

**‘I have learned that psychology is linked to almost everything we do.’
Developing and evaluating the impact of a work-based learning module in an undergraduate psychology programme.¹**

Michael Wrennall & Douglas Forbes,
Department of Psychology, Glasgow Caledonian University.

Abstract

Providing structured work experience for undergraduate psychology students is seen by many authors, employers and students as academically desirable and the Dearing Report (1997) indicates that work experience is something which all undergraduates should undertake. It is a problem for psychology degree course administrators to provide relevant work experiences and few courses do this. To provide work experience for psychology students at Glasgow Caledonian University, a second level credit bearing module was developed enabling students who are working part time to capitalise on their part time work. The module requires students to reflect on the job they are doing, the skills they are developing in the work setting and to relate aspects of their psychological knowledge to the job itself. Early evaluation, both qualitative and quantitative, has already shown that the module has been well received by the students and that it is enhancing their learning experiences as undergraduate psychology students.

The problem

A major difficulty in psychology undergraduate education is the provision of ‘relevant’ work experience and work placement. Psychology undergraduates clearly cannot undertake work requiring prior professional training or accreditation as a

psychologist, but there is nevertheless a strong demand from students for work experience as part of their degree programme. Bray and Holyoak (1994) did attempt to provide limited placement experiences for their students by having applied psychology students shadow professional

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support given by Glasgow Caledonian University Academic Development Fund in carrying out the development work to support this module.

psychologists but pointed out that '...whether the students saw psychological techniques in practice depended very much on the nature of the placement' (p.160). As student numbers in psychology still continue to grow (Radford & Holdstock, 1996) this raises even more demands for work placement, which cannot currently be met.

Many university courses, providing professional or vocational training, have significant work placement or work experience elements, e.g. Business Studies, Nursing Studies, Medicine, Engineering, Education, etc. Placement elements may carry credit and contribute towards graduation. Unlike some other professions, students graduating from psychology programmes would normally obtain their professional training and experience in psychology through postgraduate courses rather than going directly into practice. As Tommy Mackay, the former BPS President, has stated, as many as nine out of ten psychology graduates² will work in a range of non-psychology professional settings rather than working as 'psychologists'. This requires that their undergraduate experiences equip them with a range of transferable skills which would be of value to any employer as well as giving them the skills needed to pursue a professional training in psychology.

Our problem was, therefore, to provide work experience for our psychology undergraduates which would be of benefit to them in the development of their psychological knowledge, which would develop a number of transferable skills, and which would be academically comparable to other psychology modules, and subject to the normal university academic quality control mechanisms.

Psychology and part-time work.

Psychology students, like other university students, have to undertake part-time work to support themselves during their university course. Many studies have shown that part-time work can produce role conflict and ambiguity in balancing the demands of work and full-time study (e.g. Bibby *et al.*, 2000; McKechnie, Hobbes & Lindsay, 1998; Smith & Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Smith, 1998). A survey of psychology undergraduates at Glasgow Caledonian University carried out by the authors in May 2000 showed that 78 per cent undertook paid part-time work³ during the semester. Twenty per cent of students undertook voluntary unpaid work and some were doing both paid and unpaid work. Students were working an average of 16.2 hours per week and we found one mature 'full-time' student who was working 51 hours per week. Students were being paid between £4.32 and £8.00 per hour and some students had more than one job. The students were well aware of the conflicts between work and studying and in the same survey 57 per cent indicated that part time work harmed their coursework. Forty-three per cent indicated that it harmed their attendance at lectures and seminars, 75 per cent indicated it interfered with private study and 36 per cent thought it would harm the class of degree they would eventually attain. In addition, 58 per cent reported that part-time work increased their levels of stress. The employment that students were undertaking varied greatly in terms of quality of job, skills required, pay, hours and opportunities to learn. Some examples of the range of jobs undertaken include: working in call centres offering complex financial advice on mortgages and

² Tommy MacKay, BPS Annual Conference Presidential Address, Glasgow, March 2001.

