



National Conference of
University Professors

The role of the UK professoriate

A survey of the profile, roles, responsibilities and support for the professoriate of UK universities conducted by the National Conference of University Professors.



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2023

Abstract

Designed to follow up a 1991 report [*The Role of the Professoriate*](#) by NCUP the present study was designed to obtain a snapshot of the UK professoriate in 2022. Towards that end, 1018 UK academics 77.8% of whom were full professors were surveyed online. The respondents were reasonably representative of the UK professoriate with most of the respondents being male and White British. The respondents were approximately evenly divided between Russell Group and non-Russell group universities and approximately evenly divided between personal and established chairs. Most respondents were working full-time. Professors assumed a wide range of roles, but the number of roles was unevenly distributed with women and non-White British professors assuming more roles on average. Most professors were mentored in their role and mentored others but most mentorship is carried out by White British male professors. Generally, members of the UK professoriate do not receive any form of personal support. There was little evidence, outside of assumed roles, that the professoriate in UK universities had any collective and independent influence on the senior management of their universities.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all UK professors and other academic staff who responded to the survey and to acknowledge the help of several UK university Vice-Chancellors who facilitated circulation of the survey within their universities. The survey was set up and data were processed by Dr Salma Rehman whose help is gratefully acknowledged.

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Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the NCUP commissioned a series of policy documents, for example: [Higher Education: A New Framework](#); [Quality-Control of Teaching Standards](#); [The Role of the Professoriate](#); and *The Case for Universities*. These documents gave the NCUP a public profile, demonstrated the work of and the value of the NCUP and possibly attracted membership.

This present study was conducted to present an updated profile of the current role of the UK professoriate. Specifically, we set up an online survey with a series of questions related to the work of individual professors that was relatively quick to complete and would produce useful and publishable material. In addition to a range of demographic information (age, gender, discipline etc), examples of the types of items that were included in the survey – based loosely on the information in [The Role of the Professoriate](#) included: the type of chair (honorary, established, personal etc); encouragement regarding external roles; duties (eg head of department); *ex officio* inclusion in governing bodies (senates & councils); role expectations (teaching, research & administration); and personal support.

Background

In [The Role of the Professoriate](#), published in 1991, the following points formed the background to the report:

1. The increasing prevalence of non-professorial Heads of Department.
2. The changing composition of University Senates, some of which no longer accord professors the statutory right to membership of this highest academic body of a university.
3. The growing administrative demands on many professors arising from, for example, the establishment of cost centres, the introduction of more formal appraisal and auditing procedures, and the increasing tendency for routine administrative tasks to be delegated to faculties and departments rather than being undertaken centrally as they once were.
4. Reductions in resources of all kinds and the increasing difficulty of obtaining and keeping university-funded secretarial, administrative and technical assistance (assets provided much more generously to those in industry and commerce at comparable levels of seniority and responsibility).
5. Wide divergences in practice throughout the university system.

The report also considered the different types of chairs (established, personal etc) at a time when established chairs predominated and holders were commonly administrative heads of department.

Professors were expected to take on a wide range of external duties and would also be the natural heads of their department. The report acknowledged the valuable role of non-professorial heads of department but lamented the rise of the ‘ominous trend’ for the requirement for managerial skills in heads of department over demonstrated leadership in their field.

Professors, by dint of their experience and standing were commonly *ex officio* members of their university senates but it was noted that this trend was declining with the need to accommodate other non-professorial colleagues on senates.

Before concluding, [The Role of the Professoriate](#) presented eight ‘Standards for the Professoriate’ in which established and personal chairs were distinguished with the former having an emphasis on leadership with the latter on national and international eminence. Needless to say, the academic standing of all professors should be high. Professors should be engaged in research and other scholarly activities in the wider—and international—community. Professors should teach. Professors should acquire resources for their universities, be excellent communicators verbally and in writing and should serve the wider university community. Finally, they should provide services outside the university.

At NCUP, in 2021 when the project leading to the present report was initiated, we realised that times had changed significantly in UK universities since the publication of [The Role of the Professoriate](#) and that, while there was great value in conducting a new survey, that there was little point in trying to replicate the survey of 1991. One major change that has taken place since 1991 is the growth, by over 100%, in the number of universities. As [promoted by Advance HE](#), there is now greater emphasis on equality of opportunity regarding gender and ethnicity and concomitant emphasis on staff development. We also realise that, in contrast to 1991 when research was the primary consideration in promotion to a chair, there are now alternative routes, especially teaching. There are divisions within the university community between, for example, those belonging to the Russel Group and the remainder. We considered it important to reflect some of these issues.

