

# Expectations and destinations

Ian Florance meets students and the people who teach and employ them

People offer many different reasons for studying psychology, and there are equally diverse ways and contexts for applying what they learn. Do people's expectations of training match what it actually delivers, and how this feeds into employment?

## The school

Deb Gajic is head of psychology at the Polesworth school near Tamworth, as well as Treasurer for the Association for the teaching of Psychology ([www.theatp.org](http://www.theatp.org)). She left school at 16, went into banking and finance, then studied sociology after having children. Deb took her master's in psychology before starting to teach it full-time. She is obviously an inspiring teacher: her pupils gave up their lunch hour to meet in the psychology room and answer my questions.

Deb let them do the talking but, in the brief period before they arrived, made a couple of important points. 'They study psychology for a lot of reasons – they may simply need a fourth option or see psychology as a life skill. Some have been influenced by films and TV and have become genuinely interested in the whole area. Psychology is a hugely popular subject, and my biggest worry is that there aren't enough trained psychology teachers. Some head teachers – luckily not at Polesworth! – have a view that everyone and anyone can teach the subject. That's obviously not true.'

The pupils' responses were rich, varied and sometimes brooked no argument. Their reasons for studying psychology varied as much as Deb had suggested: 'Because people fascinate me'; 'It fills a gap'; 'I am interested in the mind'; 'Personal reading'. The need for a social science to qualify in another profession (both midwifery and law featured) is important, as is the influence of media depictions of psychologists – again, the TV series *Dexter* has reignited interest in forensic psychology as the novels of Thomas Harris and the TV series *Cracker* once did. Psychologists

may be critical of media depictions of psychology, psychological applications and mental disability, but it plainly has a huge influence on young people's expectations. Finally, the desire to want to help people is as clear among students as it is among practising psychologists.

Deb's students are well informed: they seem very aware of a wide range of psychological applications – not just forensic and clinical – and understand that psychological techniques can help in a variety of settings. They have an elegant appreciation of the arts vs. science debate,



Deb Gajic and her students at Polesworth school near Tamworth

seeing psychological applications as 'an art backed up by science', though they see a clear divide between more scientific 'biological specialisms' and those that are more akin to social sciences. They are also able to see that studying psychology can give transferable skills.

Their views on ultimate jobs reflect their motivations for studying the subject. Some students, unsurprisingly, had no idea of their future employment. The hardcore 'forensics', of whom there were two or three, claimed to know that work

wouldn't be like *Dexter* or *CSI* (but, I suspect, secretly hoped it would be).

Their views have changed during the course. They are pleasantly surprised at how interesting and diverse the subject is and are beginning to see applications for psychological thinking in the media and politics. One pupil, who shall remain nameless, admitted 'there are really boring bits'. Interestingly, they all knew that first degree psychology requires a study of statistics, something a lot of people I have spoken to for my 'Careers' interviews in this publication describe as being a huge shock when they experienced it.

These hugely positive responses no doubt reflect Deb's commitment to psychology teaching. One of the recurring themes of my interviews is how important psychological role models are in interesting students in psychological careers, creating expectations and opening doors. A strong school ethos will also affect pupils. That ethos became apparent as soon as I sat down in the reception of Polesworth school.

Asked what they thought could be improved in school psychology teaching,

the students, in effect, asked for more: more schools teaching it, more GCSEs and more opportunity to really learn what psychological jobs are actually like. Deb reinforced this and repeated: 'We need more psychology teachers who are committed to the subject.'

## The university

The University of East London (UEL) is near the 2012 Olympic Park and the huge new Stratford shopping centre. It is one of

the most diverse universities in the UK, educating 120 nationalities and with close links to the lively and multicultural local community. I met with Chris Pawson, Leader in Learning and Teaching and Programme Leader, Clinical and Community Psychology, and Rachel Mulvey, Associate Dean of the Psychology School and Chair in Careers Guidance.

Chris and Rachel stress that their university is at the forefront in seeking solutions to the issue of student expectations and destinations in a very changed situation. Chris comments, 'We're facing a different discourse now. At one time open days were about lifestyle – what's the social life like at the university? What's the local community like? Now parents often attend with their children and the key issue is placements. Parents are interested in how the university assesses their students and also how they build up CVs during an undergraduate course. The funding change has been a huge influence – the £9000 really influences views about employability.'

