

## Professionalisation

### Introduction

The process of becoming a profession, that is professionalisation, is the process by which an occupation becomes defined as a profession.<sup>1</sup>

Professionalisation is characterised as 'a profession arises when any trade or occupation transforms itself through the development of formal qualification based upon education, apprenticeship, and examinations, the emergence of regulatory bodies with powers to admit and discipline members, and some degree of monopoly rights'.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the origins and characteristics of professions, the development and definition of professions, the new professions, the benefits of professions, and professions and corporations.

### Origins and Characteristics of Professions

According to a classical definition 'Professions profess'. However, in the case of the professions what they profess carries the weight of authority and knowledge which privileges their pronouncements: 'They profess to know better than others the nature of certain matters, and to avow better than their clients what ails them or their affairs'.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge, ethics and governance are the central elements of professions. Knowledge is the core of professionalism, but how that knowledge is exercised is critical. The ultimate criterion of professionalisation is the achievement of the autonomy that suggests because of their extended education and training in a field of esoteric knowledge professionals know better what is good for their clients than others.<sup>4</sup> This position of authority and autonomy is reinforced by some form of self-regulation, through qualification, peer-review and effective socialisation of members in robust peer-group associations.

One of the earliest studies characterised the possession of specialised knowledge as the key characteristic of professions: 'a free, resourceful, and unhampered intelligence applied to problems and seeking to master them'.<sup>5</sup> Vollmer and Miller noted the crucial distinction of a profession is the requirement of specialised techniques supported by a body of theory.<sup>6</sup>

Historically the convention has been to elevate two traditional professions as the standard to which other professions can only aspire: 'the major professions are medicine and law; the minor professions are all the rest'.<sup>7</sup> However other well-established professions might claim a similar significance in terms of clients' interests. All professions presently face insistent pressures to replace elements of their apparent esoteric knowledge by the standardisation of software solutions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mike Dent et al, *The Routledge Companion to the Professions and Professionalism* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Harper Collins, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Everett C Hughes (1963) 'Professions' (1963) 92 *Daedalus* 655.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Schein, *Professional Education* (McGraw-Hill, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Flexner, 'Is Social Work a Profession?' (1915) 26 *School and Society* 901.

<sup>6</sup> H M Vollmer and D L Mills, *Professionalization* (Prentice-Hall, 1966) 11.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Glazer, 'The Schools of Minor Professions' (1975) 12 *Minerva* 346, 347.

What is often taken to truly distinguish the professions is the absolute commitment to ethical practice. It is marked by the depth of commitment to client interests, most celebrated in the Hippocratic Oath of the medical profession, a modern version of which was adopted by the World Medical Council in 1991. Since it is often cited and rarely quoted, it is useful to consider a few clauses of the modern version of the Hippocratic Oath:

I swear to fulfil, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:

- I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.
- I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures which are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.
- I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.
- I will not be ashamed to say, 'I know not,' nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.
- I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.
- I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.
- If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst this oath is designed for the medical profession some of its salient commitments are readily transferred to the ethics of other professions including sharing of knowledge. For example, dedication to the client, and empathy with the clients' needs; readiness to call on other professional colleagues' expertise when required. Also, pursuit of the real problem and not the symptoms; humanistic modesty and solidarity; the joy of doing the work of the profession well.

A general assumption is that the significance of a profession is related to the degree of technical complexity involved, and the amount of time it takes to master this knowledge, accompanied by higher levels of education.<sup>9</sup> This professional knowledge is sustained and developed by universities and professional societies, and buttressed by regulation and the law. Together this gives the profession jurisdictional claims regarding the performance of certain occupations, which may include a monopoly of a practice and control of recruitment and licensing.

---

<sup>8</sup> John Hopkins University, *More about the 'Modern' Oath* <<http://guides.library.jhu.edu/c.php?g=202502&p=1335759>> (accessed on 31 July 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Lindsey Smith, *Learning as a Means to Professionalization: Application of the Learning and Change Model to Emerging Professions* (School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University, 1997).

