Position statement and good practice guidelines

Applied practitioner psychologist internship programmes and unpaid voluntary assistant psychologist posts

Produced by the Division of Clinical Psychology and Group of Trainers in Clinical Psychology

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These guidelines have been developed to provide guidance to NHS trusts, health boards, universities and other higher education institutions delivering undergraduate degree courses in psychology, applied practitioner psychologist training courses (e.g. clinical, counselling, health, educational and forensic psychology) and other commissioning bodies e.g. social care providers, and to private sector organisations which may be offering unpaid assistant psychologist posts or participate in internship programmes.

The guidelines relate to:

- **Intern programmes** – The term is used here to refer to predominantly undergraduate experience placements or industry years, which may occur as a short term placement during a degree, as an additional year mid-degree or at the end of a undergraduate degree programme, usually in a clinical setting though sometimes in a research setting. Occasionally these may also occur as a component of a postgraduate master’s degree in applied psychology.

- **Voluntary psychology assistants’ posts** – this refers to post degree experience usually in a relevant practitioner setting or research setting, and may be offered in services alongside paid assistants’ posts.

There are additional references to trainee applied psychologists who are trainees on a postgraduate doctoral training programme in a specific applied psychology discipline.
Introduction

1.1 Industry placements and internships are being increasingly seen as valuable experiences for people early in their career, both in terms of skill development and work-placement experience. This model is commonplace already in many sectors such as law and accountancy, as well as already being implemented in some health trusts in association with HE courses. Once graduated, experience in relevant practice or research settings is often a requirement for entry into practitioner psychologist training; voluntary work is one way to gain this experience.

1.2 It is acknowledged that currently there is an increasing pressure, particularly in public sector services, to streamline service provision and make financial savings. This may act as an incentive for employers to provide unpaid posts, such as voluntary assistants’ posts. This raises concerns from ethical and governance perspectives, with particular reference to the discriminatory element of unpaid posts, potential exploitation, inadequate monitoring systems and access to appropriate supervision within these roles.

1.3 Whilst in some regions the provision of both internships and voluntary assistants’ posts may be well established and formalised, in other regions arrangements have been developing on an ad-hoc basis, with interested parties seeking relevant experience approaching services directly, potentially through personal contacts. This clearly has implications for fair access and equitability for others interested in applied psychology careers. Furthermore, not everyone can afford to take unpaid roles, which inherently leads to a discriminatory position.

1.4 In light of these concerns it is seen as a positive step that university undergraduate courses, higher education institutes and employing authorities, including NHS trusts or boards, wish to take responsibility for organising coherent and equitable experiences within clinical services, where appropriate, for those pursuing internships or voluntary posts. However, clear national guidance is needed to support good practice.
Potential benefits

2.1 With respect to internships, it is beneficial for undergraduates to gain experience and preliminary skills in working in relevant services, and to have a greater awareness of the roles and functions of applied psychologists prior to pursuing further a career in the particular profession. Many undergraduate psychology courses do not offer placement experience meaning voluntary work can seem an attractive prospect to some. Further postgraduate experience is often a required criterion for entry into some applied psychology training programmes, particularly clinical psychology. The knowledge of the discipline gained through these experiences may reduce attrition from training courses as a mismatch is less likely between prior expectations and later experiences during training.

2.2 Further, completion of internships may be a desired characteristic of job applicants which could give them additional experience over those who have not completed an industry-based work placement, and therefore could increase employability.

2.3 Services additionally benefit from having interns in post for a committed time period (potentially six months to a year) whereby a sustained contribution to the service can occur.
**Risks/threats**

3.1 Internships and voluntary posts may only be accessible to those financially able to support a further period of study or to work for free, particularly if posts are full time. Internships, if voluntary, can be free or funded as part of the overall degree. This has the effect of potentially reducing diversity within the profession and has implications for equality and fair access.

3.2 One concern is that unpaid posts or internships may result in the delivery of poor services if they are not subject to the same strict governance, guidance and support as paid posts, or not governed through shared ownership with a university undergraduate course and/or applied psychologist training programme placement. Untrained and unsupported staff are not able to offer services of appropriate quality. It is not clear if at present intern, and particularly voluntary, posts are planned, delivered or supervised with the same rigour as paid posts which are part of the service establishment.

Therefore, if those in unpaid posts feel governance is being compromised then they should have the right to decline supervision of these posts and their delivery of services.

