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The changing opportunities of professionalization for graduate occupations

Abstract

In recent times, rapidly changing occupational contexts have altered professional trajectories. While sociologists have emphasized that abstract knowledge acquired in higher education is an important characteristic of professionalism, it is not clear whether the expansion of higher education has affected the possibility of individuals and groups to monopolize their university credentials. In this article I argue that the emergence of new graduate occupations and the growth of a university-educated labour force have made occupational closure in the professions more difficult. The changing relationship between education, skills, jobs and credentials limits possibilities for the creation and maintenance of professionalization trajectories as a professional status and a professional knowledge base becomes harder to achieve. Due to the decreasing opportunities of using formal educational credentials to achieve professional closure, aspiring occupations will have to rely more on what is called 'symbolic closure'.

Keywords: Professionalization, Credentials, Graduate Labour Market, Occupations, Knowledge, Occupational Closure

Introduction

Interest in the sociology of professions post-war has waxed and waned. After a period of relative instability interest in the role of professions in the labour market and society (Gorman and Sandefur 2011) has been renewed, especially in the role professionals play in changing economical, technological and organizational contexts. Contemporary theorists thus highlight the effects of increased regulation, bureaucracy, transparency and accountability on the professions. At the same time, the idea that the concept still characterizes a distinct form of occupation is being contested, as many feel that the professions cannot be distinguished conceptually from other occupations (Sciulli 2010) or that it no longer seems important to draw a hard line between professions and other (expert) occupations (Svensson and Evetts 2003), so that the operational definition of profession can or should be highly pragmatic (Evetts 2013). Others stress that the concept needs to be updated in order to fit with modern occupations (e.g. Evetts 2011; Muzio et al. 2013).

Apart from such definitional issues, questions remain as to how some occupations become professions and others do not, as well as how professions control and maintain their privileged position within the occupational hierarchy.[i] In order to fully capture how professionalism is manifested in the current labour market we need to adopt a wide and comprehensive approach. As suggested by Friedson (1994: 79) we ‘must analyse the circumstances in which occupations become organized as social groups, in classifying them by the source, type, degree of their organization, and in analyzing them in such a way as to explain both how and why their form of organization came to be and could be maintained, and what the consequences are for productive division of labor of which they are part.’

It is clear that contexts matter in the professionalization process. There has been much focus on the role that the state, organizations and institutions play in professional trajectories yet the role of major occupational and educational changes that have altered high-skilled work remain underexplored. In this article, I argue that the emergence of new graduate occupations and the rapid growth of a university-educated labour force has made the possibility of professional closure more difficult and thus, the emergence of new professions and the continuation of the established professions more unlikely, although not impossible. I explain how the changing relationship between education, skills, jobs and credentials limits the possibilities of the creation and maintenance of professionalization trajectories, as professional status and a professional knowledge base become harder to achieve. Due to the decreasing opportunities of using formal educational credentials to achieve professional closure, (aspiring) professionals will have to rely more on what has been conceptualized as ‘symbolic closure’ (Tholen, 2016).

The organization of this article is as follows. Firstly, the relationship between social closure and professionalism is explored. Then the role of credentials and formal knowledge is examined in order to assess how well modern graduate occupations can use their association with higher education to their advantage in their professionalization trajectories. Finally, the changes in the current graduate labour market and their effect on the professionalization of graduate occupations are discussed.

Professionalism and social closure

It is an established idea in the sociology of the professions that occupational closure is practised to ensure that the standards of education, training and knowledge base of licensed practitioners are maintained. Through occupational closure a profession keeps out other occupations through controlling the supply of the expertise and the service itself, together with protecting the status and rewards of practitioners.