## Development of Professionals

However, the professions are distributed along a continuum ranging from well-established professions, to semi-professions where some practitioners have not yet become fully professionalised. Some occupations that can only claim professional status as an aspirational goal. Yet it is entirely possible for ordinary manual or skilled workers to demonstrate the highest ethical standards and the most profound commitments to the work that they do. It is equally possible for members of the higher professions to abandon ethics and other professional commitments for personal gain. Therefore, the performance of professions always requires careful monitoring, collegial professional discipline, and well-constructed regulatory frameworks.

By way of illustration the Council of European Professional Informatics Societies suggests there are clear distinctions between professional and practitioners in their occupation, highlighting the unique characteristics of a profession (Figure 1): 'A practitioner need only derive his or her living from the sector and may or may not possess other attributes, whereas a professional must draw together all the common characteristics'.<sup>10</sup> These characteristics include knowledge of the profession, quality in performance of the work, ethical commitment in the performance of the work, accountability to clients and the wider public, experiences of the tasks of the profession, and the payment of requisite fees to provide a salary.

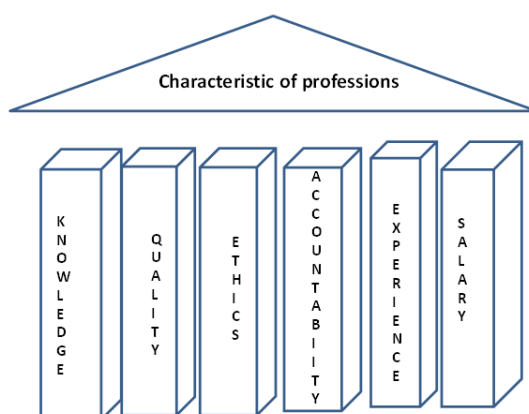
## Defining Professions

The difficulty of defining professionalisation has been resolved in different ways. Cervero suggests three different approaches – static; process; and socio-economic. The static approach attempts to identify objective criteria to distinguish between different occupations, for example intellectual qualities; scientific base; practical ends and techniques; and altruism. However, there is little consensus on the definitive criteria of a profession. The process approach asks how professionalised is an occupation along the continuum of professionalisation. This approach assumes there is no clear-cut distinction separating the professions and does not identify how professions establish their power and authority in the society.

---

<sup>10</sup> Council of European Professional Informatics Societies, *CEPIS: Characteristics and Benefits of Professionalism in IT* (6 May 2010) 2 <[http://cepis.org/media/IT\\_Professionalism\\_Characteristics\\_Benefits060510\\_final11.pdf](http://cepis.org/media/IT_Professionalism_Characteristics_Benefits060510_final11.pdf)> (accessed on 31 July 2017).

Figure 1: The Core Characteristics of Professions



Source: Adapted from CEPIS (2010)

Finally, the socio-economic view of professions focuses on this issue of the power of professions suggesting there is no ideal profession or even requisite criteria for becoming a profession. Hoyle argues professionalisation is: 'Those strategies and rhetoric's employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions'.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective what occurs in the process of professionalisation is an occupation negotiating the boundaries of the market for their services to establish legitimacy and control in the market. The mantle of profession arrives with higher economic and social status deriving from market position. Whilst having some resonance with reality, this interpretation lacks defining criteria of the nature of professionalism.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, it could be argued that the evolution of the theory and practice of professionalism suggests that it is a 'socially constructed, contextually variable and contested concept'.<sup>13</sup>

