

The Psychological Society of Ireland

Policy Document:

Guidelines for the Employment of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland

2014



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1. Introduction

This document has been written by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) Early Graduate Group (EGG) for the benefit of assistant psychologists (APs), their employers and managers, to provide guidance on the employment of APs. This document was written primarily for APs working under the supervision of professional applied psychologists in a number of diverse settings. The principles set out in this document are also applicable to research assistant posts (e.g., in third level institutions or in the voluntary or independent sector).

There are currently 13 higher education institutions in Ireland (i.e., Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) offering PSI accredited undergraduate psychology courses to students. With large numbers of students completing psychology degrees each year, AP positions are becoming increasingly popular and experience in these roles is viewed by many as important in the career development of graduate psychologists. Indeed, research has shown that 71% of entrants to Clinical D. Psych. programmes in Ireland have previously worked as an AP and felt this position helped them develop the required competencies for entry to professional training programmes (O'Shea & Byrne, 2011). Despite the increasing popularity of these posts, there has previously been a lack of guidance about the employment and role of APs. To maintain standards in psychology in Ireland, it is essential that these posts have clearly defined, appropriate roles.

This document must be considered alongside the PSI's Code of Professional Ethics. Members must be aware that the following guidelines on the employment of APs fall within the provisions of that element of the Society's Code of Conduct, which concerns responsibility for other practitioners.

2. The Role of an Assistant Psychologist

A varied schedule of work must be agreed upon between the AP and their supervisor at the outset of the employment period and must be appropriate to the skill level of a psychology graduate. It is recommended that time is allocated for supervision, administration, personal study and networking opportunities with other psychologists.

Typically an AP's workload includes:

- Assisting supervisors to carry out prescribed interventions with individuals or groups
- Assessments of individuals or groups such as direct observation, formal psychometric testing, semi-structured interviews and report writing
- Supportive work as required with carers, family members and health professionals/staff
- Assisting supervisors with training other professionals
- Research, audit and service evaluations
- Promoting the role of psychological services through the communication /provision of relevant information to interested parties
- Maintenance of equipment necessary to the running of the psychological service such as training equipment (e.g., manuals, CDs, MP3s) information packs and library resources
- Literature searches, presentations and contributing to articles for publication

Notably, the role of an AP must incorporate some form of work related to the organisation's clients in research or clinical capacities (e.g., face-to-face client work, recruitment, working with families, telephone/internet contact, working with carers).

APs must **not** be employed to:

- Substitute in any capacity for the presence/work of a qualified psychologist including provision of specialist or complex therapy
- Complete solely administrative work
- Undertake the duties of a care assistant
- Work in a capacity beyond their level of competency
- Undertake tasks for which there is no appropriate supervision
- Write any reports for a court, nor appear in court to discuss a client's assessment or treatment.

APs must **not** under any circumstances:

- Work alone in any type of emergency service
- Attempt to provide specialist therapies for which they are not qualified
- Work alone on complex cases

3. Career Development

From the employees' point of view AP positions are to be seen as career development opportunities, where the primary purpose is to facilitate development of core competencies necessary for acceptance onto professional training programmes. It is important to acknowledge that the position of "assistant psychologist" must not be viewed as a long term or permanent career choice.

In line with this, supervisors must be willing to offer advice on aspects of career development, which can be achieved through:

- Supporting the development of core competencies necessary for acceptance onto professional training programmes
- Designating time each week for reading appropriate literature
- Providing opportunities for the AP to meet with other psychologists and allied organisations
- Integrating observation of the work of an applied psychologist, where feasible, into the role of the AP
- Supporting the development of organisational knowledge through familiarisation with relevant policies
- Advising, where feasible, in relation to accessing professional training programmes.

Due to the importance of AP positions in facilitating career progression, APs may feel reliant on their supervisor's reference for future employment or training opportunities. Consequently there is a clear power differential in the relationship between the supervisor and the AP which has the potential to be abused. Supervisors must be mindful of this and must not place an AP in a position where they feel obligated to act in accordance with their supervisor's wishes if they feel such wishes are unethical or inappropriate. If this type of situation arises, APs must discuss their discomfort with their supervisor and attempt to come to a resolution. If this is unsuccessful then the AP must consider following the appropriate grievance procedure (see section 9 for more detail).