3.3 There are potential risks to wellbeing from exposure to stressful and/or overwhelming situations within some applied psychology settings, particularly if full induction, supervision, CPD and training are not provided to the same level as would be available in a paid position. These should be equally available to unpaid positions to mitigate these potential risks.

3.4 Entry to applied psychologist training posts is highly competitive. Therefore, with voluntary roles, the exploitation of those willing to work for free to gain relevant experience is a significant risk. Further, related to 3.1 and 3.2 above, those in unsupported or inappropriate posts may feel compromised in raising issues of concern about the quality of services delivered or supervision received.

3.5 With reference specifically to clinical psychology training, the traditional career trajectory has frequently included experience gained as an assistant prior to training. This has become more flexible and varied due to the introduction of alternative routes into clinical training, including those associated with the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies Initiative (IAPT) in England, and current financial constraints which may affect the number of available assistant posts.

It is possible that internships or voluntary posts could be used to cover staff shortfalls, resulting from current cuts to services. Whilst it is recognised that the assistant route may no longer be the usual pathway to training, by potentially replacing assistant posts with voluntary assistants or internships, this could undermine the role of assistants or other developing career pathways. This may have the result of further reducing these opportunities as posts could be lost.

Whilst this example is particular to one branch of applied psychology, the threat to existing posts through the use of internships or voluntary posts may apply across the
practitioner psychologist professions. A further implication may be that if unpaid posts are deemed to be successful, this could lead to all such training posts becoming unpaid in the future.

3.6 There may be implications of internships for applied psychology training programmes which rely on services to provide training placements and supervision for trainees. The reduction in qualified applied psychologists in services and the increasing workplace demands on those remaining have already had consequences for the availability of placements and supervisors in some regions. There is a risk that if placement supervisors are providing year-long internships, the pool of available placements and supervisors will be further cut.

This may have the further unintentional outcome of reducing availability for other professionals seeking workplace experience or placements, for example in clinical and counselling psychology, counselling psychology trainees may be supervised by clinical psychologists as the most appropriate professionals in the service to provide supervision.
Recommendations

4.1 Given the current economic climate, voluntary posts are likely to become more common as they may remain attractive propositions for services. The benefits of the internships and voluntary posts could outweigh the risks if clear safeguards and governance procedures are in place. Therefore established good practice guidance is needed to reduce the risk of exploitation.

4.2 Generic role specifications

4.2.1 Interns and voluntary assistants should be subject to all criteria applicable to volunteer staff within the specific practitioner setting, e.g. DBS checks, honorary contracts, adherence to Trust/employer policies and procedures and occupational health checks as appropriate.

4.2.2 Clear governance standards and procedures should be in place regarding all aspects of the selection, recruitment and employment of interns and assistants. If doctoral courses are involved in governing integrated placement experience e.g. negotiating placements with services, ensuring appropriate workload and supervision is in place, this role may fall within their remit.

4.2.3 Relevant governance procedures should encompass the oversight, monitoring and evaluation of placement progress for interns on university programmes against pre-determined criteria. Governance should occur within services for voluntary assistants’ posts akin to paid posts. Full induction and training including access to CPD is imperative, as are mechanisms to ensure the person is not trained above an appropriate level nor expected to take on clinical work that is beyond their role.

4.2.4 Governance of roles should extend to thorough induction covering basic skills orientation e.g. interviewing skills where compatible with the work undertaken, understanding of the relevant BPS code of conduct and awareness of managing professional boundaries and fitness to practice issues.

4.2.5 Appropriate supervision arrangements and governance should be in place for all such experience placement positions. This should include specific recommendations for the amount and frequency of supervision available and be consistent with what would be offered in a paid position.

4.2.6 There should be clear distinctions between roles that are appropriate for interns, assistant psychologists and trainee psychologists (terminology dependent on the service setting), and these roles should be clearly described in recruitment criteria, job titles, job descriptions and experience placement outlines, including specific balance of tasks e.g. administrative or clinical, and appropriateness of direct or direct clinical work.

Further, such posts should be titled to be distinct and differentiated from paid posts.

4.2.7 When engaging in direct clinical work, if relevant, or signing documentation, it should be made clear that the person has a volunteer role. Clients, service
users or receivers of services should be made aware verbally and
documentation should be signed ‘honorary assistant psychologist’ or other
relevant term; there must be clear distinction between paid and unpaid
positions.

