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Professionalism in Further Education: International Perspectives

Abstract

Notions of professionalism, and what makes a professional, are problematic in the context of further education teachers, and this is the case both in the UK and across international boundaries. Despite arguments that the FE teacher is, in fact, a 'dual professional' (e.g. see Orr, 2008), the 'Professionalisation' agenda in England and Wales (Standards Unit, 2004) implied that FE teachers lacked professionalism, and this made them 'poor' teachers, something which could be addressed through more rigorous, 'professional' standards and training. Similar arguments are now emerging in Australia, where the mandatory ITT qualification for the TAFE (FE) sector is a Certificate IV Training and Assessment, broadly equivalent in level and content to the now defunct PTLLS qualification in England and Wales.

This paper explores notions of professionalism UK and Australian contexts with contrasts drawn between voluntarism/regulatory frameworks and professional body frameworks. It is located within a broad range of literature exploring contemporary concepts of professionalism amongst further education teachers, including work by, for example, Gleeson and James (2007), Lucas (2004), Lucas and Nasta (2010), and Tummons (2014a, 2014b). In terms of empirical evidence, the paper reports on data drawn from a documentary analysis of government policy documents, standards for the education of teachers, and regulatory frameworks in both England and Australia.

It contrasts the understandings implied through voluntary and professional frameworks, and those published by professional bodies. The paper finds strong similarities between the conception and training for FE teachers in both countries. Documentary analysis implies that whilst there is an expectation and assumption that FE teachers are, and should be, professional, this is not necessarily translated through Initial Teacher Training requirements, some of which fail to address concepts of professionalism at all. Further, it offers evidence to suggest that where notions of professionalism are addressed, the concept is described in largely reductive and utilitarian terms. The paper moves on to consider the implications of this for teachers, students, and wider practice within the sector. It argues that meaningful understandings of the notion of professional, which are effectively applied in practice, are fundamental to broader understandings of key issues in further education, such as those associated with in/equalities and in/exclusion in education contexts. The paper concludes that such understandings are unlikely to be drawn from utilitarian, CBT based teacher-training programmes.

Exploring discourses of professionalism

Professionalism may be described as a fluid concept, with a range of different meanings and interpretations. However, broadly speaking those meanings and interpretations fall within two opposing paradigms, which are framed within different types of discourse (Gee, 1996; Lemke, 1995). These discourses may be understood in one of three ways: as being positioned within a managerialist

paradigm, an emancipatory paradigm, or a utilitarian paradigm (Avis, 2007; Kennedy, 2007; Tummons, 2014a). Here, we define the managerialist paradigm of professionalism as emphasising audit and performativity through the application of 'professional' standards (Shore and Wright, 2000). According to this discourse, professional standards, and any related regulatory frameworks such as inspection regimes or quality assurance processes, are positioned as forms of social control imposed upon teachers, masked behind a discourse of 'improving standards' which serves instead to control teachers' labour and impose a model of professionalism from above or outside the profession itself. In contrast to this, an emancipatory model of professionalism is positioned as one in which professional standards and associated regulatory frameworks come under the purview of the members of the profession, which espouses more democratic, emancipatory notions of professionalism (Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler 2005; Petrie, 2015:6). Distinct from both of these is the utilitarian paradigm. This discourse of professionalism can be understood as being a product of new managerialism (Randle and Brady, 1997; Shain and Gleeson, 1999), resting on a simultaneous de-skilling and intensification of labour amongst the FE teaching workforce. Within this discourse, professionalism is positioned entirely in terms of acceptance of and adherence to working practices that position the FE teacher as a technician, ignoring the importance or value of subject expertise and instead focusing on generic teaching skills.

