

Berichte aus der Psychologie

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**Psychologiedidaktik und Evaluation X**

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# Inhalt

## Aus-, Fort- und Weiterbildung in Psychologie

JOSUA HANDERER Zwischen Natur- und Geisteswissenschaft. Zum Fachverständnis und zur Studienzufriedenheit von Psychologiestudierenden	3
SIEGFRIED PREISER UND MICHAEL GIEBEL Weiterbildungsmotivation von Studierenden der Psychologie	11
STEPHAN DUTKE UND KADI EPLER Psychology in the Academic Education of Non-Psychologists: A Survey among European Psychology Departments	19
PETIA GENKOVA Interkulturelle Kompetenz und Auslandsstudium: Beeinflusst der Auslandsaufenthalt die Kompetenzförderung?	27
MIRJAM BRABLER Interdisziplinäres Problembasiertes Lernen im Bachelorstudium der Psychologie	37
UTE-REGINA ROEDER UND STEPHAN DUTKE Fortbildungen für Psychologielehrerinnen und Psychologielehrer	47
GISLINDE BOVET Da ist noch Luft drin! Wir brauchen mehr Beiträge zur Didaktik des Psychologieunterrichts in der Sekundarstufe II	57
PAUL GEORG GEIß Kompetenzmodell für den allgemeinbildenden Psychologieunterricht	65
HANS HERMSEN 37 Jahre Curriculumforschung zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdbestimmung: ein persönliches Fazit	75
VERONIKA KUHBURG-LASSON, KATJA SINGLETON UND UTE SONDERGELD Merkmale des Publikationsverhaltens in der Bildungsforschung	87

## Lehren und Lernen

LENIA F. BAHMANN, CHRISTINA MENNEN, LEONI RIDDER UND MICHAELA ZUPANIC POL – mit praxisnahen Problemen Psychologie lernen	97
LISA RESPONDEK, JUDITH AMANN, CORNELIA GUTMANN UND ULRIKE E. NETT Fit für die Psychologie – Mit Co-Piloten den Studieneinstieg bewältigen	105
SONJA SCHERER, JULIA BOSER UND HOLGER HORZ „Starker Start ins Studium“: Praxisbericht und Evaluation eines Moduls zur Verbesserung der Studieneingangsphase im Fach Psychologie	113
SABINE FABRIZ, CHARLOTTE DIGNATH-VAN EWLIJK UND GERHARD BÜTTNER Self-Monitoring bei Studierenden fördern – ein standardisiertes Lerntagebuch	123
LARS BEHRMANN, NATALIE FÖRSTER, SARA SCHMITZ UND ELMAR SOUVIGNIER Effekte spezifischer Prompts in Lerntagebüchern – Was bewirken die Hinweise „Theorie“ und „Empirie“?	133
MIRIAM THYE, FRIEDRICH EDELHÄUSER, CHRISTIAN SCHEFFER, ULRICH WEGER UND DIETHARD TAUSCHEL Meditation und Pausentag als Instrumente zum selbstgesteuerten Lernen	141
BARBARA THIES UND ELKE HEISE (MOOC-gestützte) Online-Einheiten als Mittel der Binnendifferenzierung in heterogenen Lehrveranstaltungen: Ein Pilotprojekt	153
REGINA JUCKS, JENS HINRICH HELLMANN UND JENS RIEHEMANN E-Learning in der Hochschuldidaktik: Zum Personalisierungsgrad virtueller Lehre	161
NICOLA MARSDEN, JASMIN LINK UND ELISABETH BÜLLESFELD Psychologische Hintergründe zur Entwicklung von Personas für den Usability-Engineering-Prozess	169
LARS BEHRMANN, JASMIN M. KIZILIRMAK UND FABIAN UTESCH Langfristige Auswirkungen ausbleibenden Strategieunterrichts auf das Lernverhalten von Studierenden und deren Einstellungen zur Schule	179

MARTIN KLEIN, KAI WAGNER, ERIC KLOPP UND ROBIN STARK	
Theoretisieren für die Praxis. Eine Lernumgebung zur Förderung der Anwendung bildungswissenschaftlichen Wissens in schulischen Kontexten anhand kollaborativer Bearbeitung instruktionaler Fehler	187

## **Praxisbezogene Anwendung psychologischer Erkenntnisse**

TORSTEN BRANDENBURG	
Mythen der Trainings- und Beratungsbranche? Was steckt hinter den „Klassikern“?	199

