

Getting on clinical training courses

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The Psychologist, December 1998, pp589-592

The demand for training in Clinical Psychology has always outstripped supply, with the result that each year a substantial number of good-quality applicants are upset and puzzled by their failure to get on a course. Some of this puzzlement finds its way into the correspondence sections of *The Psychologist*; much of it condenses into a set of hunches about the magic combination of experiences which will gain entry to training. Sometimes the hunches are right, sometimes they are wrong, and this can lead to a suspicion that entry criteria are arbitrary or even perversely difficult to achieve.

In a previous article (Roth and Leiper 1995), Rob Leiper and I attempted to remove at least some of the opacity surrounding selection systems. We surveyed courses, enquired about their selection methods, and concluded that a lot of thought and care went into the selection process. We had hoped that this article would clear-up some of the mythology, and help aspirant candidates to think more clearly about entry requirements. However, over the past year more letters and comment have appeared in *The Psychologist*, again reflecting frustration and misconceptions both about selection and the reasons for the bottleneck into training.

The purpose of this article is to try - as far as I can - to clarify some of the misconceptions around selection. Inevitably there is a limit to how far this can be done - I do not speak for all courses (though I have incorporated the comments of a number of course directors in this article), and there is some variation in what each course looks for. Nonetheless, what follows should be useful information for candidates and those who advise them.

How hard is to get onto a course?

Though it is hard to gain a place on a training course, the process is less competitive than is sometimes imagined. In 1997, 1,642 people applied for the 315 places on offer - a ratio of 5.2:1. This overall figure disguises considerable variation in the likelihood of a successful application to a particular course. Across the 23 courses in the clearing house for 1997 the ratio of places to applications varies from 1:7 to 1:29 (figures which need to be interpreted in the context of the fact that each applicant usually applies to four courses).

If there is so much demand for clinical psychologists, why do courses remain so small?

The increasing demand for the services of clinical psychologists is not being met by the numbers being trained. Over the years a number of reports recommended significant increases in training numbers, but these were not acted on, and slow and incremental growth followed. More recently the picture has changed. The Department of Health has clearly indicated a wish to see the profession expanded, and purchasers of training have responded; the current growth rate for clinical training is extraordinary when contrasted to other professions in the NHS (see Table 1). In spite of this (rather belated) growth, it is the case that there are fewer training places than applicants, though it has to be said that this situation is hardly unusual, and is shared by almost every other profession.

Why can't courses expand faster?

There are limits to the rate of expansion. There would be little problem if courses only offered academic teaching; in reality, clinical training involves a mix of academic input and experience gained on placement. Finding the appropriate number of placements is a challenge for most courses - there is no automatic requirement that practitioners offer supervision, not all placements have the resources to offer training, and there is increasing specialisation, all of which means that it can be hard to identify enough units meeting the criteria for "core" placements (all trainees must gain experience of work with children, adults and older people, and with people with learning disabilities). Because we are still a small profession, this can place a lot of pressure on supervisors of some core placements - there simply aren't enough of them, and this limits the number of trainees that can be taken on.

In fact the current rates of expansion already pose some problems. Training lasts for 3 years, and psychologists only become eligible to supervise 2 years after training, which means that it is 5 years before any increase in training numbers impacts on the number of placements that can be offered. As a result, the training load on current supervisors increases rapidly as courses expand. This can be illustrated by considering the position of North Thames, where the growth in the number of training commissions since 1991 is producing a widening gap between the number of newly eligible supervisors and new trainees (see Table 2 and Figure 1). This rapid increase in training load will continue for some time, and is managed only by supervisors placing training at the head of a long list of other professional demands - for which the North Thames courses and their trainees are very grateful.

Is the system fair?

In some ways the system is unfair, because some of those failing to gain places are appropriately qualified. In the final stages of selection courses are attempting to distinguish between candidates of very similar abilities, and the reliability of any selection procedure decreases under such conditions - indeed all course staff know the frustration of rejecting people they know would make good psychologists.

However, at earlier stages of selection the system is probably more robust. Some applicants are weak, and some are probably misconceived in their attempts to gain entry. A particular sub-group to whom this judgment applies are those who hold a 2ii degree class.

