



Towards a unique professional identity for psychology undergraduates

Janet Bryan

Michelle Tuckey

Rob Ranzijn

Elissa Pearson

Renaë Hayward

Cathy Balfour

Kurt Lushington

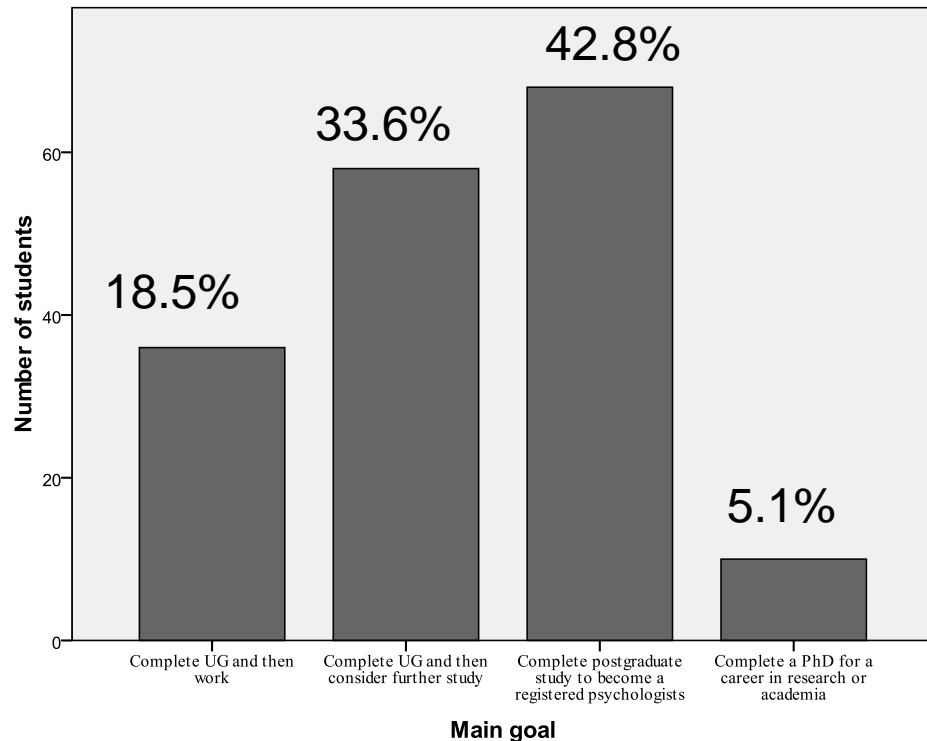
Thanks also to Sarah-Jane Branford



School of
Psychology, Social Work
and Social Policy

Most students who enter psychology want to be clinical psychologists.....

195 newly commencing psychology students in 2010 at UniSA (Bryan et al., 2012)



Over 75% want to go onto further study

But....

At UniSA.....


- Only 14% enter Honours
- Only 4% enter Masters

Therefore training in psychology under the traditional model is targeted towards the minority

And, how do we answer the common question:
“what can I do with an undergraduate psychology degree?”

There should be lots of opportunities for students with psychology training to get jobs.....

- Call for an increase for primary mental health skilled workers (COAG, 2006)
- Demands to increase numbers of trained graduates and decrease the length of training (NHWT, 2010)
- Training to be responsive and relevant to a changing health system (NHWT, 2010)
- Public and community sector “crying out for people” (Goodwin-Smith et al., 2013) in human services



So why do psychology students and academics find it difficult to appreciate what 3-year graduates will do with their degree?

How do we foster a sense of professional identity among these students?

UniSA Psychology curriculum

- First year: **Professional development course** – critical self-reflection; academic choices; professional aspirations
- First-Second year: 3 courses **counselling and interpersonal skills**
- Third year: **Placement course** (50 hours, to be increased to 150 hours) – link theory and skills to practice, high-level professional and personal critical self-reflection, become aware of potential employment options (Billett, 2011)

Industry	Area	Skills
Community services	Mental health, Aged care, Family and youth, Indigenous, Career counselling, Employment, Migrant, Disability, CALD	Counselling, interviewing, advocacy, support work, mentoring, one-on-one support and care, human resources
Education	Youth, Disability, Unemployment, Indigenous, Migrant	Counselling, behaviour change, engagement in programs, health promotion, mentoring
Government service	Youth, Family, Indigenous, Community, CALD, Counselling, Human resources, Mediation	Conservation behaviour, community environment, interviewing, counselling, advocacy, human resources
Health	Counselling volunteers	Counselling and support service
Overseas service	Community volunteer	Health promotion, advocacy
Research	Research projects, Marketing, Quantitative services, analysis of crime statistics	Research design and proposals, data analysis, statistics, interviewing, focus groups, market research,
Human resources	Introduction to psychological assessment, recruitment and induction	Report writing, desk-top research, assist with psychological assessments under supervision.

Do students feel work-ready and have a sense of professional identity on completion?

Do placement providers feel our students are work-ready and have a sense of professional identity?