This, and other things Rachel and Chris say, emphasises a critical point. It's easy to see psychological training, employability and career paths as within-discipline issues. Yet they are all hugely affected by very wide social and political pressures: from tertiary education funding to youth unemployment and cultural diversity. Chris identifies 'a chill wind blowing. The London population is cushioned compared to the rest of the country, but only if it's mobile enough. Our population needs help. They often aren't able to travel and still live within strong family systems which preclude too much flexibility. The whole situation is often bewildering for parents, given recent changes in society and in the way higher education works, even if they actually attended a college or university themselves.'

Rachel makes a wider point: 'I think the fundamental issue is a move from employability to career adaptability. Generation Y is freer and more fluid in how they regard employment, and we need to equip students to be adaptable, to learn skills they can use over a series of different types of jobs.'

What are students' expectations and knowledge when they apply for a course? Both Chris and Julie contribute. 'Many want to be clinical psychologists and there's still a hardcore at the end of the course who are focused on this route; interestingly they are often the ones with the most realistic idea of what that entails and it's very much for those people that we've designed the Clinical and Community Master's course we offer. But

a lot of students can't really distinguish psychology from counselling; they mention Freud when they apply for a course to show they know about the area. For them, the idea of psychology as a hard science is a revelation. It's the same for their parents, and students often have to battle families to help understand the subject. That's why public engagement – some of the work at the Science Museum for instance – is important to us.'

How do students get interested in the area? 'Many have personal exposure to mental health issues. Friends, family or they themselves have been treated for a syndrome or they know somebody who works in a psychologically related job.' As Chris points out, 'it's not unusual for private motives to drive the trajectory of many sorts of career'. Many students start with a generalised desire to help others, and this results in a large number of graduates moving into paraprofessional health and social care jobs in the public sector when it becomes obvious they can't get onto a clinical course, for instance.

Rachel stresses the great importance of psychological literacy, a topic dealt with by Julie Hulme elsewhere in this issue (see p.932). Rachel sees this as a major contributor both to the influence of psychology throughout society, but also as a way of overcoming the problems of unrealistic or inaccurate expectations among prospective students and their parents. The solution is not only about getting the courses right but getting the way students apply for the courses more efficient and accurate.

'Employability is not something that kicks in in the last year of a course' says Rachel. 'You address issues of career adaptability at induction. There's a job to be done in ensuring that the Society's curriculum increasingly takes this into account, that academic psychologists understand and value transferable skills as well as specialist knowledge.'

## The graduate

**It's been six years since I started studying psychology as an A-level student, and whilst my interest in a career within psychology never really wavered, my horizons have certainly broadened, and I have become much more optimistic about the career prospects of psychology graduates.**

**The lack of a concrete career path, even for those pursuing psychology-specialist roles, can be both a blessing and a curse. On the flipside, few, if any, careers are off-limits, as psychology degrees require a huge range of skills and competencies, balancing essay-writing and presentation skills with statistics and data analysis. One thing I found most enjoyable about my undergraduate degree was the variety of content, from the visual system to personality, and having such a range of knowledge makes a well-rounded and adaptable employee.**

**For those who do wish to work within psychology, the prospect of competing for rare work experience opportunities can be as daunting as the postgraduate study that is also often required. As a first-year undergraduate, I hoped to find a wealth of placements and internships in hospitals and clinical services available, and naively scanned careers-fair guides hoping to find an NHS representative. I was sorely mistaken. Whilst this can be frustrating, finding experience is possible with perseverance, grit and forward-planning, but it does not happen overnight. Even what seems like the most loosely related opportunities can be used as a springboard to more relevant or paid positions. However, although some organisations may impose age restrictions on applicants, it's important to start looking early – they can often take months, rather than weeks, to organise, and it's much easier to accept short-term unpaid positions whilst you're still in education. Nonetheless, I no longer think it's a race to tick enough boxes to apply for specialist training; each job I have taken on since graduating has counted as relevant life experience to steer me towards a career I am ultimately happy with – and hopefully good at!**

**After taking a gap year, during which I discovered science communication, as well as building on clinical experience I had already been pursuing, I am now back at Durham University, studying for a master's in Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience. I am enjoying the more focused and interactive nature of the course, and whilst I intend to apply for a variety of psychology-related and science communication jobs afterwards, I am no longer worried about where I will end up.**

*Lexie Thorpe*

Rachel is also emphatic that students need to understand their transferable skills better. 'Not just the way psychology can be applied in management, sales, marketing or social care jobs. Not just the idea that psychology helps you "understand people". Psychology courses teach a huge range of skills from the

## expectations and destinations

ability to carry our research, statistical literacy and ethical and evidence-based approaches.'