4.2.8 Posts should be advertised openly and a fair and equitable application process
be employed in light of the arguments made in 1.3.

4.2.9 When considering whether to offer an internship or a voluntary assistant post,
serives leads and supervisors may wish to consider the following:
– Is the post being used to replace a paid member of staff?
– Is the work generally thought of as an essential part of the commissioned
service?
– Does the intern role involve requests to work beyond levels of existing
competence?

If the response to any of these questions is yes, it may indicate unmet need
within a service and warrant further discussion with service leads to seek
investment rather than unpaid people filling unmet needs.

Services should also consider the number of internships or voluntary posts
offered as again this may indicate areas of unmet need.

4.2.10 Psychology graduates would be expected to have a working knowledge of the
basics of the psychological models used to inform practice. However, as
undergraduate interns will not have completed the full three years of an
undergraduate degree, the nature of the experience they could gain, both
direct and indirect, is likely to be less complex and this should be
accommodated.

4.2.11 To encourage equality of access to internships, it is recommended that
ordinarily there would be receipt of some form of financial reimbursement
(if placements are not funded as part of an on-going degree), and for both
internships and voluntary posts this should include cover of basic financial
outgoings such as travel costs incurred by service-related tasks.

4.2.12 Where voluntary posts are being offered, the providers should be able to
evidence their commitment to equality and diversity in all aspects of those
posts. It would also be expected that every effort is made to widen access to
the profession, beyond volunteer opportunities.

4.2.13 For voluntary posts and unfunded internships, it is recommended part-time
opportunities be made available as they enable concurrent paid employment
to be pursued alongside. This may help to mitigate financial inequality.

Services may wish to specify the extent of the part-time nature of posts as very
part-time roles (e.g. 0.2 WTE/FTE) may lessen the possible benefits when
weighed against costs in terms of supervisory load and supervisor input to
role.
There are additional arguments to be made on equality and diversity grounds to limit voluntary or unpaid internships to part-time posts only to exclude restricting these posts to those who are in the financial position to afford them.

4.2.14 Further, limiting the length of voluntary posts to, e.g. six months, should be considered to discourage stasis and promote the experiential and career progression nature of such roles.

4.2.15 For voluntary assistants posts services may need to consider issues of contracts and how they may wish to provide a framework for such posts in terms of ‘working days’ and ‘annual leave’.

4.3 Placement arrangements

4.3.1 There may be notable benefits from university training programmes working with undergraduate departments or deliverers of applied master’s courses to develop and govern integrated experience placements to maximise the experience gained whilst not impacting on doctoral placement availability.

4.3.2 Further, clear and official lines of communication should be established between higher education institutes and employing authorities to coordinate the provision of experience placements.

4.3.3 There should be clear negotiation and transparency between university training programmes and undergraduate courses regarding the allocation of internships and doctoral trainee placements.

4.3.4 Training placements and supervision of trainees should take priority; where there is a conflict in allocation of internships or placements, services should prioritise the preservation of placements over providing internships.

4.3.5 Arrangements should be put in place to involve Trusts, health boards or other relevant employers, and training programmes in the selection of those undergraduates who will be completing the internship though it may be more appropriate for specific services to lead on the selection of those to fill these roles, as services will have a greater appreciation of the specific skills set needed within the post.
Conclusion

Stevens et al. (2015), in a review of the implementation of an internship programme within clinical psychology settings, recommend ‘a structured and paid route into clinical psychology training’, which we endorse. In the changing economic climate this may be challenged as financial constraints lead to internships and voluntary posts being more likely to be introduced as a means to providing psychological care more widely. However, Stevens et al. have also demonstrated that an NHS clinical service can accommodate an ethical and supportive internship scheme, with clear benefits to all involved, which may provide a useable framework to translate across all applied psychology settings. The BPS embraces the need to widen access to the profession. If volunteer positions are excluding people then they should be avoided. Applied psychology services and the training community need to be aware of the changes in routes to gaining relevant experience. These changes need to be encompassed and supported in ways which will protect those in the posts and the interests of people who may access applied psychology services, ensure the ongoing provision of high quality care and maintain the standard of care offered by the profession.

References


Authors

Dr Imogen Hobbs, Senior Clinical Lecturer in Clinical Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, Norwich Medical School, University of East Anglia.

Dr Gillian Bowden, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust; DCP East of England branch chair.

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