### Professionalisation and the New Professions

In recent decades, the professions have experienced a transformation – they have expanded and multiplied, professional institutions have changed, and there has been a shift of power towards the market and large corporations, but also towards state regulation. Autonomy has given way to accountability.<sup>14</sup> Some have argued that de-professionalisation rather than professionalisation has been the outcome of 'marketisation'.<sup>15</sup> Another view is that the professions are remaking themselves, and new professions are being constructed: 'professionalism is not some social-scientific absolute, but a historically changing and socially constructed concept-in-use'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Eric Hoyle, 'Professionalism, Professionalism and Control in Teaching' in V Houghton, R McHugh and C Morgan (eds), *Management in Education: The Management of Organisations and Individuals* (Ward Lock Educational/Open University Press, 1975) 315.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, above n **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Troman, 'The Rise of the New Professionals? The Restructuring of Primary Teachers' Work and Professionalism' (1996) 17 *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 473, 476.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Hoyle and Mike Wallace, *Education Leadership: Ambiguity, Professionals and Managerialism* (Sage, 2005) 100.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Evans, 'Professionalism, Professionalism and the Development of the Education Professionals' (2008) 56 *British Journal of Educational Studies* 20.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Holroyd, 'Are Assessors Professional?' (2000) 1 *Active Learning in Higher Education* 28, 39.

In practice as occupational groups continually make and re-make professions, they build the competence, integrity and trust that are the foundations of professionalism. They are challenged by changes in technology, markets, and government policy to perform differently, to higher standards and towards different goals. Besides greater accountability, there are often firmer achievement targets which are specified and assessed. This together with more continuous professional training and a greater emphasis on certification. The tradition of the profession defining the construction of the profession and its purposes is changing, and there is often an increasing role of managers and public policy in defining these.<sup>17</sup>

## **Benefits of Professionalisation**

Debates will continue about the nature, definition and purposes of professions. Likewise, with the extent to which professional autonomy is vital to the performance of the critical work of professions, and the view that greater accountability and transparency is essential in more open societies and economies. However, there remains widespread support for the continued development of professions and the benefits of professionalisation.

For example, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting sets out the following benefits of professionalisation for a range of stakeholders including government, citizens and members:

### **Government**

- Government benefits from professionalization through gaining better public financial management, increased efficiency of resource allocation, and more active public service delivery.
- Employees with a commitment to behaving ethically and displaying the highest standards of probity and integrity.
- Impartial advice in the public interest from an independent professional body that government can trust.

### **Citizens and Civil Society**

- Can rely on the accuracy and integrity of financial and other information produced by government.
- More information enables citizens to hold government to account.

### **For Aspiring Members**

- Status and standing in the community as a professional.
- Opportunities for developing relationships with other members of the profession to learn from the experience and expertise of others.

### **For Qualified Members**

- Financial reward and opportunities for enhanced job satisfaction.

---

<sup>17</sup> Julia Evetts, 'Introduction: Trust and Professionalism: Challenges and Occupational Changes' (2006) 54 *Current Sociology* 515, 516.

- Opportunities to contribute to improving service delivery.<sup>18</sup>

To take another example from an emerging profession, the Council of European Professional Informatics Societies suggests the value of professions lies in the quality of the service they provide. It is the ability of individuals to describe themselves according to a common standard to offer clients, both corporate and individual, a clear sense of their attributes, encouraging the mobility of the profession. This is a differentiation that will provide greater assurance for the client. For the professional, professionalisation will allow a recognition of the value of the service they provide. Finally, the promotion of innovation through self-directed professionals confident of their competence and standing, who can commit themselves freely to the challenges of their organisations and clients from a position of authority.

### Professionals and Managers

A profession that has grown even more precipitously than most is that of manager. Indeed, since managers are often responsible for managing groups of professionals there is sometimes an uneasy tension between the two. The professionals with a focus on the needs of patients and clients and performing their role to their highest ability, and the manager responsible for ensuring resources are utilised as efficiently and effectively as possible to maintain enterprise viability. These tensions can become embodied in the professional/manager (that is professionals who have become middle or senior managers while retaining their professional status). Dent et al suggest these hybrid roles involving being both manager and professional can be exercised differently. It is in middle management that roles of professional interests remain strong, while in senior executive roles it is the managerial duties that often become paramount.<sup>19</sup>

Many professions historically have needed to found partnerships or small businesses to organise their work, and in some cases these businesses have grown to become large international concerns for example in the accounting and legal professions.

