The Changing Role of Professor

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I have often wondered if I would ever have been appointed professor a decade or two ago. I am an 'out' mental health service user. That is to say, I have been open with my colleagues, students and university that I have long term experience as a user of mental health services. In tabloid speak, I qualify as a 'nutter', 'psycho', 'crazy' and 'looney'. I spent eight years on poverty line benefits and 12 years using mental health services. This included psychiatric hospital, psychology service, social work, physio-therapy, occupational therapy, group therapy, as an in-patient and out-patient.

As far as I know, I am the first person actively involved as a mental health service user to be promoted to professor. I became a professor six years ago. What is exciting is that my background was not a barrier to my promotion. Instead it seems to have been seen as having a helpful contribution to make to a professorial role. That may be key here. If our aim is to explore the changing role of the professor, we are likely to gain some helpful insights in this task by considering changes in *who* professors are.

There is not yet a strong body of evidence about public perceptions of professors. What we can say is that this is a role that tends to be valued rather than devalued. Professors are still much more likely to be respected like nurses, instead of distrusted like estate agents and politicians. Yet, if there is a public picture of professors, I

suspect it is still of a grey haired, probably bearded middle aged (white) man, possibly even wearing a bow tie.

There are strong concerns among some academics that there is still too much truth in this stereotype. As yet women make up an inadequate proportion of professors. There are still only a tiny number of black and minority ethnic holders of chairs. There is significant progress yet to be made. The academic world more broadly has many similarities to a 'core and periphery' model of economic organisation. On the one hand there is the core of relatively secure and tenured senior academics. On the other, a periphery of insecure, relatively low paid post-doctoral and junior academics, on short term, part-time and sometimes hourly contracts. Despite the efforts that are being made to challenge this, it is mostly women, black and minority and young academics who are confined to this unsatisfactory sector.

So there is no reason for complacency about equal opportunities and fair routes to seniority in higher education. Nonetheless, there have been significant changes in who becomes a professor. These changes have in my view had a disproportionate and crucial effect on higher education, its role in the wider world and of course the role of professor. They have led to innovation and new forms of creativity.

Often though, such developments have been obscured by broader concerns about increasing constraints on academics and academic freedom. Whatever view we take of these fears and anxieties, whether we share or reject them, they need to be acknowledged and understood. These are the issues that have made the headlines in both mass and specialist media. They include concerns about higher education under-funding, increased workload pressures on academics, the politicisation and marketisation of higher

education and a new dominance of managerialism within it. If the QAA and Research Assessment Exercise were worthy attempts to improve quality and productivity, they have frequently been experienced as arbitrary and reductionist, undermining independence and professional principles and values. All these developments have major implications for all academic staff, but for professors, as academic leaders of higher education and guardians of its values, they create particular pressures. These have been magnified as the status, security and rewards of professors themselves have been seen relatively to be diminished.

For many, this difficult context for the professorial role may seem discouraging. However this can only give added force to efforts to explore and build on internal developments within the professoriate towards greater equality and inclusivity. As has been said, much more needs to happen here, before there are any laurels to rest on. Nonetheless, the progress that has already been made highlights how significant extending the diversity of professors may be in strengthening the role that they can play and their effective influence and interaction with the wider world.

Pressure from women, from black people and members of minority ethnic communities, from gays, lesbians and bisexuals all led to the creation of new fields of academic study, including feminist and gender studies, gay/queer studies and black studies. These now have their own schools and departments. Issues of faith, culture, age and ageing became focuses for study. As well as creating new academic subjects, new approaches to study and new understandings of study emerged. If the implicit priorities and world views of white male professors once predominated, now a much wider range of understandings and experience could exert an influence. While these changes may have

been initiated by young academics, as they received recognition and gained seniority, they became the professorial leaders who brought these new academic approaches and fields in from the margin to the mainstream. It is they, as today's professors who are defending and developing these areas of academic activity.

However, it would be a mistake to associate the emergence of a more diverse body of senior academics narrowly with some specific areas of study. Nor has the development of closer links, particularly at a senior level, between our lives, our selves and our studies, been confined to the arts or social sciences. It has also impacted on the sciences, both natural and applied. As we have all become more conscious of who we are, our place in society and why we do what we do, as women and men, black and white, enlightenment based assumptions of objectivity and traditional positivist approaches to learning and knowledge have been challenged – in science as in art – and new debates developed about the relation of subjectivity to academic study.

