

Teaching-focused careers in psychology

Victoria Bourne (Royal Holloway, University of London)

For many academics the most challenging part of the job is the juggling act that is necessary to balance the competing demands of research and teaching, and there are increasing expectations for both. Academics are under pressure to produce and maintain a substantial level of publications in journals with high impact factors. There are also expectations to apply for and (hopefully) gain research funding, in spite of cuts to the research funds available to academics.

At the same time, teaching is an important part of an academic's job; encompassing not only lectures, but also small group teaching, supervision, pastoral support course design and coordination. As with research, the demands for teaching are also increasing. Particularly with the move to £9,000 fees, students are (not unreasonably) demanding not only excellent teaching but also increased contact hours, pastoral support, career development and work-experience opportunities.

In order to cope with these increasing and often conflicting demands, a number of the 'research intensive' universities have been developing a teaching-focused career path. This allows some academics to focus on research activities and others to focus on teaching activities. With individuals specialising in each of these areas it may be easier for departments to achieve and maintain excellence in both teaching and research.

The development of a 'teaching-focused' career path has raised a number of issues for individuals who wish to pursue this track. For example: What should the job description of a teaching-focused academic entail? How does it differ from the more traditional 'research-focused' career path? Should teaching-focused academics also be researchers, and what kinds of topics should they be researching? Finally, what are the career progression opportunities for those on a teaching-focused track, and what are appropriate criteria for progression and promotion?

In many ways there is relatively little difference between the jobs of a teaching-focused academic and the more traditional

academic role. Both have three core components: research, teaching and administration. The main distinction is in the amount of time that is dedicated to each component. Whilst the exact distribution can vary, traditional academics tend to divide their time roughly equally between research, administration and teaching.

Teaching-focused academics are likely to dedicate around 50–70 per cent of their time to teaching activities. The administrative jobs that they take on are also likely to focus on teaching activities.



Depending on the institution and contract, a teaching-focused academic may also have some time to engage in their research interests. Whilst individuals pursuing a teaching-focused career are clearly enthusiastic about teaching and dedicated to providing students with an excellent learning experience, this does not necessarily mean that they are not also interested in pursuing or maintaining their own research interests. So, what role should research take within a teaching-focused career?

First, it is important that all academic staff who contribute to teaching a psychological curriculum are credible researchers. Psychological understanding is so embedded within psychological research that much of our teaching involves research. This is particularly the case in the supervision of research projects. Students often want to be supervised by an expert in the field,

and therefore being an active researcher is likely to also make you an excellent supervisor. Whilst some students are keen to pursue their own research interests, others benefit greatly from working within an established lab and research programme. This is one of the areas where the role of the 'researcher' and 'teacher' academic most overlaps. Therefore a student's research experience is likely to be enhanced by working with a supervisor who is an active researcher.

It is, however, clear that the higher teaching and administrative workloads associated with teaching-focused roles will impact on the time available to do research. This means that teaching-focused academics need to be far more selective when deciding which research opportunities to pursue. For most teaching-focused academics, their PhD research and their main research interests will be within a 'traditional' area of research, such as cognition, neuroscience, personality or social psychology. However, once on a teaching-focused career track, people may feel that they have to make the decision between using their precious and limited research time to pursue their 'traditional' research interests, or whether they should pursue more 'pedagogical' research interests.

It is worth considering whether there is an area of research that may allow more pedagogical questions to be asked in combination with your traditional research interests and methodological approaches. For example, a researcher in clinical anxiety may examine presentation anxiety or a researcher in individual differences might explore learning styles and performance across different methods of assessment. This combined approach may allow the researcher to pursue the original area of research that inspired them to enter academia, whilst also enabling them to draw pedagogical conclusions from their research.

Opportunities for career progression are also an important consideration for anyone considering a teaching-focused career. Most institutions provide the opportunity for promotion to senior lecturer level (or equivalent) on the basis of evidence that you are an excellent teacher who can design and coordinate an excellent module. For this, teaching prizes

and student feedback are likely to help achieve promotion. Some institutions do not have a teaching-focused track that progresses beyond this level, but for those who do, what more can you achieve than being an excellent teacher and coordinator that might justify further promotion?

