



Current challenges faced by qualified Nutritionists in Ireland

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The lack of legal protection of the nutritionist title in Ireland and absence of an Irish accreditation body has led to many challenges for Nutritionists. Self-proclaimed nutritionists without honours level accredited nutrition education and training offering non-evidence-based advice have given rise to many difficulties for qualified professionals in recent years. Many Irish nutritionists with honours degrees in nutrition education and training register with the UK Voluntary Nutrition Register held by the Association for Nutrition (AfN). However, many nutrition employers in Ireland are not aware of this accreditation process and the benefits in adopting it as a job requirement⁽¹⁾. The objective of this study was to explore and understand the challenges faced by qualified Nutritionists in Ireland. In-depth, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 18 participants who had advertised themselves as a “Nutritionist” on their LinkedIn profiles and were currently working in Ireland. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was implemented whereby the data was transcribed, coded, and emerging themes identified and discussed by all authors. Public perception, ‘employment opportunities’, ‘title protection’, and ‘comparison to the dietetic profession’ emerged as the four main themes underpinning the challenges faced by nutritionists in Ireland. This study highlights that many nutrition professionals in Ireland feel disheartened and undervalued in today’s society. The lack of title protection and a shared understanding of the term Nutritionist were seen as contributing factors to the current public confusion surrounding the profession. It was clear many participants believe the dietetic profession is superior to the nutrition profession with frequent comparisons highlighting the advantages of dietetics as a career. Advantages mentioned by participants included legal protection, professional regulation and a clearer career pathway. The diverse employment opportunities for Nutritionists in Ireland were coined “a blessing and a curse”. Frustration was also expressed about the sparse nutrition-specific employment opportunities, short-term contracts, and increased job competition with dietetics and self-proclaimed nutritionists. Social media was also mentioned by many as a significant contributor to the challenges they had faced as Nutritionists.

Societies’ desire for instant gratification and quick fixes, often leading to potentially harmful diet practices, has left the public vulnerable to unqualified individuals with influence on online platforms offering nutrition advice that is not supported by scientific evidence. One in three participants mentioned this as a significant challenge toward building credibility within the public who are unable to differentiate between qualified nutritionists and an unqualified one. The results of this study clearly show that qualified Nutrition professionals in Ireland are calling out for protection of the title to ease this burden. Protection and regulation of the Nutritionist title would provide a clear scope of practice, accountability and credibility for qualified nutrition professionals.

References

1. Cade J, Eccles E, Hartwell H, *et al.* (2012) *Public Health Nutr* **15**(11), 2012–9.