It is important to note that these discourses do not necessarily exist in isolation or apart from each other. By this we mean to stress that it is possible to find traces of all three of these discourses at work at the same time, during the last twenty years (the timespan for the current investigation). It is worth noting that before the UK Coalition government's de-regulation of the FE sector in 2010, the prevailing professionalization agenda was narrow, instrumental and controlling (for example, by requiring teachers to join the now-defunct Institute for Learning), but at the same time offered meaningful opportunities for funded professional training such as PGCE/Cert Ed for all full-time FE teachers, which offered the opportunity to debate issues around professionalism beyond the narrow interpretations imposed by the sector and reflected in both the FENTO and LLUK professional standards. The return to voluntary professional qualifications in the FE sector was positioned by the Coalition government within a discourse of flexibility and responsiveness to employers: simply put, it was argued that college principals would know better than government departments what their workforces required in terms of professional training and development. And yet standards and regulation remained in place: indeed, a new set of standards – the ETF standards – was published. But what was now lacking was the funding for teachers to undertake advanced forms of training (such as that offered in Universities) and CPD beyond that deemed appropriate, by their employing institution.

Contrasting national systems: The UK and Australia

The first set of professional standards for further education teachers in the UK was published in 1999 after a consultation period of several years, followed two years later by statutory reform that made the

acquisition of appropriate initial teaching qualifications based on the standards compulsory for new teachers in the sector (Nasta, 2007). The standards were published by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FEnto): one of a larger number of National Training Organisations (NTOs) introduced by the UK Conservative government of 1979-1997 to specify and implement relevant education and training programmes for the sector in question. The FEnto standards were criticised by some university-based researchers for being overly instrumental, technicist, and undervaluing wider professional development (Elliot, 2000). They were also criticised by Ofsted, who in 2003 published a report on *The Initial Training of Further Education Teachers* (HMI 1762: Ofsted, 2003). According to this report, teacher education in the sector was seen as being too variable and too inconsistent despite the introduction of new standards and new qualifications and as lacking subject-specialist pedagogy (Lucas, 2004).

In the following year, the then Department for Education and Skills published a new working paper, *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future*, which promised reform of LLS teacher education as part of a wider change in workforce education and training. NTOs were gradually replaced by new organisations – Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) – and FEnto was subsequently replaced by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), who published a new set of standards in 2006, after another period of consultation. These standards were accompanied by a further element: a new process of professional formation that required teachers in the LLS sector to achieve a new professional status – Qualified Teacher, Learning and Skills (QTLS) – following a compulsory period of continuing professional development (CPD). Criticism remained: from university researchers, who argued that the new standards were still mechanistic, overly prescriptive and narrowed the content of teacher education curricula (Lucas et al., 2012), and from policy makers who allowed the standards to ossify firstly by abolishing LLUK and secondly by removing financial support from the Institute for Learning (the professional body for LLS teachers that, amongst other things, was responsible for auditing teachers' CPD and QTLS endorsement) which ceased operations at the end of 2014. The QTLS process of professional formation has survived, but the management of the process has been passed from the IfL (ostensibly a member-led organisation) to the Education and Training Foundation (very much an employer-led organisation).

The Australian vocational education and training system, formed by a combination of TAFEs and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), broadly equivalent to private training providers in the UK, has significant similarities to the UK system, although there is less generic vocational education and a higher proportion of training that takes place in the work place. Regulatory Frameworks also have striking similarities to those in the UK, but are complicated by the fact that some aspects of the sector (regulatory frameworks for providers for example) are within the remit of national government, whilst funding and related aspects of policy are the responsibility of the autonomous State governments. This can lead to variations between States even where a policy is nationally implemented. For example, the Diploma in VET teaching, an optional qualification which also consists of centrally defined standards and achievement of which moves the holder to an identified upper point on the

national pay scales, requires students to undertake 200 hours classroom practice in Victoria but in new south Wales, no classroom practice is necessary.

