



Working with higher education institutions and professional and regulatory bodies to enhance the competencies of future professionals

This *Forum Insight* summarises the background and preliminary findings from the research undertaken by Prof Chris Lynch of University College Cork as part of his National Forum Teaching and Learning Research Fellowship, concluded in December 2021.

What is your research about?

My research project focussed on the formation of professionals in Ireland. In essence, I focussed on the development of the “professional person”, focussing on areas beyond the usual technical skills and proficiencies that we have come to know and expect from professional people. My research has focussed on non-technical/so-called “soft skills”, such as communication and empathy, but also on important professional skills such as leadership. The ambition for this project was to better inform the higher education environment in Ireland with the aim of enhancing the formation of professionals.

In Ireland, training of certain professionals is devolved to the higher educational institutions by the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, e.g., nursing, pharmacy, dentistry and medicine. In other professions, such as law, the relevant professional body administers the major component of the professional training themselves. As such, there was opportunity to consider the variety of approaches, while at the same time collecting information for dissemination to inform future practices in this area. It was hoped that the research outputs would help higher education institutions and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to reflect on their approaches to formation of professionals and further refine these to the needs in their area.

What prompted you to choose this topic for your Fellowship research?

I have been involved in dental school education for over 20 years, and over 15 years at a senior level. Over the years, I have seen many students who were excellent academically and at a technical level, but who sometimes struggled as an independent professional due to issues in relation to their “soft skills”. I began to wonder if there were ways we could further support students on their educational journey to becoming an independent professional in relation to this concern. A significant part of my own research journey has focussed on understanding aspects of clinical dental education – indeed, I was awarded a Senior Doctorate from Cardiff University on this subject in 2019. While in my earlier days as an educator there was much focus on “training” students to become technically proficient, increasingly in recent years, there is much more emphasis on professional “formation”. I spent over 10 years as a senior clinical academic at the School of Dentistry at Cardiff University before returning

to Ireland in 2017. During my time in the UK, I witnessed enhanced expectations of student professionals by the relevant professional regulators. On my return to Ireland, and in discussion with colleagues in dentistry and beyond (medicine, pharmacy, teacher education, law) I saw there was a need and a desire to move this subject forward.

Why does this topic matter to those who learn, teach and lead across the higher education community?

As educators, we all want our students to succeed. We want our students to be the very best, and to be graduates and former students of whom we are proud. As those responsible for leading educational and formation programmes, our ambition is that our students will become professionals who will best serve the needs of society in the very best ways that they can. By identifying or considering the key area/skills on which different professions place value, we are able to “press for change” or at least stimulate and encourage discussions within key stakeholders and those responsible for the formation of professionals in Ireland. In other words, it is hoped that – considering the findings from this project – that higher educational institutions and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies will reflect on their programmes for professional formation and adjust and enhance these where appropriate and relevant. Our students, those who learn, also seek to bring the very best of their range of skills and expertise to their ever-evolving professional field.

On a more generic level, this project serves to emphasise the value and impact of projects based around scholarship and educational research and potential enhancements they can bring to society in general. The outcomes of this project will have impact for stakeholders with responsibility for the formation of professionals in Ireland.

What do we already know about this topic from previous literature?

While there has been work completed in this area on an international basis (e.g., the work of the Carnegie Foundation¹, and that of Shulman²), there has been relatively little previous research work done in this area in Ireland that spans the professions and looks at common issues across all areas. There are specific research projects which have considered different aspects of professional formation in a discipline-specific approach. Within my own profession (dentistry), I completed a project in 2015 entitled “What I wish I’d learned at dental school”³ which asked graduated and established practitioners for their views and opinions on how, based on their

1 <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org>

2 Shulman LS. Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus* 2005; 134 (3 - On professions and professionals): 52 – 59.

3 Oliver GR, Lynch CD, Chadwick BL, Santini A, Wilson NHF. What I’d wished I’d learned at dental school. *British Dental Journal* 2016; 221: 187 – 194.



career/practising experiences, they would design a new dental school training programme. Much emphasis was placed by respondents on the non-technical skills such as communication, team leadership and interactions with others.

As well as this, there have been important advances in the formation of certain individual professional training programmes – for example over ten years ago, Professor Áine Hyland oversaw important changes in the development of teachers.⁴ There was a move away from the sense that teachers complete a “training” programme and rather that they undertake a “formation” programme, with the formation of a professional identity as a teacher being a key outcome.

In addition to specific programmes and professions, most universities now have embedded graduate attributes within their own institution, which encourage the development of key skills from graduates of all programmes. Across the literature, there have been a number of studies which have considered the development of graduate attributes in professionals, with some early important publications emerging 10 years ago.^{5,6,7} During my reading around this study, a concept which stayed with me was the description of Baldwin et al (2014)⁸ who considered the development of graduate attributes in nursing students. This group described graduate attributes in terms of the “Yellow Brick Road”/“Wizard of Oz” characters, describing how three necessary traits need to be developed in nursing students: knowledge, compassion and professional confidence. The authors consider that these traits/attributes “...can be likened to the basic needs of Dorothy’s three travelling companions, the scarecrow who wanted a brain (knowledge); the tin man who wanted a heart (compassion) and the cowardly lion who sought courage (professional confidence).”