Methods

An online survey of the UK university professoriate was conducted using a bespoke questionnaire (Appendix 1). Data were analysed to describe the sample and to investigate any relationships between variables. For a full description of the design and methods including sample size calculation and statistical analysis see Appendix 2.

Results

Most of the respondents were full professors as shown in Figure 1 and most were employed full time (Figure 2).

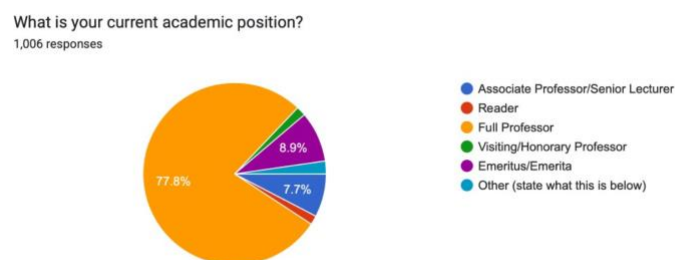


Figure 1 What is your current academic position?

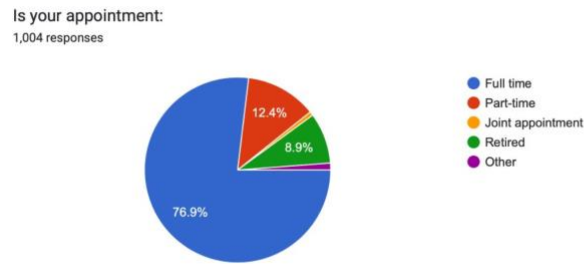


Figure 2 What is your appointment?

There was an almost equal distribution between established and personal chairs (Figure 3) and research performance remained the primary route to promotion (Figure 4). Most (87.6%) were recruited inside the UK (Figure 5).

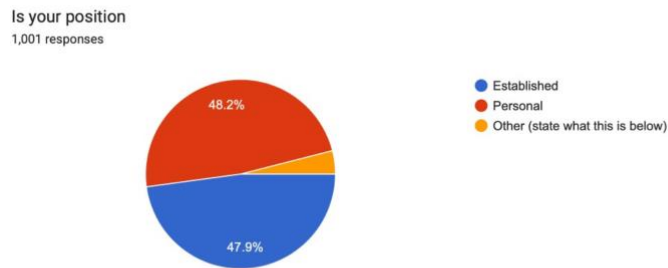


Figure 3 Is your chair established or personal?

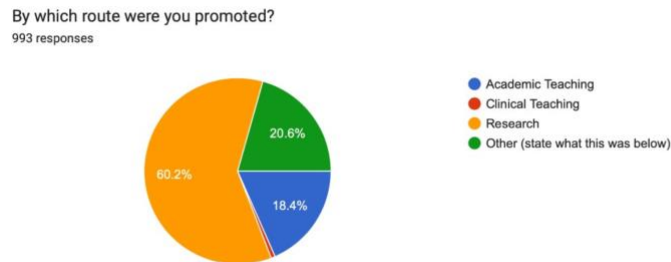


Figure 4 By which route were you promoted?

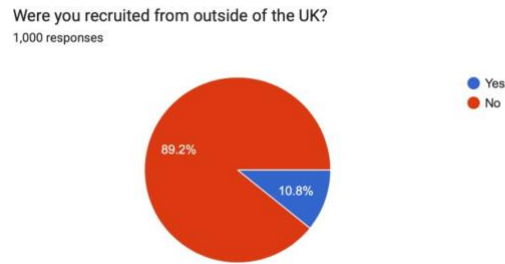


Figure 5 Recruitment inside or outside the UK?

While the year of appointment ranged from 1974 to 2022, most appointments had been made relatively recently (median 2015; mode 2021) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Year of appointment

Statistic	Year
Most past	1974
Most recent	2022
Median	2015
Mode	2021

The spread of disciplines represented is shown in Figure 6.

