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“With a Little Help From My Friends”: The Importance of Supportive Resources for Postgraduates

Andrew Manley

There is a commonly used phrase in sport that you're only as good as your last performance. By the same logic, it could be argued that any group or organisation is only as effective as the people it trains and recruits. Thus, the future success of psychology as a discipline is dependent upon the new breed of psychology students who aim to follow in the footsteps of the pioneers who have gone before them. Despite the obvious importance that students, particularly postgraduates, hold for the area of psychology, it is alarming that a huge number of these aspiring practitioners and academics remain unaware of the resources and support available to them. As a current postgraduate research student, my experience of the exciting yet daunting step-up from undergraduate to masters, and then on to PhD study has reinforced my belief that appropriate support offered to postgraduates will allow these individuals to realise their potential, and may mean the difference between success and failure in both academic progress and applied practise. The aim of this article is to outline and raise the profile of the various resources that are available to postgraduate students, as well as highlighting why it is imperative that the next generation of psychologists are fully informed of the existence of such sources of assistance.

The BPS is committed to providing students with the support and opportunities that will help them to fulfil their potential and become an asset to the society. This is illustrated by the success of the Student Members Group (SMG), a section of the BPS which is devoted to undergraduates, providing them with a

quarterly newsletter, discounts on books, seminar and conference fees, and a variety of regional support networks, all for the same price as a student railcard. Although not as widely recognised in comparison with the SMG, the BPS also funds a similar group that is run by postgraduates for postgraduates. People reading this article will most likely be aware of the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG), which provides a wide range of important resources that masters and PhD students can access as a means of aiding their academic and professional development. Although PsyPAG receives financial assistance from the BPS in order to help support psychology's postgraduate community, it remains an independent group in its own right. Hence, it is not necessary for students to be registered as BPS members before becoming accepted as members of PsyPAG. In fact, on enrolling as a postgraduate, students are automatically recognised as PsyPAG members. However, a large number of postgraduates remain oblivious to this fact, and consequently fail to take advantage of the resources and opportunities available to them. These include this very journal, *The Quarterly*, which contains news items, research notes, and useful study tips from a range of postgraduate and post-doctorate contributors. PsyPAG also offers members a mailing list designed to provide students with a platform for discussing any relevant problems or issues they may be experiencing without fear of embarrassment or ridicule.

Despite current attempts to promote and emphasise the benefits of PsyPAG via the BPS website, advertisements in *The Psychologist*, publicity stands at a variety of conferences, and flyers sent to institutions around the country, there remain too many postgraduates who manage to slip this marketing net. As a result, it should be the responsibility of lecturers and supervisors, whose attention may be more readily gripped by such media, to educate their understudies regarding the existence of

groups such as PsyPAG. From a personal perspective, I was fortunate enough to be made aware of PsyPAG by my supervisor, who introduced me to one of the PsyPAG committee members at a conference last year. I quickly realised that the group offered a myriad of options that were there to be taken advantage of. Within four months of this initial realisation, I had applied for and been granted a PsyPAG student bursary, which enabled me to attend the 2006 PsyPAG annual conference and present some of my research. Not only did this prove to be an invaluable opportunity to gain experience of presenting in a relatively safe and relaxed environment, it was also an excellent networking prospect and a chance to make contacts with other postgraduates from around the UK.

Moreover, the PsyPAG conference incorporated teaching workshops into the programme. Organised and run by representatives of the Postgraduates who Teach (PGwT) Network, part of the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, the workshops afforded delegates the chance to work through and discuss some common yet difficult scenarios that may be encountered when teaching undergraduates. Given that many postgraduates are expected to become effective teachers within a short period of time, such workshops provide a useful training tool. Furthermore, certain seminars may contribute towards a postgraduate certificate in teaching (PGCert). The PGwT workshops are not limited to the PsyPAG annual conference, but are regularly held at numerous venues across the country, thus making this network another example of the valuable resources available to postgraduates that deserve further publicity.

From my own perspective as a sport and exercise psychology student, sources of support and information for postgraduates are a crucial part of the nurturing process within professional and academic circles. In line with the ongoing

development of sport and exercise psychology as a specialist discipline, the routes to accreditation and chartership within the field have become subject to scrutiny and adaptation. For example, the BPS now stipulates that in order to be eligible for chartered status, applicants must hold a BPS accredited masters degree in sport and exercise psychology, and must also have achieved Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR) prior to undertaking the MSc (Niven & Owens, 2007). Obviously, any aspiring postgraduates need to be informed of the specific criteria of the existing pathways to accreditation and chartered status before making decisions such as which masters degree they should apply for. However, it is also of equal importance that current postgraduates, who may not have achieved one or both of the above mentioned BPS stipulations for chartership, are made fully aware of the options available to them as a result of the choices they have already made. Groups such as PsyPAG provide an advisory service, which may help existing postgraduates decide what the next step should be in their academic and professional development. Given that postgraduate study is invariably a long and arduous process, it is essential that individuals who have undertaken such a commitment be offered the appropriate information that may prevent them from venturing down avenues that could lead to further obstacles and roadblocks.

As well as providing constructive advice, valuable opportunities, and much needed funding, PsyPAG represents a supportive network for postgraduates which, at the very least, aims to make the often elusive light at the end of the tunnel that little bit brighter. It is difficult to overemphasise the potential impact that available supportive resources may have on the development of psychology postgraduates, and consequently the future advancement of the area as a whole. The Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology (DSEP) have recognised this and have recently developed

their own student bursary scheme with the objective of aiming to help postgraduate members of the Division to cover the cost of attending workshops and conferences that are deemed important to their professional and academic growth. This is a worthy initiative and one that should be emulated by other Divisions and Sections of the society. The future of psychology is ultimately in the hands of the multitude of postgraduate students currently pursuing a career in this broad area. Thus, it is vital that those associated with these individuals, be they peers, lecturers, practitioners, or supervisors, do their best to ensure that postgraduates are aware of the assistance that is readily available to them.

Useful weblink:

The Higher Education Academy Psychology Network –

www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk

Reference

Niven, A., & Owens, A. (2007). Qualification and training routes to becoming a practising sport and exercise psychologist in the UK. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist, 11*, 20-21.

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