

2 So You Want to Do a Psychology Degree?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. To be aware of the basic structure of a psychology degree.
2. To understand the value of a psychology degree accredited by the British Psychological Society.
3. To be organised so that you get the most from the first few weeks and subsequent weeks of your psychology degree.
4. To understand how this book will help you to get the most out of your psychology degree.

Introduction

There is an enormous range of degree subjects currently available and each year there are further weird and wonderful subjects on offer. What then is psychology? A common reaction when you tell someone that you're a psychologist is 'I'd better be careful about what I say!' or 'Are you analysing me right now?'. But, in fact, psychology is not psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a broad term that originates from the work of Sigmund Freud, though it is now split into numerous, often competing, schools of thought and practise. It can usefully be understood as centred on the idea of there being a 'talking cure' for psychological problems of various kinds. Psychology should also be clearly distinguished from psychiatry. Psychiatry is a branch of medicine and, in contrast to psychoanalysis, might usefully be thought of as centred on the idea that psychological problems have a 'chemical cure'.

Literally, psychology means 'study of the mind', but most psychologists would probably prefer to describe it as 'the science of the mind' with the focus on understanding human behaviour. One of Britain's leading psychologists, Professor Michael Eysenck,

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has described psychology as ‘the science which uses introspective and behavioural evidence to understand the internal processes which lead people to think and to behave as they do’ (Psychology is usually thought of as a science because it has relied on the scientific method to study the mind. We’ll be explaining exactly what the scientific method is in Chapter 4, but in essence it means that we devise and carry out empirical studies to test our ideas (hypotheses).

It is sometimes said that psychology is a young discipline but an old subject. On the one hand, the academically organised scientific investigation of the mind is little more than 125 years old but, on the other hand, the questions it addresses have interested people for thousands of years. For example: How do animals and people learn? Why do some people develop mental health problems? How do children learn language? These are all questions for psychology and are united by their focus on human and animal behaviour – ‘What makes them tick?’ is one way of thinking about it.

But is psychology anything more than common sense? Our ‘common sense’ tells us both that ‘birds of a feather flock together’ and ‘opposites attract’. We need psychology to help us harness our common sense to enable us to understand human and animal behaviour, ideally so we can improve people’s lives.

Why Do a Degree in Psychology?

You will have your own reasons for being interested in psychology. Over the years, we have met students with a wide variety of reasons for wanting to do a psychology degree. For example, we have had students who wanted to do psychology because they had helped care for a child on the autistic spectrum and wanted to understand autism. We have taught students who have had personal experience of mental health issues and wanted greater understanding of the causes and possible treatments. We have also taught students who have a clear idea of their career path and want to do psychology so that they can get a worthwhile and satisfying job. Why are you interested in psychology? You might have no clear idea of what you want to do, but just have an interest in the subject. These are all good reasons to do a degree in psychology.

It is important to stress that completing a psychology degree does not qualify you to practise as a chartered psychologist. A psychology degree provides you with the essential knowledge and skills in psychology to be eligible for the further postgraduate study that is required to become a chartered psychologist. You should note, however, that a psychology degree only does this if it is recognised by the British Psychology Society as leading to the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR).

You Really Need Your Degree to Have 'GBR'

GBR stands for the Graduate Basis for Registration and means that the British Psychological Society (BPS) has accredited the degree. Most degrees in psychology are accredited by the BPS, but it is important to check before you start your degree; you can do so using the BPS website (www.bps.org.uk) or by asking the admissions tutor of the psychology department. For a course to be accredited and hence have GBR, the ratio of teaching staff to students must be no more than 1:20. It is not unusual in some other subjects for that ratio to be much higher, so a degree with GBR means that there will be more staff available for teaching. In addition, the BPS ensures that psychology degrees with GBR have appropriate laboratory facilities, appropriate access to relevant literature, and that the degree covers an appropriate range of material to an appropriate standard. Note that a course allowing graduate membership of the BPS is not the same as having GBR, so ensure you look for *GBR*.

Most importantly, having GBR means that you will be able to continue on after your degree to study on accredited post-graduate training programmes that will enable you to become a practising psychologist and be eligible for the BPS Register of Chartered Psychologists. That status is compulsory for some careers and so is not optional if you want to work in certain jobs. So you can see that there are real advantages in choosing a psychology degree with GBR.