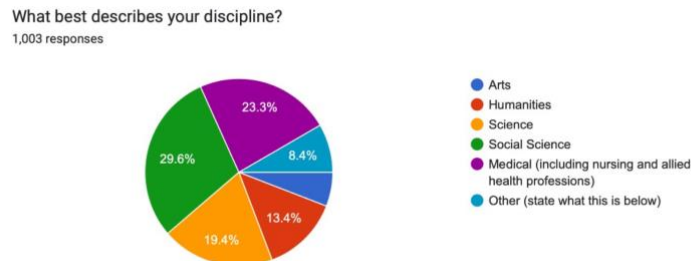


Figure 6 What best describes your discipline?

Table 2 shows the demographic details of the respondents. Most were male and the mean age of respondents was 57.2 years with the mean age of men (58 years) being significantly¹ higher than women (55.7 years). Most respondents were White British (700) and these were significantly² older (58.3 years) than non-White British (54.3 years).

¹ Independent t-test; $p < 0.001$

² Independent t-test; $p < 0.001$

Table 2 Demographic details of respondents

Demographic	N	%
Gender		
Male	605	59.4
Female	395	37.8
Non-binary	3	3
Prefer not to say	10	1
<u>Missing</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>1.5</u>
TOTAL	1018	100

Age Mean = 57.2 (SD 9.43); Minimum 31, Maximum 99

Ethnicity*

Indian	19	1.9
Pakistani	4	0.4
Chinese	12	1.2
Other Asian	9	9
African	4	4
Other Black	3	3
White/Black Caribbean	1	1
White Asian	5	5
Mixed/multiple ethnicity	15	1.5
UK/Irish White	700	68.8
Irish	39	39
Arab	4	4
Other ethnic	18	1.8
Other White	168	16.5
<u>Missing</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>1.7</u>
TOTAL	1018	100

*Classifications (abbreviated) based on [UK.GOV List of ethnic groups](#)

The most common role expectation among respondents was research followed by doctoral student supervision and external responsibilities (Table 9). Respondents indicated that they assumed a wide range of roles (mean = 5) with women assuming statistically significantly³ more roles (mean = 5.2) than men (mean = 4.8) and non-White British respondents assuming statistically significantly⁴ ($p < 0.001$; mean difference -.42; 95%CI -.69-1.55) more roles (mean = 5.2) than White British respondents (mean = 4.8).

³ Independent t-test: $p < 0.001$; mean difference 0.45; 95%CI 0.19-0.70

⁴ Independent t-test: $p < 0.001$; mean difference 1.42; 95%CI -.69-1.55

Table 3 Role expectations

Role	N*
Senior management or head of department responsibilities	346
Other management roles within the department /school/ faculty	420
Membership of the university senate (or equivalent)	121
Teaching	727
Research	844
Research management (e.g. research group, seminars etc.)	534
Clinical work	51
Income generation	548
Doctoral supervision	735
External duties within UK (e.g. external Consultancy, editorial work, etc.)	607
International duties	607
Other	34

Mean role expectations 5; Minimum 1, Maximum 9. *Respondents could respond to >1 role.

Most respondents received no personal support (Figure 7) but were expected to mentor others (Figure 8). Most were not mentored in their role (Figure 9)



Figure 7 Personal support

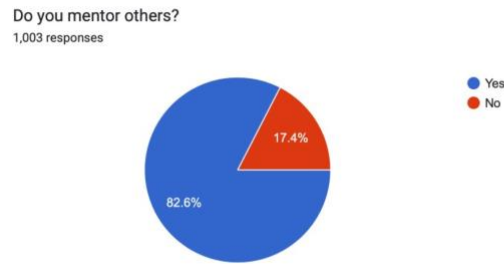


Figure 8 Do you mentor others?

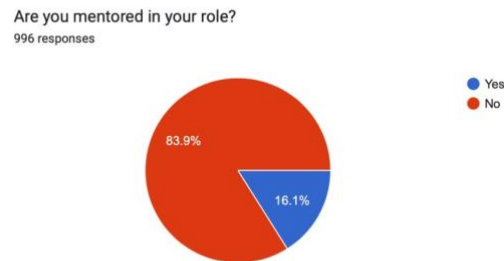


Figure 9 Are you mentored in your role?

Men were more likely to act as mentors than women⁵ and are also more likely to be mentored while White British respondents were more likely to be mentors than non-White British⁶. Those mentored reported being mentored by senior colleagues including professors, heads of department, deans and other colleagues. Those who provided mentorship mentored other colleagues, early career researchers, doctoral students and junior colleagues.

