

# ERASMUS partners in conversation: Psychology at the University of Wroclaw and University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

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**I**N THIS EDITION devoted to understanding how psychology is constructed and positioned in different countries we offer an account of a free-ranging discussion highlighting common features of psychology provision and that considers the differences between two departments and two distinct programmes. The discussion took place between ERASMUS partners during a Teacher Exchange visit to the University of Wroclaw, Poland, in March 2011. ERASMUS exchange programmes have been running since 1987 and offer students opportunities to travel and learn in universities across Europe where agreements are signed between member institutions. The European Higher Education Area looks to bring comparable academic standards and quality assurance to universities and thus enable greater movement between countries. In practice this means that students can have their work in one country recognised as being equivalent to that in another through the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). In 2010 over 22000 students visited the UK as part of an ERASMUS exchange (European Commission, 2011).

Since 2006 there has been an agreement between the psychology departments in the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) and the University of Wroclaw, Poland. Students come to Cardiff and complete one full academic year (60 ECTS), including the final year dissertation for which they are allocated individual supervisors. Our experience of these students is that they are excellent; working hard in a second language, with an enviable grounding and working knowledge of psychological literature, history and

theory, yet they can also require much closer supervision not just in terms of proof-reading but in terms of basic research skills and knowledge. The question for us was how to best support the students in their learning? It did seem that a different emphasis and structure of the degree programme in Poland meant that we had to think about our own expectations of undergraduate psychology education (Mercer, 2011; Mercer & Heggs, in press). In thinking of ways to support ERASMUS students there was a point of reflection of our own expectations of psychology provision in terms of both content and skills, and also on how we understand departmental structures and the role of academics in terms of their own career development and the tensions between teaching and research.

Two teacher exchange visits have taken place to Wroclaw, ostensibly to deliver short courses on research methods, but with the advantage that discussion between the departments can take place that have helped put guidelines in place that support exchange students and meet the demands of two distinct programmes. Moreover, it also allowed psychology staff to chat. Discussion has focussed on the differences between UWIC and Wroclaw in provision and expectations of psychology degrees. During the last visit we used the opportunity to record a conversation over dinner. We started by talking about departmental structures.

Our conversation began with a discussion about faculty. At UWIC, the Department of Applied Psychology is within the Cardiff School of Health Sciences. There is a Dean of School and Head of Department, then

Programme Directors for the different degrees. In some ways, then, the two departments appear quite similar.

**Jemy:** So I was going to ask you about your Faculty. Within the Faculty, you're with Pedagogy? Am I right?

**Kasia:** We're in a faculty, you're right, of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences. In other universities psychology would be in the Social Sciences faculty, here it's under Historical and Pedagogical Sciences. For historical reasons, as far as I know, but it does seem a little strange

**Dan:** And is there a Head of Faculty?

**Kasia:** There's the Dean.

**Dan:** There's the Dean and then there'll be the heads of department under the Dean?

**Kasia:** Yeah, the director, our departmental director.

**Dan:** And then the structure within the department under the director?

**Kasia:** We've got eight divisions in total, including Work Organisational Psychology, Experimental and Social Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Clinical and Health Psychology.

**Dan:** But do those divisions have a head as well?

**Kasia:** Yes, there is a head but actually I think it's not as meaningful a post. So, the director distributes budgets between eight departments and then when we want to go, for example, to a conference, a national conference, we have to ask our division head for the money because he knows how to distribute it. When we want to apply for an international conference we have to ask the director because she also has a budget that she manages.

**Dan:** Is psychology seen as important within the University?

**Kasia:** It is, because it brings a lot of money. *[All laugh]*

**Dan:** Because you also said that psychology is very popular, yeah, so have your numbers been growing over the years?

**Kasia:** I think so, yeah, yeah, definitely. We accept more and more students and there are more and more students per place.

This mirrors the growing popularity of psychology as a degree in the UK, where there has been a doubling of students in the last 10 years to 77,350 (Trapp et al., 2011). As we chatted about growing student numbers, we also discussed the need to support students appropriately in terms of staff numbers. A major part of the conversation focussed on academic roles and development, and almost inevitably touched on the tension between research and teaching.

