

Professional Autonomy as a Cornerstone for Effective Professional and Social Activity

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ABSTRACT

Current challenges in the labor market associated with rapid globalization, digitalization, and skills gaps, cause features such as a learning community, opportunities for collaboration, student self-efficacy, social skills, coherent intercultural communication, and self-realization to play a significant role in students' professional development. Successful interpersonal and social participation in society as well as skills such as independence, self-confidence, decision-making, openness to change, and responsibility, which are emphasized in the definition of professional autonomy, are also fundamental to their development.

To prepare university students for the labor market, it is necessary to consider the above and develop students' professional autonomy to close the gap between students' theoretical learning and the development of practical professional pursuits. Despite the importance of professional autonomy, its concept in educational sciences is not sufficiently defined and described, as it lacks a theoretical basis. For that reason, this research aims to study the etymology of professional autonomy, the typology of professional autonomy, and how professional autonomy is measured in higher education by conducting a systematic literature analysis.

The results of this study reveal divergent definitions of professional autonomy, the scope of its concept, and explain the applicability of tools for measuring professional autonomy in higher education. Additionally, it identifies three levels of professional autonomy: general, collegial, and individual.

Keywords: Higher Education, Interpersonal Skills, Professional Autonomy, Social Skills, Systematic Literature Analysis

Introduction

UNESCO's latest education policy document, *Reimagining our Futures together A new Social Contract for Education*, among the proposals for the renewal of

education, mentions the need to expand the professional aspects of learning, seeing it as a common goal, recognizing the work done by teachers and recognizing that they are creators and central figures of knowledge in educational and social transformation. Teamwork and cooperation are the main characteristics of teachers' work. Reflection, inquiry, and the creation of knowledge and new teaching methods must become integral aspects of teaching (UNESCO, 2021). This means that teachers' autonomy and freedom of action must be supported and that educators must actively participate in public discussions and dialogue about the future development of education.

Given current challenges in the labor market associated with rapid globalization, digitalization, and skills gaps, features such as a learning community, opportunities for collaboration, student self-efficacy, social skills, coherent intercultural communication, and self-realization play a significant role in students' professional development. To prepare university students for the labor market, it is necessary to consider the above and develop students' professional autonomy to close the gap between students' theoretical learning and the transfer to professional pursuits (Skills development and employability in Europe, 2016).

In Latvia, professional autonomy is one of the quality monitoring indicators of the quality of higher education, and the implementation and evaluation of professional autonomy as a result of study in the study process is considered a serious and challenging task for further research to ensure the quality of higher education (Rubene et al., 2021).

For that reason, this research aims to study the etymology of the concept of professional autonomy, the typology of professional autonomy, and how professional autonomy is measured in higher education by conducting a systematic literature analysis.

Methodology

A systematic review was conducted in five phases by Xu Xiao and Maria Watson (Xiao, Watson, 2019). The first phase included searching the literature in the University of Latvia database Primo. The keywords were selected by the researchers based on their knowledge of the field and the results of the search conducted. Originally, studies were selected using keywords: professional autonomy, professional autonomy in higher education, and student professional autonomy.

All Searches were restricted to full-text articles that were published between 2017 and 2020 in English and Latvian . The search procedure was conducted using the Primo database with the specified keywords. A total of 25 potential articles were found.

Within the second phase, based on the analysis of abstracts, each article was verified to determine if it should be included for data extraction and analysis.

The criteria for inclusion and exclusion were established so that the research units met the requirements and articles could be included or excluded from the study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies in the English and Latvian languages.	Studies in other languages.
Education/higher education field	Other fields
Definitions of measurement of professional autonomy	No definition or measurement provided
Scientific articles, reviews or books, monographs.	Conference review, Conference paper.

After careful review, a total of 5 studies were excluded for different reasons. (For instance, if there was no definition provided, if the full text was not available, or only the abstract was available, and if the articles were in languages other than English). In general, 15 studies from the initial search were included in the next step of the full-text inquiry.