KERSTIN BRUSDEYLINS UND JORINTHE HAGNER	
Das PENTApus-Programm zur psychologischen Prüfungsvorbereitung – ein präventives Gruppentraining	209

KERSTIN BRUSDEYLINS	
Wie erreichen psychologische Themen Ratsuchende mit unerfülltem Kinderwunsch?	215

## **Evaluation**

MICHAEL KRÄMER	
Studienziele und Evaluation	225

KATJA SINGLETON, VERONIKA KUHBERG-LASSON UND UTE SONDERGELD	
Wer finanziert Forschungsprojekte zur Bildung? Inhaltliche und methodische Interessen der Drittmittelgeber	235

SEBASTIAN STEHLE UND SABINE FABRIZ	
Ein Instrument zur Erfassung des Planungswissens von Hochschullehrenden	243

MICHAELA ZUPANIC, THOMAS OSTERMANN, ROBIN J. SIEGEL UND MARZELLUS HOFMANN	
Vom Wissenstest im Auswahlverfahren Psychologie der Universität Witten/Herdecke zum Progresstest Psychologie	251

ROBIN J. SIEGEL, MICHAELA ZUPANIC UND ULRICH WEGER	
Persönlichkeit statt NC – Evaluation des Auswahlverfahrens an der Universität Witten/Herdecke	259

EVA SEIFRIED, CHRISTINE ECKERT UND BIRGIT SPINATH Eingangs- und Verlaufsdiagnostik von Lernvoraussetzungen und Lernergebnissen in der Hochschullehre	267
JOHANNES PETER, NIKOLAS LEICHNER, ANNE-KATHRIN MAYER UND GÜNTER KRAMPEN Das Inventar zur Evaluation von Blended Learning (IEBL): Konstruktion und Erprobung in einem Training professioneller Informationskompetenz	275
JULIA BOSER, MIRIAM HANSEN UND SIEGFRIED PREISER Präsentationsfertigkeiten von Studierenden fördern – Evaluation eines Seminarkonzepts	283
CHRISTINA DUSEND, NIKOLAI WYSTRYCHOWSKI UND BORIS FORTHMANN Entwicklung eines Evaluationsbogens für die tutorielle Unterstützung im Fachbereich Psychologie	293
CHRISTIAN SCHÜRING UND STEPHAN DUTKE Was erfahrene Lehrer an der Psychologie schätzen – Ergebnisse einer Studienangebotsevaluation	301
NINA ZEUCH UND ELMAR SOUVIGNIER Entwicklung eines Fragebogens zum wissenschaftlichen Denken bei (angehenden) Lehrkräften	309
STEPHANIE MOSER, CHRISTINE KAISER, INES DEIBL UND JÖRG ZUMBACH Entwicklung und Evaluation einer Skala zur Erhebung Epistemologischer Überzeugungen Lehramtsstudierender im Bereich der Pädagogischen Psychologie	319
ULRIKE STARKER UND MARGARETE IMHOF „Komplexitätsmanagement“ in der Lehramtsausbildung: das Planspiel „Schulalltag“ und dessen Evaluation	327

# **Psychology in the Academic Education of Non-Psychologists: A Survey among European Psychology Departments**

**Stephan Dutke und Kadi Epler**

Study programs in psychology underwent fundamental changes related to the Bologna process. This transformation process affected not only the education of psychologists but also the psychological education of students from other academic disciplines. Only scarce information is available about the role psychology as a minor subject plays in the policy of psychology departments. Therefore, the EFPA Board of Educational Affairs conducted an online survey among psychology departments in Europe. Results indicate that teaching psychology to non-psychology students is for most departments the rule rather than the exception. The results are discussed with regard to target groups, psychological topics exported, and organisational issues.

## **Introduction**

During the last decade, study programs in psychology underwent fundamental changes related to the Bologna process. Potentially positive and negative consequences for the quality of education in psychology (e.g., Krämer & Dutke, 2007), for universities (e.g., Powell, Bernhard, & Graf, 2012), and the psychological professions (e.g., Lunt, 2005) have been intensively discussed. Among the shades of these developments another aspect of teaching psychology has received less attention: teaching psychology to students of other academic disciplines, as a minor subject or in selected courses.

