

Vibrant British Psychology

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Over the past 25 years, the story of psychology in the United Kingdom has been one of increasing success in all areas and aspects of our science. Psychological research and education in the UK are currently in good shape, and we are able to produce high quality innovative science across a broad range.

Psychologists have been able to make important, insightful, and highly interesting contributions. The discipline is regularly consulted by journalists, editors, broadcasters, and others in the media on a wide range of subjects from the development of language, social justice, psychological illness, which parts of the brain do what, what happens following brain injury and how to adapt, how we remember or fail to remember, how the visual system works, how the brain changes with age and many other specific areas in which psychologists conduct high quality scientific research. At the same time, this wide range of expertise is frequently drawn upon by the legal world, business community, commerce, medical agencies, and the government. This “broad church” of psychological research is making, increasingly so, a substantial and valued contribution to British society.

In this context, it is not surprising to learn that psychology as an undergraduate degree in our universities has undergone an unprecedented period of development. Over 10 years ago, psychology became the most popular science undergraduate subject. This position has strengthened, with each year seeing increasing numbers of applicants to study psychology at university. Indeed, in terms of applications psychology is now one of the leading university subjects. This popularity has seen very large increases in the number of places available within courses and in the number of institutions offering degrees in psychology. Most importantly, psychology at the undergraduate degree level is dominated by women with a ratio of roughly four females to each male student, a ratio that is at the very least reversed in other science subjects. Thus, our vibrant sought-after psychology undergraduate degrees are the main route into science for women.

It is worth briefly reflecting on why this long period of positive development has occurred. I believe that one important reason is a coming-of-age of psychology as a science. The cognitive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s led to psychologists posing and beginning to answer questions of importance to society generally. Questions such as: How do we read, learn to speak, remember, see, feel or solve problems? What happens when these processes go wrong in development, in illness, or following brain changes? What can we do about it when these fundamental process malfunction? Because we have been able to frame these questions in scientific ways, investigate, them, and provide theory where none existed before, we have caught the attention of the public and held it.

In the United Kingdom another, rather more prosaic and local, reason for the success of psychology in our universities has been the standardization of the undergraduate degree program. This has come about largely through a degree accreditation process that is conducted by the British Psychological Society (BPS). The exact accreditation process was approved and funded by the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments (AHPD) and supported by the Experimental Psychology Society (EPS). These three national bodies, BPS, AHPD, and EPS, have been extremely influential in ensuring that psychology continues to be taught and practiced as a high quality science.

At the moment I write, the entire UK university research sector is about to undergo the Research

Assessment Exercise of 2008 or RAE. The RAE has been in operation since the early 1980s and represents an attempt by the government to concentrate resources (i.e., money) in centres of excellence. Although there remain many mixed feelings about the RAE, I believe it has been advantageous for psychology. We have been able to demonstrate the high quality of our research and the fact that this high quality is present across many university departments. It is partly because of our achievements in the RAE that we now have, for example, a number of state-of-the-art neuroimaging centers, world-leading behavioral genetics research, and exciting developments in social neuroscience. The RAE has also increased our contributions in the traditional research areas of attention, memory, perception, and language. Also, the success of cognitive clinical approaches to understanding psychological illnesses has been recognized by a very substantial government investment in providing wide ranging cognitive behavioral therapy in the National Health Service. The RAE has, at the very least, been a positive force in the remarkable development of psychology in the UK over the past 25 years.