

The psychology degree in its place

Peter Reddy & Kim Rochelle

Abstract

In response to the issues raised by Radford a clearer understanding of the psychology degree as part of the liberal education tradition is advocated in line with Newman (1982) and Graham (2005). Such a focus incorporates developments in employability and graduate competencies and reinforces rather than undermines concern with scholarship. Links between academic subject material and personal development and a debate on the role of the British Psychological Society in regulating the Bachelors' degree are advocated

JOHAN RADFORD does what Emeritus Professors do par excellence, take a long, cool and seasoned look at their discipline, and then poke it with a stick. We should all be grateful. He points out that in his time psychology as a subject has vastly expanded both at undergraduate (QAA, 2002) and pre-degree levels and that the psychology degree has an uncertain relationship with the profession. Most importantly, he suggests that as fees rise it is important to have a coherent view of both what higher education and the psychology degree is for. This response aims to add to this debate.

Radford (2008) shows us that the point of a university degree is not clearly articulated, may not be clearly understood by students or their parents and is conceptualised differently by differing stakeholders. For vocational degrees the case appears to be straightforward. The student aspires to a profession and buys into it financially, intellectually and emotionally in entering university. On graduation the student has a clear route forward to professional membership, status and reward and has received an approved body of knowledge and leaves on track for a licence to practise it, subject to pre-registration experience or similar. The benefits are clearly visible to outweigh the costs. Many vocational degrees lead to highly sought-after professions (perhaps a component in their desirability is their clear entry routes) and the primary stakeholders, student and parents, have good reason to be satisfied.

On second look however this may be less

satisfactory. Vocational degrees remain in a minority and require 18-year-olds to reach early career decisions. The tradition of university study is far broader than vocational training and governments and employers talk of generic skills and competencies (e.g. Harvey, 1997; Harvey et al., 2002) or graduate attributes (e.g. Barrie, 2004) rather than professional entry. The professions are only one aspect of societies in rapid technological, social and economic change and employers seek graduates with the competencies necessary for future competitive advantage (IRS, 2003) and the ability to adapt to and manage future change. The notion of a professional body of knowledge is ill-suited to dynamic professions and suggests an unsophisticated epistemology in which knowledge is fixed and poured into empty vessels.

Differing stakeholders have their own agendas. Students are driven by many factors but amongst the strongest are their interest in psychology as a subject, employment prospects generally, and the more glamorised and high profile work in clinical and forensic psychology. Parents also want good employment prospects for their offspring. Government sees mass higher education as a central plank in economic and social regeneration, and promotes an agenda of employability, life-long learning and global citizenship. Universities themselves are far from passive. They compete for academic esteem, research income and financial security. Success in research is the principal route

but newspaper league tables mean that esteem and the number and quality of undergraduate and postgraduate entrants is closely tied. The temptation as an admissions tutor, in order to convert applicants to entrants, is to veer into sales; to weave a vision of students having the time of their lives before exiting in a golden glow to professional careers, maturity and prosperity. It is poor marketing to mention debt, or to point out that only a minority will become professional psychologists.

Radford points out that the original function of Western European medieval universities was to prepare students for the emerging middle class professions of the time, often in clerical contexts. This point is also made by Graham (2005) and by Newman (1982) in defining university education in the 1850s at the time of the foundation of the Catholic University of Ireland. Newman argued that universities should be concerned with the education of the mind and the cultivation of understanding, not with the provision of technical skills for the workforce or with the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake. Universities should develop critical faculties so that students can see things as they are, get to the point, discard irrelevance and detect sophistry. Newman argued that education in this manner would prepare a student to fill any post with credit and approach any subject without fear (cited in Johnson, 2005). This is a compelling vision of non-vocational academic undergraduate education with much contemporary relevance. Perhaps Newman will forgive us if we interpret him as suggesting that university education equips graduates with a universal bullshit detector.

Despite the existence of psychology as a profession, with up to 20 per cent of psychology graduates entering professional psychology (BPS, 2007) through the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR) and postgraduate study, the UK psychology Bachelors degree is non-vocational. It aligns with academic subjects such as history and sociology, rather than with vocational degrees such as medicine or vocationally oriented subjects such as

business studies. However, we may need to do more to promote the employability and life-long learning potential of psychology as a non-vocational degree. Graduate employers' focus on competencies offers a way forward and reminds us, as Newman does, that the subject studied may be less important than the context it offers for sharpening critical faculties. Students choose a subject to study that they think they will enjoy, but they may retain little of its content five years after graduation if they are not employed teaching, researching or practising it. Does this mean that university education is pointless or merely a way of grading students into degree class categories to help employers select? Does the content studied ultimately not matter? Does an increased focus on employability and this meta level of higher education necessarily undermine scholarship and the liberal education tradition?

