



Leadership Preparation and Development Research Funding Initiative

Final report of the project: *Leadership preparation and development for UK-based university professors*

Linda Evans, University of Leeds
l.evans@leeds.ac.uk

Background and Theoretical Framework (max 500 words)

One of the issues to emerge from a small scale project that I carried out 2011-12 (*Leading professors: academic professorial leadership as it is perceived by 'the led'*, funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education) was that there is an absence of leadership preparation and development for professors in UK universities, despite the increasing expectation that they should assume ever-widening roles as academic leaders. An anonymous questionnaire respondent made the comment: "Leadership development is not generally offered to new professors - an omission, given the focus of their work - and something that could make the role more effective", and this theme was taken up by Ann Mroz, then editor of the *Times Higher Education*, in her leader of 17th November 2011, where the study's preliminary findings were reported: 'What it means to be a professor - and more importantly what others think it means - is magnificently opaque. There's plenty of advice on how to get there, but little once you've reached your destination. There's no global job description, no template, no handbook, only the example of those who have gone before.' This BELMAS-funded study was intended to address this issue.

Located within a socio-cultural framework that incorporated consideration of self-efficacy theory, social theory on structure and agency, and situated workplace learning, the research applied the notion of distributed leadership to the university sector, examining professors' academic leadership – their leadership of junior academic and academic-related colleagues' 'creative', scholarly, research-focused and intellectual-related development - rather than their (professors') formal designated leadership and management roles such as head of department, dean of faculty, research director and pro-dean or pro-vice chancellor. Informed and prompted by the findings from my study of professorial academic leadership as perceived by 'the led', the rationale for the BELMAS-funded study was that there are clear expectations of professors – not only from university senior management, but also from 'the led' – and that considerable dissatisfaction and discontent arises when these expectations remain unmet. Yet anecdotal and experiential evidence indicates that professors are often unprepared for the increasingly expansive leadership roles that they are required or expected to fulfil. This study was directed at exploring the reliability of such evidence, and at examining the nature, extent and bases of any such lack of preparation on the part of professors. Also examined was how any such lack of preparation and preparedness affects professors' feelings of self-efficacy, along with consideration of how, through their agency, professors are expected to – and do – shape the various and myriad structures that define the 21st century higher education sector, such as: research cultures, academic disciplinary tribes and epistemic cultures; and learning communities of practice. Essentially, the disparity between what is expected of professors and how they carry out their roles represents the disparity between what I call 'demanded' or 'requested' professionalism and 'enacted' professionalism (Evans, 2011).

Preparation and development may be thought of as being subjective and objective in focus (i.e. as self- [or auto-] preparation or development, and preparation or development that is effected or attempted on one person by another). Incorporating this ambiguity of focus, four perspectives on and interpretations of preparation and development were applied to the study:

- preparation and development as ‘training’ or enhancement of skills for and capacity to carry out a specific work role (in the case of professors, this could be at both the pre- and post-appointment or promotion stages);
- preparedness for the role and its requirements/demands (this might include mental preparedness, or preparedness in terms of understanding what the role involves);
- preparation as a strategy or tactic (e.g. for securing promotion to a chair; preparation for a long-term career goal or ambition);
- development of the role and how it is perceived and carried out.

Objectives and Research Questions (max 300 words)

The study’s objectives were to examine the extent and nature both of a perceived need for, and any provision of, leadership preparation for university professors, with a view to identifying lacunae and shortcomings as well as examples of good practice, in order to formulate recommendations for policy and practice and disseminate these widely across the HE sector both in the UK and overseas. Reflecting these objectives, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What level and quality of preparation – if any - for their various leadership roles is available to university professors?
2. What lacunae and shortcomings exist, and with what consequences?
3. What – if any - models of good practice (of professorial leadership preparation) exist, and what are the bases of their effectiveness?

Methodology (max 300 words)

Answers to the research questions were sought through questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires

Although in the application for this award I proposed sending questionnaires to around 2000 UK-based university professors, in the event some 6000 online questionnaires were sent to professors based at both pre- and post-1992 universities, using Bristol Online Surveys. In addition to biographical-related questions, respondents were asked:

- Do you understand what your institution requires of you as a professor (i.e. are its expectations of its professors in general - or of you specifically - clearly articulated)?
- How much guidance have you received within your institution to help you fulfil your professorial role?
- What has been the quality of any guidance and support you've received within your institution to help you fulfil your professorial role?

