**The Career Development Profession: Professionalisation, Professionalism, and Professional Identity**

John Gough and Siobhan Neary

**Abstract**

This chapter examines the professionalisation of career development provision in countries across the world. ‘Professionalisation’ and ‘professionalism’ are explored through several concepts, including social closure, the professional project, and the regulatory bargain. The chapter argues that professionalism is a useful and important concept for the career development field but recognises the challenges that the field has had in achieving professional status. It recognises some of the critiques that exist of professionalism and explores how these relate to careers professionals. It then argues that increasing professionalism within the field needs to be understood as an ongoing process that has to be conducted on the personal, organizational, and professional level. The chapter concludes by outlining some key strategies that the field can use to advance the cause of professionalism in the future.

**Keywords:**

career development profession, professionalisation, professionalism, professional identity, regulatory bargain

This chapter seeks to define, and explore, the professionalisation and professionalism of career development practice. It uses two main theoretical lenses to achieve this aim. The first lens is a trait view of professions (Millerson, [1964](#Ref33)), which argues that professions have essential features that distinguish them from jobs. The second lens is concerned with issues of societal power and esteem associated with the professional project (Larson, [1977](#Ref28)) and the regulatory bargain (MacDonald, [1995](#Ref31)). The concept of the ‘regulatory bargain’ is a key idea for professions. It is the view that professionalism is a bargain between the government and a profession, which gives the profession the legal authority to define the training required to be a professional, control entry to the profession, and specify standards of practice. In return for these rights, professions are responsible for the self-management and regulation of the profession. Such a regulatory bargain has the consequence of tacitly maintaining and promoting social hierarchy through the privileging of those within the profession. This relationship between professions and social hierarchy was originally described by Durkheim (1893/[1984](#Ref20)) and later was explored by Perkin ([1989](#Ref39)).

In most countries, the career development sector has been unable to strike a regulatory bargain with government despite the advocacy and lobbying of professional bodies. The career development profession’s professionalisation project is still ongoing and continues to develop in response to shifting government policies concerned with employment, education, and training. As Peck ([2004](#Ref38)) noted, in the United Kingdom, the career development profession has been consistently linked with key government policies, yet despite this apparent importance, it has yet to be rewarded with legally enshrined standardised entry requirements, the ability to regulate practice, and many of the other traits of a recognised profession.

Despite its failure to strike a regulatory bargain, in some cases the career development profession has achieved a partial social closure (Weber, [1949](#Ref46)) by establishing some limited legal and political authority for the profession. This chapter explores the implications of this partial professionalisation for career development practitioners. It then goes on to show how, even without a formal regulatory bargain, career development professionals have shown resilience and creativity in enacting their professionalism (Stones, [2005](#Ref42)).

**Defining a Profession**

Professionalisation is the process by which occupations become recognised by society as having a special status. The trait view is a starting point in considering what separates professions from other occupations. The trait view focuses on what professions do and why they are different from other occupations. Perkin ([1989](#Ref39)) argued that the growth of Western industrialism led to the expansion of roles that served and supported developing economies and societies. As a result, certain occupations developed or acquired traits that differentiated them from other jobs.

Becker ([1962](#Ref4)) identified six criteria, including the extent and depth of training and knowledge needed for work. Millerson ([1964](#Ref33)) went further in identifying twenty-three features, covering areas such as the ways in which practitioners’ skills and competence are framed by professional codes of conduct and ideas of public service. Larson’s definition of a profession included functionalist and structural aspects.

Professions are occupations with special power and prestige. Society grants these rewards because professions have special competence in esoteric bodies of knowledge linked to central needs and values of the social system, and because professions are devoted to the service of the public, above and beyond material incentives. (Larson, [1977](#Ref28" \o "Larson, M. S. (1977). The rise of professionalism: A sociological analysis. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.), p. x)

Crucial to this definition is the role of ‘society’, which in practice is usually represented by the state. The state has the power to formally recognise a profession, award it power, control, and resources, and influence its prestige in a variety of ways, including the use of the media. Whilst the trait view of professions is useful in considering their characteristics and ingredients, jobs cannot simply claim a new, more powerful status without structural support. The regulatory bargain (MacDonald, [1995](#Ref31)) clarifies how this status is acquired in negotiation with the state. Society grants professions the legal power to set exclusive entry requirements and professional practice standards, in return for maintaining the social system. This functionalist bargain (Durkheim, 1893/[1984](#Ref20)) is tacit but impactful. As Perkin ([1989](#Ref39)) noted, professions, such as law and medicine, are usually populated by the middle classes. Gaining entry to these professions can secure, and indicate, an individual’s socioeconomic position.