The basis on which closure is thought to be achieved differs between theorists. In some cases the basis is thought to be demonstrable competences (Freidson 2001; Hughes 1963; Parsons 1954; Saks 1995; Sciulli 2005) and not necessarily unjustified privilege. Moreover, some have argued that the professions may retain a normative value besides their privileged labour market position (e.g. Freidson, 2001; Saks, 1995). Studies focusing on power (e.g. Abbott 1988, 1991; Freidson 1994, 2001; Larson 1977; Rossides 1998) make occupational closure of prime importance. In this reading the base of closure is achieved through power differentials, not productive differences. The professions try to maintain skill scarcity and maximize rewards by restricting access to the occupation as well as the privileges and opportunities attached to it, combined with. Professionals claim a monopoly on their duties and tasks, strive to expand their area of jurisdiction and protect their domains and as well as pursuing collective interests and high occupational status honour (Collins 1990: 36). Sheltered from competitive market forces, professions acquire the freedom to set their own terms of compensation (Freidson 1970; Johnson 1972; Weeden 2002).[ii]

To power theorists professional projects are essentially labour market strategies that aim to establish an occupational monopoly over the provision of certain skills and competences in the market for services (Witz 1990: 675). They are the systematic attempts to translate a scarce set of technical as well as cultural resources into a secure and institutionalized system of social and financial rewards (Larson 1977: xvii). Such projects are often built on educational and legal closure (MacDonald 1995; Murphy 1988; Parkin 1979) whereby groups seek to control entry to labour markets and competition within them. Parkin (1979) characterizes exclusionary closure as occurring when members of an occupation close off opportunities ‘downwards’ from occupations below them to preserve or to secure privilege. Subordinate occupations can resist and even win a greater share of the resources that are in the possession of the dominant group in an upward direction, a process named usurpation. Inter-occupational demarcationary closure can also be manifested between related or adjacent occupations (Macdonald 1995; Witz, 1992). In the neo-Weberian version, professions mainly compete with other professions. Liljegren (2012) reminds us that an important strand in the neo-Weberian sociology of the professions centres on the intra-class struggle that takes place inside the professional class rather than movements within the class hierarchy (as Marxists want it). We will now turn to the role of educational credential in professionals’ closure strategies.

Credentialism

An important aspect of professional closure is found in the creation and use of educational credentials. In the sociology of the professions there is consensus that education itself is an important element in the constitution of professional status as well as a constitutive element of a professional’s knowledge base. Some stress that that a professional status can be achieved following years of higher education and vocational training (e.g. Evetts 1999: 75; Siegrist 2002) or that training needs to be systematic and scholarly (Burrage et al. 1990: 205)

Many have pointed at use of tactics that involve acquiring a monopoly through credentialist closure (Freidson 1970; Larson 1990; Parkin 1979; Weber 1978). Formal and informal qualifications serve as powerful tools for inclusion and exclusion. For instance Larson (1977: 30) writes that a professional is ultimately ‘a name we give to historically specific forms that establish structural links between relatively high levels of formal education and relatively desirable positions and/or rewards in the social division of labour’.

The relationship between credentialism and professionalism was observed by Weber (1978: 1000) who argues that educational credentials, or patents, serve the formation of a privileged stratum in bureaus and offices by limiting the supply of eligible candidates. This can be an intentional effect created by the occupational groups in question. In particular, the establishment of patenting education for the professions limits the supply of contestants and thus gave them an economic advantage. Building on this insight, Parkin (1979) observes that credentialism is increasingly becoming an exclusionary tactic used by professionals. The dominant class in modern capitalism consists of those who possess or control productive capital, and those who possess a legal monopoly of professional services. Credentials are an effective device for protecting educated professions from free market labour competition. Credentialism monitors and restricts the supply of labour and also protects all professional members regardless of the tremendous variations in the level of ability among them. There is an universal tendency among professionals to raise the minimum standards of entry as increasing numbers of potential candidates attain formerly scarce qualifications, named the diploma disease.

Freidson (1986) specifically emphasizes the role of higher education in professionalization projects. What makes professionals distinct is their ability to create monopolies (which he calls ‘labour market shelters’) through higher education. Educational systems provide training and credentials to do particular tasks that lead to privileged access to trained worker occupations in the labour market. Occupations that require formal education and credentials as prerequisites for holding a job become professions. Yet, as Kreckel (1980: 531) observes, we need to specify the structural conditions under which certain qualifications may gain strategic significance in the capitalist labour market in order to understand their bargaining power. We now turn to the knowledge base of the professions.