They were also asked questions relating to the extent to which – if at all – they experience pressures in carrying out their professorial role and if they have ever felt the need to modify their behaviour in order to meet other people’s expectation of them as professors. Responses to these questions were intended to identify any implicit need for guidance and/or support in carrying out their roles.

Interviews

Directed at delving deeper into and elucidating the factors underpinning some of the issues that emerged from the questionnaire findings, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 20 professors representing a range of biographical variables and representing institutions in all 4 UK national contexts. An additional important consideration in selecting this sub-sample was the content of their responses to the questionnaire items referred to above; I tried to include interviewees representing a wide spread of experiences of provision of support and guidance – though this proved more difficult than I had anticipated, since it became clear that little dedicated professorial development and support is available.

Key Findings (max 1500 words)

The questionnaire generated over 1200 largely complete responses, as indicated in Table 1, below. Table 2 indicates the distribution of responses in relation to institution type (pre- and post-1992), and Table 3 indicates the distribution according to subject (applying the categories used in the 2008 RAE). It should be noted that all of the 62 respondents who selected ‘other’ should, in fact, have selected a specific subject since the ‘other’ subject that they recorded was in all cases covered by the subject choices offered (e.g. astrophysics should have been categorised as physics; medical education should have been categorised as education).

Table 1: Questionnaire responses, by gender

	Frequency	Percent
<i>male</i>	911	71.1
<i>female</i>	350	27.3
<i>total valid</i>	1261	98.4
<i>missing</i>	21	1.6
total	1282	100

Table 2: Questionnaire responses, by institution type

	Frequency	Percent
<i>pre-1992</i>	1087	84.8
<i>post-1992</i>	195	15.2
total	1282	100

The overarching key finding to emerge from the study is that ‘official’, designated, institutional preparation and/or development provision for such professorial leadership is practically non-existent. I found only one UK university – Newcastle - that has recently (within the last three years) offered such provision; *Unpacking your chair* is a professorial development and support programme that offers workshop-type meetings to a small cohort of Newcastle professors, and incorporates the flexibility to shape the group’s agenda in order to meet members’ articulated needs and preferences.

In terms of preparation interpreted as preparedness for a role – that is, knowing and understanding what is required or expected of one as the role-holder - the questionnaire data suggest that most respondents felt prepared for professorship. As is indicated in Table 4, over 65% of the item’s respondents responded positively to the question: *Do you understand what your institution requires of you as a professor (i.e. are its expectations of its professors in general - or of you specifically - clearly articulated)?* Yet it is important not to overlook the fact that this leaves over a quarter of the item’s respondents (who selected the response options: ‘in

some cases', 'not really' or 'no') reporting varying degrees of uncertainty about what is expected of them.

Table 3: Questionnaire responses, by subject affiliation (numbers indicate respondent selections)

