From A Career Development Programme to Professional Doctorate or Practice-oriented PhD: A Norwegian Case Study

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This article describes a career development programme in Norway, which might be compared to the Professional Doctorate programmes worldwide. This particular programme supports teachers who intend to apply for 'alternative' associate professorships (so-called førstelektor *in Norwegian). Such positions are equivalent to those that are awarded to candidates with PhDs or equivalent, but their profile is somewhat different. Candidates to such alternative positions need to provide evidence of their capacity to develop teaching and learning in higher education in an innovative way, in particular as far as preparing students for professional practice is concerned.*

In this article a short description of the two paths is provided, and the particular characteristics of the 'alternative path' are outlined. 'A description of the dilemmas and challenges of having two parallel career paths that are meant to be 'equal in status but different in form' is followed by a discussion of the possibilities of formalising this path as a Professional Doctorate .

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Introduction

In Norway, career development in higher education follows a rather unique pattern. Instead of a single ladder, as in most Western countries, there are two parallel career tracks:

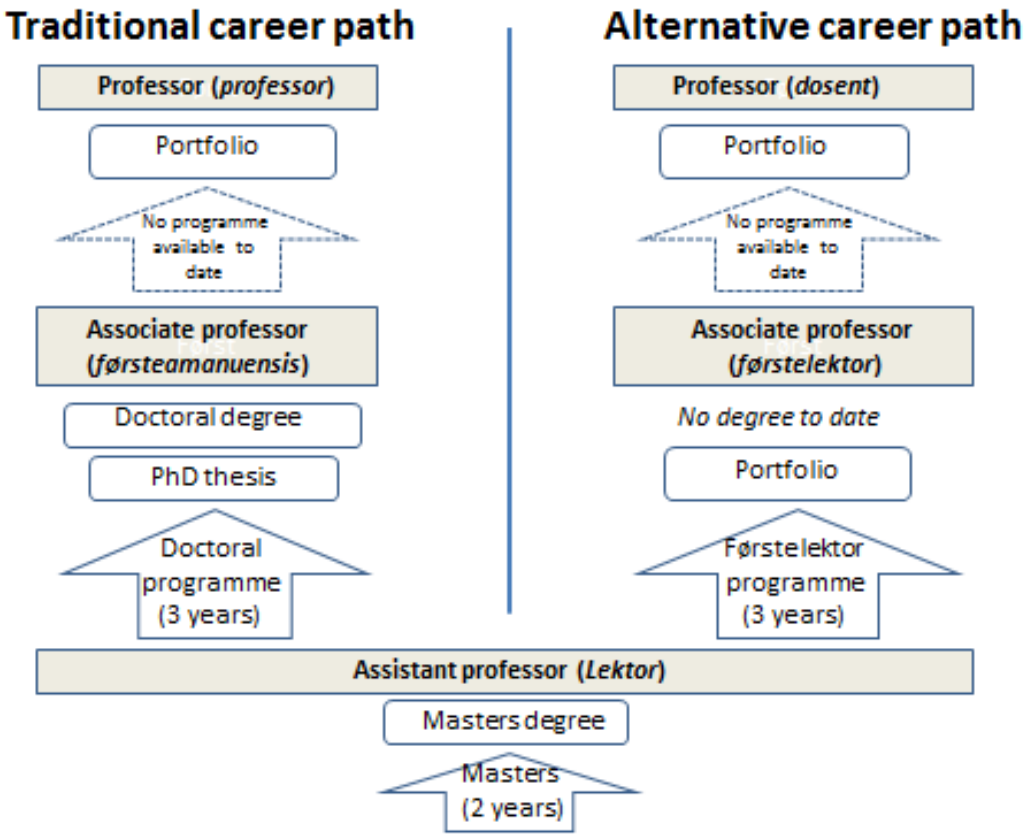

Fig. 1. Parallel career tracks

This situation opens up for a relatively varied spectre of possibilities for career development, and provides an alternative route to what is normally considered the way up in the system (through a PhD or equivalent). However, experience has shown that although the two paths have equal status in theory, the traditional path is in practice often considered 'more worth' than the alternative path. Therefore, the question of accreditation of the alternative path, as well as the issue of whether it may or may not lead to a degree, is crucial. In the following we will first describe the similarities and differences between the two paths, then elaborate further on the characteristics of the 'alternative' career path, the dilemmas and challenges of having two parallel paths that lead to the same level of qualification, but still differ, and thereafter discuss possible solutions.