**Dan:** To get a lecturing post yeah, you've got to be completing a PhD – it's almost become mandatory to have a PhD to become a Lecturer. It's something that we would be looking for.

**Kasia:** Here as well it's an obligation. In previous years when I was starting it was possible that some teachers were called Assistants, and just didn't have their PhD completed yet, they were just in the process of doing it, but now it's impossible, you have to have your PhD completed to apply for a University position.

**Dan:** That sounds familiar. You could become an academic without having a PhD or completed a PhD, now that has changed very much. It can be seen as a professionalisation but some people don't always see it that way, I think.

**Kasia:** But I think in previous years it was most popular first to apply for a position as an Assistant and then start your PhD so you were both working and developing yourself

**Dan:** And once you get a post, do you become... well, what are the different academic roles?

**Kasia:** So first it's adjunkt, in Polish adjunkt, so it's assistant professor is the first rank. Then when you develop as a researcher you may apply to become Habilitowana Doktor (doktor habilitowany), so you work to achieve habilitation and it's something exceptional, in Europe I think. So after being a doctor you are trying to become a Doctor Habilitowana and you are considered as professor so students call you Professor but you are not a full professor. And then

you may become a professor but it is the President (of the country) who makes you the professor after some real achievements. So first it's Assistant Professor then Doctor Habilitobana and you become independent as an academic. You may be called Professor nadzwyczajny (an 'irregular' professor made by the university). Full professor's are made by the Polish president. These are also known as Profesor belwederski. Belweder is the name of the palace of the President of Poland.

So how it is in your country? You started saying about a hierarchy of teachers.

**Dan:** There's a hierarchy. To start you would nowadays tend to have a PhD or be very close to completing your PhD. You may have had some teaching experience but not necessarily a great deal but certainly lots of PhD posts now would expect some teaching support from the PhD students. Then you would become either an Assistant Lecturer or a Lecturer and then as you progress up the scale you become a Senior Lecturer, possibly a Principal Lecturer or a Reader depending on the institution you are in.

**Kasia:** So reader is higher than –

**Dan:** Yes, and then professor is still seen as that... I don't want to say pinnacle, but

**Jenny:** Yeah, professor is very high up and there would be very few professors.

**Kasia:** I don't know how it works in your country but here we are both teachers and scientists, so my post actually, my contract with my post is half science post, half teaching post so I'm obliged to do research as well as to teach.

**Dan:** Yeah. It's not always that clear cut but there would be an element of... certainly, if you think of the stuff that you process, workloads and things, we talk about teaching and what we're doing there and also about research as well. So the two are seen hand in hand but it's not obligatory, straightforwardly, that you should be doing one or the other.

**Kasia:** Here it is more and more obligatory so we have to prove that we do the research, that we publish our findings, that we develop – the habilitation demonstrates that we have actually developed as scientists. So you won't get the habilitation for your work as a teacher, however excellent you are as a teacher so actually it's based, I would say, only on your research which is strange.

**Dan:** Not necessarily.

**Kasia:** But do you gain any 'points' for doing your teaching at a higher level?

**Dan:** You can do but they're also wanting to see more and more that you're doing research as well.

**Jenny:** So, research still has higher status?

**Dan:** Fundamentally, yeah.

**Jenny:** Yeah, even though it doesn't necessarily bring in the money, it's the students that bring in the money and the teaching, but it's...

**Kasia:** It's the same, I think. Our new Minister of Higher Education put such a focus on research, our scientific development, but on the other hand seems to overlook that we earn to live and people have to take extra teaching jobs so there's little time for doing this research and for preparing well for your teaching at the university

**Dan:** Because an institution is looking for esteem, it's looking for recognition and some of that comes through research and then actually an institution also likes to have students and it does seem that you can be pulled in different directions.

There were evident similarities, then, in terms of academic hierarchies and pressures for research output. However, when talking about research it is hard not to talk about teaching. Here, we discussed differences in the emphasis on content for students, and in particular, what emphasis ought to be placed on skills for students. This touched on issues of preparing students for life after a degree.

