

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Practising professionalism in activation work: Developing and testing a questionnaire

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**Abstract**

The professional nature and professionalisation of the street-level delivery of activation policies have received increasing attention in academic debate. The study reported in this article contributes to this debate in two ways. The first way is to elaborate a multidimensional conceptualisation of practising professionalism in activation work, distinguishing eight dimensions: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, knowledge use, innovation, accountability, client-centred practice, collaboration and methodical work. The second way is to have developed and test a questionnaire for studying professional practice in activation work. Two models were compared in the study. The first model hypothesised that professional practice is a construct capturing all eight dimensions. The second model hypothesised that the eight dimensions reflect a knowledge-oriented and a service-oriented aspect of professional practice. The models were tested using data from a survey among Dutch activation workers. Both provided acceptable fits with our data. What model researchers consider most appropriate will depend on the focus of their research.

**KEY WORDS**

activation, frontline work, measurement, policy implementation, professional practice

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of studies carried out in the United States and Australia (Brodkin & Marston, 2013), the last 15 years have seen an increasing number of publications on the frontline or street-level delivery of activation or welfare-to-work policies in European countries (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016; Grandia et al., 2020; Ohls, 2020; Van Berkel et al., 2017). These studies opened the black box of the delivery of these policies by showing how activation workers activate their clients and how contextual characteristics structure workers' practices.

A recurring issue in these studies concerns the desirability and feasibility of professionalising activation practices (Dall,

2020; Eikenaar et al., 2016; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012). This issue is discussed against the background of broader theoretical debates about the nature of professionalism, especially in public service sectors, on the one hand, and debates about street-level bureaucrats' discretion and use of discretion, on the other hand (see Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Following Freidson (2004, p. 12), professionalism exists:

...when an organized occupation gains the power to determine who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance.

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Freidson's definition clearly shows that professionalism, as Noordegraaf (2007) argued, is about content (knowledge, skills, expertise, codes of conduct) and control. Freidson's definition closely resembled 'pure' professionalism where control takes place by professionals and professional associations. Debates about the nature of professionalism made clear that this 'pure' professionalism has increasingly become under pressure (Evetts, 2011; Newman & Tonkens, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2007). As a consequence, occupational control (and consequently, occupationally controlled content) has been eroded and made way for forms of control including other actors and stakeholders (such as managers, policy makers and clients). Thus, debates about professionalism in activation work—which never had the status of a 'profession', let alone a 'pure' profession—unavoidably raise the question of what type of professionalism is at stake. In addition, debates about professionalism are inextricably linked to debates about the discretion of professional frontline workers. Discretion is directly linked to professional control: Professional practice requires professional workers (i.e. members of professions) to have autonomy to use their knowledge, skills and expertise in individual situations. Whereas, on the one hand, professionalism is advocated as a strategy to manage the use of discretion by ascertaining that frontline practices meet professional standards and codes of conduct, on the other hand, debates on new types of professionalism strongly focus on the impact of reforming professionalism on the autonomy and discretion of professionals (Evans & Harris, 2004; Evetts, 2011; Sainsbury, 2008).

Studies of delivering activation policies can be divided into two groups that correspond with two of Green's (2009) approaches of professional practice. The first group of studies focused on professional practice understood as what Green called *practising a profession*. This type of activation research focused mainly on the role of the social work profession. Some studies looked at the degree to which social work ethics and values fit with activation policies and their objectives (Hasenfeld, 1999). Others compared activation practices of social workers with those of non-social workers or other professionals (Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018; Van Berkel & Knies, 2018). The second group of activation research used a *practising professionalism* approach: '(...) the fact that one enacts professionalism, one practices what it is to *be* professional, or to be *a* professional. In this case, professionalism is itself to be understood as a practice phenomenon (...)' (Green, 2009, p. 6; italics in original). Some studies in this group adopted a more *prescriptive* approach. They argued that activation work should be organised and managed as professional work, because of the people-changing objectives of activation policies (Hasenfeld, 2010) and the need to personalise services given the heterogeneity of the policies' target groups (Berthet & Bourgeois, 2014; Rice et al., 2018). Other studies adopted a *descriptive* approach, investigating the degree to which activation workers enact professionalism. Eikenaar et al. (2016) showed that activation workers differ significantly in their views of clients. The authors, finding that workers hardly reflect on

### Key Practitioner Message

- This article helps practitioners in discussing and developing the professionalisation of the frontline delivery of activation policies.

these views, interpreted this as pointing at a lack of professional practice. Other studies found that in decision-making, activation workers make limited use of research knowledge (Bolhaar et al., 2018) and statistical matching instruments (Behncke et al., 2007). Using research knowledge and standardised instruments are often seen as part of professional practice, although this is not uncontested (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016).

Our study used the practising professionalism approach of professional practice. Activation workers are a very heterogeneous group in terms of their educational background and professional training, making it hard to decide what profession is being practised in activation. Various empirical studies used social work as a 'proxy' of the profession being practised in activation work. But this is problematic as, in a considerable number of countries, many activation workers are not trained as social workers (Ohls, 2020; Van Berkel & Knies, 2018). Taking the practising professionalism approach as our starting point allowed us to elaborate on the issue of professional activation practice while abstracting from specific social professions.

This study aimed to conceptualise practising professionalism in activation and to develop and test a questionnaire to investigate it. Practising professionalism is a multifaceted concept and this makes an explicit debate about the concept relevant. We contribute to debates about professionalism in activation in the following ways. First, an explicit conceptualisation of professional activation practice facilitates academic and practitioner debates about our understanding of practising professionalism in activation. Second, developing and testing a questionnaire to measure professional practice in activation is helpful for scholars interested in studying how activation workers enact professionalism.

The article starts with a description of the approach we used in developing and testing our questionnaire. The following two sections focus on conceptualisation and operationalisation, respectively. Then, after briefly describing the research sample and analytical strategy, we present the results of the test of the questionnaire. We conclude with a discussion.

