

Specialist education in Work and Organizational Psychology in Norway

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Historical background

The education programme for psychologists, as we know it in Norway today, was established as a cand. Psychol. degree in 1948. In 1974 the psychologist profession was formalised by law, known as the “psychologist law”. This meant that the title “psychologist” is a protected title by law. The framework for recognition to the title of “psychologist” consists of six years’ university study, where one year of supervised practice is integrated as a part of the education programme. Although the curriculum may vary between the four universities offering the cand. Psychol degree, there is a national standard outlining a common framework. The programme is based on the Scientist – Practitioner model, is considered to be a generalist education with a focus on clinical psychology. Psychologists in Norway are authorised as health personnel.

Specialist education

The NPA are responsible for the specialist education of psychologists receiving financial support from the Norwegian Directorate of Health as the administrative body for the specialism. An incentive for psychologists to take on the education programme, besides for professional reasons, are the financial gains connected to a considerable rise in salary once a psychologist is approved as a specialist.

Admission to the specialist programme requires being authorised as a psychologist by the competent authority for health personnel in Norway. The framework for the specialist programme describes the relevant practice needed, courses that are recognised, supervision and a thesis. Candidates need five years of full-time practice

as a psychologist. In the speciality of Organizational Psychology four of these years must be in the practice of applied Organizational Psychology. There are 256 hours of study; 96 of which are common for all psychology specialities and deal with issues relevant to new psychologists entering the profession. The remaining hours covers topics such as motivation, engagement, organizational culture and climate, organizational and team leader development, conflict management, recruitment and selection.

Supervised practice and supervision are valued as the most important learning activities for transforming theoretical knowledge into applied skills and competences; with 240 hours of supervision expected in total.

A thesis in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology is also required as part of the qualification; however, other published papers, if peer reviewed, can be accepted as the equivalent of a thesis.

Challenges for specialists of Work and Organizational Psychology

Although psychologist specialist titles in general are well recognised by the Norwegian public and by the authorities, this has more been the case for specialists within the clinical fields. Specialists in Work and Organizational Psychology have experienced less recognition resulting in relatively few psychologists working in this field. Therefore, fewer people enter the specialist education programme; and even fewer finish their training. This may be due to the lack of ownership of the Work and Organizational area, lack of incentives to specialise, and little knowledge of what a specialists' competence in Work and Organizational Psychology comprises.

Who “owns” the area of Work and Organizational Psychology? Although psychology scholars have been central in developing theories in this field, several other professions assume ownership in applying theories relevant to field (such as organizational culture and climate, leader and team development, the psycho-social work environment, and conflict management). Consultants in Organizational Psychology are working with the same tasks, challenges and processes as the other psychologist specialists; and who would tell the difference?

Further, psychologists in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology are in general paid more than psychologists working within Clinical Psychology as they are usually employed in the business sector. Obtaining a specialist title doesn't automatically mean a substantial increase in salary for the psychologists working in this field. Though some take courses connected to the specialist education, few have had the motivation to see the programme through and obtain the title.

A specialisation in Work and Organizational Psychology has existed in Norway since 1985. But, it can be questioned if the profession has been good enough at promoting the benefits and added value of specialist knowledge within this field that can be offered to clients and customers. It seems that we have not been able to communicate what the specific competences that specialists in Work and Organizational psychology possess and why these competences are important.

The EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology as a helping hand

Since the job market for Work and Organizational Psychologists is trans-European, the news about a European standard for specialists in Work and Organizational Psychology was welcomed. The certificate brought hope of a heightened status for psychologists working in this field, providing aid when working across borders. More importantly, the introduction of a competency model has put emphasis on explaining and demonstrating competences. The focus has now shifted from explaining what was invested in the training programme, to describing the different competences the specialists in Work and Organizational Psychology are mastering; thus making it easier to demonstrate the added value a specialist would bring to clients and customers.

When Norway joined the pilot project for the Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was already in place in the academic institutions. We compared the Norwegian specialist programme in Organizational Psychology with the ECTS user guide (2015) finding our specialist education programme was equivalent to 75 ECTS (compared to 90 ECTS in other countries). While our contact hours, practice period, and the amount of supervision hours were similar to other programmes we lacked the assessment of competence. Beside an assessment of the thesis, there were no assessment of achievement of the learning objectives of the training programme that were essential for

calculating the credit value of an education programme.

Luckily, at the time of the EuroPsy pilot project, we simultaneously had a revision of the specialist training programme in Organizational Psychology in Norway. We decided to develop the programme in accordance to the criteria of the Specialist Certificate and focus on competence descriptions. We had in mind that we would obtain good descriptions of competencies from applications that describes Work and Organizational Psychology unique specialist competencies. However, this turned out to be very difficult for most people to describe. While it is easy to describe what you have done in a project, it was much more challenging to explain what specialist competences you had applied, how they were applied, or which competencies you had to develop to accomplish the project.

Both in working with the Specialist Certificate and in the revision of the specialist training programme, we have adopted the concept of the consultancy cycle that is based on six primary competences described in the EuroPsy model: Goal definition, Assessment, Development, Intervention, Evaluation, and Communication. We use these primary competences as a method to describe the specialist competences the psychologist has to use when working with a project. We have developed forms for describing the consultancy cycle along with guidelines on how to describe competences. Since competences are based on updated research literature, one way to demonstrate this is to describe and justify how one has applied relevant theories, models and methods. A critical approach to the strengths and limitations of the project method taken is another way in which specialist competences can be demonstrated.

Role of the supervisor

The supervisors, who are specialists in Work and Organizational Psychology, have an important role in our new regulations for specialist education. They have the responsibility to assess the professional development of the psychologists in training. Based on the assessment they need to “feed forward”: How, and by which means, can the psychologist develop the competences necessary to reach the learning objectives of the specialization? Supervisors also serve as gatekeepers. They have the responsibility to assess if the competences and learning objectives, described for the speciality, are met. This requires awareness of their responsibility, of the learning objectives, and knowledge in regards to methods of assessing professional development.

To help the supervisors fulfil their responsibility, the NPA are now planning to offer short training courses throughout the country. One of the subjects that will be addressed is a potential risk some have been concerned of: when assessment becomes part of the supervisors' responsibility, this might compromise the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. We believe that it is possible to have a safe developmental relationship even when assessment is a part of it, but measures have to be taken to ensure the relationship is maintained. For example, clarifying expectations of the working relationship early on, and training in how to give feedback and feed forward.

Status and expectations

To make the application process as easy as possible, we have developed an online search platform, both for the basic EuroPsy certificate and the Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology. So far only a few have applied for the Specialist Certificate. However, these few applications have allowed use to check if the system the working or if any modifications are needed. A total of 12 Norwegian psychologists, included those who participated in the pilot project, have obtained the Specialist Certificate so far. We expect a larger number of applications when those who have taken the new specialist training programme have graduated.

Conclusion

In the future we hope for an increase in applications, and that the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology will become a quality mark for psychologists working within this field. When the number of certified specialists are high enough, the national associations and EFPA will need to work towards making this quality mark acknowledged by national authorities, as well as by the customers needing services in this business area.

Reference

ECTS user guide 2015, download from http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/publications/2015/ects-users-guide_en.pdf