**Jenny:** Something else that your students have talked to me about quite a lot is that they're quite surprised when they come to

UWIC about the emphasis on research methods and what they say, they say that their knowledge is more theoretical in the way of classic theorists, they've read texts by Korney and Freud and others which our students wouldn't have done, would they, read the original text?

**Dan:** No, they wouldn't, they may have come across a name and theory but not to have read them in any depth at first

**Kasia:** Yes, I agree, Polish studies are more theoretical than practical although we are trying to change it but I would say that more in the direction of applied psychology rather than into research which may be reasonable as far as the work market is concerned because students seem to have more and more, how do you say, job qualifications for careers. So we try to be sure in our department that when they finish the course, and from the focus on work organisation in the fourth or fifth year, that they can do, for example, a complete recruitment procedure; that they know how to work on every step; that they know how to interview people for a job; that they know how to apply other methods or complicated methodology. It could impact on their future career applied skills so it has changed into this direction and I think it is good because previously it was too theoretical and people complained that they finished their studies and they can hardly do anything, they can hardly be useful in the workplace. So they have to have a mentor for quite a long time in various workplaces to be able to do something. Now they seem to be more –

**Dan:** Because I think that we've taken a slightly different approach in that for a lot of reasons we teach a lot of research methods but we feel that those are giving students similar skills, that we would refer to as transferable skills, which are then applicable in different settings. So they've got a skills base that enables them to apply knowledge in different ways and to know how to get new knowledge and things so it's a slightly different way of thinking about it.

**Kasia:** I think, yeah, you are right, our students have problems with doing their research especially the clever ones because when it comes to their last project they often, think about something really complex, as in so complex that it's methodologically much more demanding and difficult to do, to do it correctly because there are too many things to deal with on the level of methodology.

**Jenny:** Yeah, for the Master's thesis they have to do a piece of research, do they? How big is it, how many words?

**Kasia:** It's not said directly how many words, but usually it would be more than 100 pages, maybe 100, 200 pages. I would say half of this is theory so various theoretical approaches which lead to the research area, in broader perspective, narrow than showing their research, methodology, hypothesis, etc., then doing a piece of research either qualitative or quantitative and, yeah, and the results.

The emphasis on the final Master's dissertation echoes the BPS focus on the Level 6 empirical project as a standalone requirement for a programme's accreditation. The final piece dissertation is seen as the culmination of psychology degrees, yet in completing the degrees there is a need to support and guide students as they progress. Our conversation moved toward these areas as we discussed programmes offered by the department.

The Department of Applied Psychology at UWIC also offers Master's programmes, and so we were interested in whether students on completion of their five-year programme could continue their training in the department, and also discussed issues of student support throughout their studies.

**Dan:** So basically within your institute you're offering psychology with all the Master's specialisations in the fourth and fifth year and then PhD places...

**Kasia:** Hmm mmm.

**Dan:** ...and that's it?

**Kasia:** Yes, but apart from psychology classes all the students have to complete some classes of sociology, philosophy, biological mechanisms. So, during the first two years there are various areas and then it is narrowed to psychology only.

**Dan:** Okay. And student support while they are studying? At each level or year of the degree is there like a Year Tutor or a Year –

**Kasia:** No.

**Dan:** There's nobody looking after –

**Kasia:** There's nothing like this.

**Dan:** And students don't get a Personal Tutor?

**Kasia:** No, not until they reach fourth and fifth year and here they have to decide on the area of research. And here after the third year when they decide on the area of research they will be appointed a tutor, a professor who will have a group of students interested in an area. It sometimes happens that a student changes his mind.

**Dan:** Yes, that happens to us. So at that point they will have also chosen a topic of research?

**Kasia:** In general terms. After the fourth year they should have the subject first as a subject and they should be more or less aware what kind of research it will be, what tools will be used, etc.

**Dan:** But that role, that supervisor/tutor it doesn't have any pastoral aspects, it's not about looking after the student as in how are they doing and things, it's about 'you are now developing towards doing a big dissertation at the end of your degree'?