³ This figure of 78 per cent working part-time would appear to be well above the national average of 30 per cent given by Ford, 1995, and 50 per cent given by Berkley, 1997, both cited in Harvey *et al.* (1998), but may reflect a growing economic trend and increasing financial hardship among the student population, particularly those students attracted into the post-1992 University sector with its distinctive mission of widening access.

investments; working in call centres selling insurance products; dealing with customer billing for a large utility company; retail jobs in clothing, white goods, off licences or small retailers; agency nursing; working in fast food outlets and cafes as food producers or servers; bar work; child minding and school or nursery assistants, and working on production lines. In addition, a number of students were working in the voluntary sector dealing with client housing, alcohol problems, drug problems, head injuries, students' nightline advice service, youth clubs and societies, old persons' homes and reading groups.

Benefits of part-time work

The picture concerning part time work is not all negative. In our survey cited above, many students were able to recognise the benefits of part-time work. Ninety-five per cent of students indicated it improved their communication skills, 67 per cent indicated it improved their time management skills, 61 per cent indicated it improved their problem solving skills, and 41 per cent thought their work experiences would help them get a job at the end of the course. The reality is that students do have paid part-time jobs and that they often have a pressing financial need to work.

Some of the more general benefits that can be derived from work experience have been put forward by a number of official reports. The Dearing Report (1997) recommended that '...All Institutions should identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students become familiar with work and help them reflect on such experience'. Further recent government and industry-based reports (e.g. The Learning Age, 1998; The Fryer Report, 1997; Opportunity Scotland, 1998) have placed considerable emphasis on the role of work-based learning in the development of a highly skilled and flexible workforce. However, relatively little is known about how and what students really learn

in the work setting. Brennan and Little (1996) summarise three trends in theories of adult learning as: individual learner being required to think and reflect about the experience in order to learn; individuals have to learn how to learn in order to prepare for future experiences; and learning needs support from others to be effective.

They also state '...central to work based learning is the firmly *held belief* (our italics) that people can learn by reflecting critically on their experiences and by discussions of those experiences with others' (p.78). Seagraves *et al.* (1996) point out that there are three areas of learning which can be linked to jobs: learning for work, conceptualised as anything vocational delivered in school, college, university, etc.; learning at work, conceptualised as anything done by employers to train and develop the workforce in the job situation; and learning through work, conceptualised as the application of job related and other learning together with skills and knowledge acquired in the process of doing the job.

Psychology students are well placed in terms of the general skills and abilities that they develop during the course of their academic psychology studies and these have been listed by Hayes (1989) as: good computing and IT skills; good numeracy and knowledge of statistics; literacy skills – report writing, presenting and weighing arguments; groups and presentation skills; information gathering; problem solving; and knowledge of human behaviour in different contexts.

What is lacking in the majority of psychology courses is Seagraves' third dimension of learning through work. In a discussion paper on the value of work experience for undergraduates, the National Centre for Work Experience (1999) indicated that institutions can capitalise on student *ad hoc* work experiences external to the programme of study and went on to say that it is the learning that comes from work

experience that is important⁴ not just the fact that the student has worked. We have used this as one of the starting points to develop the work-based learning module for psychology students. This module and possible subsequent modules, will enable students to gain academic credits based on their part-time work experiences. The module will provide a valuable, but different, type of learning allowing students to contextualise their work experiences and integrate these with their academic knowledge of psychology.

Work and Psychology Module – GCU

Our strategy for solving the work-based learning (WBL) problem follows an action research methodology similar to that suggested by Zuber-Skerrit (1992). Her four steps in action research consist of a spiral cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. We have planned and implemented an initial solution to the work-based learning problem, and built into the solution (module) are a number of evaluation and feedback mechanisms. These will enable us to take account of the responses of students, ourselves and other stakeholders, to the solution. Further reflection in the light of running the module will enable us to make appropriate changes for the next cycle of the module and again evaluate the outcome of these changes.

In developing our model of WBL, a number of schemes, such as those operating at Napier University (Marshall, 1999) where general work-based learning modules are available; and at Leeds University where the ‘Working for skills’ project (Bibby *et al.*, 2000) and the JEWELS⁵ project, were examined. In most of these situations the student

has to negotiate a ‘contract’ with an employer and undertake reflective exercises of increasing complexity on the value of the work experience and the skills being developed. These studies informed our own attempts at introducing work based learning for psychology students. We could not provide placements involving ‘psychology’ directly (because of professional constraints indicated earlier). However, we believed we could provide a number of learning experiences for students to apply and develop their knowledge of psychology within a job situation.