The members of a profession have a clear interest in achieving the formal status of a profession through the striking of a regulatory bargain. Once this has been achieved, professions can set standards that promote their own esteem and power. An example is the law profession, where only those with accredited qualifications have the legal right to perform transactions like representing clients in court or determining the nature and scope of contracts. Being part of an exclusive profession offers social esteem and access to socioeconomic advantage (Perkin, [1989](#Ref39)). A recognised profession, particularly one with an effective professional body, is well placed to lobby government and maintain these advantages.

For clients or users of a profession, the designation of professional status can also be taken as an indication of the quality of the service offered by its practitioners. Professionals are expected to maintain their knowledge and skills as a key part of their professionalism, and so they must commit to continuing professional development. Professional bodies exist to codify these standards, to support their members in meeting them, and ultimately to censure those who fall short. The existence of this system of self-regulation offers clients a mechanism for making complaints, addressing concerns, and raising issues of malpractice. For example, the Law Society in England sets practice standards and the training curriculum (Law Society, [2020](#Ref29)), and an associated body, the Solicitors’ Regulation Authority, operates complaints and disciplinary procedures to protect clients from poor practice.

The definitions of professions and professionalisation discussed so far inform thinking about what constitutes professionalism. Professionalism in its everyday usage does not relate solely to the practice of formally constituted professions. To be ‘professional’ can indicate conforming to social standards of self-presentation and punctuality or denote someone’s ability to do a job to a high standard. More specifically, and particularly for professions that have a clear regulatory bargain in place, professionalism is evidenced by the ways in which members of the profession act in accordance with standards established and regulated by professional bodies. For example, medical practitioners exhibit their professionalism by adhering strictly to standards of ethical behaviour set by their professional body.

Although the career development profession is not formally regulated in the same way as the medical profession, many countries have established career development professional associations with attendant codes of practice and ethics. Career development professionals can then demonstrate their professionalism by joining the associations and adhering to such codes. For example, standards developed by the Career Development Institute (CDI) in the United Kingdom (CDI, [2019b](#Ref10)), and the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA, [2019](#Ref11)) cover client-centredness, confidentiality, equality, diversity, and the promotion of individual ownership of decisions.

**Critiques of Professions**

When viewed positively, the existence of professions offers benefits for the state, citizens, and members of the profession. For the state, professions take on responsibility for managing and regulating a key social function. For citizens, professions promise quality of service and reliability. For the professional, belonging to a recognised profession offers a boost to social status, identity, and earning power. However, not all commentators have viewed professionals so positively. Critiques of professions have highlighted the ambiguity of what constitutes professionalism, tensions with organisational agendas, and how professions gather power in ways that allow them to function as a vested interest.

Birden et al. ([2014](#Ref7)) argued that a robust and shared definition of professionalism can be elusive. It is common to find other occupations, without professional status, that share traits with professional roles. In such situations, it can be difficult to defend why one collection of occupational traits justifies professional status, whilst another does not.

Tensions also exist within organisations where professions can be seen as pursuing their own agenda in ways that might not be in tune with organisational agendas. Professions and their practitioners can be viewed by employers as too orientated towards professional standards, to the detriment of organisational success. As Banks ([2004](#Ref3)) and Evetts ([2005](#Ref23)) discussed, professionally qualified practitioners who operate within managerially driven public services are increasingly expected to be organisationally accountable and not orientated towards more abstract professional bodies. Professionalism, in this sense, means demonstrating accountability to employers and responsiveness to customers, or expert service users, who expect flexible and high-quality services after exercising their market(ised) choices (Alcock, Daly, & Briggs, [2013](#Ref1)). This creates a tension between professionalism as meeting managerial requirements and customer demands, and professionalism as aligned to codes of ethics (Banks, [2004](#Ref3)). In relation to career guidance in the United Kingdom, Lewin and Colley ([2010](#Ref30)) and Colley, Lewin, and Chadderton ([2010](#Ref12)) noted the effects of the alleged Connexions’ managerialism both on practitioners’ sense of professionalism and on their capacity to provide wider, more holistic support to young people, as required by the Connexions’ service model.

