

# ‘We live in a hugely psychologised society’

Juliet Foster talked to Ian Florance about her new role as Chair of the Society’s Education and Training Board.

**The Society’s new Education and Training Board continues with the educational focus of the Education and Public Engagement Board, which had its final meeting last year. It will be one of four boards, the others being Practice, Public Policy and Research.**

Its Chair, Juliet Foster, tells me it’s being formed for a number of reasons. ‘We have seen an exponential increase in the number of school and university students studying psychology – not only full-time but also as a component of a separate qualification. Similarly, in addition to traditional routes, many people who have no initial psychological training are now doing in-service or professional training courses to develop as managers, leaders, coaches, teachers, health professionals. We need to be able to respond to this shift. Some of my friends have switched to psychological careers later in life: it’s a subject that can suit that approach, which in turn fits with UK career structure trends and demographics.’

Juliet also raises the NHS Long Term Plan. ‘That communicates a hugely expanded, very exciting role for psychology in the future: more people treated for mental health issues; more professionals involved in delivering psychological solutions. As a Society we have a responsibility to ensure best practice for education and training in psychology within this framework. In many ways we live in a hugely psychologised society and people come into contact with psychology more and more... but there is still often little understanding of the diversity and range of approaches within psychology.’

When I read the plan at [www.longtermplan.nhs.uk](http://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk) after my conversation with Juliet, I realised how ambitious it is for psychological intervention. To take one example, some of the milestones for 2023/24, just for adult mental health services, include access to IAPT services for an additional 380,000 people a year; a single, universal point of access and alternative forms of provision for people experiencing mental health crisis; introduction of mental health transport vehicles and mental health nurses in ambulance control rooms; and mental health liaison services in all acute hospital A&E departments.

Juliet continued: ‘We recognise that the NHS Long Term Plan, and other developments, could shift the notion of the psychological workforce dramatically. More people and more different professions will offer psychologically-based treatment; more people will receive such treatment. Put all this together and we have to rethink how psychology is taught and to whom. The traditional routes into these careers will not be the only things we have to consider – although maintaining a focus on them will also be crucial. The Board aims to outline a cradle-to-grave approach to learning, and teaching, psychology.’

Diversity within the profession is also important to Juliet and the Board. ‘It needs to be reflected in our approach to education and training. There’s evidence that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented at A-level in Psychology compared with some other subjects, but diversity and inclusion tend to decrease in various ways the further they go in the training route. It’s interesting that, unlike other STEM subjects, female students are hugely overrepresented at undergraduate level. We need to understand the choices students are making at all stages of their careers and why. It’s important not just to ask highly targeted questions: you need to understand the whole culture around this and all the factors that are involved, otherwise you’ll come up with misleading answers.’

I asked Juliet if this approach stemmed, at least in part, from her training in social psychology and her 20 years of teaching social psychology at Cambridge University and now King’s College London. ‘Yes. I’m particularly interested in the way we’re socially situated and the influence that has: areas like the public understanding of health and illness and the way that knowledge is socially maintained and challenged. My relatively new role as Deputy Dean of Education at Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London will also influence my approach. I’m looking at best practice and teaching in HE. For too long it was felt that if you could research you could teach. I love the fact that that has changed and is still changing – that we think about how students learn, and how we teach.’

Given these influences it's no wonder the Board has such a wide remit, promoting excellence in psychology training across the lifespan in a range of ways. 'Our work is not just about reacting to the influences I've outlined: it's as much to do with predicting what's going to happen and what are the desired outcomes. To do this we'll need to engage with every interest group to help the Society understand their needs: this will mean talking to, among many others, people in education, businesses, organisations which use psychological services, the NHS. The Board itself will need a very wide range of expertise to achieve this. I suppose one of the things I'm looking forward to is talking to such a wide range of people – I've always enjoyed that. My first priority is exactly that – fact-finding. Learning about how the Society works, talking to teachers and students at all levels of education and to training providers.'

Have you got sufficient resources to deliver this huge programme? 'That's one question I can't answer directly. I'll be finding out – and I hope so. What I do know is that we're going to depend hugely on our members – their inputs, their efforts and, of course, their connections with involved people outside the Society.'

Will the growth of psychology in the way you've described risk lowering standards? 'That's always a risk, and it is bound to be a concern for some members of the Society. But it will be our job to look at exactly this issue, and to ensure we can be part of the debate about what constitutes excellent education and training in psychology. We need to consider, and value, the status quo whilst also being aware and not being afraid of, change. And our recommendations must be evidence-based. We should aim to have resources to undertake real research into the area.'

Presumably your work could impact the Society dramatically. 'Take the Divisions as an example. Divisions give support to people with similar jobs and concerns. We shouldn't underplay that role. But equally, the Divisions can be quite separate in some ways: we can end up learning less from one another than we should, and this can narrow the idea of psychology. Engaging fully with the range of psychologists within the Society as part of an



educational project will be essential. We'll also want to invite non-psychologists into the Board's work: the NHS plan highlights their role in psychological delivery. So, psychologists won't be doing this on our own. Outside voices, as well as inside, will be critical.'

What would you see as success, in say three years' time, Juliet? 'Having a really coherent strategy about educating and influencing. I'd like us to make the Society better known, and to be seen as really driving best practice across education and training.'

I asked Juliet to sum up the new Board's job. 'Psychology is relevant to every aspect of life: it has such a vital role to play in addressing the issues we face within today's society. This is our chance to decide how we're going to educate future practitioners to be more effective in meeting challenges and to help other professionals, and users of psychology, to understand the discipline and use it effectively.'