As in the UK, there is no financial incentive for teachers in Australia who work in the VET sector to undertake study at degree or masters level. This is despite the fact that, originally, there was a consensus that VET teachers should hold teaching qualifications with graduate status, equivalent to those held by school teachers – an equivalence echoed in the short-lived LLUK framework that sought to create equivalence between school teachers and college lecturers through the Qualified Teacher, Learning and Skills (QTLS) status which would be akin to QTS for school teachers. Instead, the 1990s saw a move in Australia from a higher level of mandated qualification to a minimalist one (Guthrie, xxxx). Guthrie goes on to propose a range of reasons for this, key amongst which are the cost of higher education programmes to the funders, casualization of the VET workforce, concomitant with limited access to training and CPD, and a greater focus on the workplace, rather than the classroom, as a site of learning – all issues which are familiar to those involved with the UK system.

Consequent to this de-regulation, the only nationally mandated credential that is currently required for teachers working in the VET sector in Australia is the Certificate IV in TAE. This qualification is offered by Universities, TAFEs and RTOs, and is generally acknowledged as being of variable quality. It is a 30 hour programme broadly similar in size, content and level to the now defunct PTLLS award in the UK, but significant in its lack of coverage of assessment within the syllabus, something which has led to a number of arguments within and beyond the sector that assessment practices are weak and inconsistent (REF). The inadequacy of the Certificate IV as a minimum credential is also acknowledged in the draft version of the *Professional Standards for Vocational Education and Training Practitioners (PSVETP)* (Queensland College of Teachers, 2015: 2), which will be implemented in Queensland later this year, in part as a response to perceived weaknesses in the Certificate IV. It is widely considered likely that other states will follow suit in either adopting the Queensland Standards or developing their own equivalent standards. Notwithstanding concerns over the syllabus, the Certificate IV still has advocates. For example, Clayton (XXX) cites NAWT (2001), who argued that the Certificate IV was critical to the VET sector in two ways: firstly, in providing standards for trainers and assessors to adhere to; and secondly, in providing structural support for the quality assurance arrangements of RTOs.

Models of professionalism across national contexts

In comparison to a relatively lively, as well as long-standing, body of literature discussing professionalism in vocational education and training in England and Wales, there is a paucity of literature exploring how professionalism is understood in the context of VET teaching in Australia. Nonetheless, some authors (Robertson xxx; citations), have raised concerns that the Certificate IV TAE requirements are not consistent with the development of 'expert' and 'professional' teachers, but

only with those for novice or beginning teachers. That is to say, the Certificate IV requirements are seen as being appropriate only at entry to the profession, a critique that resonates with similar earlier criticisms of the English FENTO standards and the qualifications that were mapped onto these (Lucas, 2004). However, whereas subsequent series of professional standards in the UK have made sincere, if contested, attempts to establish consensual models of professionalism within the sector, in Australia there has been a failure to define professionalism, except insofar as it is conflated with notions of the 'expert' teacher. The literature tends to focus on the lack of content within the Cert IV. Simons et al (2006) criticised the absence of any reference to learning theory, as well as the uncritical application of concepts such as learning styles. Robertson (ref) argued that (in a previous incarnation) the Certificate IV programme had no evidence of critique or conceptual foundations, also noting a complete absence of critique of CBT.

Professionalism, curriculum and professional standards

It is quite common for professional bodies to endorse specific qualifications that are designed to provide students with the required practical and/or theoretical competence, knowledge and experience, at a threshold level, to allow them entry to the profession in question. Through aligning professional curricula with professional standards, the qualifications in question can then be benchmarked in terms of delivery, performance and assessment, all in such a way as to meet the requirements of the relevant professional body (Katz, 2000; Taylor, 1997). It follows, then, that if a qualification such as a Certificate in Education or a Diploma in Teaching and Learning in the Lifelong Learning Sector has been endorsed by one of the three professional bodies that have since 1999 had purview of the sector (FENTO, LLUK or ETF), and then also been mapped onto the appropriate professional framework or set of standards, aspects of those standards would be found embedded in the curriculum being followed. These have been explored in detail elsewhere (Tummons 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, we might expect similar processes to take place within equivalent curricula in Australia, a theme to which we now turn.

