Irish Section Conference 2023, 14–16 June 2023, Understanding the role of sex and gender in nutrition research

An investigation of Irish nutrition graduates' employability capital

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This abstract was awarded the student prize for best oral presentation.

Today's nutrition science graduates are prepared for employment across various sectors within the nutrition field. Understanding graduate employment outcomes will provide vital information to ensure university education is adapting to modern workforce needs[1]. Dietetics research in the last decade has explored graduate outcomes and employability to better shape curricula and enhance student success[2]. A recent Australian study exploring employment journeys of graduates from a single nutrition science programme identified curricula adaptations and career resources that could improve career prospects for future graduates[3]. In Ireland, little is known about graduate employment outcomes and workforce readiness.

The aim was to explore Irish nutrition graduates' employability and role of employability capitals in supporting nutrition science graduate outcomes.

In-depth semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 42 nutrition graduates who had completed a nutrition science degree between 2016–2021. This study was grounded in interpretivism whereby researchers sought to co-construct meaning of experiences between themselves and the participants. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed, whereby the data was coded, themes identified and discussed by all authors. The data was further mapped against the Graduate Capital Model[4] (GCM) by deductively coding against five graduate capitals.

All elements of the GCM were identified. Human, social and identity capital were most dominant within the data and identified as influential on employability. The presence or absence of these capitals could be clearly identified within each graduates' experience. Presence of human capital - possession of hard skills and specialist knowledge – was high amongst graduates, with 83% referencing research skills, nutrition knowledge and attainment of technical skills as contributing factors to employment success. Social capital, developing networks and fostering relationships, was present across the data with 3 in 5 graduates reporting it as important for success post-graduation. Many graduates reflected on positive experiences gained through networking at conferences, membership in university nutrition societies, and developing mentorship relationships with supervisors or lecturers. Identity capital, consisting of a professional narrative or feeling like a nutrition professional, was discussed by 81% of Irish graduates positively. Formation of professional identity and connection to the profession was strong, with many expressing a sense of pride in their profession, and ability to use their skills and knowledge to help people. However, the remaining fifth of graduates reported feeling like an imposter and perceived many barriers to professional identity formation including lack of regulation, presence of non-qualified individuals within the field, and comparison to dietetics. Both psychological and cultural capital were rarely discussed.

This study highlights that Irish graduates are developing human, social and identity capital. More research is needed to further bolster identity formation and identify solutions to current barriers. Lack of psychological and cultural capital, however, presents a concern for resilience and understanding amongst future graduates.

References

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