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Mapping the leadership development of UK (full) professors in terms of cognitive, experiential, humanist and social learning

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Abstract

This paper applies Walker's (2018) Global Leadership Development Ecosystem to the leadership development offered to and/or valued by (full)¹ professors at UK² universities. It draws on 1,282 survey responses and 42 one-hour interviews. The survey data indicate that approximately 39% of respondents felt adequately prepared for the role, on appointment, whereas 29% did not, with a further 28% feeling it 'to some extent'. Male (full) professors were statistically more likely than their female counterparts to say they felt adequately prepared. The qualitative data reveal a small amount of cognitive/formal learning (whose value was sometimes disputed), some experiential learning, very little humanist learning (which may reflect distinctive features of the academy) and widespread social learning (which was universally praised). Most participants thought preparation was important and that informal, self-initiated, self-directed and personalised

¹ I am using the term 'professors' for those who have achieved the highest academic rank in UK academia and who would be deemed 'full professors' in USA academia. This term excludes academics of lower ranks e.g. 'assistant professors' or 'associate professors'. Similarly, the term 'professoriate' is used as the collective noun for all (full) professors at a university (excluding all lower-ranked academics).

² Throughout this paper, I will refer to 'UK higher education' because the data come from all four jurisdictions (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Without doubt, the four systems are becoming more distinctive as a result of different funding regimes and accountability structures. However, with regard to academic labour, the similarities still outweigh the differences.

learning opportunities (particularly coaching and mentoring) were more valuable than formal training courses. The paper concludes by arguing that focusing on leadership development (as opposed to leader development) may help the professoriate avoid burn-out and achieve greater organisational development.

Keywords: higher education; leadership development; full professors; social learning.

Introduction

This paper applies Walker's (2018) Global Leadership Development Ecosystem to the leadership development offered to and/or valued by UK (full) professors. Over the last 60 years, UK higher education (HE) participation rates have increased five-fold from about 10% to 50% (Department for Education, 2019), with a corresponding (though not equivalent) rise in academic staff of all ranks. Previously, it was common for departments to have a single professor who was also Head of Department. Nowadays, however, approximately three quarters of UK professors have no departmental line management responsibilities. In 2018/19, there were 16,840 full-time professors in this category, and they constituted approximately 12% of the total academic workforce (see Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020).

Given the steep rise in the number of UK professors without line management responsibility, and the associated increase in salary costs, it is no surprise that universities want to maximize the individual and collective contribution of their professoriates. Yet, research on this particular staff group is sparse (Meyer, 2012; Rayner, Fuller, McEwen & Roberts, 2010) since most studies of HE staff focus on specific formal leadership positions (e.g. Mercer & Pogosian, 2013; Scott, Bell, Coates & Grebennikov, 2010) or, more broadly, on academics of different ranks (e.g. Juntrasook, 2014; Juntrasook, Nairn, Bond & Spronken-

Smith, 2013; Uslu and Welch, 2016). The small body of work that focuses exclusively on the professoriate (Evans, 2015; 2017; 2018; Evans, Homer & Rayner, 2013; Macfarlane, 2011, 2012; Tight, 2002) suggests universities are not getting the best out of their most expensive resource. The role is multi-faceted, ill-defined and poorly-understood. Professors are subject to an ever-increasing set of competing demands. This has created an urgent need to determine whether the leadership development available to the professoriate is sufficient and fit-for-purpose. The current study contributes to this important but under-researched area by addressing the following research questions:

- 1) How well-prepared do UK professors feel when first appointed and thereafter?
- 2) What types of leadership development do they experience before and after appointment?
- 3) What types of leadership development do they most value?

In light of the findings, some tentative recommendations are made for university senior managers, HR Directors and those who design, deliver and/or facilitate leadership development.

Literature review

This section discusses the various ways professorial academic leadership has been defined whilst noting the lack of clarity and consensus. It then considers leadership development, more generally, within the HE sector, and, specifically, within the professoriate. It ends by reviewing the conceptual framework that has guided data analysis, namely, Walker's (2018) Global Leadership Development Ecosystem.