Professionals and expert knowledge

Weber (1978) insisted that the relative knowledge upon which the professional base their monopolistic practices has to be certified and credentialized. On the basis of credentialized knowledge social closure can be achieved. For many closure theorists the possession of credentials does not correlate with a greater quality of work performance or client care (Berg 1973; Collins 1979) but instead relates to a body of knowledge and expertise. For instance Freidson (1970: 79–80) writes that '[T]he content and length of training of an occupation, including abstract knowledge or theory, is frequently a product of a deliberate action of those who are trying to show that their occupation is a profession and should therefore be given autonomy. If there is no systematic body of theory, it is created for the purpose of being able to say there is'. For others like Parkin, degrees need to have include *scarce* skills and knowledge to maintain labour market scarcity and hence, high rewards.

In the sociology of the professions the rise of scientific knowledge in the everyday sphere has been of key importance in understanding the nature of the professions since the early works of functionalist theorists. The role of experts has been thought to have increased in late modernity (Giddens 1990, 1991) and accordingly the professions tend to be associated with scientific expertise and knowledge. For instance, Freidson (1999: 118) claims that professional work requires a recognized body of knowledge and skill that is believed to be based on abstract concepts. For Macdonald (1995: 1) professions are occupations based on 'advanced, or complex, or esoteric, or arcane knowledge'.

For many, the technical scientific knowledge involved in professional work servers as a justification and legitimization of their control over their own occupation (Elliott 1972; Freidson 1994, 2001). Abbott (1988, 1991) elaborates on how acquiring a professional body of knowledge has become the basis of domination. Professions compete with each other to dominate jurisdictions or markets for services. Aspiring professions need to be able to identify, diagnose and treat human problems in a manner that necessitates and thus legitimates the interventions of those who hold that expert knowledge. These ‘spheres of jurisdiction’ establish the identity of a profession while differentiating it from competing occupational groups. Practical skills grow out of an abstract system of knowledge. This knowledge justifies the profession’s technical and political autonomy as well as setting up practical techniques that become prescriptive[iii] (Abbott 1988). Only through abstraction can professions survive in the competitive systems of professions. Even more sceptical is Collins (1979), for whom the knowledge system functions primarily as a prestigious ideological base that gives professionals high occupational status honour. The ritualistic and ceremonial moments in practising theory impress the lay person. Professionalization becomes the legitimization of the monopoly of competence by monopolizing sanctioned ‘expertise’ and its credibility with the public (Larson, 1977: 38).

How knowledge is applied within the work context is not easy to ascertain. Brante (2010: 851) is sceptical of the mainstream canon that assumes the professions are fundamentally based on the possession of abstract scientific knowledge while providing ‘no attempts to specify what type of (scientific) knowledge is referred to, what qualities this knowledge must have’. Traditional graduate occupations such as medicine and law have relied heavily on the formal structures of knowledge that have been essential in maintaining their status as professionals. Yet for other occupations this association between a (scientific) body of knowledge and their position within the labour market hierarchy is less clear. This has become an issue for growing groups of highly qualified workers in relative new or upgraded occupations. For these roles the link between this body of knowledge and potential professional status needs to be negotiated. The next section shows that many university graduates work in occupations where the relationship between the body of knowledge taught at university and the role of knowledge in the workplace is unclear.

Professions and the graduate labour market

Western graduate labour markets are in flux (Abel et al., 2014; Tholen, 2014). One important change that has influenced how graduate occupations can become professions or maintain their status relates to the widening range of jobs that have become graduate occupations. The emergence of new professions is sometimes identified as a challenge to the traditional professions. Reed (1996: 585) distinguishes three ideal types of expert groups. The first are the independent/liberal professions (e.g. lawyers and doctors) whose knowledge based is abstract, codified rational knowledge. The second are the organizational professions (e.g. managers and administrators) whose knowledge base is technical; tacit; organization-specific and political. Through the educational and bureaucratic credentials required, the organizational professions attempt to mobilize the localized and contingent cognitive resources available to them in order to secure relatively powerful and privileged positions in technical and status hierarchies. The third are the knowledge workers (e.g. information technology [IT], the media, research and professional/business services) who use specialized marketable cognitive and technical skills that are difficult, but not impossible, to standardize and replicate. Their power base lies in economic liberalization and commodification of experts' services and products. Reed identifies increasing pressures on the first two types of professionals and sees the knowledge worker as becoming increasingly effective and successful in the modern global economy.