What roles and unique skills do our graduates offer to workplaces?

Methodology

- A realist methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Analysis of students' written work and focus group responses (n = 5)
- Survey of placement providers (n = 8)
- Read thoroughly, analysed systematically, noting important themes, issues and outcomes for each participant
- Key illustrative quotes

Did students.....

Understand how psychological knowledge and skills relate to workplace contexts?

Yes.

“I found myself surprised that theory provided so much structure for therapy”

“I was able to apply my current knowledge and skills learnt throughout my degree...”

“to some degree yes because we were doing one on one counselling with students..”

Feel work ready?

No.....almost...wanted more placements and more discussion between students about the variety of experiences

*“The lessons and skills I learnt as a result of...this course are extremely valuable and **will be adapted and applied** within my coursework and career for years to come”*

*“..the concepts that came out of that experience and how they can be **applied into the next work setting**”*

*“I feel a bit more confident...It’s **pointed me in the right direction** but I think a lot of it is **still going to come from actually being in the workplace**”*

*“I don’t have that previous life experience. But I think the placement was **definitely a good start, it was just that little taste** of what it will be like”*

Have a clear sense of professional identity?

“you could do this degree and go well I was thinking to be a counsellor but now I really love doing research. Or I could work within the government...I think the options you have as a professional are a lot broader”

Student feedback: Strengths

- Experience vital for the future
- Pulled together 3 years of study
- Application of theory to practice
- Experience of “real life” situations
- Prepared students for the workplace
- Self-discovery
- Reflection skills
- Exposure to possible careers

Student feedback: Areas for improvement

- More communication between Uni and placement providers
- Workload
- Debriefing throughout the placement
- 3 hour preparation workshops too long
- Increase the length of placement

Did placement providers think that students.....

Could link psychological knowledge and skills to the workplace?

Yes, most could...

“...undergraduates were able to apply their psychological knowledge to most situations. I think this is why the placement is so successful...”

“students were able to use these theories to adapt to diverse situations within the placement”

But...

“More practical experience in various workplace situations would help students.”

Understood professionalism in the workplace?

Yes.

“..students were professional...demonstrated through respectful communication, taking the initiative, completing tasks on time, punctuality and appropriate dress.”

“.....very well informed and have a understanding of general work place practices...”

Developed professionally?

“I believe that every student enhanced his/her professional skills and knowledge...”

“...improved their time management skills, public speaking skills and their ability to think outside the square....”

“...developed personal confidence...and realised that they had a broader skill set and knowledge than they thought they had...”

But

The placement...”...highlighted that psychology is one of the degrees that doesn't have emphasis on practical workplace learning”

Had a clear idea of the type of job they could perform on graduation?

A resounding no!

“Definitely not...undergraduates are very hazy about the job prospects that come from the degree”

“...have great understanding of how people work....but don't feel as confident in how to actually perform...”

Students were “...really surprised how fundamental skills and knowledge were transferrable across various professions..”

“..the placement should remain and exploration not a journey...” Students use the placement to find out what they don't want to do as well as what they do.

Were work ready?

On the whole, yes, but....

“...some still require training in areas of professionalism...”

“...still very young....need an organisation to help them grow into a professional..”

“..the transition from student to a practitioner could be strengthened with more experience....”

Needed more to enable them to be work ready?

Yes:

“project planning”

More understanding of *“roles that the students would anticipate in the workplace”*

“working in teams”

“general life experience, ability to handle stress, organisation and multi-tasking”

“more hours on placement”

Do you see a role for psychology graduates in your organisation?

Yes, but those identified were vague....

- Many varied roles within education: human resources, VET/careers counselling, assist boarders
- Counsellor/pastoral carer
- Family support
- Parent/child educator
- Working with at-risk adolescents

And...

“...it is rare that we will hire a graduate of psychology unless they had additional experiences....”

What are the unique skills of psychology graduates?

“Excellent research skills...and...understanding of different theories and methods of psychology”

“...very strong understanding of how people work...”

“...brain development...”

Can “converse with people in a meaningful and ethical manner...deconstruct ideas and self-reflect on personal experiences...how to approach situations with objectivity...deal well with conflict..”

“..a thirst for knowledge and the ability to use technology and help others to do so..”

“...an understanding of complex mental health issues..”

Summary

- Psychology placements enable students to develop professional skills
- Students are somewhat work-ready but would benefit from more experience
- Students have unique skills that are valued by potential employers, but have difficulty defining a clear role for graduates
- Students do not have a clear idea of their employment prospects, nor a clear professional identity

Next steps...

- Longer placements/more placements in undergraduate psychology
- Teach psychology in broader contexts in all courses
- Breadth of training (Goodwin-Smith et al., 2013), use of double degrees, majors, minors to add breadth and context to psychology
- Develop relevant skills in undergraduate training e.g. psychological assessment, behaviour change and management, fundamental CBT training
- Named role for undergraduates.

Thank you
Questions?

Janet.bryan@unisa.edu.au

