

# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF THE PSYCHOLOGY FOURTH YEAR IN AUSTRALIA

Frances H. Martin<sup>a</sup>, Jacquelyn Cranney<sup>b</sup>, Kandice Varcin<sup>b</sup>

Presenting Author: Frances H. Martin ([Frances.Martin@Newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Frances.Martin@Newcastle.edu.au))

<sup>a</sup>School of Psychology, University of Newcastle, Ourimbah, NSW, 2258, Australia

<sup>b</sup>School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

In Australia, the fourth year program, usually an Honours year, in psychology incorporates training in scientific methodology in the form of a thesis and training in applied topics relevant to professional psychology in the form of coursework. Little research has been conducted investigating the fourth year experience in psychology, or indeed in any discipline in Australia. Current pressures on the fourth year model indicated a necessity to investigate the view of students on their fourth year experience. Two surveys were conducted over a two year period, in which the views of fourth year students were collected regarding their views of the fourth year experience. Fourth year students generally enjoyed the experience of fourth year. Overall fourth year students found the fourth year experience valuable but were more satisfied with their research experience than with their development of skills required in professional psychology or with their understanding of the application of psychology suggesting a desire for more skills training and application of psychological principles to be incorporated into fourth year psychology programs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Fourth year psychology programs in Australia, which require the completion of an undergraduate psychology major, include the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC, 2010) accredited Honours programs, accredited four-year programs that include a final Honours year, and the Postgraduate Diploma of Psychology. The experience of the fourth year in Australian psychology education and training has received little investigation over the years (e.g., Geffen, 1993). In a recent study of the Australian Honours experience, although not in psychology, Kiley, Moyes and Clayton (2009) investigated the assumption that staff and students who are engaged in biological sciences and humanities Honours programs across five universities, would share common assumptions about their purpose. Their results indicated otherwise: the aims of Honours programs and the reasons students enroll in Honours vary, and many traditionally held views of Honours are not supported by the changes in the structure and nature of Honours programs that have occurred over recent years.

The psychology fourth year differs from (a) other international models of psychology undergraduate education, in that the research thesis is a substantial capstone experience, and is compulsory, and (b) Honours programs in other disciplines within Australia, in that substantial coursework is required. In psychology, the thesis component accounts for approximately 50% of the year's work and credit, whereas in many other science disciplines in many Australian Universities, although this does differ across the sector, the thesis accounts for the majority of the year's work. The fourth year in psychology thus provides not only research training, in the form of a thesis and associated methods courses, but also applied training in aspects of psychology relevant to further work in professional psychology (i.e., psychological assessment and interventions, and professional ethics). Given that the majority of students enter accredited undergraduate psychology programs with a view to becoming a registered professional psychologist, the fourth year program is a necessary step for them along this career route. With the limited number of places available in postgraduate psychology specialist programs (Voudouris, & Mrowinski, 2010), competition for places in these degrees is fierce, resulting in a perceived high level of competition in the fourth year program. Inevitably, the majority of four-year graduates do not enter postgraduate research or professional psychology programs (Cranney, Botwood, & Morris, 2012).

With both national (e.g., Australian Qualifications Framework; AQFC, 2013) and international (e.g., the Bologna Model; Lunt, Job, Lecuyer, Peiro, & Gorbena, 2011) pressures on the fourth year model, it seemed timely to investigate the views of students on their fourth year experience. To achieve this aim, we undertook two surveys over a two year period.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

For Sample 1, a total of 86 fourth year psychology students, drawn from 12 Universities throughout Australia completed the first survey. The sample included 69 females ( $M$  age = 26.66 years,  $SD$  = 6.43 years) and 16 males ( $M$  age = 28.06,  $SD$  = 8.47). The age ranged from 21 to 43 years. One respondent did not give age or gender details. Participants were enrolled in a range of degree programs including Psychology (37%), Science (22%), Arts (21%), and a mix of degree programs (e.g., 6% in Arts/Psychology/Science, 5% in Behavioural Science, 2% in Advanced Science, 1% in Social Science, and 1% in the Postgraduate Diploma in Psychology). The remaining 5% of respondents did not specify a degree program. For Sample 2, a total of 300 psychology fourth year students from 22 Australian Universities completed the survey. The sample comprised 260 females ( $M$  age = 26.85 years,  $SD$  = 8.16 years) and 40 males ( $M$  age = 29.00,  $SD$  = 10.61). The age ranged from 20 to 60 years. Data concerning degree enrollment were not collected in the Sample 2 survey.