In the final chapter we give details of careers that are possible for someone with a degree in psychology. If you are not familiar with the possible careers available to psychology graduates, it is a good idea to read through that final chapter sooner rather than later as it will help guide you in making choices for your university and non-university life. You will probably find the careers listed to be fascinating, but if you don't you may want to reflect on whether a psychology degree is the best degree for you. However, even if you are not planning to go on to be a practising psychologist, a psychology degree is an excellent preparation for subsequent work or study. On a psychology degree you develop writing skills, numerical and IT skills, and skills to investigate the real world that are eagerly sought after by employers.

What is the Structure of a Psychology Degree?

There is a basic structure to three-year full-time psychology degrees. (In Scotland, degrees usually last four years and it is best to consider the final two years as being similar to the final two years of a three-year degree in England and Wales.) Part-time degrees usually involve covering the material at a different rate taking up to six years, but it is best

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to examine individual part-time degree courses as some allow faster and slower part-time routes. It's worth noting that psychology degrees throughout the United Kingdom, are fairly similar in their course content, because the British Psychological Society requires that certain areas must be covered if a degree is to be accredited.

Indicative degree structure:

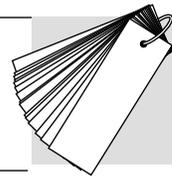
Year 1: Basic psychology, research methods and statistics and key skills.

Year 2: Core areas including research methods and statistics.

Year 3: Empirical project in psychology (not a literature review) and options particular to a department.

The core areas may extend into the third year and need to include the factors listed in Box 2.1.

Box 2:1 Corer Areas of Degree Subject and Respective Content



Core area	Typical content (not exhaustive)
Cognitive Psychology	Perception, attention, learning, memory and language
Psychobiology	Basic neurochemistry, neurophysiology of nerve transmission, hormones and behaviour, biological bases of behaviour
Social Psychology	Attitudes, attributions, prejudice, social identification, conformity, obedience
Developmental Psychology	Perceptual, motor and cognitive development during infancy
Individual Differences	Genetic, environmental and cultural influences, psychological testing
Conceptual and Historical Issues	Scientific method, social and cultural construction of knowledge, history and philosophy of science
Research Methods and Statistics	Research design, quantitative methods including statistical tests

We've assumed that you're reading this book having already chosen somewhere to study, but if you haven't, check out the Appendix 1 where we give advice on choosing the place that's right for you.

What if I Make the Wrong Choice?

It is possible to transfer between institutions should you feel that you've made the wrong choice, particularly from one degree offering GBR to another also offering GBR. However, if you want another university to take you, they will want to be confident that you can handle their degree. Obviously, that university would also have to have a place available, so the first thing to do is contact the admissions tutor and see if there is a possibility that you can move there. Remember that our advice in Appendix 1 about choosing a suitable course for you still applies even if you feel that you've made the wrong choice.

Before You Arrive at Your Chosen University

The most important thing to do before you start your degree is to ensure that, as far as possible, you have organised your life outside of study. You may have arranged accommodation on campus; if you do, ask to see your room as soon as possible to see what facilities it has (television aerial, Internet access and so on) as well as seeing how much storage and cupboard space is available. If you don't have accommodation on campus, make sure you have arranged your accommodation *before* you need to go in to university (normally for enrolment and induction). It is worth finding out if the university has an accommodation service, as they may be able to give you lists of properties that have received an inspection and have a landlord that hasn't (so far) caused problems for students. When considering if a property is suitable, do a test run of how long it takes to get to your place of study at the time that you would usually travel. For example, taking a bus in the afternoon is likely to take less time than in the rush hour when you are likely to be going in to the university. If you are in a rural area, you may find that the buses don't run at certain times of the day. It's also a good idea to find out if you will have some classes away from the main campus, as some universities in large cities have campuses that are spread over a very wide area.

If you have childcare responsibilities

If you need childcare support, it's a good idea to contact the university as soon as possible to see if there is a university nursery that would be suitable for you. Also, ask for a complete timetable for the whole year (ideally with deadlines for assessments) so that you can plan for half-term and so on.