In terms of university characteristics, most universities did not have a university-wide professorial forum and where they did, these did not have influence on senior management. Most universities from which respondents came did not belong to the Russell Group (Table 4).

⁵ Chi-square test; $p < 0.001$

⁶ Chi-square test; $p = 0.008$

Table 4 University characteristics

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Does your university have a university-wide forum specifically for professorial discussion a debate?		
Yes	301	29.6
No	517	50.8
Don't know	184	18.1
<u>Missing</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>1.6</u>
TOTAL	1018	100
If yes does this have any influence on the senior management team?		
Yes	97	9.5
No	182	17.9
Don't know	282	27.7
<u>Missing</u>	<u>457</u>	<u>44.9</u>
TOTAL	1018	100
Is your university a member of the Russell group?		
Yes	318	31.2
No	671	65.9
<u>Missing</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>2.9</u>
TOTAL	1018	100

Discussion

While we were unable to aim for a random and therefore truly representative sample of UK universities or professors, it is worth considering how representative our respondents were of the UK university professoriate.

The [Russell Group](#) contains only 24 member universities which, given [the number of UK universities](#) at the time of the survey (164) means that the Russell group represents only 14% of UK universities. In that light, in our sample, Russell Group universities, constituting 31% if the universities included, were overrepresented. We were unable to ascertain the number of professors working in Russell Group universities.

Higher Education Statistics Agency ([HESA](#)) figures, current at the time of the survey indicate that 27% of university professors are women. Among our respondents, women were in the minority although they constituted 37.8% of the respondents. On the other hand, White British constituted 68.8% of university professors whereas the reality across the sector is that [82% of university professors are White British](#). In that light, both women and non-White British are slightly overrepresented among our respondents.

Regarding the results of our survey, most of the respondents were full professors who worked full-time. Approximately half of the respondents held personal chairs and while precise figures are not available for the present number of personal chairs held by UK university professors, it can be assumed that this represents an increase since the [The Role of the Professoriate](#) was published in 1991. Currently there are [22,855 professors in UK universities](#) and that compares with, for example, [fewer than 2000 in the early 1960s to 4500 in the mid-1980s](#). The same source refers to the rarity at that time of personal chairs and their growth at that time; our data indicate that a professor in a UK university is almost as likely to be promoted to a personal as to an established chair. Most professors continue to be promoted based on their research activity although 20% in our survey reported being promoted by the teaching route. Promotion based on teaching is still considered quite rare and as recently as 2015 the [Royal Academy of Engineering said](#): “The higher education community urgently needs to develop teaching-based promotion measures, with transferability across and between institutions, which better reflect academic achievement and contribution to teaching such as the Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship Scheme.” It is notable that, while the importance of professors being involved in teaching was indicated in [The Role of the Professoriate](#), there was no mention then of promotion to professor based on teaching and scholarship as opposed to research and scholarship. Presumably the 20% of professors promoted based on teaching noted in our present survey represents a significant increase since 1991.

Approximately 10% of respondents were recruited from outside of the UK. We can find no published figures with which to compare this directly but [according to HESA](#) 31% of UK academics are non-UK nationals suggesting that they are less likely to achieve promotion to full professor.

The range of role expectations of professors is wide, with an emphasis on research and doctoral supervision. However, the distribution of roles assumed was unevenly spread with women and non-White British professors among our respondents assuming significantly more roles than their White British colleagues. This is surely a matter of concern, that both these groups assume a greater number of roles yet remain underrepresented among the UK professoriate. Moreover, while White

British males more commonly assumed the role of mentor, women and non-White British academics were significantly less likely to assume the role of mentor. Again, this is surely a matter of concern. It must be acknowledged that women and non-White British are underrepresented among the professoriate and, thereby, less available for the role of mentor. However, faced with the underrepresentation of both groups, there is a need to increase their involvement in mentorship to act as role models. Generally, despite the wide range of roles assumed by professors, the majority remain without any personal support. This was a concern raised in [The Role of the Professoriate](#); clearly, it remains a matter of concern.

Approximately half of the respondents reported that their university had no forum for the professoriate. However, a further 18% reported that they did not know if such a forum existed which suggests, strongly, that there was none. Where such a forum existed, only approximately 10% reported that it had any influence on senior management. It is striking, in most universities where respondents worked, that the professoriate is an under-used resource with the possibility that they are only considered valuable if they assume specific managerial and administrative roles.

