

Getting a good deal out of education

Chris Scott, Chair of the Society's Scottish Division of Educational Psychology (SDEP), draws on his career path and present job to illuminate some issues facing educational psychology in Scotland, and talks about the SDEP's activities

The SDEP is something of an anomaly; the only Society Division at least partly defined by geography. It represents the distinct context of Scotland with its own issues and practice shaped by separate legislation and policy-setting mechanisms. It serves to communicate between practising psychologists in Scotland and the Society.

The Division has a particular focus on training and practice of educational psychology. Training is a key issue for us at the moment and was a particular issue for me when I started my career. When I started to study psychology I knew little more about the subject than the picture the media painted. I certainly didn't think about educational psychology as a job. I was interested in teaching and children's issues in general. Various jobs after my degree – in social work, as a classroom auxiliary and an EFL teacher in Romania – coupled with a meeting with an educational psychologist gave me experience of the practical applications of psychology and interested me in the Scottish training route.

In England, the route to becoming an educational psychologist was a one-year course for which you had to have a teaching qualification. In Scotland the route comprised a two-year MSc course preceded by two years' experience working with children. The increased course length allowed us to go into issues in more depth. Students from different backgrounds also brought a wide range

of experience, and this peer learning was a really valuable feature of our training. This also helped to prepare us for the multidisciplinary model, which is central to contemporary practice in Scotland.

Scottish training arrangements are still specific. The Universities of Dundee and Strathclyde offer two-year MSc courses, which are followed by a one-year probation and supervised practice. So, although students don't come out with a doctoral qualification, the course content is pitched at a doctoral level. All psychologists employed by local authorities have to be eligible to be chartered educational psychologists with the British Psychological Society.

We believe this is a good system, but the Division is constantly reviewing the arrangements. The Scottish Executive, now called the Scottish Government, continues to make a commitment to offer a training grant to support people during their MSc. This funding has been fixed for a number of years, perhaps reflecting the importance of educational psychology in Scotland: it is a requirement for local authorities to provide a psychological service. Most of our work concentrates on working with school-aged children, but many psychological services in Scotland are also funded to provide support to the post-school sector.

When I trained, there were 12 people

on my course; now there are 27 on the training programme. We are constantly keeping an eye on balancing the supply and demand for jobs nationally. At the moment we have the balance just about right, but predictions suggest we may not have enough qualified people in around seven years' time. We're also investigating the pros and cons of doctoral training for Scotland. The DECP requires a three-year

doctoral postgraduate course to qualify as an educational psychologist. On the surface this seems like a good thing, but we're trying to predict any unintended consequences

and evidence the value to employers, families and children. In essence we're looking at exploring the training arrangements so that the profession is fit for the challenges facing Scottish education for the next 15 years.

Scottish legislators have been active in the areas we work in. The Currie Review of Educational Psychology Services in Scotland (2002) looked at issues such as CPD, quality assurance and ensuring that psychologists had the resources and time to do what they're supposed to be doing –

“our task is not just, for instance, assessing individual children”

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FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Lecturer (0.5 wte)
Employer: University of Edinburgh

Elsewhere in this section, Chris Scott talks about the effect of particular Scottish legislation on the work of educational psychologists and the Scottish Division of Educational Psychology (SDEP). This month's featured job highlights both the influence of such legislation on clinical and child psychology, and the growing use of psychological techniques in society. Matthias Schwannauer, Programmes Director at the University explains:

The lecturer will work on the MSc in Applied Psychology for Children and Young People. The first course intake was in January 2007 and is open to students with the Society's graduate basis for registration. It is proving very popular; we have 15–20 places and get 150–200 applications annually. The trainees are paid as employees of the NHS during the year's course and qualify as Clinical Associates in Applied Psychology (Children and Young People) on successful completion.

The MSc responds to structural changes in Scottish child and adolescent mental health services, as well as innovations in the training structure for applied psychologists. It was developed with support from NHS for Education Scotland, Health Boards in Scotland, and many clinical psychology departments for children and young people.

“this role reflects real innovations in the way psychologists work”

A number of recent policy documents have created a need for more child and adolescent mental health practitioners in Scotland. These new roles will help deliver increased psychological healthcare in universal as well as specialised service settings. Services for children, young people and their families will benefit from enhanced capacity to intervene early in a child's development or early in the stage of problem cycles.

The course equips graduate psychologists with the clinical and academic competencies required to contribute to service delivery in these areas. It also offers a novel career development path for psychology graduates within this area of applied psychology.

Our approach focuses on evidence-based interventions for children, families and young people. Models of developmental psychology and developmental psychopathology provide a solid theoretical foundation for the course. Service placements emphasise the consistent development of core clinical competencies of evidence-based practice and effective treatment models. There is a particular focus on shifting focus to early intervention and prevention of disorder, both early in a child's life and early in a problem cycle.

The successful candidate for the job will be a clinical psychologist with a strong interest in developmental psychology and a commitment to clinical training and research. Because the course combines academic study and work placements, understanding and interest in both areas is essential. We work as a strong team between the University of Edinburgh and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and good team working abilities are essential, as is a real passion to make this innovative policy initiative work. We are particularly looking for someone with experience and a genuine interest in web-based e-learning as developments in this area are going to be essential to the course's success.