Since the mid-1990s, when Reed's work was published, much has changed. Not only have new occupations have been created, the educational (re)classification of skilled occupations has taken place. An increasing number of occupations are now regarded as graduate or graduate-level occupations for two reasons. The first is that their assumed increased complexity signals that increased education qualifications are required to perform these jobs. The second is that an influx of university graduates has moved into these occupations. New graduate occupations are to be found in IT, psychotherapy, human resource management, consultancy, advertising, marketing, project management and real estate, among many others.

There has traditionally been a reasonably well-defined understanding of what a graduate occupation consists of. Before mass higher education emerged, those who graduated from universities would generally enter conventional and established graduate occupations. However in recent decades the graduate labour market has expanded with the rapid growth of higher education. More jobs have been created in traditional graduate occupations, new graduate occupations have been created and graduates have moved into non-graduate occupations.

Purcell and Elias (2004) showed that for the UK that share of traditional graduate occupations has remained constant over time. So to what extent do the new occupations require the skills and knowledge provided by the higher education curriculum? In a more recent study, Purcell and Elias (2013) define graduate occupations by examining the extent to which they utilize specialist, orchestration and communication expertise, and go on to identify three types of graduate occupations: the experts (those in knowledge-intensive occupations that require specialist higher education knowledge and skill), orchestrators (those who use knowledge to evaluate information, asses options, plan, make decisions and coordinate the contributions of others to achieve objectives) and communicators (those who draw on advanced interactive skills).

It has become increasingly difficult to define what constitutes a graduate occupation. This is partly because it is very hard to ascertain to what extent the skill, knowledge and attitudes they use at work are linked to their knowledge attained in higher education studies in the wide range of positions that together make up an occupation. Moreover, graduates have moved into a growing number of occupations, yet we do not know whether this is by choice or because of the intensification of competition for traditional graduate occupations. There is strong evidence to suggest that association between educational attainment and occupational prestige is in decline as graduates take employment in a wider range of occupations (Klein, 2016).

It has become far from easy to establish which jobs require advanced skills and which do not. As Brynin (2013: 285) recently noted: ‘[W]hile some occupations have become wholly graduate and others remain wholly non-graduate, many occupations are now partially graduate’. The fact that a growing pool of graduates finds jobs in the labour market does not necessarily mean that these jobs could not have performed by workers without tertiary education. One important trend is the ‘graduatization’ of the labour market. This term is used to describe the growing pool of graduates entering occupations that were traditionally non-graduate. Research on the skills used by British estate agents (Tholen et al 2016) suggests that some employers do indeed hire graduates for reasons other than their university-related skills and knowledge. Whereas estate agents were predominantly non-graduates in the past, now an increasing number of them are graduates. In interviews, employers and estate agents agreed that graduate skills related to higher education were not needed to perform the job, but importance was attached to the experiences and soft skills developed at university. In a growing number of occupations, such as estate agents, there is a much wider gap in the skills acquired at university and the practical demands of the job itself than in traditional professional occupations. Attaching value to these soft skills, as opposed to the skills and knowledge developed in formal learning, could be the driving factor in the increasing graduatization of many professions, although this is an area for further research.

Other evidence confirms that there is a fading line between graduate and non-graduate work and the role of formal qualifications in the recruitment process (Blenkinsopp and Scurry 2006). Jephson's (2012) work on professionalization and accountancy outlines the trend for accountancy firms to recruit increasingly from non-graduates (school leavers). Again, in this occupation formal qualifications are deemed to be of low importance. It is also important to note that the skills developed in institutes of higher education are in many occupations not the skills that employers value (Tholen et al 2016). How we can understand the professional projects of new graduate occupations if their knowledge and skill base has not been defined by a traditional university-based education?