## DEVELOPING AND TESTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE: OUR APPROACH

The first step in developing and testing the questionnaire focused on conceptualising practising professionalism in

the context of activation. Inspired by DeVellis (2017), we combined insights from the academic literature with insights from key actors in the field of delivering activation. We started with a literature review, focusing specifically on empirical publications on frontline activation work in English language academic journals (published in Van Berkel et al., 2017). For this review, 58 articles were used, most of which (52) were single-country studies: 18 from the United States, 27 from European countries and 7 from Australia. The articles were found in 27 different academic journals, mainly social policy, social work and public administration journals. In addition, we made use of a literature review published by Nothdurfter and Hermans (2018). Their review focused on street-level research in general, including activation work. Both reviews resulted in a provisional conceptualisation distinguishing various dimensions of practising professionalism. This multidimensional conceptualisation does justice to one of the core findings of the reviews that practising professionalism is a complex and contested concept. Distinguishing various dimensions helped us to avoid conceptualising practising professionalism in activation in a too normative way—although we fully acknowledge that any decision to include dimensions is eventually normative. As we elaborate in more detail below, there are good arguments to consider each of the dimensions as an important element of practising professionalism in activation work. At the same time, because definitions of what practising professionalism means differ not only among academics but also among practitioners, policy makers, clients and managers, we are likely to find different ‘profiles’ of practising professionalism in specific study contexts: combinations of dimensions that score high and low in activation practices. From a descriptive perspective, our questionnaire can identify the profile of practising professionalism in a given context. From an evaluative perspective, it can also assess the strengths and weaknesses of practising professionalism using all dimensions as a yardstick.

Our provisional conceptualisation was then discussed in individual and focus interviews with activation workers, managers and clients in six local welfare agencies in the Netherlands. Local welfare agencies are responsible for the administration of social assistance benefits and the activation of social assistance recipients. We interviewed 82 activation workers (employees in welfare agencies directly involved in providing activation services), 12 managers and 7 clients. The aim of these interviews was to explore whether our conceptualisation matched the opinions of field actors. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Focus interviews were recorded on video to facilitate the transcription process. All transcripts were then coded in ATLAS.ti, focusing specifically on: (a) the interviewees’ views on (dimensions of) professional activation practice, (b) their opinions on the dimensions of practising professionalism distinguished in our

provisional conceptualisation, and (c) the interviewees’ understandings of the meanings of the dimensions. Our interviewees had different opinions in terms of how they define professional activation, what dimensions they consider of more or less importance and the meaning of the dimensions in everyday service provision. Nevertheless, the dimensions included in our provisional conceptualisation turned out to cover the diversity of our interviewees’ views about professional activation practice.

The next step involved operationalising our conceptualisation into questionnaire items. Here again, we combined insights from the literature and from field actors. The literature was used to find existing operationalisations of dimensions of practising professionalism that fit with our definitions of the dimensions and have been tested for reliability and validity (these tests were in some cases more robust than in others). The questionnaire was tested with seven individual activation workers in various local welfare agencies, resulting in several changes in questionnaire items. Insights from field actors helped to ensure that the questionnaire items were recognisable and relevant, given the Dutch context of delivering activation policies.

The final step involved statistically testing the measurement quality of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was part of a broader survey investigating practising professionalism in activation and its antecedents and outcomes. It was directed at activation workers in Dutch local welfare agencies (see below for a description of the research sample). First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis allowing us to explore the dimensionality in the questionnaire. This test is data-driven: The data tells us whether there are dimensions in the questionnaire and whether these dimensions overlap our conceptualisation. The second step involved a confirmatory factor analysis. This is a theory-driven test. It allowed us to model our measurement construct in line with our hypotheses (presented in the next section) and to test whether this model fits the data well.

## **DEVELOPING AND TESTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE: CONCEPTUALISATION OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVATION PRACTICE**

We will now present the eight dimensions of practising professionalism in activation that we identified. Knowledge and expertise constitute traditional cornerstones of practising professionalism. During education and through continuing professional training during their careers, professionals acquire knowledge that guides their decision-making. There is considerable debate about the types of knowledge that guide professional decision-making (James et al., 2019) and about

the issue of what qualifies as valid and robust knowledge (Green, 2009). Nevertheless, academic and research-based knowledge are generally considered a crucial part of professional practice. Thus, our first dimension of practising professionalism was the acquisition of knowledge based on academic insights and research evidence.

The second dimension has a clear link to the knowledge-based nature of professional work as well: knowledge sharing. This has been defined as ‘the provision of task information and know-how to help others and to collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures’ (Wang & Noe, 2010, p. 117). Although knowledge sharing is often studied in the context of organisational knowledge management and not specifically as an exclusively *professional* practice, it has been recognised as a constitutive element of professional work (Styhre, 2016). Knowledge sharing also directly relates to what is considered a characteristic of ‘modern’ professionalism: inter-professional working and learning (Reynolds, 2007; also see Sousa & Costa, 2010). In the context of activation, workers are not only confronted with inter-professional working and learning in the context of external networking in service delivery. The heterogeneity of professional backgrounds of activation workers makes inter-professional knowledge sharing an inherent part of working with their colleagues as well.

Knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing are directly related to the core of practising professionalism: knowledge use. Debates about evidence-based professional practice (Gray & Schubert, 2012; James et al., 2019) illustrate that knowledge use is far from a straightforward concept. Types of knowledge that should be used (research-based knowledge vis-à-vis tacit, practice-based and experiential knowledge) and the issue of who decides what knowledge should be used—reflecting the issues of content and control discussed in the introduction—are subject to controversies. Here, we defined knowledge use using a slightly adjusted version of a definition of evidence-based medicine (Swanson et al., 2010, p. 286): the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence, combined with professional expertise and client preferences and values, in making decisions about the services provided to individual clients. This definition uses a broader knowledge base than research evidence only and does not frame knowledge use as merely ‘applying’ best evidence.

The fourth dimension of professional practice in our study concerned innovation. Bos-Nehles et al. (2017) argued that innovative behaviour is particularly relevant for public organisations that provide knowledge-intensive services, as it helps these organisations to create public value and secure long-term survival. A review study of innovation in the public sector found that innovation takes place not only in the context of performance pressures on public organisations, but also against the background of promoting user involvement and satisfaction, and of dealing with societal issues (De Vries

et al., 2016). We defined innovation as ‘an employee’s intentional introduction or application of new ideas, products, processes, and procedures to his or her work role, work unit, or organisation’ (Yuan & Woodman, 2010, p. 324).

Client-centred practice was the fifth dimension in the study. Professional–client interactions have traditionally been a core element of professional practice, especially in human service organisations. Societal, policy and governance changes have an impact on professional–client interactions. These changes have resulted in what Newman and Tonkens (2011) called a reordering of power and authority. They pointed at service user choice and voice as core areas where this reordering become manifest. At the same time, activation policies have repeatedly been mentioned as a policy area where client-centred practice is challenged by the increasing use of compulsion (Lindsay & Mailand, 2004). Reflecting the issues of choice and voice, we defined client-centred practice as a professional–client relationship characterised by partnership, respect for clients, the facilitating of choice and the involving of clients in decision-making (based on Sumsion & Law, 2006).