Why do courses have a minimum entry requirement of a 2i?

Few candidates holding a 2ii degree gain a training place. Ninety five people (6% of all applicants) applied with a 2ii in 1997; only 8 gained a place, an acceptance rate of just 8% for this group, contrasted with the overall acceptance rate of 24.5%. Usually such individuals will have studied for a further degree, and will have references which account for their failure to gain a 2i.

Though this issue impacts on relatively few applicants, the 2i entry requirement has been the subject of a number of recent letters and comments in *The Psychologist*, and is seen by some as excluding otherwise worthy candidates. Because of this concern, I think it is worth explaining and defending the insistence on minimum academic standards. All courses now award doctoral degrees, and the work expected of trainees (in both academic and clinical settings) is demanding. The criteria of a 2i was set at a time when only a third of students

could expect such a degree; currently about half of graduates are awarded a 2i, and about one third a 2ii (Newstead 1996). There is also a debate amongst academics about the equivalence of degrees across Universities - the proportion of 2i degrees awarded is broadly similar in every University, regardless of their entry standards, a result which suggests that there has been a move away from national standards for degree classes (The Dearing Review 1997). Though courses should not discriminate between awarding institutions (unless they publicly indicate that this is a part of their procedure), there is no doubt that it is becoming harder to make reliable judgments of academic ability.

All this makes the minimum standard of a 2i degree class more generous than it used to be. Some would argue that in spite of this, it is unfair to reject individuals purely because they have a 2ii. However, there is little sense in taking on individuals who are unlikely to meet the academic requirements of courses, and no evidence that individuals with poorer academic qualifications make better psychologists. It is important that courses do not take on individuals who are very clever, but very bad at interacting with others, but there is little risk of this as long as academic achievement is not privileged over interpersonal capacities - a principle to which all courses seem to be signed-up (Roth and Leiper 1995).

Where does this leave individuals with a 2ii? They should think about *why* they got a 2ii - for some, this is the degree they merited. Others may have underperformed because of circumstances beyond their control - for example, a family bereavement immediately prior to finals. Such individuals should make sure that their academic referee confirms that the degree class is unrepresentative of their ability. It is always an error to imagine that courses won't notice the degree class, or will take at face-value an unsupported assertion that the candidate should have been awarded a higher degree class. A further possibility is to obtain a further degree, such as a Masters, and to use this as a marker of academic ability. Again, the academic reference must confirm that performance in the degree meets a 2i standard. However, candidates should bear in mind that gaining a Masters does not automatically demonstrate a capacity to complete a doctoral course, because of the increasing trend towards conferring this degree for courses which would previously have been considered relatively non-academic.

In the final analysis, candidates who have had difficulty in academic settings should think very carefully about their career paths - quite pragmatically (and as any trainee will tell them), the academic demands of courses are considerable. In the longer run, it may be best to make a realistic appraisal of their chances of getting onto a course. Those with a weak academic track-record do themselves no favours by continuing to orient themselves to clinical psychology, when they would be better-off considering avenues which lead to work in a similar area, but with different entry-requirements.

Do courses require additional postgraduate qualifications?

Candidates must have a degree which makes them eligible for the BPS's Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR). From this perspective, further degrees are not a requirement or a criterion for entry, and applicants should not feel obliged to undertake them. Relevant postgraduate degrees or qualifications may enhance an application, but equally may be redundant if they duplicate prior experience, or are of little relevance to clinical work. Candidates should only undertake courses if they have a clear rationale for doing so. For example, are they really interested in the course? Will it be useful to them individually and

professionally? Will it genuinely compensate for weaknesses in their CV?

What about research experience?

While all courses are looking for individuals who can carry out research, and use and understand the research literature, for some this is demonstrated through the basic research requirements of undergraduate degrees, while for others postgraduate research experience is seen as important. The variation between courses makes a definitive statement inappropriate, but it is worth noting that postgraduate research experience can be acquired alongside clinical work - for example, carrying out an audit as part of an assistant post. It is also the case that not all research contributes equally to an applicant's CV. The clinical relevance of the research is an important issue - whether it exposes candidates to clinical populations, tackles clinical issues, or introduces candidates to clinical skills such as interviewing.