Professorial academic leadership

There is no agreed definition of academic leadership, and the subtle differences between intellectual leadership, educational leadership and academic leadership are rarely articulated. This lack of clarity is compounded when looking at the professoriate, as opposed to those with formal leadership positions. Drawing on survey and interview data from predominantly UK professors, Macfarlane (2011) identifies six qualities expected of a professor (*role model, mentor, advocate, guardian, acquirer and ambassador*). Building on this classification, Macfarlane (2012) argues that being a professor involves two freedoms (*critic and advocate*) and four duties (*mentoring; generating opportunities for others; safeguarding academic standards and values; being an ambassador for one's university*). It is debatable how far these freedoms and duties are distinctive. Academics below the rank of professor might feel they can exercise the two professorial freedoms, depending on the culture of their discipline and/or institution. Likewise, even junior academics are expected to safeguard academic standards and be an ambassador.

Drawing on several UK studies, Evans (2018) identifies three professorial roles that overlap with Macfarlane's. These are *developing future generations of academics; public engagement and institutional status-enhancement*. Evans' (2018) fourth role, *income generation*, is missing from Macfarlane's framework, since the professors in his research ranked it last out of nine potential roles. Its inclusion in Evans' list may stem from the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis and, in the UK, the subsequent decision by the Coalition government to remove the block teaching grant and triple student fees. Many universities are less financially secure than they were even a decade ago, when Macfarlane was collecting his data, and entrepreneurialism has become a much more prominent driver.

Leadership development within higher education

Dopson et al. (2016, p. 7) describe the literature on leadership development in UK higher education as ‘small-scale, fragmented and often politically weak’. Moreover, leader development, which focuses on the individual, is often conflated with leadership development, which focuses on capacity building within a given organisational context (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee, 2014). This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the scale and quality of what is currently available and, harder still, to make recommendations for future practice.

Notwithstanding the lack of robust research noted above, it is generally agreed that leadership development is becoming more prevalent, though not necessarily more effective. At the turn of the century, there was very little leadership development for those with a formal leadership role and virtually none for those with a more informal role (Inman, 2009; Johnson, 2002). The formal programmes that did exist were widely criticised for being too theoretical, too generic and insufficiently reflexive (Inman, 2009; Johnson, 2002). It was also said that some facilitators lacked credibility or a sufficiently detailed understanding of the distinctive HE landscape. In the last 10 years, leadership development initiatives have increased in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, meaning more support is available and at an earlier (pre-appointment) stage (Bolden et al., 2012; Burgoyne, Macknass & Williams, 2009; Hemsall, 2014). However, the criticisms levelled at the earlier programmes do not seem to have been overcome (Floyd, 2016; Preston and Floyd, 2016) and the target recipient remains a single individual with a designated role (Dopson et al., 2016).

Professorial leadership development

Since the professorial role is multi-faceted and ill-defined, it is difficult to specify what constitutes appropriate leadership development for this group. Leadership development needs

are a function of many variables. These might include a) the type of appointment, with personal chairs being seen as less demanding than established/named chairs; b) the academic discipline and whether this favours the 'lone researcher' or the large, externally-funded lab team; c) the professor's previous experience, within and beyond academia, and d) the expectations placed upon new appointees by their institution, their departmental colleagues and themselves.

Evans (2017, p. 137) found there was very little leadership development for the UK professoriate, primarily because 'the meaning of academic leadership remains relatively unexplored and obscure'. Institutions focus on easy-to-measure elements like publications and research income, and then throw all the more nebulous and relational outputs into a separate box labelled 'academic leadership'. Doing this relieves them of the need to specify its contents whilst simultaneously encouraging professors to 'overestimate its capacity and imagine it filled to the brim with an incalculable miscellany of every conceivable academic activity'. Evans argues that it would be far easier to meet the professional development needs of new professors if institutions had more explicit and realistic expectations. In the meantime, Evans (2017, p. 138) endorses the findings of Johnson (2002) and Inman (2009) by recommending 'initiatives such as support groups, mentoring schemes and semi-social gatherings' that allow professors to learn from each other by sharing experiences.

Leadership development outside higher education: conceptual framework

As already noted, the literature on leadership development in HE is limited, and none of the material reviewed in the previous section offered a conceptual framework. The search was therefore widened to include papers from management education. From that field, Walker's (2018) Global Leadership Development Ecosystem was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the four theories of learning (cognitive, experiential, humanist and social) are comprehensively

and convincingly articulated. Secondly, the quantitative data analysis is reassuringly rigorous, enabling the reader to be confident that the claims being made are fully warranted. As with all typologies, the differences between the elements (i.e. the four learning theories) have been deliberately highlighted in Walker's (2018) original paper and in the summary provided below. In real life, of course, the boundaries are more blurred.