A second level module (in a Scottish four-year honours degree programme) was designed to recognise and reward some of the different types of learning relevant to psychology that can be achieved through part time work. It capitalises on the diverse range of ongoing student work experience, enabling students to reflect on the learning that can be derived from workplace experiences. Students undertaking the module can be doing any sort of part-time job, paid or unpaid and the only restriction is that they should be working more than four hours per week. An initial strategic decision was taken that employers did not need to be involved in the module and students do not have to tell their employer they are undertaking the module. It was decided not to involve employers since seeking employer involvement was seen as potentially restricting students opting for the module, or could take a long time to negotiate. We feared that asking students to negotiate with an employer could well curtail or even lose some of them their part-time work. We were well aware of the ethical problems involved in not requiring students to inform employers that they were participating in

⁴ It is a Glasgow Caledonian University strategic objective to increase work-based and workplace learning and to facilitate their development within credit bearing programmes. Both authors were members of a committee set up in 1999, tasked with developing WBL and APEL within university programmes.

⁵ Joint Systems to Enhance Work Experience, Levels of Service and Satisfaction. DfEE-funded project under the Higher Education Innovation Fund Work Experience theme 1998–2000.

the module and students were given very clear guidelines on respecting the anonymity of both employers and co-workers in any writings about their work.

The 12-week, 20-credit module is based around an extensive course handbook together with a set text, McKenna (2000) *Business Psychology and Organisational Behaviour*. These materials provide all the information the student needs to complete the module. There are no set lectures for the module although there are a number of group discussions about the module and part-time work in the early stages. In addition, each week, there are two, hour-long drop in 'surgeries' available. The module is structured around three assessed exercises which drive student reflection and learning over the module and these are detailed below.

Reflective area 1. The job the student is undertaking, the place of the job within the organisation, the skills needed to do the job and the satisfactions, dissatisfactions within the job.

Assessment Exercise 1. (Week 4, counts 20 per cent of final assessment.) The student is required to describe, in detail, the organisation he/she works for; the department in which they are employed; and to give a detailed job description with commentary on the activities undertaken together with a description of a 'typical day'. The students describe and rate the satisfactions and dissatisfactions available in the job and carry out an analysis of the skills needed to do the job. The student is then asked to say how they think aspects of their psychology course relate to the job they are undertaking. (Students will have completed a number of psychology modules before undertaking this module.)

Reflective area 2. The student has to consider the development of skills within the job, their abilities within the job and the way in which the job is influencing their personal development.

Assessment Exercise 2. (Week 7, 20 per cent of final assessment.) In this exercise the student has to give an oral presentation to a group of other students undertaking the module and to staff members. The presentation has to cover the basics of the job, the skills required and used in the job; the student's strengths and weaknesses in the job and to draw links between psychology and their job. Additionally the student's presentation skills are assessed.

Reflective area 3. The student has to select a number of psychological theories or areas of psychology and relate these to the job situation.

Assessment Exercise 3. (Week 12, 60 per cent of final assessment.) The student has to write three reports of about one thousand words each, linking aspects of organisational or other psychology to their job. In doing this the student is directed to approach the reports from two possible perspectives. In the first approach, they have to describe an incident, common occurrence or practice within the workplace and analyse it with regard to the relevant theory or writings in the textbook. In the second, the student has to start from a theoretical model or perspective and analyse the pertinence of the model or concept to practice within the workplace. A list of possible topic areas is suggested such as communication problems, leadership, motivation, social interaction with customers and clients, stress in the workplace, formal and informal groups, etc. This exercise is given more weight (60 per cent) than the others because it requires the students to relate work and psychology together, drawing more explicitly on the academic literature, and represents the synthesis of the module. A major administrative concern of staff running the module is that we have to be able to demonstrate the academic merit of the module and provide assessment that is objective, quantifiable and of equivalent academic standing to other Level 2 modules.

In designing the structure and assessment, we were striving to get students to reflect on their job and what they are learning; to reflect on the skills they are developing and to show that they can relate aspects of their psychology course to the job setting and apply what they are learning. (Brennan & Little, 1996). Students should also be able to bring work experience to the study of psychology in the classroom. The 'pioneering' aspects of the module (first cohort entered in February 2001) have been shared with the students and they have been encouraged to discuss with us how the module should be modified or developed.

Evaluation

In designing the work and psychology module and running the first cohort of students we decided to adopt a number of evaluation strategies and indices, both qualitative and quantitative, as indicated below.