Collaboration was the sixth dimension. Debates about new types of professionalism have repeatedly emphasised the importance of inter-professional and inter-organisational co-operation and boundary-spanning professional practice (Ingold, 2018; Lindsay & Dutton, 2012). Collaboration is considered crucial for successfully addressing complex social issues and societal problems (Considine & Lewis, 2012). In the activation context, this discourse gained relevance as activation policies have been directed increasingly at vulnerable client groups (Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014). We defined collaboration as co-operation in service-provision processes with relevant internal and external partners.

The seventh dimension in the study, accountability, has been defined as ‘a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his conduct to some significant other’ (Bovens, 1998, quoted in Hupe & Hill, 2007, p. 286). Against the background of the growing multiplicity of ‘significant others’—discussed in the context of collaboration (see above) and new public management (Brodkin, 2008)—Hupe and Hill (2007) distinguished three types of public accountability: public administrative accountability (including political organs and supervisors), professional accountability (including peers and colleagues) and participatory accountability (including clients).

The final dimension we distinguished was methodical work. In the Dutch activation context, methodical work has been defined as working in accordance with an individual action plan based on a diagnosis (Hazelzet & Otten, 2017). The methodical work concept has been especially adopted in debates on professionalism in the Netherlands and Belgium (Boumans et al., 2014). However, profiling instruments to diagnose clients (Desiere et al., 2019) and individual action

plans (Van Berkel et al., 2017) are used by activation workers in many countries. Methodical work can therefore be considered part of their repertoire of practising professionalism. Table 1 provides an overview of the dimensions and their definitions.

The core aim of analysing the validity and reliability of our questionnaire is to test whether these dimensions indeed reflect an underlying or latent construct. We tested the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** *Practising professionalism in the context of delivering activation is a second-order latent construct that captures the following eight factors: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, knowledge use, innovation, client-centred practice, collaboration, accountability and methodical work.*

We also developed an alternative set of two hypotheses where we hypothesised that the eight dimensions reflect two aspects of practising professionalism rather than one undifferentiated construct of practising professionalism. The dimensions knowledge acquisition, knowledge use, knowledge sharing and innovation focused on the knowledge-oriented aspect of practising professionalism. The other four dimensions can be denoted as the service-oriented aspect of practising professionalism.

The corresponding hypotheses were:

**Hypothesis 2a** *The knowledge-oriented aspect of practising professionalism is a second-order latent construct that captures the following four factors: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, knowledge use and innovation.*

**Hypothesis 2b** *The service-oriented aspect of practising professionalism is a second-order latent construct*

*that captures the following four factors: client-centred practice, collaboration, accountability and methodical work.*

## DEVELOPING AND TESTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE: OPERATIONALISING DIMENSIONS AND DEVELOPING ITEMS

Our operationalisations of the eight dimensions into questionnaire items were based (wherever possible) on operationalisations developed and tested in prior research. Sometimes changes were made to the original items. This was done, first, to adapt the formulation of items to the work and context of activation workers; and second, to reduce the number of items. For all items in our questionnaire, respondents were asked how often they perform the practices mentioned in the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'often'. We decided not to include 'always' as we expected the likelihood of respondents to 'always' perform certain practices to be practically nil. Below, we explain what sources were used for our operationalisation and what changes were made.

For operationalising knowledge acquisition, a slightly modified version of the operationalisation developed by Grover (1992) was used. Items included, for example, 'reading professional journals' and 'attending conferences'. The item 'writing papers for journals or conferences' was omitted as this hardly takes place in the context of Dutch activation work. The formulation of some items was adjusted to the specific context of our research. For example, we asked respondents about attending conferences focused on activation specifically, to exclude conferences about other issues.

For operationalising knowledge sharing, we used Kim and Lee's (2006) items for measuring employee

TABLE 1 Definitions of dimensions of practising professionalism in activation

| Dimension of practising professionalism | Definition  |
|---|---|
| Knowledge acquisition                   | Acquiring and updating academic or research-based knowledge on activation services and interventions  |
| Knowledge sharing                       | The provision of task information and know-how to help others and to collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures  |
| Knowledge use                           | The conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence, combined with professional expertise and client preferences and values, in making decisions about the services provided to individual clients |
| Innovation                              | An employee's intentional introduction or application of new ideas, products, processes and procedures to his or her work role, work unit or organisation   |
| Client-centred practice                 | A professional-client relationship characterised by partnership, respect for clients, facilitating choice and involving clients in decision-making  |
| Collaboration                           | Co-operation in service provision processes with relevant internal and external partners  |
| Accountability                          | A social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his conduct to some significant other   |
| Methodical work                         | Working according to an individual action plan, based on a decent diagnosis   |

knowledge-sharing capabilities, reformulated in terms of ‘practices’ where needed. For example, Kim and Lee’s item ‘I can freely access documents, information, and knowledge held by other divisions within the organisation’ was reformulated as ‘I use documents, information...’ and so forth.

For operationalising knowledge use, the ‘behaviour’ section of the evidence-based practice process assessment scale developed and validated by Rubin and Parrish (2011) was used. The other sections of the scale (attitudes, familiarity, feasibility and intentions) less directly referred to our focus on practices. Rubin and Parrish (2011) explicitly regard research knowledge as supporting rather than determining decision making, which is in line with our definition of knowledge use. Of the original eight items, we used five. Three items were omitted because they refer to aspects of practising professionalism that we included in other dimensions (informing and involving clients were part of our client-centred practice dimension; evaluating outcomes was part of our methodical work dimension).

For operationalising innovation, a shortened version of the innovative job performance scale developed by Janssen and Van Yperen (2004) was used. Of the nine items in the original measurement instrument, we used five. Our main reason for shortening was, as mentioned above, to reduce the number of questions in the questionnaire. The five selected items covered the three ‘stages’ distinguished in the original scale: idea generation, idea promotion and idea realisation.

Our operationalisation of client-centred practice was based on the client-centred rehabilitation questionnaire (CCRQ) developed and validated by Cott et al. (2006). We selected the three subscales from this questionnaire that were most relevant for our study: client participation in decision making, client education and information, and emotional support. Since the CCRQ is developed as a questionnaire for clients, we rephrased the items in terms of activation workers’ practices. For example, the item ‘I was treated with respect and dignity’ in the CCRQ was reformulated as ‘treating clients with respect’<sup>1</sup>. The four omitted subscales were either less directly relevant for activation, at least when studied from a worker point of view (physical comfort, family support), or they were included in other variables in our study (co-ordination was part of our collaboration dimension; client evaluation of outcome was part of the performance variable in the survey: an outcome rather than dimension of professional practice).

