

# Reflections on Becoming a Research Professor

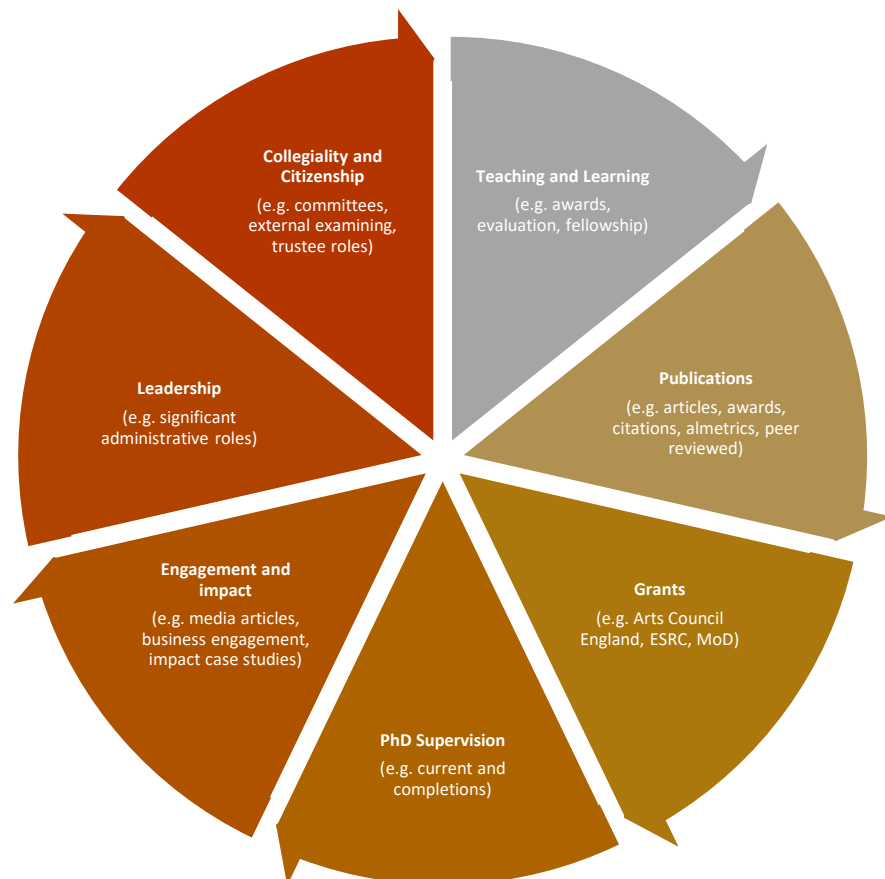
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Below are some of my reflections on the journey to becoming a Professor of Management at the University of Exeter Business School. It is important to emphasise that there is no one fixed template. I would suggest you consider what you aim to bring to the Professoriate and how this relates to the norms and expectations of your institution.

## What do you aim to bring to the Professoriate?

There are many things to consider when you are applying for promotion to Professor, which will be considered by a panel of experts who will typically be from inside and outside of your department, school or faculty. Things you may wish to consider include evidence of sustained teaching and learning excellence, the quality and volume of your publications, grant income, PhD supervision and completions, engagement and impact, leadership, and collegiality and citizenship activities. I summarise these in Diagram 1 alongside some examples that I used in my promotion application.

Diagram 1: Broad criteria for becoming a Professor



I recognise that the criteria are extensive and you may not necessarily need to have evidence of all of these because your achievements in some areas may ameliorate for gaps in others. However, in a research-intensive university it is unlikely that you will be considered for promotion to Professor unless you clearly reach a certain quality threshold in

relation to your publications. One way that I have tried to manage my publication planning and development has been to regularly update a spreadsheet which describes the papers that I am preparing, papers that are under review and papers that are under revise and resubmit (see Diagram 2). This helps me to visualise, hold myself accountable and speak with my line manager and mentor around the development and progress of my papers. It also reminds me of which of my co-authors I should be sending materials to or following-up with.

**Diagram 2: A template for papers to hold myself to account**

Papers under revise and resubmit	#	Short Title	Revise and Resubmit	Status	Co-Authors	Comments
Papers under review	#	Short Title	Under Review	Status	Co-Authors	Comments
Papers in preparation	#	Short Title	In Preparation	Planned Submission Date	Co-Authors	Comments

**What are the norms and expectations of your institution?**

Most universities are clear around their expectations for promotion. The University of Exeter, for example, has codified guidelines on probation and promotion to help staff to understand how they can achieve their career goals. This is championed by the Provost and is referred to as the [Exeter Academic](#). In terms of promotion to Professor at Exeter, there are three broad categories where faculty on and education and research contract need to demonstrate excellence: a) education, b) research, impact and knowledge exchange, and c) academic leadership, all of which map onto the criteria I discussed in Diagram 1.