I think this role reflects real innovations in the way psychologists work and therefore changes in the shape and content of their training. It's going to be a challenge for the successful candidate, but one which allows them to influence future practice.

You can find this job on p.258, and with many others on www.psychapp.co.uk. The site provides a valuable resource to Society members and employers alike. Those advertising in the print edition receive a free online ad, or employers can choose to advertise online-only for just £150 (NHS and academic) or £250 (commercial organisations).

practising psychology. Educational psychologists are also developing practice that is consistent with the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act, Getting it Right for Every Child and the Curriculum for Excellence.

As educational psychologists, our task is not just, for instance, assessing individual children. We are specifically targeted to work more holistically: at institutional as well as individual level, undertaking multidisciplinary consultation and assessment as well as applying specific psychological knowledge in interventions, training and research.

Let me provide an illustration. On the website of Dundee City Council's Educational Psychology Services where I work, our first two listed activities are Consultation and Casework. Our view of assessment and intervention takes a collaborative approach to this activity: we work with children, their families, teachers and the wider school setting. The work is also multidisciplinary, involving, for instance, social workers and home visitors. We also contribute to whole school development in areas such as communication skills, better behaviour and other topics that have been identified through negotiation.

I can also point to an average day in the life of an educational psychologist to show how these functions and levels create a varied range of tasks. In the morning you might be busy playing (observing) in the water tray with a pre-school child, then later in the morning talking about a school's disciplinary policy with the head teacher: there might be a case meeting with social workers in the afternoon before a discussion at authority level on trends and development of policy related to additional support needs.

contribute

We would like to hear from our readers about what areas of psychology you would like to see covered in these pages.

Articles and interviews can cover any topic related to careers in psychology, including:

- | Getting on the career ladder
- | Career progression
- | Recent developments and trends
- | 'Warts and all' accounts of the highs and lows of your work
- | Your careers-related letters

We rely on your contributions and we can support and advise you through the process.

E-mail your suggestions to ian.florance@bps.org.uk.

To be a successful educational psychologist in this context you need a range of skills, attributes and interests: commitment; interest in educational outcomes; relationship building. The ability to solve problems and make decisions without being perfectionist is crucial. You don't work in a laboratory.

A firm grounding in theory is essential but you also need to be able to build relationships and communicate in appropriate ways. When someone says 'But that sounds like common sense', I take it as a compliment.

Equally you must work to make a difference but understand that many of your contributions will be behind the scenes: you're often working indirectly through other people. I see educational psychologists as good social scientists but also good artists, displaying judgement, empathy and approachability. They are

people who are familiar with impact, target setting and outcomes, but realise the limitations in describing their activity in isolation. This is particularly important to keep in mind as services are undergoing inspection.

We are committed to the aim of providing a high-quality contribution to Scottish education, maintaining professional standards and ensuring the public is protected. In this regard the Division is working to ensure that the Society's negotiations regarding statutory regulation with the HPC meet these core aims. Thankfully, we're all united by the feeling that Scottish educational psychology has very good foundations to address the new challenges facing it.

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Education for all in a time of change

Ian Florance talks to Jean Law, who reflects on an eventful year chairing the Society's Division of Educational and Child Psychology, and on what the future holds

Hardly a week goes by without the media reporting a major change in educational provision, debates over funding, controversy over exam results or statements about lifelong learning. We talked to Dr Jean Law as she handed over as Chair of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP), to find out what impact this has on the ground, and what the future holds.

Have all the changes affected morale in the profession?

To some extent. There have been many changes and developments in how local authorities are organised. It's had some impact on motivation and morale. I think we're struggling to keep our professional identity clear and distinct in some of the new structures.

But educational psychology is a wonderful job, and recent developments have made it even more varied; working with children, teachers and at an

institutional and local authority level. No day is the same and we don't have one model – say the medical one – to apply; we have to decide about our approaches.

You mention a loss of professional identity. What do you mean by that?

I don't want to overemphasise it. It's an aspect of the reorganisation of child services which we support.

Among other high-profile incidents, the Victoria Climbié tragedy highlighted gaps between different services and led to the setting up of multidisciplinary child and young people services. This entails a real – and welcome – change to our work. Many of us are working more in the community and in multidisciplinary teams, whilst some services work more in school improvement.

We tend to be locally based, and for some time most of our

work has been focused through schools. We do more work outside school now and concentrate on areas such as vulnerable children and their families, children in care and ethnic minority families, as well as issues such as special educational needs assessment and intervention. But this move to multidisciplinary working can make effective CPD and peer

support more difficult. Some teams are now led by non-psychologists.

Of course, different areas organise this in different ways. The general idea is that any multidisciplinary team must be more like a good crisp salad than a mushy vegetable soup: each profession has different skills to contribute and that diversity of approach will result in better outcomes. It mustn't be lost.

Another issue that's reappeared is the suggestion from a House of Commons Select Committee that the

assessment of and provision for special needs should be separated. This idea suggests that separating the two would ensure that there would be no bias in evaluating special needs requirements. The upshot might be that educational psychologists have to leave local authority employment. This is an ongoing argument that we need to keep an eye on.

