



The role of the scientist-practitioner model in the teaching of psychology: preliminary results from the AUTC funded project *Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Development in Psychology*

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The Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) is committed to the identification of 'examples of best practice in teaching and learning in Australian universities at the level of discipline or field of study'. The AUTC funded project *Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Development in Psychology* was awarded this year to a team representing a diverse cross-section of Schools and Departments of Psychology in Australia. The project brief demands 'an evaluative overview of courses... with a focus on the specification and assessment of learning outcomes and must identify strategic directions for universities to enhance teaching and learning in these areas'. Although the final project outcomes will include a discussion of the teaching of psychology beyond that taking place within Schools and Departments of Psychology, this preliminary report will consider only information relevant to the teaching of psychology in core programs within Australian Psychological Society (APS) accredited academic organisational units (AOUs).

The project submission started with an assumption that the APS accreditation process plays a central role in curriculum design within the discipline. The current accreditation guidelines require academic AOUs to demonstrate (among other things) that a core sequence of teaching has taken place for all students in the degree, and that students have completed a significant piece of independent research as a component of their fourth year of study. These requirements follow from the general principle that the main focus of the undergraduate four-year degree in psychology should be the provision of a thorough understanding of the theoretical bases of the discipline and a capacity to understand and contribute to the growth of this knowledge base through empirical research. The development of significant practical skills is considered to be most appropriate for students in post-graduate training, where specialisation for membership of one of the Colleges of the APS (clinical, educational, organisational, etc.) takes place. This orientation to undergraduate education can be traced to the general acceptance of what is called the 'scientist-practitioner' model of training, which emerged in the United States following a conference of academic psychologists, the American Psychological Association and government stakeholders in Boulder during 1949 (Baker and Benjamin 2000; Barlow, Hayes and Nelson, 1985). The 'core value' of the scientist-practitioner model is that research and practice are deeply intertwined (Stricker, 2002) and that the practitioner must, therefore, be trained in the research practices of the discipline to the level of participation.

The project will bring together representation from Schools and Departments of Psychology in a 'Network Group' meeting in November of 2004. The Network Group will help us to validate the information already collected from web sites and individual schools concerning their courses. It is also hoped that this group will be able to provide insight into those informal processes within schools that have a bearing upon questions of curriculum development and innovative teaching practices. In preparation for this meeting, we have been interviewing nominees from psychology AOUs. These interviews provide information about the factors perceived to be important in curriculum design with respect to both content and implementation. The APS accreditation process, educational and psychological models of training, and individual views are all relevant dimensions about which we have elicited information.

The most striking feature of the information collected from Network Group members to date is the wide diversity of views held on almost all of the critical dimensions discussed above. Although there is a general consensus about the importance of the APS accreditation guidelines, on almost all other factors individual schools and departments differ widely. In some cases curriculum content and delivery have been influenced strongly by individual staff members, and in others the process has been strongly collegial and based upon shared principles. Differences between institutions in the presence of structures such as faculty and school teaching and learning committees, and in the degree of influence held over day-to-day teaching are quite marked. A number of nominees indicate budgetary constraints influencing some teaching processes, but the content of curricula is not generally perceived to be affected by either financial or staffing limitations. Technological innovation is taking place within Psychology AOU's that perceive such changes to be valuable on pedagogical or strategic grounds. However, we have not found any instances where real changes in delivery have come about through institutional pressure from above. Laboratory work and research training still play a substantial role in student learning experiences, but information technologies are being used to support and extend these processes in the face of increasing financial pressure.

One somewhat unexpected difference between institutions noted in the interviews conducted so far is in the degree to which the views (or at least the perceived views) of the State Registration Boards appear to influence curriculum decisions. It seems to be the case that some State Registration Boards are more influential than others. The level of influence appears to be related to the degree to which academic staff members are actively involved in the Registration Board. Registration Boards have usually been regarded as representing a somewhat more pragmatic, practitioner-oriented, view of training models. Thus it will be interesting to be able to compare institutions and their consensus positions on the scientist-practitioner model with respect to the level of engagement with their State Registration Board. These data will be available at the Network Group meeting. The Registration Boards are also becoming more closely involved in the accreditation process at the present time, making some discussion of their perspective on a range of issues quite critical.

References:

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