EDITORIAL

Ensuring professional higher education meets the needs of students and society

Stephen DesJardins[1] · Elisabeth Hovdhaugen[2]

Introduction

Higher education is expanding and diversifying, both in terms of the courses provided and the students participating. This special issue focuses on professional education, primarily nursing and teacher education, which in many European countries have been incorporated into the higher education sector. Common for degrees termed "professional education" is that part of the training is done as practice placements, which means that learning takes place outside of the higher education institution. Professional education can be several types of degrees, in this special issue we focus on what Etzioni (1969) termed "semi-professions," sometimes described as "welfare-state professions" (Brante, 2013). These are typically degrees in nursing, teaching, pre-school teacher and social work, all of which are graduating professionals who are in high demand in many European countries.

The relationship between professional degrees and higher education varies across countries. The teaching profession has been part of the higher education system for a long time in most European countries, while nursing degrees only became a formal part of higher education more recently, at least in Norway and England. Adding to the challenge of international comparison is the fact that not all forms of professional education are considered to be higher education in all education systems. For example, in Germany, nursing and preschool teacher qualifications are not taught in higher education institutions, requiring a lower-level qualification (ISCED 5, defined as "short cycle tertiary", but not at the higher education level (UNESCO-UIS 2012). However, due to a directive from the European Union on professional qualifications (2005/36/EC), nursing and other welfare-state degrees have similar degree structures across countries, regardless of whether they are part of higher education or not.

As governments across the globe strive to ensure a sufficient number of professionally trained staff for various welfare-state roles, promoting learner persistence and completion

✉ Elisabeth Hovdhaugen
elisabeth.hovdhaugen@nifu.no

1   School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

2   NIFU, Oslo, Norway

in these professional degrees is vital. As such, non-completion is an increasingly important issue, and the common denominator of the papers presented in this special issue is that they address topics important for ensuring completion in the professional programmes studied. The literature and research related to student persistence and completion has focused on regular university programmes. However, it may be that understanding degree completion and dropout using these types of degrees as a lens are inappropriate for professional degrees, as they differ in structure and by having some of the training done in practice placements.

In addition, higher education institutions and welfare state employers are increasingly required to promote equality and social inclusion, and to ensure that the student population and the workforce reflect the diversity of the national population (e.g., UK Equality Act 2010). Thus, professional education courses in particular need to graduate students that reflect the gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background of the population. Several of the papers in this special issue touch on the issue of diversity and inclusion.

The papers included represent analyses from three European higher education contexts, with the commonality being the unit of analysis is students pursuing various professional degrees. Keane, Heinz, and Lynch use data on initial teacher training students from Ireland, whereas the paper by Hundebo examines a broader set of degrees: nursing, teaching, pre-school teaching, and social work and does so in a Norwegian setting. The paper by Nesje and Wiers-Jenssen compares nursing to business students, while the rest of the papers focus on students in nursing degrees. Three papers rounding out the special issue are comparative, examining nursing students from Norway and England.

This special issue begins with a paper by Keane, Heinz, and Lynch, *Factors impacting on the retention of students from under-represented groups in initial teacher education in Ireland*, which addresses the issue of student recruitment and retention in teacher education. In the Irish context, low retention rates are not the main problem, rather, the issue is the recruitment of under-represented groups into the teaching profession is low. An important point made in this paper is that students entering teaching programmes from working-class backgrounds may require special support systems in order to thrive and succeed.

The next paper, *When the education emphasises empathy: Does it predict differences in professional commitment between male and female students in caring education?* uses data on nursing students to investigate how the notion of care and empathy is present in professional degrees. As these degrees are often female dominated, it has been assumed that the strong focus on caring and empathy built into the degree may in itself explain why men are less attracted to that type of programme. In the paper, Nesje uses measures of learning outcomes to investigate students' perceptions of the weight put on empathy. She finds no difference between male and female students in reporting that empathy has been over-emphasised in the study programme. However, there is a gender difference in reporting that the degree has given excessive weight to empathy, for men this is negatively related to their commitment to the profession, while the same is not true for women. Hence, the paper points to gendered recruitment and completion challenges in nursing programmes, potentially being linked to programme structure and design, not just the type of work and status of the profession.