**Kasia:** Yes, and it's called a Master's Seminar when the students meet regularly with their tutors, with these groups, and are discussing various aspects of their chosen area. So they are more or less interested in similar area but then they will go into various particular directions.

**Dan:** Okay, so one of the things Jenny was telling me last night was actually that the dissertation doesn't count towards their overall degree work, does it, so they're not getting credits for it?

**Kasia:** No, it's something that has to be done, to have the diploma, and the credits are gathered here through the courses, through completion of the courses.

**Dan:** So to get the overall psychology Master's diploma, how many ECTS credits do they need?

**Kasia:** Sixty per year and it's five years, so it's 300 credits minimum. It can be more. If it's more it goes into the supplement of the diploma and then perhaps a tutor/employer will look at the diploma, the supplement and he can see that the student was actually engaged doing something extra. But actually it's, yeah, 60 per year, 30 per semester.

Standing out from this passage is how there is a clear difference in the pastoral and supporting role of personal tutors that is in place at UWIC. The tutor system is meant to benefit staff in how they support students, and also to help ensure that all students are known to members of the psychology team, whereas in Wroclaw the students are known through teaching. Moreover, to complete an undergraduate programme at UWIC requires 180 ECTS points, that is European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). When a Master's programme is included a student will have completed a further 90 ECTS credits giving a total of 270 credits. This credit accumulation includes dissertations. The transparency enabled by Bologna and ECTS credit transfer highlights differences in approaches, especially when expected hours of effort are included. At UWIC after three years a student would be seen to have completed 3600 hours of academic work. A further difference also came to the fore when discussing the content of the degrees. At UWIC students in the first year start specialist psychology modules, whereas in Wroclaw this is not the case. Some of the differences were more puzzling to us than others. We also discussed entry requirements, and touched on the process of selection.

**Dan:** So there's commonalities to all the degrees, so whether you're doing Psychology, Law, in the first year you might be doing a Language and other things before you specialise as you get to the final stages?

**Kasia:** Yes, or looking from a different perspective, any student who is finishing their studies has to prove that he knows at least one foreign language at a certain level, and physical education must be completed by everybody unless there are physical problems.

**Dan:** And when you say physical education, is that, that's to do what?

**Kasia:** To make the society healthy, I guess, that's my guess but I think this is about –

**Dan:** So people are having to get to a certain level of fitness or they're meant to be participating in a sport?

**Kasia:** I think that it's a more general idea that it's good to introduce the culture of physical education, yeah, people should exercise their body either one way or another to be healthy, whatever age they are in. So it starts from the primary school but it is an obligatory subject so it stays till the last levels of education.

**Dan:** It's certainly not obligatory in the UK during A-levels, and then in university it isn't obligatory at all.

**Kasia:** So for sure there is a difference.

**Jenny:** So what would be an example of a class, a physical education class?

**Kasia:** Whatever, sometimes very interesting things like tennis, skiing. I, for example, did skiing and it was my first skiing experience when I was starting my studies in Poland.

**Dan:** But you're still skiing so it's stuck with you?

**Kasia:** Yeah, so actually it was my first experience and it lasted.

**Jenny:** Oh yes. If our students wanted to, they could join a society like a rowing club or horse riding or rugby but it wouldn't be part of the curriculum, it would be an activity in their spare time.

**Dan:** Yeah, that's it, it's a hobby, it's in their spare time – it's not part of what they're doing and they certainly don't get any academic credits for it.

**Kasia:** There is a difference, it's interesting, for sure.

**Dan:** It seems a very strange idea. It's the obligatory nature of it, it's quite alien to what our expectations might be.

**Jenny:** It is, yeah.

**Kasia:** But for the evening students it isn't obligatory, it's only obligatory for the day students.

**Jenny:** Oh, right.

**Dan:** Because that was something we wanted to ask about, what's the difference between the day students and the evening students?

**Kasia:** Basically, it seems that there is no difference but actually when you look further into the syllabuses of the programmes you notice that they've got a little bit less hours. And this is as far as Psychology is considered, 2700 hours to complete the whole Masterclass course.

