

The Current and Future Position of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland Q & A

What exactly is the PSI and what is its role?

The PSI is the learned and professional body for psychology in the Republic of Ireland. The PSI is committed to maintaining the high standards of practice in psychology that have been set by its members over the last 40 years in practical and academic settings and also to exploring new and innovative ways of furthering psychology as a real and applied science. However, it must be noted that it is not a trade union and is legally prohibited from acting in a negotiating capacity in relation to pay or working terms and conditions of its members.

How is PSI governed?

The PSI is run and governed by the members of the Society. The governance of the PSI lies with the Council of the PSI, which is composed of elected and co-opted members of the Society, all of whom operate in a voluntary capacity.

What is an assistant psychologist?

An assistant psychologist is a psychology graduate who works under the direct supervision of a suitably qualified Psychologist. Assistant psychologist posts are typically created to support services and enhance the service provision capacity of qualified Psychologists. Following induction and training, assistant psychologists can be deployed to perform prescribed tasks commensurate with their level of competence. This includes assisting qualified psychologists with assessment, intervention, service delivery and research. While assistant psychologists have been widely employed in the Health Services in both Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) for many years, and while there are guidelines regarding their employment both in Ireland (Psychological Society of Ireland [PSI], 2014) and the UK (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2007), the grade of assistant psychologist is formally recognised in the UK but not in Ireland.

What is the rationale for establishing the grade of assistant psychologist?

Psychology departments aspire to provide psychological services that are accessible, co-ordinated, clinically effective, efficient, equitable, relevant, safe and user-friendly (or acceptable). Irish psychology graduates are a highly educated and skilled resource for often stretched psychological departments to meet those goals. Currently, these positions are filled on an ad-hoc basis with differing terms and conditions, often unpaid. It is proposed that having a single grade of assistant psychologist within the HSE framework would have a number of benefits:

- It will simplify the process for recruiting assistant psychologists by having fixed terms and a clear role;
- It will make it easier for the contributions of assistant psychologists across the HSE to be visible;
- By having a paid grade, it will avoid disenfranchising talented psychology graduates who do not have the financial support to work unpaid;
- It will reduce burnout and stress for assistant psychologists who would otherwise have to work additional jobs.

Taking the AP role 'out of the shadows' would better utilise the potential of our psychology graduates and would provide them with improved career development opportunities.

What is the PSI's position on assistant psychologists?

In 2014, the PSI published clear and comprehensive *Guidelines on the Employment of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland* that can be found on the PSI website, www.psihq.ie. In relation to assistant psychologists operating in a voluntary capacity, the following is the PSI's position as stated in those Guidelines:

- 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.

How can the PSI as an organisation stand over supporting voluntary positions?

A distinction needs to be made here between volunteering for a role in a voluntary organisation and being unpaid as part of your career development. They are not the same kinds of choices. In relation to a member organisation:

- The PSI as an organisation could not exist without volunteerism. It was founded by people who volunteered their time to promote and further the profession of psychology in Ireland and this tradition continues through all of the current members of Council, Divisions and Special Interest Groups who give up their time to ensure the continuation of the organisation
- It is acknowledged that for some, but not all, the ability to volunteer time is supported by having access to a salary through other roles they may have
- The PSI as an organisation believes that it does not have the right, and would not wish to, discriminate against any member or potential member by taking the position that an assistant psychologist should not make an informed decision to work on a voluntary basis
- On the other hand the PSI can also recognise that for some, for financial reasons, it is not possible or feasible to be able to engage in voluntary work as an assistant psychologist and they require the support of a salaried position

The solution is quite clear, PSI should ban voluntary positions and advocate with government/voluntary agencies and the HSE for the provision of an assistant psychologist grade with a commensurate salary for the education achievements and experienced gained.

As noted above, the PSI is not mandated (through its *Memorandum and Articles of Association*) to and is legally prevented from negotiating or advocating with Government in respect of salaries. The PSI does not have the right to dictate to early career psychologists that they cannot make an informed decision to volunteer if such a position is available to them

The PSI also does not have the right to dictate to members that they cannot make an informed decision to be involved in the creation of voluntary assistant psychologist posts or working with volunteer assistant psychologists. The PSI understands some progress has been made with the HSE negotiations with the Department of Health to set up such a grade at the Executive Officer level. No definite timeline has been confirmed but it is the PSI's understanding that the HSE hope to be able to establish it in the near future

If the PSI did take the position of banning the use of voluntary Assistant Psychologist's then what outcomes would be likely?