The third paper, *Degree completion among students with an immigrant background in short-cycle welfare-oriented professional education*, is a quantitative analysis of several groups of professional degrees: nursing, social work, pre-school teaching and teaching. Hundebo addresses differences in completion rates between the native majority and students

with an ethnic minority background. In line with earlier findings on this group of students in Norway (Andresen & Lervåg, 2022), he finds that students with a minority background are less likely to complete the professional degree they started.

Nesje and Wiers-Jenssen's paper, *Initial motivation and drop-out in nursing and business administration programmes*, is the fourth paper in the special issue and focuses on student dropout. The authors use survey data supplemented with registry information on whether these students completed their programme or not. They use batteries of motivation to examine whether various forms of motivation are related to dropout. They find intrinsic motivation, being motivated for the programme in itself, buffers against non-completion for nursing students, but not for business administration students. For the latter group, having a status motivation, that is, they wanted to get a well-paid job and career, was a stronger predictor. However, when these results are contextualised, status motivation is seen as a steppingstone to meet future internal goals, such as success in one's career.

The last three papers of the special issue are comparative and use qualitative data on nurses to investigate how well Tinto's retention model (1975, 1993) fits professional education. His model is a common way of understanding degree completion and dropout in higher education, dominated by concepts of student integration and commitment. Common to these papers is that they discuss the ways these concepts may be useful in professional education. Since nursing is a degree programme with large parts of the teaching and learning done in practice placement away from the higher education institution, the model set out by Tinto may not be entirely appropriate for professional education.

The three papers build on and complement each other, but unique aspects are also presented in each. In *The (dis)integration of nursing students. Multiple transitions, fragmented integration and implications for retention*, Sweetman, Hovdhaugen and Thomas investigate how well the concept of social and academic integration, as originally proposed by Tinto, works when applying to a professional degree. The paper finds that the constant change of modes of teaching and of study groups, partly created by the structure of the study programme in combination with the many practice placements, prolongs the starting phase of the degree. Hence, for nursing students, integration into the programme takes much longer than for students in regular university degrees, but the concept of integration is still very much relevant. The next paper, *Professional or student identity and commitment? Comparing the experiences of nursing and healthcare students with literature on student success*, authored by Thomas, Hovdhaugen and Sweetman addresses the issue of commitment, another important concept in Tinto's model. Earlier studies have shown that nursing students have a strong commitment to their future profession. This finding is supported in the analyses, and the paper also finds that nursing students to a low degree have a clear student identity. The last paper, by Hovdhaugen, Sweetman and Thomas, *Institutional scope to shape persistence and departure among nursing students: re-framing Tinto for professional degrees*, uses information from the preceding two papers on how nursing degrees differ from regular university degrees to argue for an adjustment to Tinto's model to fit professional education. Their altered model is slightly more complex than the original, detailing the relevance of Tinto's integration and commitment concepts but noting how they need to be reformulated, making them appropriate to also study completion and dropout in professional education. Hence, the contribution of the paper is an expansion of the usefulness of Tinto's concepts, beyond regular university degrees.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue address the ways professional degrees are different from regular university degrees. The research findings challenge and extend conventional wisdom about recruitment, student experience, and student outcomes for professional degree programmes that are important in terms of supplying well-prepared and a diverse pool of graduates for the welfare state. By drawing on research from Norway, Ireland and the UK, practical recommendations are made which are also likely to be relevant for an international audience.

References

Andresen, S. M. H., & Lervåg, M. L. (2022). *Frafall i universitets- og høgskoleutdanning [Dropout in university and university college education]. Statistics Norway Reports 2022/6*. Oslo/Kongsvinger: Statistics Norway.

Brante, T. (2013). The Professional Landscape: the historical development of professions in Sweden. *Professions & Professionalism*, *3*(2), 1–18.

Etzioni, A. (1969). *The semi-professions and their Organisation*. New York: Free Press.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: a synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, *45*(1), 89–125.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

EU-directive 2005/36/EC (2005). Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005, on the recognition of professional qualifications. Available online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32005L0036

UK Equality Act (2010). *Equality Act 2010*. [online] Legislation.gov.uk. Available online: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

UNESCO-UIS (2012). International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 2011. UIS/2012/INS/10/REV. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Available online: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf