

The contribution of the Open University to widening participation in psychology education

Troy Cooper

The work of the Open University is situated historically in widening participation, both through its open access policy and the modular structure of the qualifications it offers. The process by which the Open University produces more British Psychological Society accredited graduates with GBC than any other HEI, and the contribution of introductory level psychology modules to a broad spectrum of other qualifications, is discussed.

Statistical analysis of module recruitment and progression to psychology modules shows that level 2 (NQF level 5) psychology modules recruit well from mature students, women, and those with low levels of previous educational achievement and living in low participation postcode (LPC) areas as defined by funding councils. However, those with lower educational qualifications or from LPC areas have lower pass rates and progression to higher levels of study than other groups. The factors involved in this are discussed, together with current initiatives aimed at producing change.

1. Introduction

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY (OU) has a long-standing commitment to widening participation. Its core values and strategic priorities have not changed much since its founding in 1969. These are:

1. We are open to all and we value diversity. We are committed to supporting the participation of those who have been previously disadvantaged in their pursuit of education.
2. We believe in the transforming power of education. We are committed to removing barriers to participation and to stimulating and supporting people's engagement in active learning.

(Open University Statement of Strategic Priorities, 2009–2010, p.2)

To these ends those embarking on study of a variety of qualifications at the University are not required to have any entry qualifications of any kind. At enquiry or initial registration stage, however, students are encouraged to begin study with a module which carries 30 or 60 CATS credits points of level 1 (NQF level 4) module in a subject area of relevance to their main curriculum interests. These

level 1 generic modules function almost as foundation modules did in four-year degrees in the 1990s in many English universities. They are designed to bring all students up to a particular level of subject content knowledge, and academic and study skills. However, it is not compulsory to do this type of module first in the qualification, and it is perfectly possible for students to begin studies on a level 2 module before they do a level 1 module.

This open access policy was one of the founding principles of the OU. In the 1990s this policy was well placed to address the political agenda on lifelong learning which emerged as the UK Government realised it needed a flexible workforce, capable of acquiring new skills and expertise throughout life as jobs and careers changed more frequently (Dearing, 1997). In relation to psychology the success of this policy can be seen in the figures which feature in the rest of this paper. These detail the numbers of students from a variety of different widening participation groups who take psychology modules with the OU either to gain the British Psychological Society accred-

ited qualification or one of a variety of combined studies qualifications. Over the years this access success has allowed us to further refine our understanding of widening participation issues. In our experience it is not sufficient to look solely at access pertaining to recruitment; attainment, retention and progression as important indicators of the deeper success of widening participation. We recognise that the next steps we need to take in terms of widening participation are to widen successful progression from lower to higher levels of study, and rates of successful study for those from backgrounds which do not support study at higher degree level.

This paper will look at statistical analysis of psychology modules at the OU in terms of some accepted widening participation indices. These are age, prior educational qualification, ethnic heritage, disability and residence in geographical areas which provide fewer students to higher education and recruitment, retention and progression to further study. These statistics will be used to highlight the contribution the OU offer in psychology is making to widening participation in psychology education to these groups both in terms of the BSc Psychology, and as part of other study pathways (combined studies which do not specialise in psychology). The modular structure of OU qualifications allow students to do introductory psychology modules and then to decide for themselves whether higher and specialised study in psychology is for them. Evidence will be considered which suggests that psychology brings in a group of students to study in higher education who might otherwise not turn to it, but that the demands of formal academic study of the subject are often too great for this group and they do not progress on to higher levels of study.

2. Studying psychology at the Open University

Students study at the OU on a modular basis, and have freedom to determine when and which order they take the modules necessary to complete a particular qualification. Students may study as few as 15 or as many as 120 CATS points in an academic year, and this flexibility is based on the assumption that most students will have paid work, family or other commitments around which they need to organise their studies. Those who complete the BSc Psychology (accredited for conferral of GBC by the British Psychological Society) at the OU will generally have completed a generic level 1 module prior to studying psychology specific modules, or they will have transferred in validated credit from previous study in higher education to exempt them from the need for study at level 1. Level 1 study is designed to give studentship and study skills and some knowledge of a cognate subject area relevant to higher specialised study. There is, however, no requirement that students beginning study at level 2 have completed study at level 1, or that they have competed it in a particular area.

The BSc students then go to studies at levels 2 or 3 (corresponding to NQF levels 5 and 6) to complete the core of the modules in the BSc Psychology, which is accredited as providing the Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership with the British Psychological Society. At levels 2 and 3 all the modules listed below are compulsory and amount to 285 CATS credit points of study. Together with the 60 CATS credit points at level 1, students gain 345 CATS credit points in total which they top up to a 360 credit points honours degree from a range of 15 points modules. The compulsory psychology modules for the BSc Psychology are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Level 2 and 3 compulsory modules for the BSc Psychology.

Level 2 compulsory modules	CATS Points
Exploring psychology (DSE212)	60
Exploring psychology project (DXR222) or Exploring psychology online project (DZX222)	15
Biological psychology: exploring the brain (SD226)	30
Child development (ED209)	60
Level 3 compulsory modules	CATS Points
Cognitive psychology (DD303)	60
Social psychology: critical perspectives on self and others (DD307)	60

The main empirical and practical components at level 2 are taught through the 15-point project modules associated with the Exploring Psychology module. These offer dedicated methods teaching and hands-on experience of using quantitative and qualitative research methods and data analysis techniques which students use to develop and write up an empirical project. At level 3, students are expected to complete a substantial, independent project for both modules. Because the level 2 psychology project module is connected to the level 2 Exploring Psychology module in the rest of this paper it is not identified or discussed separately from it.

However, not all students studying modules in the BSc Psychology qualification are aiming for this particular qualification. These students can use them to count towards a wide range of combined qualifications. In particular the Open Degree qualification allows students to complete 120 points at each of levels of study 1, 2 and 3 with few restrictions on the combinations allowed. In this context for example the level 2 Exploring Psychology module features in 15 other qualifications in the University, with a range from BScs in Social Sciences, Nursing Practice, Social Work Studies, to those in Natural Sciences and Life Sciences. Similar contribution to particular other qualifications applies to all the psychology modules, and this means that the numbers

studying a psychology module in any particular year will not be a direct indication of the number of students studying to gain the BSc Psychology.

Students will often study particular psychology modules that interest them and use them to gain another qualification.

As this is the case, the statistics relating to widening participation category analysis at module level tell us about the 'reach' of a module in terms of the various indices of widening participation. This data, however, does not then carry over directly to tell us about the 'reach' of the BSc Psychology qualification in a simple way. Not only can students use modules from the BSc Psychology in a number of other qualifications, but they do not have to declare which qualification they are intending to gain whilst studying a particular module. They can also change their minds about which qualification to use a particular module to gain at any time. On the level 2 Exploring Psychology module, for example, only about 60 per cent of students link it at the beginning of studying the module to the BSc in Psychology.

However, students who take the level 3 modules are predominantly doing so to gain the BSc Psychology qualification, indicated by the much larger numbers who when they begin studying the module, link it to that qualification. Of any of the modules that can be used for the BSc Psychology, the level 3

Cognitive Psychology module has the highest number of students studying and linked to it at 89 per cent of the module total. This module can, therefore, broadly be seen perhaps as the trend indicator of numbers seeking the BSc Psychology, and that the difference between numbers on that module and those on the other level 2 and level 3 modules reflect the contribution of psychology modules to psychology education in the broader non-psychology specialist curriculum.

3. Widening participation profile of psychology students at the Open University

3.1 Access and the demographic profile of Graduates with the BSc Psychology.

According to HESA figures, the three years of 2007, 2008 and 2009 psychology have produced the largest number of UK graduates of any specific supplementary subject.

The number of psychology degrees conferred by the OU in those three years totalled 2488, so that overall the OU produced about seven per cent of UK psychology first degrees in that period.¹

This is the largest number of graduates for any University in the UK, and since most of these graduates would almost certainly not have gained a degree if the OU had not been available to them (the OU has over 60 per cent of the part-time market in psychology education), this in itself represents considerable widening of participation in psychology education through access.

Figure 1 shows that the median age of 2007 psychology graduates gaining the BSc qualification lies between 40 and 49. These students have taken a median time of 4.8 years to gain their degree. In any cohort in any year there have been very few students who gain the qualification whilst under the age of 25.

Table 2: Number of students at module start on each compulsory module of BSc Psychology by year 2007–2009.

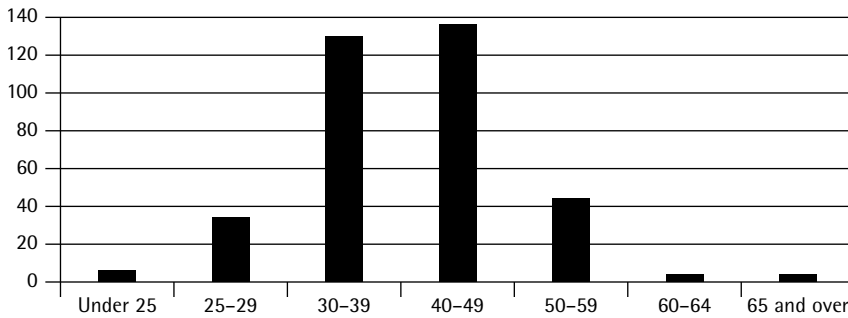
Module student numbers	2007	2008	2009
L2 Exploring Psychology	4140	4102	4555
L2 Biological Psychology	1716	1918	1864
L2 Child Development	2826	3103	2813
L3 Social Psychology	1370	1317	1454
L3 Cognitive Psychology	1453	1141	1228

Table 3: Number of OU Psychology Graduates gaining BSc Psychology with number of UK Graduates gaining first degree in Psychology (source: HESA).

Year of graduation	2006	2007	2008
No. OU BSc Psychology	905	1126	457
No. UK First Degree Psychology	12,453	13,420	12,365

¹ The individual higher numbers in 2007 and lower in 2008 reflect a change in OU regulations applying to those who complete the qualification after 2007 which led to many students accelerating their progress through the degree to complete by end of 2007.

Figure 1: Age distribution for Graduates receiving BSc Psychology in academic year 2007.



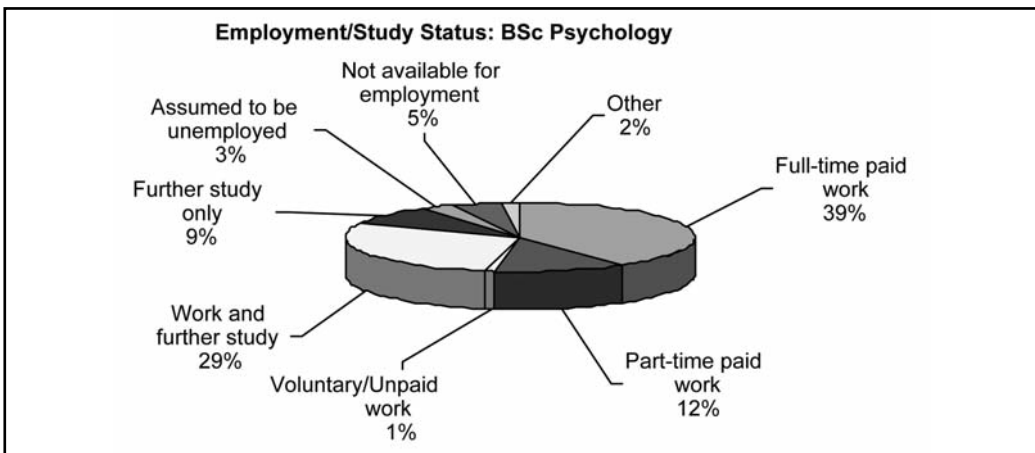
In combination with figures indicated by Table 3 it also shows that OU BSc has been very successful serving the life-long learning agenda. I would argue that this has made a major contribution to the broadening of access to psychology education and subsequent impact on the non-psychology specialist spectrum of occupations in which the majority of OU graduates will work, which will be discussed further in section 4.

In the last five years around 10 per cent of each graduating cohort have had a registered disability, around five per cent describe themselves as having a non-caucasian ethnic heritage and 19 to 20 per cent are male. This compares with current HESA sector averages for the principal subject Biological Sciences (C series) under which Psychology usually

comes (C8) of nine per cent for disability, 19 per cent for non-caucasian ethnic heritage, and 33 per cent for male students.

This does suggest that the OU BSc has made less impact in terms of the diversity of students with non-caucasian ethnic heritage who come through the qualification, and the low number of male students. However the latter may be related to the fact that the OU degree structured modularly and for part-time study is well suited women returning to work after a break, or gaining a qualification whilst working part-time: whilst 39 per cent of graduates in 2007 were in full-time work another 42 per cent were involved in some kind of part-time paid work and the majority of these were female students.

Figure 2: Employment/Study Status of BSc Psychology students for 2007 and 2008.



3.2 Effect of previous educational qualification and participation from areas of social and economic deprivation on module recruitment, success and progression.

In terms of prior education qualification level, OU psychology students are spread right across the spectrum, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 demonstrates clearly a great breadth of prior educational qualification of students studying on the psychology curriculum modules, and is indicative of some of the differences between students who study a level 2 module and link it to another qualification, and those who are following the BSc Psychology route.

When read in conjunction with Table 2 which shows the actual numbers of students on each of these modules from 2007–2009, we can see that of the approximately 4,000 students studying on the largest level 2 Exploring Psychology module an average 29 per cent had either no formal qualifications or less than two ‘A’ levels and over 50 per cent had no experience of HE. On the benchmark module for completion of the BSc Psychology, level 3 Cognitive Psychology, only 22 per cent had no formal qualifications and fewer than two ‘A’ levels. We can also see that around 33 per cent of the level 2 Exploring Psychology students have an HE qualification, and that by

level 3 Cognitive Psychology a much larger 42 per cent or so do.

What this suggests is that whilst the level 2 modules attract a reasonably high proportion of students with low prior educational qualifications, by level 3 these students have gone elsewhere. At level 3 study well over 50 per cent of students studying the module will have either an existing HE or postgraduate qualification.

Sixty per cent of students who study on the level 2 Exploring Psychology register their intention to gain the BSc Psychology, and in any year this translates in actual numbers to an approximate figure of 2400 students. However, doing a similar calculation for the level 3 Cognitive Psychology module shows that in any year the actual figure of students who link their study to achieving the BSc Psychology is just over a thousand. This suggests that between level 2 and level 3 study around 1400 students who initially stated the intention of studying towards the BSc Psychology decide to decommit from it. The difference in figures for prevalence of higher previous educational qualification in these two groups strongly suggests withdrawal from studying for the qualification is greatest amongst the group with lower levels of prior educational qualification.

Table 4: Prior Educational Qualification of students on Psychology modules.

Level of prior educational qualification	Averaged percentage of student total in each category of prior educational qualification level by module over years 2007–2009 (percentages have been rounded down)				
	L2 Exploring Psychology	L2 Child Development	L2 Biological Psychology	L3 Social Psychology	L3 Cognitive Psychology
No formal qualifications	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Less than 2 ‘A’ levels	29%	22%	27%	19%	19%
2 or more ‘A’ levels	20%	21%	27%	22%	21%
HE qualification	32%	37%	32%	42%	42%
P/G qualification	9%	10%	6%	11%	11%
Unknown	7%	4%	3%	4%	3%

The effects of social and educational disadvantage on progression in studying psychology is further underlined by data comparing the success and progress of those with no previous experience of HE and from low participation postcode backgrounds with all those from other postcode areas². Across all modules in the BSc Psychology recruitment runs at more than three times the national sector average of seven per cent and more than twice the OU average of 9.5 per cent (HESA breaks these averages down as 12 per cent for young part-time students and 6.4 per cent for mature part-time students across the sector, however, in the rest of the sector young part-time students account for only 14 per cent of the total of part-time students. The Open University figures are 14 per cent of young part-time students and nine per cent of mature part-time students, where 93 per cent of our students are mature part-time students³).

Table 5a shows the averaged percentage over three years of students who have no experience of HE and live (and study from) a post-code in which fewer inhabitants go on to higher education study (as recorded by HESA), compared to other students by module and in terms of what their pass and failure rates are. This has been analysed using the chi-square statistic to explore how strong the grounds are for proposing a difference in the proportions of pass and failure in these two groups. The magnitude of difference can be ascertained from the percentage values beside the actual figures in each cell of the contingency table. The modules are listed in order of most popular pathway of study, i.e. the sequence in which a majority of students who complete the BSc Psychology study them.

For the level 2 Exploring Psychology module there is a nine per cent difference in pass rates between those in low participation postcodes and those in other areas, and it is not much better for the Developmental Psychology module. The differences in proportion of pass rates between the two participation groups is significant at a very high level for these two modules as indicated by size of chi square value. It is also interesting how the Biological Psychology module shows an erosion of the magnitude of difference in proportions, reflected in a chi-square figure which is at the highest level of acceptable probability that the proportions of pass:fails for each group do not belong to the same normal distribution of results.

This develops further in the level 3 results where judgement as to whether the Social Psychology results are different for the two groups is marginal (the chi square value reflects a decrease from level 2 in the size of difference indicated between pass and fail percentages for each group in the contingency table), and for the Cognitive Psychology module there are no grounds at all for seeing the two sets of results as differentiated. Moreover the analysis in Table 5b show that level 2 results are quite different from level 3 results for both the group of students with no previous study at HE and low post-code participation and all other students. The obvious differences in pass:fail proportions at level 2 are marked for both groups (with a clear direction of difference between them), but are very similar at level 3 suggesting a selection effect has taken place for both groups in the transition from level 2 study to level 3.

² As defined by funding councils POLAR2 methodology www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1168/141/ Checked 2 April 2010.

³ Most recent audited figures are for 2006/07 at: www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1174/141/ Checked 2 April 2010.

Table 5a: Analysis of averaged numbers over years 2007–2009 of students living in low participation postcodes by module of study and module results.

Module	Module Result	Low Participation Postcode Category: number of students (percentage of each category)		Row total
		LPP yes	Not LPP	
L2 Exploring Psychology	Pass	452 (43%)	1408 (52%)	1860
	Fail	605 (57%)	1307 (48%)	1912
Column totals		1057	2715	
Chi-square value level of significance	X=25.91 $p<0.001$			
L2 Child Development	Pass	341 (47%)	1052 (54%)	1393
	Fail	393 (53%)	888 (46%)	1181
Column totals		734	1940	
Chi-square value and level of significance	X=12.88 $p<0.001$			
L2 Biological Psychology	Pass	300 (62%)	800 (67%)	1100
	Fail	186 (38%)	395 (33%)	581
Column totals		486	1195	
Chi-square value and level of significance	X=4.15 $p<0.05$			
L3 Social Psychology	Pass	198 (59%)	656 (61%)	854
	Fail	136 (41%)	321 (39%)	457
Column totals		334	1077	
Chi-square value and level of significance	X=6.78 $p<0.01$			
L3 Cognitive Psychology	Pass	171 (73%)	593 (74%)	764
	Fail	65 (27%)	209 (26%)	274
Column totals		236	802	
Chi-square value and level of significance	X=0.21 $p>0.64$ NS			

Table 5b: Analysis of averaged numbers over years 2007–2009 of students living in low participation postcodes by level of study and result on module of study.

Low Participation Postcode	Level of study	Numbers pass (as % of total)	Numbers fail (as % of total)	Totals
	Level 2	906 (40%)	1371 (60%)	2277
	Level 3	369 (65%)	201 (35%)	570
Chi-square value and level of significance		X=76.54 $p<0.001$		
Not Low Participation Postcode	Level of study	Numbers pass (as % of total)	Numbers fail (as % of total)	
	Level 2	3260 (56%)	2590 (44%)	5850
	Level 3	1249 (70%)	530 (30%)	1779
Chi-square value and level of significance		X=118.35 $p<0.001$		

The gradual attrition down the pathway of study in terms of absolute numbers of students studying, and in particular in the number of students from low participation postcodes studying by the L3 Cognitive Psychology, combined with the statistical analysis of results is striking. Barely 22 per cent of the number of low participation postcode students who studied the L2 Exploring Psychology module are studying on the L3 Cognitive Psychology module in that period, compared to 30 per cent of other postcodes. However, that 22 per cent is not distinguishable from the other 30 per cent in terms of pass:fail ratios, and it is worth reflecting on how it may be that by level 3 low participation postcode students are passing their modules in almost equal numbers to other students.

In considering these results it is worth noting that the category for not passing the module includes those who withdraw from completion of the module before the end of the module. Therefore, many who do not pass a module have not completed all assessment elements and been graded as failing, but have rather failed to complete all the assessment elements which would be necessary for them to be eligible to pass the module. Surveys of students who withdraw from OU modules show clearly that the adverse impact of family and work circum-

stances is the largest reason for failure to complete a module (and hence not pass it). The reasons for withdrawal for mature learners are quite distinct from younger students in that balancing the competing demands of work, caring roles, and financial burdens are of greatest importance, as is the social and interpersonal support to carry on studying given the pull to withdraw produced by these demands (Christie et al, 2005; Yorke & Langdon, 2008; Thomas et al, 2002).

Liz Thomas (2002) makes a convincing argument for the role, drawing on the work of Reay et al. (2001), of 'institutional habitus'. Thomas identifies and explores several factors influencing student retention in higher education: academic and social match or integration of the student into their institution; demands of finance in undertaking education and demands of employment to fund education; academic preparedness of students to study at HE level and the quality of the academic experience; institutional expectations and commitment of the student to the institution; family support and commitments and level of university support services available to students to address their issues and problems, and support of their continued participation in HE study. She proposes a concept of 'institutional habitus' to explain why some

students persist in HE in spite of difficulties encountered from these factors and others do not.

'Habitus' as used by Bourdieu, Thomas claims, is: 'a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of 'reality'. Thus 'a person's habitus is acquired, at least in significant part, through the family and this, for example, structures their educational experiences ... Habitus is more than norms and values, because it is embedded within everyday actions, much of which is sub-conscious, hence the use of the term 'disposition' (Thomas, 2002, p.430). She then goes on to link this to the work of Reay et al. (2001) in which 'institutional habitus can be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' and 'In other words, educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups ... to the detriment of other groups. Hence the education system is socially and culturally biased ... (but) it should be understood as more than the culture of the educational institution; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice' (ibid, p.431).

In conventional institutions Thomas discusses how much can be done to change the practice, norms and values of those working with students to change the habitus of this institution – to enable students from diverse backgrounds and group membership to feel more included and identified, and less like 'fish out of water'. But this work on habitus must importantly extend to friendship and mutual support and social networks, and Thomas identifies the importance of new 'relational issues and priorities' emerging which are key to how students cope with strains and demands that might lead them to drop out of university. For students studying part-time and by distance learning this is one of the most obvious elements missing.

Whilst students at conventional institutions live together, share goals and lifestyle, develop new interests and learn new things, forming new relationships which often supersede those formed prior to university study, part-time distance students remain in the same context, with family, friends, responsibilities and demands that may change very little during their studies. OU students have comparatively low levels of contact with other students, with the institution and with support services compared to students studying at a geographically based University. Thomas notes in this section how it is new relationships, new identities and the sense of belonging which keeps students who encounter difficulties at university from dropping out. In particular this resource is more scarcely available to students from low participation postcodes studying at home who, by definition, will have few family and friends who have studied beyond school and a social and possibly cultural environment that is even antipathetic to it. Moreover these students have (again by definition) a low level of academic preparedness so that they bring little cultural capital themselves in terms of understanding of the norms, roles and expectations of academic study and assessment.

These students, therefore, come in to study psychology at the OU with a high intrinsic interest in the subject of psychology at level 2, and on the two largest modules more of this group fail or fail to complete the module than pass it. The numbers of students in this group then becomes much lower on the other psychology modules in the BSc Psychology, and the pass rate increases. Since students typically study in a particular pathway of modules, and are encouraged to begin their study of psychology on the two largest modules, it can be argued that there is a loss of low participation postcode students to modules 'later' in the pathway because they encounter failure and as distance students they have little contact with the kind of 'institutional habitus' resources Thomas describes which could retain them.

4. What graduates with the BSc in Psychology from the Open University do next

In surveys of primary reasons for taking the BSc Psychology about 50 per cent of OU graduates give career related reasons, and another 45 per cent say they took up the study because of intrinsic interest (Cocking, 2009). The subject of the degree, psychology, is often clearly most useful to those seeking a change of direction or job after graduating. Sixty per cent of students who changed employment post-graduating rated the qualification subject as needed or advantage to their employment, whereas only 22 per cent of those who did not change employment valued it as such.

However, whilst in another survey 61 per cent of respondents said they began the qualification with plans to enter an area of professional psychology, only 19 per cent actually did so (Institute of Educational Technology Longitudinal Survey for Psychology Graduates). This is, however, directly comparable with current estimates over the sector that 20 per cent of psychology graduates will eventually work as professional psychologists (of these most went into specialisms relating to educational, child or occupational psychology).

Seventy-six per cent of those who graduated in 2008 with the BSc Psychology from the OU and were in paid employment after their degree were in a varied spectrum of occupations. Six months after graduating the majority of employed psychology graduates were working in the public sector and nearly a third in the education sector. However, the examples given below are indicative of a range of occupations which could encompass psychological knowledge and in which some accredited study might be considered relevant by employers:

Examples of jobs and employers held by graduates (Figure 3)

Cocking also found in her survey that 42 per cent of the 496 respondent OU psychology graduates intended to go on to further study

after their degree. Of these 39 per cent intended to go into a taught higher degree, seven per cent into a research higher degree, 15 per cent into a postgraduate diploma or certificate and seven per cent into professional training. The most popular defined subject areas of further study were psychology, teaching as a profession, counselling and research. The most popular reason for postgraduate study given by 70 per cent of respondents was 'to change or improve their career options'.

5. Conclusions

The foregoing analysis shows that the OU has been successful both in a substantial contribution to the absolute numbers of graduates with a British Psychological Society recognised psychology degree in recent years, but also in expanding the access to psychology education of those who then went on to gain other qualifications. Whilst the contribution to the number of psychology graduates is considerable, relatively few go on to use their qualification to become professional psychologists, although this is comparable with the rest of the sector. However, it is clear that a first degree in psychology is considered useful and relevant to a growing number of occupational fields as shown by breadth of posts psychology graduates were working in post-graduation. It is also an important contribution to widening participation that the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey showed a substantial number of graduates intended to go on to postgraduate study. A useful follow-up to this analysis would be to find out how many of these graduates came from low educational participation backgrounds.

Through its modular structure for qualifications, the OU makes a significant contribution to the ability of students to study some psychology without having to study for a psychology dedicated qualification. The recruitment figures on the largest level 2 modules evidence a high level of interest. It is also clear that the psychology modules

Figure 3: Examples of Jobs and Employers.

Graduates who remained with the same employer	Graduates who changed employer
JOBS	JOBS
Business Change Manager Physiotherapist Councillor Psychology Teacher Senior Research Officer Pupil Support Worker Electronic Engineer	Chief Executive Officer Family Support Worker Accountant Trainee Clinical Psychologist Assistant Psychologist (several) Graduate mental health worker Gypsy and Traveller Support Officer
EMPLOYERS	EMPLOYERS
Network Rail BAE systems Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service Department for Working Pensions KLM	Citizens Advice Bureau NHS Trust Warwick University Scottish Society for Autism The Transitional Rehabilitation unit

have attracted a reasonable proportion of students with low levels of previous educational qualifications and living in low participation postcode areas.

However, what is less obvious is the means of ensuring the success of these students in their continuing studies either on module or progressing through modules to a final qualification in psychology. Section 3.2 demonstrated the lower success rates of this group in terms of passing the module, and progressing through levels of study on psychology modules. Retention factors and a theory of a need for support from ‘institutional habitus’ was discussed. This is a difficult area for a distance institution to address, but the electronic communication revolution and development of virtual spaces for social and business interactions has offered new possibilities. The OU has adopted a Moodle learning environment as the backbone to its teaching, using the electronic conferencing to provide tutor or module group forums for students and tutors to have regular contact. A website dedicated to psychology has also been established which offers multimedia presentation on areas like psychology careers advice, psychology talks

and events due to take place around the country as well as support and resources relating to psychology modules and qualifications taught by the OU and developing particular study skills. This is only a start however, and the work which remains to be done is to develop an online psychology university community through which students can be offered the institutional support and develop peer relationships and integration which might retain them as they encounter some of the areas of difficulty which have been identified as leading to withdrawal.

In particular in order to better support academic preparedness of students from these groups going in to level 2 study where there are low levels of successful study, a new 30 CATS points level 1 psychology module is being introduced in Autumn 2010. It will be in addition to the more generic foundation type level 1 modules currently available, whose task is to introduce students to study and studentship skills and provide a general background in a relevant cognate area for psychology like science or social science. It will focus on key figures in the development of different areas of psychology and on the

methods and methodologies they explored or generated, together with basic but subject specific study skills like descriptive statistics, which will be attractive to the majority of students who begin their level 2 studies with the stated intention of completing the BSc Psychology.

Finally 46 per cent of BSc psychology graduates give their primary interest in taking the qualification as intrinsic interest in the subject, and over 4000 students undertake study of the level 2 Exploring Psychology module which is significantly more than any other module in the psychology profile. This is mirrored in the current popularity of the subject at A level, and across the HE sector in numbers of students doing modules. The most popular psychology specialisms which students say they would like to specialise in if they became professional psychologists are clinical, educational and counselling. These are specialisms which involve working with people and the range of occupations which graduates of the BSc already occupy or move into post-qualification are overwhelmingly of that time (see Section 4).

The growth of those seeking training as counsellors has been indicative of this, and that counselling often attracts those without high levels of formal educational qualification probably because of its perceived accessibility. Accordingly two years ago the Psychology programme developed a short level 1 15 CATS points module Introduction to Counselling. Over 4000 students have taken the module in that time, and of these over one-third were new students and not already studying with the University. The other two-thirds had largely done at least one of the psychology programmes in the BSc Psychology. This level of interest suggested that there was indeed a large group of students studying on the BSc Psychology who

would be interested in pursuing this area of applied psychology in greater depth, and that it appeals also to a substantial number of new students who had not been attracted by the formal accredited psychology curriculum. In response we have designed a larger level 2 30 CATS points module on counselling called Exploring Fear and Sadness which will begin in 2011, to provide a study pathway more congruent with these students' interests and orientation.

These modules will not be part of the compulsory curriculum for the Society's accredited psychology qualification conferring Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership, but can be done in addition to them for that qualification. More importantly those students who take a level 2 Psychology module for the accredited qualification but then who do not go on to level 3 study and hence to complete the qualification, will have an area of applied psychology to study which can make a good contribution to broader qualifications and to occupational groups needing skills for working with people. We will monitor students progress in studying this module, paying particular attention to recruitment and retention of widening participation groups, and the development of strategies to support and retain students who withdraw from completion of the accredited qualification.

Correspondence

Dr Troy Cooper

The Open University,
131 Briggs Building,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
The Open University,
Milton Keynes MK6 7AA.
E-mail: T.Cooper@open.ac.uk
Tel: 0908 652589

References

- Cocking, E. (2009). *DHLE key data for BSc Honours Psychology 2007/08 cohort*. Milton Keynes: Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University.
- Christie, H., Munro, M. & Wagner, F. (2005). Day students in higher education: Widening access students and successful transitions to a University life. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(1) 3–29.
- Dearing, R. (1997). *Report of the National Committee of enquiry into Education*. Accessed 4 April 2010 from: <http://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/>
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (2010). *HESA Students and Qualifiers Data Tables*. Accessed 2 April 2010 from: www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_datatables&Itemid=121&task=show_category&catid=3#quals
- Lantz, C. with Moysey, L., Dean, L., Duncan, A. & Tawse, I. (2009). *Student Psychology Employability Guide*. Accessed 2 April 2010 from: www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/docs/pdf/p20080915_Employability_Guide.pdf
- Open University (2010). *OU Futures: The Open University's Strategic Priorities 2009–10*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2001). Making a difference? Institutional Habitus and higher education choice. *Sociological Research Online*, 5(4). Accessed 2 April 2010 from: www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/reay.html
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423–442.
- Thomas, L., Quinn, J., Slack, K. Casey, L. (2002). *Student services: Effective approaches to retaining students in higher education*. Institute of Access Studies: Staffordshire University.
- Yorke, M. & Longden, B. (2008). *The first year experiences of higher education in the UK, Phase 2 Final Report*. York: Higher Education Academy.