

## Psychology Benchmarking Review Recommendations

Following the publication of the International Panel's report in May 2011, the British Psychological Society (BPS), Experimental Psychology Society (EPS) and the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments (AHPD) review stakeholders met to discuss how to take forward the recommendations contained in the report. Many of the recommendations require the need for stakeholders to work together, and the actions agreed below reflect this. Progress on the agreed actions will be reviewed annually.

### **Recommendation 1: Initiatives should be established to increase research co-operation of (a) educational psychology with cognitive psychology and developmental psychology and (b) occupational psychology with cognitive psychology.**

Cognitive psychology and developmental psychology are both very strong in the UK, and are also both relevant to educational research; yet in the UK there is not much collaboration between educational psychology and these other two cognate disciplines. The quality of research in educational psychology in the UK would be greatly improved by such collaboration; so steps should be taken to bring this about. This could be achieved if the ESRC and the BPS were to arrange a meeting with representatives of the cognitive psychology, developmental psychology and educational psychology sections of the Society, with the aim of promoting such collaboration. This might help raise the international profile of UK research in educational psychology. A similar meeting involving the cognitive-psychology and occupational-psychology sections of the BPS with the aim of fostering collaborations between these two sub-disciplines might help to raise the international profile of UK research in occupational psychology.

**Group response:** The BPS has agreed to work with the EPS to facilitate discussions and/or collaborations between these sub-disciplines, involving other parties as appropriate.

To implement this recommendation, the BPS plans to arrange a meeting between the relevant sub-sections of the Society and, possibly, a joint conference with the EPS. Cognitive and/or developmental psychologists already working in educational research will have the relevant knowledge to bring these sub-disciplinary groups together and so will play a key role in facilitating such collaborations. In addition, the BPS and EPS will consider whether joint committee appointments between the two Societies are needed to ensure that links are maintained.

### **Recommendation 2: Steps need to be taken to establish whether the international competitiveness of UK psychology research involving nonhuman animals is under threat because of difficulties with establishing and funding animal houses.**

Data are needed here eg on how many psychology departments currently have access to animal houses for research versus how many did a decade ago (anecdotal evidence suggests that this number has declined considerably). A meeting between senior researchers doing animal work in psychology and representatives of the Research Councils is also needed, at which these researchers could express their concerns about current and future arrangements about animal houses that support research in psychology. If serious concerns are in fact identified, discussion is needed concerning whether the problem might be dealt with adequately by greater

collaboration between universities re infrastructure provision along lines recommended by the Wakeham review (2010). It is important to note here that animal houses designed to support animal research across many disciplines run a severe risk of being designed inappropriately for the needs of specific disciplines.

**Group response:** The AHPD plans to conduct a survey to establish the number of animal facilities currently accessible to psychology departments and to assess whether there are any concerns with current and future funding of psychology research involving animals.

**BBSRC and MRC response:** MRC and BBSRC only fund research using animals where this is scientifically justified and no suitable alternatives exist. All research grants and fellowship applications submitted to the Research Councils are costed on the basis of full economic costs. All costs that contribute to the full economic costs of a project, including animal costs, weekly maintenance charges, building and premises costs, basic services and utilities, may be included. It is the responsibility of Research Organisations to have in place suitable facilities providing excellent care and welfare standards, as laid out in the “Responsibility in the Use of Animals in Bioscience Research guidelines”

([www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/position/policy/animals-in-bioscience-research.aspx](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/position/policy/animals-in-bioscience-research.aspx)).

**Recommendation 3: Data on the proportion of psychology funding that has gone to the funding of brain imaging research should be collected and analysed.** Data on the proportion of psychology funding from the various Research Councils and Universities that has gone to support research in neuroimaging annually over the past decade should be collected and analysed, so as to provide a picture re the impact on psychology research support of this very expensive form of research. Is this funding impact as great as many UK psychology researchers believe? If so, is this what the Universities and Research Councils, as a matter of targeted research-funding policy, want to be the case?

**Group response:** The Research Councils do not routinely collect information on brain imaging research from psychology-related research grants, and in many ESRC-funded projects imaging forms only one (and often a small) part of a larger programme of work. However, the ESRC will work with the BPS to provide and analyse some data on recent psychology-related grants that contain an element of brain imaging work.

**Recommendation 4: Past and current funding provisions for full-time PhD students in psychology should be surveyed.** There needs to be a review of funding provisions for PhD students in psychology which compares how this currently happens in the UK with how it happens in Australia (where there are schemes of Federally-funded doctoral fellowships that are much more extensive than is the case in the UK), the USA, Canada, Germany and The Netherlands. How has the proportion of full-time PhD students in psychology funded by the Research Councils changed over the past decade?