### Professions and Corporations

As professional firms have grown and become international, for example, the big four accounting firms of PWC, EY, KPMG and Deloitte, they have increasingly corporatised their activities. PWC and EY are limited liability partnerships. KPMG has independent legal entities in each country, all members of a KPMG International Cooperative registered in Switzerland. Deloitte is a UK private company limited by guarantee. Yet, all four firms have the same scale of revenues, worldwide operations, and hundreds of thousands of employees as with the largest multi-national corporations. In the context of very large organisations it is largely the firm that monitors competence, determines tendering processes, legitimises its activities through market value, maintains membership and regulation, develops relations with clients, and sustains jurisdictional authority (Table 1). The professionalisation project of professional associations in this context

---

<sup>18</sup> The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability, *Definition and Benefits of Professionalisation* <<http://www.cipfa.org/global/professionalisation/definition-and-benefits-of-professionalisation>> (accessed on 31 July 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Dent et al, above n **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

requires the active participation of the large corporate organisations that have shaped the fields of practice.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 1: Collegial and Corporate Professionalisation**

Professional Characteristics	TRADITIONAL 'Collegial Professionalisation'	CONTEMPORARY 'Corporate Professionalisation'
<b>Knowledge Base</b>	Reliance on an abstract body of knowledge	Co-production of knowledge with industry, situated knowledge and focus on competence.
<b>Market</b>	Statutory Closure via Royal Charter	Market Closure via corporate practices (tendering and procurement processes)
<b>Legitimacy</b>	Legitimised by public benefit	Legitimised by market value
<b>Composition of Association</b>	Individual membership Single-tier membership structure	Individual and organisational membership Multi-level membership structure
<b>Relation to the State</b>	Licensed/regulated by state	Not licensed/regulated, state acts as (significant) stakeholder/consumer of services
<b>Relations with clients and employers</b>	Arms-length	Close engagement
<b>Jurisdiction</b>	National	International

Invariably the process of corporatisation is associated with a more commercialised approach to the understanding and practice of professional work as Muzio et al argue:

These 'new' professions increasingly operate within a commercialised understanding of professionalism,<sup>21</sup> which downgrades notions of public service and the social trusteeship of socially relevant skills<sup>22</sup> and celebrates the ability to provide business orientated expert services which add value to clients.<sup>23</sup>

There sometimes occur tensions between professional values and the developing practices of large international corporations, for example in the large international banks during the global financial crisis. These tensions have yet to be fully resolved.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Muzio et al, 'Towards Corporate Professionalization: The Case of Project Management, Management Consultancy and Executive Search' (2011) 59 *Current Sociology* 443.

<sup>21</sup> Gerard Hanlon, 'Professionalism as Enterprise: Service Class Politics and the Redefinition of Professionalism' (1998) 32 *Sociology* 43.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Muzio et al, above n **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, 461.

<sup>24</sup> Dimity Kingsford Smith, Thomas Clarke and Justine Rogers, 'Banking and the Limits of Professionalism' (2017) 40 *University of New South Wales Law Journal* 411.

## Summary

This article has highlighted the critical process by which occupations develop the status, proficiency and accountability of professions.

While this is a distinct process by all professions, the goal is to express in policy and commit in practice to some core characteristics of professions including professional knowledge, quality, ethics, accountability, experience and reward.

The professions strive to integrate and practice these elements of professionalism with more commitment and consistency than other occupations, and therefore they are regarded as special occupations.

However, the process of corporatisation does bring the professions closer to more commercial approaches to the practice of their work.

Written by: Thomas Clarke

This subject overview has been written with the support of the following partners:

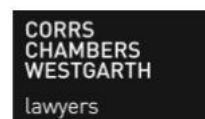


**Australian Government**  
**Australian Research Council**



**UNSW**  
SYDNEY

**CLMR**  
Centre for Law, Markets and Regulation



**Allens > < Linklaters**