4. Accountability, Governance and Supervision

The work undertaken by an AP must be professionally accountable to a qualified applied psychologist as set out by the PSI Code of Professional Ethics. This includes having access to appropriate supervision from a professional applied psychologist. It must be clearly identified from the beginning of the employment term which applied psychologist will act as the AP's primary supervisor. The primary supervisor must be a suitably qualified applied psychologist who ideally has received training in supervision, and is working in the specialty area and for the same organisation as the AP. The primary supervisor will be held accountable for the work of the AP. In the case where the role of an AP is allied with more than one supervisory psychologist, one specific individual must be designated as primary supervisor. It is the responsibility of the primary supervisor to negotiate adequate provisions for alternative supervision should the primary supervisor be unavailable for a period of time; for example, if s/he is on annual leave.

Supervision may be comprised of clinical supervision, research supervision and personal/professional development. Supervisory sessions must be provided and carried out in a confidential setting, without interruption. There must be a minimum of four hours supervision a month, and it is advised that this corresponds to one hour of supervision per week. Time allocated to supervision must reflect the work undertaken by the AP, bearing in mind that some AP work (e.g., work that involves client contact) will require extra supervisory support. Furthermore, supervisors must periodically observe the AP's work to evaluate their performance and there must be opportunities for APs to directly observe their supervisor in practice. In addition to a formal supervision session, informal supervisory contact must be anticipated.

If a number of APs are working in the same department, group supervision may be appropriate. If a single AP is working in an isolated service, increased supervision may be required (applied psychologists must be mindful of risk and governance arrangements when agreeing to act as a supervisor in isolated services). In this instance, APs must have access to a qualified applied psychologist within one working day, even if over the telephone. Alternative supervision arrangements must be made when a supervisor is absent.

A formal agenda outlining items for discussion must be drafted prior to supervisory sessions. Additionally, it is recommended that a shared record of topics discussed be maintained. Examples of issues that may be discussed during supervisory sessions include, but are not limited to:

- Monthly objectives
- Reviewing the previous week's work
- Case management issues

- In-depth discussion about specific clients
- Plans for the following week's work
- Personal and professional development
- Personal support and care
- Project management issues
- Support for ongoing research

5. Responsibilities of Assistant Psychologists and Supervisors

5.1 Responsibilities of Assistant Psychologists

It is the responsibility of the AP to carry out tasks specified in their job description with due care and diligence. Furthermore, APs must ensure their supervisor is fully aware of their qualifications, experiences and the extent of their professional competence. It is the responsibility of the AP to inform their supervisor as soon as possible if they feel that tasks that they have been assigned exceed their professional competence.

5.2 Responsibilities of Supervisors

It is the responsibility of the AP's primary supervisor to ensure that:

- Appropriate formal induction training is provided at the commencement of employment
- Adequate professional supervision is maintained for the duration of the AP's contract
- They are aware of the interpersonal impact that clinical duties have on their APs and provide them with the appropriate levels of support for this (O'Callaghan & Byrne, 2011)
- The AP is periodically observed and provided with a constructive evaluation of their performance
- Where possible and as appropriate there are written performance appraisals addressing the AP's performance to date and future goals
- There is an appropriate grievance procedure in place within the organisation and that APs are aware of this procedure at the commencement of their employment
- APs are not assigned to tasks that are over and above their level of competence, for which they are unqualified (e.g., provision of specialist therapies), or that are unrealistic to achieve within specified times.

On termination of employment, it should be anticipated that the AP's primary supervisor will provide appropriate references.