On reviewing the literature, I found that the concept of graduate attributes was more established or embedded in health profession fields compared to other areas such as law or accountancy. This seems to have been driven by the expectations of the professional regulators in the field. There was a seam of publications relating to either advocating for, or measuring already established, graduate attribute approaches in health professionals, particularly in Australia, the UK and North America⁵⁻⁸. In other areas publications mainly identified, or called for, the establishment of graduate attribute approaches in professional education.⁷

The aim of my project was to look at aspects of the formation of professionals within the Irish higher education sector.

How did you go about the research?

At the outset, I conducted a rapid/scoping review of the available literature, focussing mainly on a number of professional areas (such as medicine and other clinical areas, law, accountancy). The purpose of this was to explore the use of

certain terms such as “graduate attributes”, “transversal skills” and “professional competencies”. I reviewed databases and hand searched journals, and distilled available information from the existing literature. The literature reviewed was fascinating: the concept of exploring concepts such as graduate attributes appeared to be more evolved in the health/clinical/paraclinical areas compared to other areas. As well as this, there was often an occasional lack of clarity in relation to the precise definition of terms such as “graduate attributes” in the sense that some authors would include relevant technical skills as part of the proficiency of the professional in their definition, while others would consider only other than technical skills.

I convened a working group/workshop with representatives from the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, along with representatives in key areas from the higher education institutions. We had open discussions exploring the use of the above-mentioned terms, which were part of the rapid/scoping review. We also discussed and explored concepts in the current expectations of the formation of professionals in Ireland which would be utilised in subsequent surveys of the sector in Ireland.

I recruited an expert panel working group to assist in the construction of instruments to collect information on the key qualities and attributes of professionals in training in Ireland. The composition of this expert panel working group was carefully considered: representation was included from the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, as well as the higher education institutions. Representatives were mainly from Ireland, but a number were drawn from overseas. Over a number of interactions, the instruments were carefully distilled and designed. Each professional, statutory and regulatory body in Ireland received an invitation to take part in the study. Following a review of the websites of relevant professional programmes in the higher education institutions in Ireland, we invited identified key individuals to take part in the study. Responses received were carefully reviewed and considered.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with a representative sample from the higher education institutions and the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

What are the key initial findings from the research?

The scoping/rapid review was revealing as to the evolution of concepts in relation to the formation of professionals around the world. Some professions in certain geographic areas could be considered “evolved”, while others still had some way to go. Many professions expressed a desire or need to include such information in their formation programme, but had little concrete information on how to implement this.

From discussions amongst the working group, there was a great sense of enthusiasm for the need to further develop and

4 Hyland Á. Teaching education reform in Ireland: Policy and process. *Education Research and Perspectives* 2018; 45: 4 – 24.

5 Williams B, Onsmann A, Brown T. A Rasch factor analysis of a paramedic graduate attribute scale. *Evaluation & the Health Professions* 2012; 35: 148 – 168.

6 Woolley T, Sivamalai S, Ross S, Duffy G, Miller A. Indigenous perspectives on the desired attributes of medical graduates practising in remote communities: A Northwest Queensland pilot study. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 2013; 21: 90 – 96.

7 Morgan S, Orr K, Mah C. Graduate attributes for master’s programs in health services and policy research: results of a national consultation. *Healthcare Policy* 2010; 6: 64 – 86.

8 Baldwin A, Bentley K, Langtree T, Mills J. Achieving graduate outcomes in undergraduate nursing education: following the Yellow Brick Road. *Nurse Education in Practice*; 2014: 9 – 11.

enhance the non-technical skills of the professional. An overall consensus was reached that “graduate attributes” were the “Day 1 expectations of new the graduate/professional”. The participants also felt that the term “graduate character” meant more to them than “graduate attributes”. There was a sense that the formation of professionals in the “soft skills” was quite embedded and involved in some professional areas compared to others. The participants expressed confusion as to how these “soft skills” could be assessed during the formation of professionals: for example, a view was expressed that it was more than “ticking boxes”, however the challenge to record information in a reliable manner is often difficult without the ability to “tick boxes”.

Collecting data from the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and higher education institutions in Ireland was also interesting. Of the 33 qualities and traits listed, none were ranked as “not important”. Trustworthiness, integrity, reliability and honesty were the traits/qualities most commonly rated as “very important”. At the other end of the scale, being “public spirited”, “negotiation skills”, “societal awareness” and “ability to innovate” were least commonly rated as “very important”. “Relevant technical proficiency” was ranked 19th of the 33 qualities and traits considered. Clearly there is much scope to consider the importance of certain values and traits in the future formation of professionals.

The semi-structured interviews revealed that participants identified key aspects that define the “professional person” (most common being subject to ethical guidelines, being bound by a code of conduct, and taking responsibility for one’s actions) and key qualities that characterise well-formed professionals (most common being honesty, professional/technical knowledge and being self-aware). Communications between the higher education institutions and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies drew twice as many positive comments as negative ones.

