

# **Supporting access to psychological professions through a widening participation placement programme for undergraduate psychology students: A Pilot**

## **Abstract**

We describe an initiative designed to explore the development of diversity in our doctoral level psychology professions in the NHS. Undergraduate courses welcome a more diverse population and in more recent years, this increase has been reflected in our doctoral level courses. Our aim is to acknowledge what we know and create a learning opportunity for undergraduates and the profession.

**Keywords** : Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, Under-represented groups, Psychological Profession, Honorary, Undergraduate, Placement, Assistant Psychologist, Black and Ethnic Minority Group, Supervisor, Widening Participation, Reflection

## **Our Understanding of the Diversity and Inclusion Challenge**

Current processes are not attracting sufficient diversity with the psychology professions. Given the diversity in our undergraduate populations we know that we are losing this cohort of psychology undergraduates from under-represented groups by the time they have graduated. We want to understand and address this loss.

To have a chance of creating an “even playing field” we need to consider that potential talent in under-represented groups often does not make it onto the relevant field or if it does, it is positioned without the necessary information and resource. This risks negative and rejecting experiences, walking away prematurely without having the guidance and support to navigate this. Our current selection processes rely on us looking for the “best candidate”, the candidate with the highest grades and relevant experience, who is able to articulate and translate their experience to practice. However, as employers we need to develop our curiosity to understand what talent looks like in this population and consider that those we need to recruit are not necessarily going to look like the “best candidates”. Our definition of “best candidates” needs to include those who appreciate the range of sociocultural contexts and can develop and apply psychological principles in those contexts.

## **The History of Modern Psychology**

The foundations of psychology within our most recent historical and cultural context are white European and non-native north American. Much has been written on the industrial and post-industrial epoch and the place of colonialism. Yet, psychology has roots that connect way before this era in human history. How can we be optimally aware of the cultural paradigm of psychology and use the existing strengths in our psychology training to formulate our situation and evolve forward?

We need to understand where we are, where we came from and connect to what is lost, rejected or not yet present in our ways of knowing. Taking a compassionate approach by recognising the power of shame and blame at this time when we review

the history of white privilege. The power of a fear-based culture where there is a risk of psychologists not stepping forward to address the challenges for fear of being judged as discriminatory.

### **Why is the Diversity and Inclusion agenda important?**

A systemic frame would see the ability to work with difference as key to a process of change and inclusion. Framing the challenge as one of how we create an environment that works well with difference for the benefit of the development of our psychological professions, including the models we work with, the staff that work with us and the communities we serve.

Are we bringing people into our professions to shape them into the existing culture or recognising that the existing culture needs to change? If the latter is the case, then what context do we need to create to facilitate this development?

### **The Project Team**

Clinical Health Psychology, the Counselling Psychology network and the Human Resources Department at Surrey and Borders Partnership Trust (SABP) and the Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London, came together with the joint aim and strong commitment to increasing diversity into the profession of psychology by starting with the intake of Honorary Assistant Psychologists (HAP) across both the university and SABP.

All the undergraduates in this cohort identified as women and were from a range of black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. One project lead was from a white western background and the other was from a BAME background. Other members of the project group were from a white European background and from BAME backgrounds. Half of the group identify as male and the other half as female. The two project leads negotiated a learning space in their roles to facilitate open conversations about any potential biases they may have been holding throughout the project.

### **Description of the project**

Undergraduates from under-represented groups were identified by the University and offered the opportunity of a sandwich year placement and/or individual mentoring sessions. We targeted those from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups (BAME) backgrounds and men and asked Clinical Tutors at the University to encourage candidates from these under-represented groups and who were less likely, to put themselves forward. Candidates were interviewed by the SABP team with a standard NHS interview process.

Six undergraduates with protected characteristics were recruited and offered a HAP role for 9 months with tailored training, coaching and supervision. Additionally, the clinical supervisors received reflective supervision.

### **What we planned**

#### **Themes of the project:**

### *Recruitment Strategy and procedures:*

We planned to recruit people who were undergraduate psychology students seeking a placement/sandwich year. These individuals were:

- Interested in becoming applied psychologists in health care.
- Had the personal characteristics of being under-represented in the profession such as BAME and men.

