

The value of GBR and the employability of psychology graduates

Martin Hagger

JOHAN RADFORD's (2008) article *Psychology in its Place* is a provocative and thoughtful piece on the state of psychology as a discipline in higher education, and I welcome its challenging and constructively-critical approach. I am convinced that many academics reading the text will feel a degree of empathy towards Radford's sentiments and recognise many of the problems identified in their own experiences. I agree with Radford's general premise: that psychology is an important, worthy and useful discipline within modern society but that psychology programmes in higher education perhaps need a rethink in terms of their goals and content. Radford is in favour of greater flexibility in the provision of psychology at undergraduate level, criticises the narrow, core-academic content of the GBR syllabus, and encourages the inclusion of important knowledge and skill-based learning such as the inclusion of multi-discipline approaches (e.g. anthropology, history), new branches of psychology (e.g. positive, transpersonal, community psychology), and transferable skills relevant to graduates that are unlikely to follow a narrow path to chartership through training in one of the named psychology disciplines. I also agree that the Society and institutions making provision of psychology at undergraduate level need to acknowledge that the majority of graduates will not, ultimately, work as a 'psychologist' and should incorporate elements to their programmes that will assist graduates in securing a career in professions outside the discipline. I would go further to say that universities have to take responsibility in providing programmes that enable graduates to seek out a clear career path.

In his article, Radford introduces evidence that psychology graduates are attractive to employers for their numeracy and literacy skills and acknowledges that psychology graduate employability is buoyant, although the specific demands of employers of psychology graduates remains vague (Prospects, 2007). This may be a failure of the Society and higher education providers to communicate the virtues of a psychology degree as a sufficient 'raw material' for some professions. It is disappointing that employers' understanding of psychology and what psychology graduates are trained to do (they are 'good with people', as Radford so eloquently puts it) is largely derived from the eclectic, unstructured manner in which psychology is portrayed in the media and popular culture. Raising employers' awareness of psychology and the training that Society degrees provide should be part of the strategic plan of the Society. Taking an example from the Division of Health Psychology (I am currently Divisional Chair), one of our main achievements during my tenure is the development of promotional material targeting employers and prospective students that highlight the added value and services that health psychologists can offer in health contexts. These are small steps, but important ones to address our strategic aim to promote the profession and the skills that health psychologists can offer. In the same way, the Society and universities can play a pivotal role in illustrating what psychology graduates can offer employers. A preoccupation with academic-level training and an exclusive focus on a set of core subjects does not serve the majority of psychology students that graduate with psychology degrees each year

and seek employment in professions and organisations that have no formal roles for psychologists.

My view is that universities and the Society have a responsibility to provide training in employment with a view ensuring that students graduating with Society-accredited degrees know their worth and have clear ideas as to how to sell their skills to employers. A purely academic syllabus at undergraduate level does not fulfil this goal. Is it the duty of universities to act responsibly in the provision of degree programmes that reflect bone fide skills that can be translated into clear career paths of their graduates? The answer must be an emphatic 'yes'. However, while universities are making up lost ground in the provision of information, training, and advice on careers to graduates, many develop degree courses that appeal only to demand with little clearly defined career pathways for holders of these qualifications. The glossy literature and prospectuses that accompany the promotion of these programmes are highly effective in recruiting motivated young applicants persuaded by the promise of a future career but mostly by an interest in the subject matter that is predominately 'academic'. The career prospects outline in this literature merely pay lip service to the breadth and potential job market for these graduates. More could be done to maximize the earning potential and employability of graduates through the provision of information and knowledge of the important vocational applicability of psychological skills. One method of doing this is to make clear provision for careers within the curriculum that belies the largely academic focus taken by many psychology schools and departments.

The Society also has role duty to provide psychology students with information on the vocational aspects of psychology that may lie outside the realms of accredited psychology routes. I think one of the limitations of the Society is its failure to engage with undergraduates and encourage these entry-level students of psychology to become members

of the Society. A straw poll of my undergraduate psychology classes indicated that less than 5 per cent of the students were members of the Society and none were members of particular divisions. The Society needs to be more active in recruiting members from a young age. I sense that psychology students are fundamentally ignorant of the role that the Society plays in their education and the curriculum they study at undergraduate level. It is only when they move towards training to gain professional accreditation through chartership (and soon as statutorily-regulated psychology professionals) that they gain an awareness of the procedures and statutes of the Society. Part of this failure may lie in the schools and departments of psychology across the country in promoting career paths in psychology among their students. But, I feel, the onus lies with the BPS to engage with those at the top to disseminate information about GBR, training routes, and the role of the BPS in education. APHD may be a useful starting point. I feel that this promotion creates a win-win scenario for the Society. It will likely boost membership and may help recruitment to postgraduate training. In addition, it may help highlight the needs of students and the need to be more flexible in providing a syllabus that confers GBR that is a better reflection of the psychology professions, broadly stated.

In addition, the divisions may also be a place to further promote psychology at undergraduate level. I find it surprising that student membership of the Society is not tied in with potential student memberships at divisional level. Student members have to become 'associate members' of the divisions if they want to join them at all. While I am aware of the drive for parsimony and harmony in the Society that has sought to streamline grades of membership across the divisions, I feel that title of 'associate membership' will be largely off-putting to undergraduate students as it smacks of shunting them into a non-descript category that is 'not for them'. My view is that a student member-

ship of the divisions aimed at undergraduates, in conjunction with student membership of the society may further introduce students to the areas of psychology that they may wish to pursue through one of the professional training routes offered by the divisions or at least raise awareness of the relevance of these domains of psychology and their utility. I may also introduce them to fields of psychology that they do not encounter through their undergraduate programmes at university.

I disagree with Radford that GBR should be completely replaced with a flexible system that permits more than a modicum of choice for students. I think that a core GBR is important in order to provide a minimum standard, as is required for research, teaching, and practice as a psychologist. It is right that the Society and its divisions have vehemently argued in their negotiations with the Health Professions Council for the conferment of GBR as a prerequisite step in gaining access to training to qualify for courses that will lead to entry to the register of psychologists under statutory regulation. However, I think the Society undergraduate syllabus that confers GBR needs to be revised to promote new and diverse fields of psychology and vocational knowledge and training the particular fields in which graduates may

work that are not part of the formal roles in which chartered psychologists may work. I am convinced that this can be done without compromising the depth and breadth of training in psychological knowledge, method, and theory that form the basis principles of the GBR curriculum.

In sum, I agree with fundamental principles of GBR and a generalised, common basic education, but agree, in part, with Radford that there is a need to broaden the curriculum to incorporate the changing face of psychology as a developing science and profession – a few modules on the divisional and special sections of the Society is inadequate to provide a genuine core grounding in psychology as a science and as a profession. Importantly, there is a need to address the skills employer's value, as Radford argues and a need to engage students to highlight the skills their training can offer to employers.

Address for correspondence

Martin Hagger, University of Nottingham,
University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD.
E-mail: martin.hagger@nottingham.ac.uk.

Reference

Prospects. (2007). *What do graduates do?* www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home-page/What_do_graduates_do_2007, May 2007.