Understandably, teaching prospective psychologists is one of the core tasks of psychology departments. The next generations of psychologists assure the development of psychology as a science and as a profession. Thus, the education of psychologists deserves specific attention, further development, and resources. Last but not least, the quality of psychological services and research substantially form psychology's public image. However, how psychology is evaluated in society is not only a function of psychologists' professional activities. It is also influenced by how representatives of other academic disciplines such as prospective engineers, lawyers, physicians, human re-

source experts, or teachers are informed about psychology and how it can contribute to the solving of practical problems or research questions in the domain of other academic disciplines. Although non-psychologists usually do not acquire the same in-depth understanding of psychological research or methods as psychologists do, their influence on the public appearance of psychology is nevertheless high. The reason is the relatively high number of students from other academic disciplines who get into contact with psychology during their time at the university. Figures from Germany may serve as an illustration. In 2012, 2,755 psychologists received the Master's degree from German universities. In the same year, 39,137 prospective teachers left German universities (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013) – most of them with an initial understanding of what psychology is and in which respect psychological research results might be relevant to their profession.

However, only scarce information is available about the role psychology as a minor subject plays in the policy of psychology departments. Therefore, the EFPA Board of Educational Affairs conducted an online survey among psychology departments in Europe concerning their psychology courses and programs for students of other academic disciplines.

## **Method**

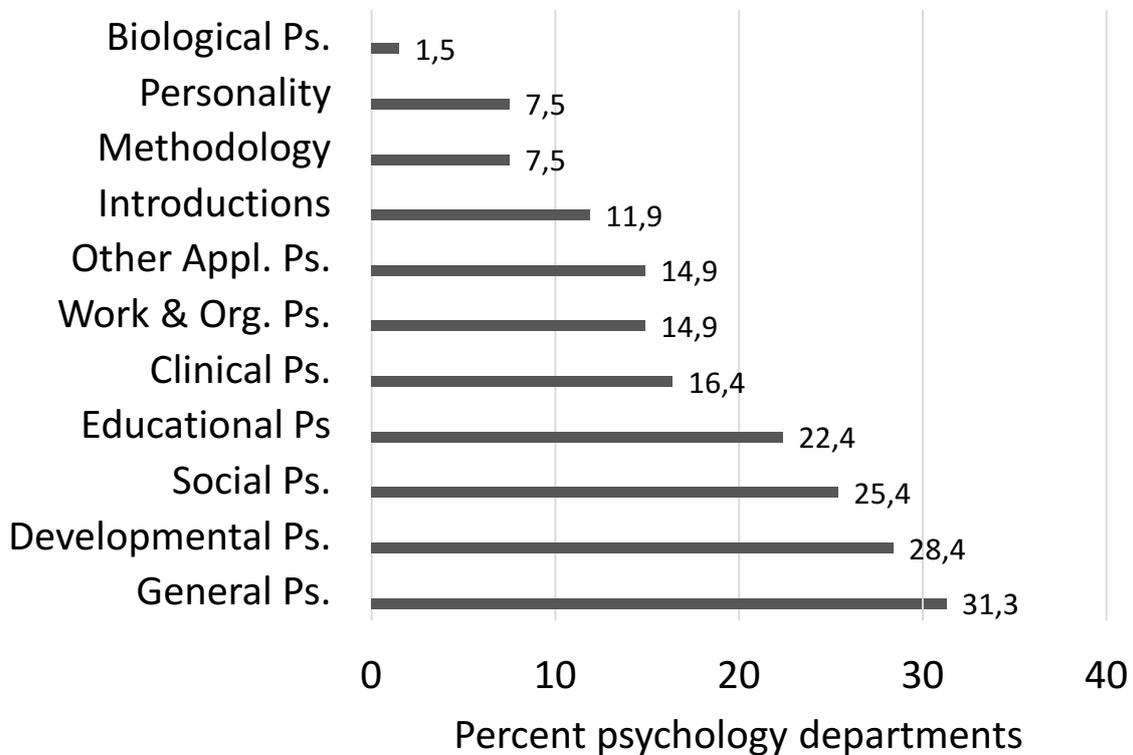
The questionnaire consisted of ten questions concerning the contents and the amount of courses, modules, and programs offered to non-psychology students, the cooperation partners involved, and the institutional context. Respondents answered all questions in their own words. Post hoc, the answers were categorised by the authors and an independent expert. For categorising psychological subjects we used the recommendations of the German Psychological Society (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie, 2005); for categorising scientific disciplines the OECD field of science and technology classification was used (OECD, 2007).

The invitation to participate was directed to all EFPA member associations via electronic mail with the request to inform all national psychology departments. Within each country the national member association or individual EFPA delegates invited the departments to participate. We received complete responses from 67 psychology departments from 14 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Re-

public, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom).