Another tension for professions is that they can be seen as overly self-serving. The exclusive, often legally protected nature of professions and practitioners has been seen as increasingly problematic by governments and clients alike over the last three decades. As Alcock et al. ([2013](#Ref1)) noted, professions and their members may be seen as self-serving, overly protective of their status to the detriment of service, and resistant to change. In addition, those with exclusory entrance requirements are criticised for being too elitist and inclined to reward those with existing and high levels of social and cultural capital (Sutton Trust, [2017](#Ref43)).

**Career Development Work as a Profession**

If these definitions and considerations are applied to the ‘career development profession’, it is clear that it fails to fully meet the criteria of a profession. Career development professionals are spread across multiple professional contexts, including schools, vocational education, colleges, universities, and public employment services, and it can be difficult for a model of professionalism to apply equally to all of these contexts (Gough, [2017a](#Ref25)). Each of these contexts includes different drivers that shape professionalism in different ways and create challenges for the idea of a single career development profession. In many cases, the state continues to hold the regulatory power, rather than devolving it to the profession.

An example that can be seen in England is the long tradition of careers work rooted in youth services, but also extensive practice in higher education and the adult sector (Peck, [2004](#Ref38)). Historically, these different sectors have been funded, managed, and regulated by different parts of government. The recent Careers Strategy in England (Department for Education [DfE], [2017](#Ref14)) was ostensibly addressed to the entire lifelong career development field but was, in practice, predominantly focused on schools and colleges. The implementation of the strategy has been strengthened by statutory guidance (DfE, [2018a](#Ref15), [2018b](#Ref16)) that regulates activities within schools and colleges. Rather than requiring the existing career development profession to drive and to oversee these activities, the strategy has established a new hybrid professional, which it describes as a ‘Careers Leader’ (Andrews & Hooley, [2019](#Ref2)). The professional association has then sought to assimilate this new role into its purview through the creation of a community of practice and other resources (CDI, [2019a](#Ref9)). In this case, the profession has been left playing catch up, with the state’s being responsible for defining and regulating (albeit in a very limited way) career development professionalism in schools.

The organisational and policy settings for careers provision combine with local traditions in practice to frame the way that the profession develops in different countries. Maze, Yoon, and Hutchinson ([2018](#Ref32)) presented a range of country examples that explore the primary drivers for the establishment of career development work provision and how they have resulted in credentialization for practitioners. They suggested that the need for careers support may often be initiated within one part of the education system, such as higher education. Countries like Uganda and the United Arab Emirates, for example, identified a need for graduates to be able to maximise their learning within an increasingly dynamic work context, and therefore careers support would help achieve this and contribute to social stability (Maze et al., [2018](#Ref32)). Once it is established in one sector, it is possible for the nascent profession to then be cascaded into other parts of the education sector. Examples can be seen in China (Jin, [2018](#Ref27)) and Pakistan (Zahid, Hooley, & Neary, [2019](#Ref47)), where the early development of the field in higher education has broadened out to include career development work in schools.

These examples show how the professionalisation of the career development sector is rooted in local and even sectoral contexts. In different countries across the world, the career development profession takes a variety of forms, with some countries awaiting professionalisation, whilst others have well-developed professional associations, standards, ethics, and links with policy. Maze et al. ([2018](#Ref32)) stressed that this is not a developing/developed country binary, but one where countries progress through similar stages of development on their journey. It is also clear that professionalisation is not a one-way street and that the power and status of the career development profession ebbs and flows, meaning that in some cases there is a need to re-professionalise the field.

The rest of this section discusses three of the key themes that have been important to the evolution of the career development profession across the world. The examples presented show that it is relatively rare for the career development profession to have established a full regulatory bargain. Some of the more established systems have clear requirements for qualifications and training or professional practice but lack a fully formed legal relationship (Maze et al., [2018](#Ref32)). Even within those countries where professionalisation is stronger, it is often limited to certain sectors, typically secondary education, rather than consistent across all contexts, including young people, higher education, adults (both in employment and unemployed), and the private sector.

*Recognition of the Need for Career Development and Career Development Professionalism*

A key issue that underpins professional discussion and negotiation is the need for the public and the state to recognise the value of career development support and the contribution that a dedicated profession can make to this. In Japan, increased work uncertainty has led to recognition that there is a need for career development and a dedicated career development workforce (Watanabe-Muraoke & Okada, [2009](#Ref45)). Although this has been supported by the government of Japan, it was initially classed as a paraprofessional occupation. More recently, Mizuno, Ozawa, and Matsumoto ([2018](#Ref34)) reported that career development qualifications have been defined under the job title of career consultant in the 2016 Promotion of Human Resources Act, in which the government established a baseline for career competencies.

