

# PEDAGOGICAL PROFESSIONALISATION THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION – LEARNING BEYOND PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This discussion paper outlines potential learning outcomes of degree programmes in education with respect to the professionalisation of educational practitioners. A knowledge-centred approach to pedagogical professionalisation is supplemented by considerations on academic professionalisation in general. Finally, both perspectives are integrated, discussing curricular implications and resulting research desiderata.

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of the massification of Higher Education (HE), an increasing number of students enters their studies with diverse life experience, turning universities into important places of adult education. While some of these students pursue their studies primarily out of personal interest or the goal of personal development, another predominant motivation for studying is the drive for professional development. From this perspective, University Lifelong Learning can be highlighted not only as a (special) form of adult learning, but also as a distinct means of the professionalisation of practitioners.

Professionalisation is a central topic in the field of education, embracing both social-institutional facets such as the development of regulation frameworks and individual facets, like the biographical formation of knowledge, orientations, motives and practices (Helsper, 2021). In bridging both sides, the role of thematically relevant degree programmes (i.e., BA Education Studies, MA of Educational Sciences) in professionalising practitioners deserves special attention: What is the added value of these study programmes with regard to learning outcomes? Or – to put it more plainly – *What do educational practitioners actually learn in thematically related degree programmes beyond practice?*

This paper will argue that degree programmes in the field of education are central to the professionalisation of educational practitioners. First, the concept of pedagogical professionalisation will be defined, drawing on a knowledge-centred approach that highlights the importance of academic knowledge. Second, general learning objectives of HE in the context of professionalisation are discussed. Finally, both perspectives are integrated, discussing curricular implications and resulting research desiderata.

## PEDAGOGICAL PROFESSIONALISATION

Pedagogical professionalisation is a broad field, as neither the concrete borders of pedagogical tasks and activities nor their organisational framing can be clearly defined (Nittel, 2011). Professionalisation as a process can be viewed not only from a social-institutional or individual perspective, but also with respect to different issues (i.e., power relations, structure of actions; Helsper, 2021). In the context of research, a knowledge-based approach to pedagogical professionalism is helpful as it differentiates forms of knowledge that underpin professional actions.

Oevermann (1996, p. 80) points out the inherent tension of pedagogical actions between individual and societal interests, which, in light of "increasing social differentiation and rationalisation require an academic-critical foundation." Consequently, a central focus of professional pedagogical actions then becomes the "methodologically explicit review of validity questions and claims under the regulative idea of truth" (Oevermann, 1996, p. 88). Dewe, Ferchhoff and Radtke (1992) describe professional knowledge as an "independent realm between practical knowledge, with which it shares the permanent pressure to make decisions, and systematic academic knowledge, which is subject to an increased pressure to justify itself" (Dewe, Ferchhoff and Radtke, 1992, p. 81). This concept of pedagogical professional knowledge has recently been further elaborated by Helsper (2021). He distinguishes pedagogical professional knowledge as academically based knowledge to justify decisions, critical reflective knowledge and reconstructive, diagnostic knowledge, which should be developed by the "formation of a researching-reflective epistemological-critical attitude" (Helsper, 2021, pp. 136-138).

With regard to the function of academic knowledge in the context of professionalisation, Dewe (2002) points out that "it limits the options for actions and at the same time serves as a contouring foil [...]. In this sense, the academically (trained) practitioner is distinguished from the everyday practitioners [...] by reflective knowledge that allows him to know what he is doing" (Dewe, 2002, p. 25). This relates to Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner" where reflection on action - the highest level of reflexivity - describes the reflection on past actions to "elicit and criticize the tacit understandings that have been formed around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice" (Schön, 1983, p. 61).

However, the function of academic knowledge in this context requires further elaboration. As Cendon (2020, p. 238) points out, being a reflective practitioner may serve as an entry point into the studies, but the reflection borne out of relating one's studies to one's professional activities goes far beyond.

## ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALISATION

The Dublin Descriptors for the European Higher Education Area may serve as a good overview with respect to the overarching learning objectives of European university degrees, linking academic learning outcomes to the professional sphere. For a Bachelor's degree for instance, students are supposed to "apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation", embracing competencies in devising and sustaining arguments, solving problems and gathering and interpreting data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, 2016). The Framework for Higher Qualifications in Germany explicitly refers to on an "academic self-image", which is defined

as the ‘academic professionalism’ of graduates” (KMK, 2017, p. 4), when introducing the B.A. and M.A. degree framework.