1. A specific questionnaire was given to the module participants towards the end of the semester asking them what aspects they liked, disliked or thought could be improved.
2. The assessments and the marks given for the three assignments were evaluated against marks for other psychology modules.
3. A pre- and post-module questionnaire was completed looking at attitudes concerning why students work part-time and the drawbacks and benefits of part-time work. This was to allow us to evaluate any changes effected by taking the module.
4. A pre- and post-module questionnaire was given to a control group of students also working part time, but not undertaking the work and psychology module.

Twenty-three students undertook the module, but of these, only 11 completed the optional end of module evaluation forms. Very few students completed the pre- and post-module questionnaires and so we were not able to use these. It would have been an

ideal situation to have a fully controlled comparative study but this was not possible.

Evaluations that were usable, were a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures. The qualitative measures, likes, dislikes and improvements perhaps give more insight into what the students thought of the module and these are given verbatim below.

Question: What did you like about the module? (Responses 8)

Being able to work independently. Studying a topic I relate to easily.

I did like the fact that I was working at my own pace.

Choice to work by your own timetable.

Ability to work alone and improve skills to work alone.

The assessments were spaced out well giving enough time to prepare work. Not having to go to any lectures and being able to work independently.

It opened my mind to new ideas and realisations about my work.

Liked the intranet links. Like the fact that work could be a positive extra to degree. Many tutors frown on work but to many students it is essential. Good idea that it is recognised and could be linked to psychology. Helps knowledge of psychology and work.

Enjoyed that we were able to work independently. Also enjoyed the fact that it was personally linked to our own job.

I found the aspects of organisational psychology interesting and learned quite a lot from the module. It also made my part time work feel worthwhile for a couple of months.

What module? Independent learning is quite rewarding.

Coursework schedule was well spaced so we had time to do things properly.

Question: What aspects of the module did you dislike or could be improved? (Responses 8)

I think a few seminars either at the start of the semester or once a month would be very helpful.

It would help to discuss some of the topics etc. Maybe there should have been a weekly seminar even if there isn't much to discuss. It gives you a chance to speak to fellow students about how things are going, what you are doing and so forth. As many people on the module you don't know outside university.

Maybe a bit more notice about presentation time. The drop in class could perhaps be earlier in the day as most students work from 4pm and could find it difficult to attend. Participants were aware however, that tutor was available at other times which was good.

I enjoyed the independence also thought that learning seminars could be included. (compulsory). Like a discussion group.

I felt that there should have been at least one set seminar per week instead of just going in when you need to.

None.

Contact with tutors was inadequate.

Question: In general terms, what do you feel you have learnt from undertaking the module? (Responses 9)

How to use my time better. To link psychology to other aspects of my life.

The majority of elements within a working environment are in some way connected to psychology.

I have learnt more about how psychology is linked to various aspects of my life especially work.

Learnt to work by myself, to impose a schedule of working on assignments for the module. A better understanding of the organisation where I work the role I play and you learn to see the whole picture better.

I have learned that psychology is linked to almost everything we do.

I feel I have learned a great deal about psychology in the workplace which I hadn't really considered before. Hopefully this will help in the future when I graduate. Overall very impressed by the module.

Learned to identify methods and the reasoning behind them, that are implemented by organisations.

I have learnt quite a lot of psychological aspects of my work which I had never really thought about.

Have learnt about organisations different from mine as well as better insight into my own. Better time management skills.

Very basic knowledge of organisational psychology.

Students obviously valued the chance to work independently and to be in charge of their time allocation and to learn something that was of interest to them. One student points out the obvious fact which is often overlooked, that the majority of tutors frown on student part time work seeing it as a hindrance to their academic studies whereas in this module, they are gaining credit for working. In detailing improvements, most of the responses revolve around wanting more contact with the staff. Students seem to be saying that independence is acceptable but 'we still need some hand holding'. The question about what they have learnt from the module is perhaps most rewarding for the staff concerned. The statements summarise exactly what we were trying to do in setting up the module.

Quantitative evaluation

Students were asked to rate various aspects of the module on a four point scale. The questions used, means and standard deviations are given for each item in Table 1.