*Gaining Policy Support and Partnership*

As the example from Japan shows, the development of the profession is part of a negotiation with policy for recognition. Where the careers profession is well aligned with policy goals, it is often afforded a greater degree of professional recognition. In Scotland, career development professionals are at the heart of the national skills agency, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), and there is a clear statement about the role that career development work needs to play in skills policies (SDS, [2018](#Ref41)). SDS has developed a career development framework for staff, with defined roles linked to academic levels, and staff are funded to undertake university training programmes that incorporate the Qualification in Career Development (QCD), which is a recognised professional qualification validated by CDI (SDS, [2012](#Ref40)). Although there are strong controls in place in SDS for the delivery of career development, they does not apply universally for all career development provision in Scotland.

In Ireland, the Department for Education and Skills has produced the *Programme Recognition Framework: Guidance Counselling* (Department for Education and Skills, [2016](#Ref17)), which details the criteria and guidelines required for higher education institutions that deliver initial training. Only students who have successfully completed one of these recognised programmes can work as guidance counsellors in schools, further education, and adult educational contexts. As in Scotland, the regulation of professionalism is confined to the areas that the government has direct control over and consequently excludes that provided within higher education and the private sector.

Vuorinen and Kettinen ([2018](#Ref44)) provided further examples of countries that have established legal requirements linked to the provision of career development. In Finland, for example, there is a legal requirement that schools guidance counsellors and vocational psychologists be professionally qualified. Additionally, young people in comprehensive and upper secondary schools have a legal entitlement to adequate careers education and guidance and dedicated time within the curriculum. This is similar to Iceland, where practitioners have to be licenced through the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and to obtain a licence they need a recognised master’s degree qualification. The majority of practitioners are also members of the professional association, The Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association (Euroguidance, [2019](#Ref22)). Although other countries, including Poland and Slovakia, have legal requirements linked to their professional qualifications (Vuorinen & Kettinen, [2018](#Ref44)), Iceland and Finland appear to be the closest to achieving the regulatory bargain.

*Managing Hybrid Professionalisms*

In many countries, career development work has not evolved as a distinct profession but rather as an adjunct to other roles, such as teaching, counselling, and psychology. In Colombia, for example, the job title of career counsellor does not exist, and the role is subsumed under the role of the school counsellor, who is required to be an educational/counselling or psychology professional (Brunal, [2018](#Ref8)). So far, no formal training programmes exist to support professional practice focused on careers support.

In Malta, career guidance was separated from personal counselling as a result of policy changes, and it became the primary role of a guidance teacher with a reduced teaching responsibility (Debono, Camilleri, Galea, & Gravina, [2007](#Ref13)). This differentiation has evolved further to encompass a number of defined career development roles, including guidance teacher, careers adviser, and career guidance teacher. Careers advisers and guidance teachers are required to undertake continuous professional development, but formal professional training is not compulsory (Euroguidance, [2018](#Ref21)). These examples show how a need has been identified and how existing staff are initially used, but with a recognition that a more specialist role may be required.

**Challenges to Career Development Professionalism**

In most countries, the career development field is involved in an ongoing process of professionalisation. This has resulted in highly variable levels of status and power for the career development profession and only rarely in anything like the regulatory bargain that defines traditional professions. As a result, professionals in the field often find that they are under pressure and lack the power and authority afforded to other professions.

Douglas ([2011](#Ref19)) described how career development professionals in New Zealand have become increasingly subject to quantifiable performance targets. This kind of managerialist approach essentially replaces professional autonomy and responsibility with a top-down, target-driven culture. This kind of approach undermines the rationale for professionalism and views individual careers workers as units of production, rather than as independent actors. Douglas’s example from New Zealand reflects wider debates about the role of professionals and professionalism in public services. Increasingly, public services demand accountability to organisational objectives and require workers to demonstrate their value through regimes of performativity (Banks, 2004; Evetts, [2005](#Ref23" \o "Evetts, J. (2005). The management of professionalism: A contemporary paradox. Changing teacher roles, identities and professionalism symposium. Kings College, London.)). Such rationality reduces the space for both the development of a professionalisation agenda and the enactment of professionalism.