For many occupations that could potentially become professions the lack of a well-defined knowledge base is a problem. Fincham (2012) has updated and expanded Reed’s model, distinguishing six categories of expert groups.[iv] One category of specific interest is that of the quasi-professionals. These occupations resemble elite professions but struggle to get professional recognition (such as personnel work, project management and public relations). The strength of the knowledge base for these occupations is very uneven. Fincham writes that ‘some have been unable to persuade wider audiences of the acceptability of their skills (e.g. HRM), others seem to have been quietly developing proprietary knowledge bases’ (Fincham 2012: 219). There remains continuous pressure on various occupations to professionalize but these pressures are ‘no mere matter of step-by-step strengthening of professional control in specific occupational domains – it has become a matter of contradictory and controversial attempts to get a grip on occupational control’ (Noordegraaf 2007: 764). Brante (2010: 875) reckons that some of the emerging professions (which he calls the pre-professions) will indeed become real professions if they can be rooted in scientifically based ontological models by which their objects can be constituted so that they are understood, explained and treatable, as well as socially recognized.

An important requirement for these new graduate occupations is thus to build theoretical foundations for their occupation in order to lift it into the professional domain. As Muzio et al. (2011) observe, modern expert occupations cannot rely on a body of knowledge certified through official educational credentials in a competitive, flexible, market-driven, customer-orientated context. Their knowledge base is too ‘fuzzy, fragmented, indeterminate, perishable and client/context-dependent to be formalized into a coherent and portable set of credentials that can sustain traditional processes of occupational closure’ (Muzio et al. 2011: 446). The question that now emerges is how modern graduate occupations can uphold their knowledge base through the higher education system in order to create or sustain a professional status as well as to exclude others from sharing their opportunities.

Graduate occupations and their knowledge bases

Professionalism requires professionals to use their knowledge base strategically in order to be rewarded with authority, rewards and high status. Abbott (1988: 53–4) notes that ‘[T]he ability of a profession to sustain its jurisdiction lies partly in the power and prestige of its academic knowledge. This prestige reflects the public’s mistaken belief that abstract professional knowledge is continuous with practical professional knowledge, and hence that prestigious abstract knowledge implies effective professional work'.

Because of the growing number of graduates in the labour market, the status as well as the closure mechanisms that used to be associated with higher learning and the skills acquired in higher education are declining, preventing the emergence of professional trajectories in a traditional sense. This is a failure to establish an explicit and exclusive knowledge base; that is, the codification or standardization of professional knowledge is becoming harder in new graduate occupations. Universities produce the knowledge base of the professions and provide the credentials (an approved degree) that support closure regimes (Burrage et al. 1990). The growth of higher education, together with the growing heterogeneity in graduate destinations, has made the link between university outputs and the foundation of a professional tenuous. Scott (2008: 233) asserts that although formal knowledge remains strongly salient, the knowledge base mastered has become increasingly differentiated and compartmentalized.

Equally important is the declining significance of higher education in the development of a professional identity and status. The role credentialism has in occupational closure should not be underestimated. The concepts as well as the reality of what we call the professions and professionalism are socially constructed (Olgiati 2010: 810). This process is contingent upon social, institutional and political forces that shape how the professions are understood. Whereas educational credentialism used to be a cornerstone of the frame of references in which professionals were seen, this base needs to be renegotiated for those who want to increase their power and control over their trade or occupation.