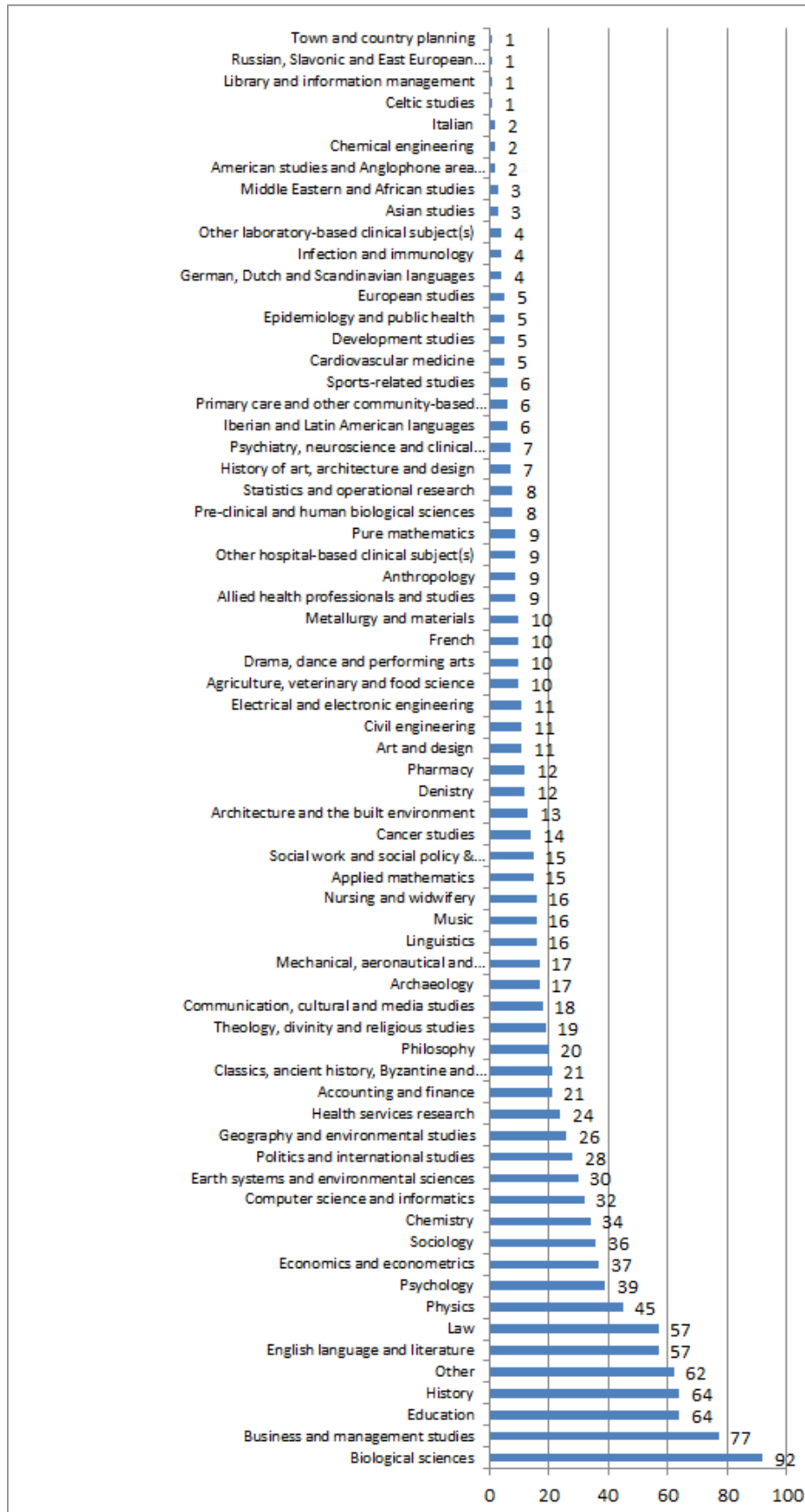
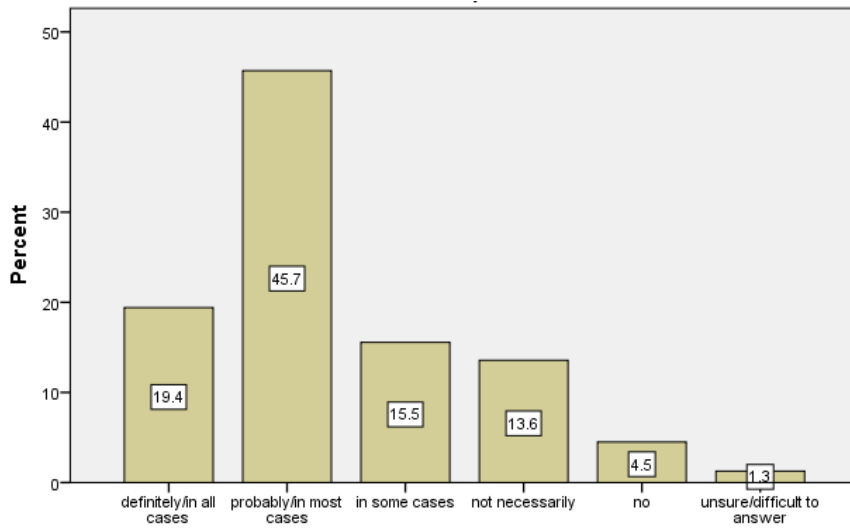
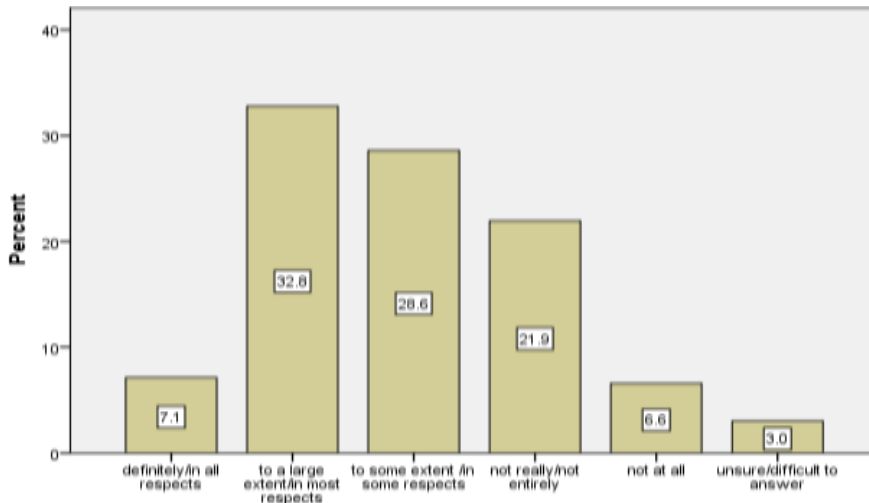


