**Why graduate outcome measures in Psychology don’t add up**

One of the hallmarks of having a Psychology degree is that it offers a wide range of employment opportunities: equipped with the skills and knowledge from British Psychological Society-accredited courses, Psychology graduates can choose from a variety of jobs directly and indirectly related to their degree. Yet so many graduates end up choosing a career outside Psychology, or do not satisfy the official statistics of career destination measures. As a recent Psychology graduate (Victoria) and in our roles as Psychology lecturers (Lisa and Gaby), we have asked ourselves: why?

In our article on The Psychologist website, we consider two factors to explain this phenomenon: 1) the current trend for job exploration over job commitment in today’s graduates, and 2) the amount of work experience and demands required to obtain a professional job in Psychology. Along the way, we question whether the official graduate outcome measures are even helpful for Psychology graduates.

In recent years, we (GP and LH) have observed huge individual differences among final year students concerning the psychological and emotional readiness to sign up to work or study obligations immediately after university. Students are well aware that entering graduate schemes and postgraduate courses requires ongoing commitment to perform and achieve within well-structured programmes, and a willingness to assume responsibility. It also requires career clarity and a strong desire for continuity: the push into graduate roles straight out of university puts graduates on linear career paths towards professional roles they may not have been able to explore sufficiently, and that offer little flexibility for change.

While these roles provide excellent opportunities and direction for graduates with a clear career focus, they put unnecessary pressure on those who would prefer alternative work-based learning opportunities and non-graduate roles to develop vocational skills and gain job insight before making major career decisions. Graduates may also benefit from a more gradual transition into complex psychological roles, such as those involving direct work with clients and service users. In such instances, opportunities and experience gained in non-graduate jobs can help to build confidence and serve as stepping stones to apply and develop research, professional and transferable skills acquired at university in a real-world setting.

The trend for career exploration has been framed within Gratton and Scott’s multi-stage life model. According to this model, young adults often transition into an explorer stage after completing their education. They may undertake temporary work for different employers, mixing full or part-time jobs with consulting or freelancing, as well as gig work. This allows graduates to develop a portfolio of skills, professional and personal experiences while retaining work flexibility, and build important networks that might last a lifetime. Similarly, those with a more entrepreneurial spirit may become independent producers, turning business ideas and service user needs into start-ups. While these stages may be short-lived, they serve as valuable experiential learning phases for graduates, complementing the theoretical knowledge acquired in HE and fostering adaptability to multiple careers they may need to prepare for in the future.

When we introduce the multi-stage life model in our developmental psychology module, our students intuitively recognise its compatibility with their own career aspirations and appreciate the innovative fit around other life demands. The trend for job exploration is consistent with the ‘emerging adulthood stage’, according to which young adults aged between 18 to 29 continue to develop their identities and demonstrate delayed commitment – not just concerning career decisions, but across multiple major life decisions, including marriage, parenthood, and where they live. This trend is not unique to Psychology. However, it illustrates that expectations made of university leavers need to be adapted, either by extending the time of destination measurement or by changing definitions to incorporate the latest developmental trends observed in young adults.

We also need to consider how routes in Psychology are explained at undergraduate level. Students are presented with the outline, without learning much about the additional, and often specific, work requirements along the way. This leads some students to believe in faster and less expensive career progression opportunities in our field than is realistically possible. Many students end up feeling trapped in a long-winded and expensive system that demands top degree classifications, work experience, postgraduate study… and there’s still no guaranteed graduate position at the end. To further complicate the picture, job exploration is frequently perceived as showing a non-committal attitude, and students are hurried and unable to enjoy their varied roles as they are feeling the pressure to progress quickly towards more stable and higher earning positions.

We end our online article by considering how best to incorporate employability opportunities in the curriculum, and to increase graduates’ work readiness through stronger collaboration between HE institutions and employers, more inclusive employment for neurodiverse graduates, reinforcing employability and skills integration. We also suggest making the first year count. The typical weighted ratio of a three-year programme is 0:25:75, thus entirely discounting the students’ efforts during the first year in a way that is inconsistent with the ‘real-world experience’ that students will encounter in the workplace.

In sum, there have been positive changes in helping students navigate through the various roles available towards becoming professional Psychologists. But we can and should do more, and we must avoid a false picture of the types of jobs available to Psychology graduates within 15 months of graduation. Adding the trend for job exploration and the work experience required from Psychology graduates, we cannot help but think that graduate outcome measures might be more successful if expectations were adjusted to give graduates more time to enter graduate employment and to recognise the value of portfolio careers.

*Victoria Sanderson (University of Leeds)*

*Lisa Harkry (Leeds Beckett University)*

*Gaby Pfeifer (University of Southampton)*

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