The challenge to professionalism can also be seen concretely in the proliferation of organisationally defined job titles. Examples include careers adviser, career counsellor, career development consultant, careers and employability adviser, employability consultant, employability and enterprise adviser, and career coach (Bergamo-Prvulovic, [2014](#Ref5" \o "Bergamo-Prvulovic, I. (2014). Is career guidance for the individual or the market? Implications of EU policy for career guidance. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 33, 376–392. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2014.891886); Douglas, [2010](#Ref18); Neary, Marriott, & Hooley, [2014](#Ref36)). Research in the United Kingdom by Neary et al. ([2014](#Ref36)) analysed job and person specifications aimed at recruiting career practitioners and identified 103 different job titles. Such proliferation of nomenclature does not seem to affect professions that have secured a regulatory bargain (for example, law or medicine). While variations of name and role might seem superficial, they may obscure the theories, practices, and ethics that unite members of the career development profession and undermine its scope for collective action and responsibility.

**Holding on to a Professional Identity**

Despite the challenging context for the professionalisation of career development, many professionals have steadfastly hung on to their identity as a professional. Many commentators have argued that professionals must actively assert their professionalism. For example, Mulvey ([2013](#Ref35)) argued for a determinedly existentialist approach, with individual practitioners encouraged to view themselves as individual heroes despite the challenging context. One way in which they can become match fit for the performativity challenge is to become resilient (Bimrose & Hearne, [2012](#Ref6)) in the face of the attacks to their professionalism.

There is evidence that practitioners are actively resisting deprofessionalisation and are asserting themselves as knowledgeable social agents (Giddens, [1984](#Ref24)). Douglas ([2010](#Ref18)) argued that practitioners are continually struggling to ‘re-story’ themselves and navigate the continued challenges between policy and practice. Neary ([2014](#Ref37)) pointed to the crucial role of continuous professional development in enabling practitioners to reclaim and develop their sense of professionalism and identity. Gough ([2017b](#Ref26)) argued that, far from being victimised and deprofessionalised cultural dupes (Gidden, [1984](#Ref24)), career development practitioners from a range of delivery contexts exhibit a strong and shared sense of professional identity, and an equally firm efficacy in knowing how to put their commitment to client-centred services into effect. This sense of empowerment is born out of a deep and practical understanding of their place within everyday structures and their power to mobilise them (Stones, [2005](#Ref42)). Encouragingly, both Neary and Gough noted how strongly the practitioners in their research felt they belonged to an important profession. Their approach may offer further potential for research into career development workers’ professionalism and identity in wider geopolitical contexts.

The strategies of determination, resilience, re-storying, and professional development clearly offer career development professionals ways to maintain their professionalism in the face of the political, cultural, and economic challenges to the field. As Douglas, Neary, and Gough have all argued, such strategies allow careers professionals to exert their agency and build identities as professionals even when the state might not recognise their professionalism. Where the literature is less instructive is in offering ideas that allow such professionals to shift the context within which they are working, to enhance their professional standing and capacity for self-determination, and to negate the need for persistence and resistance. As this chapter argues, while individuals have the capacity to behave professionally in difficult circumstances, a real solution will require a more structural approach that ultimately empowers professionals through an effective regulatory bargain.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to be definitive about the extent that careers services are professionalised. Across the world, contexts differ and the development and organisation of the profession itself are varied and sometimes bound up with other overlapping professions (such as counselling, psychology, teaching, youth work, and employment services). Furthermore, the struggles for professionalism have reached different stages and have been played out in negotiation with governments with more or less sympathy towards career development and the idea of professionalisation itself. There are few countries, if any, that have established a regulatory framework. In those that are closest, the regulatory framework is located within publicly funded provision and has not been extended to all career development practitioners.

As this chapter shows, being professional is not an end state, but a process. Career development professionals are always involved in a process of developing their professionalism and working on their professional identity. Similarly, the profession in any one country is also in a process of negotiation and struggle, of becoming more established, and resisting deprofessionalisation. If the profession is to be successful in increasing and maintaining its professionalism, there is a need to increase public and government understanding of the benefits and impacts of career development practice. Key aspects of this are likely to be developing the evidence base (see Robertson, this volume, and Whiston, this volume), making use of it in practice, and promoting its existence. There is also value in building international links and opportunities for practice sharing, such as the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP; see McCarthy & Borbély-Pecze, this volume) and the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG). These provide opportunities to share practice and ideas and to build awareness that the professionalisation of the field is a global endeavour.

In the future, increasing challenges from technology, globalisation, and neoliberal agendas are likely to influence the future of work for all. These changes will influence career development practice at both the macro and the micro level. The issue of professionalisation is not straightforward and meanders according to policy imperatives. Therefore, professionalisation will continue to evolve, and we should expect to continue to discuss the value and nature of career development professionalism, as well as the best strategies for professionalisation, long into the future.

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