Table 4: Questionnaire responses to the question: *Do you understand what your institution requires of you as a professor (i.e. are its expectations of its professors in general - or of you specifically - clearly articulated)?*



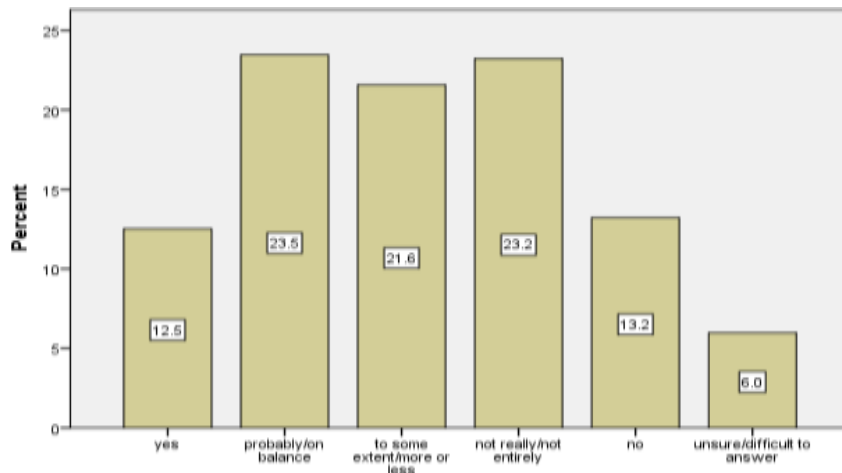
A similar proportion of the respondents responded negatively to the question: *Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?* As Table 5 indicates, over 28% of respondents selected ‘not really/not entirely’ or ‘not at all’, and well under half of the sample, collectively, selected either of the two most positive response options.

Table 5: Questionnaire responses to the question: *Do you feel that, in your earliest days as a professor, you were adequately prepared for taking on the professorial role?*



The most negative findings derived from questionnaire data relate to universities’ roles in preparing academics for the professorial role. As Table 6 indicates, in response to the question: *Has your current institution done all that you would want or need it to do to prepare you for the professorial role at that institution?*, over one-third of respondents selected negative responses (‘not really/not entirely’ or ‘no’), and only 12.5% selected an emphatic ‘yes’, leaving slightly more than one-fifth selecting one of two response options that represent qualified positivity (‘probably/on balance’ and ‘to some extent/more or less’).

Table 6: Questionnaire responses to the question: *Has your current institution done all that you would want or need it to do to prepare you for the professorial role at that institution?*



Interview-generated data broadly corroborated the questionnaire data, with interviewees indicating that their institutions had offered no form of preparation specifically for professorship. In response to being asked, most interviewees responded that, on taking up their first chair, they had felt ill-prepared for professorship. The following quotes are indicative of the consensual response:

[I was] totally, totally unprepared! I remember my first faculty meeting, and I thought, “Well, I’ve been appointed to a chair here; everyone will be looking at me in the room and thinking, ‘Who is this guy?’ I need to speak”. So I ... I spoke, and I learned, and I spoke, and I learned. I was active. I did a lot of stuff wrong, but I did some stuff right, and I learned on the job. There was no induction. And there was no help from my current head of school at that stage. So, I learned the hard way. And I think, in some ways, it’s the only way to learn. (male linguistics professor, pre-1992 university)

I did feel under-prepared, and I was worried about expectations, but I persuaded myself that it would be a role that I would grow into, and that if you lead by doing, you *learn* by doing, and that I didn’t believe that I wouldn’t be able to work it out. I didn’t get any induction when I arrived at all, at either university or faculty level. Absolutely nothing! And the first term I just wandered round in a fog, having no idea what I was supposed to be doing. ... So, how to be a professor: no. (female humanities professor, pre-1992 university)

Yet despite articulating their recollections of unpreparedness, interviewees were, for the most part, relatively unenthusiastic about the notion or prospect of any form of institutionally organised preparation or development provision for professors. The same linguistics professor quoted above, for example, commented:

The problem is that, unless you’re going to start normalising, I find a lot of training partly coming out of the science model, but also, so generic as to be ... er ... not directly useful for me. So, I am the person that I am; I reacted in the ways that I reacted, and I ... I’m not sure what sort of induction processes there should be for a professor. 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, and you may make mistakes, but, basically, you are what you are, and whatever contribution you can make, you'll make it.

