



Associate Editor: Nicola Hills

Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com

Thinking about a postgraduate degree?

CHOOSING to do a PhD just over 10 years ago was a bad decision. I'm not saying that I'm now unhappy with my chosen career. Far from it – applying psychology to practical problems in the workplace is interesting work.

But it was my decision-making process that was bad. If I'm honest, I did a PhD because I didn't know what else to do. I'd been to careers seminars, but nothing really appealed. Then an advert for an industry-sponsored scholarship caught my eye. So, lo and behold! I was being paid to be a postgraduate.

While my career has turned out OK, that was over 10 years ago – and the job market has changed a lot since then. Nowadays I talk to students embarking on PhDs and MSc courses, and I have a whole different perspective on it all.

Talk to practising professionals

Speak to at least half-a-dozen people who work in the field before embarking on your course. Don't rely on course tutors to tell you how the job is – they are effectively on commission to sell the course (and its fees) to you. Speak to practising psychologists. What are the highs and lows of doing it day in, day out? Is there much administration and form-filling? Do they work for an employer or are they effectively self-employed?

But ask about the lifestyle too. What are the hours like? What is the salary like? What are the prospects for career advancement and pay increases? How easy is it to take maternity leave?

Understand that experience is more important than qualifications

It's a situation that most clinical psychologists are familiar with. You can't get a place on a clinical course unless you've got some experience. Unfortunately, the same is rarely true of occupational and health psychology courses around the country, some of which hand out places even though the competition for jobs is so fierce that only a percentage will end up as actual psychologists.

For example, if you look at firms that employ occupational psychologists, they usually say the same thing – they all want

BY ROB YEUNG

people with work experience. So make sure that you get some. Take a gap year or two before doing an MSc. If there is a good employer, offer to work for free



for a couple of months to get valuable experience on your CV. Even if you can't work as a psychologist – having some experience of working in a professional environment will stand you in better stead than having simply studied for your entire adult life.

Choose your dissertation topic carefully

Don't plump for a dissertation simply because it is interesting to you. Consider what potential employers are interested in – are there hot topics that they are wrestling with at the moment?

Even better, to demonstrate that you are not a crusty old-school academic, try to get involved with organisations other than your university. Think of ways to make your research as broad as possible. Can you do your clinical research across a number of health authorities? Can you test your workplace stress intervention in a business rather than on students? Can you get sponsorship – even if it's only to pay the postage costs for your survey – to demonstrate that you can forge partnerships across organisational boundaries?

These are all key skills that will make you more employable after your course of study.

Build your contacts

'It's not what you know but who you know.' Having a qualification and a good understanding of your field is important. But employers often recruit the people they already know.

Presenting a paper at conference is a good way to get your name embedded into employers' minds. Finding out about other professional associations and attending their events is another way. For example, in addition to the BPS Division of Occupational Psychology, there is the Association of Business Psychologists (www.theabp.org).

Even if you only manage to meet someone for two minutes, that could make a difference when they are interviewing you for a job a couple of years down the line.

So don't let yourself get too focused on your postgraduate research and study. Keep an eye on the future as well, and what you need to do to get the job you want.

■ *Dr Rob Yeung is a director of Talentspace, a business psychology consultancy (www.talentspace.co.uk).*

BEHIND THE NAME

by Noel Sheehy

GORDON ALLPORT pioneered an approach to the study of personality that emphasises the influence of social processes on personality development and stresses the importance of free will and personal responsibility. His simple Protestant upbringing imbued values of cleanliness, piety and virtue. Allport met with Freud on only one occasion during which he told Freud a story about early onset of phobia. It was about a four-year-old boy Allport had seen on the tram on the way to visit Freud. Allport reckoned Freud might be interested in this young fellow's fear of dirt. Freud listened, fixed his therapeutic eye on Allport and enquired 'Was that little boy you?'

Further reading: Nicholson, I.A.M. (2002). *Inventing personality: Gordon Allport and the science of selfhood*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.