Why do courses insist on applicants having clinical experience?

All courses require that candidates have some relevant clinically-related experience prior to starting training, in order to establish that they know what they are applying for, what clinical psychologists do, the settings they work in, and the people they work with. This pre-training experience is usually useful, and probably contributes to the very low dropout rates from courses because it guards against trainees becoming disillusioned as a result of basic misconceptions about the profession.

This requirement is not intended to force candidates into an apprenticeship, but there is no doubt that some applicants have worked for inappropriately long periods on low pay, sometimes with little supervision and little job structure, in order to "prove" their motivation. This is a situation which benefits no-one, leading only to resentment and a sense of exploitation. However, while the bottleneck to training persists, there is little that can be done other than to make clear to candidates what sorts of experiences are most useful.

How much experience, and what sort of experience?

This can be a vexed issue; although selectors will probably agree about broad criteria, they may well disagree about specifics.

A crucial question is "how much experience?". Many people (candidates and those advising them) have the impression that applicants need to gain extraordinary amounts of experience before coming into training. This probably results from the fact that many people do not get onto courses at their first application. In 1997 30% of UCL trainees were successful first-time applicants; for 40% this was their second application, and for 30% their third application. Because such a high proportion enter training at the second or third attempt, this can generate the impression that a lengthy period of experience is a course requirement, rather than a by-product of selection pressures. As a rule of thumb, at UCL we look for at least one year's relevant experience. Though more than this is common, quantity is not the crucial issue (as discussed below).

What sort of experience is best? It is difficult to be specific, but in broad terms:

- a period of full-time employment which gives experience of the sort of clients clinical psychologists usually see. This could be adults with mental health problems, older adults, people with learning disabilities, or children with psychological difficulties (and so on).

- work in settings which are similar to those encountered by psychologists - for example, hospitals, day-care units, multi-professional teams.
- work which ensures some contact with clinical psychologists, even if the contact is indirect (for example, working on a unit where psychologists have an input). Not everyone will be able to work alongside psychologists, and it may be necessary to generate the contact through visits - this isn't always easy, but will enhance the quality of an application.

Some experiences are often too specific to help the candidate achieve a realistic appraisal of the role of the psychologist, and to have had an opportunity to test their motivation in the context of this appraisal. Although very useful in the context of broader experience, by itself some work is only partially relevant. For example:

- work in student counselling settings (such as Niteline) - the sorts of problems students using these services present with are not representative of work in statutory settings
- intensive work with one individual - which, by its nature, will not represent the usual pattern of work
- work with normal individuals in ordinary settings - such as schools or holiday camps

In the end, it is the quality of interpretation of experience rather than the amount of experience, that determines the likelihood of gaining a place - the ways these experiences are written about on the application form, and discussed at interview is critical. For example, some candidates have gained a wealth of experience as Assistant Psychologist, but still seem to have little idea of what psychologists do, or show no evidence that they have thought about what they are doing in a way which enables them to generalise beyond their own experience. Equally, some candidates have only limited contact with psychologists, but by dint of their own initiative and thoughtfulness show that they understand the role very well.

Do I have to be an assistant psychologist to get on a course?

Many trainees have previously worked as assistant psychologists - 22 of the 32 trainees joining the UCL course in 1997 gained their pre-training experience this way. However, there has been a worrying shift in perception over the past few years, with assistant posts being seen as the major, perhaps only, route of entry¹ to training. It is also the case that the number of assistants has increased rapidly in recent years, partly because services often use money from unfilled jobs to create assistant posts. These posts attract a large number of applicants, because the assistant post is perceived as the ante-room to training, but the resulting competition for these jobs compounds the sense that the path to training is unduly arduous.

¹ while many employers work hard to ensure that these posts offer meaningful and supported experience, applicants need to be aware that some are poorly structured, offer little by way of training or supervision, and make inappropriate demands of the assistant. Guidelines for these posts have been republished in Clinical Psychology Forum, January 1998 pp 44-46.