Cognitive learning theory views learning as the process by which an individual acquires, internalizes, stores and retrieves specific types of decontextualized knowledge (see Fox, 1997). It relies on didactic methods (especially lectures and guided reading). Advocates claim this learning theory is efficient and its learning outcomes are relatively easy to assess. Critics contend the methods do not develop the complex thinking skills and sophisticated behaviours needed by modern day global leaders.

Experiential learning theory considers how experience affects learning and subsequent behaviour (see Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning uses personal reflection on previous experiences to bring about personal transformation. Critics say it is unstructured, time-consuming and expensive.

Humanist learning theory is similar to experiential learning theory but foregrounds feelings and emotions (see Rogers, Lyon & Tausch, 2014). Typically, it involves deep personal reflection on a person's motives, interests and values. It attracts the same criticisms as experiential learning theory and may be resisted by certain personality types.

Social learning theory looks at how humans learn from one another through observation, imitation and modelling (see Bandura, 1985). Social learning is facilitated through mentoring, coaching and group projects. How much formal structure and support to provide is a key consideration within this learning theory.

In Walker's (2018) study, 107 mature students taking an International Masters in Business Administration (IMBA) at an American university simultaneously completed a

web-based survey designed around the four learning methodologies outlined above and the Global Mindset Inventory (GMI), a psychometric assessment tool. Hierarchical regression analysis was performed on both datasets in order to test three hypotheses. The results indicated that ‘learning methodologies played important and distinct roles in building intellectual, social, and psychological capital’ (Walker, 2018, p. 18).

Unsurprisingly, the strongest correlation was between social learning (operationalised as mentoring and peer learning) and social capital³. Formal learning (akin to cognitive learning) was correlated not only with intellectual capital⁴ (as expected) but also (and a little more strongly) with social capital⁵. This likely reflects the fact that the formal classes on the IMBA programme frequently included groupwork. Experiential learning did not correlate directly with psychological capital, as might have been expected, but with intellectual capital⁶. In other words, formal learning and experiential learning both correlated with intellectual capital and, rather surprisingly, none of the learning methodologies correlated directly with psychological capital.

Moreover, strengthening self-efficacy was seen as the best way to improve global leadership capabilities. Formal learning and experiential learning were shown to have the most direct impact on self-efficacy, suggesting that these two approaches are the most effective of the four. Mentoring was shown to be the most effective type of social learning. Walker’s Global Leadership Development Ecosystem has been used to analyse the qualitative data generated by the UK professors in the current study, even though these cannot be directly compared with Walker’s quantitative results.

³ $r(64) = .36, p < .05$

⁴ $r(64) = .26, p < .10$

⁵ $r(64) = .28, p < .10$

⁶ $r(64) = .28, p < .10$

Research design

Data were collected via a questionnaire survey completed by 1,282 UK professors and 42 hour-long, semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire survey comprised 24 items. It had sections on what is expected of professors; what respondents understand by the term *academic leadership*; how much importance they attach to it; the factors that hinder their exercise of academic leadership; their current morale, what preparation they have received, and how, if at all, their opinions have changed over time. Most items used a five-point Likert-type scale (e.g. definitely agree / agree to some extent / neither agree nor disagree / disagree to some extent / definitely disagree). There were also six opportunities to add comments. Over 700 people did this, making the survey data unusually rich.

Approximately 5,000 personalized emails were sent to professors at universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, inviting them to visit the survey website. 1,282 usable questionnaires were generated (911 from men, 350 from women and 21 with gender unspecified). This makes the dataset the largest of its kind, by far. However, the sampling was non-systematic, and, therefore, the results are neither representative nor generalizable. In fact, subsequent analysis has indicated that the sample is highly skewed towards those who believe professorial academic leadership is important⁷ and moderately skewed towards those who have high morale⁸.

⁷The item asking respondents to rate the importance of professorial academic leadership from 1 ('not at all important') to 10 ('extremely important') had skewness -1.834 (SE = .069) and kurtosis .030 (SE = .138).

⁸The item asking respondents to rate their current work-related morale, from 1 ('very low morale') to 10 ('very high morale') had skewness -0.852 (SE = .069) and kurtosis 5.230 (SE = .138).