### MATERIALS

The materials consisted of a nineteen-item survey. The survey contained demographic questions relating to age, gender and the respondents' program and university, followed by 14 (Sample 1) or 17 (Sample 2) scaled items (see Table 1) whereby responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Respondents were then asked open ended questions concerning the fourth year and their intentions for further study. Finally respondents were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale (ranging from "always" (7) to "never" (1) their agreement with the extent to which completing a four-year undergraduate degree contributed to their development of six graduate attributes<sup>1</sup>.

### PROCEDURE

The survey was sent electronically to Heads of Departments and Schools of Psychology at the 36 Australian Universities that offer a four-year sequence of psychology leading to either a Bachelor's Degree with Honours (e.g., BA Hons, BSc Hons) or a Bachelor of Psychology (a four-year integrated program). Surveys were then distributed either electronically or in hard copy to each fourth year student within each university. Surveys were distributed at the end of October, by which time all students had completed their year of study, but had not been notified of their results. Surveys were returned either electronically or in hard-copy. No reminder letters were sent to Heads of Departments and Schools. In Sample 1, the response rate by University (12 of 36) was poor at 33.33%, and the response rate for surveys was also poor, at 23.89% (based on total Year 4 student numbers supplied by Year 4 coordinators). The response rate in Sample 2, by University, was acceptable at 61.11%, and the response rate for surveys was 27.27%. The response rates for surveys for both years were within the range of generally expected response rates.

## RESULTS<sup>2</sup>

Means and standard deviations for the 14 (Sample 1) and 17 (Sample 2) scaled items are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in this table, responses ranged from 2.44 to 4.44, indicating variation in the amount of agreement with each of the items. In both years respondents strongly agreed (>4) that their research skills improved significantly during the year, that they enjoyed the process of undertaking an independent research project and that they would like to be involved in future research in psychology. Respondents would also have liked to have more practical training in professional psychology during the course of the year. On average respondents did not strongly disagree with any statements however in both years they agreed that the year was stressful. In neither year did respondents feel that the competitiveness of the fourth year was counterproductive.

The responses to the 14 scaled items from the Sample 1 survey were then divided on the basis of the degree in which the respondents were enrolled. Degree information was not collected in the Sample 2 survey. The 78 respondents who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Science ( $n=19$ ), a Bachelor of Arts ( $n=18$ ) or a Bachelor of Psychology ( $n=31$ ) comprised the sample for this analysis.

<sup>1</sup> This data was not reported in this manuscript. Respondents reported that their four-year undergraduate education contributed to the development of their knowledge and understanding of psychology to a greater extent than their learning and application,  $t(84) = 5.64$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, respondents reported significantly greater development of research methods skills than learning and application,  $t(84) = 7.46$ ,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>2</sup> Data from the 14-item survey collected in Year 1 has been reported briefly in the professional journal *InPsych* (Martin, Cranney, Varcin, Provost, Katsikitis, White, & Cohen, 2009).

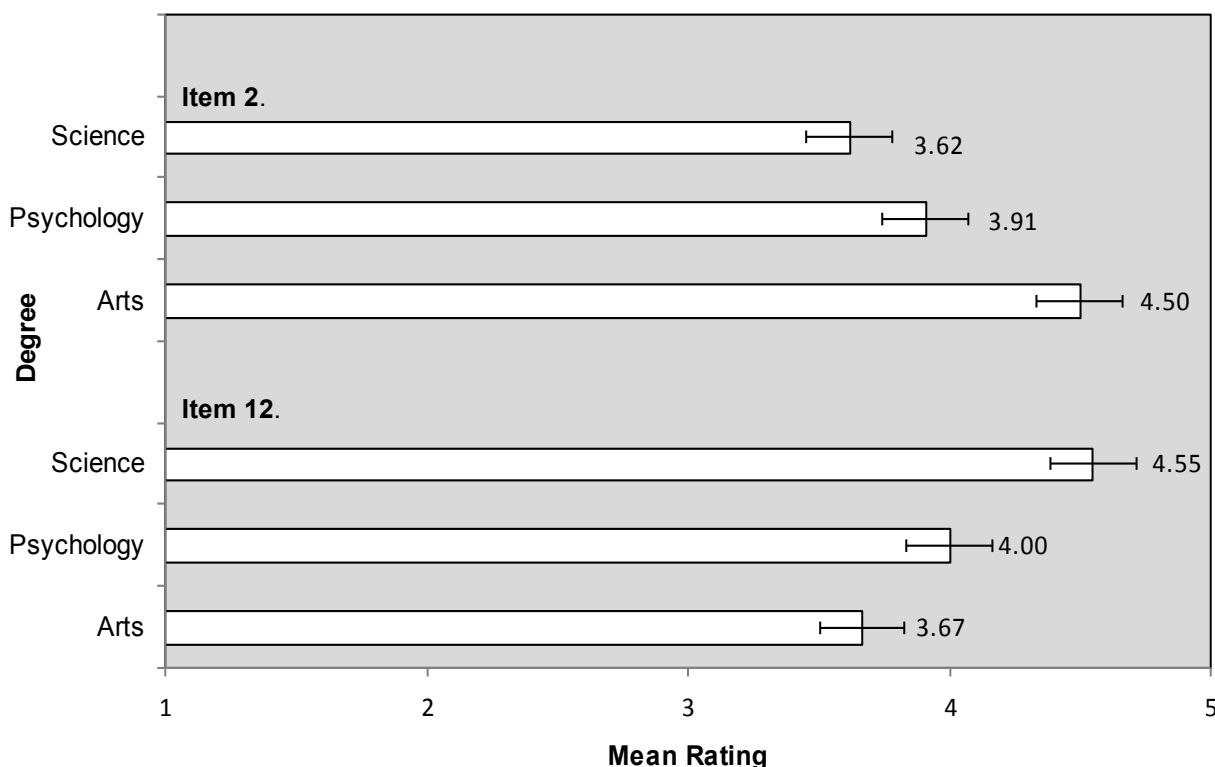
**Table 1: Means and standard deviations for the responses to the 14 scaled item questions (Sample 1) and the 17 scaled item questions (Sample 2) (1=strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)**

