



Welcome back to your studies!

A very warm welcome to those of you who are joining us in their first year and a very warm welcome back to those returning to us after a well deserved summer break!

We look forward to teaching and working with all of you and we wish you a successful and happy new academic year!

And the winner is...

In our last newsletter we announced the Department's profile picture contest. In this newsletter, you can already see the winning picture (see above). We congratulate 3rd year student James Herman on winning the competition. During the 3rd year welcome meeting he was awarded a £25 gift certificate. A big thank you to everyone else who participated!

Warm welcome to new PhD students



Wednesday 5th October was a date for welcoming new PhD students into the psychology department fold. Following the wanton devouring of coffee and cakes in the CBS building in the afternoon, around 22 PhD students, accompanied by regular graduate director, Dr. Andrew Simpson and acting graduate director, Prof. Geoff Ward, headed off to Prezzo restaurant in Colchester for a meal. After much confusion over who ordered what (as is customary for large group meals), everyone settled down to enjoy the delicious Italian dishes excellently prepared by the Prezzo staff. The social gatherings by the PhD students are a regular occurrence that help create a supportive bond between the students that will be a crutch in times of need (and times of need are plentiful during the PhD years!). With the support of other students and the graduate directors, the current year's recruits will feel right at home in what is clearly a large yet close-knit and friendly department. Our thanks go to Lydia Whitaker for organising the evening and to the psychology department for supporting the event.

Dean Wybrow

Welcome to new members of staff

We welcome Dr. Karla Holmboe, Ratna Kannan, and Stefan Borrell to the Department. Karla joined the Department as a Research Fellow working on "The development of executive functions from infancy to middle childhood: Longitudinal trajectories in relation to social and school outcomes", a project funded by the British Academy. Ratna and Stefan will be part of the technical support team headed by Chief Technician Roger Deeble. We wish all of them a good start and look forward to working with them!

10 minutes with a PhD student

Interview conducted by Shannon Jackman



Deciding what to do after you have finished your undergraduate degree can be a daunting experience. For those considering furthering their education by completing a research degree, current PhD student Laura Blackie kindly shed some insight into what is involved in obtaining a doctorate.

What made you decide to do a PhD?

That's a difficult question - I think the main reason was that I really enjoyed my UG project, which I did in the department with Philip Cozzolino, and I was exposed to this new research area. Mortality awareness wasn't something we'd covered and it has always been something that had intrigued me.

You did your BSc at Essex in 2008 and started your PhD in the October the same year – did you find that not having a master's degree hindered you in any way?

It was more of a challenge initially as you are used to having your time well structured, and then you go in to a PhD and you have all this time to work on your research, but I don't think not having a masters hindered me.

What sort of things did you do to put yourself above the other PhD candidates?

I didn't actually but I would definitely say it's good practice to do those things. The more research experience you get the better. I came up with a novel idea and I made sure that I had a few studies in mind, so I had some sense of how I would implement that idea. I just put my proposal together, went to the interview and they said that I interviewed well, and I was extremely lucky.

What's involved in applying for a PhD?

The first thing you look at is funding. If you are self-funded then you need a 2.1 and you need to find a supervisor with the time and resources to help you. If you haven't got the money then you need to target places like the University or other institutions offering studentships. You will need to come up with a proposal and 2 or 3 ways in which you would go about investigating it and go for an interview. Obviously, having a 1st or a 2.1 will improve your chances of being selected.

Can you briefly describe a day in your research life?

It's very varied. Some days your reading material looking at ways your subject hasn't been explored before. Other days you are trying to come up with an idea and are getting the materials ready and pilot testing. Once you do all that you spend a lot of time testing and making sense of the results.

Students in the third year are about to do start their final projects do you have any advice?

Start testing early, as it takes a lot of time to test people. The second is an obvious thing that people tend to forget which is to write down the method section when you are testing people as its easy to forget things that may help the reader understand what you did. Other than that, enjoy it. It is probably the most interesting and interactive part of psychology.

Uncomfortable images are all around us

Sarah Haigh, Peter Tang and Arnold Wilkins have been studying what makes images uncomfortable. They have asked people to look at patterns of coloured stripes and found that some are really quite uncomfortable, and consistently so. They can predict how uncomfortable the patterns are from the physical difference in colour between the stripes, based well-known measures of colour. The greater the difference in colour, the more uncomfortable the stripes – it's as simple as that. Different colours are focused at different depths in the eye, and only yellowy greens are in focus on the retina. You might have expected that it was more difficult to focus on the uncomfortable stripes that have the greatest difference in colour, and that this was a reason for the discomfort. But this does not seem to be the case: you can focus on the uncomfortable stripes that have a large colour difference just as easily as on those that have a small colour difference. Instead, the discomfort may have something to do with brain processing, because, on average, stripes with a large colour difference produce a larger change in blood oxygenation in the visual part of the brain.



