



Professions, Professionals and Professionalism - an Introduction

The Australian Council of Professions is the unifying alliance of Professional Associations that is acknowledged by the community, industry and government as thought-leaders in all things professional since 1971. Through our Member Organisations we represent close to one million Australian professionals.

We are delighted to provide this introduction and well-established definitions to Professions, Professionals and Professionalism and other useful information for the use of the public as well as students and researchers.

You are encouraged to use this information in your articles, assignments or theses with the following attribution:

Australian Council of Professions, 2003, What is a Profession", <www.Professions.org.au/what-is-a-professional>

For assistance, please contact WIP@Professions.org.au

What is a Profession?

Since 2003 the Australian Council of Professions has provided this definition: A **Profession** is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others.¹

It is inherent in the definition of a Profession that a code of ethics governs the activities of each Profession. Such codes require behaviour and practice beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual. They define and demand high standards of behaviour in respect to the services provided to the public and in dealing with professional colleagues. Often these codes are enforced by the Profession and are acknowledged and accepted by the community.

Who is a Professional?

A **Professional** is a member of a Profession. Professionals are governed by codes of ethics and profess commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism and the promotion of the public good within their expert domain. Professionals are accountable to those they serve and to society.²³

Traditionally, a 'Professional' is someone who derives their income from their specific knowledge or experience – as opposed to a worker, hobbyist or amateur without formal education. This meaning is still used in areas such as sport. However, in the Professions, a 'Professional' has a broader meaning, typically around some moral or ethical foundation within the practice of a specific and usually established expertise.

What is Professionalism?

'**Professionalism**' is defined as the personally held beliefs of a Professional about their own conduct as a member of a Profession. It is often linked to the upholding of the principles, laws, ethics and conventions of a Profession in the form of a code of practice.

¹ Australian Council of Professions, 2003, 'What is a Profession', <www.Professions.org.au/what-is-a-professional>

² Evetts, J., 'Sociological Analysis of Professionalism: Past, Present and Future', Comparative Sociology 10, 2011

³ Freidson, E., 'Professionalism: The Third Logic', Polity Press, London, 2001

What is Professionalisation?

Professionalisation is the pattern of how a profession develops, as well as the process of becoming a profession.⁴

What is the Chief Professionalist

The dedication of our community of professionals offering evidence-based expert solutions and counsel is something we want to celebrate and promote in particular in difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To magnify and personalise that voice the Australian Council of Professions in April 2021 appointed the world-wide first Chief Professionalist as the "*one who professionalises an occupation*" (Merriam-Webster). The Chief Professionalist advocates the professionals' mission to government and the community as well as engages with national leaders as well as the broader community to advocate for the purpose and value of the professions, professionals and professionalism.

What is the Importance of the Professions?

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen renewed importance placed on science, expertise and evidence in decision and policy making within Australia and the world. There is an opportunity to encourage this as a normal operating mode (instead of crisis mode) and to be applied across professions, sectors and issues, broader than health. A driving question has been *Who can we trust?* Many professionals have stepped-up to that challenge and shown that science-based, deeply considered expert guidance helps us successfully navigate the threats to our lives and livelihoods.

One path to achieving this in a technologically advanced, sophisticated and humane society is to always demonstrate trustworthiness by decision and policy-making based on science, evidence and ethics. Professionals who display the highest levels of professionalism supported by their professional associations will ultimately allow our society to honour that trust.

Is Professionalism still relevant?

The relevance and value of professional conduct are regularly questioned. Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne Dr George Beaton explored this in his essay "*Why Professionalism is Still Relevant*".

The essay maintains that 'ethical considerations and obligations lead to and maintain trust in the parts of those served and are the essence of professionalism. There is no definition of professionalism – even a rough outline of professionalism's characteristics – that does not include a central component of ethics and altruism.' and 'as long as professionals and professions hold on to this essence of professionalism – even, and especially, in an age of globalisation – they will survive and flourish, and professionalism will fulfil its role in serving humanity.'

Download the essay at

[www.Professions.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Why Professionalism is still Relevant Beaton WIP.pdf](http://www.Professions.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Why_Professionalism_is_still_Relevant_Beaton_WIP.pdf)

⁴ Abbott, A., 1988, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labour*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.