Similarities and differences in the two equal paths

As of today, the status of *førstelektor* (which is translated as Associate Professor in English) is not based on an academic degree or a compulsory structured programme. It is acquired on the basis of a formal assessment of documented research and development and of special teaching qualifications. 'Documented research and development' refers both to traditional research and to work consisting of identifying and implementing best practice in teaching and learning. In addition, the assessment exercise values practice-oriented development processes within the realm of an institution's educational programmes or a profession's practice fields (Kyvik & Lepori, 2010).

Førsteamanuensis (which, interestingly enough is also translated as Associate Professor in English) is normally obtained through a PhD or equivalent research work, normally documented through articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The status of *førstelektor*, on the other hand, is obtained via a commission assessment on the basis of a portfolio. The portfolio documentation opens up for a variety of documentation formats, although current practice is that the majority of the documents included in the application portfolio are of textual nature. The usual application also includes a so-called 'profiling document' that aims to bring together the various elements in the portfolio. It may be noted that PhDs in Norway can also have a similar form (i.e. a number of published or publishable articles, as well as a reflective document linking those articles), but the norm for PhDs is to follow traditional academic processes where traditional criteria for scientific research are used to assess the quality of the work.

The profile of the alternative career path

The criteria for the commission assessment of the portfolio that is to be submitted to obtain the status of ***førstelektor*** are more detailed than those of the traditional academic PhD:

1. Documented extensive research and development work (or artistic work) that is equivalent to a doctorate in scope and quality
2. Exceptional qualifications related to teaching and other educational work
3. Documented relevant practical competence in terms of teaching, mentoring, or teacher training

A *førstelektor* will also have the possibility to build his or her career further, towards the status of *dosent* (translated in English by Professor). In order to obtain the status of *dosent*, a new portfolio has to be submitted, and the criteria for assessing a *dosent* portfolio are as follows:

1. Documented comprehensive research and development on a high level, within the practice-field
2. Documented comprehensive educational development work and other high quality educational tasks
3. High qualifications within one or more of following areas:
    a. leading research and development projects
    b. interprofessional collaboration and networking
    c. comprehensive collaboration within business, societal or cultural areas for development of studies or research and development
    d. exceptional work experience relevant for business, society or culture
    e. building up scientific collections
4. Documented relevant practical competence in terms of teaching and mentoring, gained on teachers training for higher education or trough experiences

(Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006)

Additional government guidelines underline that in order to be awarded the title of *førstelektor* or *dosent,* one has to prove that one's research and development profile is connected to reflective practice with a focus on professional and practical innovations. The qualification profile is that of educational proficiency, in relation with the development of the roles of professions in society. Those guidelines are not always followed by the juries or 'commissions' in charge of assessing the *førstelektor* applications. Often, the commission members have little experience with the processes of documenting practical development in higher education as well as in professional work, and sometimes lack a common understanding of what is acceptable in such applications and what is not.

A career development programme

In the following a *Career Track Programme for Associate Professorship (CTPAP)* will be described and discussed. To date, there is no programme that would support the work of putting together a portfolio for the purpose of going from the middle level (*førstelektor*) to top level (*dosent*). Since 2002 more than 50 candidates have been enrolled in the programme, on a part-time basis, normally working 50 % and studying 50% over five years. The programme is providing theoretical, methodological and practical support to the candidates, in the form of seminars, courses and mentoring, as a support to the candidates own research and development projects. Examples of seminars or courses are as follows:

- action research and other methodologies for academic development
- domestication, appropriation and distribution of innovations
- epistemology and ontology in academic development
- 'profiling' one's work for the purpose of normative assessment
- 'grounded theory', Actor Network Theory, Activity Theory
- genres of portfolio building, narratives, op-eds, interviews etc

The seminars offered might vary from year to year, according to the interests of the participants and availability of the staff members. Mentoring might be carried out both on a one-to-one basis, and as group mentoring. Mentoring sessions will provide insights and feedback both as far as process is concerned (how the project is to be planned, carried out, evaluated, who should be involved and how, etc.) and in the terms of product (what documents need to be written etc).