The TAE programme in Australia consists of 10 Units, seven core and three optional, all described and assessed within the context of a CBT framework that includes performance criteria, range statements and knowledge criteria. Across all seven core units there just one single reference to professionalism, in a single criterion which requires the candidate to be able to:

Use appropriate communication and interpersonal skills to develop **a professional relationship** with the candidate that reflects sensitivity to individual differences and enables two-way feedback (TAEASS402B) (emphasis added).

However, the criterion is not underpinned by a requirement to understand concepts of professionalism at any level. Without such foundations, therefore, how can the VET practitioner be conceptualised as a professional? What meanings can legitimately be applied to the term 'professional relationship'? The inclusion of even this minor reference to a 'professional relationship' implies an assumption that

teachers will be able to conceptualise the nature of a 'professional relationship' and enact that in their day to day working lives. However, any reference to these conceptual foundations is absent from the TAE requirements which fail to address even the most instrumental analyses of what it means to be professional.

In stark contrast to the TAE requirements, the newly published Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) Standards (2015) are structured around three domains of *Professional Knowledge*, *Professional Practice* and *Professional Learning and Engagement*, suggesting that those responsible for the development of the standards have concerns about the way in which VET teachers enact their role, and the extent to which this might be described as professional. Similarly, the revised frameworks for training providers introduced as part of the ongoing Australian federal VET Reform policy make only passing reference to the term professional, and then in the context of 'professional development', which is defined as maintaining the 'knowledge and practice of vocational training, learning and assessment...' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015, para 1.6). However, whilst the QCT standards mention 'professionalism' with considerable frequency, it is once again not explicitly defined. Moreover, despite the frequency with which the word is reiterated, there is no change to the meaning of the text if Kennedy's (2007) test of removing the word 'professional' is applied.

It is not necessary, however, for professional standards – either in Australia or in the UK – to provide an explicit definition of any or all of the terms or constructs that they draw upon: professional standards do lots of things, but they do not provide glossaries; nor are they expected to. But the dominant discourses (Gee, 1996) within which they are located will construct 'professionalism' in particular ways. We suggest, therefore, that it is through the textual analysis of the standards that latent constructs of professionalism can be made visible.

QCT standard 1.1 is the only one of the Australian standards which explicitly requires theoretical knowledge, and then only in relation to the underpinning of 'effective practice' in teaching and assessment. In the UK, whilst Professional Standards 8 & 9 require practitioners to 'maintain and update your knowledge of educational research to develop evidence based practice' and 'apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment drawing on research and other evidence' these criteria too imply that theoretical underpinnings of teaching as practice are all that is necessary for teachers to understand.

The lack of acknowledgement of a meaningful base of propositional knowledge for teachers (Shulman, 1986) across both national contexts at best marginalises, and at worst dismisses the foundational subjects which underpin the study of education: the history, philosophy, sociology and psychology of education – implying that somehow, they are of no particular relevance to the workshop or classroom as these are currently positioned by policy makers, reflecting the use of an instrumental CBT approach to teacher education which is, in fact, a form of 'pseudo-apprenticeship' which de-professionalises the intending teacher as they do not require mastery of inbuilt theory (Broudy, 1972), in stark contrast to the concept of professional education as being based around the provision of a

threshold body of knowledge as well as competence and ethical practice, appropriate for new entrants to the profession in question (Taylor, 1997).

Such Instrumental and reductive conceptualisations of what it means to be professional pose a number of wicked problems (Trowler, 2012). They constrain practitioners to a particular set of behaviours which can be associated with neoliberal concepts of managerialism and performativity, whilst simultaneously denying practitioners the opportunities to develop and enact more democratic or emancipatory notions of professionalism, since the standards themselves lack any real conceptual underpinning. Thus, if, as Broudy (1972:12) suggests "...professional means theory-guided practice with the practitioner possessing both the how and why of the practice" and that that no single observable behaviour is likely to be proof of understanding, since understanding is essentially a state of mind, the inevitable corollary of utilitarian professional standards will be a continuing and increasing de-skilling and de-professionalisation of the FE workforce (Avis, 2007).