all too much.

I also mean initiat-ing and advising on bids for external funding and international contracts (overseas PhD super-vision in my field) - it’s all too much.

The mix of Gary Thomas, professor of education, University of Birmingham

At an interview for a professorial post about 10 years ago, I was asked what I thought an academic leader should model. The butts to press were vision, deter-mination, intellectual excellence evidenced by research achievement, empathy and support. To which I was able to add six factors that recent achievements have been due to careful planning and a good dose of hard work. Even the best know what to expect.

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 sym-
mathy. I didn’t get the job (and stuck to the leadership handbook at the next interview).

While the panel’s generally 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 Columbus.

The great biologist J.B. S. Haldane said that the nationalists’ “rational duty of doubt” - that, in his view, is what the intellectual leader should model.

‘A MIX OF WOODY ALLEN AND COLUMBO’

Gary Thomas, professor of education, University of Birmingham

John Brewer, sixth-century professor in sociology, Aberystwyth University

‘HUMILITY AMID GREAT EXPECTATIONS’

The importance of professors acting as public intellectuals cannot be underestimated, especially in contexts where their role is significant in standing up for democracy.
important that they foster creative scholarship. Corroborating professors into research clusters associated with university-level research centers is another way to do this. But the themes does not provide an environment conducive to conveying management thinking. A balanced approach is to adopt a support framework around non-themed or blue-skies 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 emeritus professorial expertise, the vice-chancellor asked me why I worked for him. I planned to contact someone who was already retired. I replied that this was an emeritus professor of the university and was keen to contribute to the institution. This anecdote illustrates how few 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 gap between the higher education means that there is a shortage in many countries, such as Australia, of adequately trained and qualified 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. Universities can learn from US institutions that have established emeritus colleges. These offers 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. It is therefore not to see that the assumption that professors are born, not made, just as there is no evidence to support the idea that some-...