To obtain a complete list of literature, a backward search was conducted to point out the articles' most cited studies or research units using the list of references (Webster, Watson 2002; Xiao, Watson, 2019). This search resulted in the identification of 3 more articles, expanding the search criteria – the year of publication of scientific articles (one article from 1987, a second from 2003 and a third from 2011) and the field of articles (as the origin of the term “professional autonomy” derives from the field of nursing (medicine)).

Results

In the third phase of the study, after screening for inclusion, the full texts of the studies were derived for quality assessment in order to refine the full-text articles. This was the final step in preparing studies for data extraction and analysis (Xiao, Watson, 2019). The research was conducted on articles published between 2003 and 2020 (and one article in 1987) from the following countries: Portugal, Finland, India, Netherlands, Japan, Sweden, and Iran, which emerged as a result of the data analysis of 18 research units.

In the fourth phase – data extraction or characterization of the studies was carried out (Xiao, Watson, 2019). From each study, information was extracted and divided into research areas or categories by an inductive method. After careful reading of the literature units, four thematic categories were developed:

Table 2. Thematic categories of systematic review

Thematic category	Authors
Professional autonomy in medicine	WMA, 2017 Schutzenhofer, 1987 Hara, Asakura, K., Asakura, T., 2020 Delshad, Belkrouz, Masoumeh 2019; Salvatore et al., 2018 Gobbi, Caunonen, 2018; Seetoodegan et al., 2019
Professional autonomy in teacher education	Han, 2014; Puaca, 2020 Carvalho, Diogo, 2017 Wagenaar, 2018
Measuring professional autonomy	Wagenaar, 2018 Schwimmer, Maxwell, 2017
Division of professional autonomy	Lundstrom, Holm, 2011 Frostenson, 2015 Evetts, 2003 Svensson, 2008 Wermke, 2013

The main features of the thematic inductive analysis were applied to analyze the content of the given articles, dividing them into four categories.

The first category looked at the definition of professional autonomy in the field of medicine, where the concept of “professional autonomy” has been known in theoretical discourse since 1987 when the Madrid Declaration on Professional Autonomy and Self-Regulation of the World Medical Association was signed (WMA, 2017), which states that professional autonomy is a quality that confirms the ability to be independent, self-determined, self-directed in decision-making, flexible, endowed with life force (resilience) when performing one’s professional activity.

From analyzing the genesis of the concept, it can be concluded that professional autonomy has been studied in medicine most often, and that medical publications are the first to describe its assessment in the study process (Schutzenhofer, 1987). One of the definitions considers professional autonomy as the freedom of professional participants to determine the nature of professional work in terms of its formal content, quality criteria, formal education, control mechanisms, ethics, etc. (Hara, Asakura, K., Asakura, T., 2020).

Another definition in the medical field emphasizes that professional autonomy, as an integral part of the medical profession, refers to self-control, independence, and the ability to use clinical decision-making and clinical assessment of patient care within the scope of the individual’s profession, while also taking into account the relevant work rules and regulations (Hara, Asakura, K., Asakura, T., 2020). Three dimensions of professional autonomy are identified in medical

research: clinical or professional freedom of work (includes the doctor's ability to decide about patient care), social and economic independence of work (the doctor determines, for example, the workload, which is largely influenced by institutional arrangements) and influence on organizational decisions (the doctor has the opportunity to affect the functioning of the hospital). The relationship between professional cooperation and professional autonomy is emphasized, in which decision-making and taking responsibility for decisions are essential. The level of skills is highlighted as a determining factor in making these decisions (Delshad, Belkrouz, Masoumeh, 2019; Salvatore et al., 2018).

One of the fields of medicine in which professional autonomy has been studied more and more in recent years is nursing education (Gobbi, Caunonen, 2018; Seetoodegan et al., 2019), where it is called a complex concept and the basis of professionalism, the professional right to act autonomously within the framework of duties and working conditions (Seetoodegan et al., 2019). In addition, professional autonomy includes the right to make independent decisions. Additional indicators of professional autonomy include critical thinking, clinical decision-making, discretion and self-manage, specific personality traits, job satisfaction, and teamwork. The degree of nurses' autonomy is related to their level of knowledge and education, as well as aspects of life experience, confidence, and sociability (Seetoodegan et al., 2019).