We offered mentoring sessions to talk about the possibility of a career in psychology in the NHS, targeting applicants who had previously “written themselves off” and encouraged them to make applications. The mentor sessions also supported individuals to make informed career choices.

We worked closely with HR and the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) Lead to ensure we were within legal limits and following impeccable EDI processes to tailor the interview process focussing on the service needs and what students could benefit from.

We utilised multiple interview panels involving future supervisors and focused on the applicants’ learning needs and not on their achievements. Project leads took careful consideration of a best fit when allocating students to services.

### *Tailored Induction Phase:*

The project team recognised that introduction to key professionals in the services held great importance, whilst providing the HAPs with opportunity to network with peers.

HAPs had specific placement contracts. They experienced a graded introduction to their tasks within their induction timetable. They were offered a series of talks delivered by supervisors over the course of the year on skills relevant to their role. HAPs were offered monthly group mentoring and monthly individual line management and clinical supervision.

### *Discussing Diversity:*

The project team discussed with the university about which students from under-represented groups could be suitable candidates for this project.

The project team set up a start of placement discussions for the supervisor and supervisee to discuss goal setting, rate their confidence and talk about any concerns they were holding about the forthcoming HAP placement. This was repeated at the midpoint and end of placement.

The project team created a reflective group space for supervisors to think beyond the usual supervision of a HAP and to be inclusive about issues of diversity and equality that could arise during the placement.

The HAPs had bespoke group mentoring sessions in which they identified what their diversity contributed to the workplace.

### *Discussing challenging experiences:*

Supervisors and mentors were encouraged to reflect and learn. A similar space of encouraging reflection and learning was held to encourage HAPs to share their experiences with others and issues experienced in the supervisor/mentor relationship.

### *HAPs Welcome and Connection to the team:*

Placements were focused on what the HAPs could offer and wanted to gain. Supervisors intended to learn from the HAPs as well as guide and teach them. HAPs were provided with an explicit contract/plan to address skill, confidence and diversity issues.

### *Personal Growth:*

Explicit attention to detail between supervisors and HAPs was generated to include coaching each other's behaviour to effectively deal with prejudice and diversity issues in the workplace during the placement, either in the present or relating to past experiences.

## **Feedback and Results from HAPs and Supervisors**

### **Themes of the project**

#### **Recruitment Strategy and procedures:**

The project team recognised the importance of having an accessible and transparent selection criteria, with a clear application process. Supervisors shared the importance of the specificity of criteria for undergraduates.

Supervisors shared *“We weren't basing it on qualitative CV, or merit. It was a very different process, but I don't know whether it's the right way or not.”*

HAPs shared *“Timing in between finding out the shortlist to the interview date was short notice would have liked more time to prep a bit more”,* yet in contrast, other HAPs shared *“Phone call in the same week as the interview, really positive, asked if I wanted feedback, found it really helpful.”*

#### **Tailored Induction Phase:**

HAPs shared the importance of have a formal structured induction phase, offering choice/explanation and early training opportunities right, with a graded introduction to their duties.

Supervisors shared *"I think they felt at times (in those early weeks) a bit purposeless - that they were just kind of finding their way; they definitely gave us feedback to that effect."*

Supervisors shared *"...having the induction timetable was really helpful but following that they did feel there was a quite a lack of direction and lack of purpose."*

For HAPs, they shared *"Inductions, information bombarding, learning, overwhelming exp, felt lost, first time working in the NHS a lot to process."*

*"My exp was feeling overwhelmed a presentation or joint small induction for the placement student, including a small q and a about what to expect, any specific questions we have that could ease our worries and anxieties."*

### Discussing Diversity:

Internal policies and frameworks on how to support acknowledging and working with diversity were utilised. Supervisors expressed some unease and uncertainty about the best approach for those who were new to this.

HAPs identified the role the placements had in opening up conversations about diversity, but may not have had the confidence/experience to know how to articulate conversations. As part of the collation of feedback, HAPs were asked questions about the wider role of diversity in the profession and changes for the future.

