

Educating Europe

Peter Reddy, Stephan Dutke, Ioulia Papageorgi and Helen Bakker look at how our continental neighbours are nurturing the next generation of psychologists

In the UK most psychology undergraduates are women, most finish their education with a bachelor's degree, most do not enter professional psychology, and competition to do so at 21+ is fierce. This all raises many questions – not least about the nature of the discipline itself and the purpose of university education.

Although they have unique features, other European countries, are grappling with similar issues. They all have interesting and varied responses within a common broad framework. These variations tell us something about higher education, about vocational preparation, and about the shape and future of the discipline.

Educating psychologists in Europe has been challenged in recent years. At the level of education policy we have seen the Bologna process, a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications. At the level of structuring study programmes in psychology, there has been input from the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) and the establishment of a common European qualification framework for psychologists, the European Certificate in Psychology (EuroPsy). How have universities, students and the labour market reacted to these changes?

This article is based on information about 16 European countries kindly offered by members of the European Network for Psychology Learning and Teaching (EUROPLAT) and EFPA's Board of Educational Affairs. These experts (see end of article) were asked to provide informal descriptions of how psychologists are educated in their countries, how they are integrated into the workforce, and what the most pressing issues are in educating the next generation of psychologists. Their answers were geared to a list of questions generated by the authors. Although all contributors made use of numerous official databases they were also free to

"in every country most students want to practise as professional psychologists"

present individual opinions based on their profound knowledge of the respective national education system.

Psychology is popular!

In all countries, psychology is a popular subject, often with still increasing numbers of psychology students. In Turkey, for example, the number of freshers accepted in psychology departments increased from 305 in 1986 (Başaran & Şahin, 1990) to 4896 in 2013 (Student Selection and Placement Centre, 2013). In most European countries the number of interested students outnumbers study places.

How universities react to this imbalance, however, differs substantially across Europe. In most countries university entry in psychology is restricted and competitive either on the basis of school grades (e.g. in Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany) or on the basis of university entrance tests (e.g. in Finland, Turkey) or a combination of the two (e.g. Cyprus). The admittance rates may be extremely low (under 10 per cent, for example in Finland). In other countries, admittance is less competitive. In Spain there are thought to be 1500–2000 new psychology graduates per year, but psychology is offered in many universities, both public and private, and high entry grades are not necessarily needed. In France university entry is not selective.

Between the extremes of high and low restrictions, alternative pathways are explored. Some Dutch universities are currently trying out a 'matching' procedure, both to help students select a higher education programme that 'fits' their interests and abilities, and to increase the probability of admitting students who will successfully finish the programme.

Thus, the probability of getting a place to study psychology differs

questions

Are large numbers of undergraduates in psychology a blessing or a curse?

Should entry to professional training in psychology be at 18+, as in medicine, optometry etc., with a direct route to chartership?

resources

Allen, K., Quinn, J., Hollingworth, S. & Rose, A. (2013). Becoming employable students and 'ideal' creative workers: Exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(3), 431–452.

EuroPsy: www.europsy-efpa.eu

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substantially across Europe, though it is an attractive subject for many students in many places. Interestingly, attempts at harmonising study structures across Europe have improved student mobility so that students from countries with high university entrance restrictions (e.g. Germany) successfully seek study opportunities in neighbouring countries with lower restrictions (e.g. Austria and the Netherlands).

We also note that psychology is not equally attractive for women and men. Most psychology students are women, approximately 80 per cent in Croatia, Switzerland and Finland, 75 per cent in Germany, 90 per cent in Slovenia, over 80 per cent in the UK, and the majority in Cyprus and Poland.

At what level do psychology students generally graduate?

The Bologna process has led to the widespread, but not universal, application of a three-year bachelor's and two-year master's pattern. Many, if not most, psychology students in Europe study for five years and leave university with a master's degree. This tendency approaches EFPA's EuroPsy qualification concept which requires a five-year 300 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System academic psychology programme plus one year of supervised practice as the minimum qualification for independent professional practice in psychology. For example, Croatian psychology students usually graduate after five years with a master's diploma and less than 2 per cent switch out of psychology after the bachelor's level, and similar structures were reported from Cyprus, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland. Also most Czech psychology students graduate at master's level, although the proportion of master's to bachelor's graduates has fallen from 3:1 in 2007 to approximately 2:1 in 2013. In the Netherlands professional master's programmes, despite the Bologna agreement, are typically of one year's duration, with the exception of a two-year programme in medical psychology. As in most other countries, the majority of Dutch psychology students pursue a full training taking bachelor's and master's degrees in succession. Aside from the

academic programmes, four-year training programmes in applied psychology were recently developed at colleges of applied studies leading to a Bachelor of Arts (a similar trend is observed in Germany). For students aspiring to an academic and research career, there are two-year – mostly interdisciplinary – research master's programmes. In Turkey and in Cyprus, a bachelor's degree also requires four years, and a master's degree is officially two years plus an additional year if needed. Some countries stick to uniform five-year (e.g. Poland) or five-and-a-half-year programmes (e.g. Finland) leading directly to the master's degree. Reports from Turkey and the UK show a different pattern. The majority of psychology students in these countries graduate after three or four years with a bachelor's degree.