- The PSI would immediately be disenfranchising those members who choose to volunteer.
- It would be a guideline only and ultimately would not be enforceable by the PSI, especially if the employing psychologist was not a member of the PSI.
- There is very limited budget for mental health in Ireland. In 2015 mental health, which accounts for many but not all psychologists' funding, accounted only for 6.2% of the health budget. At present there is no allocation within existing budgets for funding of assistant psychologist posts should they be established as a grade in the HSE. Banning voluntary positions in the hope that funding will follow for assistant psychologist posts will in all likelihood result in an immediate and significant decrease in available assistant psychologist posts.
- This would then result in increased competition and pressure for the few paid assistant psychologist posts which might become available, in essence moving the bottleneck further away from qualification

as a professional psychologist. It would also likely result in more early career psychologists having to go abroad to secure assistant psychologist posts

Are the PSI involved in the discussions with the HSE around the establishment of paid assistant psychologist posts or has the PSI been consulted?

The PSI has good working relationships with psychologists working in the HSE and many psychologists employed by HSE are also members of PSI. However, the PSI has not been consulted directly by the HSE around the establishment of paid assistant psychologist posts, nor would it expect to be, given that it is legally prevented from negotiating or advocating with Government in respect of salaries. However, the PSI has been in communication with the HSE to enquire if and when such posts are being established and the *PSI Policy Document on the Employment of Assistant Psychologists* (2014) has been shared with HSE psychology managers and colleagues. In addition, research by the PSI and members of the PSI, such as articles in *The Irish Psychologist* profiling Irish early career psychologists, provide a body of work that inform decision makers and help make a case for the establishment of paid assistant psychologist posts.

What will happen if/when the HSE introduces a paid grade of assistant psychologist?

If/when the HSE introduces a paid grade of assistant psychologist they are likely to start off introducing a small number of paid assistant psychology posts initially and gradually grow the number of paid posts over time. It is likely that each HSE area/Psychology Manager will have to make a business case for a paid assistant psychology post. It may reduce the number of voluntary assistant psychology posts in the HSE but it may also reduce the number of assistant psychology posts overall. It is unlikely that all voluntary posts would be converted to paid posts due to the cost implications and lack of dedicated funding; however, the impact of the introduction of a paid grade of assistant psychologist in the HSE is not yet clear.

Why doesn't the PSI tell the universities who provide the postgraduate professional training programmes in psychology to remove the entry requirement of experience as an assistant psychologist?

The PSI is the accrediting body for postgraduate professional training programmes in psychology in Ireland. This means that it monitors and reviews the content, delivery and resources of such programmes to ensure that individuals qualifying from these programmes have attained the skills necessary to competently undertake the particular professional psychologist role (e.g., counselling psychologist). However, the PSI does not have the authority to dictate to the universities the selection criteria they use for selecting candidates for these programmes. The criteria for selection to postgraduate professional training programmes in psychology are determined independently by the universities and, in cases where candidates are sponsored (i.e., programmes in clinical psychology), the sponsoring organisation (e.g., the HSE).

Why is assistant psychologist experience so important in getting on a postgraduate professional training programme in psychology?

The requirements with regard to assistant psychologist experience for selection for a postgraduate professional training programme in psychology differ from programme to programme. These requirements are at the discretion of the universities, in conjunction with the sponsoring organisations. Due to the significant competition to gain entry to professional postgraduate training in psychology it is likely that there will continue to be many different requirements and shortlisting criteria used by the universities to select what they believe to be the most suitable candidates.

Will someone who has completed an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in psychology be guaranteed a salary at that point and an opportunity to complete their professional training?

Completion of undergraduate and postgraduate psychology degrees are considerable achievements. However, as with any degree, the unfortunate reality is that they do not guarantee a salaried position. A degree in psychology provides a highly transferable skill set that is sought after in jobs not directly related to psychology. Media and advertising, human resources, and business management are some examples. A number of psychology graduates will choose not to continue along the professional path in psychology and will instead have successful careers in other fields. Professional training programmes in psychology are recognised worldwide as being subject to intense competition. Demand is always likely to outstrip supply;

this is a difficult but perhaps necessary consideration when choosing to pursue a professional career in psychology.

Where can early career psychologists go to in order to progress the situation with regard to the employment of assistant psychologists?

Early career psychologists can make representations to the relevant employers and unions about their role in the employment of assistant psychologists. However, the PSI, for reasons already outlined, is not engaged in lobbying any groups with regard to the employment of assistant psychologists, and as such would not attempt to direct any of its members to do so.

So what is the PSI doing for early career psychologists?

The PSI remains committed to improving the professional working conditions of early career psychologists. Through our policy document on *Guidelines for the Employment of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland*, the PSI has provided guidance for graduates on such posts and on how those who employ psychologists should use them. The PSI, through the Early Graduate Group and the Student Affairs Group, provide opportunities for representation with the governance structures and a voice for this group to advocate within the organisation. The PSI provides on-going training and continual professional development opportunities for early career psychologists. The PSI is currently in the process of rolling out a mentoring programme where early career psychologists will be linked with an established psychologist in their chosen psychology discipline who will act as a mentor with regard to future career development. The PSI is also in the process of having a creating a designation (M.Ps.S.I.) for graduate members

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PSI Council