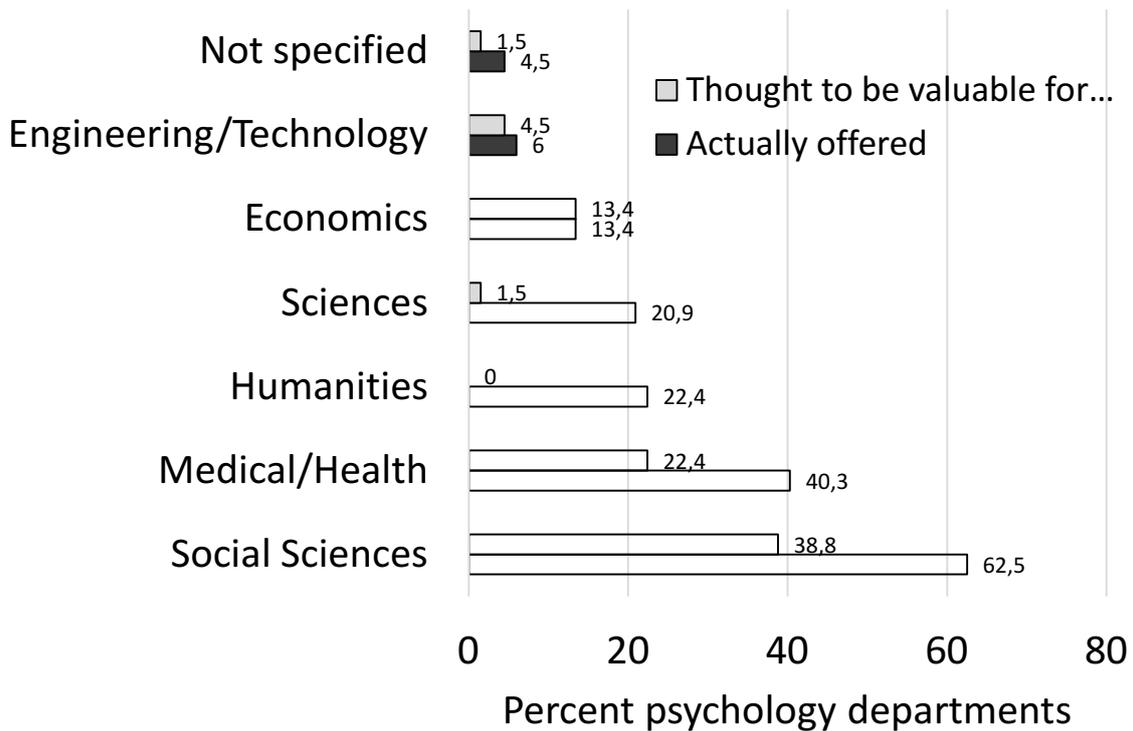
## Results

The majority of the departments (76%) reported to have co-operations with at least one other department in the university to include psychology in the curriculum for another professional group. Only 10% answered to have not, 13.5% had such co-operations previously or occasionally. This is in accord to the departments' answers to the question whether "psychology would be a valuable component for other disciplines or professions." This question was answered with "yes" by 88% of the departments, although some qualifications were made – mainly concerning the required teaching staff resources. Only a few departments did not answer this question (6%) or denied it (6%). The number of courses offered to students from other academic disciplines ranged between 2 und 200 ( $M = 25$ ,  $SD = 42$ ). Expressed in credit points (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, ECTS), each department at average exported 76 credits ( $SD = 118$ ), ranging from 2 to 625 credit points.



**Figure 1: Percentage of departments offering courses on psychological topics**

Figure 1 shows which psychological topics were primarily exported. Most often, the courses covered topics from the basic psychological sub-disciplines, general, developmental, and social psychology. Among the applied psychological subjects, educational psychology was offered more often than work and organizational psychology and clinical psychology. Only a few departments reported to export courses on methodology (7.5%), personality (7.5%), or biological psychology (1.5%).



**Figure 2: Departments evaluating psychology as a useful component of studying a given academic discipline and actually offering psychology courses to this discipline**

A partially inconsistent pattern emerged when the departments' opinions about the usefulness of psychology for students of other disciplines were compared with the actual supply of psychology courses (Figure 2). For example, no department mentioned that students of humanities would benefit from psychology and only 1.5% of the departments answered that psychology would be important for those who study sciences. The actual teaching co-operations, however, showed a different situation: about 20% of

the departments offered psychology courses to the aforementioned faculties. Whereas only 22.4% of the departments evaluated psychology as useful for students of medical and health sciences, over 40% of the departments offered psychology to these students. A similar picture emerged for the social sciences. Most psychology departments (62.5%) offered psychology courses to students of social sciences although only 38.8% of the departments answered that psychology is useful for these students. Summarized, psychology courses were more often offered to students of other disciplines than one would expect on the basis of the departments' opinions about the usefulness of psychology as a minor subject. A good fit, however, was observed for engineering and economics (see Figure 2).