Item	Sample 1 (N=86)		Sample 2 (N=300)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
The Honours year was very stressful	3.85	(1.08)	4.02	(0.95)
The Honours year was the most valuable of all my undergraduate years	4.00	(1.09)	3.95	(1.02)
Overall, I enjoyed my Honours year	4.00	(0.92)	3.84	(1.00)
I feel that the Honours year was a waste of time for training as a professional psychologist	2.44	(1.25)		
I feel that the fourth year did not prepare me for work as a professional psychologist			3.38	(1.10)
My writing skills improved significantly during the year	3.58	(1.06)	3.77	(1.02)
My research skills improved significantly during the year	4.35	(0.79)	4.32	(0.78)
My project management skills improved significantly during the year	3.86	(1.02)	3.68	(0.90)
At the beginning of fourth year, I felt well prepared to undertake the year's requirements			3.29	(1.14)
Over the year, I became more confident in my capacity to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty			3.60	(0.99)
I found the degree of competitiveness during the Honours year counterproductive	2.88	(1.22)	3.02	(1.25)
I enjoyed the process of undertaking an independent research project	4.44	(0.59)	4.12	(1.14)
I feel well prepared to undertake further training in professional psychology	3.95	(1.06)	3.94	(0.99)
I saw the course work as relevant to psychology			3.59	(1.02)
The "advanced topics" seminars/courses were challenging but worthwhile	3.18	(1.25)		
I wish there had been more practical skill training in professional psychology this year	4.12	(1.14)	4.31	(1.14)
Sometime in the future, I would like to be involved in undertaking further research in psychology (not necessarily the same as my Honours project).	4.12	(1.02)	3.94	(1.17)
This year, our class was presented with adequate information regarding our choices for next year.	3.68	(1.06)	3.42	(1.21)
This year, I gained more of a sense of collegiality with staff and other senior students			3.87	(1.10)

One-way analyses of variance conducted across degree for each of the items showed significant differences only for Items 2 and 12. For Item 2,  $F(2,77) = 3.98$ ,  $MSE=4.64$ ,  $p=.02$ , Arts degree students strongly agreed that the fourth year was the most valuable of all their undergraduate years, whereas Bachelor of Psychology students, followed by Bachelor of Science students, less strongly agreed that this was true (see Figure 1). For Item 12,  $F(2,77) = 3.29$ ,  $MSE = 4.29$ ,  $p=.04$ , Bachelor of Science students were much more likely to agree that they wished there had been more practical skill training in professional psychology, followed by Bachelor of Psychology and then Bachelor of Arts students (see Figure 1).

The responses to the open ended questions enquiring about experiences during the fourth year were collated, and common themes emerged. In terms of the best thing about the fourth year (see Table 2), friendships and support from other students was most commonly mentioned, followed by being able to participate independently in a research project and the research process itself. In terms of the worst thing about the fourth year (see Table 2), the most common types of responses related to stress and pressure, workload, and coursework. In terms of suggestions for how the fourth year could be improved, the two most common responses in both year samples related to a desire for more professional skills training and a desire for less content in electives. In addition, 32% of the respondents in the Sample 2 survey indicated a desire for the fourth year to be more clearly organized and structured, although this theme did not emerge in Sample 1. The majority of

respondents in Sample 1 (86.58%) and a smaller percentage in Sample 2 (65.3%) indicated that they would be continuing their education in the form of a PhD or a Doctorate or Masters Degree in Psychology.