In the second category, professional autonomy was also considered in studies related to teacher education, and in this area, the need for interaction and ensuring successful intercultural communication in the classroom is revealed, creating a unique environment supporting self-realization and autonomy in which the teacher assumes the role of coordinator, collaborator, advisor, mediator, inspiring supporter – a role that stimulates the possibilities and creativity of students and helps ensure quality education (Han, 2014; Fallah, Gholami, 2014). Researchers emphasize that developing teachers' professional autonomy requires further education, including learning new skills for implementing innovative and creative methods (Puaca, 2020).

The study of professional autonomy shows that it is a multidimensional concept closely related to institutional autonomy. It determines the right of professionals to act autonomously within the framework of specific duties or work rights, which, of course, does not exclude opportunities for cooperation with colleagues. The main characteristics of professional autonomy are the individual's ability to make independent and responsible decisions, the ability to think critically, freedom of opinion, possession of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, all of which are based on the individual's education and personal characteristics and affect their professionalism. Several studies describe the conditions for promoting students' professional autonomy. It is emphasized that teachers need to be professionally autonomous before they teach it to students. Therefore, it is

vital to provide lecturers with opportunities to conduct self-analysis and self-evaluation of their professional activities to reveal their personal and professional potential, develop lecturers' analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as the skills to make choices in the context of uncertainty or incomplete information. It is also necessary for lecturers to stimulate cooperation and collective action both in the educational environment of the university and outside it, as well as to promote their involvement in various innovative practices. It is emphasized that it is necessary to formulate guidelines for developing the professional autonomy of lecturers (Carvalho, Diogo, 2017).

On the other hand, in promoting the development of students' professional autonomy, the learning community, the opportunities for cooperation between teaching staff and students, as well as the promotion of students' self-efficacy, it is possible to close the gap between students' studies and the development of professional activities, which is of great importance. Clearer cooperation between educational institutions and internship centers is needed to help students identify opportunities for professional development. To connect theory and practice, it is necessary to create professional development centers for students, which would help young professionals to reduce possible institutional and bureaucratic obstacles (Carvalho, Diogo, 2017).

University of Groningen professor Robert Wagenaar emphasizes the need to promote civic, social, and cultural participation to prepare students for active social representation and involvement in the labor market. Therefore, it is essential to improve students' social competence by understanding the generally accepted codes of conduct and norms of behavior in different societies and environments, for example, distinguishing between personal and professional spheres at work and civic competence, which is related to the ability to function effectively in public space with others and show solidarity and interest in solving problems, which in turn affects local and broader society (Wagenaar, 2018).

It can be inferred therefore that the promotion of professional autonomy is relevant for both students and teaching staff. However, to promote professional autonomy, it is necessary to improve the social and civic competence of academic communities.

The third category shows the assessment of professional autonomy in the process of studying, where the Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe (hereinafter CALOHEE) framework should be mentioned. This includes areas of civic, social, and cultural involvement with four dimensions:

- 1) society and culture,
- 2) information and communication processes,
- 3) management and decision-making processes,
- 4) ethics, norms, values, and professional standards.

Each domain includes characteristics of knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility. The last part corresponds to the assessment of professional autonomy, as it contains indicators describing professional autonomy. For example, the CALOHEE Reference Framework for Civic, Social and Cultural Engagement (which emphasizes a problem-solving learning approach, practical action, and responsibility for promoting professional development (Wagenaar, 2018).

The CALOHEE framework was developed to conduct assessments, or tests, to assess the quality and relevance of curricula. The comparative evaluations are based on the CALOHEE multidimensional evaluation model, which distinguishes between knowledge (theory and methodology, use of knowledge and skills), preparation for the labor market, civic, social, and cultural involvement, and professional field evaluation system.

The framework offers a new tool for understanding, defining, and visualizing curriculum requirements. They cover the fields of study in construction (engineering), teacher education (social sciences), history (humanities), nursing (health care), and physics (natural sciences). Assessment frameworks show in detail which competencies are formulated as learning outcomes and providing valuable indications about the respective fields of study – not only the content of basic knowledge, including theory and methodology, but also the skills for developing and using this content, as well as the level at which the graduate will be able to function meaningfully in his profession and society as a whole . It differentiates between first and second-cycle degrees (Bachelor's and Master's degrees) in the professional field, showing the links between the levels of learning to be developed. The assessment framework includes tables containing indicators covering the categories 'knowledge', 'skills,' 'autonomy,' and 'responsibility' according to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (Wagenaar, 2018).