Semi-structured interviews

42 one-to-one semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 25 male and 17 female professors, from 15 different institutions and 26 different disciplines. Nearly 400 survey respondents volunteered an interview, but time constraints meant we could accommodate only a tenth of them. We had to rely on convenience sampling for the same reason. Within these limitations, we sought maximum variation with respect to nationality, subject/discipline, length of experience as a professor, and university mission group (e.g. the research-intensive Russell Group, the business-focused University Alliance etc.). All but one interview were face-to-face; most lasted about an hour, though some lasted much longer; all were audio recorded and then transcribed. The interview schedule covered interviewee's career history, job satisfaction, work, work/life balance, morale, preparation for the role and support once in post. Since the interviewees had self-selected (twice), we did not expect them to admit to behaving badly. So, instead, we asked them to consider whether any of their professorial colleagues were unworthy of the title, and, if so, to explain why.

Data analysis

The quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and any statistically significant differences noted with respect to gender. The survey comments and interview transcripts were coded using the procedure outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990) and then inputted into Nvivo 10. In the presentation of results, anonymous survey respondents are indicated by *SR* and interview participants by *IP*.

Results

1a) Levels of preparedness

Survey respondents were asked whether they felt adequately prepared for the professorial role when first appointed. As Table 1 indicates, the results are very mixed, with 39% saying broadly ‘yes’ (i.e. ‘definitely’ or ‘to a large extent’), 28% saying ‘to some extent’, and 29% saying broadly ‘no’ (i.e. ‘not really’ or ‘not at all’). 4% of responses were unclear/missing.

Table 1: Levels of Preparedness (Survey Data)

Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?						
	All (%)	All (N)	Male		Female	
Definitely / in all respects	7%	90	8%	72	5%	17
To a large extent / in most respects	32%	414	33%	300	31%	107
To some extent / in some respects	28%	361	30%	272	24%	85
Not really / not entirely	22%	277	19%	175	29%	101
Not at all	7%	83	7 %	60	6%	22
Unsure / difficult to answer	3%	38	3%	23	4%	14
No answer	1%	19	1%	9	1%	4
Total	100%	1282	100%	911	100%	350

When the data were broken down by gender, male professors were statistically more likely than female professors to say they felt adequately prepared for the role⁹. There are at least three possible reasons for this difference. Firstly, male professors might have actually

⁹ The Mann-Whitney U test showed a significant difference in the proportion of males and females answering ‘definitely’, ‘to a large extent’, ‘to some extent’, ‘not really’ and ‘not at all’ when asked if they felt adequately prepared in their earliest days as a professor. $U(\text{male}=879, \text{female}=332)=131722, z=-2.720, p=0.007$.

received more and/or better preparation/training, though, intuitively, this seems unlikely. Secondly, more of them may think preparation for this role is unnecessary and, therefore, all newly-appointed Chairs should feel up to the job. Again, however, this seems unlikely, given the qualitative data below. The third possibility is that female professors feel less confident than their male counterparts when first appointed, and it is this lack of confidence, rather than any lack of preparation/training, that leads to these feelings of under-preparedness.

This would accord with a wealth of previous literature documenting women's relative lack of confidence, especially within the academy (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Tessens, White & Web, 2011). It also resonates with IP30 (female, Business and Management) who asserted most emphatically that women simply did not put themselves forward because they doubted their abilities. If a lack of confidence is the root cause of 35% of female professors saying they felt underprepared for the role, this has implications for the kind of support they should be offered.

Survey participants were also asked if their current institution had done enough to prepare them for the professorial role. Here, the differences between male and female respondents were not statistically significant. 36% of respondents said broadly 'yes'; 22% said 'to some extent' and, rather worryingly, 36% said broadly 'no'.

1b) Amount of leadership development experienced by professors

Many professors pointed out that we were asking them to recall events from 20 or 30 years ago. There was general agreement that leadership development opportunities had increased and were becoming ever more diverse, in response to the rapidly changing higher education

landscape. Some of these opportunities were directly related to formal leadership positions (e.g. Head of Department) or specific initiatives (e.g. the Athena Swan Charter)¹⁰.

Despite this recent expansion, the majority of professors had not experienced any type of leadership development at the time of their appointment. Most were unperturbed by this. A small number believed professors had no distinctive role to perform over and above what would be expected of any academic. More commonly, they believed no-one would be appointed to a Chair unless they were already performing at the required level. The following quotes are typical of these two perspectives:

Being a professor is a promotion from whatever you were before. Other than that, there really is no difference ... Your duties aren't any different. (IP6, female, Languages and Linguistics)

Someone who needs special institutional training for a professorial role is probably unfitted for that role. (SR621, male, Philosophy)

Professors often highlighted how ill-defined and diverse the role was. Consequently, it was impossible to be fully prepared for the wide range of demands that might be generated.

