



# The psychology curriculum in European secondary schools: What should we teach?

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## 1. Abstract

This poster reports participatory action research into the nature of psychology curricula for 15-19-year-olds in Europe. At a conference of the European Federation of Psychology Teachers' Associations (EFPTA) held in Copenhagen in 2012, 48 psychology educators from 10 countries took part in focus groups on the purpose, content and development of the psychology curriculum at pre-tertiary (pre-university) level. Qualitative analysis of responses revealed much common ground, as well as some striking differences in how curriculum is developed and controlled, and by whom.

## 2. Introduction

In many countries in Europe, psychological science is taught at pre-tertiary level, including academic qualifications required for entry to higher education (HE). It is often taught as a discrete subject, delivered mainly to 15-19 year-olds in secondary schools and colleges, at levels 3-4 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Psychology is also taught – though often not named as such – within a wide range of other subjects, e.g. philosophy, human biology, personal development, and vocational courses such as health and social care.



The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) supports the aim of providing psychology education for all young people in Europe (Roe, 2011). However, the academic status of school psychology varies enormously: in Finland an element of psychology is obligatory for all, whilst in France, Spain, Italy and many other EU countries the subject seems to be absent from the school curriculum.

The psychology curriculum may be considered from the perspective of curriculum theory and research, and in the wider educational context of debate regarding factors that impact on achievement, such as: quality of teacher education; usefulness of international league tables (e.g. PISA) in identifying 'what works' in education; curriculum coherence (Schmidt & Prawat, 2006); central control versus school / teacher autonomy (e.g. Coe & Sahlgren, 2014). From studies of high-performing systems, Oates (2014) claims the key lies in a highly-trained teacher workforce and high-quality resources; a rigorous assessment regime has a role to play but is far from the whole story.

Research into pre-tertiary psychology education (PTPE) in Europe is sparse, compared to the vast body of literature on psychology at university level (Mampaey et al, 2014; Kittler 2009), and in sharp contrast to the attention accorded to 'high school psychology' in the USA (eg Rossi et al, 2005; and see the American

Psychological Association [APA] website). A small amount of PTPE curriculum research has been conducted (eg Rowley, 2008; Sokolová, 2008, 2012; Radford, 2008). Some European national psychologists' associations recommend core content, eg a British Psychological Society report on A-level (2013). In the USA the APA Education Directorate provides National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (2011). However, it appears that no peer-reviewed research has been published into the pre-tertiary curriculum at European level, though it is one of a number of concerns amongst PTPE educators Europe-wide (EFPTA, 2014; Augustin, 2012; Williamson et al, 2011).

In the current research the focus-group questions served as a starting-point to discover European teachers' views on the psychology curriculum, in terms of its purpose, content, and who should design and have control of what is taught. These questions arose both from the literature and from concerns expressed in professional dialogue amongst psychology educators.

This was a small-scale, exploratory study of a much-neglected though very important area of psychology education.

## 3. Method

At the EFPTA annual conference in Copenhagen in April 2012, round-table workshops were held to discuss issues of the PTPE curriculum in Europe. Delegates' consent was obtained for participation and audio-recording of discussions, and for recordings to be used as focus group data for the purpose of this research.

48 participants from 10 countries took part, in three parallel groups, each with a mixture of at least five nationalities, and each led by a facilitator (Table 1). Most participants were psychology teachers at pre-university level; a small number were involved in some other way in PTPE (psychology teacher educators, educational psychologists, and researchers in the field of psychology education). Discussion was prompted by a semi-structured schedule of open-ended questions on **three related key aspects of curriculum**:



Psychology teachers from 10 European countries took part in the focus groups

- what should be the **purpose** of the pre-tertiary psychology curriculum?
- what should its **content** be?
- **who** should be involved in designing it, in order to determine content and achieve agreed purpose(s)?

Discussion was in English and lasted about 45 minutes. Some participants also made handwritten responses.

| Country      | Focus group participants by country     |
|--------------|---|
| Denmark      | 15                                      |
| England      | 3                                       |
| Finland      | 11                                      |
| Germany      | 3                                       |
| Iceland      | 3                                       |
| Luxembourg   | 1                                       |
| Netherlands  | 1                                       |
| Russia       | 7                                       |
| Scotland     | 3                                       |
| Slovakia     | 1                                       |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>n = 48</b><br><b>(F = 43, M = 5)</b> |

Table 1: Participants by country

## 4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis was applied to collated data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A range of sub-themes emerged from responses to the pre-coded themes (the three discussion questions). Themes and inter-relationships are illustrated in thematic maps (Figs. 1 and 2).

### 'Purpose' and 'content' themes

In response to the first two questions on 'purpose' and 'content', considerable common ground appeared amongst prevalent sub-themes: the question on '**purpose**' elicited responses emphasising student learning outcomes, and responses to the '**content**' question appeared to constitute views on how to achieve those purposes. Across these two themes there was broad agreement on the value of pre-tertiary psychology education for students, and on criteria for determining content.