6. Formal Induction

The primary aim of a formal induction is to enable an individual to adjust as quickly as possible to their new working environment. During the formal induction, an AP must be provided with details of their duties and responsibilities within their post (including any subspecialist roles), individual responsibilities within a team/service, relevant legislative and policy documents, appropriate channels of reporting, working environment and secretarial support, if any is available. Individuals must also complete any secretarial support, if any is available. Individuals must also complete any mandatory training at this point. In addition, details on support systems available (i.e., structured supervision) must be provided. As part of the induction process, supervisors must support individuals in managing their workload and schedule. At an induction, a written induction pack must be made available which could include the following:

- Staff list: Names, telephone numbers, and room numbers
- Annual leave arrangements and entitlements
- Sick day arrangements and entitlements
- Arrangements for claiming expenses, if applicable
- Safety procedures relating to fires, emergencies, accidents and hazards

As per standard practice, any induction must take place over a number of days/weeks, and not be limited to one day. This will afford individuals with the opportunity to become familiar with their role.

7. Voluntary Assistant Psychologist Positions

The PSI is not opposed to the use of voluntary positions by employers, in situations whereby the guidelines outlined below are adhered to. However, early career psychologists and employers must view such posts as temporary, entry level positions for gaining the relevant experience to apply for subsequent professional training or paid positions.

The PSI provides the following guidelines for the use of voluntary AP positions:

- APs are a valuable addition to any service (e.g., they increase efficiency of qualified staff) and should be remunerated where funds are available
- Where voluntary positions are used by organisations, it is recommended that volunteers are not employed to work full-time hours.
- Written contracts for voluntary posts should only last up to a year, although may last longer in certain circumstances.

8. Advertising and Recruitment

The title “assistant psychologist” must only be used in cases where the position advertised is in line with the role and duties of an AP as outlined within this document. Ideally applicants for AP posts should meet the criteria for graduate membership of the Psychological Society of Ireland (e.g., have a second class honours degree in psychology). All advertisements for AP positions must explicitly outline the following information:

- Whether the advertised position is paid or voluntary
- The current role and responsibilities of the AP within the organisation, bearing in mind that these may change over the course of the recruitment campaign
- The number of hour per week the candidate will be expected to work
- The duration and frequency of training/supervision that will be available to the successful candidate
- The minimum qualifications/prior experience requirements that candidates must meet in order to be short-listed for interview
- Whether travelling will be required as part of the AP position and whether remuneration for travel costs incurred will be provided.
- That an AP post is not a career grade, and that this is reflected in the temporary nature of the contract. Contracts for APs are of fixed term and fixed purpose with a specified duration of no more than two years.

9. Grievances

Employers are responsible for promoting a working environment in which the dignity of all individuals is respected, regardless of whether the position is voluntary or paid. APs should have the same employment rights as other employees on short-term contracts and must receive information from their employer which will allow them to exercise those rights. If an AP feels unfairly treated or otherwise disadvantaged as an employee, they must be able to communicate such concerns through their line management or through their employer's agreed grievance procedure.

If an AP raises a genuine grievance, a quick and effective response is necessary to promote a harmonious working environment and a positive employee-organisation relationship. The following guidelines are proposed to facilitate open communication between an AP and their supervisor (or line manager in cases where the supervisor is not the AP's line manager), enabling an AP to raise work-related complaints so that they may be addressed promptly:

- Regular performance appraisals with a supervisor
- Formal and informal peer support from other assistant psychologists
- Access to local policies and procedures
- Discussion on the termination or extension of a contract at least one month ahead of the initial termination date.

Should a grievance arise, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to assist and advise the AP in addressing the concerns. If an AP feels the guidelines in this document are not being adhered to, they may present to and remind their supervisor of these guidelines. If an AP feels that they are being treated unfairly or are disadvantaged as an employee, they must communicate this to their supervisor and attempt to come to a resolution that appropriately addresses their concerns. If a resolution cannot be agreed upon within an appropriate time frame or a resolution is not implemented as agreed by the supervisor, the AP must then consider following their employer's standard grievance procedure.

References

- O'Callaghan, A. & Byrne, M. (2011). Facilitating and evaluating trainee clinical competencies in Ireland. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 225, 43-48.
- O'Shea, G. & Byrne, M. (2011). A profile of entrants to Irish clinical training programmes. *The Irish Psychologist*, 37(5), 119-123.

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