What, if anything surprised you in this research?

This answer is in two parts: the first is not surprising at all; rather it is reassuring and refreshing. The overwhelming support, enthusiasm and interest I had from all key stakeholders that I spoke to – both in the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and the higher education institutions – was palpable and strong.

The results overwhelming suggest that traits such as trustworthiness, honesty and integrity are ranked as “very important” – much more than “relevant technical proficiency”. While my personal perceptions were that these qualities were of comparable importance, the findings of the study suggests that many stakeholders place greater importance in these areas. This provides much food for thought for me as someone with responsibility for the formation of professionals within my own higher education institution.

What do your initial findings mean for higher education policy/practice?

Evolving societal expectations and advances in technical knowledge and understanding means that the nature and character of a professional in Ireland undergoes continuous and repeated challenge and change. The professional who completes training and qualifies in 2021 will face significant

changes in both their career and the expectations of society in relation to their role over the next 20 – 40 years. An everyday example of what is meant here is exemplified by the increasing area of complaints and concerns for emerging and younger professionals in relation to social media issues – be it allegedly inappropriate advertising or contact with clients or other individuals. Yet, 15 – 20 years ago, such technology did not exist. Looking forward – there are other perhaps similar aspects to the life of the professional that will be mainstream in 2041, yet we cannot foresee these today. How do we ensure that our graduating professionals are best prepared for such challenges?

Reviewing the findings of my research, there is hope for those involved in the formation of professionals in Ireland in meeting these and other challenges. Despite the issue of graduate attributes, or other similar concepts, not being significantly evolved in certain areas, there is clearly a strong desire and enthusiasm that our qualifying professionals need to be strong in character – with some key stakeholders in Ireland expressing a desire for the term “graduate character” rather than simply “attributes”. The stakeholders I engaged with were determined/keen for their qualifying professionals to be more than just technically proficient at their trade. They sought out individuals who are honest, trustworthy and of integrity. There was a sense that many are keen to define the “Day 1 set of skills” of a new professional and that these would be very strong on the non-technical, so called “soft skills”. Within the data collection instruments, traits/qualities such as honesty, integrity and trustworthiness were more likely to be ranked as “more important” than other such as “effective management skills”, “effective ICT skills” and “knowledge of relevant legislation”. I found this to be significant: clearly individuals who are honest and trustworthy and of integrity will be able to withstand the as yet unforeseen personal and professional challenges that arise in 2041, as Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms challenge our young (and not so young) professionals in 2021.

Reflecting on my initial thoughts in relation to the relative importance of the traits such as honesty, trustworthiness and integrity relative to technical proficiency (initially I assumed these would be comparable, but respondents ranked honesty, trustworthiness and integrity higher than technical proficiency), there is a certain intuitive logic in this approach. In many professional areas, skills/tasks/legislation/processes/rules have evolved rapidly over time. (There have been many changes and in clinical skills and technologies since I qualified as a dentist over 20 years ago). My initial thoughts on this finding are that a professional who is honest and trustworthy will, in all likelihood, engage with continuous professional development and seek to upgrade their skills as technical aspects evolve over time. Hence there is much merit and potential in the collective and consistent response of stakeholders who participated in this study.

Having set out the position that we want our new professionals to be honest, trustworthy and of integrity, how do we ensure that this is achieved? Is it possible to “train” people to be honest, trustworthy and of integrity? Is this something that can be inculcated from exposure to suitable role models during training? Or are these traits developed in the formative years of life and are selection processes needed to detect and “screen out” people not exhibiting such traits from ever entering training programmes? In my own personal experience from UK higher education in dentistry, I witnessed a change from a selection process which was based around academic achievements



in A-levels and non-structured interviews, to a more formal structured selection process where the interviews were replaced with mini-station interviews which assessed a range of skills and traits from manual dexterity to breaking bad news to communication skills and to critical analysis. Is there a role for such selection process for entry into professional training programmes in Ireland? Then, having said that traits such as honesty, integrity and trustworthiness are all to be desired in professionals in training, how do we set about measuring or assessing these? Individuals in one of my working groups said that we should not have a “tick box” approach to assessing such traits, but what is the alternative, educationally robust and defensible way (e.g., resistant to challenge from a disappointed or sanctioned trainee?) There are many ideas here to ponder over the coming years in implementing such a worthwhile approach.

At a more macro level, there was a keen desire for all stakeholders, both from the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and from the higher education institutions, to continue to engage with each other to further enhance the formation of new professionals in Ireland. From discussions with these key stakeholders and from relevant bodies such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland such an approach augurs well for the landscape and the future potential such professionals can bring to society in Ireland. It has been a privilege to work with such enthusiastic stakeholders from both the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and higher education institutions over the course of this project.



For more information on this research please contact Chris Lynch at chris.lynch@ucc.ie



For more information on the National Forum Teaching and Learning Research Fellowships see teachingandlearning.ie/fellowships