**Figure 1: Mean response to Items 2 and 12 across different degree programs (Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Psychology, Bachelor of Arts). Item 2 was “The Honours year was the most valuable of all my undergraduate years” and; Item 12 was “I wish there had been more professional skill training in psychology this year”**

**Table 2: Common responses to the open ended questions regarding students’ perceptions of the fourth year**

Response	Frequency (n) (% of coded responses in parentheses)*	
	Sample 1 (n=86)	Sample 2 (n=300)
<b>What was the best thing about the Honours year?</b>		
Friendships and support from other students	20 (16.53)	65 (14.61)
The independent nature of the research project	19 (15.70)	71 (15.96)
The actual research process	17 (14.05)	81 (18.20)
Support from supervisor and staff	13 (10.74)	71 (15.96)
Finishing the thesis and the sense of accomplishment associated with it, the challenge	12 (9.92)	73 (16.40)
<b>What was the worst thing about the Honours year?</b>		
Stress and pressure	27 (23.48)	113 (26.59)
Electives and coursework	20 (17.39)	60 (14.12)
Workload/time	9 (7.83)	66 (15.53)
Organisation		59(13.88)
Cohort		36 (8.47)
Supervisor		30 (7.06)
Social isolation	4 (3.48)	22 (5.18)
<b>Do you intend to undertake postgraduate study within the next two years?</b>		
Yes	71	195

\*Sample 1: 115 coded negative responses, 121 coded positive responses, Sample 2: 425 coded negative responses, 445 coded positive responses.

## DISCUSSION

The results of these two surveys indicate that with some exceptions, respondents were positive about their fourth year experience. In both samples, although respondents found the year stressful, they found it to be the most valuable of their undergraduate years. In general, respondents felt that they had learned more about research than about professional psychology. They strongly agreed that in the fourth program they would like more practical skill training in professional psychology. This highlights one of the contradictions inherent in the psychology fourth year. The year is seen by academics (In a separate survey, (referred to in Martin, Cranney, et al., 2009) Heads of Departments and Schools were asked to rate (on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 = "not at all important" and 10 = "absolutely essential") how important they thought the Honours year was in education and training in psychology. These ratings indicated that they viewed the Honours year as an important component of psychology education in Australia with responses ranging from 6.5 to 10 ( $M = 8.75$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), universities, and indeed the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQFC, 2013), as a capstone research experience, yet the majority of the students completing fourth year would prefer a strong professional training emphasis (see also Lipp, Terry, Chalmers, Bath, Hannan, Martin, Farrell, Wilson, & Provost, 2007; Cranney Provost, Katsikitis, Martin, White, & Cohen, 2008).

Training of professional psychologists has been underpinned by the Scientist Practitioner Model (Benjamin & Baker, 2000) whereby there are three critical components: the acquisition of foundational knowledge in the science and profession of psychology; supervised practice in professional settings; and research training culminating in a significant original research contribution. In North American, British and Australian contexts, this Model has been implemented as foundational knowledge of the science of psychology, and foundational training in research in the undergraduate years (the latter particularly in the fourth project), and foundational knowledge of the profession of psychology, supervised practice, and further research in specialist graduate programs. This model has been challenged, with the main argument being that pre-professional skills of a generic nature should be taught in the undergraduate years (Littlefield, 2012). Moreover, students likely expect, similar to their fellow students in the health sciences, to be gaining some professionally related skills in their first degree program.

Although respondents in this study indicated that they enjoyed the research component and felt they had learned from it, they were also keen to gain skills in professional psychology practice. Interestingly there were degree program differences regarding this issue. Relative to Science students, Arts students were less eager to gain professional skills during the fourth year, and more strongly agreed that the year was their best; responses from Bachelor of Psychology students were in between these two groups. The psychology major students who enrolled in Arts degrees may have viewed the degree program, including the research capstone experience, as more of a liberal arts and sciences education (McGovern, Corey, Cranney, Dixon, Holmes, Kuebli, Ritchey, Smith, & Walker, 2010), and less as a precursor to professional training, than did the students enrolled in Science degrees. It is possible that the experiences of the students in their undergraduate years may have impacted on these results. For example, some of the students may have been enrolled in a University with programs designed to engage undergraduate students in research prior to the Honours year and if this is the case, these students may view the Honours year differently to those without such a background. Future research is needed to determine the reasons for these differences.

Given that many four year graduates will not undertake further professional psychology training (Cranney et al., 2012), it would seem imperative that, in order to increase engagement in the Honours year and the psychological literacy of psychology graduates and thus the general public (Crowe, 2012), greater emphasis on application of psychological principles to everyday personal and professional life should be emphasized in Year 4 (see Cranney Morris, Martin, Provost, Zinkiewicz, Reece, Milne-Home, Burton, White, Homewood, Earl, & McCarthy, 2011).

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