Collaboration was operationalised in a rather straightforward way. Patterns of collaboration are highly dependent on activation workers’ task design, which takes very different

forms across Dutch local welfare agencies. For example, activation workers may work for specific target groups in terms of clients’ labour-market distance. This potentially has an impact on the kinds of external partners involved in collaboration. As it was difficult to control for activation tasks, we distinguished three general types of collaboration partners (Considine & Lewis, 2012): collaboration with colleagues in the same team, collaboration with colleagues in other teams or departments of the same local welfare agency and collaboration with external partners.

Our operationalisation of accountability focused on various actors that activation workers may co-operate with in activation service-provision processes. We distinguished between clients (including employers), colleagues, supervisors and external collaboration partners, as potential ‘significant others’ to which activation workers potentially justify their decisions. The formulation of the items was adjusted to the results of our interviews. Whereas accountability takes the form of formal ‘justifying’ in relations with supervisors, in relations with other actors it is often more informal (‘justifying/explaining’).

Lastly, methodical work was operationalised using a questionnaire developed by the Dutch research institute TNO (Hazelzet & Otten, 2017). The items in our operationalisation reflected the four steps that this research institute distinguished as elements of methodical work in activation: diagnosis, development of individual action plan, service provision in line with the plan and evaluation. The full questionnaire can be found in the Appendix, Table A1.

## RESEARCH SAMPLE

Our survey (which included the professional practice questionnaire) was published online. Because no national register of activation workers from which a random sample could be drawn exists in the Netherlands, we had to develop an alternative strategy of convenience sampling. First of all, various local welfare agencies—whose collaboration in getting access to respondents and inviting them to participate was crucial—were contacted. The agencies were of different sizes and located in different parts of the country. Eventually, eight of them were willing to participate in our study. Together, these agencies administer social assistance and provide activation services for 23% of all Dutch social assistance recipients. The eight agencies sent invitations (plus two reminders) to participate in the study to all their activation workers. In addition, invitations were sent to members of the Dutch occupational association for activation workers. 431 workers filled in the survey. Their average age was 47.83 ( $SD = 10.99$  years) and 63% of our respondents were female. On average, their work experience in activation was 12.5 years. 85% of the

<sup>1</sup>The client-centred practice items were not presented to activation workers who only have employers as their ‘clients’, as client-centred practice obviously means something different when clients are employers.

respondents had an educational background at university level or at the level of an institute for higher professional education. Two-thirds of the respondents worked under a permanent contract, about a quarter worked under a temporary or flexible contract.

## ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Several analytical steps were taken to examine the quality of our measurement scale. First, exploratory factor analysis with Oblimin rotation was conducted in Mplus 8.0 in order to explore the dimensionality in the data. We assessed whether a measurement with eight dimensions indeed generated a better fit than measurements with fewer dimensions. Following the recommendation by Byrne (2013), we considered a RMSEA value below 0.08, a CFI above 0.900 and a TLI above 0.900 to indicate an acceptable model fit. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha was used in order to assess the *reliability* of the eight dimensions of our measurement model. Second, we used confirmatory factor analysis to test our measurement model and assess its *validity*. For all models, WLSMV estimation was used, which is considered an appropriate measure to use for non-normally distributed data.

## RESULTS

### Dimensionality

In the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), we compared a one-, two-, four-, six- and eight-factor model, thus estimating five models in which we allowed a different number of dimensions. By comparing the model fit indices of these models, we could assess whether a model with eight dimensions fit our data better than a model with fewer dimensions. Table 2 shows the model fit indices for these models. The values for the model fit indices suggest that the eight-factor model fit our data better than the models with fewer dimensions (RMSEA = 0.043; CFI = 0.974; TLI = 0.959). These results corroborated that our measurement scale indeed consisted of eight dimensions.

Table A2 (Appendix) shows the factor loadings of each item on each dimension. We found that the items for each dimension were predominantly in line with our conceptualisation. The factor loadings for the 'knowledge sharing' items were comparable with the factor loadings on a dimension in which 'knowledge sharing' and 'knowledge acquisition' were combined. This is not surprising, as processes of sharing and acquiring knowledge are closely linked. Furthermore, several 'knowledge acquisition' items also had factor loadings above 0.3 on the dimension 'innovation'. In addition, the accountability item 'Explaining/justifying decisions concerning

TABLE 2 Model fit indices exploratory factor analyses

|              | CFI   | TLI   | RMSEA | $\chi^2/df$ (p) |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------|
| One-factor   | 0.631 | 0.612 | 0.132 | 8.04 (<0.001)   |
| Two-factor   | 0.739 | 0.710 | 0.114 | 6.26 (<0.001)   |
| Four-factor  | 0.870 | 0.840 | 0.085 | 3.91 (<0.001)   |
| Six-factor   | 0.945 | 0.923 | 0.059 | 2.39 (<0.001)   |
| Eight-factor | 0.974 | 0.959 | 0.043 | 1.74 (<0.001)   |

Note: The model fit indices for the models with three, five and seven dimensions are in line with the ascending (for CFI and TLI) and descending (for RMSEA) patterns.

services to clients and/or employers' had a higher factor loading for the dimension collaboration. This can be explained because this element of accountability is embedded in activation workers' collaboration with clients/employers. However, since this item theoretically fits our conceptualisation of accountability, and because the factor loading is acceptable for this dimension, we considered this item as a part of the dimension accountability. Lastly, we found that the items for 'knowledge use' had acceptable factor loadings for the factor 'innovation'. However, the factor loadings of these items on the dimension 'knowledge use' were sufficiently higher. All in all, the results of the EFA were predominantly aligned with our conceptualisation.

### Reliability

We used Cronbach's alpha to test the reliability of the dimensions and followed Nunnally's (1970) recommended cut-off point of 0.7 to indicate a reliable measure. All eight dimensions had a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7, indicating that the measures for the dimensions of practising professionalism were reliable.

### Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA)

We conducted several CFA in order to test our measurement model and assess validity. Again, we compared several models in order to determine whether a measurement model with eight factors fit our data best. The model fit indices for these models are presented in Table 3.

First, we estimated a model in which all items of our measurement scale are loaded onto *one* factor (CFA Model 1). Here, we tested the measurement quality when there is no dimensionality. A schematic representation of the measurement structure is presented in Figure 1. The poor model fit indices of this model (RMSEA = 0.132; CFI = 0.631; TLI = 0.612) indicated that this measurement scale was not sufficient to capture the concept of practising professionalism.

