

Graduate Basis for Registration and its place within psychology

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HAVING JUST completed a BSc (Hons) Psychology degree, I feel well placed to offer a student's perspective on John Radford's provocative article, 'psychology in its place'. Although Radford discussed a number of relevant areas regarding psychology in higher education I aim to discuss one main issue that many psychology undergraduates have to face and that is the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR). I will be focussing on one of the main assumptions of the GBR which is that all psychology students want to and/or will be entering the world of 'professional psychology'. I will then discuss how this assumption can result in an inflexibility to adapt the course content and overall university experience for those students who do not chose professional psychology. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that in its present state GBR is failing many graduates who choose to enter the world of work rather than continue on into post graduate education.

Before I begin to discuss the points I am making regarding GBR, I would like to provide some insight into the kind of student that I am and how my experience has helped to form my view of the GBR in general. Firstly, I am a mature student and therefore I embarked upon my university course with one aim in mind, to get myself a career, or at the very least better job prospects. I knew of no other reason why people would choose to go to university except to better their life chances by improving their job prospects. In hindsight, though, I now understand why many 'younger' students choose to attend university, purely for the experience of university life and the independence related to it. They simply choose a course that has interested them in college and then make

their university choice based on which can give them the best 'life' experience.

Here is where I will raise my first issue with GBR, which is its assumption that all psychology students have chosen to read psychology purely to gain entry in to professional psychology. It does not contemplate that students may be attending university for the sheer experience of university (independence, and transition into adult life). Nor does it accept that some students are still unsure about which career is right for them and if psychology is indeed the correct subject. Rather, this core assumption limits the student's choice of psychology modules once they reach university level to allow the students who do want to move into postgraduate studies/professional psychology to do that. But what about the rest of the students who simply want to gain a degree and enter the world of work rather than further studies? Why are we restricting all undergraduate psychology students when as Radford points out not many of them actually carry on and move into professional psychology after graduation? For example, how many students really know whether they will want to progress in psychology after they have graduated before they even start a degree course? I certainly did not know where my choice of undergraduate psychology was taking me when I applied to university. As mentioned earlier, I would like to describe how my own experience has contributed to my current views regarding GBR, which I will discuss in more detail next.

I first came across psychology when I returned to education by following an access to higher education course at a local college. As part of this course I took an

A-level equivalent in psychology and became fascinated with the whole process of being able to break down and understand human behaviour. I also knew why I wanted to go to university and I had a pre-planned route mapped out that ultimately would have allowed me to teach English in secondary schools. However, as my access course progressed I became even more infatuated by the depth and breadth of psychology and where it could lead, I made a very rash decision to apply to do a degree in the subject instead of initial teacher training. This went against all my rationally made career plans. I am a very well organised individual (I wonder what Freud would make of that!) and had planned well in advance about where I wanted my education to take me. After making the decision, I felt uneasy about having so many vague options that would be open to me from gaining a psychology degree. Careers advice at this level dictated the 'professional' psychology roles of clinical, educational, occupational and health but also pointed out that many individuals with psychology degrees could gain entry to a wide range of other careers, i.e. teaching and management. I was formally advised to take a degree course that had GBR accreditation as you will 'need' it after graduation. Plus, to be truthful, the thought of holding a degree that would provide entry to a graduate register was quite appealing to a naïve pre-university student, even though I did not fully understand what I would gain from it.

Therefore, my college experience provided an empty base for my views concerning GBR to form on to, although its overall importance had been stressed to me. To be truthful, it was not until I reached university that I started to question what the true value of GBR was. It all started during my first term of psychology, I felt like I had skipped the country and gone to a university where I did not understand the dialect or language! It all seemed to be speaking about 'psychology' as if it was an entirely different subject to the one I had studied at college. Furthermore, I must admit, at first I begrudged having to

learn about biopsychology, or cognitive psychology, as I had chosen my preferred strand of educational psychology. They were interesting but I felt that since I would not be using them after I graduated there was little point trying to understand the ins and outs of the human eye. I was the first of my entire family to reach university therefore dropping out was not an option. I persevered with the lectures and did the extended reading, and finally academic 'psychology' started to make sense. I found that sections of one strand crossed over into others and I slowly started to piece together why we needed so much ground knowledge, even in the strands that truthfully sometimes bored me. Psychology is made up of all the strands together and if we do not study them all, then surely we are not really studying psychology.