Organisations have had to adapt their human resources procedures in order to remain competitive and to continue to add value to products and services. This has required a culture shift from job-based to competency-based organisations (Lawler, 1994) and graduate recruitment today is largely competency-based. Employers no longer consider degree class to be a reliable indicator of potential (IRS, 2003; Barber, Hill, Hirsh & Tyers, 2005) and have moved away from simply matching individuals to jobs. In their place, competency-based recruitment is viewed as a more reliable method of identifying graduates with potential. Faced with the prospect of continual change, employers seek individuals who fit the wider organisational context and have the generic and therefore transferable competencies that equip them broadly rather than more organisational-specific competencies that might fit a person to a specific job but can be acquired with development and training (IRS, 2003). Graduates need to suit the organisational culture; including company values, relationships with colleagues and customers, the workplace environment and the technology used (Graduate Recruitment Bureau UK, 2007).

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre Employability Profiles (such as that for psychology by Kubler and Forbes, 2004) identify generic competencies in different subject areas. The profiles define the typical skills demonstrated by graduates in these subjects and are described for employer, undergraduate, prospective student and parent. The profiles are also intended to help students to recognise their own competencies, to relate them to those required by employers and to recognise evidence of them. Kubler and Forbes cite the QAA psychology Benchmark Statements:

- research skills;
- analysis skills;
- communication skills;
- handling data and information effectively;
- effective team working skills;
- problem solving and reasoning skills;
- interpersonal skills; and
- development of lifelong learning skills.

They also cite the *Graduates' Work* report (Harvey, 1997) which lists attributes identified by employers of the Policy Forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education and are considered to indicate individuals with the potential to make a significant early career contribution and to instigate change:

- Cognitive skills/brain power; including analysis, judgement and attention to detail.
- Generic competencies; including planning and organising, influencing, written communication, questioning, listening, teamwork, interpersonal sensitivity, organisational sensitivity, lifelong learning and development.
- Personal capabilities; including Personal Development Planning, creativity, decisiveness, initiative, adaptability/flexibility, achievement orientation, tolerance for stress, leadership.
- Technical ability; (competence) including knowledge and application.
- Business/organisation awareness; including organisational understanding, commercial awareness, financial awareness.
- Practical and professional elements;

including professional expertise (e.g. reflective practice), process operation, image presentation.

In a meta-analysis of 29 validation studies, Bartram (2005) suggested that a criterion (competency) based approach to recruitment based upon a model of eight generic competencies better met the needs of employers, in terms of eventual work performance, than predictor-based personality scales such as the Big Five. As competency based recruitment is becoming the standard for employers seeking new graduates, undergraduates need to be conversant with the competency approach and the undergraduate curriculum should afford opportunities for students to identify and develop competencies in preparation for graduate selection. This development is a significant challenge for psychology undergraduate education.

Does the argument for developing employability and graduate competencies in non-vocational degrees undermine liberal higher education and suggest that students should simply be prepared for work? It would seem to suggest that the subject that students study is no more than a sugar coating of the employability pill. Furthermore it also suggests that the real point of higher education is either purely vocational, as in the case of medicine or journalism, or is employability and graduate competencies for all the other non-vocational subjects.

Newman, and his contemporary champion, Graham (2005), would certainly take issue with this. Firstly, Newman does not deny the power of vocational subjects to provide intellectual stimulation. He says,

'no one can deny that commerce and the professions afford scope for the highest and the most diversified powers of the mind.'

(cited in Graham, 2005, p. 54).

Graham goes on to argue that graduate competencies (he prefers the term transferable skills) cannot explain the value of subjects in terms of their content and distinguishes the point of studying a subject from the benefit of studying it. There may be

many benefits to playing football he suggests; fitness, teamwork, social relationships, but these are not the point of playing the game. Similarly, Graham argues that

'literacy, numeracy, articulacy and facility with analysis are benefits (let us hope) of studying philosophy, linguistics, psychology (...); but it is not in these that we find their point. The point, rather, as I think Newman meant to say, is the exercise and the enriching of the life of the mind for its own sake.'

Exercising and enriching the life of the mind certainly has the vocational importance of future-proofing graduates through endowing them with the intellectual capacity to both adapt to and explore the potential of change. But for Graham this is still not the point of liberal education. Studying psychology (and other subjects) at university is valuable not because it provides an *occasion* for thought but because it provides a worthwhile object of thought. Here is the point of higher education, 'it is a source of wealth *per se*' (p. 56). Graham suggests that the truth of this lies in two propositions; that 'intellectual enrichment is indeed a source of wealth' (p. 56) and that higher education supplies intellectual enrichment. Both propositions are beyond the scope of this paper but are discussed by Graham.

