

Postgraduates' perspective

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WE WOULD like to first thank Dr Radford and *Psychology Teaching Review* for the opportunity to reply to this thought provoking article on behalf of the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG). We feel that this article raises a number of key issues, many of which have a great impact on the future of postgraduate training and funding as well as other discussion points which, although not directly related to postgraduates, affect our future careers.

There are a number of points from the article that we would like to discuss here which we feel affect postgraduate students in particular. The first of these relates to higher education. With government initiatives leading to a great increase in the number of undergraduate students entering the HE sector it may be true, as Radford has said, that this has turned academic staff into 'slaves in the graduate mines'; to extend this analogy it could be said that often postgraduate students are the canaries sent before them frequently having to test new ideas and deal with the consequences. The teaching at undergraduate level is evermore being given to postgraduate students in an attempt to maintain the levels of teaching needed to satisfy demand.

The implications for this are both positive and negative: on the positive side, this teaching experience adds value to the CVs of those studying for postgraduate qualifications, hopefully making them more competitive in the job market when they graduate. There are, however, a number of problems with this; postgraduates very rarely have any training in teaching and may be only months past completing their own undergraduate qualification. The consequences of this are many and varied; postgraduates are often

asked to teach on any module which is short staffed, which might mean teaching a subject about which the person has very little knowledge. This puts undue pressure on postgraduates, who often feel that asking for help shows weakness so early in their career and therefore continue to suffer in silence. The consequences are also felt by undergraduates, who may end up being taught by underqualified members of staff. Although the work of the Higher Education Academy's PostGraduates who Teach (PGwT) network is doing something to remedy this by organising workshops on teaching for postgraduates this still does not amount to a comprehensive training. If postgraduates are to continue to make a significant contribution to teaching during their training then it only seems fair and natural that they should receive training in these skills to allow them to do this work.

The article also discusses an issue that has been clear for some time; that the nature of government funding for research is focused on a small number of institutes with others increasingly being seen as teaching universities. This can already be seen with the Russell group (comprising 20 of the top research intensive universities) obtaining 66 per cent of all research funding and 56 per cent of all research doctorates (www.russellgroup.ac.uk). Again, this has clear consequences for research training at postgraduate level; it is increasingly possible that a two tier system may emerge with research rich institutes training future researchers and research poor institutes training students to become teachers. Lantz, Smith and Branney (2008) have already indicated that those training at post 1992 universities are expected to take on higher level teaching duties and may not have the resources available for the extent of

research training given in the older universities. This is not beneficial to anyone as the best mix for teaching and research requires a mixture of these skills.

In terms of the more general comments of interest raised in the article, it seems clear that psychology needs to address the rather artificial boundaries it sets between sub-disciplines. We feel that in modern psychology, with a more applied ethos to our research, which so often occurs on the boundaries between the areas, it is rare to find someone who can call himself/herself a cognitive or social (for example) psychologist as our work transcends these synthetic categories and works in a more multi/cross-disciplinary way. If we want to encourage students to think in a more analytical way and apply their knowledge it seems foolish to put up such clear boundaries between sections. To remedy this, the Society division and sections need to lead the way engaging in a greater number of collaborative events, and encouraging the teaching of subjects based on their work to be conducted likewise.

Another issue concerns the Society's Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR). Although many students may never use their GBR in any professional context we do not agree with the assertion that this undermines the value of GBR. We feel that with the potential breadth available for study at undergraduate level it is necessary to have core knowledge and skills common to all psychology graduates to ensure that basic standards of learning are met and that core competencies can be assumed about these students. Even though we feel that GBR should be protected it is clear that changes to its application may be necessary. Many universities meet the Society's guidelines by having set modules named after each of the 'core' areas where it might be more prudent to embed these topics within other modules, for a more synoptic approach in which the aims of the core modules are studied in context, and therefore not seen as 'separate issues'.

The article also points out that the ethos and approach to higher education is changing in modern systems. Psychology needs to forge a place for itself in this new system and with the current scope of psychology it is in the perfect place to be at the forefront of this change. Many students now approach higher education as a business venture, showing more interest in outcomes (grades) and how this will benefit them in the job market and fail therefore to truly benefit from the experience of learning. We feel that psychology degrees should endeavour to encourage participation in activities which involve the application of psychological skills to create rounded graduates. For example involvement in the Society student members group (SMG), volunteering for charities (especially those with a psychological focus), and conducting more research. Without this further involvement much of the learning that psychology students gain has no concrete basis and may be dismissed without contemplation of its implications or applications. Although we feel this engagement should be encouraged, there are of course issues with finding suitable work experience positions for all students, with the very large numbers of undergraduates presently studying psychology.

The development of young psychologists ought not to begin at undergraduate level, however, which raises the question of whether or not A-level psychology should be a pre-requisite for starting on a psychology degree. If this were to be the case, then A-level psychology might need to be more closely monitored. One of us (RSW) has taught A-level psychology for the last two years, and both of us have taught psychology at the undergraduate level. Like probably most teachers of psychology, we have experienced the frustration of trying to fix some misunderstandings from our students' previous education. For example, that the *p*-value is *not* the probability that your results are 'due to chance'. If A-level psychology were to become a pre-requisite for further study of psychology, then perhaps a specification

could be developed in conjunction with the Society and the A-level exam boards, which would be aligned with the GBR core module. Having said that, it ought to be remembered that the majority (although not all) of A-level students are 16 when they begin, and that they should not be put under the pressure of making a decision about their future career path so early on is questionable.

There are a number of additional issues with pre-degree psychology, many of which have been eloquently presented and discussed in a series of articles in a special issue of *The Psychologist* (October 2007), the dismissal of A-level psychology as something to be unlearned once an undergraduate degree in psychology being embarked upon being one of them (Conway & Banister, 2007). Rather than dismissing pre-degree psychology, why not take more responsibility for it? We will hopefully see some benefits as a result of the new specifications due to be rolled out this year in all four A-level specifications, from OCR, AQA-A, AQA-B and Edexcel, which are designed to adhere to new Qualifications and Curriculums Authority (QCA) guidelines, in which psychology is now classified as a science. Apart from research methods, unfortunately there are no core psychology modules, which means that HE teachers can still not assume any core knowledge of psychology in new undergraduates, and therefore a certain amount of covering old ground will be inevitable for most students who have completed an A-level in psychology. On a positive note, the Society appears to be taking a more active interest in pre-degree psychology, and A-level students can now become members of SMG, which offers a specialised publication and a mini annual conference as part of the Society annual conference.

For potential teachers of A-level and GCSE psychology, however, two major problems remain. The first problem is that for psychology graduates who want to teach pre-degree psychology, there is a distinct lack of centres that offer training in teaching psychology. Psychology as a taught subject is usually relegated to a second subject position, while the psychology graduate (or other potential psychology teacher) is trained in teaching another subject as their primary one and usually has to teach psychology as a second subject once training is completed, while taking on other subjects, such as citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) to supplement their timetable. The second problem is that due to these difficulties faced by psychology graduates, the subject often ends up being taught by a teacher who is unqualified in the subject. So therefore psychology students are not unusually taught by an untrained teacher with a degree in psychology (teaching at instructor level) or by a trained teacher who does not have a degree in the subject. As one reviewer pointed out, level one undergraduates are fortunate in that they are at least taught by someone with a degree in psychology!

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