**Dan:** That's over five years?

**Kasia:** Yes, for the day students but for the night students it will be about 2500 something. So it's 200 less hours for the evening students.

**Dan:** And the evening students, they're still full-time students?

**Kasia:** Yes, and the qualifications they gain, the certificates are exactly the same. Although people say that actually the employers look into these details.

**Jenny:** So the day class has more prestige?

**Kasia:** Yes, it seems that it has.

**Dan:** And those students, when you say the qualifications may be the same, the day students have got higher entry grades?

**Kasia:** Yes, and this is because the day students are those who did best in their previous stages of education. There is about 20 people per place available so we choose only the best students for the day students and then all the others who are rejected may agree to pay and they come evening students. It is sad that we don't have a limit on those who we accept but generally it will be about 200, 300 a year that decide to do it, to pay and to do the evening studies in psychology in our university.

**Dan:** So could you be an evening student and not be paying?

**Kasia:** No, but there is a chance that when you are doing extremely well...

**Dan:** As an evening student?

**Kasia:** ...yeah, when you prove after the first or second year that you are really very good student, you may apply for becoming a day student and we accept such, how do you put it, enquiries. We accept about five a year to move them from the evening group to the day group and they don't have to pay any more.

**Jenny:** I see. So do you have to do an entrance exam, and how do you decide if somebody wants to be a day student?

**Kasia:** We used to do the entrance exam but now it's forbidden in our country and we have to rely on the matura exams on the selective students. We may decide but we will take into account only, for example, biology, maths, etc., whatever, it's up to the university, the Institute, but we have to count this from the matura exam, the last exam that every student has to take.

The distinction between the day and evening students was something that at first we struggled to understand. The distinction highlighted different recruitment pressures and also different strategies for thinking about Widening Access and Participation. UWIC recruits approximately 120 students a year, based on a clear set of entry criteria. All new students are part of the same year cohort. In Wroclaw, there are approximately 60 students recruited as day students, yet with a further 150 evening students.

The distinction between day and evening students, the focus on a general introduction to psychology in the first two years and also the final emphasis on the dissertation did lead to a discussion of how the final two years might be characterised and understood from our perspective of three year degrees, possibly followed by postgraduate training.

**Dan:** One of the things that seems to be very different is the fact that you're offering a

five-year course and when it comes to ERASMUS that's something that... well, if you remember, trying to organise last year how we best support the students, that final two years are really... we'd see them as post-graduate, wouldn't we...

**Kasia:** Yeah, yeah, the final two years are focused on applied psychology mostly. When you are in your fourth or fifth year you can choose a module and module means a set of courses not like at UWIC. Module means actually about eight, nine courses which are focussed on one area. And I'm, for example, teaching mostly in work and organisational psychology modules which have different names, for example, Recruitment or Coaching or Transportation, etc....

**Dan:** Because one of the things that surprises me is the fact that... well, one of the things that Jenny and I were discussing again last night when we got back is, your students have to do the dissertation and they've specialised in a couple of modules...

**Kasia:** Modules, yeah.

**Dan:** ...which consist of courses and we were confused because we were trying to make sense of what clinical... how can you call yourself a clinical psychologist or an occupational psychologist, you don't have to do further training, or do you?

**Kasia:** Yeah, to be treated as a clinical psychologist after finishing, graduating in psychology, you would go for a special training, especially taken in hospitals, so it involves, I guess, a couple of years, at least two.

**Dan:** But if it was for Workplace Psychology or Occupational Psychology you wouldn't do that, or would you?

**Kasia:** As an academic I won't but, if I want to be a practitioner, I would probably...

**Dan:** You probably would?

**Kasia:** Yeah, I probably would. If they want to be academics they have to do their PhD studies and focus more on research, mostly research in PhD studies, but if they want to be practitioners with in clinical psychology, organisational they have go for for practice.

**Dan:** And they will have like supervisors and things?

**Kasia:** I'm sure, and it will be state level supervisors.

The regulation and recognition of 'psychologists' is, therefore, important at a state level. In the UK this is now managed by the Health Professions Council, and postgraduate training needs to be recognised and accredited as such. External overview is, therefore, present in both Poland and the UK.

