

Plan for establishment of Assistant Psychologist Group (APG)

The primary aim of the proposed APG is **to provide representation of the interests of Assistant Psychologists and to promote the role of Assistant Psychologist in Ireland and to help increase their visibility**. Such a group would provide a forum for Assistant Psychologists to come together and share experiences, and would ensure that their interests are recognized at PSI council level. This form of peer support has proven successful in Britain and, by many accounts, has been beneficial to Assistant Psychologists there. In Britain, regional Assistant Psychologist groups arrange meetings and lectures directly relevant to assistants. These groups are now able to run events with CPD points and regularly have talks from local researchers, academics, and applied professionals. A similar set-up could potentially be adopted in Ireland to great effect.

Ideally, such a group would exist within Psychological Society of Ireland's Division of Clinical Psychology or, at least, maintain an official connection with this Division. This would ensure that the best interests of assistants and the profession generally would be met, but it would also allow for a degree of flexibility.

It is proposed that membership of this group be open to all individuals fulfilling the following criteria:

- a) Psychology graduate
- b) An intention to pursue a training in Clinical Psychology in the short term
- c) Currently in employment as an Assistant Psychologist or some similar position with a significant clinical aspect and the supervision of a clinical psychologist

It is imperative that the position of Assistant Psychologist not be viewed as a back-door entry into the profession. The APG would strongly hold the position that clinical training in a recognised training programme is necessary step to qualifying as a Clinical Psychologist. The proposition to form a group for Assistants is not akin to a proposition to create a new position throughout psychological services, although we believe that widespread employment of Assistant Psychologists could be beneficial. It is intended that the APG represent the interests of a distinct position already in existence. The APG would also allow a level of regulation relating to the employment of Assistant Psychologists insofar as suggested guidelines could be developed and published.

Specific aims and objectives of the Assistant Psychologist Group (APG)

1. Clarification and recognition of the role of Assistant Psychologist

The role of the assistant psychologist must be clarified in Ireland. As time goes on, this role will become more and more common in Ireland as has happened in Great Britain as services evolved. As yet, we feel it is a somewhat vaguely defined position that can cause confusion within services, not only in terms of the levels of skill and supervision required but also, for example, in terms of how much one should be paid and how much study time/CPD time one is entitled to or requires. It is envisioned that guidelines surrounding the role will be developed over time in association with those involved in employment and training of psychologists.

We feel that clarification will achieve a number of things:

- 1) This will help to highlight the responsibilities *and* rights of assistant psychologists *currently* in employment in Ireland
- 2) Once the position is understood and supported by the society generally, professionals within and without psychology will be less reluctant to employ and work with Assistant Psychologists where feasible
- 3) An increased number of assistants will help to ensure that there is an adequate system for gaining relevant experience prior to applying for a clinical training programme and should also reduce the sense of isolation that can be part of the job and the application process

Recognition and clarification of the role of assistant psychologist through the Clinical Division would be a desirable step for assistant psychologists and for those involved in running clinical training courses as well as those who supervise trainees on placements and for those who currently employ assistants.

We feel that assistants, where they exist, perform an important role and, where they do not exist, they could offer much to a service.

2. Research into the role of Assistant Psychologist

One of the proposed functions of the APG would be to carry out research into the role and status of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland. This would involve finding out how many assistants are currently working in Ireland and their demographic breakdown, what services they work in, what level of skill and what level of experience they

possess. This would enable the APG and the DCP to make recommendations in relation to the general training requirements of assistants and to further clarify the role. This research could also look at reasons why assistants are not employed in many services and perceptions of the work that is appropriate for assistants among experienced applied psychologists. It is envisioned that the Irish Psychologist can be used as a forum for informing the general PSI membership of issues related to assistants. A sub-group of APG members could assume responsibility of this project, chaired by one APG committee member.

3. Meetings, training, and other benefits

Regular meetings could involve local academics, researchers, APG members and applied professionals speaking on topics agreed by the committee of the APG that are of relevance to Assistant Psychologists. These could be related to specific topics (e.g. Neuropsychological Assessments for Assistant Psychologists; Making the Most of Supervision; The use of CBT with people with Learning Disabilities) or be more general (e.g. The importance of working within your competency levels; Skills and Competencies required to be a Clinical Psychologist). Over time, it is envisioned that the APG could arrange workshops/seminars for assistants and others in equivalent posts that impart relevant skills to them as well as helping them to fulfil their requirement of CPD points. This would help them to develop skills related to current employment but also skills and competencies desirable in future clinical psychologists.

4. Preparation for careers as applied professionals

It is envisioned that the APG could provide a forum for developing skills, expanding your knowledge base, and meeting other people in a similar position as well as, hopefully, some of those involved in training applied professionals. In Britain, similar groups have sought and received advice from Directors of Clinical Programmes as well as placement supervisors in relation to what they look for in applicants to programmes and how an assistant can best spend their time. The period immediately preceding clinical training is one in which most individuals strive to gain “relevant experience” – the position of Assistant Psychologist is an ideal in this regard and can afford valuable insight into the workings of Clinical Psychological services prior to clinical training.

4. Production of an Irish “alternative handbook”

The “Alternative Handbook” has come out of the British “Prequalification Group” and this, it seems, is an invaluable resource for applicants to clinical training programmes in the United Kingdom. This involves an annual survey of trainees and staff on all clinical programmes seeking their opinions and advice and is published annually to help inform people in their choice of colleges.

It is envisioned that the APG could be involved in producing a similar publication in relation to Irish Clinical training programmes that could be made available to applicants. A sub-group of members could assume responsibility of this project chaired by one APG committee member.

5. Involvement with PSI

Becoming involved with PSI can be daunting for people early in their psychological careers. Even joining a special interest group can provoke questions such as: “Am I qualified to join this?” and “What if I do not know what they are talking about?” or “What will I do if they refuse my application for membership?”. An APG would help to reduce this anxiety by bringing together many individuals who share experiences and are aiming for a longer-term career in applied psychology. Such a group would encourage recent graduates and people in the earlier years of their psychological careers to take an active role in the society, which in turn prepares people for more proactive society roles later on. Furthermore, as already stated, the group would ensure that issues related to assistants are known and dealt with at council level.

Summary

The establishment of an APG would create the opportunity to meet other assistants and provide peer/social support for each other while establishing connections with professionals in the field. It would help to ensure that issues related to Assistant Psychologists are represented at council level. It would work to clarify the role of the Assistant Psychologist and to ensure that training opportunities arise and, importantly, publish a document outlining guidelines for the employment of Assistant Psychologists. The APG would make available details in relation to the number of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland and would help to establish reasonable rights and responsibilities of assistants.