The small number of students (11) responding to this aspect of the questionnaire means that the results are indicative rather than an accurate measure of how students felt about the module. It is interesting to note that the ability to work independently was given the highest rating (3.46) as was their ability to understand the functioning of an organisation (3.09). Their ability to integrate psychology studies with practice also scored highly (3.00). The organisation of the course, materials and support all received moderate ratings. It was a little disappointing to see the

Table 1. Mean responses to specific questions about the module. Responses are based on a four point scale with 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = moderately, 4 = a great deal. (n = 11)

Question	Mean	SD
Was contact with your tutor adequate?	2.60	0.67
Was adequate support provided?	2.90	0.54
Was adequate information provided?	2.73	0.70
Were assessments adequately specified?	3.09	0.70
Was the learning guide useful to you?	3.36	0.67
Has participating in the module allowed you to integrate your psychology studies with practice?	3.00	0.89
Has participating in the module increased your ability to solve problems?	2.46	0.69
Has participating in the module allowed you to gain a perspective on the functioning of an organisation?	3.09	0.70
Has participating in the module increased your confidence in your ability to work independently?	3.46	0.52
Has participating in the module allowed you to learn something important about your role at work?	3.27	0.65
Has participating in the module allowed you to add to your understanding of how to seek and use information for problem solving?	2.60	0.67
Has participating in the module increased your ability to communicate clearly in a report?	2.36	0.80
Has participating in the module increased your ability to present an idea to a group?	2.45	0.82
Has participating inn the module improved your time management skills?	2.55	0.82
Has participating in the module improved your understanding of psychology?	2.80	0.40

improvement in skills areas receiving relatively low ratings although only two, communication skills and problem solving skills, scored below the mid-point of the scale. In some cases the mean scores would appear to be at odds with some of the open ended responses.

Evaluation using coursework marks.

The marks given for the three module assignments are given in Table 2 and comparative marks for other psychology modules are given in Table 3.

Using marks for assignments for evaluation purposes is necessary but problematical. Obviously the staff running the module want the module to be a success and so have

Table 2. Mean marks allocated for the three assessed pieces of coursework for the work and psychology module (n = 23).

	Assig.1 (20%)	Assig.2 (20%)	Assig.3 (60%)	Overall mark
Mean	59.1	61.3	56.5	57.8
SD	9.1	6.7	7.9	5.0

**Table 3. Mean marks for other Level 2 psychology modules.
All modules ran in academic session 2000/2001.**

Module	Mean	SD	n
Person in a Social Context	56.6	9.2	66
Brain, Behaviour and Experience	53.1	14.1	71
Research Methods	57.0	15.1	40
Work and Psychology (first running 2000/2001)	57.8	5.0	23

a vested interest in the summative outcomes and could well bias these. The marks awarded for the module have been confirmed by the External Assessor who was very complimentary about the written material produced by students and used as the basis for assessment. The marks would appear not to be out of line with those of other comparable modules.

One of the issues which arose as a result of Assessment 1 was whether students should be allowed to resubmit work and improve it in the light of comments from staff. In Assessment 1 students had to give a job description, write about their job, their organisation, satisfactions and dissatisfactions, etc. Comments on submitted work were provided in the form of a feedback sheet which indicated shortcomings and where improvements could be made. If we are asking students to think reflectively about their jobs, then there is a strong argument for saying let them resubmit having had feedback and this will lead to further improvement – but how then do we assign a mark for the work? A given unchangeable

mark for a piece of work is unlikely to encourage the reflection we are seeking. Discussions with students indicated they would wish to resubmit work where there was indicated room for improvement.

All the information from evaluations, formal and informal comments from students, together with comments from other stakeholders will be used to modify and develop the module. This is obviously only the first cycle of an action programme and changes will be made in the light of all our experiences.

Discussion

It is a reality in student life that most of them will have to work during their time at university. Paid work, as our survey revealed, is done for a variety of reasons including to support themselves, to buy academic materials, to provide extra income for leisure activities. A number of students also undertake voluntary unpaid work. There is a strong demand from students that courses provide work experience since they are well aware that this will enhance their

prospects of securing jobs upon graduation. Students are also aware that employers are 'looking for' graduates who have done more than just meeting the academic requirements of the course. Providing work experience for psychology undergraduates is difficult because of the fact that most routes to becoming a professional psychologist are through postgraduate courses and training. Many psychology graduates do not become psychologists which means that most of them will have to have the skills needed to enter the normal job market. By developing a psychology module which gives academic credit for part time work activity, we are linking work and the academic study of psychology. The development of the module has been subject to the normal university quality control and approval mechanisms and is thus judged to be academically comparable with other 'academic' modules. This hopefully gets over a common misperception among academic staff that all part-time work is detrimental to academic study because it prevents students from attending or completing coursework on time to a high standard. The 'time flexibility' of this module may be of benefit to other course modules in allowing students to better manage the competing demands between part time work and academic study without sacrificing the academic rigour.

