

Pre-tertiary psychology education in Europe: a survey of approaches to teacher education and continuing professional development of school psychology teachers



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1. Abstract

Psychology has been taught in secondary schools for many years in several European countries, yet despite the growth in student numbers, **pre-tertiary psychology education (PTPE)** has received little attention from researchers.

Considered a non-traditional secondary school subject, access to **initial teacher education (TE)** and **continuing professional development (CPD)** for psychology teachers appears to be more limited than for other subjects.

The aim of this exploratory research was therefore to examine approaches to TE and CPD for school psychology teachers in eight European countries which provide PTPE for 15-19 year-olds. Telephone interviews were conducted with seven teachers from six countries, followed by a focus group of eight further teachers.

The qualitative data suggested that **TE and CPD were regarded as at least adequate in most countries**, but concerns remained over **poor availability of TE in England, parts of Germany, and Scotland**, and the consequent impact on **quality of PTPE and career opportunities for psychology graduates**.

2. Introduction

Pre-tertiary psychology education (PTPE) in Europe

Until recently the research focus of psychology education has been mainly on the undergraduate level; studies on PTPE are rare (but see Banyard, 2008, and Rowley & Dalgarno, 2010, on PTPE in the UK; Kittler, 2009, on PTPE in Europe). As far as the authors are aware, no cross-European comparison studies of PTPE have been published.

Under the auspices of the **European Federation of Psychology Teachers' Associations (EFPTA, www.efpta.org)**, a survey of PTPE in Europe was conducted (Schrempf *et al.*, 2010) by means of a quantitative online questionnaire.

Responses were received from psychology teachers in seven countries. A database of psychology curricula was constructed and concerns of teachers were identified, including availability and access to TE and CPD. Findings showed that "psychology education" exists in a variety of guises; though not labelled as such, psychology is taught in diverse curricular areas, including citizenship, personal and social development, religious and philosophical studies. However, it was **PTPE leading to HE-entry qualifications** (e.g. Abitur, Matura, International Baccalaureate, English A-levels, Scottish Highers) that had given rise to the main concerns regarding TE, and is therefore the focus of the current study.

Teacher education (TE) & continuing professional development (CPD) in Europe

Two models of TE for qualified teacher status (QTS) in Europe have been identified: simultaneous and consecutive (Eurydice, 2002); a further distinction is made by Ostinelli (2009), into "English" and "Nordic" models. The Council of the European Union (EU) has engaged in efforts to improve the quality of TE in Member States, in nine agreed areas including teachers' specialist subject knowledge and pedagogical skills (European Commission [EC], 2007). Two major reports have been published on TE and CPD in the EU: see Eurydice (2009) and FIER (2009). The EC's "Common European Principles for Teacher Competences & Qualifications" (2010) assert a range of standards or benchmarks for teachers' development needs that should be met by both initial TE and CPD.



Trainee German psychology teachers with their mentor in an English 6th form college (EFPTA exchange, 2007)

Teacher education for PTPE in Europe

In spite of this recent focus on TE, the subject specialism element has received little emphasis. As a non-traditional subject, psychology tends to have a low profile amongst school leaders and teacher educators. Poor availability of TE courses, and negative perceptions of the subject as 'dumbed down' or 'easy to teach' (Smith, 2010), can lead to non-specialists being assigned to teach psychology. The issue has prompted action by psychology teachers' associations (e.g. ATPS, 2010) and professional psychologists' associations. In this context, the current small-scale action research project was conducted by the EFPTA research team, all PTPE practitioners, as a follow-up to the 2010 survey. The aim was to investigate and compare psychology teachers' knowledge, experiences and perceptions of TE and CPD for PTPE in a range of European countries, and to interpret these in relation to current European benchmarking on TE.

3. Methods

• **Structured interviews** and a subsequent **focus group** were carried out. For both procedures, participants were selected by **non-probability, purposive sampling**. The selection criteria were:

- ✓ extensive experience in psychology teaching with 15-19 year old students
 - ✓ thorough knowledge of psychology education in their own country
 - ✓ a good command of English or access to an interpreter.
- Most participants were active members of national psychology teachers' associations.

• **Interviews** were conducted with seven participants (see Table 1). Interview items were open-ended and related to aspects of TE and CPD for PTPE. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted via Skype. They were recorded digitally, and were mainly in English, except for two participants who were interviewed in their first language and their responses translated into English.

• **Focus group questions** were devised on the basis of preliminary analysis of the interview data, requiring expansion on certain key points. Participants were eight psychology teachers who were also EFPTA Committee members. Discussion was in English and lasted approximately one hour.

Country	Participant codes	
	Interview	Focus group
Denmark	-	P8
England	P1	P9
Finland	P2	P10
Germany	P3	P11, P12, P13
Iceland	P4	-
Russia	-	P14
Scotland	P5, P6	P15
Slovakia	P7	-
	n = 7	n = 8

Table 1: Participant codes, by country

4. Results and Discussion

Data from interviews and focus group were collated for analysis.