Finally, our discussion considered the flexibility given by offering three- or five-year programmes. A three-year programme could be seen as offering limited scope for enabling ERASMUS exchanges, especially when students are concerned about completing accredited modules. Alternatively, three years can be seen as offering flexibility in how students can move between institutions and take up postgraduate training.

**Dan:** Because it's only three years I guess the flexibility comes because they go away and if they want to come back then they can and having done other things but they don't count as our students – they're starting again if you like.

**Kasia:** Here it is longer so this is one of the few ways of being flexible. So still you seem to be much more flexible because you explained to me, as far as I understood correctly, that the student can start with a Master's programme after finishing...

**Dan:** Their third year.

**Kasia:** So this is astonishing to me because we don't have possibilities, it must be from the very beginning to the very end through this five years only for psychologists.

**Dan:** Yeah, but the flexibility that your five-year programme gives you is, for things like ERASMUS where a student can go away and come back. We're still struggling to think about how we can support ERASMUS students because the second year being a core year where they have to have completed everything for BPS requirements, and the BPS is very strict about how we might accredit

learning done elsewhere, then it sort of stops students wanting to use ERASMUS in the way that we would like to support them.

Okay, that's been excellent, yeah, it's quite surprising some of the similarities and differences. Yeah, it's been good.

**Kasia:** Me too, I also have a much more clear idea of those similarities and differences.

The ERASMUS Teacher Exchange programmes have offered opportunities to better understand the differences in programme structures between UWIC and Wroclaw, and ultimately for us to be able to better support students. Importantly, here, it also offered opportunities for psychology staff to discuss common aspects of their working lives.

From the conversation presented here there are clear differences between the psychology programmes. The most obvious is the distinction between three- and five-year programmes, and, therefore, what can be delivered through the programmes. It struck us as odd that languages and physical education may or may not be a requirement. The distinction between day and evening students also was a puzzle at first, yet the opportunity to allow others opportunities to study fit with widening access agendas. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, there were similarities between the experiences of staff. Career and professional development were evident concerns, and there was an obvious shared focus on the tension between teaching and research. Some of this might be understood as academic staff letting off steam, yet they suggest common issues in higher education. Our experience of ERASMUS student and teacher exchanges have been positive. Our discussion has enabled reflection on how we engage with students, and also how we understand the role of academic staff. Furthermore, they remind us that the psychology we are familiar with might not be the same for everyone, and the importance of understanding the discipline in other countries if we are to work effectively cross culturally.

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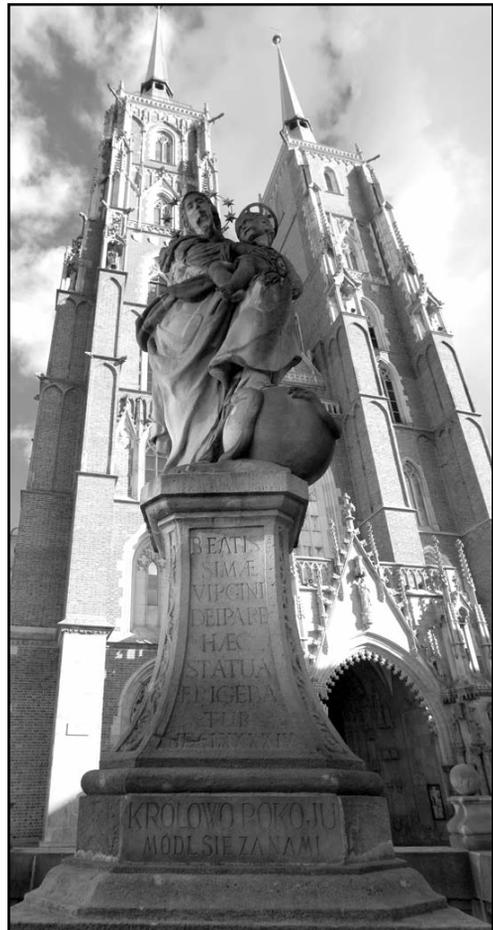
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