What are typical destinations of psychology graduates?

In all countries considered here a bachelor's degree does not normally qualify the graduate for independent professional practice, given that the title 'Psychologist' is not protected everywhere. In some countries psychology education



The Bologna process has sought to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications across Europe

produces 'practice-ready' graduates with preparation for professional practice typically taking place during the master's phase or in supervised practicum training integrated in the master's phase (e.g. in Finland and Cyprus). The Finnish psychology programme, for example, aims at providing students with the knowledge and skills needed to work as

a professional psychologist based on the scientist-clinician model and includes a mandatory five-month internship (in Cyprus 1000 to 1500 hours). In other countries studying psychology is more geared to a basic, scientific understanding of psychology (e.g. Austria, Germany, Turkey, UK) so that practical skills related to specific fields of application (e.g. psychotherapy, traffic psychology, forensic psychology, etc.) often are subject to postgraduate training (e.g. in Germany and the UK).

It seems that in every country most students want to practise as professional psychologists, especially in clinical psychology or in the health sector. In Germany, where psychotherapy is regulated by law and requires a three-year postgraduate training after the master's degree, the majority of psychology graduates work as psychotherapists or in related positions in clinical psychology.

In many countries, however, this hope is not fulfilled. In Slovenia, for example, students are mostly interested in clinical work, but only about 10 per cent get positions in health care and specialise in clinical psychology. Similar, though less extreme, situations are reported from the Czech Republic, Spain and Turkey. Thus, from the public view and in the perspective of most psychology students, psychology is still identified with clinical psychology, although this view is not often supported by the reality of the labour market. Job opportunities in other sectors such as in work and organisational psychology and marketing, and in the educational or judiciary systems, are sometimes underestimated. Research and teaching as a perspective for professional activities play only a marginal role in most countries considered here.

With growing numbers of graduates the job situation becomes more difficult in several countries. In Spain there is a surplus of psychology graduates, but some of them find jobs according to their graduation level (e.g. as a personnel manager in a company) outside the psychology field. In Turkey about half the graduates work in areas related to psychology, the rest work in non-psychology areas. In Poland preliminary data suggests that just over 50 per cent of graduates work as professional psychologists, around 25 per cent have a job where psychological training is necessary, and under 20 per cent work in a sector not related to psychology as a profession. Many psychology graduates in Ireland obtain employment immediately after graduating from their bachelor's degree but typically

building on the transferable skills that they have developed, rather than specific psychology skills. In France almost all psychology bachelors apply for a master's place in psychology, but some of them decide to become teachers in elementary schools (after a specific master's degree) or social workers, or to work with children or adults with disabilities. In the UK the majority of psychology bachelors go into a wide variety of non-psychology occupations.

To summarise, graduating at master's level increases the chance of working in a psychological field. Graduating at the bachelor's level, which is the less frequent choice in Europe, often drives graduates into non-psychology domains. Here, their generic skills may help them to be more successful than bachelors from other disciplines.

There are several issues facing us in preparing the next generation, and we turn to these now.

Implications of growth

All our respondents reported growth in psychology education or strong demand for limited places, so there is a need to face up to the implications of growth. In countries where the number receiving psychology education remains restricted this may drive up entry grades and may relate to professional status being high. This may be the case in Finland where psychology is one of the most popular academic subjects and entrance for the approximately 270 places available is highly competitive. Presumably as a result, teaching aims to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to work as professional psychologists, and graduates have excellent employment opportunities and are held in high regard.

Other examples demonstrate that psychology can be studied in some countries as perhaps a more pure academic endeavour, in the same way that history, sociology or philosophy can be. If graduate numbers exceed the demand for professional practitioners, is this a problem or a benefit? An unprecedented level of interest in a discipline has much to commend it, but there are certainly problems. There may not be a clear distinction between the discipline and its professions in the minds of applicants, leading to unrealistic student expectations about future career opportunities. Consider France: there is no limit placed on the number of students who may study psychology and so there are many graduates. Psychologists are poorly paid and little respected, and it is thought this may in part be a consequence of over-



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supply. In Spain also there are thought to be too many psychology graduates and a reduction in the number of entrants might result in higher admission grades, better education and a decrease in graduate unemployment. In the UK there is strong competition at 21+ for professional entry, intensely so for clinical psychology training.

A Swiss view is that it is helpful if psychology students combine their study programme with other academic and professional skills and training, because 'pure psychology' is less compatible with the labour market than combinations of psychology with education, economics, media science, and so on. Furthermore, Psychologists should enter with more confidence into new and innovative professions and fields such as environmental psychology, media psychology, traffic and security psychology. Otherwise psychology as a subject will become more and more integrated into other study programmes (like behavioural economics) and psychologists themselves will remain outside these and other innovative fields. It is interesting therefore that the progressive vanishing of double-subjects (e.g. psychology and sociology) at bachelor's level is noted in the Czech Republic, and conversely that almost 25 per cent of Polish psychology graduates declare that in addition to the psychology course, they have been studying (or have completed) another degree.