60 seconds with Jo Page (1st year UG administrator)

What's your job like?

Interesting, varied and busy. The contact with students is the best bit!

What would surprise people about you?

I can play the drums (well I have had 10 lessons!).

If you were a character on a TV show, which one would you be?

Phoebe Buffay on Friends.

Where can we find you outside work?

I live in Brightlingsea.

Has a TV show ever moved you to tears?

Yes, anything where people are achieving their goals, so X Factor moves me to tears most weekends.

It is with deep sadness that we announce the loss of our colleague and friend Michael Lodge. Michael passed away on 16th September 2011 after a short illness. We will miss Michael greatly and our thoughts are with his family in particular his wife Tina and his baby son Matthew.

Careers in Psychology: Senior Public Health Epidemiologist

Ever wondered where a Psychology Degree can take you? Thanks to Careers Officer Dr. William Matthews, we will regularly feature recent Essex Psychology graduates to inspire you when making a decision about which career path to follow after graduation. In the current version, read about Essex psychology graduate Stuart Keeble and his work as a Senior Public Health Epidemiologist for NHS Suffolk. Stuart graduated from the Department in 2008.



What does your work entail?

As an epidemiologist I study the distribution and determinants of disease and ill health within the population. This involves providing public health practitioners and partner organisations with intelligence and evidence to prioritise investment, target health interventions towards groups and communities with the greatest health needs, monitor health outcomes and identify health inequalities. Tasks include the production of reports on disease specific topics such as diabetes or wider strategy documents, advising colleagues on methodology for research and intelligence based projects and the production of various outputs using statistical methods.

What is the most enjoyable aspect of what you currently do?

The most enjoyable aspect of the role is its variability; in the morning I could be helping to target areas with high smoking prevalence and in the afternoon writing a strategic document on health and wellbeing in Suffolk. I also derive a great deal of satisfaction from seeing my work directly influence policy and practice as well as championing the needs of those experiencing the worse health outcomes.

What is the most challenging aspect of what you currently do?

One of the bigger challengers is providing robust analysis based on sound methodology in very short time frames. This often requires an element of pragmatism. A further challenge is trying to communicate complex statistical findings in a manner which is accessible to non specialist.

Which of the skills that you got from your degree do you use most in your current work?

The statistical knowledge and skills obtained during the degree have provided an excellent foundation for my current role. The empirical basis of the degree and the techniques taught as part of the research methods modules helped me develop an enquiring and questioning mind, which is an important attribute within public health. The module on health psychology provided a good understanding of theories underlying health behaviours and behavior change.

What advice would you give to students interested in pursuing this kind of work?

Try and get some work experience through volunteering with a public health department. Perhaps take a Masters course in public health or epidemiology.

Prof. Elaine Fox: Visiting Fellow at Magdalen College

While on research leave from the Department, Elaine will be spending the 2011-2012 academic year in Oxford working on various cognitive neuroscience and clinical projects. She will also work on collaborative grant applications with colleagues in Oxford and Essex. We wish Elaine a successful academic year at Magdalen College and look forward to hearing more about her research leave in the near future.

Funding award goes to Prof. Sheina Orbell

The Head of Department of Psychology, Prof. Sheina Orbell, has recently been awarded funding to investigate psychological determinants of colorectal cancer screening uptake together with colleagues from the University of Warwick. Congratulations!

Upcoming Seminars

As in previous academic years, we will run the Psychology Seminars Series which is organized by Dr. Rick O’Gorman. Seminars take place at 4pm in the Psychology Building room 4.722. These seminars are usually followed by drinks and nibbles in the CBS. Everybody is welcome to attend.

These are the next three seminars:

18/10/2011: Dr. Sarah Beck (University of Birmingham): Making tools isn’t child’s play: physical cognition and problem solving in young children.

25/10/2011: Dr. Xi Zou (London Business School): Social Networks and Subjective Well-Being: The Effect of Regulatory Fit

01/11/2011: Dr. Steven Chance (University of Oxford): Brain micro-circuits for words and faces.



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Psychological Society

Have you considered joining the Essex Psychology Society? It's a great way to get to know fellow students outside the classroom ! The Society is aimed at having fun socials, interesting trips, and leaning about human communications.

If you would like to join this group check out their facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/PsychologyatEssex#!/groups/110420492382810/> or get in touch with Ben Hawkes, the current president of the society!

Newsletter:

If you are interested in getting involved in writing or designing the Psychology newsletter, please get in touch with the Department's Director of Marketing and External Relations Silke Paulmann (paulmann@essex.ac.uk). We would like to thank all contributors (some preferred to stay anonymous) of the current issue. Thanks for providing us with news that interest you!