I'm not sure how you can be prepared for all these intangibles so I'm not critical of the Universities I've worked in for not preparing me 'properly'. Anyway, I always thought we were a community of peers (OK I'm not totally naive) and that academics were responsible for themselves rather than each other. (SR806, female, Sociology)

2) Types of leadership development experienced by professors

¹⁰ The Athena Swan Charter was established in 2005 to encourage more women to pursue HE careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine. The Charter now aims to address gender inequality more broadly.

In terms of Walker's (2018) conceptual model, the study found a small amount of cognitive/formal learning (whose value was sometimes disputed), some experiential learning, very little humanist learning (which may reflect distinctive features of the academy) and widespread social learning (which was universally praised).

Cognitive/Formal learning

Not many participants had undertaken formal training and opinion was divided as to its value. Two survey respondents at Newcastle University, one male and one female (SR384 and SR961)¹¹ described their university's leadership training for new professors as 'outstanding' and 'very good'. A third (983) said the programme had deservedly won a *Times Higher* award. Their opinions were endorsed by IP31 who had taken the course before moving elsewhere. The programme comprised fortnightly sessions over nine months with the same participants. For IP31, 'the most useful' part was the monthly workshop in which colleagues offered practical advice about a specific problem one member of the group was facing. The key learning opportunity came during the next session when 'they would give us a little précis of whether it worked or not'. This suggests that, in line with Walker (2018), formal learning can build social capital when it facilitates not just groupwork, per se, but peer learning.

No other interviewees mentioned a specific course for newly-appointed professors, but two were very positive about the generic in-house management training their respective universities offered:

Almost uniquely, in my experience of university training, it has been really useful because it was not soft skills. It was basically - and I absolutely hate this phrase but it's the one the university

¹¹ To avoid compromising anonymity, the academic disciplines of respondents from Newcastle University have not been given.

insist on using – it was basically people from corporate services telling us about how these corporate services work. So, finance, HR and the marketing and admissions, etc. etc. I found it incredibly helpful and much more helpful than I had envisaged. (IP28, female, Business and Management)

They do a leadership management course here for university management which I took myself. Which was actually really, really good. Some bits were just validating stuff you knew ... communication skills, I knew. But then some of the financial and strategic management in the university thinking at that higher level was really useful. (IP32, female, Medicine)

Similarly, two interviewees praised external courses run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) even though these were not specifically aimed at new professors. IP13 (female, Law) described hers as ‘very, very helpful’. It ran for two days a month over several months during which participants worked on a project in groups. IP33 (female, Law) was more ambivalent about her LFHE course (‘some bits were good and some bits were not so good’) but, like IP31, the thing she valued most were the ‘action learning sets’ during which people ‘in very similar situations and at very similar stages in their career’ discussed their current issues. From these interactions, she learnt resilience (‘being able to distance myself emotionally from the pressure and anxiety’) rather than the best way to tackle a specific problem. Outside academia, the NIHR course provided by Ashridge Business School on behalf of the NHS was endorsed by two survey respondents (SR136 and SR294), as was the leadership training provided by a technology company (SR256).

These positive remarks were counterbalanced by scathing comments from those who thought formal courses were too generic and/or taught by HR people lacking credibility. The quotes below concur with sentiments expressed by many participants:

Please, please. please do not turn this into another call for 'training'. I have seldom found 'generic training' by 'experts' who do not do the job useful. (SR1039, female, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts)

Our staff development had a terrible reputation when I first got here and the two or three things that I was made to take reinforced that. (IP24, female, Biological Sciences)

Experiential learning

A few participants highlighted previous university roles that had helped them prepare for professorship (such as being on Senate or having management responsibility). Many of the others claimed they had been able to learn most, if not all, of what they needed to know simply by performing their new role. This attitude is hardly surprising given that those promoted to the highest rank will likely have a sharp mind, strong motivation and a keen desire to succeed. The following comment was typical:

It was just expected that I'd learn the ropes and get on with it. Universities mostly operate in this way, and I have to say that, for the most part, it kind of works. (SR570, male, Education)

IP18 (male, Languages and Linguistics) took this argument a stage further by claiming that, for such senior academics, experiential learning is not just the most common approach, but also the best:

I learnt on the job ... there was no induction ... there was no help ... so, I learned the hard way. And I think, in some ways it's the only way to learn ... I can certainly see the need for induction processes for younger members of staff. For a professor, I'm not sure. I think people assume that you have cut your teeth.