**Group response:** The ESRC is planning a follow-up to its 2006 Demographic Review of the UK Social Sciences in 2013/1. This will provide an in-depth analysis of current and recent trends in staff and student numbers across the UK social sciences.. In the meantime, the ESRC will provide data on the number of psychology funded studentships in recent years, including DTC disciplinary allocations.

**Recommendation 5: Discipline-appropriate postgraduate research training courses for psychology PhD students should be established.** Postgraduate research training courses for

psychology PhD students will enhance the research training of such students and make it less narrow, but only if:

- Such courses are directed specifically at the discipline of psychology (eg “Advanced statistical techniques for psychology”) rather than being generic (eg “Advanced research techniques”), and
- Any requirement to attend such courses does not conflict with the requirement that students must submit their theses in a fixed and short period of candidature. Using brief intensive summer-school formats for such courses might help address this problem.
- Heads of Psychology Departments could be surveyed asking them to name specific research skills which such are lacking at the doctoral level and could be the subject of such training courses.

**Group response:** The ESRC’s new Postgraduate Framework provides its Doctoral Training Centres with the flexibility to develop more specialised disciplinary training. Doctoral Training Centres are able to request the accreditation of new training pathways as part of their annual reporting process, and we encourage dialogue between the BPS and institutions (perhaps via the AHPD) to determine requirements here.

In addition a key objective of the ESRC’s new Training Framework is to open up access to advanced training (specialist disciplinary and methodological) to all UK postgraduate students through the DTCs and other ESRC investments such as the National Centre for Research Methods and the Researcher Development Initiative. Bursaries will be available to support access. The ESRC is currently undertaking a training-gap analysis and will hold a consultation with the academic community from December 2011 to assist with this. ESRC would encourage the BPS and AHPD to respond to our consultation, following which we will decide on any additional training to be commissioned.

**Recommendation 6: Consideration should be given to establishing a second format for PhD theses in psychology: the journal-article format.** Consideration needs to be given to making it possible for psychology PhD students to submit their theses in the form of a set of papers (which are not required to have been published, though they may have been, or even required to have been submitted, though they may have been; they just need to be in the format of submittable journal articles). Amongst the many reasons why this would be beneficial to UK Psychology are:

- It would increase the likelihood of PhD students actually publishing prior to graduation (making them more competitive for post-PhD positions).
- It would provide them with on-the-job training in how to write a journal article. Writing a PhD thesis in traditional format does not do this; it is a skill which the student will never need to use again.
- It would free up more time during the PhD candidature for students to engage in activities not specific to their theses: attending postgraduate research training courses, for example, or visiting other labs.

This would make UK research training in psychology less narrow than it currently is. Here cognisance would need to be taken of outcomes of any actions taken in relation to Recommendation 8 concerning whether UK-trained PhDs are under-represented in recent appointment of junior postdoctoral researchers to positions in UK psychology departments.

A Working Party involving representatives from the BPS, EPS and UK Heads of Psychology Departments should be established to work on this proposal re the format of psychology PhD theses.

**Group response:** Whilst the assessment of PhD candidates is a matter for the Research Organisations concerned, the AHPD is happy to initiate discussion of this proposal and to help implement any changes with the support of the BPS/Higher Education Academy if a strong need for change is identified by the psychology community.

**Recommendation 7: A survey documenting the availability and funding sources of junior postdoctoral fellowships in psychology should be conducted.** There needs to be a review of the funding of junior postdoctoral fellowships in psychology which compares how this currently happens in the UK with how it happens in Australia (where the Research Councils fund extensive schemes of applicant-based postdoctoral fellowships), the USA, Canada, Germany and The Netherlands.

**Group response:** The ESRC (in consultation with the participating Research Councils) will provide details of postdoctoral support offered by the Councils and to work with the AHPD and BPS to produce a factsheet for the psychology community. In addition, the AHPD is willing to conduct relevant surveys to assess the current funding provision for PhD students in psychology, and to review the funding of junior postdoctoral fellowships.

**Recommendation 8: Data comparing rates of appointment of UK-trained and non-UK-trained appointees to junior research positions in psychology need to be collected.** It needs to be definitively determined whether junior research positions in psychology are more and more going to people who were trained outside the UK: and, if this is so (as it seems to be), it needs to be definitively determined whether this is because people trained outside the UK are more competitive for such positions or because there is a shortage of UK-trained junior psychology researchers. Either alternative has policy implications. So an appropriate survey designed to determine which alternative is the case (perhaps both are) needs to be carried out.

Also valuable in relation to this issue would be the collection of data tracking the immediate postdoctoral career paths of UK students graduating with PhDs in psychology.

**Group response:** The AHPD will collect this data in its survey of psychology departments which will also identify the extent to which posts in areas of psychology are being filled by non-UK trained appointees.