The CTPAP has a number of unique characteristics, which have significant consequences on the profile of the programme, as well as its status within and outside academia.

a. *Every individual applicant to the programme has to be employed as an assistant professor (*lektor*) in a Norwegian institution of Higher Education.*

This characteristic is the result of the particular career ladder in Norwegian academia, especially in profession-oriented Higher Education, where a doctorate is rarely a prerequisite

to employment in an academic position. Since all the candidates have first-hand experience from the field of Higher Education they will be more likely to understand what academic development is about. They will also have, at least theoretically, established themselves as a member of one of more networks of colleagues, which normally facilitates the introduction and implementation of their project. However, this imperative in terms of employment may contribute to fuelling the belief that the programme is merely a career advancement scheme, with no application outside the realm of Norwegian Higher Education.

b. Each individual applicant is accepted on the basis of a project of academic development that has been endorsed by his or her department or faculty.

One of the prerequisites for acceptance of an applicant is that the academic management at their department or faculty guarantees that the planned project of academic development as described in the application form is considered strategically significant for the organization, and will be given the required support during the entire period of the programme. What is meant by support is subject to interpretation, but some aspects of this support are regulated by a contract that stipulates that the candidate will be provided 50% research and development time throughout the programme, and will get 40 hours of supervision per academic year. Other aspects of the support that is required for carrying out the project are more difficult to formalize in the form of contract, for example ensuring that the colleagues and other stakeholders that will be affected by the project are informed of the project's status as prioritized, and are encouraged to contribute to its success. The authors' experience is that those non-contractual aspects of support are sometimes left out, which can hinder and delay the project.

c. The programme is inter-professional and inter-disciplinary in nature

There are no restrictions as to which faculty, department or professional field the candidates belong to, as long as the project can be defined as academic development. This normally results in rather heterogeneous groups of programme participants, with different theoretical, methodological and epistemological backgrounds. However, this diversity is generally experienced as positive, as it allows for processes of cross-pollenization and

experience exchange across disciplinary borders. A number of activities in the programme consist of presenting one's own work to colleagues from other professional fields, faculties or institutions, which often result in participants having to make explicit aspects of their project that they may otherwise had taken for granted.

d. The deliverables of the programme may vary in form and in number

The move in status from *lektor* (assistant professor) to *førstelektor* (associate professor) happens on the basis of a formal assessment based on a portfolio put together by the applicant. It is interesting to see that there are to dates few formal requirements as to what the portfolio should entail. Many candidates choose to write a so-called 'profiling document' that functions as some sort of reader's guide, providing an overview of the various elements of the portfolio, how they relate to each other and how they contribute to documenting their work of academic development. Such a profiling document is not formally required, but applicants from the programme are encouraged to write one, so as to ensure that the members of the assessment commission understand the purpose of each document. The type of material included in the portfolio varies greatly from one applicant to another. Some choose to include only text-based documents, while others also include multimedia material, such as sound files, pictures, drawings, videos, or computer programmes. There is generally no limitation as to which documentation form may be used, but experience has shown that different assessment commissions value differently the various types of documentation that may be included in the portfolio.

e. The interpretation of the criteria for assessment has proved to be challenging.

It may be noted that the criteria for assessment are different from those used to assess PhD work, and that those criteria are also subject to interpretation. This has resulted in situations where commission members have lacked a common understanding about how those criteria are to be used in the process of assessing portfolios. In one particular instance, the exact same portfolio was sent to two different commissions, one that concluded with a clear reject and one that concluded with a clear accept. Such an example is illustrative of the challenges faced by the programme. A recurring question is whether a portfolio needs to include peer-reviewed articles in order to be considered acceptable for the purpose of career

advancement to *førstelektor*. Although the official guidelines do not postulate that peer-reviewed material is necessary, many commissions have rejected applications on the basis that they lacked peer-reviewed publications, thereby bringing about uncertainty amongst future candidates as to what to include in their portfolio. Such a situation illustrates problems related to the recruitment of commission members. The main requirement to date is that at least one member of the commission needs to have a Professor status, while the others need to have at least a status as Associate Professor. This requirement might bring about situations whereby a commission has high qualifications within conventional academic contexts, but may not necessarily be familiar with the criteria for assessment within an 'alternative' orientation. Another challenge that is regularly encountered within the realm of the programme is that documenting change processes within a particular field of interest often relies on a different genre than traditional theory-oriented research.