Just occasionally, experiential learning was criticised for being inefficient. IP9 (male, Social Sciences) likened it to ‘learning how to play the guitar by listening to records’, coming to the conclusion, ‘it can be very successful, but it is a bit hit-and-miss, though’. Likewise, IP20 (female, Languages and Linguistics) complained that:

I frankly didn’t have any help. I mean, I *completely* didn’t have any help ... it took me a hell of a long time to just discover some basic things [laughter].

Very often, experiential learning was combined with an element of social or cognitive learning making it hard to judge how successful experiential learning alone might have been. The following quotes are typical:

Experience was the main preparation, though there was a tiny amount of management training.
(SR595, male, Music)

I was left to invent the role for myself, but there were many examples to observe and a few to ask.
(SR242, male, Chemistry)

Humanist learning

There were no survey responses about this type of learning and only two interview comments. IP21 (female, Education) described how the atmosphere at a university-convened meeting of newly-appointed professors changed for the better after a man had revealed ‘in a very *personal* way’ how his depression had affected his career. As she put it, ‘You could just feel the shift’. His revelation gave the rest of the group permission to talk about ‘personal stuff’ and not just research bids.

In contrast, IP12 (male, Engineering) complained about not receiving any training in conflict resolution, even though it was obviously needed. He had spent the first five years of his professorship trying to change his department's culture, which had caused him 'intense grief and stress'. He continued, 'There was no training at all in handling that, so it was very unpleasant for me'.

Walker (2018) notes that humanist learning was popular in the 1960s but lost out to more 'rationalist' forms of leadership development thereafter. She claims it is currently enjoying a revival. The data from this study provide little evidence of this, perhaps because the life of the mind remains so highly privileged in academia. Whether or not this constitutes a lost opportunity is a moot point.

Social learning

This was by far the most prevalent type of leadership development and the most highly valued. Most often, social learning occurred with colleagues within the participant's department or wider discipline, although there were a few instances of people learning from parents, spouses, siblings or friends who were also professors:

There is no preparation like a wise colleague. (SR584, male, Theology)

Most of what I've picked up about professors' roles I've learned informally through friends and acquaintances in the field rather than formal institution-level preparation. (SR1171, male, Sociology)

Generally, any mentoring that occurred was informal, meaning the mentee approached someone of their choosing for ad hoc support, as the need arose. IP16's (male, Physics) experience was typical:

So, I have always taken advice from my colleagues, from both senior colleagues and colleagues at my own level ... and I found it extremely helpful ... I can always pick up new ideas and get an external perspective or sanity check.

These informal arrangements were usually deemed adequate with the exception of two women who wanted more structure. One initially eschewed a formal mentor but changed her mind, saying:

One year in, I realise that I would actually appreciate some kind of sensible (non-naïf) leadership training/mentoring. I've always found mentors before ... but it's harder to see who they might be at this level. There's a sense that you're already expected to know all this stuff. So, it feels a bit odd to ask for advice or help. Athena Swan recommends mentors for all at all levels, and I now see why. (SR972, female, History)

The other (SR1085, female, Health Services) went as far as to pay for her own 'very expensive intensive leadership course and a coach' because, in her first year, 'mindless admin and expectations to deliver money and REF' had squeezed out 'all the things I valued (mentoring, supporting women in particular, trades union work etc)'.

3) Types of leadership development most valued

Professors without portfolio generally eschewed the kind of content-heavy management courses directed at HoDs, covering topics such as departmental finances and employment

law. However, opportunities to develop strategic leadership and ‘soft skills’ were viewed more enthusiastically. One-off events were not as highly rated as courses that lasted 5-10 days spread over several months, which mirrors much of the literature on effective professional development (Dopson et al., 2016; Mercer, Barker & Bird, 2010). These so-called ‘block courses’ were valued because they allowed participants to interact with people at a similar career stage facing similar problems. This interaction was enhanced if action learning sets were actively facilitated and participants required to report back on how their attempts to problem-solve had panned out. Informal opportunities to observe others and ask for ad-hoc advice were also valued by nearly all participants. A few were keen to supplement this with more formal mentoring arrangements.