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Buying books

Some students are keen to obtain details of preparatory reading and it is worth finding out what books are required for the different subjects that you will be studying. However, it is a very good idea to try to speak to existing students first as they may tell you that they didn't find an 'essential' book all that essential! Also, in many departments there is an opportunity at the start of the academic year to purchase books from the students in the previous academic year, so you could save some money if you wait for that.

University libraries tend to have copies of core texts, but not enough for all students so for those core books you are probably going to have to buy a copy. Most universities have a bookshop on site that should stock all required books. However, the prices are normally the price printed on the book. To save money, you might want to check on-line booksellers as you can sometimes save large sums of money when buying a number of books. Our favourite is the most well known, Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk), but it is best to use a price comparison website like Kelkoo (www.kelkoo.co.uk) to see which is the cheapest for each of your books (remembering any postage and packing charges). We've already mentioned that students who have completed your year of the degree might sell their books at reduced rates, but check that those books are still required for a unit and that they are the most up-to-date editions. Some university student unions have secondhand bookstores where you can also save a lot of money. Finally, you could share a book with a friend, but we have found that doing so can lead to frustration since both students tend to want to use the book at the same time.

Enrolment and Induction

Usually in the week before the official start of term, universities have 'enrolment and induction' sessions. In enrolment, a member of the university may want to check your *original* certificates that were the basis for your acceptance on the degree. Photocopies will normally *not* be acceptable. In addition, you will need to complete various forms and procedures such as getting student ID, joining university societies and so on. Induction might be part of the same process and the content varies between different institutions. Some universities have minimal formal induction, but instead include induction in the first few weeks of a first-year course. Other institutions have more extensive induction sessions prior to the start of the teaching term. Whatever the precise arrangements, it is important to try to attend your induction as there will be useful information provided. It's best to get on top of this information at the start to avoid confusion later on. Induction also provides the first chance to meet the people who will be studying with you and who will, hopefully, become your friends.

The First Week

The first week of the degree can be chaotic, frustrating, confusing, overwhelming and frightening – and that’s just for the lecturers! OK, it’s not that bad, but it can be hectic because there is so much going on. There should be a fresher’s week with lots of events (many involving alcohol, but also many that don’t). There will be first lectures, perhaps with reading lists of books to obtain. There will be a timetable that may seem meaningless until you work it out and discover the coding used for rooms. There may be desperate searches for toilets, for edible food, for somewhere you can smoke, for somewhere you can have a break from it all. The important thing is to recognise that the first week is just that: you should quickly learn the location of the toilets, a good place to go and chat over a coffee and where your classes are taught. It’s understood that students may find it difficult to find lecture theatres at first, so lecturers plan for late arrivals. Similarly, the first lecture is usually a gentle introduction that explains the structure of that part of the degree, so if you miss the start it is usually no great disaster.

The Second Week and Beyond

The second week is much calmer than the first and is when you can start settling into the pattern of your degree course. It is important to attend all the teaching situations that are available, that is, lectures, seminars and tutorials. As we’ve said, the first week or so is usually a general introduction to the content and procedures of each unit and if they are missed, you can catch up *with effort*. However, the biggest problem we’ve found is that students who miss sessions can become rapidly overwhelmed trying to catch up in addition to preparing for future teaching and reflecting on the teaching that they have attended. Think about what we said in the introduction about your life at university: you need to *organise, communicate* and *reflect*.

Do also make sure that you find out some of the mundane, but important, routine things that you need to know, like:

- **Exactly when do classes start?**
- **The procedures for seeing staff (do you need to book to see staff in their offices?).**
- **Is there a particular member of the department I should see if I am having personal problems?**
- **Is there a particular member of the department I should see if I am having academic problems?**

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- **How exactly do I submit work?**
- **What are the deadlines for my assessments?**
- **What is the policy and procedure for extensions?**
- **What allowance is made if I am seriously ill or suffer a death in the family?**

As the degree progresses you should ensure that you find out about the learning and personal support that is available for you. You can find support in a variety of places. In your psychology department you will get support from your tutors, other students and may even be offered extra sessions, for example, for statistics. Both the university and the student union will have services that offer advice and support on all aspects of student life, and you will find societies/support groups for women, ethnic and religious minorities and lesbian/gay/bi/transgendered individuals. Finally, you still have access to services that are available to the general public that can help you with general life problems, such as:

- **Citizens Advice Bureaux (www.nacab.org.uk)**
- **National Health Service (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)**
- **Samaritans (www.samaritans.org.uk)**

I've started late – help!

