

The Knowledge, Action and Identity Project

Empirically modeling 'professionalism' in undergraduate students

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Paper SRHE 2023

The Knowledge, Action and Identity Project

Empirically modelling 'professionalism' in undergraduate students

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Abstract

Students in higher professional education are prepared for high level professional practice. To be able to fulfil their future roles, their educational programs aid them in developing their professionalism. This paper presents the conceptual and empirical search for a measurement model on professionalism. Professionalism is a multifaceted construct which is at best vaguely described in previous research. It is here conceptualized through the conceptual model by Griffioen (2019) as a personal integration of professional identity, professional knowledge and professional action that transforms over time through accommodation and assimilation practices. These practices imply the development of the (future) professional. Additionally, initial findings of the development of professionalism in students during their 4 year undergraduate degree are discussed.

Introduction

The higher education system has been given the responsibility of the university to educate citizens who often become high level professionals in society (Ministry of Education Culture & Science, 2015). This is an important responsibility that actively helps to shape society. At the brink of their educational pathway towards professionalism, students bring their own beliefs and expectations of what it entails to become a professional through higher education (Brownlee, Walker, Exley, & Pearce, 2009). It is however unclear how interactions with higher education over time results in educated professionals; in their own particular types of professionalism. This understanding of the development of professionalism in students is the focus of the overarching project. This paper focuses on the methodology needed to analyse the student's professionalism.

'Professionalism' is at best a vaguely described and multifaceted concept (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). To be able to grasp this change in more detail, the conceptual model of professionalism by Griffioen (2019b) is applied, which distinguishes between professional knowledge, professional identity and professional action (see Figure 1; see also Barnett and Coate (2005)). The presumption underpinning this model is that these elements of professionalism will develop over time in students and professionals resulting in a need for assimilation or accommodation to achieve a new balanced state of professionalism. This process would imply professional learning, and raises questions like: 'Who do I want to be?'; 'What do I need to know' (also embodied)?; and 'What do I need to do'?.

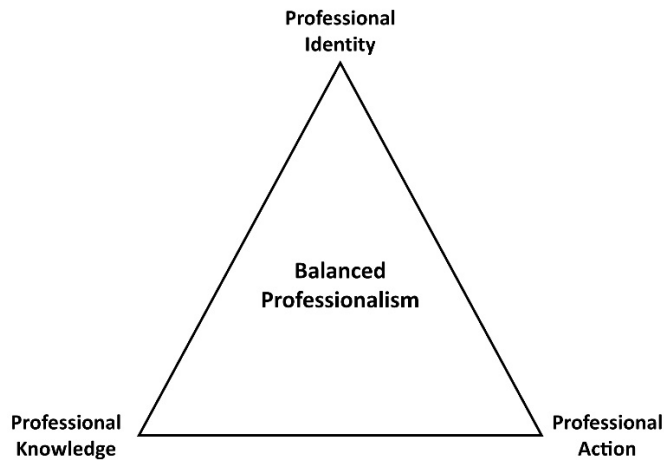


Figure 1: The model by Griffioen (2019) on professionalism.

For each of the elements a body of knowledge exists and is applied to this study, however, for all three, as well as professionalism as a whole, there still is a need for clarity in conceptualisation, demarcation and measurement. This will be further explored in the full paper.

Research Design

This five year longitudinal project considers the development of undergraduate students' professionalism over time. The project approach builds on the Sociology project by Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean (2014).

This Dutch project included in total 40 students (16 remained after 4 undergraduate years) from four disciplinary different programmes in a single applied university in The Netherlands. They were selected based on prior research (Griffioen, 2019a) showing differences in knowledge interactions between life-applied disciplines, and non-life-applied disciplines (see also Biglan, 1973). In the Summer of 2023 the final set of data will be gathered.

Table 1: Educational programmes included in this study.

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| | <i>Life</i> | | |
| <i>Hard</i> | Physical Therapy (PT) | Social Work (SW) | <i>Soft</i> |
| | Aviation (AV) | Creative Business (CB) | |
| | <i>Non-life</i> | | |

Measurement instruments

Each undergraduate student was interviewed annually: at the begin of their first, second, third and fourth year and at the end of their fourth year. The interviews were focused on the development of (the elements of) their professionalism. From the second interview, each student brought an assignment from

their educational track to discuss their development as a professional. The interviews were part of a wider dataset.

Analysis

The intention in the analysis is to capture the development of professionalism in students in a holistic, grounded manner (Saldana, 2021), so not to lose the whole person by segmenting the data, while still following its concept in the three integrated elements identity, knowledge and action.

For data-reduction, all quotes related to professionalism, being a professional, etc. were selected in all interviews. Secondly, these quotes were physically mapped on the triangle of professionalism (Figure 1). Thirdly, combinations of quotes with similar content were labelled with a grounded phrase. Finally, combinations of phrases received a more meta-level label. This procedure provided a data-reduction with a continuous overview over the wholeness of the students utterances, 'absorbing them as a whole, rather than analysing them line by line' (Saldana, 2021, p. 214).

The conceptualisation of an interpretation model for data-analysis started with interpreting the nine positions of intellectual development by Perry (1999) as notions of 'knowledge' and expanding them to nine notions of 'identity' and nine of 'action'. In several iterations, this base model is further developed to attune better to the current literature, and to increase applicability to analyse the afore described reduced data. After development the measurement model will be applied to define the students' position on the different elements of professionalism, and combined their professionalism as a whole at a particular point in time.

Findings

The expectation is that at the time of the conference a empirically and conceptually sound model for analysing students professionalism can be shared. Additionally, some initial results of the development of undergraduate students' professionalism over four years is expected. Both methodological and content findings will be discussed with the SRHE audience.

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