TABLE 3 Model fit indices confirmatory factor analyses

|             | RMSEA | CFI   | TLI   | CA    |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| CFA Model 1 | 0.132 | 0.631 | 0.612 | 0.923 |
| CFA Model 2 | 0.067 | 0.907 | 0.901 | N/A   |
| CFA Model 3 | 0.051 | 0.945 | 0.942 | N/A   |

Note: Good fit: RMSEA < 0.05; CFI > 0.950, TLI > 0.950. Acceptable fit: RMSEA < 0.08; CFI > 0.900, TLI > 0.900.

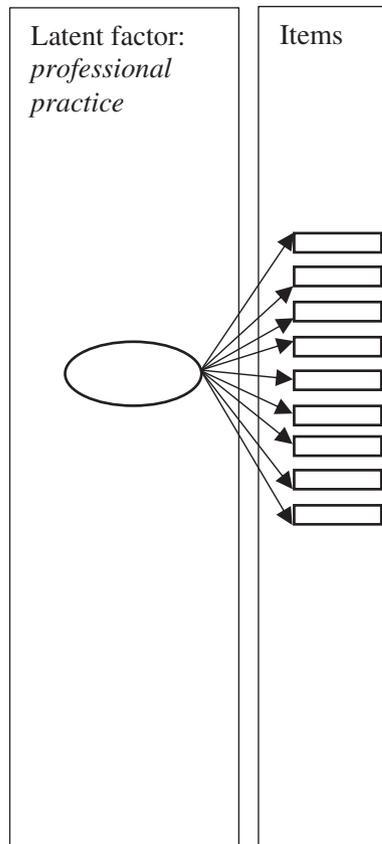


FIGURE 1 Schematic representation of Model 1

Second, we estimated a second-order model in which the items were first loaded onto the eight dimensions; then these dimensions were loaded onto one factor (CFA Model 2). A graphic depiction of this measurement model structure, reflecting hypothesis 1, is presented in Figure 2. The model fit indices suggested that this model had an acceptable fit (RMSEA = 0.067; CFI = 0.907; TLI = 0.901). We concluded that a second-order construct in which eight dimensions are loaded onto one overall factor for practising professionalism was acceptable in terms of model fit.

Third, a model was estimated in which all items were loaded onto the eight dimensions, and these dimensions were loaded onto two factors (CFA Model 3). This measurement structure (Figure 3) was equal to what we expected in hypotheses 2a and 2b. The model fit indices for this model were acceptable (RMSEA = 0.051; CFI = 0.945;

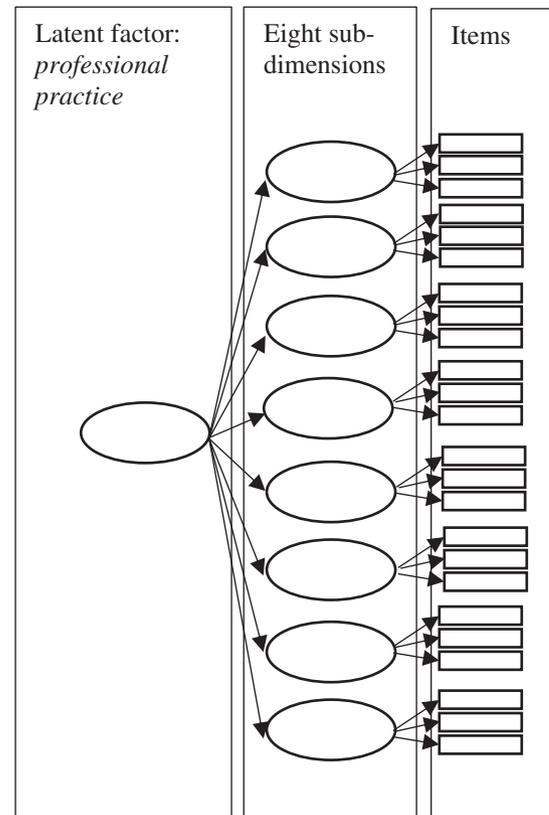


FIGURE 2 Schematic representation of Model 2

TLI = 0.942). Based on this, we concluded that this measurement structure sufficiently captured the construct of practising professionalism.

All in all, we found that Model 3 fit our data slightly better than model 2 ( $\Delta$  RMSEA = 0.016;  $\Delta$  CFI = 0.038;  $\Delta$  TLI = 0.041). However, the acceptable fit indices for Models 2 and 3 seemed to suggest that both models can be used to capture the construct of practising professionalism. Therefore, the results corroborated hypothesis 1, in which we expected there to be one second-order latent construct of practising professionalism. The results also corroborated hypotheses 2a and 2b, in which we expected there to be two second order latent constructs, consisting of a knowledge-oriented and a service-oriented aspect of practising professionalism.

We finalised our analysis by assessing the factor loadings of measurement Models 2 and 3. Tables A3 and A4 (Appendix) present the standardised factor loadings, standard errors, and significance levels for each item for both measurement models. The factor loadings of the dimensions on the latent constructs are presented in italics. First, for both models, the factor loadings for all items were significant and the standard errors were not excessively small or large. This was a first indication for acceptable model fit (Byrne, 2013). Furthermore, we found that for Model 2 the factor loadings of dimensions 'knowledge sharing' and 'accountability' were above 0.7. The factor loadings of dimensions 'knowledge

