

Exploring student experiences of UK MSc Health Psychology courses: Outcomes of an EHPS Tandem Grant.

Sarah Tonkin-Crine We were very pleased to be awarded the EHPS Create Tandem Grant in 2015 to carry out research exploring student experiences of studying MSc Health Psychology programmes in the UK. The Create Tandem grant allows two early career researchers from different European

countries to work together to strengthen networks between universities and research groups. Although we completed our training at the same time, undertaking the PhD Health Psychology Research and Professional Practice at the University of Southampton together, we had both gone to work in different universities and focus on different topics in health psychology. We were aware that we both worked in strong research teams, Sarah at the University of Oxford, and Jenny at the National University of Ireland, Galway and were keen to see how we could share the skills we had developed by working on a joint project.

Developing the Tandem Grant Proposal

Our idea for the research study came about after we both attended a British Psychological Society Stage 2 Health Psychology supervisor training course. The Stage 2 qualification forms part of health psychology training in the UK, where professional health psychology training is well established. The UK British Psychological Society Qualification in Health Psychology consists of the completion of a BPS accredited Master of Science

(MSc) in Health Psychology (Stage 1) and structured supervised practice to demonstrate core health psychology competences (Stage 2). A number of universities offer accredited Stage 2 professional doctorates and since 2007, the NHS Education For Scotland has supported funded Stage 2 trainee health psychologist positions (Johnston, Weinman, & Chater, 2011).

After a day of discussing how we can support students to develop through Stage 2 supervision, we started thinking about the MSc students that we taught and our own experiences of studying MSc courses. Although recent research has sought to explore A-level students views of health psychology (Greenwell & Turnbull, 2014; Lewis-Smith, et al., 2014) and the core skills held by trainees and qualified health psychologists (Bull, et al., 2012), we realised there was no existing research exploring MSc students' motivations for studying health psychology, their understanding of professional training and their aspirations for future employment. We wanted to find out how we could promote the discipline when we taught on MSc courses and how we could support our PhD students to develop the careers they wanted to pursue. Stage 2 training in Ireland was under development at this time, and we were also interested to see how the established training in the UK could inform developments in Ireland. The EHPS Create Tandem Grant provided us with an opportunity to work together on a topic of interest to both of us, which had the potential to contribute to the further development of health psychology as a discipline.

The Student Experiences of studying health Psychology (STEP) study.

On being awarded the tandem grant we initially sought to map the MSc courses currently being run in the UK which focussed on health psychology. We were surprised to identify 30 courses which were accredited by the BPS to provide Stage 1 training. We contacted the programme leads of each course to find out about their intake of students, how long the course had been running and whether they offered a placement to students. We were very grateful to have responses from nearly all lecturers and were pleased to hear that several had thought the study sounded interesting. The majority of course leads were happy for their students to participate in the study and agreed to advertise the study for us if required. This enabled us to purposively select courses across the UK with specific characteristics from which to recruit students.

Whilst contacting various universities, and collating information about courses in the UK, we worked on developing materials for the study. The grant enabled us to have our first meeting in Galway where we were able to pilot the interview guide with MSc Health Psychology students at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Although within a different education and healthcare system, students in Ireland had similar experiences of studying health psychology and we were able to develop and amend the questions we wanted to use in our study. In speaking to the students in Galway we were interested in the breadth of reasons that students had chosen to study health psychology and the diversity in what students planned to do in the future. All felt that having an equivalent Stage 2 programme in Ireland would be beneficial.

Following our pilot work in Ireland we obtained ethics from the University of Oxford Medical Sciences Division enabling us to start recruiting students for interviews. We selected specific courses in the UK based on the number of students

studying in 2015/16, the length of time the course had been running, whether the course offered a placement and geographic location in the UK. We were pleased to get several responses from students indicating interest in the study despite recruiting over the Christmas period and exam time. The majority of interviews were carried out by phone or skype however the funding did allow us to make visits to three universities in Scotland and England to interview students in person which helped to advertise the study and increase interest.



First meeting at National University of Ireland, Galway.

We enjoyed speaking to the 18 students who participated in an interview across 7 universities. During the interviews, we had some great discussions about how students first heard of health psychology, what they had initially expected when starting their course, how they were finding their study and what they wanted to do on completion of their MSc. Whilst undertaking the analysis we identified several points of interest in students' reports of their experiences. We were

encouraged at the knowledge students had about the training paths in health psychology however many students expressed uncertainty about the next steps, given the lack of a clear career pathway. All students reported enjoying their course but many reported that the content differed from their initial expectations. Several mentioned that their views of what health psychology was had changed since starting the course for example that their understanding of health psychology had become broader and they now had a greater insight into the role of health psychology research applied to health care. We found that many were interested in pursuing a career in health psychology but perceived several barriers. For example, feeling lost about the next steps, and concern about the additional time and financial investment required to become a registered Health Psychologist or complete a PhD. These reflections provide some interesting lessons to those promoting health psychology as a career.

We were able to present the initial results of our work at two health psychology conference both in Ireland and the UK; an oral presentation at the Psychology, Health and Medicine conference at University College Cork in May 2016 and a poster presentation at the EHPS Annual Conference in Aberdeen in August 2016. We were pleased to get a great response from both students and lecturers at the conferences and were encouraged that many showed interest in seeing the final results.

Now we have finished analysis we plan to publish our study in the near future to enable us to share our results with a wider audience. We believe that our results are particularly encouraging for those running MSc Health Psychology courses as our findings show the interest that students have in health psychology and career paths within the discipline. The enthusiasm and interest from students in pursuing health psychology careers was also encouraging and results are likely to be of interest to undergraduate students who are considering training in health psychology. The

results have helped us to consider our own teaching on MSc courses, for example through emphasizing the transferable skills being taught relevant to a range of careers and including careers sessions from early in the year to support interested students in pursuing careers in health psychology. Our findings also suggest ways to improve promotion of our discipline in general including highlighting the positives of a discipline with multiple possible career options and including health psychology content at undergraduate level.



Poster presentation at EHPS Annual Conference in Aberdeen

We are very grateful to all the students who took part in the study. These students represent the future of health psychology; harnessing their interest and facilitating their career development is vital to the future of the discipline. We are also grateful to the course directors and lecturers who provided information about their MSc programmes and who advertised the study for us. We were particularly encouraged by the interest that both staff and students had in the project and hope that the results will be informative to those planning a

career in health psychology and those who seek to support students in developing their careers.

Finally, the EHPS Tandem groups provided us with a chance to be lead investigators on a small grant, an important and sometimes challenging step in developing a research career. Submitting the application, organising and recording meetings, managing finances, and completing the project on time are all important skills that we developed together. We would like to thank the EHPS Create group for the opportunity to carry out this work and would encourage other early career researchers to apply for the grants which are available.



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