CALOHEE's highest level of study is characterized by the "autonomy and responsibility" descriptor, which is based on knowledge and skills acquired and practiced within the process of studying. The description of autonomy and responsibility ('broader competence') can be compared to the 'competency framework' used by employers. Such a system describes which competencies are desirable for an employee in a particular profession and which can be applied in practice.

Regarding the last category – the division of professional autonomy – it is stated in research that it can be divided into at least three categories – General professional autonomy, which refers to the frames of professional work with regard to the organization of the school system, legislation, entry requirements, teacher education, curricula and procedures, where professional autonomy implies organization of teachers' work.

Meanwhile, Collegial professional autonomy in the teaching profession concerns the teachers' collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at the local level (Svensson, 2008; Wermke, 2013). Collegial autonomy may be

generated through two different processes. It may be seen as the delegated and preferred principle for organizing work from a managerial perspective, or it may be seen as the collegial outcome of individual autonomy, where the preferences of individual teachers result in collegial action and decisions. Individual autonomy may be understood as the individual's opportunity to influence the contents, frames, and controls of teaching practice (Krejsler, 2005). This includes the choice of teaching materials, methodological decisions on temporal and spatial conditions of work, and the influence of the evaluation systems of professional teaching practice (Frostenson, 2015).

The above-mentioned factors mean that employment can range from research and analytically oriented positions to practical realization; the required skills will change but will be related to general competencies concerning the structure of the professional work (Lundstrom, Holm, 2011). Regarding the level of practice, which includes collegial and individual autonomy, the former reveals issues related to professional knowledge, control, and organization of professional work (Evetts, 2003). On the other hand, individual autonomy shows that the sphere of activity and decision-making related to the professional practice of each individual is essential (Frostenson, 2015).

Finally, when evaluating professional autonomy, it is necessary to take into account the three levels of autonomy mentioned above (general professional autonomy, collegial professional autonomy, and individual professional autonomy), showing that professionalism is influenced by the institution, management, and colleagues, as well as by one's professional practice as was described in the fourth category of the thematic analysis.

Discussion and conclusions

In analyzing the genesis of the concept, it should be concluded that professional autonomy has been studied in medicine most often, and that publications in medicine are the first to describe its assessment within the process of studying.

The study of professional autonomy shows that it is a multidimensional concept closely related to institutional autonomy. It determines the right of professionals to act autonomously within the framework of specific duties or work rights, which, of course, does not exclude opportunities for cooperation with colleagues.

The main characteristics of professional autonomy are the individual's ability to make independent and responsible decisions, the ability to think critically, freedom of opinion, possession of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which are based on the education and personal characteristics of the individual – all of which affect their professionalism.

On the other hand, in promoting the development of students' professional autonomy, aspects such as the learning community, the opportunities for cooperation between teaching staff and students, as well as the promotion of students' self-efficacy, can close the gap between students' theoretical studies and the development of professional activities. To link theory and practice, it is necessary to create professional development centers for students, which would help young professionals to reduce possible institutional and bureaucratic obstacles.

In the assessment of students' professional autonomy, it is possible to provide opportunities for lecturers to conduct self-analysis and self-evaluation of their professional activities by developing guidelines for the development of the professional autonomy of lecturers and students, which means that the civic, social, and cultural aspects of the field must be purposefully integrated into the study programs.

The assessment of professional autonomy should take into account four dimensions:

- 1) society and culture,
- 2) information and communication processes,
- 3) management and decision-making processes,
- 4) professional and research ethics, norms, values, professional standards and its three degrees of professional autonomy: general, collegial and individual.

Study program evaluation tools can be used to assess professional autonomy, with professional autonomy being given the highest rank, as it proves that the student can use the knowledge and competencies acquired at the university in his professional activity. Professional autonomy can be measured using self-assessment questionnaires, in which respondents have the opportunity to assess their professional autonomy characteristics using a Likert scale.

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