Supervisors shared *"Wanted echo the point that my student also felt unsure around what their role was. Am I here to do something about diversity?"*

*"We want to work on diversity and we're both naming diversity, but then we're not really sure what we're going to do with that."*

*"Representation really does matter, matching the supervisor to the service helped, feel under-represented a lot of the time, more action about diversity and making it clear that you are excited to get BAME staff into the workplace and there is a space for them."*

### Discussing challenging Experiences:

Supervisors felt that they were navigating new, and at times uncomfortable territory managing challenges for HAPs within the context of diversity. This was more profound for HAPs, who report situations that may have left them lost and feeling the right structures/safeguards were needed to mitigate and/or resolve that situation. Supervisors found that naming of scenarios, interpersonal dynamics, diversity, experienced on placements was tricky terrain if no frameworks were present to scaffold this. We were fortunate to have guidance and the supervisors reflective space to take this to.

Supervisors described *"I don't think there was a supervisor among the team who didn't have at least one or two really uncomfortable or distressing or difficult experiences come up either for them or for their HAP or both."*

*“Team meeting is not always a safe space to challenge things and being the least qualified person in the room leaves you feeling uncomfortable and no set procedure on how to raise matters.”*

*“Understanding the boundaries and processes around having volunteer workers in the team. What can we ask them to do? What should we not? How does annual leave work if you are not even getting paid? All those type questions that HR may have been able to help with.”*

HAPs described *“Age played a part when facilitating a group, when the I was doing what my supervisor did, the patient was vocal. Patient was picking on everything I said. Patients comment on age, you are young, say this all the time. Not sure if this had anything to do with my BAME representation or just an age issue.”*

### Welcome Value and Connection:

HAPs acknowledged the importance of being listened to and valued, establishing connections with members of the multi-disciplinary team to help embed them in the team and feel purposeful. Safety and containment were often found within the supervisory relationship. This could often help nullify the challenges posed on placement.

Value and connection was echoed by supervisors, finding peer supervision for supervisors equally useful for naming difficulties for them.

Feedback demonstrated that the HAPs *“Felt as an equal in the Clinical Psychology meeting, speaking as a peer, how we can bring new opinions and views to the service, felt valued and as important as the rest”*.

*“Safe to talk about some of those things that perhaps felt a bit more uncomfortable to talk about – I found that really valuable. It definitely made me feel more connected to my colleagues that were going through similar and supervisory experiences.”*

*“It (supervision) felt like a very safe space in which to really share some of the dilemmas and some of the tricky, messy nitty gritty bits together.”*

### Personal Growth:

Supervision and the supervisory relationship provided the safe, containing, and motivating platform from which a wealth of opportunities for HAPs was offered and promoted. This promoted a sense of personal development and was profoundly felt by HAPs.

HAPs shared *“At the beginning of placement, I was asked what I wanted to do, asked if I am happy to do things, willing to try new things, felt really supported and a lot of teamwork, milestones.”*

*“Challenge myself, did a presentation with the psychology network, homing in on presentation and develop skills, showcase the skills I have, immersing myself into a new environment and the Clinical Psychology work, found it really enjoyable.”*

*“Ample opportunities to shadow, enhance and consolidate skills.”*

Supervisors shared *“hearing the development they fed back, was just one of the most rewarding things. I think I’ve experienced, certainly, in recent years.”*

### **Learnings and divergence from the project plan:**

#### **Recruitment Strategy and procedures:**

A collaborative partnership with the appointing university was key at all stages of the project. It was important to seek out funding (managed by director level finance, HR and Psychology) for IT, equipment and travel expenses.

The project team valued having HR involvement to check the wording was legally permitted and the recruitment approach was in line with SABP’s policy and procedures. They recognised the significant work to get the contracts for HAPs and organising equipment, delivery and the practicality of travel expense approval.

Keeping a consistent and small interview panel inclusive of supervisors who were tuned into the projects principles was crucial. The project team acknowledged that a mentoring programme goes hand in hand with the widening participation placements.

#### **Tailored Induction Phase:**

The project team questioned whether HAPs should have to complete statutory and mandatory training. In future, more training opportunities stemming from the series of talks from the supervisors at the start of the placement are essential to thoroughly induct the HAPs. Recognising that even with a tailored approach, HAPs are still going to struggle to navigate the NHS system and encounter purposeless.

#### **Discussing Diversity:**

In future projects, there is a need to set expectations that role of a HAP is not to transform diversity but to widen access to the profession. There is a need to support supervisors to be more skilled in working with difference, diversity and being inclusive.