However, this new level of understanding regarding psychology as a discipline did not form until at least the third year of my degree. I feel this may have been due to the difference of psychology being taught at college level to the broadness of psychology being covered at university level. For example, psychology at university level is generally controlled by the GBR but not at A-level and open college access levels, which results in some large differences of curriculum. This is an issue that the GBR simply does not contemplate. Many students reach the end of their first year at university and begin wondering what on earth they are studying and why they chose psychology. Maybe the Society could take this into account when considering the GBR requirements? Why, if half way through an undergraduate degree a student decides they no longer actually like GBR psychology, should they have to be confined into reaching a level of psychology that will entitle them to GBR? Let's say they go for a position in management they will not get the job or appear to be a better candidate just because they have GBR and the other applicants do not. Therefore, although GBR sets out to confirm that all students who hold the qualification have been taught the same general material it renders

itself useless if that student does not enter the world of professional psychology! These students need the flexibility of being able to study the modules that they feel will benefit them more after graduation. For example, if an individual enjoys working with children and chooses to take a degree in psychology, would it not benefit them more if they could study child development and typical and atypical development than it would forcing them to take advanced biopsychology? Universities could address this issue by providing parallel psychology programmes, one which is GBR accredited and the other which is not. The latter programme would have more flexibility to offer students the knowledge and experience they crave, while also offering all psychology students a 'get out of professional psychology' free card.

Another issue regarding the GBR assumption that graduates will go on to post-graduate studies, is that GBR degree courses simply do not provide any form of work skills training for undergraduate students. The number of 'suitable' placements is one of the reasons given for not providing these as a standard part of a degree course. However, what is classified as a 'suitable' placement? Is it a professional psychology related placement (i.e. assistant psychologist or shadowing an educational psychologist) or a general psychology-related work placement? On entering work 'skills' are what sell you, more than general knowledge. I speak from experience as I have just spent the last 12 months of my life trying to sell my psychology degree. After working out that I would probably be amongst the thousands of students that would not make it into educational or clinical psychology I applied to teacher training (my original career plan). As I enjoy working with adolescents I applied to teach social sciences in secondary schools. However, although my psychology degree is an ideal base to teach social sciences, I did not get accepted, even though I had at that point two and half years of voluntary, and paid, work experience in schools. To gain entry to secondary teaching you need to sell the skills

that are transferable into national curriculum subjects. I did collaborate with the careers service to ensure I was selling the correct skills but my reply was, unofficially of course, that there are many students who are committed to teaching as they have followed at least one national curriculum subject during their degree or that they have taken modules which teach skills that are transferable into teaching. I was told that if I picked up some extra modules that I may stand a better chance of being accepted at the next intake. I looked into this and was informed that it would clash with the requirements set out by the Society, meaning that I may not be eligible for GBR. At this point I knew as a teacher I would probably not need GBR but on the other hand I loved psychology and was sure that whatever job I did finally take on it would still be involved within the world of psychology in some way therefore I felt I would need to graduate with a GBR accredited degree.

This brings me to the suggestion that the GBR is failing students because it is not flexible enough to teach the 'skills' that many graduates need to access the world of work, although the Government's Employability initiative attempts to help all graduates to become more employable. Higher education seems geared into teaching students how to transfer their skills into 'clinical psychology' or 'counselling psychology' but not how, for instance, our essay writing skills would help us to produce a well argued report to a company director. Maybe universities themselves need to be more proactive in teaching work related skills whilst still holding true to GBR requirements. For instance, universities could widen their assessment strategies to include a greater variety of formats, i.e. as well as conventional essays and exams they could include course-work like reports to managing directors.

Additionally, even if the GBR became less ubiquitous, universities need to acknowledge that they are accountable for setting the curriculum that they teach (within the limits of GBR). Maybe the Society and universities

need to consider the question of what is the purpose of education. Is it purely for gaining knowledge that will allow access to a set career, or is it about self fulfilment, personal growth and enhancing or understanding ones attributes? People access education for a number of reasons and the Society and possibly some universities have lost sight of that fact. Psychology as a subject however is varied enough to include all those reasons for studying it.

Initially, there needs to be a focus on setting a curriculum that sets out psychology at the GCSE level and the A-level/Access level, which can then be built upon at the undergraduate level. This would help remove the 'two psychologies syndrome' which occurs when the psychology taught at college level seems completely different to that which is taught at university level. It needs to be flexible enough to include 'life' and 'work' related modules which are something more than just employability issues running alongside degrees; some thing embedded explicitly and relevantly into the degree course. Fur-

thermore, it needs to be made more imaginative in terms of assessment procedures as this will allow students to learn to apply psychology out in the real world.

Finally, I do not profess to have any firm answers to the debate over the GBR but I do feel that undergraduate students need something in place to ensure that they are all taught the main areas of psychology but also how to implement this knowledge into the world of work, outside of professional psychology. I whole heartedly agree with Radford's point that, at the very least, we should be making sure that there are modules that teach students non-psychology related work skills. As after all, psychology is accessed and studied for a variety of reasons meaning it should be useful and insightful to a number of audiences, and not just focused purely upon one.

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