A key issue is that professors, by definition, are successful as academics. For the most part, they will have manifested relatively high degrees of competence, self-confidence, intelligence and resourcefulness. As is implied by both of the interviewees quoted above, professors tend to 'find a way through', and to cope with, whatever challenging situations they face – including how to be, and how to present themselves effectively as, professors. That they should be sceptical about formal training or development is therefore unsurprising; in many respects they are likely to consider such provision unnecessary, and, aware of such sensitivities, universities are likely to be similarly wary of offering it. Promotion to professorship is often regarded as a reward or form of recognition for having performed successfully as an academic, and the implication of this interpretation is that professors will carry on in much the same vein as before their promotion.

My findings show that many professors prepare themselves for being, and develop as, professors by modelling themselves and their practice on what they consider effective academic leadership manifested by professors with whom they have interacted. Whilst a few of my interviewees spoke of specific professorial role models, most implied having assimilated impressions of good 'professorialness' from multiple examples, accumulated throughout their careers, and of fashioning their own professorial academic leadership on similar lines, avoiding replicating unimpressive behaviour. A recently appointed male maths professor, for example, observed:

I think there are some people that you very much respect, and they do things in particular ways that you very much like. Er ... not, I think, in a way of saying, "This person is my role model and I'll consciously follow them"; I mean, I don't feel I have *that* – although, maybe, I mean, you take aspects of people, more ... and some people you take more aspects of ... people that give very good lectures that are, sort of, consistently impressive. ... I mean, I've got, kind of, very much *anti*-role models ... people that you've heard certain kinds of behaviours that I just don't want anything to do with: you know, talk to someone for about 30 seconds and you think you should be an author on their paper!

In this sense, developing as a professor, within the role, seems to incorporate a large element of perpetuating, consciously or unconsciously, the kind of practice that one's professorial predecessors manifested, and which was considered acceptable or effective. Yet I was also struck by the evident concern of many questionnaire respondents and interviewees to meet the expectations of others – not only of senior management, but also of junior colleagues: those for whom professors are expected to provide academic leadership. One female education professor, for example, told of her perpetual concern to publish – and be seen to be publishing – more papers than junior colleagues, in order to justify her promotion and senior status. Others spoke of being constantly aware of the need to act as role models, and to be above reproach in their professional behaviour, and in many ways their development within the professorial role – their developing a niche for themselves – was strongly influenced by what was identified as the unrelenting pressure to perform and to prove oneself.

My interpretation is that this pressure was exacerbated by lack of clarity about what is meant by 'academic leadership' and how it manifests itself. Professors were very conscious that they were expected to provide academic leadership, but in the absence of their universities clarifying precisely what this entails (and conveying this to junior academics), professors often took on excessive workloads and set themselves goals that were almost unmanageable, in order to meet what they imagined to be other people's

expectations of them. This is, it must be remembered, a constituency that prides itself on its capacity to perform and to deliver – which underpins professors’ perceptions of self-efficacy.

Implications for Theory and Policy (max 500 words)

A clear policy implication to emerge from the findings is that if universities see academic leadership as professors’ key institutional role, they must be more explicit in defining and articulating how they interpret the term, and precisely what they expect professors to do in order to manifest academic leadership. Such clarity should be communicated not only to those expected to be academic leaders – professors – but also those on the receiving end of it (‘the led’: staff who are not themselves professors), and whose expectations evidently impact on professorial attitudes and behaviour. Preparing academics for the professoriate, and developing them as professors once they are promoted, should be heavily informed by such articulation.

My study also revealed a growing trend of introducing institutional professorial grading, whereby professors are graded and may progress through the grades according to their achievements and performance. Manchester University, for example, has five grades of professors; Leeds University has recently introduced three grades, and Oxford University has for some time distinguished between statutory and titular professors (the former category – effectively, named chairs – being the more prestigious and the only one of the two grades that warrants a professorial pay scale). Other universities have also adopted professorial grading, and it seems inevitable that the policy will eventually become widespread across the Russell Group. It is a policy that, in the interests of fairness, transparency and equity, has important implications for the continued development and preparation of professors; universities surely have a duty and responsibility to offer provision for any of their professors who do not, but wish to, enjoy the highest grade status (and associated salaries), to develop their skills and performance towards meeting the criteria for advancement to the next grade.