f. Pedagogical practice and research and development (R&D) work are overlapping entities

All the candidates are employed on a 100 % basis as lecturers and should in theory be able to dedicate 50% of their work time to R&D and a maximum of 50% to their teaching duties. However, the notion of development is not unequivocal, and it may be argued that teaching-related work such as the development of curriculum, the design of course evaluation, etc. are in effect R&D. Although this argument is valid, the practical consequences of it are that candidates spend a lot more than the intended 50% of their time on teaching-related duties. This may not be a problem if their schedule allows for a sufficient amount of time for documenting all the activities that are undertaken. However, experience has shown that much of the teaching-related work carried out by lecturers remains undocumented due to lack of time. This results in candidates having less time than expected to document their work, thereby putting pressure on them to perform R&D work in their spare time, or to postpone writing their *førstelektor* application until after their grant has run out.

g. An individual career development on the basis of collaborative work

The status of *førstelektor* is awarded to individuals only, on the basis of a portfolio assembled and structured by those individuals. However, the projects that are described in the portfolios are per definition collaborative projects, where a large number of

stakeholders might be involved (colleagues, students, managers, administrative and technical staff, practitioners, etc.). It is therefore not surprising to see that many of the documents gathered in the portfolio are the product of collaborative work. Many of those have a number of different authors, among which figures the candidate. Others have a form that does not lend itself to the listing of the authors (for example a course plan). This situation is often the source of challenges for assessment commissions that need to ascertain whether and to what extent the individual candidate has contributed to the end product. There is therefore a need for a detailed account of what sections of the presented material the candidate has actively contributed to, and what sections he or she has had a secondary role in (or no role at all). Such detailed accounts are to date rather rare, which makes the process of assessment somewhat problematic. Experience has shown that some candidates have not managed to provide a clear picture of their role in the writing of the submitted documents, and this deficiency has, in some cases, resulted in a rejection of their application. In addition, having been able to perform collaborative work in an effective and constructive way is generally considered to be an asset from the point of view of assessing the candidate's performance. It is therefore important for candidates to document their collaborative work thoroughly, thereby providing evidence of their teamwork proficiency.

Examples of projects with a practice-oriented profile

In the following we will give some examples of the elements and focus of portfolios that might appear as a basis for an application for a promotion to a *førstelektor.*

Example no. 1

Project theme:	Teaching of mathematics in Norwegian schools
Affiliation:	Faculty of Education
Length of the project	4 years, part-time
Main topics:	- What methods are used in Norwegian school to teach mathematics? - How can Higher Education academics and teachers in school increase each other's competence in mathematics teaching? - How can student teachers be used to facilitate this type of competence development?
Methods:	- Classroom observations - Drawing of rich pictures - Administrative work targeted at developing a 'bridge' between schools and the Faculty of Education
Example of documents in portfolio:	- Book chapter - Articles - Reports

Example no. 2:

Project theme:	Use of narratives within the realm of nursing education
Affiliation:	Faculty of Nursing
Length of the project	3 years (part-time)
Main topics:	- User perspectives within the realm of dialogue between health institutions and next-of-kins of disabled children. - Introduction of the use of narratives in student work at the Faculty of Nursing - Evaluations of courses (quality assurance) at the Faculty of Nursing
Methods:	- Questionnaires, - Action research, - Grounded theory, - Narrative analysis
Example of documents in portfolio:	- Articles - Reports - Popular press articles presenting the project, - Conference presentations

Example no. 3:

Project themes:	1) Use of information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate art education 2) Development of a knowledge base for 'smart textiles'
Affiliation:	Faculty of Art and Design
Length of the project	5 years (part-time)
Main topics:	- Introducing ICT in art education encouraging feedback from peers to allow students to develop a language to describe and assess art and design work. - Gathering and organizing information about existing textiles with integrated electronic technology
Methods:	- Development of a software package for a picture database, - Classroom observations, - Course evaluation
Example of documents in portfolio:	- Software programmes - Articles - Reports - Rich pictures