Then there's statutory regulation.

I gather there's real disagreement about how much difference this will make.

It's dangerous if practice has to change to fit policy requirements. My big issue is that the statements of proficiency don't fit educational psychology practice. They're based on the model of a single practitioner working with a single client in a health-type setting, using a medical model. Educational psychology isn't like that. Our work with groups, families and at a policy and project level needs to be included.

This leads neatly into a central

"any multidisciplinary team must be more like a good crisp salad"

Rejection and dejection

We all know being rejected for a job can be upsetting, but Dr David Biggs and colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire have found that it can feel like being rejected by a romantic partner or, at its worst, going through a divorce.

Dr Biggs, programme director for the Occupational Psychology course at Gloucestershire, reported the findings at January's Division of Occupational Psychology Conference.

'The research was interview-based. People react more strongly to rejection than we'd thought. One person compared it to a

divorce where one party thinks they're useless. One even stated that they needed to have a year-long psychological break as the constant rejections were having an effect on them and their family.

Overall, the study found that the effects can last for years or even make people emigrate.'

"force yourself to apply for another job... to get back into the swing"

issue for the Division: training.

My job involves a lot of work in this area and it is taking up a lot of time within the DECP. Statutory regulation will obviously affect the curriculum we deliver to create effective educational psychologists.

Training has changed a lot. When I trained there were two routes. You could get the graduate basis for registration, a teaching qualification and a minimum of two years' teaching experience before going on to train as an educational psychologist. My route was slightly different: I taught, got interested in behaviour and then did a psychology degree. This gave me GBR and entrance to a professional course.

The first big issue at the moment is training enough people to meet the undoubted demand. We've introduced three-year doctorate training, and the third cohort starts the course in September 2008. The move to three-year courses will change the demographics of the profession: we'll have younger educational psychologists from a wider variety of backgrounds, because the teaching component is no longer needed. But the move has also caused a blip in supply; for two years no one has qualified, and this feeds into

a situation where there are always job vacancies.

There are two other issues. One's a longer term one: by 2012 a lot of people will have come up to retirement age. The other is geographical: the ratio of psychologist to head of population varies around the country. This sometimes reflects specific needs, sometimes other issues such as budgets.

In addition to all these issues there is the huge, and unresolved issue of funding for the three-year course. The funding for the first year has been withdrawn twice. The Educational Psychology Future Implementation Group is trying to sort out a longer-term funding strategy. At present in years two and three, students are employed by local authorities. Can they actually support 390 to 450 trainees when the bursary for year one does finally end by 2009?

To sum up, society seems to view educational psychology as an increasingly important contributor to society. We need to ensure there are enough well-trained professional people to deliver it.

Despite these concerns you seem very positive.

Statutory assessment for special educational needs has

been seen as something of a straitjacket for the profession. We have been, and some of us still are, too identified with it as a profession and are sometimes seen by schools and parents as a block within the system, preventing children getting the extra help they need. An assessment could cost between £3000 and £4000, and special needs budgets are not infinite. A local authority has to try to direct its limited resources to those in most need.

Like most educational psychologists, my first job was delivering services to a 'patch' of schools. I now work for Leicestershire, where I'm part of the management team for 50 staff, including 20 full-time equivalent educational psychologists, as well as teachers and others working in multidisciplinary teams. We're involved in the community on issues like anti-bullying work, as well as addressing high-profile issues such as autism spectrum disorders and ADHD.

The local authority has just had its first area review since becoming a children's service, and we had a very good report.

So, despite the policy issues that need sorting – and I'm very involved in and enjoying a role which looks at the big picture –

Does Dr Biggs have any advice for job seekers? 'Respondents fell into two defined groups: those who got straight back in the saddle and tried for more jobs and those who felt victimised. The former seemed more successful, so my advice is to force yourself to apply for another job..to get back in the swing.'

Should employers do anything? 'There were no specific findings but, generally, try to ensure your recruitment methods are not only professionally carried out but obviously relevant. Explain how they relate to the job and how they're used. We discovered a strong anti-psychometric bias. People thought their rejection was based on one set of test results which they didn't see as relevant.'

For more information on Dr Biggs's work see tinyurl.com/ytzer2

our day-to-day work is stimulating and rewarding.

So, given this transformation, what makes a good educational psychologist?

Communication and good interpersonal skills are key. Our work is all about communication with other people, often in getting them to change the way they are working with children and young people.

That said, I think we need to be more overt and upfront about our psychological knowledge – to state why we're doing something, giving sound scientific reasons, making the psychology involved apparent. There's a lot of half-understood psychology around, and we work with other professionals who use psychologically based techniques. Sometimes this is harmless, sometimes it can be off-beam. We need to stress that we're a profession with an expert body of knowledge. Evidence-based practice is crucial.

We have sometimes had a bit of a reputation for being navel-gazing, of either not intervening or taking a long time to come up with obvious solutions. We need to have the courage of our convictions: to listen and think, and when we have to explain what we're doing, say where the psychology is.