Furthermore, because interest in an academic career has often grown out of people's personal experience, its relation with the world that they live in and the desire to address issues which have confronted them, academic curiosity has increasingly been coupled with a commitment to change. This encourages a natural and ready relationship with the world outside and a belief that academe should be part of its community, challenging, not perpetuating, traditional preconceptions about 'ivory towers'. This connects closely with wider aspirations for higher education institutions. How many universities now, like mine, have a mission statement based on a concern to 'produce high quality teaching and research *of use to the community'*.

This is the inheritance that professors like me have to build on. Disability is perhaps the last area of difference to be addressed in our society. Put crudely, first it was gender, then ‘race’, then sexuality and now finally disability. It is important not to create hierarchies of difference. However, of all areas of disability, the one associated with the greatest stigma and exclusion is (long term) use of mental health services. The group of disabled people with the lowest employment levels are mental health service users. That is why for me being employed as a professor not only feels like a personal achievement. It is also a statement of the way that people as mental health service users can confound negative expectations and attitudes towards them. It also says something about how much the role of professor may now be changing, that it can accommodate and welcome the contribution of people like me. Of course the recruitment of disabled people as professors also relates to wider developments. This October sees the third stage of the Disability Discrimination Act, which requires changes in buildings, to ensure improved access for disabled people. The Special Education Needs and Disability Act of 2001, established legal rights for disabled students. The government’s commitment to ‘widening participation’ relates to disability as well as other expressions of difference. The Human Rights Act can also help challenge the many barriers that disabled people face.

Reflecting on this issue, the changing role of the professor, has highlighted for me, as a disabled person, both how much broader changes may affect the make-up of the professorial workforce and in turn how the inclusion of disabled people may influence this role for the future. I am of course conscious of how broader legislation has made it possible for the role of professor to change creatively in my case,

enabling me to work to the best of my ability. Thus I have sought ‘reasonable adjustments’ under the Disability Discrimination Act. Their aim is not to privilege disabled people or to ‘dumb down’ their job. Rather it is to enable them to work on as equal terms as possible as non-disabled people. For me this means being able to work flexibly to deliver what is required of me; for account to be taken of my mobility needs (agoraphobia has been a long term issue for me) and to make possible the most effective communication with colleagues and line managers.

I have also noticed that my experience has equipped me with resources that can be useful for students (as well as sometimes members of staff), It is not always easy for either to be open about psychiatric difficulties or histories. Trust and shared understanding can be at a premium. Complementing the University’s counselling service, I can sometimes provide information and suggest contacts, as well as offering a ‘user’ perspective for students who are undertaking work in the mental health field.

I work in a School of Health Sciences and Social Care. Our responsibilities include professional training, including social work education. The new three year social work qualification, first introduced in 2003, requires ‘service user involvement’ in every aspect of the degree. Service users include people with learning difficulties, older people, ‘looked after young people’ disabled people and mental health service users. This involvement ranges from student selection and curriculum development to providing input on the course and course assessment. The Government has made funding available to support such involvement and some HEIs have given this funding directly to organisations which service users themselves run, for them to organise the involvement. Exciting new roles, relationships and ways of working are

developing. As a service user, I was a member of the Department of Health Committee which oversaw the development of this new course. As a Professor, I am involved in providing it and developing and supporting service user involvement.

These are early days and as yet disabled people are under-represented as academics and there are few disabled professors. But these have already helped lead to major change, both in the professorial role and in academic activity. Mike Oliver of the University of Greenwich was a pioneering disabled professor and the first Professor of Disability Studies. He played a key role in developing the social model of disability which has made a fundamental impact on many disabled people's lives and expectations, as well as leading to new approaches to providing support and personal assistance to disabled people. As a leading academic he was also closely involved in the British Council of Disabled People, an umbrella organisation of disabled people's organisations. (Oliver, 1996; Barnes and others, 2002)

A significant pattern in the role and activities of such professors can be seen from this. First it has led to new forms of partnership between academic organisations, service users and service user organisations. Thus for example, the Centre for Disability Studies at Leeds University, directed by Professor Colin Barnes, is a research base for the British Council of Disabled People. Colin Barnes has also developed taught and distance learning MA courses in disability studies which are open to non-graduates and which recruit large proportions of disabled students. Professor Ann Davis of Birmingham University, has supported the development of SureSearch an organisation of mental health service users which

undertakes research and consultancy locally and nationally. The Centre for Citizen Participation which I direct has seven honorary fellows, four of whom identify as long term health and social care service users. It has also developed , in association with service users and service user organisations, ‘user controlled’ approaches to research.