Two questions were related to organisational issues. We asked whether non-psychology students are allowed to enrol in psychology core courses, i.e. courses that were explicitly designed to students studying psychology as the main subject. About a third of the departments (32.8%) did not allow this but offered separate courses for non-psychology students. However, the majority of the departments (64.2%) allowed non-psychology students to enrol in psychology core courses. That means the probability in these departments is high that psychology and non-psychology students attend the same courses. Moreover, we asked whether departments co-operate with national or international groups or institutions when they develop curricula for non-psychology students. Only 23.9% of the departments affirmed this question, whereas 70.1% answered "no."

## **Summary and Discussion**

Whereas teaching psychology as the main subject has received much attention during the years of changes related to the Bologna process, presenting psychology to students of other academic disciplines – as a minor subject or in selected courses – has been a less prominent issue. Nevertheless it is part of the daily work of most psychology departments taking part in this survey. They focus on the main subject but only a few of them exclude co-operation with other departments. The number of courses offered to students from other disciplines is substantial.

Many departments seem to teach psychology und non-psychology students in the same courses. Given that these target groups are characterized by different needs, we doubt that this is the optimal format. Non-psychology students study psychology in smaller

fragments, they vary more than psychology students with regard to their prior knowledge, and expect to use their psychological knowledge in different application contexts than psychology students. Addressing the diverging needs of these target-groups in the same course might be difficult.

Most psychological topics taught to students of other academic disciplines come from the basic psychological sub-disciplines, such as general, social, and developmental psychology. This is contra-intuitive as especially students with other professional perspectives than psychology are often assumed to be more interested in applied aspects of psychology. Having their own future professional tasks in mind, for example as doctors, teachers, judges, or managers they might be especially interested to learn how psychology can inform their future professional activities. Nevertheless, they seem to be confronted with issues related to a basic understanding of human cognitive functioning and development. Whether this satisfies the audience's needs remains to be explored.

Some departments explicitly stated that their concept of teaching psychology, be it in the major or minor subject, requires contextualizing psychological knowledge with respect to theory and empirical evidence. Therefore, they tend to resist other faculties' requests for offering pure behavioural trainings of specific, narrow psychological skills. This may also explain why more departments offered courses from the basic rather than the applied psychological sub-disciplines.

The number of departments offering courses on methodology, personality (individual differences), and biological psychology is low although all three domains represent extremely active research fields with growing potentials for other disciplines. Similarly, it is not evident why only a few departments offer psychology courses to students of economics and engineering. With regard to long research traditions in work and organisational psychology and cognitive ergonomics we expected these target groups to be addressed more often.

The number of departments offering psychology courses to students from other disciplines was higher than the number of departments evaluating psychology as useful for these disciplines. One might speculate whether this discrepancy is due to the other faculties' overestimation of the relevance of psychology or to the psychologists' underestimation of the usefulness of their own subject. Unfortunately, the data collected in this study is not appropriate for further exploring this issue.

Only a third of the departments reported that they co-operated with national or international groups or institutions when they develop curricula for non-psychology students. Such co-operations, however, might be useful for different reasons. For example, curricula (or elements of curricula) need not be developed from scratch and experiences from existing curricula could be taken advantage of. Furthermore, references to other curricula or standards for their contents and methods could facilitate negotiations with other faculties. Psychology (as the main subject) benefitted tremendously from establishing a common qualification standard for psychologists (European Certificate in Psychology, EuroPsy, see Lunt, Poortinga, & Roe, 2015). It would be worth a discussion whether a comparable initiative for psychology as a minor subject would be useful. In Germany, for example, the German Psychological Society developed a curriculum framework for teaching psychology in teacher education programs, which departments engaged in teacher education can refer to (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie, 2002).

In interpreting the results, the following limitations of the present study should be considered. The sample of departments is probably not representative – neither for individual countries nor for Europe. Although psychology’s history and current status varies across the European countries, the small sample size did not allow comparisons between countries. Finally, the study completely relied on open-ended questions, which aggravated data analyses but allowed more individual insights into the departments’ policy for teaching psychology to non-psychologists.

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