The way in which we at Glasgow Caledonian University are treating work experience for the psychology student is to ask them to reflect on the job that they are undertaking. As well as looking at the structure and conditions of the job we are asking them specifically to look at psychological aspects; what psychological processes apply within the job and what relevance, if any, do psychological paradigms, theories and research methodologies have in the job setting. This will counter some arguments that students doing menial or low level tasks will not learn anything of relevance in the workplace and thus work experience of

this nature is not credit worthy in higher education. (One of the best pieces of coursework relating psychological theories to the job setting was submitted by a student working on a production line grading and packing fruit for supermarkets.) For students doing well paid jobs for which they have received extensive training, this is not usually seen as a problem. There is an obvious difference between 'working' and 'work experience' (Harvey, Geall & Moon, 1988). Work experience is seen as part of a structured learning experience that is more than just working in a setting outside the university. Skills development awareness, reflection on the learning process, and attempting to relate psychology to work activities are crucial to learning and this is, perhaps, more important than the type or level of work undertaken.

The module appeared to have worked well and attained its major objectives. We feel that as far as assessed assignments are concerned the work submitted has vindicated the extensive preparatory work and support materials provided. Whilst generally happy with the academic standard, we intend to examine Assessment 3. It would be rewarding to see more of the students going beyond restating theories and concepts derived from the set text and becoming even more critical. Perhaps we could expect them to consider how far, as psychologists, they could adopt the methodologies and skills they have learned on the programme, and bring these to bear on improving their work situation. It has to be remembered however, that this is a Scottish Level 2 module which is probably equivalent to the end of first year in a comparable Welsh/English three-year honours programme. We should not attempt perhaps to be over ambitious. We also need to address the issue raised by students of requiring more contact. As indicated, we assumed that 'self directed' learning would be appreciated. What we had not realised was that the students still

need reassurance from interaction with staff and other students. In the next running of the module we will probably have more regular group discussions although this will require more time within the university and perhaps more conflict with student part time work activities.

Future developments

A logical development of the module would be to provide a third level module concentrating more on the development of specific psychological skills while at the same time encouraging personal development and assistance to others. A focus for the module would be the development of mentoring skills (defined very broadly). This would enable students to develop skills and knowledge through interacting with others. It would enable them to apply the psychology they are learning to real people and this would have significant benefit to both parties. A number of our students already work with voluntary groups including Head Injury Trust, MENCAP, Drug and Alcohol Counselling, Autistic Society, Prisoners Aid groups and voluntary counselling groups. Offering academic credit will benefit those already undertaking these activities as well as encouraging more students to participate. Postgraduate courses in Forensic, Counselling and Clinical Psychology would, we are sure, look favourably on students with such experience, as would many employers.

Personal note

Being responsible for the instigation and development of this module has been of real interest and benefit to the two staff concerned. It has been a real eye opener to find out what students are working at, the levels of skills, responsibilities and the hours that some of them are working. It has allowed us to develop a better understanding of our students and the demands being placed upon them. It has also been personally rewarding to see the positive

way in which the students have responded. *'I feel I have learned a great deal about psychology in the workplace which I hadn't really considered before. Hopefully this will help in the future when I graduate.'*

'It gave me the chance to work independently without lecturers/tutors telling me what to do all the time – an element of freedom.'

'I now realise that my part time job is not meaningless.'

'My expectations were exceeded. I learned more than I thought I would and will hopefully be able to adapt this knowledge to future employment.'

These quotations from students have made the module development worthwhile. Further development of the module is ongoing in the light of experience.

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Correspondence

Michael Wrennall

Senior Lecturer in Psychology
 Department of Psychology
 Glasgow Caledonian University
 Cowcaddens
 Glasgow G4 0BA.
 Tel: 0141 331 3485
 E-mail: M.Wrennall@gcal.ac.uk