There is a need for professionals to continuously legitimate themselves to the public and other audiences as a professional justification is an ongoing project (Turner, 2001). Demarcation is a crucial mechanism of bargaining strength among groups of worker such as occupational groups (Kreckel 1980: 541). This demarcation occurs against other competing occupational groups but equally against non-professional skilled occupations. To justify their position in the labour market as well as their elevated status, professions’ knowledge bases need to discursively be fought over. Boundaries separate and strengthen professional categories over which different occupational groups struggle to establish and maintain control. Following Abbott (1988), who emphasizes the need for professionals to construct and maintain divisions between their own and other occupations’ sphere of competence through a body of knowledge, Fournier (2000) adds that professionalization is contingent upon the labourious effort involved in constructing and maintaining boundaries of self-contained, autonomous fields of expertise. Yet both authors underplay the need to distinguish expertise through educational credentials.

Tholen (2016) argues that the meaning of graduate work has fundamentally changed. Graduates traditionally were naturally classified as more able, knowledgeable and deserving of higher status and rewards than non-graduates. The symbolic power of university-educated groups was aligned to and upheld by their access to superior economic, social and cultural capital leading to their dominant position in various fields such as politics, the arts and the media. Although this dominance has persisted for some graduates, mass higher education produced a body of graduates with increasing varieties of cultural, social and economic capital and subsequent labour market outcomes. As a status group, current graduates *collectively* have been less and less effective in holding privileged positions over time. Their claim to social esteem and social honour has been less effective compared to earlier generations of graduates. Using the works of Bourdieu as well as the conflict theorist such as Parkin, Collins and Murphy, the concept of ‘symbolic closure’ is applied to describe how groups can close off opportunities through classificatory means. Using symbolic rather than exclusionary power, graduates aim to access many of the perks and advantages that traditionally were associated with graduate professions, yet not all of them can do so in reality. Symbolic closure is directed therefore both inwards and outwards. It is targeted outwards towards non-graduates, including skilled craft workers, the vocational professions and those with only high school qualifications. Equally important, it is targeted inwards towards redressing the growing inequality in the graduate labour market. In the graduate labour pool, members accept the social fiction that graduate degrees lead to labour market success disguising the failure of many graduates to lead fulfilling careers and attain high wages and skilled and fulfilling jobs (Brynin 2013; Okay-Sommerville and Scolarios 2013).

Professional status itself is of course built on a form of symbolic closure. The symbolic nature of professionalism in a Bourdieusian sense has outlined by Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) who argue that professionalism represent a form of symbolic capital. As such it represents "symbolically controlled content in autonomous but dynamic contexts of struggle"(p.85) Through continuous struggle and (re)negotiation over recognition over the content professions can maintain dominance over other occupations

Here, knowledge base is a key form of content.

Examples of symbolic closure

We can apply the concept of symbolic closure to modern graduate occupations that yet have to receive professional recognition. As a body of knowledge is no longer associated with higher education or with university credentials, modern graduate occupations may in many cases lack the symbolic means to move up the occupational ladder and become professions. The future of the professions will to some extent depend on the malleable and constitutive nature of professional knowledge and the boundaries that can successfully be defended as being real to the public and clients as well as to other occupations. To remain successful, professionals strive to maintain their jurisdiction through control over access to education, training, and the professional labour market (Macdonald, 1995). In some cases this problem may be overcome by professional accreditation or types of professional credentials that emphasize competences, transferable skills and industry knowledge and experience (Muzio et al. 2011: 451).

In recent times there have been professionalization movements based on the graduatization of an occupation (for instance, primary school teachers). Relative recently in the UK there has been a great shift in the educational requirements for entering registered nurses. Nursing education moved from the National Health Service (NHS) into higher education, replacing the apprenticeship system of nurse training with formal nursing degrees. Nursing now is an all-graduate entry profession. This has been attributed to an increase in the demands made on the modern nursing profession and the tasks nurses now fulfil (Mckenna et al. 2006) or to a policy push to decrease the increasing demands of providing both care and education in one location, separating the demand side (the NHS requires qualified nurses) from the supply side (the NHS producing qualified nurses) (Meerabeu 2006). Yet education also has contributed to the trajectory of nursing's professionalization.

