

# Mental Health Workforce: Supply of Psychologists



MENTAL HEALTH  
WORKFORCE  
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Psychology involves the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes. A psychologist may be defined as a person who is on the register maintained by a state or territory psychologists board or council to practise psychology in that state or territory. Requirements for registration differ slightly between jurisdictions. The minimum Australian educational requirement to be a registered psychologist is either:

- A four-year degree in a course approved by the appropriate state or territory registration board plus two years of supervised training; or
- A four year degree plus a two-year full-time masters degree accredited by the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC).

Clinical psychologists are specialists in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of psychological problems and mental illness. Membership of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) College of Clinical Psychologists (CCP) requires a minimum of six years university training, including approved postgraduate clinical studies and placements in psychiatric settings, with one year of further approved supervision in the clinical field.<sup>i</sup> However, much of the data reported on clinical psychologists actually refers to a broader group of psychologists, with data based on self-reported work directly with patients or in a clinical area. Self-reported clinical psychologists are a broader group than membership of the APS CCP, as not all those working in a clinical area are members of the APS CCP.

The APS supports eight other specialist colleges in addition to the CCP. These include clinical neuropsychology, community psychology, health psychology, organisational psychology, and sport psychology. Some of these specialist areas are much more relevant to mental health workforce than others, and not all psychologists form part of the mental health workforce.

The overall psychology labour force is relatively small, and information regarding this group comes from two key sources. One source is the ABS Labour Force Survey, which is a household-based sample survey intended to provide broad-level, national labour force estimates. The small number of psychologists means that estimates of employed psychologists are subject to high sampling variability at state and territory level, hence only national-level data are used from this source. The second source is an AIHW survey carried out in 2003 that targeted psychologists via registration administrative records. As it is subject to non-response, the survey data are weighted to match the available registration data.<sup>ii</sup> The AIHW data gives a greater level of detail, but the ABS data is more recent. The data collection periods vary between the two sources, further limiting comparability between them.

In 2003 the AIHW estimated that there were 16,094 registered psychologists in the five states and territories that participated in the survey in that year. It excludes WA, Tasmania and the NT.<sup>iii</sup> This estimate also excludes psychologists registered in more than one jurisdiction. Psychologist registration board data for 2004-05 indicates that there were 22,175 psychologist registrations in Australia (excluding the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory). This data does not take account of psychologists registered in more than one jurisdiction and will therefore include some duplicates. The APS estimate of registered psychologists in 2006 is broadly consistent with this data and is given in the table below:

Table 1: Registered Psychologists in Australia by State in 2006<sup>iv</sup>

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total
Full		7716	143	3148	1070		5730	2004	20,774*
Probationary		1339	33	925	50		1496	165	4,242
Total	719	9055	176	4073	1120	448	7226	2169	24,986

\* includes 80% of ACT and Tasmanian registrants

Data from the Department of Education, Science and Training shows the number of people completing psychology courses (undergraduate and postgraduate) has steadily increased between 1998 and 2005. Hence numbers of new psychologists moving into the workforce can be expected to be significantly greater than was the case prior to 2000. It should be noted that a student may complete an undergraduate course in psychology, but never pursue registration or a career in psychology. Postgraduate course completions are a better indicator of numbers moving into the workforce.

Table 1: Australian citizens and permanent residents completing psychology courses: level, sex 1998-2004<sup>v</sup>

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number	2,823	2,850	2,995	3,088	3,393	3,813	4,063	4077
Per cent undergraduate	62.7	64.9	61.9	62.8	63.1	60.0	58.0	57.5
Per cent male	21.7	20.9	20.0	19.9	20.2	20.3	20.5	19.9

The 2005 ABS national estimate of the number of employed psychologists was 13,900. As noted above, estimates of clinical psychologists by the ABS and AIHW are based on self-reports by psychologists. Eligibility for the APS College of Clinical Psychologists is the requirement set by the Commonwealth for delivery of MBS-rebateable services in clinical psychology. The number of people registered with Medicare as clinical psychologists was 1,904 as of September 2007.<sup>vi</sup> The number of people registered as psychologists with Medicare is not publicly available.

## Distribution of the Workforce

The AIHW found that the distribution of main work location of employed psychologists was skewed to being metropolitan-based.<sup>vii</sup> 'Metropolitan' refers to major city and inner regional areas of Australia. Inner Regional Australia includes towns such as Launceston, Noosa and Tamworth. Across jurisdictions, the proportion of employed psychologists with a main work location in a metropolitan area varied from 86.9% in Queensland to 98.3% in Victoria. FTE rates for employed psychologists working as clinicians varied between 35 per 100,000 population in South Australia to 61 in NSW and 103 in the ACT.<sup>viii</sup> The majority of psychologists working in the profession reported working mainly as clinicians, and the majority of psychologists worked in the public sector. Psychologists in the private sector may work as clinicians, or in other areas such as organisational psychology or education. Proportions of psychologists in private practice ranged from 34.6% in Victoria and 31.7% in SA, to 24%, 22.9%, and 27.1% in NSW, Queensland, and the ACT respectively.<sup>ix</sup>

Table 2: Registered psychologists 2003

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	ACT	Total
Employed psychologists	5,589	4,671	2,535	769	509	14,073
Employed psychologists working mainly as a clinician	3,996	3,067	1,793	516	323	9,694
Proportion employed psychologists with main job located in metropolitan area <sup>x</sup>	97.4%	98.3%	86.9%	96.1%	100%	N/a
Proportion population residing in metropolitan areas	92.1%	94.7%	78.6%	84.4%	100%	N/a
FTE rate of all employed psychologists (supply)	88	95	64	54	170	N/a
Proportion of employed psychologists with main job in public sector	61.0%	47.1%	60.0%	58.9%	59.9%	N/a
Total registered psychologists	6,483	5,212	2,928	901	569	16,094

Overall, in NSW, Queensland, SA and the ACT, the ratio of public sector to private sector employment was about 60:40. However, this pattern was different in Victoria, where under half of psychologists (47.1%) reported working mainly in the public sector. In all jurisdictions, psychologists in the public sector were younger, on average, than their private sector colleagues. Psychologists working in the public sector worked more hours on average than their private sector colleagues, and were less likely to be part-time<sup>xi</sup>.