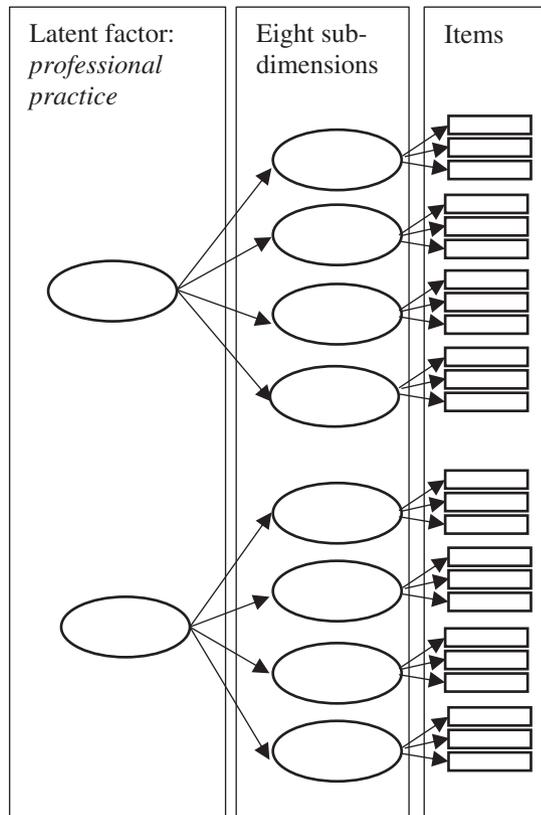


FIGURE 3 Schematic representation of Model 3

acquisition' and 'collaboration' were above 0.6, and the other dimensions were above 0.5. For Model 3, we found that for the knowledge-oriented aspect of professional practice, the factor loadings of the dimensions 'knowledge sharing', 'knowledge use' and 'knowledge acquisition' were all above 0.7, and the factor loading for the dimension 'innovation' was above 0.6. For the service-oriented aspect of practising professionalism, we found that 'client-centred practice' and 'accountability' had factor loadings above 0.7. 'Collaboration' and 'methodical work' had somewhat lower factor loadings but these were above .5.

### Measurement invariance

To assess the measurement invariance of our measurement model, we conducted a multi-group analysis in which two CFAs<sup>2</sup> were compared based on two subsamples of the data-

<sup>2</sup>After the subsamples were created, there were no observations with the values 1 or 2 in a number of items. Therefore, we were not able to include these items in our CFAs and had to reduce the number of dimensions in this model comparison. The dimensions that were included in the multi-group CFA were: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, knowledge use, innovation and methodical work. Although the measurement models were not equal to the original model, this multigroup analysis gives an indication for measurement invariance across our subsamples.

set. The subsamples were created based on gender (group 1 = female, group 2 = male). A multigroup analysis indicated no significant differences in terms of model fit between group 1 (RMSEA = 0.079, CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.961) and group 2 (RMSEA = 0.072, CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.968) (chi-square difference test = 14.942,  $p = 0.31$ ). We concluded that there are no differences in terms of measurement between these two subgroups, which is an indicator for measurement invariance.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article set out to contribute to debates about the front-line delivery of activation policies by conceptualising practising professionalism in activation. This article does not put an end to debates about the meaning of professional practice in activation. But our identification and definition of eight dimensions, as well as our operationalisations of these dimensions that make explicit to what practices the dimensions refer, contribute to these debates among scholars and practitioners. In addition, although our empirical study focused on the Dutch context, the literature on activation work and professionalism provide sufficient evidence that our conceptualisation is not merely relevant for the Dutch context. Without trivialising the importance of national contexts, contextualisation may be more relevant for the operationalisation of the dimensions than for the selection of dimensions as such.

Furthermore, we contribute to empirical studies of the frontline delivery of activation by developing and testing a questionnaire to measure professional practice. Our statistical tests found support for two models: one in which we hypothesised that the eight dimensions are captured by a single second-order construct (practising professionalism); and one in which we hypothesised two second-order constructs that is a knowledge-oriented and a service-oriented aspect of professional practice. The latter model resulted in a slightly better fit with our data than the first. This is not surprising, as the general 'practising professionalism' model is more encompassing and abstract than the model where we distinguished two aspects. Which model researchers should use depends on the questions their research addresses. Researchers interested in studying professional practice in general are advised to use the practising professionalism model. Research could, for example, investigate antecedents and outcomes of practising professionalism. Researchers interested in studying the occurrence of specific 'profiles' of practising professionalism may be more interested in the model that distinguishes two aspects of professional practice.

As with any other study, there are limitations in this study. Our research focused on how activation workers themselves assess their practices. It would be interesting to

compare these self-assessments with those of other stakeholders, such as clients, employers, or supervisors. Not only because stakeholder evaluations of professional practice may differ from workers' self-evaluation, but also because professionals and other stakeholders may have different views of what constitutes professional practice in the first place. Furthermore, even though our dataset consisted of workers in different welfare agencies, a multilevel analysis could not be conducted due to the limited number of agencies in our dataset. Therefore, we encourage future researchers who make use of our measurement scale to conduct similar tests as we did, so that a more robust claim can be made in favour of the quality of our measurement scale.

As a concluding remark, we hope that our questionnaire will stimulate research into the impact of practising professionalism on activation outcomes. Policy and academic debates on the professionalisation of activation work often assume that professionalism matters in terms of the effectiveness and successfulness of activation. However, empirical evidence for this assumption is still limited: Effectiveness studies of activation usually focus on programme rather than worker impact (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012). More robust evidence that 'practising professionalism works' would provide a strong argument for investing in activation workers' professionalisation.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DANS at: <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-x3w-7q4b>.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Questionnaire for measuring practising professionalism in activation: Overview of items

| Dimension   | Items in questionnaire  |
|---|---|
| <i>Question: How often do you do the following activities? (Answers: never, almost never, now and then, regularly, often)</i> |   |
| Knowledge acquisition   | KA_1: Reading professional journals on activation and re-integration<br>KA_2: Attending conferences on activation and re-integration<br>KA_3: Participating in courses or workshops on activation and re-integration<br>KA_4: Participating in organising workshops, peer-to-peer learning or consultations about activation and re-integration   |
| Knowledge sharing   | KS_1: Voluntarily sharing my knowledge, information and know-how with colleagues<br>KS_2: Collaborating and communicating with colleagues to share knowledge and information, for example during peer-to-peer learning<br>KS_3: Using documents, information and knowledge of other teams or departments in my organisation   |
| Knowledge use   | KU_1: Using the internet to search for knowledge concerning effectiveness of services to support decision-making<br>KU_2: Reading reports, articles etcetera on research into the effectiveness of services to support decision-making<br>KU_3: Reading manuals, guidelines or other sources of knowledge concerning effectiveness of services to support decision-making<br>KU_4: Using knowledge concerning effectiveness of services for guiding decision-making<br>KU_5: In decision-making, combining knowledge concerning effectiveness of services with my own expertise and client attributes   |
| Innovation  | IN_1: Creating new ideas for services improvement<br>IN_2: Mobilising support for innovative ideas<br>IN_3: Searching out new working methods, interventions or instruments<br>IN_4: Acquiring approval for innovative ideas<br>IN_5: Transforming innovative ideas into useful applications  |
| Client-centred practice   | CC_1: Deciding with clients what services they need<br>CC_2: Providing clients with the information they ask for<br>CC_3: Acknowledging clients' emotional needs (worries, fears) and taking those seriously<br>CC_4: Treating clients as a person<br>CC_5: Taking clients' needs into account when scheduling an appointment<br>CC_6: Taking clients' individual needs into consideration in decision-making about services<br>CC_7: Informing clients of opportunities for support<br>CC_8: Clearly explaining the aims of services to clients<br>CC_9: Treating clients with respect<br>CC_10: Considering clients' needs, priorities and goals as important<br>CC_11: Making sure clients feel comfortable to express their feelings<br>CC_12: Explaining service choices to clients in a clear way<br>CC_13: Inviting clients to participate in setting goals<br>CC_14: Informing clients about services |
| Collaboration   | CO_1: Collaborating in service provision with colleagues in my team<br>CO_2: Collaborating in service provision with colleagues from other teams in my organisation<br>CO_3: Collaborating in service provision with external service providers, caregivers, employers etc.   |
| Accountability  | AC_1: Explaining/justifying decisions concerning services to clients and/or employers<br>AC_2: When asked for, explaining/justifying decisions concerning services to colleagues<br>AC_3: Justifying decisions concerning services to my supervisor<br>AC_4: When asked for, explaining/justifying decisions concerning services to external partners with whom I collaborate in service provision  |
| Methodical work   | MW_1: Service-related decisions are based on an intake and diagnosis of clients' situation and possibilities<br>MW_2: Developing an action plan for clients stipulating service objectives<br>MW_3: Objectives included in the action plan guide service decisions<br>MW_4: After completing service provision for a client, strong and weak points of the action plan and provided services are evaluated  |