In my view the profession would be the poorer if the assistant role was too closely linked to training - a diversity of pre-qualification experience enriches training cohorts and the profession. Furthermore, Boyle et al (1993) found that ethnic minorities were under-represented in assistant posts, suggesting that courses would introduce an undesirable bias into selection if they over-valued the assistant role.

My usual advice to candidates is to obtain a post as an assistant if they can, though to be careful that such posts offer appropriate supervision, and are not abusive of their position. Alternatively, candidates should consider any position which meets the experience criteria above - for example, work as a nursing assistant, within social services departments, care assistant, within residential homes, a clinically-relevant research assistant post, a clinically-relevant PhD - and so on. Realistically these posts may make it harder to gain an appreciation of the role of the psychologist, and where there is no regular contact with clinical psychologists I always advise candidates to make links for themselves, even if this only amounts to a brief visit or telephone conversation.

So is it all down to a good CV?

Without a good CV, the chances of a successful application are very limited. However, even the best CV can be undermined by a poorly filled-in application form. Sensible candidates will have noticed how many forms courses have to process each year, and concluded that they need to take great care with their application. We know that most forms have been carefully reviewed by colleagues and friends, but still see basic errors of spelling and grammar, poor expression, an inability to distinguish relevant from non-relevant information, an inability to convey a sense that the reasons for the application have been thought-through, an unrealistic idea of the profession or inappropriate or misguided views of the professional context within which psychologists work. With levels of competition very high, forms can be "marked-down" for reasons which may not be immediately obvious to candidates, but which make sense in the context of the pool of forms which are seen. In fact there is some evidence that, though experienced as a difficult and demanding task, raters of application forms are able to make reasonably reliable judgments. At UCL batches of forms are independently rated by 3 independent judges; tests of inter-rater reliability yield Kendall's W ranging between .47 and .78, with 80% above .55, suggesting acceptable levels of concordance.

Am I too old? Or too young?

The average age of entry onto courses is about 27. This may worry individuals who have gone from school to University, and at 21 or 22 may feel they have a 5 year apprenticeship ahead of them - I refer them back to my comments above. Equally, some applicants are transferring from one career to another, and may be concerned about being too old. In fact it is common for courses to accept people for training in their 30's, though successful applicants in their 40's and 50's are rarer.

And in conclusion...

This article is unlikely to be the final word on selection, but it is intended to inform aspirant clinical psychologists about steps they need to take to gain entry to the profession, as well as helping them understand why previous applications might have been unsuccessful. Courses do encourage dialogue from within and without the profession, and almost certainly feedback on this article will be helpful in indicating which areas of selection remain unclear, or appear unfair.

References

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- Newstead S. (1996) The psychology of student assessment *The Psychologist* **9 (12)** 543-547
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- The report of the National Committee of inquiry into higher education (The Dearing Review) July 1997

Table 1 Increase in number of places on UK training schemes 1994-1997

year	number of courses in clearing house	number of places	year-on-year increase in places (%)	number of applicants	ratio applicants: places
1994	23	221		1224	1: 5.5
1995	23	260	17.6%	1398	1: 5.3
1996	23	285	28.9%	1645	1: 5.7
1997	23	327 ¹	14.7%	1642	1: 5.2

¹12 places at Royal Holloway were advertised outside the Clearing House

Table 2 Increase in training numbers in North Thames

	n° of new training places*	year-on-year increase (%)	total n° of trainees in North Thames Region in each year[#]	n° of new supervisors (new qualifiers + 2 years)[†]
1991	31	-	81	14 (1989 qualifiers)
1992	37	19	99	18 (1990 qualifiers)
1993	38	2.7	106	19 (1991 qualifiers)
1994	39	2.5	114	28 (1992 qualifiers)
1995	42	7.7	119	31 (1993 qualifiers)
1996	50	19	131	31 (1994 qualifiers)
1997	62	24	154	37 (1995 qualifiers)
1998	67	8	179	38 (1996 qualifiers)

*from 1986-1991 figures includes trainees at University College London (UCL), N. Thames in-service & University of East London (UEL); 1991--1996 trainees at UCL & UEL; from 1997 at UCL, UEL & Royal Holloway

includes all first, second and third year trainees for that year

† makes the (unlikely) assumption that all qualifiers stay within N Thames region