For this, it might help to not just think about how you can provide an excellent learning experience for your students, but also to consider how your teaching activities might have a wider impact. At a department level, this might involve mentoring or training more junior staff (such as PhD students who teach), or taking on higher-level administrative responsibilities, such as programme-level coordination. You might want to look outside of your department at your institution. Might there be opportunities to become involved in administrative tasks such as programme reviews or quality assurance panels?

It may also be beneficial to look for opportunities outside of your institution, for example by becoming involved in events coordinated by the BPS Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology, or by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Recognition of your teaching excellence at a national level, such as through the HEA's Senior Fellowship or National Teaching Fellows schemes, will also provide strong validation for the quality of your teaching activities. This would also be a good time in a teaching-focused career to pursue external examining opportunities. Pedagogical publications, whether research articles or textbooks, are also a good way of demonstrating the wider impact of your teaching excellence.

Being a teaching-focused academic can be a very rewarding career for those who are passionate about improving the student experience. This may be through directly teaching and inspiring students early in your career, or through influencing and inspiring others to become excellent teachers later on in your career. Regardless, the emergence and recognition of a specialised teaching-focused career path is an exciting time for those of us who may previously have felt some guilt or embarrassment over their desire to be an 'excellent teacher'.

Special Group's website – www.sgcp.org.uk – provides a useful Q&A on how to join, the process involved and training. 'There are now a number of courses including PhDs which encourage a primary focus on coaching psychology research and practice. We've worked to develop CPD events and publications to support the needs of our members as well as of our profession. That the Society has actively welcomed the introduction of a Post-Qualification Register for coaching psychologists indicates that coaching psychology is coming to be accepted as a distinct application and area of expertise.'

Talking to Sarah, it's clear that coaching psychology has been strengthened by growth in positive psychology and in applications such as sports science. 'There's been a move to medicalise human distress. To some extent we offer a counterweight to over-enthusiastic medicalisation.'

I've never interviewed a coaching psychologist who was less than friendly, informative, a good listener and, above all, open to ideas. It may be these very qualities that, as Sarah puts it, will ultimately enable applied psychologists to revise any unhelpful and outdated tendencies towards silo-based thinking.

'I'm using every bit of psychology I ever learnt'

Reflecting back on over 40 years of working, initially in the NHS, then in the university sector and now as an independent practitioner, I realise how many, varied opportunities to learn professionally and academically I've had. I've loved my work and learnt from clients and colleagues. This has continued even since retiring from my university job as pro-vice chancellor and professor of psychology. Soon after I left



the psychology department to become the university PVC Learning and Teaching someone said to me 'Don't you miss being a psychologist?'. My response was that I'm using every bit of psychology I ever learnt in creative ways in this new role to bring people on board and to lead change across the university.

I started my working career as a graduate sociologist and nurse specialising in oncology, and then moved into mental health as a nurse behaviour therapist in the specialist unit at the Middlesex Hospital. Later I became a nurse teacher. Questions relating to psychology, behaviour change, personal and professional learning, counselling and health drove me to further study and a move into the world of psychology at City

University, London. I developed and taught

masters and doctoral programmes in the health and counselling psychology areas.

It was the transition from full-time psychologist to PVC that led me to think and read more deeply about coaching and related psychology and to support the development of the Interest Group and then the Special Group in Coaching Psychology. I was a founder member of the SGCP and also chair of the first annual conference. Maybe it is the richness of collaborations and the diversity of areas of research and practice that enables me to feel so at home in the world of coaching psychology. I remain emeritus professor of psychology at City University, have completed a business coach training and now practise independently, drawing on all of my professional and academic learning experiences of over 40 years. My interest now is to collaborate widely to facilitate, with others, the further development and drawing together of the significant and diverse body of knowledge which is coaching psychology.

Mary Watts, Past Chair of the SGCP