TABLE A2 Factor loadings exploratory factor analysis

|                   | Knowledge sharing | Knowledge acquisition | Knowledge use | Innovation   | Client-centred practice | Collaboration | Accountability | Methodical work |
|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| KS_1 <sup>a</sup> | <b>0.463</b>      | 0.472                 | 0.387         | 0.439        | 0.345                   |               | 0.440          |                 |
| KS_2              | <b>0.518</b>      | 0.546                 |               | 0.315        | 0.308                   |               | 0.460          |                 |
| KS_3              | <b>0.313</b>      | 0.462                 | 0.378         | 0.361        |                         |               | 0.385          |                 |
| KA_1              |                   | <b>0.584</b>          | 0.612         | 0.340        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KA_2              |                   | <b>0.767</b>          | 0.390         |              |                         |               |                |                 |
| KA_3              |                   | <b>0.807</b>          | 0.331         |              |                         |               |                |                 |
| KA_4              |                   | <b>0.667</b>          |               | 0.429        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KU_1              |                   |                       | <b>0.731</b>  | 0.370        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KU_2              |                   | 0.391                 | <b>0.893</b>  | 0.425        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KU_3              |                   | 0.312                 | <b>0.879</b>  | 0.329        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KU_4              |                   |                       | <b>0.859</b>  | 0.397        |                         |               |                |                 |
| KU_5              |                   |                       | <b>0.718</b>  | 0.375        |                         |               |                |                 |
| IN_1              |                   |                       | 0.423         | <b>0.884</b> |                         |               |                |                 |
| IN_2              |                   |                       | 0.419         | <b>0.884</b> |                         | 0.300         |                |                 |
| IN_3              |                   |                       | 0.417         | <b>0.883</b> |                         |               |                |                 |
| IN_4              |                   |                       | 0.314         | <b>0.878</b> |                         |               |                |                 |
| CC_1              | 0.456             |                       |               |              | <b>0.641</b>            | 0.426         |                | 0.321           |
| CC_5              |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.763</b>            | 0.331         |                |                 |
| CC_6              |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.867</b>            | 0.407         |                |                 |
| CC_10             |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.834</b>            | 0.337         |                |                 |
| CC_12             |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.781</b>            | 0.622         |                | 0.386           |
| CC_13             |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.612</b>            | 0.408         |                |                 |
| CC_3              |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.892</b>            | 0.433         |                |                 |
| CC_4              | 0.332             |                       |               |              | <b>0.917</b>            | 0.457         |                | 0.362           |
| CC_9              | 0.319             |                       |               |              | <b>0.974</b>            | 0.488         |                | 0.469           |
| CC_11             |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.912</b>            | 0.466         |                | 0.356           |
| CC_2              | 0.530             |                       |               |              | <b>0.778</b>            | 0.558         |                | 0.383           |
| CC_7              | 0.407             |                       |               |              | <b>0.884</b>            | 0.531         |                | 0.410           |
| CC_8              | 0.449             |                       |               |              | <b>0.863</b>            | 0.570         |                | 0.454           |
| CC_14             |                   |                       |               |              | <b>0.814</b>            | 0.495         |                | 0.397           |
| CO_1              |                   |                       |               |              | 0.551                   | <b>0.812</b>  |                |                 |
| CO_2              |                   |                       |               | 0.300        | 0.417                   | <b>0.891</b>  |                |                 |
| CO_3              |                   |                       |               | 0.311        |                         | <b>0.439</b>  |                |                 |
| AC_1              |                   |                       |               | 0.309        | 0.431                   | 0.778         | <b>0.341</b>   |                 |
| AC_2              |                   |                       |               |              | 0.327                   | 0.349         | <b>0.622</b>   |                 |
| AC_3              |                   |                       |               |              |                         |               | <b>0.793</b>   |                 |
| AC_4              |                   |                       |               |              | 0.368                   | 0.304         | <b>0.659</b>   |                 |
| MW_1              |                   |                       |               |              | 0.473                   | 0.321         |                | <b>0.539</b>    |
| MW_2              |                   |                       |               |              | 0.312                   |               |                | <b>0.851</b>    |
| MW_3              |                   |                       | 0.227         |              | 0.332                   |               |                | <b>1.000</b>    |
| MW_4              |                   |                       | 0.310         |              |                         |               |                | <b>0.643</b>    |
| Cronbach's alpha  | 0.741             | 0.772                 | 0.922         | 0.951        | 0.879                   | 0.751         | 0.801          | 0.716           |

Note: Factor loadings below 0.3 have been left out of the table; factor loadings of items of theoretical dimensions are presented in bold; Cronbach's alpha calculated for items that are part of theoretical dimensions.

<sup>a</sup>The codes refer to the questionnaire items in Table 2.