Chris and Rachel return to the issue of placements. They both stress the opportunity offered by local communities. 'Our placements on our clinical/community programme are driven by partnerships. A recent project with the Newnham Clinical Commissioning Group allowed students to become genuinely engaged and make recommendations for real-life policy. Working in local schools allows students to see how their work impacts real issues. Placements help you find out what you can do... and what you can't do. Like the student who wanted to be an educational psychologist but bravely admitted that she's discovered she didn't like working with kids.'

Rachel raises a final issue, which Chris supports. 'We need to widen access to psychology courses. Clinical psychology demographics are a real problem in particular, in that there is a growing impression that you need to come from quite a well-off background to survive in unpaid placements. Clinical psychology is in danger of appearing to be a white, middle-class profession. We need to open it up to BAME students. If not, the profession will fail many of its clients.'

### The employer

I ring Julie Smith, General Manager at Headway in Cardiff. I could have rung any

number of organisations to get an idea of what is good or bad about employing a psychologically trained person, but an appeal on Facebook drew an instant response from Headway, a charity dedicated to helping people who have acquired brain injury. Headway Cardiff was founded 30 years ago.

Julie used to work in a bank (see also Deb Gajic above – is there a pattern here?) and is at pains to point out: 'I'm not an expert. I'm not a psychologist. And, indeed, none of us are, that's not what we're about.' Headway's range of day services offer 'therapy by stealth... we try to grow people's confidence and help them to thrive'. Headway Cardiff has 12 staff but 'a huge number of volunteers'. 'We look for bright, enthusiastic individuals who can help our service users. The volunteers create energy. They ensure people are involved in the activities on offer. What's critical is that they have social skills.' Julie notes that, given problems in the job market and the need to get experience, there's been a huge growth in numbers of graduate volunteering since 2008. 'And that includes psychologically trained graduates'. Presumably a number of them are on the path to a clinical course. 'Yes, and they're often working with a number of different organisations to build up their experience.' Julie echoes comments made by Rachel about the demographics of people who are able to volunteer. 'It squeezes the diversity. Many of them come from a professional

background, which our clients often aren't from – they tend to be from the lower end of the economic scale.'

'We employ graduate psychologists for their transferable skills – by their third year they're notably empathetic and have good social skills. We look at personality and aptitude rather than skills or knowledge. I sometimes get the feeling that the students are champing at the bit to do more in-depth work with the clients, but that is not what we provide. We work hard to ensure that they understand the benefits to the service users of simply being able to participate and being listened to with patience and empathy.'

### Themes

Over the last decade the pieces in our 'Careers' section (see the archive at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/meets>) have built up a picture of what studying psychology and using it is like – looking at fairly conventional career paths within one of the Society's recognised applications as well as more unusual ones, from robotics, to railway safety, sports coaching broadcasting and financial services.

A number of themes have developed, not least the fact that psychological training gives individuals a range of strengths that are applicable in many different jobs; that psychology graduates often underestimate these skills; but that employers who do take on psychology graduates come to value a really rigorous approach to evidence, a strongly ethical approach and genuine numeracy among many other qualities, not least, as Julie points out, empathy and people skills.

Talking to Deb, Chris, Rachel and Julie, the overwhelming impression is one of huge change – in terms of the expectations of young people, the job market, the requirements of training in (and the importance of building on the strengths of) an increasingly diverse society. Parts of the model for training – particularly clinical training – crop up regularly in discussion, and there is a tension between the requirements of an accredited course and the needs of trainees to gain employment.

Another overarching theme is the need for more attention to society's psychological literacy. Could this be the key not only to decision making among parents and prospective students, but also to helping a variety of organisations fully value the skills of psychology graduates?

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## Where do graduates go?

**In 2012 the British Psychological Society launched a longitudinal study to find out about the career destinations of psychology students.**

**The aim is to follow the 2011 cohort of graduates over seven years, evaluating their career progression at four key points – one, three, five and seven years post-graduation. The current careers of earlier graduates will also be evaluated as a comparator. This should enable us to pinpoint key landmarks in the early years of employment (such as completion of postgraduate training, entrance into postgraduate training, completion of supervised work experience, progression/transition into a stabilised period of employment in their chosen profession).**

**Phase 2 of the project was undertaken over the summer and the results from this phase will be published early next year. A summary report of the main results from Phase 1 is available from Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard ([Lisa.MorrisonCoulthard@bps.org.uk](mailto:Lisa.MorrisonCoulthard@bps.org.uk)).**

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