Example no. 4:

Project themes:	Peer-assessment and writing groups in Early Childhood Teacher Education
Affiliation:	Faculty of Education
Length of the project	5 years (part-time)
Main topics:	- Does collaborative writing impact on the students' learning potential? - Does student participation in selecting criteria for assessment result in better learning?
Methods:	- Focus-group interviews, - Classroom observations
Example of documents in the portfolio:	- Case studies - Conference presentations - Articles in the professional press - Op-eds in the national press.

The challenges of the Norwegian model

The Norwegian model, consisting of two paths, exposes various challenges:

- The unequal possibilities for acquiring a degree
- The documentation of development processes
- The categorical differences between theory building and practice development
- The need for meta-reflection on one's own competence development
- The variations of interpretations of the criteria for assessment

First of all, the main challenge of the Norwegian model, consisting of a two-track qualification system, is that of the difference in accreditation. As the traditional academic path leads to a PhD, there is no degree offered to the 'alternative', practice-oriented path. A degree provides status within higher education. Even though the two paths legally are equivalent, the associate professors and professors that have achieved their status through the alternative route (*førstelektor*/*dosent*) report that they are often met by the rest of the

academic society, especially internationally, with either a lack of respect or a lack of understanding for what they have achieved, both of which seem to be mainly related to the fact that they do not hold a degree.

It may be argued that one of the reasons for the lack of status of the alternative track is linked up to the fact that there are to date no or few traditions for the 'new' track, and that the documentation of practice oriented processes is not yet fully developed. What documentation of 'comprehensive research and development of high quality' means, has been and remains the subject of discussions.

Documenting the effects and results of projects aiming at improving practice is not a straight-forward endeavour, especially since it is difficult to describe and measure the complexity of social relations and of change processes. One of the traps that need to be avoided is becoming overly 'doing-oriented' - to such a degree that the theoretical reflections are under-communicated. On the other hand, merely studying what is going on without initiating or carrying out any interventions, might not make any difference to the field, which may defeat the purpose of an alternative track. In other words, the balance between theory and practice appears to be more challenging within the practiceoriented academic path, than within the realm of the traditional PhD.

Similarities to the professional doctorate

The practice-oriented alternative career track seems to have similarities to the generic Professional Doctorates, as described as 'practitioner doctorates', 'third generation doctorates' or 'work-based doctorates' (Fell et al., 2011; Costley & Stephenson, 2009). Such doctorates are mostly located in a work context, and are aiming at professional or organisational changes. For the Norwegian alternative career track the work context is currently that of teaching and learning in higher education. The focus is on research and development, with an emphasis on developmental institutional and educational changes, often in an action research format. The Norwegian alternative track is multiprofessional and interdisciplinary in nature, just as mant of the existing generic Professional Doctorates. As mentioned above, the assessment is based on a portfolio, which might include written texts

or other types of materials that document the change processes that each one of the included projects might have brought about.

Conclusion

The two qualification tracks described above are legally equivalent according to government guidelines established in 2006. Still, there is a need to revise the guidelines, in order to gain full equivalency. As we look upon it today, there might be two possibilities:

1. Adjusting and developing of the CTPSL programme for an accreditation as a Professional Doctorate degree, or
2. Incorporating the CTPSL programme in the existing portfolio of PhD programmes, providing that the practice orientation as well as the inter-professional orientation are preserved.

Both these solutions will probably result in a need for harmonizing the titles connected to the two tracks so as to enable Norway to operate with identical titles all through the career ladder.

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Laurence started her education at EDHEC Business School in France, before getting a Diploma, an MSc and a PhD in Information Systems at the London School of Economics. After having worked within the field of software consultancy, she returned to academia, first at the Norwegian Computing Centre, and then at Oslo University College since 2003. She is now a professor in educational science and after a period as the director of the Centre for Educational Research and Development, she is now entering a position as a leader of the Institute of information technology at the Faculty of technology, art and design. Her research areas include domestic technologies, learning technologies and methodologies for academic development, including rich pictures.