So far it has been argued that the point of higher education is not well understood. That both government and employers focus on graduate competencies and employability, whether in vocational or non-vocational degrees and that the liberal education tradition ultimately rests on the idea that intellectual enrichment is a source of wealth. What are the implications for the psychology degree?

Firstly liberal education does not exclude the vocational and the development of employability and competence. As with the football example, there is a point, but the enjoyment of consequent benefits is entirely in order. It is a false dichotomy to suggest that a focus on scholarship is inimical to a focus on employability and competency or vice versa. As the competencies listed above

suggest, they run hand in glove and to paraphrase Newman above (cited in Graham, 2005, p. 54) commerce and the professions not only 'afford scope for the highest and the most diversified powers of the mind', employers in commerce and the professions go to considerable lengths to identify and recruit graduates who can bring them the highest and the most diversified powers of the mind to future proof their organisations and offer them competitive advantage. Psychology thus needs to retain and consolidate its place in liberal education and the case for liberal education needs to be made to stakeholders. This does not exclude the place of psychology as a pure science and as an applied subject, but the place of its content as a worthwhile object of thought and a source of intellectual enrichment must have primacy.

Secondly, there is a case for a more explicit focus on the development of employability and competencies in psychology. The move to competency based selection and the development of psychometric and other selection protocols is very much based in the application of psychological research. Yet curiously the undergraduate curriculum may not reflect this. Psychometrics, individual differences, personnel selection, organisational behaviour and related material may be taught but at an academic level without necessarily engaging students personally with their own work experience, career plans and developing competencies. Failing to bring together academic material in the way that it is used in practice, and in the way that our graduates will be faced with and, in all probability expected to know something about, is surely a lost opportunity both for scholarship and employability. We should seek opportunities to enable students to make links between academic subject material and personal development. For example the work of Baxter Magolda (2001) on epistemological development in early adulthood illuminates scholarship and the nature of knowledge and is of direct relevance to our students and their interest in their own growth.

Finally the assertion of the position of psychology in liberal education calls into question the role of the British Psychological Society in regulating the bachelors' degree. Professional bodies clearly need to regulate vocational courses but a debate on the value of regulating an undergraduate subject that leads only to the starting gate of GBR may be timely. Regulation may constrain and stifle and a lighter touch may be appropriate.

References

- Barber, L., Hill, D., Hirsch, W. & Tyers, C. (2005). *Fishing for talent in a wider pool: Trends and dilemmas in corporate graduate recruitment*. Institute for Employment Studies Report 421.
- Barrie S. (2004). A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(3), 261–275.
- Bartram, D. (2005). The great eight competencies: A criterion-centric approach to validation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90, 1185–1203.
- Baxter Magolda, M. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*, Virginia: Stylus.
- British Psychological Society. (2007). *So you want to be a psychologist?* Leicester: Author.
- Graduate Recruitment Bureau. (2007). *Employability uncovered: Developing your skills*. Retrieved from www.grb.uk.com/developing_skills.0.html.
- Graham, G. (2005). *The institution of intellectual values: Realism and idealism in higher education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Harvey, L. (1997). *Graduates' work: Organisational change and student attributes*. Birmingham: Centre for Research into Quality, University of Birmingham.
- Harvey, L., Locke, W. & Morey, A. (2002). *Enhancing employability, recognising diversity*. Retrieved 9 January 2007 from <http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/employability.pdf>.
- IRS Employment Review. (2003). Competencies in graduate recruitment and selection. *IRS Employment Review*, 783, 44–48.
- Johnson, G. (2005). Review of G. Graham, (2005). *The institution of intellectual values: Realism and idealism in Higher Education*. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 9 December, p. 17.
- Kubler, B. & Forbes, P. (2004). *Psychology Subject Centre: Student employability profile*. Retrieved 9 January 2007 from www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability/Psychology.pdf.
- Lawler, E.E. (1994). From job-based to competency-based organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 3–15.
- Newman, J.H. (1982). *The idea of a university*. Paris: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2002). *Psychology subject benchmark statement*. Gloucester, QAA. Retrieved 2 November 2007 from www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/psychology.pdf: 1.
- Radford, J. (2008). Psychology in its place. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 14(1), pp. 38–50.

Address for correspondence

Peter Reddy, Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice and School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham.

Kim Rochelle, School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham.