

Application for 2016 ASET Research Bursary

Project:

What determines student success and failure when searching and applying for placements?

Applicants:

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1. OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY & TIMESCALES

Background

Psychology is a popular degree choice with over 100,000 applications made annually to study the subject at UK universities. However, psychology students are known to take longer than other graduates to develop professional careers following university and less than 20% progress to become practicing psychologists. It is therefore crucial for psychology courses to ensure their students are prepared for the demands of a diverse range of modern workplaces and successfully develop the broad professional skills that employers want.

Opportunities to gain work-related skills and experience during a degree are known to improve the academic performance and employability of graduates. Despite this, psychology course providers have been relatively slow to adapt, with opportunities to undertake work placements still being relatively uncommon on undergraduate courses, and students mostly being required to independently locate and secure their own placements.

A common observation within universities where optional placements are integrated into courses, is that not all students who initially express an interest in taking placements will secure a position, and it is often assumed that only the more capable students succeed in finding placements. It follows that more needs to be done to better understand students' motivations, actions and support needs when seeking placements in order to determine why some succeed and others fail to find suitable positions, and to help ensure that equal opportunities are afforded to all students.

Objectives

This research project will:

- a) Examine students' personal motivations and experiences when seeking and applying for placements.
- b) Compare the psychological characteristics of students who successfully secure placements with those who are unsuccessful or uninterested in finding placements.
- c) Evaluate the academic performance and careers engagement of placement and non-placement students before and after the application process.

Methodology

Psychology students at Portsmouth are able to complete two different types of placement in professional areas related to psychology: (i) a non-campus based sandwich year placement taken between the second and final year of their degree, and (ii) an optional day placement unit taken alongside other lecture-based units during the final year. Both sandwich year and day placements are introduced to students through briefing sessions held during their second year, with students being required to secure placements by the summer of that academic year.

A questionnaire survey of students placement seeking behaviour will be undertaken which will evaluate students' attitudes towards and reasons for seeking placements, engagement with careers, and other relevant psychological attributes (e.g. achievement motivation, mindset, skills development). Responses will be retrospectively examined between students who successfully secure a placement and those who do not, and

compared against a control group of students from the same cohort who elected not to seek a placement. The academic performance of each group, pre- and post-placement seeking will also be compared.

Following the questionnaire survey, a selection of students who were either successful or unsuccessful in securing placements will also be invited to take part in separate focus groups to explore their experiences whilst seeking and applying for placements. It is envisaged that results will provide valuable data regarding the individual factors and attributes which best predict student success when applying for placements, which will be of use when advising future generations of students.

Timescales

Initial data collection will commence at student placement briefings held in Spring 2015. The critical phase of the research project to be undertaken by the bursary student will be conducted from July - September 2016, once placement outcomes are known. A schedule of work to be undertaken by the student is shown below.

Task/Week	Wk-1	Wk-2	Wk-3	Wk-4	Wk-5	Wk-6	Wk-7	Wk-8
Preparatory reading, literature search and identification of relevant sources/materials.	+++++							---+-
Preparation (survey instructions, question design, and ethical considerations).		++++-						
Finalise survey. (Training and practice survey administration and scoring).		----+	+----					
Participant recruitment and data collection (questionnaire survey).			+++++	+++++				
Data scoring, entry and screening.			----+	----+	----+			
Data analysis (questionnaire).					----+	++----		
Preparation (room and equipment booking).					----+	+----		
Preparation (focus group training, interview schedule design, participant recruitment and arrangements).						-++++		
Data collection (focus groups).							+----	
Focus group transcription and data analysis.							-++++	
Final report preparation and attendance at ASET conference.								+++++

2. BURSARY STUDENT'S ROLE & LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The bursary student's responsibilities will include contributing to the design, preparation and administration of the questionnaire, recruiting participants, data entry and statistical analysis. It is hoped to survey a total of 90 participants from those who were successful, unsuccessful or not seeking placements. The student will also recruit approximately 12 of those surveyed to take part in the two focus groups, will act as facilitator for group discussions, record and transcribe qualitative data and undertake preliminary thematic analysis of responses.