**TABLE A3** Standardised factor loadings for Model 2

|                                | $\lambda$ | Standard error | Significance ( $p < 0.001$ ) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Knowledge sharing</i>       | 0.777     | 0.034          | ***                          |
| KS_1 <sup>a</sup>              | 0.841     | 0.032          | ***                          |
| KS_2                           | 0.747     | 0.031          | ***                          |
| KS_3                           | 0.709     | 0.039          | ***                          |
| <i>Knowledge acquisition</i>   | 0.648     | 0.039          | ***                          |
| KA_1                           | 0.842     | 0.038          | ***                          |
| KA_2                           | 0.722     | 0.031          | ***                          |
| KA_3                           | 0.720     | 0.031          | ***                          |
| KA_4                           | 0.633     | 0.042          | ***                          |
| <i>Knowledge use</i>           | 0.593     | 0.036          | ***                          |
| KU_1                           | 0.742     | 0.027          | ***                          |
| KU_2                           | 0.913     | 0.014          | ***                          |
| KU_3                           | 0.867     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| KU_4                           | 0.844     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| KU_5                           | 0.708     | 0.030          | ***                          |
| <i>Innovation</i>              | 0.519     | 0.040          | ***                          |
| IN_1                           | 0.872     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| IN_2                           | 0.909     | 0.013          | ***                          |
| IN_3                           | 0.891     | 0.014          | ***                          |
| IN_4                           | 0.852     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| <i>Client-centred practice</i> | 0.571     | 0.051          | ***                          |
| CC_1                           | 0.681     | 0.029          | ***                          |
| CC_5                           | 0.737     | 0.025          | ***                          |
| CC_6                           | 0.839     | 0.020          | ***                          |
| CC_10                          | 0.797     | 0.023          | ***                          |
| CC_12                          | 0.836     | 0.024          | ***                          |
| CC_13                          | 0.637     | 0.032          | ***                          |
| CC_3                           | 0.878     | 0.020          | ***                          |
| CC_4                           | 0.920     | 0.029          | ***                          |
| CC_9                           | 0.966     | 0.025          | ***                          |
| CC_11                          | 0.901     | 0.017          | ***                          |
| CC_2                           | 0.833     | 0.021          | ***                          |
| CC_7                           | 0.911     | 0.017          | ***                          |
| CC_8                           | 0.906     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| CC_14                          | 0.812     | 0.026          | ***                          |
| <i>Accountability</i>          | 0.776     | 0.035          | ***                          |
| AC_1                           | 0.858     | 0.030          | ***                          |
| AC_2                           | 0.839     | 0.026          | ***                          |
| AC_3                           | 0.522     | 0.048          | ***                          |
| AC_4                           | 0.807     | 0.028          | ***                          |
| <i>Collaboration</i>           | 0.608     | 0.042          | ***                          |
| COL_1                          | 0.732     | 0.046          | ***                          |
| COL_2                          | 0.724     | 0.039          | ***                          |
| COL_3                          | 0.775     | 0.040          | ***                          |
| <i>Methodical work</i>         | 0.506     | 0.045          | ***                          |
| MW_1                           | 0.665     | 0.054          | ***                          |
| MW_2                           | 0.861     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| MW_3                           | 0.958     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| MW_4                           | 0.666     | 0.035          | ***                          |

<sup>a</sup>The codes refer to the questionnaire items in Table 2.

TABLE A4 Standardised factor loadings for Model 3

|                                | $\lambda$ | Standard error | Significance ( $p < 0.001$ ) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Factor 1</b>                |           |                |                              |
| <i>Knowledge sharing</i>       | 0.861     | 0.035          | ***                          |
| KS_1 <sup>a</sup>              | 0.847     | 0.031          | ***                          |
| KS_2                           | 0.738     | 0.030          | ***                          |
| KS_3                           | 0.713     | 0.037          | ***                          |
| <i>Knowledge acquisition</i>   | 0.761     | 0.038          | ***                          |
| KA_1                           | 0.843     | 0.034          | ***                          |
| KA_2                           | 0.725     | 0.030          | ***                          |
| KA_3                           | 0.706     | 0.030          | ***                          |
| KA_4                           | 0.646     | 0.040          | ***                          |
| <i>Knowledge use</i>           | 0.718     | 0.034          | ***                          |
| KU_1                           | 0.741     | 0.026          | ***                          |
| KU_2                           | 0.912     | 0.013          | ***                          |
| KU_3                           | 0.863     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| KU_4                           | 0.845     | 0.018          | ***                          |
| KU_5                           | 0.717     | 0.029          | ***                          |
| <i>Innovation</i>              | 0.606     | 0.040          | ***                          |
| IN_1                           | 0.876     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| IN_2                           | 0.904     | 0.013          | ***                          |
| IN_3                           | 0.890     | 0.014          | ***                          |
| IN_4                           | 0.854     | 0.016          | ***                          |
| <b>Factor 2</b>                |           |                |                              |
| <i>Client-centred practice</i> | 0.706     | 0.047          | ***                          |
| CC_1                           | 0.682     | 0.028          | ***                          |
| CC_5                           | 0.735     | 0.025          | ***                          |
| CC_6                           | 0.841     | 0.020          | ***                          |
| CC_10                          | 0.798     | 0.023          | ***                          |
| CC_12                          | 0.836     | 0.023          | ***                          |
| CC_13                          | 0.635     | 0.032          | ***                          |
| CC_3                           | 0.877     | 0.020          | ***                          |
| CC_4                           | 0.919     | 0.029          | ***                          |
| CC_9                           | 0.968     | 0.024          | ***                          |
| CC_11                          | 0.901     | 0.017          | ***                          |
| CC_2                           | 0.833     | 0.021          | ***                          |
| CC_7                           | 0.910     | 0.017          | ***                          |
| CC_8                           | 0.906     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| CC_14                          | 0.815     | 0.026          | ***                          |
| <i>Accountability</i>          | 0.843     | 0.043          | ***                          |
| AC_1                           | 0.870     | 0.026          | ***                          |
| AC_2                           | 0.828     | 0.025          | ***                          |
| AC_3                           | 0.501     | 0.049          | ***                          |
| AC_4                           | 0.817     | 0.028          | ***                          |
| <i>Collaboration</i>           | 0.627     | 0.044          | ***                          |
| COL_1                          | 0.751     | 0.046          | ***                          |
| COL_2                          | 0.702     | 0.041          | ***                          |
| COL_3                          | 0.781     | 0.040          | ***                          |
| <i>Methodical work</i>         | 0.560     | 0.050          | ***                          |
| MW_1                           | 0.714     | 0.049          | ***                          |
| MW_2                           | 0.860     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| MW_3                           | 0.953     | 0.019          | ***                          |
| MW_4                           | 0.652     | 0.035          | ***                          |

<sup>a</sup>The codes refer to the questionnaire items in Table 2.