There is pressure from HAPs and supervisors to attend to the diversity agenda, without knowing what they could do in this. We recognise there is an unconscious bias in the desire to want to increase diversity verses candidates from diverse background, but also a need to retain the competencies and expectations of a paid Assistant Psychologist role. Without knowing how to reach the criteria set for western candidates, we expect those from under-represented backgrounds to sell

themselves to us rather than trying to actively get the best out of candidates and look at what we can teach them.

### *Discussing challenging experiences:*

Acknowledging the difficult experiences from the project shows the importance of this topic. We recognise the need for reflective spaces and structures in place to scaffold the project and facilitate the principles, having a safe, separate space for brave conversations.

Supervisors shared challenging dilemmas in the reflective supervision group allowing for healthy discussions and co-creative ways on how to manage these. We recognise there is a long way to go in skilling up supervisors to work with HAPs from under-represented groups. Supervision and support for supervisors is essential to create a safe space to work through challenges as they arise. Having a compassionate relational space to process allows time to understand and make sense of what is happening in the supervisory relationship.

### *Welcome Value and Connection:*

The project team acknowledge the importance of creating spaces for supervisors and HAPs to feel safe enough to speak about their experiences. Seeking funding is key, for example – a paid placement could help candidates feel valued.

### *Personal Growth:*

Offering more opportunities to embrace projects like this can help supervisors develop their own career pathways. There is a need to work together to set meaningful tasks and experiences for the supervisor and HAPs.

Offering undergraduates these opportunities enables catching their attention earlier in their psychology career. This opens up the possibilities and encourage undergraduates to explore their sense of their potential in psychology professions.

### **Discussion:**

Several learning opportunities arose during the project.

Recognising the need for HAPs to fulfil the criteria of the job description laid out, acknowledging the gaps that exist and what learning opportunities we can offer without underestimating the competencies of someone from an under-represented background. There was potential for the white project lead to “drop standards and expectations” of the HAPs. The white lead challenged the BAME lead in situations where supervisors faced criticism and judgment and a lack of curiosity around the perception of prejudice. At these times, supervisors felt too afraid to ask about the HAPs background for fear of being judged as discriminatory.

Working with a number of female south Asian HAPs provided an opportunity to develop an awareness of our white western lens on competence and what “best



candidate” looked like. Awareness of how these undergraduates appeared less “independent” to us – and the extent to which we value “independence” as a quality associated with maturity and “readiness”.

We learnt from this cohort of HAPs that came from nurturing extended families in which cohesion and belonging is promoted. We observed the systemic cultural differences between BAME undergraduates pursuing a HAP role in the NHS working environment. They did not have the same assertion in approach as a white western individual who may have left home at 18 and was encouraged to pursue an independent life. This could easily be misinterpreted as a lack of motivation or interest if there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of cultural context.

Working with an awareness of some of the Asian cultures from the project teams lived experiences, we could see how in some of the Asian cultures, a daughter is seen as a gift from god in which the parents are guardians, Lakshmi in the Hindu religion and an Amanat in the Muslim religion. Parents see their role as a privilege to look after their daughter until she is married. We were able to challenge our views of what “readiness” and maturity looked like. This led to reflections on what it might be like for an Asian family to bring their daughter to the door of a workplace which is predominantly dominated by white NHS clinicians to be guided into the profession of psychology which is largely based on white western theories.

We noticed supervisors who were treating HAPs as fragile – concerns about not asking them to travel long distances for 15-minute opportunities as they too embraced this cohort as fragile and reciprocated that care. This was identified in reflective supervision and supervisors were encouraged to treat the undergraduate cohort as they would regardless of their diverse backgrounds whilst holding this understanding of cultural difference. We do not need to assume we can see everything and allow ourselves to apply curiosity by being kinder, braver and with more humility.

## **Conclusion:**

From this project, we recognise that a key role of psychology is bringing in difference to the lives of people and communities. By increasing diversity within the workforce so those employed are from a diverse community and are representative and better able to understand the population we see in services.

A key learning point in this work is the extent to which a culture of shame and blame blocks the natural process of being allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. This inhibits growth and introduces a paralysis. Without projects such as this, the paralysis may continue and access to a career in psychology professions for under-represented groups may be limited. In times of considerable change, we need to be considering what change is needed in psychology, a priority to hone our skills and awareness around facilitating change and difference in our practice and systems using the wider lens of diversity.

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