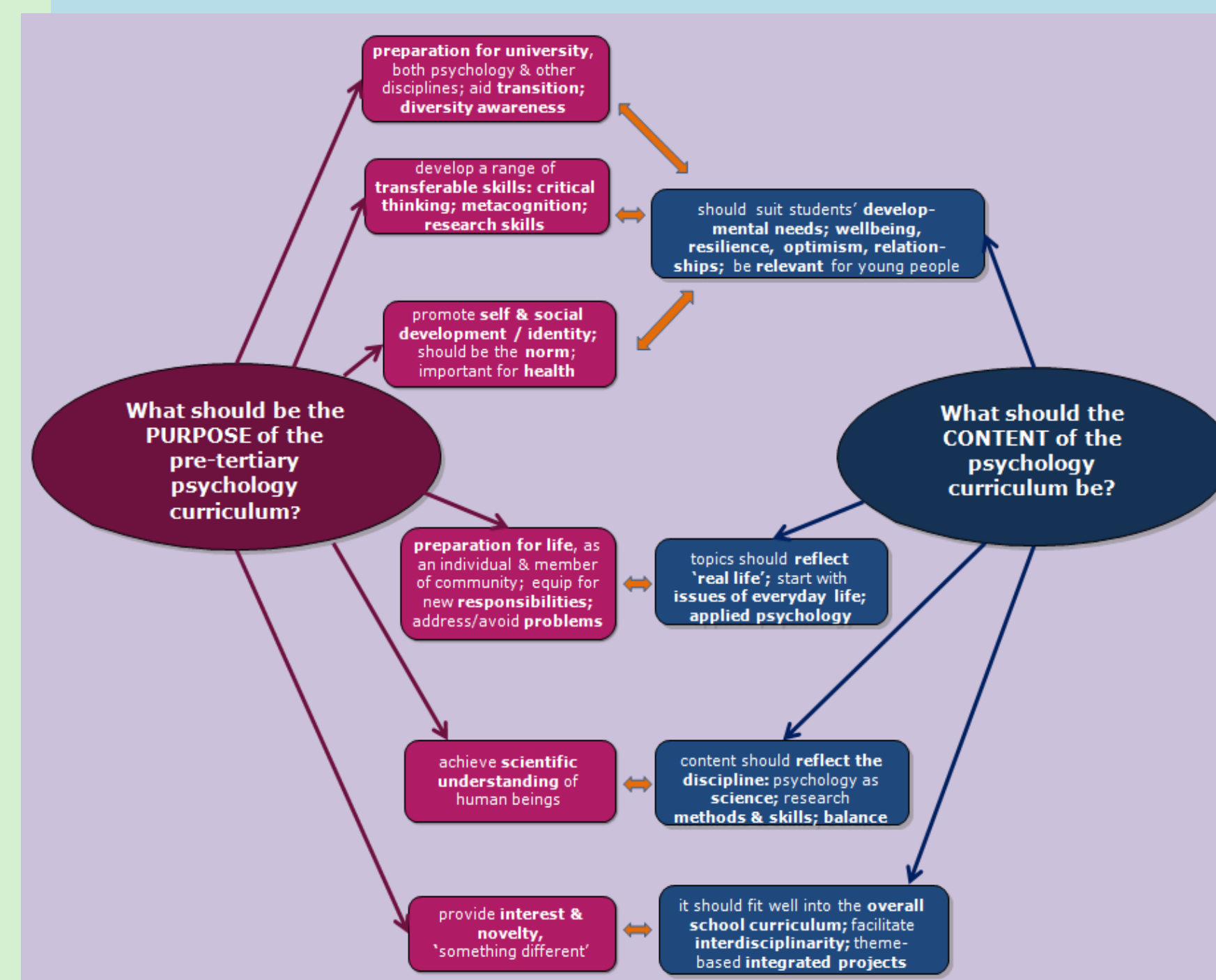


Figure 1: 'Purpose' and 'Content' themes

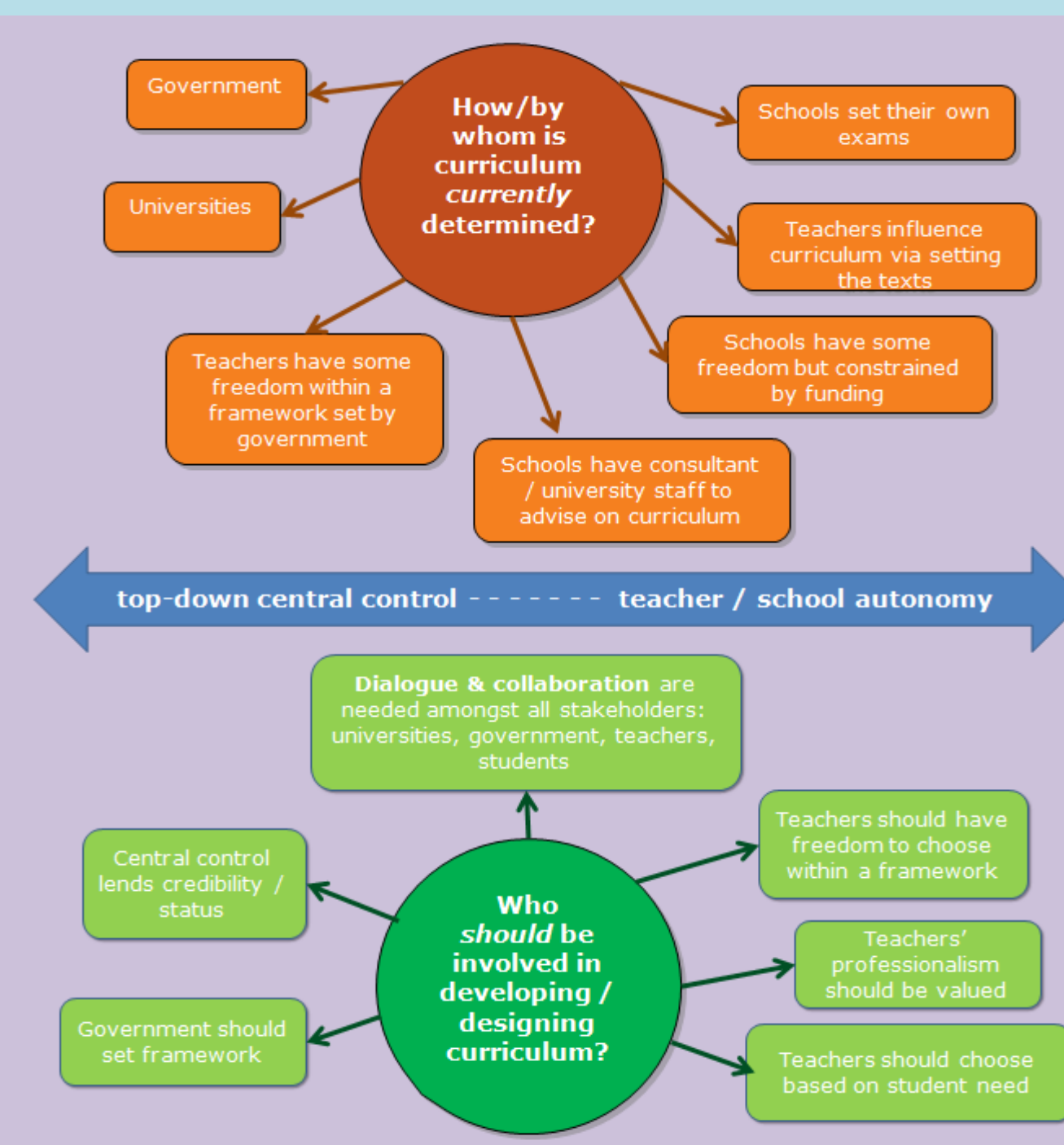


Figure 2: Who determines curriculum?

## ...Results and Discussion (continued)

Clear correspondences emerged between responses to '**purpose**' and '**content**', yielding four dominant views on what the psychology curriculum can and should do (Fig. 1):

- promote student development – academic, personal, social
- prepare students for life, focus on 'real life' issues and applications
- reflect the scientific nature of the discipline
- fit well into the overall school curriculum, facilitate interdisciplinarity

### Who should determine the curriculum?

Themes emerging from responses to the third question, on who should determine the curriculum are shown separately (Fig. 2). Participants often indicated who is *currently* in control of designing curriculum in their respective countries, as well as stating views on who *should* be involved.

There was striking variation in participants' reports of the existing 'locus of control' of the psychology curriculum in their countries, ranging from tight top-down control to almost complete teacher autonomy. Some central control was seen as necessary for quality assurance, especially in high-stakes national assessments, but should be a framework within which teachers should have some autonomy. In contrast to the disparities in the *status quo*, there was remarkable consensus on the importance of dialogue amongst all stakeholders, to develop high quality psychology curricula. Balance was needed between top-down control and teacher/school autonomy; design of the curriculum should not be left to any single body or stakeholder group.