Recently there has been a growth in the provision of master's level education for qualified nurses in the UK. Yet this has not lead to a successful professionalization trajectory. It seems that advanced degrees mainly aid professional standing within a largely professionalized healthcare sector (Gerish et al 2003). Crucial here is that the nursing has not developed autonomous academic and professional discipline (McNamara 2010) constructing a tenuous knowledge base to aid its professionalization trajectory. Nursing department fail to developing enough research capacity and quality (Meerabeau 2006). Within the work context of the National Health Service, the skills and knowledge base are often contested. McMurray's (2010) insightful account of the struggle of English Advanced Nurse Practitioners to be recognized as a revealed how the required educational credentials were not formally acknowledged within the medical hierarchy. A Master's degree was deemed to provide nurses with advanced decision-making and problem-solving skills, granting the right to diagnose. Yet in practice it turned out that "GPs had little appetite for deploying nurse's newly acquired skills." (p.810) and nurses were continued to be used for basic medical procedures such as taking blood. The higher degree alone as emblem of a distinct field of academic knowledge does not confer the desired status on which their further professionalization potentially could have emerged. The professionalization of nursing has not been helped by a recent government announcement that healthcare assistants already working in hospitals will be able to avoid the degree route and train on the job to become a nurse (UK Government 2014).

Another example of an occupation struggling for professional status due to the graduatization of the labour force are early years practitioners/teachers. There has been a strong push from recent governments to get graduates to work in nurseries to raise standards in early years education. In 2007, the UK government introduced Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) accreditation which is only accessible for graduates, in order to create a graduate-led workforce in the early years sector. Nurseries are incentivized to support staff in gaining graduate-level qualifications or to take on graduates. Although advertized by universities that offer the courses as being equivalent to qualified teacher status, the qualification fails to aid any professionalization trajectory. First of all the earning of those in the occupation isn't comparable to those in other graduate jobs, there are few enhanced financial rewards for those who choose to do it (Murray 2009; Qureshi 2010). Yet fundamentally, unlike teachers there remains a tenuous link with higher education. A report from the Nuffield foundation observes that a strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early years education and childcare exists but “but we do not know nearly enough about whether it is the skills that graduates have developed through their higher education that are playing a part, nor about how the skills of graduates are best deployed in early years settings (Hillman and Williams 2015: 8)” There is also little known about what type of higher education course is of importance (Hillman and Williams 2015: 46).

Davis (2014) found that although the EYPS is positively judged by those who have undertaken it, there is a lack of recognition within the workplace and it is afforded the same low status as the early childhood workforce in general. Osgood (2012) suggests that graduates within the field of Early Childhood Education and Care struggle to construct and negotiate a stable identity around their advanced educational credentials. The fact that the workforce is predominantly female is seen by Cooke and Lawson (2008) as hindering the occupation from improving its status (as well as the low pay). This disadvantageous position is likely to reduce the scope for workers to use advanced educational qualification in order to professionalize their occupation.

The role of labour markets

Burrage et al.’s (1990) claim that professionalization trajectories are the result of the interplay between four key actors: practitioner, users of professional services, the state and the universities, still seems to hold true today. Traditionally, scholarly interest placed much emphasis on role of the state, differentiating between Continental and Anglo-Saxon varieties.[v] It is thought that in Anglo-American contexts, the state grants relatively extensive autonomy and self-regulation to professionals and their associations, whereas in the Continental European context, the state actively licenses and regulates therefore driving professionalization. Often overlooked is how the regulation and configuration of labour markets interacts with this process. In other words, professionalization plays out differently in different national labour market and regulatory contexts. In practically all Western countries the share of graduates in the labour pool has increased dramatically over time. Yet how this has affected the exclusive social status of particular occupational groups depends on how the labour market is integrated with the educational system. I use the British context once again as an example.

An important feature of the transition from education to employment in Britain is the relative independence of the educational system (Bol and Weeden 2015). Smyth et al. (2001) believe that the relationship between education and employers in the UK has been decoupled. Employers have little influence on the kind of education that is offered to students (Clarke and Winch 2006). There is strong evidence to suggest that they are less likely to look for occupation-specific fields of study or certified, field-specific skills when recruiting graduates compared to employers from countries that have a tighter relationship between higher education and the labour market (DiStasio and van der Werfhorst 2016).