Such ‘user led’ approaches to research, are based on equipping and resourcing disabled people and other service users to initiate their own research, developing their own research focuses and questions. As disabled professors have made clear, it is not just what they know as ‘professors’ that they see as important, but also what they know as ‘disabled people’. Challenging issues are raised about the nature of knowledge and its relationship with ‘direct experience’. Different stakeholders may have different knowledges to offer. Service user researchers value their own experiential knowledge and that of other people. They question hierarchies of knowledge based on traditional assumptions of credibility and validity. This debate is beginning to affect the research role of professors.

Both government and non-statutory research funders have responded to this emphasis on ‘service user involvement’ in research. Organisations as diverse as the Medical Research Council, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and ESRC are now requiring evidence of it from bidders. Senior academics now need and are developing new skills to make this possible. The Big Lottery Fund, formerly the Community Fund, will only support research bids from Universities made in partnership with such voluntary organisations.

Here we see an emerging model of professors as facilitators and supporters for people’s own initiatives, research and learning, seeking to be accountable to them, rather than

acting as self-appointed ‘experts’. There is also another issue that may mean fundamental change in the professorial role. This is the need to understand issues of access and to address them, whether in relation to physical, cultural or communications access. Most attention tends to be paid to physical access – enabling disabled people to access transport and negotiate the built environment. But accessible communication is no less important. This means ensuring that information is available in appropriate formats if people are deaf or have a sensory impairment and that people with learning difficulties can understand it.

In Shaping Our Lives, the national service user organisation which I chair, we have worked hard to try to enable accessible communication, whether this is providing a palintypist (someone who types up what is said on a screen) for someone who has a hearing impairment, but does not lip read or use sign language, or providing a supporter for people with learning difficulties to enable them to follow a meeting and make their contribution on as equal terms as possible. Accessible communication is not only about how we ‘talk to each other’. It will also mean academics exploring ways of reporting their findings and sharing their ideas which are available to all. Last year, Professor Peter Huxley of King’s College helped produce a report on future research priorities for the social care workforce which included the contribution of a woman with learning difficulties who does not read or write. The report contained a transcript of what she said and copies of the drawings prepared by her supporter which she used to remind her what she wanted to say. (Social Care Workforce Research Unit, 2003) Professors, in their role as research leaders and coordinators of publications and other outputs for future research exercises, will need to build on these skills and understandings if they are to reach a truly wide audience.

It is easy to assume that taking a lead on issues like improving communication access, will only be a concern for a narrow group of professors specifically concerned with disability issues. However, if there is anything to be learned from the the identity politics of recent years and the current emphasis on anti-discrimination, it is that it will have implications for us all. Professors have learned over the years that a key part of their responsibility is being able to communicate their message effectively with the media. As state and market both seek to define the public more inclusively, so addressing and reaching all sectors of that public, whether as students, collaborators, or end users of their research, will become a common concern for *all* professors. Then the wider relevance of the pioneering work of some senior academics, developing new communication technology, new approaches to research and knowledge formation and more inclusive approaches to learning and teaching, will become much clearer.

I started with my personal experience as a mental health service user and I am now drawn back to it. What it highlights for me are the close and important inter-relations there are between who I am and what I seek to do in my work as a professor. But my experience in the changing role of professor also highlights the need to address the interconnections between the personal and the academic and the gains that are to be got from doing so. Government now talks about the 'work/life balance'. But there are other relationships there that affect us as professors. The old slogan 'the personal is political' needs to be rewritten. The academic is personal too. Recognising this makes possible a creative harmony between us as human beings and as co-producers of knowledge and learning. This is a complex process and to develop successfully it requires rigour as well

as imagination and innovation. It does mean change in the professorial role, I have already experienced that, but I believe it has the potential to be a liberating rather than constraining change, supporting universities to play the fullest part in their communities and to relate to everyone in them.

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