While universities are often clear in codifying their expectations for promotion, which is driven by the human resources function, I would strongly encourage you to informally speak with your mentor, Head of Department and Dean in advance of your application. From my experience, they tend to be specific and candid about the strengths, areas for improvement and timing of your promotion application. It is good to have their feedback and support before you apply as they are likely to be consulted by others at some or multiple points during the process. I provide some examples of what I evidenced in my application for Professor (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Examples used for Promotion**

Expectations	Exeter Academic	Examples used for Promotion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching</li> </ul>	Education	University and School teaching awards, commendation letters, consistently strong peer and student teaching evaluations, fellowship of the Higher Education Academy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publications</li> <li>Grants</li> <li>PhD Supervision</li> <li>Engagement and Impact</li> </ul>	Research, impact and knowledge exchange	Consistent publications across the social sciences that are well-cited, research awards, competitive grants, steady flow of PhD completions, regular media activity and engagement with business, voluntary work.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Collegiality and Citizenship</li> </ul>	Academic leadership	Director of Research, Co-Director of a Centre, staff mentor, visiting professorships, fellowships, above and beyond awards, keynote talks, two external examiner roles, regular reviewer.
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Reflecting on my own path to promotion, I have tried to be an all-round academic, contributing to several areas of expectations outlined in the table above. I recognise that by seeking to deliver on all of these, there are limits on my time, which impinges on my capacity to dedicate more time to other areas. Or to put it another way, I have considered it important to publish well, but I have not sought to pursue this at the cost of other areas. There are costs and benefits with this approach, especially when considering the norms within your institution and issues such as achieving a healthy work-life balance.

### **What your institution needs and what the labour market values**

Throughout my career, I have tried to be a good colleague who supports and advocates my department, school and university. In the last few weeks, for example, I have been reviewing environment statements and impact case studies from other parts of the university for our preparations for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) submission. For the last two years I have sat on a University Board for a new research management system that will be rolled-out next year. I have also given a tour of the university for an alumnus and donor, and sat on an interview panel for a role outside of the Business School. These are time-consuming tasks that are important for supporting the university to deliver on its strategy, but they can be taken-for-granted and swiftly forgotten by others.

I could spend most of my time sitting in university meetings and committees, conducting reviews, sitting on probation and promotion panels, which would help my institution, but this would have limits on the wider value of my experience and achievements in the labour market. While the examples above are important, they do not easily translate into a CV or cover letter, compared to a key publication, grant or teaching award, which are easier to convey succinctly, and are unquestionably valued in the academic labour market.

To be clear, I am not advocating an instrumental approach with how you allocate your time. Quite the opposite: I have witnessed many people who have been very ‘successful’ and prolific with their publications, but who have not been particularly supportive of their colleagues or departments and who have seldom volunteered for activities that are important for the university. At the same time, I have also witnessed highly collegial individuals who say yes to all of these activities, and more, and who find themselves struggling to juggle too many tasks. Often this has led to them not meeting the core requirements of research and teaching as well as significant challenges with their health and wellbeing.

I ask myself how can I support my institution and ensure that I am continuing to enhance my labour market credentials. It is hard to know how and when new job opportunities emerge and sometimes things happen in your life or at your institution that may necessitate you having to look elsewhere for a job. Finding the right balance of supporting your institution and developing your labour market credentials will help to ensure that you will have a strong CV, application letter and set of references from your current institution.

### **Enhancing what you bring to the Professoriate**

Finally, I would encourage you not to see becoming a Professor as an endpoint. As the new kid on the block three years ago, I felt I had something to prove to myself when I was a newly appointed Professor. Over time, I have found that it is important to role model desirable behaviours and outcomes. I have been busy in leadership roles, including two Associate Dean roles: one for research preparing our REF submission and another for global, focusing on accreditations, rankings, alumni engagement and international student recruitment during a global pandemic. Externally, I have been an Associate Editor, I have continued my external examining roles, and I have been Chair of the Board of a charity. I have been fortunate to have experienced some research and teaching successes, including several Business School and a university prize. One of the most rewarding experiences this year was witnessing one of my former PhD students winning an international PhD award by Emerald and EFMD.

### **Final Thoughts**

I have found that becoming a research professor has required some careful planning and a focus on delivering excellence across a variety of activities within my department, school, university, academia and beyond. An important lesson from my journey so far is from another one of my current PhD students who has just finished serving a sentence for white collar crime in a United States Federal Prison. Having supported him before, during and after his time in prison, it has been a privilege to help him during the many ups and downs of his life.

This has brought into sharp focus that although it has been important to develop my career, when I reflect back so far, I have enjoyed my successes, including being promoted to Professor. However, there has been nothing more fulfilling in my professional life as a colleague, supervisor and teacher or in my home life as a husband, father and member of a rural community, than helping to support others to succeed. Adam Grant brilliantly captures this in his book, *Give and Take*, when articulating the benefits of giving without expecting anything in return. Perhaps, it is even worth reflecting on whether becoming a Research Professor is the right goal in the first place. Of course, I recognise that I say this from a position of privilege, but I would urge you to think of becoming a Professor as part of a journey and not as the endpoint.

William S. Harvey is Associate Dean of Global and Professor of Management and the University of Exeter Business School. This article is based on a keynote talk for mid-career academics on '[Becoming a Research-Oriented Professor](#)' for the British Academy of Management on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020.