There was consensus that all stakeholders should be involved in curriculum development

### Limitations of method:

- sample was small and unrepresentative of psychology teachers in Europe or own countries
- gender imbalance (F=43, M=5) was large though not atypical in PTPE
- researchers are all practitioners -> increased risk of subjectivity in interpretation of data
- discussion was in English which was not the first language for 85% of the participants
- collation of two response formats for analysis (verbal and written) may compromise validity.

Despite these limitations the findings offer clear pointers for further research.

## 5. Conclusions

Although participants came from 10 different countries, their perceptions of school psychology showed much common ground, suggesting comparability of national qualifications amongst European countries; this may help increase mobility of school students making the transition to HE. Such developments would facilitate internationalisation, reflecting the principles of the Bologna process.

Participants clearly felt that dialogue and a collaborative approach amongst all stakeholders was essential to produce a 'good' curriculum, and thus 'good learning'. A logical and informative next step in research would be to investigate views amongst these other stakeholders, i.e. students, academic and practising psychologists, government education agencies, awarding bodies, employers.

This study was modest in its aims and scale, and further research is urgently needed. It has, however, highlighted key aspects and concerns about pre-tertiary psychology education across Europe, which should be addressed by education policy-makers and agencies.

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\* available at [www.efpta.org](http://www.efpta.org)