The term academic professionalisation addresses professional development in an academic setting that differs from other forms of professionalisation in the working environment or non-academic professional trainings, covering structural (curricular), societal and personal aspects (Schüßler & Egetenmeyer, 2018). Barnett (1992, p. 186) points out that professional education is “a particularly complex form of higher education, having to satisfy a large number of educational objectives”, as professional practice “is itself a complex of possibilities” varying between clients and the concrete working field (Barnett, 1992, p. 188). Moreover, since “professional activity is an extraordinary amalgam of mind and body, of thought and action, of knowing and doing, [...] professional education - if it is to be worthy of its object - should reflect that complexity and interwovenness” (Barnett, 1992, p. 190). Barnett then delineates four spheres of critical ability in the professional context, framing them as four domains of the professional educational curriculum. Higher Education is tasked with fostering the student’s critical ability in all four interdependent domains:

|                     |                        |                         |
|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cognitive domain    | a) Core knowledge      | b) Contextual knowledge |
| Professional domain | c) Professional action | d) Professional values  |

*Table 1. Domains of the professional educational curriculum (Barnett, 1992, p. 187)*

In a more recent publication, Barnett (2015) widens this approach by developing a “Curriculum for Critical Being”. Interestingly, the four levels of criticality in the domains “knowledge”, “self” and “world” and the bond to the professional sphere are inversely linked: The higher the level of criticality, the lower the connection to the professional sphere and vice versa. The lowest level of criticality, “critical skills”, is actually very closely related to the professional sphere: it is about “discipline-specific critical thinking skills” with regard to the domain of knowledge, “self-monitoring to given standards and norms” regarding the self and “problem-solving (means-end instrumentalism)” in the domain of the world (Barnett, 2015, p. 64). The second level, “reflexivity”, seems to cover central aspects of professionalism such as “self-reflection (reflection on one’s own projects)” and “reflective practice (‘metacompetence’, ‘adaptability’, ‘flexibility’)” (Barnett, 2015, p. 64).

## SYNTHESIS AND OUTLOOK

Looking at the depicted approaches together, the study of education/educational science combines pedagogical and academic professionalisation, which can thus be justifiably viewed as a prerequisite for successful professionalisation in the field of education. Merely being a reflective practitioner may not be sufficient to remain competent in a complex educational situation in view of the special responsibility in educational settings and the complexity of the field as such. Rather than knowing exactly what do to by drawing on formulaic knowledge, pedagogical professionalism is characterised more by a broad (academic) knowledge base that serves as an orientation in complex professional settings. When integrated with the primary goal of HE – becoming a critical being (Barnett, 1997, 2015) – academic pedagogical professionalisation can be described as the development of a critical attitude regarding:

- (professional) knowledge (i.e., one’s own professional experience and its limits),
- the self (own attitudes and routines)

- and the world (especially the structural framing of the workplace and the societal framing of educational problems).

As demonstrated, academic professionalisation cannot be sufficiently explored without considering structural aspects, such as concrete curricula (Barnett, 1992; Schüßler & Egetenmeyer, 2018). In turn, the curricular framing is context-dependent, especially on a national level (i.e., DfGE, 2004 for Germany). With respect to core knowledge, educational study programmes have a speciality that renders them quite unique in the context of “becoming a critical being”: as the studies essentially address just these topics in a professional context, professional and personal development are inextricably linked to each other. However, it is not only the core but also context knowledge that is relevant for an academic professional curriculum, embracing both liberal and operational contextual disciplines, offering a wider understanding of the professional practice itself *and* multidisciplinary, operative skills (Barnett, 1992). In contrast to these content considerations, the concept of basic methodological training within study programmes may also have a notable effect on professionalisation within the sphere of knowledge critique, as the (re-/de-) construction of knowledge is central in academic writing and research.

If we regard learning processes as bridging both the outlined desired learning outcomes (academic pedagogical professionalisation) and the input (the curricular frame), the concept of reflective learning in the context of HE (Cendon, 2016; 2020) merits further attention.

In particular, the relation between (theoretical and/or academic) knowledge and reflective learning could benefit from further clarification. Hereby, greater elaboration could be offered on what differentiates HE from other learning contexts where professional development is fostered. Finally, core topics of pedagogical knowledge and of related context knowledge must be concretised from the perspective of the learner, especially within the context of HE.

The research work that frames this paper will tackle these questions through a qualitative approach. While these results are pending, it may be worth doing some self-assessment as an adult educator and/or lecturer based on the approaches presented – what about our own knowledge and skills? To what extent do we reflect ourselves, our knowledge basis and our actions in the context of a learning society? Hopefully, the professionalisation of adult educators in HE will also benefit from the upcoming research.

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