Finally, this study’s findings have implications for theory development. Specifically, it would be interesting and useful to develop theoretical perspectives on people’s motivation to develop, which would address issues such as whether there is a stage in one’s career progression where one becomes satisfied with one’s achievements and skills and eschews further development, or whether the desire to develop is insatiable, and whether individuals differ in this respect, and, if so, what factors underpin any such differences. There is potential for exploring links with extant theories of motivation and human development, such as Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of human needs, and Sternberg’s theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 1999; 2008).

Future Plans [if appropriate] (max 200 words)

My plans are to focus on developing theoretical perspectives from the study’s findings, along the lines outlined above.

Related Papers and Presentations

A written paper, focused on the findings from this BELMAS-funded study, is in preparation, for submission to an academic journal. A paper will also be presented at the 2014 European Conference on Educational Research in Porto, Portugal.

In terms of what has already been delivered, the study’s findings (combined, in some cases, with those of two studies funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education) have fed into:

Evans, L. (2014) What is effective research leadership? A research-informed perspective, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33 (1), (special issue: 'Leading the academy: Defining the future of leadership in higher education').

Evans, L. (2015) A changing role for university professors? Professorial academic leadership as it is perceived by "the led", *British Educational Research Journal* (in press at the time of writing).

Findings from this BELMAS-funded study have been presented at the following conference or seminar papers, which have focused exclusively on this study:

Evans, L. (2013) '*Becoming and learning to be a professor: academic leadership preparation and development for the UK's professoriate*', paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education, Celtic Manor Resort, Newport, Wales, December 11-13th.

Evans, L. (2013) '*Becoming and developing as a professor: examining the professional development needs of the UK's professoriate*', paper presented at the annual conference of the International Professional Development Association, Aston University, Birmingham, UK, November 29-30th.

Evans, L. (2013) '*Leadership Preparation and Development for UK-based University Professors*', paper presented within the symposium: Leadership Development, at the annual conference of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society, The Dalmahoy Hotel and Country Club, Edinburgh, UK, July 12-14th.

Evans, L. (2013) '*Professorial academic leadership in UK business schools: is there a need for professorial preparation and development programmes?*', paper presented at the 2nd Annual EFMD Higher Education Research Conference, Purpose, Performance and Impact of Higher Education Institutions, Université Paris Dauphine, France, May 23rd-24th.

Evans, L. (2012) '*Leading and managing academic professional development in higher education*', paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society, Midland Hotel, Manchester, July 20th-22nd

The following invited conference or seminar papers included the findings from this BELMAS-funded study, along with those of two studies of professorial academic leadership funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education:

- 'Examining the purpose and role of professors', invited workshop at the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, London, January 15th 2014.
- 'Effective research leadership in higher education: what it is, what it looks like, and how it may be achieved', invited seminar at the Learning Institute research seminar series 2013-14, Queen Mary University of London, November 14th 2013.
- 'What is the role of professors in providing academic leadership?' invited paper presented at the Leaders@Leeds open dialogue series, University of Leeds, 21st October 2013.
- "'Misleading" professors? Cautionary tales of ineffective and damaging professorial academic leadership', invited plenary paper at *Questioning Leadership in Higher Education*, seminar hosted by the University of Bristol, under the aegis of the Centre for East Asian Studies (CEAS) VC Initiative, University of Bristol, in collaboration with The Community for Research in Higher Education (CHER), Hong Kong, and The South-West Higher Education Network of the Society for Research into Higher Education, 6th June 2013.

References

- Evans, L. (2011) The 'shape' of teacher professionalism in England: professional standards, performance management, professional development, and the changes proposed in the 2010 White Paper, *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (5), 851-870.
- Maslow, A.H. (1954) *Motivation and Personality*, New York, Harper and Row.
- Sternberg, R. (1999) The theory of successful intelligence, *Review of General Psychology*, 3 (4), 292-316.
- Sternberg, R. (2008) Applying psychological theories to educational practice, *American Educational Research Journal*, 45 (1), 150-165.

Financial Statement (Separate document)

The financial statement cannot yet be finalised since permission has been granted for some expenditure to be deferred, to facilitate additional dissemination-focused activity.