The competition for graduate jobs in Great Britain also is not set in an occupational labour market framework, nor is it based on experience and tenure, as it occurs in an internal labour market. The liberalization of labour markets has opened graduate jobs up to competition. The competition does not depend (or no longer depends) on structuring mechanisms like occupational or internal firm recruitment. Gangl (2000: 4) notes that in the UK ‘available educational credentials provide little guidance in allocating individuals and occupational tasks due to their lack of occupational specificity’, but they are important as a signalling device of relative labour market value. It seems the relationship between higher education and the graduate labour market is increasingly defined by market rules. This means that the free market mechanism coordinates the channelling of workers into jobs, the competition for graduate jobs and the rewards linked to these jobs, without institutional interference. Research shows that a relative high percentage of UK graduates work in a field other than their own (vertical mismatch) compared with other European countries (Little and Arthur 2010).

This loose connection between educational qualifications and occupations affects the way in which aspiring occupations can use educational credentials in setting up boundaries against outsiders to protect and enhance their privileges in the marketplace. In the British context those in graduate occupations may not have the educational capital to link their status to a legitimized body of knowledge. This becomes even more relevant in the British context where professionalization is seen to occur historically ‘from below’ (Siegrist 1990); that is, it is driven by interest groups as opposed to being state-driven (as it is in Germany). Even if the linkage between educational credentials and occupational skills and knowledge is close, as the case for registered nurses, the lack of state support works against further professionalization.

Conclusion

The lack of exclusivity of formal higher educational credentials help explain failing attempts to convincingly claim exclusivity over particular occupational knowledge and skills. Qualifications have the potential to represent a body of knowledge that is exclusive to and demarcated by the particular profession but this potential may have reached its limit. Likewise, the role of higher education of 'authoritative custodians of the knowledge and skills claimed by the professions in constituting their credentials' (Freidson 1986: 82) is deteriorating. This could mean that the success of professionalization projects will thus depend increasingly on the actions of other actors such as the state, firms or consumers. Yet it may also mean that it becomes contingent on whether university credentials can be symbolically aligned with a coherent body of academic knowledge in order to convince stakeholders that the credentials and body of knowledge are worthy of professional status. In these uncertain circumstances power relations between competing occupational groups remain of key significance.

The fate of professions and professional trajectories is not merely decided by how well credentials can serve professional closure. For instance, the role of the state and state-sponsored mandates also remain of key importance (e.g. Freidson 1994; Saks 2010). In addition, we need to understand how different types of occupations are affected by changes in the graduate labour market. Despite the relative fluidity between so-called old professions and new expert occupations (Evetts 2006), different occupations are in different positions in the labour market hierarchy and they are not equally affected by the need for symbolic closure in their knowledge domain. Equally important is now the struggle *within* occupations to close opportunities and seek advantage over others. This fragmentation in the occupational structure may deeply affect professionalization trajectories. Moreover, there are likely to be significant differences between national contexts in how professionalization projects occur.

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[i] Professions and regular occupations should be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

[ii] The power theorists use the concept of social closure to explain how social stratification or class reproduction takes place, following the work of Max Weber. Weber's original formulation of social closure was the process of 'monopolization of resources by individuals and groups using rules of exclusion 'designed to create legitimated social inequalities' (1978: 43–6). Weber claims that social groups are inclined to close off social and economic opportunities to outsiders with the purpose of maximizing their own rewards and privileges. Opportunities can be monopolized not just by economic classes but also by other groups, such as status groups.

Wherever groups can successfully label certain characteristics, such as race, language, social origin, religion, or the lack of credentials as inferior, closure can be achieved. Virtually any group attribute can be used to make other groups into outsiders and close off their social and economic opportunities (1978: 342).

[iii] The techniques can be delegated to other workers.

[iv] These are: professions, professional services, business services, quasi-professions; knowledge work.

[v] It has been recently argued that both varieties are converging (Evetts 2012)

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