Nature of initial TE – general aspects

- Patterns of TE were similar across countries, falling mainly into 'simultaneous' and 'consecutive' models (Eurydice, 2002).
- In most countries TE had a strong 'training on the job' emphasis, confirming findings of FIER (2009). In Denmark and Germany graduates must find a teaching job first in order to access training; in Slovakia and Finland, participants felt a need for greater emphasis on workplace experience.
- **Mentoring** of trainees was seen as an important role of senior staff, however resourcing varied: in Iceland, the role was not incorporated into workload but was given additional payment, whereas in England, no payment was available and there was little reduction of teaching load.
- **Professional skills and subject expertise** were seen as equally important, reflecting the view of the EU Council (EC, 2007).
- There were no major differences between participants' in **perceptions of quality** of TE in their country; most felt that quality was adequate overall but varied between institutions.

Availability of TE for psychology

There were large differences between countries: extent of provision in Finland met or exceeded demand, but in Germany, only two states (Länder) provided adequate TE places in psychology. In England, demand far outstripped the limited number of places. In Scotland, there were no such courses at all. In these countries with limited availability of training, participants reported that psychology was nevertheless widely taught in schools, including at the level of HE-entry qualifications. In those countries with poor provision, participants were concerned at the reduced career opportunities for psychology graduates.

"the high interest in the subject by pupils should be met by a better supply [of teachers]"
Participant 3, Germany

5. Conclusions

This small-scale initial exploration of an as yet under-researched topic has shown many areas of similarity, as well as some major differences in TE and CPD for PTPE in Europe. There was greater variation, and concern, over initial TE:

- **poor access to TE for PTPE in some countries:**
 - **England** – limited TE student places; QTS for FE sector not valid for schools
 - **Germany** – not available in all Länder
 - **Scotland** – no TE courses; QTS for FE sector not valid for schools
- **deployment of non-specialist staff to teach psychology** in the 15-19 age band, suggesting that the relevance of teachers' specialist subject expertise for their students' learning is undervalued by school leaders (England, Scotland)

These findings carry clear implications for practice: the major obstacles to TE for psychology in England and Scotland must be addressed, in order to enhance the quality of PTPE, and psychology graduates' career opportunities, to the levels that obtain in other European countries and in other subjects.

Possibilities for future research: status of psychology v. other school subjects; PTPE for younger learners and embedding in school curriculum; students' perceptions of PTPE; psychology-specific pedagogical skills; PTPE curricula, and how they are determined.

Results and Discussion (continued)

A particular obstacle faced aspiring psychology teachers in England and Scotland. In both countries, students aged 15-19 were split between two sectors: secondary schools and further education (FE) colleges, each with different routes to QTS, a distinction that appears to be unique in Europe.

Whilst schoolteachers could obtain employment in colleges without hindrance, college lecturers were effectively prevented from working in schools – a restriction on mobility which flouts the EC's 'Common European Principles' (2010). Psychology appeared to be disproportionately affected by this segregation of the sectors, because unlike traditional school subjects it had become more firmly established in the FE sector.

In England the Wolf Report (2011) had addressed this issue, recommending that qualifications for college teaching (QTLS) be recognised in schools. However in Scotland the Donaldson Report (2011) was limited to TE for primary and secondary sectors; the needs of 15-19 year-old students and their teachers in the FE sector were outwith its remit, and the issue of the absence of TE for psychology (and some other subjects) was not addressed.

Deployment of teachers: matching qualifications to subject(s) taught

In Finland and Iceland, allocating a teacher to a subject in which they were not qualified was very rare, and was unusual in others (e.g. Germany), whilst in Scotland and England it was not unusual. In psychology, reduced rigour in staff deployment arose partly through pressure of student demand: PTPE seemed to be a victim of its own success. Headteachers' judgments on staff deployment in terms of specialisms varied across countries. Participants felt that deployment of non-specialists often accompanied a perception of psychology as 'easy' amongst headteachers, in sharp contrast to students' perceptions; there appeared to be leadership issues in this area.

"Teachers would disapprove of being asked to teach a different subject [other than their specialism]"
Participant 4, Iceland

CPD for psychology

Most aspects of CPD were similar across countries, including availability, types of providers, amount of time per year, quality, and teacher autonomy in identifying development needs and appropriate development activities. Participants from several countries felt the most useful psychology CPD was provided by teachers' associations, but that there was not enough.

Limitations of methodology

The samples were targeted for the specific purpose of obtaining their specialist knowledge of PTPE, TE and CPD; there was no intention to generalise findings to a wider population. Possible threats to validity and reliability include: researcher bias, as all were psychology teachers with an interest in promoting PTPE; misinterpretation of responses where English was not the first language. However, a degree of concurrent validity was achieved through triangulation of interview and focus group data. The standardised protocol and structured nature of the interviews provided some degree of internal reliability.

Presentation by German high school psychology students (EFPTA Conference, Dortmund, 2006)



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