Limitations

The sample is not random and therefore this limits the extent to which the data can be generalised to the whole population of UK university professors. It is possible that some respondents held positions in more than one UK university as visiting professors, and this was not accounted; however the number of visiting professors responding to the survey was relatively small.

Conclusion

Against a background of an increasing number of universities and a concomitant increase in the number of professors, our survey has provided a snapshot of the current profile and roles of the UK university professoriate. With most of the UK professoriate being White British there is probably a need to increase the diversity within this important sector of the UK university workforce. To achieve that, currently promoted non-White British professors—and women—need to be involved in mentoring their peers and acting as role models. The disproportionate distribution of roles and responsibilities towards women and non-White British professors should be investigated and, if necessary, addressed. We perceive that there is an increase in the number of academics being promoted to professor via the teaching route. This is a positive development and routes to professorship other than via the traditional research route should be more widely publicised and made available. It should be a matter of concern, especially with the number of roles that professors are expected to assume, that most professors receive no personal support.

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

NCUP Professoriate Project

Your academic position:

- Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer
- Reader
- Full Professor
- Visiting/Honorary Professor
- Other (state what this is)

Personal details:

Age

Gender Female / Male / Other *

*If you would like to record that you have variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex, you can use this write-in box. If you would like to, you can also write in your gender (for example: "intersex, non-binary")

Ethnicity

Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background

White

- English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Any other White background

Other ethnic group

- Arab
- Any other ethnic group

Appointment

Year of first academic appointment

Year of first full professorial appointment (if relevant)

Were you recruited-from outside of the UK? Yes / No

Is your position:

- Established
- Personal
- Other (state what this is)

By which route were you promoted:

- Academic Teaching
- Clinical Teaching
- Research
- Other (state what this is)

Role expectations:

- Senior management or head of department responsibilities
- Other management roles within the department /school/ faculty
- Membership of university senate (or equivalent)
- Teaching
- Research
- Research management (e.g. research group, seminars etc.)
- Clinical work
- Income generation
- Doctoral supervision
- External duties within UK (e.g. external Consultancy, editorial work, etc.)
- International duties
- Other (state what this is)

Personal support:

- Secretarial/Personal assistance
- Personal budget
- Other (state what this is)
- None

Mentorship:

Do you mentor others?

If yes, who do you mentor?

Are you mentored in your role?

If yes, who mentors you?

Raising Issues

Does your university have a university-wide forum for discussion and debate?

If yes does this have any influence on the senior management team? Yes / No

Is your university a member of the Russell group? Yes / No

Comments (please feel free to make any additional comments here):

Appendix 2 – Design and methods

With a short initial survey of NCUP membership we obtained a range of issues and items for inclusion. Once an initial survey was constructed it was validated with a small working group—existing council members—and then piloted on a small number of NCUP members. The survey was then put online and the process of inviting professorial colleagues—to be described below—was initiated between May to September 2022.

Sample size

Using the online sample size calculator [Raosoft](#) the minimum sample size was calculated as follows:

Number of UK university professors (September 2021) = 19,975

Sample size = 377 (5% margin of error and 95% level of confidence)

We established a database of email addresses of professors working in UK universities for an initial ‘mailshot’ with a link to the survey, inviting them to complete the survey which took no longer than 5 minutes to complete.

The participants were reached in several ways: all NCUP members were invited to respond; some emails were sent to personal contacts; public domain lists of professors in particular subjects (eg [nursing](#)) were used; several vice-chancellors agreed to have the survey circulated within their institutions; the project researcher, the project leader and the administrator of NCUP harvested emails manually from university websites alphabetically ordered list available at the [Wikipedia List of universities in the United Kingdom](#) and worked from either end of the alphabet until the required sample size had been exceeded threefold.

Data were downloaded and analysed using SPSS® version 28.0. Data are described in terms of their demographic and other characteristics. This is followed by inferential analysis using independent t-tests for mean differences and Chi-Square tests of association, to investigate relationships within the data based on a selection of characteristics. Due to the preponderance of full professors, the very few respondents who identified other than male or female or as other as White British, some categories have been excluded from the analysis or collapsed to provide more robust data for the analysis.

Ethical considerations

The survey was conducted in accordance with the [Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research](#) of the British Educational Research Association (2018). All data were stored securely and not made available to any other organisation in compliance with GDPR. Participation was both voluntary and anonymous, names of neither individuals nor institutions was collected.