What is fuelling the widely seen growth in psychology? It is possible that it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the subject. Students may not only assume that there are more

opportunities in counselling and psychotherapy than really exist, but see this as the true focus of psychology and fail to appreciate its scientific core. In Ireland the public perception of psychology is thought to impact on psychology education in terms of what students expect when they first come to study the subject. If their expectations are not met, this can have an effect on student engagement and, ultimately, retention. Actively promoting psychology as a science at every available opportunity is seen as key in tackling this issue.

Education in psychology as liberal education

We need to think about the value of an education in psychology, particularly at bachelor's level, for those who do not enter the psychology professions or academia. The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, which safeguards quality and standards in UK universities and colleges, has a subject benchmark statement for (BSc)

Psychology that comments:
 ...due to the wide range of generic skills, and the rigour with which they are taught, training in psychology is widely accepted as providing an excellent preparation for many careers. In addition to subject skills and knowledge, graduates also develop skills in numeracy, teamwork, critical thinking, computing, independent learning and many others, all of which are highly valued by employers. (QAA, 2010, p.2)

If we accept these points as both true and

generally applicable, psychology as a subject of study has much to commend it, and perhaps we should think of it at bachelor's level as not only providing the scientific grounding for further professional level study and the competencies valued by employers but also from the point of view of 'liberal education'. The idea of liberal education is notoriously ambiguous (Barnett, 2009) but includes the idea that the process of coming to know, the journey of study itself, brings forward desirable human qualities, the epistemic virtues. For example, offering contrasting perspectives helps to promote openness; teaching that requires students to engage with each other helps to foster respect, generosity and preparedness to listen; and encouragement helps to keep students going forward and to be open to new experience.

Knowledge itself seems increasingly marginal to higher education. Barnett (2009) suggests that higher education has moved from a focus on knowledge to a focus on skills and competencies. As knowledge has expanded and access to it has become easier, the emphasis has shifted away from knowing facts to evaluating evidence. This also accords with that 19th-century champion of liberal education, John Henry Newman (1852/1982) who suggests that university is for the education of the mind and the cultivation of understanding, not for providing technical skills for the workforce or accumulating knowledge for its own sake. The aim of a university education is to develop students' critical faculties so that they get to the point, discard irrelevance and detect sophistry. A graduate can then fill any post with credit and approach any subject without fear (Graham, 2005). Although this argument is debatable, it might justify the education of students in psychology even if they will probably never work as psychologists.

Education in psychology as psychological literacy

'Psychological literacy' (Cranney & Dunn, 2011; McGovern et al., 2010) suggests that knowledge of research and theory in psychology allows students to detect false argument better and become better citizens and employees. Our respondents suggested that in some countries a need for 'psychologising' society (e.g. in the Czech Republic) is seen, acknowledging that psychological knowledge might positively influence public and private life. Scientifically based knowledge, for example, about educating children, caring for the elderly, leading

personnel, communicating effectively, solving problems, learning, and so on, may enrich behaviour in the family, in the job or in public contexts. Thus, psychological literacy might be seen as an effective ingredient of a society developing along the lines of humanistic thinking. Graduates may benefit from studying psychology and promote societal development even if they work in non-psychology fields.

Major challenges

Looking at the education of psychologists in Europe is instructive: Psychology is increasingly popular. Some countries react to this growth by restricting university entrance or by restricting later access to postgraduate training that is required for professional practice. The nearly Europe-wide applied bachelor-master structure, as a consequence of the Bologna process, provided the opportunity to graduate at different levels of education, although the psychologists' associations in Europe agreed that five years of psychology education plus one year of supervised practice is the minimum qualification standard required for independent practice as a professional psychologist. Thus, in some countries students are educated in psychology who will probably never work as psychologist. The major challenges arising from this situation for psychology are (at least) three-fold.

1 *Self-reflection*: Where and how is the growth of education in psychology desirable for psychology – for its public image as a scientific discipline and profession, for its standing within universities, for its future development? In some universities psychology is offered based on a simple demand–supply rationale without considering consequences of over-supply for students and the psychological professions. At the same

time, how can we prepare students to accommodate the needs of tomorrow's society and the changing demands of the labour market?

- 1 *Self-presentation*: Where and why do we give rise to false expectations in young people (the majority female) interested in psychology? What can be done to make the scientific core of psychology salient and to avoid confusion between psychology as a scientific discipline, as a profession and as an enrichment of individual development? A thoughtful self-presentation can help to prevent false expectations and thereby misdirected growth.
- 1 *Self-balance*: We discussed studying psychology (a) as preparation for a profession, (b) as individual development (liberal education) and (c) as 'psychologising' society (psychological literacy). Psychologists should be aware of all three functions of psychology study programmes and acknowledge the need to weight and balance these functions according to a complex network of individual and societal demands and the resources on the side of the universities.

To the extent we accept and act upon these challenges nationally and at the European level, the next generation of psychologists will have the opportunity to be successful and European!

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