There are a variety of reasons why you might start a week or two late: illness, visa problems and accommodation problems. However, that isn't usually a big problem but you must see the course director to find out what you have missed and where you can obtain any handouts or lecture notes. So, make sure you see the course director or year tutor straight away otherwise you will find that your degree gets more complicated rather than simpler.

At the End of the First Year

The first year (first two years in Scotland) is essentially a foundation and you are usually only required to reach a pass standard so that you can progress into the second year. It's interesting to note that most universities don't include marks from the first year in their final degree classification. So, if you pass that first year you shouldn't have any worries. Having said that, if you have only just passed in one or more units, then you should consider why that happened. If you didn't do well on an examination because you were ill or had a temporary life crisis, then that's just 'one of those things'. If,

however, your mark reflected fairly your understanding of an area, it is a very good idea to spend some time over the summer break working through the material, as most of those areas will be covered in more depth in the next two years of your degree.

If you fail a component or two of a unit, you may be allowed to redo those assessments during the summer. However, as soon as you fail an assessment, find out the regulations as you may discover that if you fail a certain number of assessments you will be required to leave without a chance of redoing those assessments.

I've failed and have to leave – my life is over ...

It can be devastating for students who have failed and are required to leave the degree. If you hadn't told the university about mitigating circumstances, you might want to submit a formal appeal, but you would need a good reason why you hadn't revealed those problems beforehand. If you don't have mitigating circumstances, you might feel that you've failed as a person and that your life is over. That's nonsense – ask Bill Gates, who didn't complete his university degree! Getting a degree is certainly not a guarantee of success and, similarly, not getting a degree is not a guarantee of failure. You need to ask yourself why you failed. It might not have been the right time in your life to do a degree. You might have enjoyed a little too much the freedom of moving away from home and need to be more mature now. You might have belatedly realised that psychology is *not* for you and maybe you would succeed in another degree. You may simply have hated your university and would flourish at another. However, doing a degree may not be what's right for you and you might want to consider other options, depending on your skills and what *you* enjoy doing (rather than what other people – like parents or partners – think you *should* do).

At the End of the Second Year

At the end of your second year you should have a basic grounding in the key areas of psychology. You should have made your option choices and chosen a project area with those choices reflecting your interests or your intended career path – ideally both of those. It is also important to note that the second year of your degree *does* normally count towards the final degree, so failing one or two units can adversely affect your final degree classification.

At the End of the Third Year

Time for a celebratory drink and a party! Then, once the hangover has subsided, time to *continue* your career plan. In other words, it is not the time to *start* planning your career or *start* to submit job applications or applications for post-graduate study.

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Although difficult, it really is worthwhile using your final semester to also make applications. One good reason is that after your graduation it is likely that many of your tutors will be away at conferences, writing books and journal articles, working at another department or possibly even having a holiday. As a result, reference requests received over that summer break can take a long time to get a response.

Getting the Most out of Your Degree

It's important to remember that lectures, seminars, practical work and tutorials are actually only a small part of the time you spend on your degree. The largest part of your degree is the time you spend in the library, on the Internet and in your 'office'. Your degree is what you make it. If you want a good degree, you need to take control of the process and use your time as effectively as possible. That still means having time for family and friends, since having good relationships with others is good for your mental health and should help you through stressful times. However, you need to discover the best way to manage yourself and others (Chapter 3), to understand what is involved in 'doing' psychology (Chapter 4), how to get the most out of out a variety of teaching situations (Chapter 5) so that you can do your best in your assessments (Chapter 6), how to use resources most effectively (Chapter 7), and in particular in your psychology project (Chapter 8). Then you should be in a good position to do well after your degree (Chapter 9).

Box 2:2 Before You Move On...

What topics are covered in a psychology degree?

What is GBR and why is it important?

What careers are possible for psychologists?

What is/was important to you in choosing where you are/will be studying your psychology degree?

What should I do in the first few weeks?

Where can I get help for personal problems?