Discussion

Although leadership development opportunities have become more prevalent in recent years, very few participants had received any kind of leadership development prior to their appointment. For many, this was not considered problematic because they saw themselves as highly skilled individuals who could easily acquire through experiential learning any attributes they lacked. For a minority, however, this deficiency required a remedy. Obviously, a one-size-fits-all approach is counter-productive because the relationship between professional development and levels of preparedness is not straightforward. Much depends upon the type and quality of professional development on offer; how far the demands of the new and the previous role differ, and the personality of the person making the transition. Some people will feel underprepared regardless of how much high-quality professional development they have received; others will feel adequately prepared without any professional development at all.

The leadership development opportunities experienced by participants came from a variety of sources, before and after appointment, within and beyond the academy. Some had benefitted from leadership experiences within their own institution prior to appointment (e.g. serving as HoD or on University-wide committees). Others highlighted leadership opportunities they had experienced in their previous employment outside academia. After appointment, leadership development opportunities were generated within the academy by peers, more established senior professors and those in formal leadership roles such as HoDs, deans and PVCs. Some people also sought out development opportunities outside the sector. In one instance, a recently-appointed professor paid for her own leadership development course and external coach.

In terms of Walker's (2018) Global Leadership Development Ecosystem, social learning (in the form of mentoring and peer learning) was by far the most prevalent and most highly valued. Experiential learning was also common, although participants thought it worked best when combined with social and/or cognitive learning. Cognitive learning, on its own, was rarely deemed worthwhile, except by the handful of participants who had been pleasantly surprised by the usefulness of courses about 'Corporate Services'. Humanist learning was almost completely absent. Although participants frequently mentioned their values, motivations and interests, these were not seen as vehicles for developing leadership capabilities.

Recommendations and conclusion

It is notoriously difficult to demonstrate if professional development is fit-for-purpose, let alone value-for-money. The fact that many participants felt they were providing copious amounts of academic leadership, despite their own lack of leadership development, could be

seen as one reason for cash-strapped universities to spend their limited resources elsewhere. However, if they do decide to facilitate professorial leadership development, the results of this study support the following recommendations:

- develop clearer and more realistic job descriptions (ideally in consultation with role-holders and their role-set)
- prioritize informal, self-initiated, self-directed and personalized learning opportunities, particularly coaching and mentoring
- ensure any leadership courses for professors are genuinely desired, suitably bespoke and credibly delivered
- prioritize ‘block courses’ during which action learning sets can engage in collective problem solving over several months
- recognise that some incumbents (perhaps women more than men) may lack confidence rather than particular knowledge or skillsets.

Obviously, some of these suggestions are easier and cheaper to implement than others. Beyond the specific initiatives noted above, there is also scope for a more fundamental shift away from *leader* development towards *leadership* development. The promotion criteria for a Chair will specify what previous achievements are required but not what is expected of the incumbent, once in post. This lacuna allows all the different stakeholder groups to make ever greater and more diverse demands, which no single individual can hope to satisfy. Many participants felt that what their departmental colleagues and the central university administration collectively wanted from them was simply unachievable. The participants would certainly endorse Evans’s (2017) call to lay out and then strip back the contents of the black box labelled ‘academic leadership’. However, such entreaties may well fall on deaf ears, given that universities are ‘greedy organisations’ (Mercer, Barker & Bird, 2010) and

there is no shortage of academics aspiring to be professors. A more fruitful approach might, therefore, be to highlight the way some knowledge-intensive organisations outside academia (particularly management consultancy and law firms) are achieving greater organisational development through a more integrated approach (Dopson et al., 2016). Instead of focusing on leader development and human capital (the knowledge, skills and attributes of individuals), these organisations are prioritising leadership development and social capital (the connections and interactions between individuals).

The professoriate, as a collective, offers great potential for shared leadership amongst its own members, with individuals playing to their unique strengths. The professoriate could also foster shared leadership amongst other (less senior) staff groups, by nurturing not just their teaching and/or research expertise but also their leadership capacities. Adopting these two approaches would appear to be the best way to maximize the contribution of the sector's most expensive resource. Any institution that deliberately chose to foreground leadership development and social capital (as opposed to leader development and human capital) in its professoriate would be worthy of further study in order to see if the gains being anticipated in this paper were realised in practice.

Conflict of interest statement

None.

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