The research project will assist the student in gaining experience of two different research methodologies, and the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative research data. They will be guided in the design of survey items and focus-group schedules as well as trained on the administration and scoring of psychological tests of vocational skills. Their research skills will be enhanced through literature search and information management techniques; familiarity with using mixed methods approaches and experience of the analysis of complex data sets. Specific training on the use of SPSS for advanced analyses will be provided by the applicant (Dr Turner) who is a Principal Lecturer in Research Methods and Statistics. Guidance on the use of psychometric tests will also be provided by the applicant who holds Level A and B+ certification in occupational testing, and is currently listed on the British Psychological Society register of competence. Further guidance will also be available to the student from the co-applicant (Dr Udell) who is a Senior Lecturer in qualitative research methods, with expertise in academic issues relating to student employability and placement learning.

The student will also benefit from becoming part of the existing research community within our department and being a member of its Health & Quality of Working Life group. We hope that through this opportunity, the student will gain first-hand knowledge of applied research projects as well as contributing to the writing and presentation of academic research that will support the student's own professional development, and help stimulate their potential for postgraduate study or future career in research.

3. SUPERVISORS' ROLES & EXPERTISE

The student will be supervised by Dr Turner, Associate Head (Education) of Psychology at the University of Portsmouth, with over 20 years lecturing experience. He is a Chartered Psychologist (AFBPsS) and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) who is passionate about improving the career opportunities of psychology graduates. In 2012, he designed and ran the University's first psychology-based work placement unit, and in 2014, he oversaw the introduction of an optional sandwich-year work placement programme across all undergraduate courses within the Psychology Department.

In 2015, he was awarded British Psychology Society funding to support a summer research student bursary investigating the impact of placements on graduates' transition into the workplace. This research demonstrated that psychology students undertaking placements perceived the experience as highly beneficial to their career development, reporting advantages such as improved workplace confidence and responsibility gained in real-world settings. Whilst not necessarily finding the initial transition to work after graduation easier, placement students were more satisfied than non-placement students with their career progression up to 3-years following graduation. Results from this study will be presented at the society's forthcoming annual conference (Tricker, Turner & Udell, 2016).

Dr Turner will be the student's main supervisor and day-to-day manager during the project. The student will also be jointly supervised by Dr Udell (co-applicant). Dr Udell is the Department Placement Coordinator, who annually leads placement arrangements for 50+ students within the Psychology Department. She is vastly experienced in managing the support and mentoring of psychology students whilst on placement, in advising students seeking placements and liaising with external placement organisations and university careers services to ensure the effective delivery of placement opportunities.

4. SUPPORT FROM SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Full agreement to support and resource the project has been given by Dr Sherria Hoskins, Head of Psychology. The Department agrees to provide all computing equipment, software and laboratory space necessary for the conduct of the research and to meet any incidental costs relating to psychometric test consumables, questionnaire printing, or recording equipment. Training in the use of specialist software or equipment will also be given to the student during the bursary. Any additional travel costs related to attendance at the ASET conference will also be met by the department.

5. RELEVANCE TO WIDER SECTOR

Growth in higher education participation rates and increased competition within the graduate job market, mean it is more important than ever for students to gain work experience during their degree that will help develop their future employability. This may be especially true in subject areas where the progression into specific vocations is less clear-cut.

Data from the proposed research will be of value to HEIs seeking to maximise the potential of their students to successfully secure placement opportunities. Findings will help identify key attributes and actions which differentiate between successful and unsuccessful placement applications, independent of academic ability. This knowledge may be used to help provide more effective developmental guidance to students to help improve their chances of securing placements and improve placement seeking support strategies such that the number of successful placement applications may be expected to increase.