In November 2006, new Medicare Benefits Schedule mental health items were introduced. These include rebates for psychological assessment and therapy services provided by clinical psychologists, and focussed psychological strategies by registered psychologists. Uptake of the items has been very high<sup>xii</sup>. In the period November 2006-December 2008, clinical psychologists delivered 468,800 fifty-minute plus services (item 80010) and registered psychologists 935,983 fifty-minute plus services (item 80110).<sup>xiii</sup> MBS rebates enhance security of work and income in the private sector for psychologists, and may have a significant impact on the ratio of public sector to private sector employment, and hours worked in each sector.

### Other workforce characteristics

Psychologists are predominantly female, and recent course completions indicate little change in this aspect of the workforce. The average age of psychologists in 2003 was 44.2 years, with female psychologists younger than their male counterparts (average ages of 43.2 years and 48.5 years respectively).<sup>xiv</sup> As postgraduate level qualifications are being phased in as the minimum qualification for registration nationally, the proportion of people completing postgraduate psychology courses is increasing.

The great majority of employed psychologists are Australian citizens and Australian born. For those jurisdictions where information is available on country of birth, the most common countries of birth for overseas born psychologists are UK /Ireland, other Europe and Asia.

Table 3: *Employed psychologists working mainly as clinicians: citizenship and country of birth<sup>xv</sup>*

	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>ACT</b>
No. of clinical psychologists	3,996	3,067	1,793	516	323
Proportion Australian citizens	93.2%	95.2%	93.6%	96.3%	98.5%
Proportion born in Australia	71.9%	76.4%	74.8%	N/a	N/a

### Future supply of psychologists

Australia is largely self-reliant for its psychology workforce—unlike mental health nurses and psychiatrists, psychologists are not in workforce shortage. Psychologists do not, for example, currently appear on the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' Skills in Demand Lists.<sup>xvi</sup> In addition, the supply of psychologists in Australia appears to be increasing, although the data to support this is very limited. In addition, there is significant variation between states and territories. As noted in table 2 above, the FTE rate of employed psychologists in 2003 varied from 54 per 100,000 population in South Australia to 170 per 100,000 population in the ACT.

The NSW psychologist workforce was estimated to have increased by 820 or 21.4% between 2001 and 2003.<sup>xvii</sup> The AIHW survey indicates that the FTE rate in NSW increased from 73 per 100,000 in 2000 to 88 per 100,000 in 2003. The growth was even higher in Queensland, where the FTE rate rose from 49 in 2000 to 64 in 2003, with a 33.9% increase in the number of employed psychologists.<sup>xviii</sup> In both states this growth occurred despite average hours worked decreasing over the period.

The impact of the introduction of MBS rebates for psychologists on the psychology labourforce is not yet clear. Certainly the uptake of psychological services has been very high. The provision of

rebates may well increase overall demand for psychologists, and particularly clinical psychologists, thereby putting pressure on supply. Another potential consequence is a shift in the ratio of public to private sector employment, with a greater proportion of psychologists opting for private sector work. Further monitoring and analysis of information on the psychology labour force is warranted to assess developments.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Australian Psychological Society website at <http://www.psychology.org.au/community/specialist/clinical/> accessed 22 August 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006, *Psychology Labour Force 2003*. AIHW cat. No. HWL 34. Canberra: AIHW (National Health Labour Force Series No. 33)

<sup>iii</sup> AIHW 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Psychological Society, unpublished data, 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Higher Education Student Data from Department of Education Science and Training, quoted in AIHW 2006. Figures for 2005, received from AIHW, unpublished. Note that the data excludes New Zealand citizens regardless of permanent residence status.

<sup>vi</sup> Australian Psychological Society, unpublished data, 18 September 2007.

<sup>vii</sup> AIHW 2006 p. 5.

<sup>viii</sup> The Full-time equivalent (FTE) measure of supply is based on the total hours worked by all psychologists, divided by 35 hours. Hence the FTE measures how many 35 hour week workloads are being worked by psychologists. It provides a measure of supply of psychologists because it takes into account both psychologists working full-time and those working part-time. Defining supply in terms of FTE per 100,000 population (or the FTE rate) enables meaningful comparisons across geographic areas and over time.

<sup>ix</sup> AIHW 2006.

<sup>x</sup> Note that this includes major cities and inner regional areas.

<sup>xi</sup> AIHW 2006.

<sup>xii</sup> D. Crosbie and S. Rosenberg, July 2007. *COAG Mental Health Reform: Mental Health and the New Medicare Services: An Analysis of the First Six Months*, Mental Health Council of Australia.

<sup>xiii</sup> Data downloaded from [www.medicare.gov.au](http://www.medicare.gov.au) on 11 February 2008.

<sup>xiv</sup> Note these average ages are not national but refer to NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Website at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10322#n00> accessed 23 August 2007.

<sup>xv</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Website at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10322#n00> accessed 23 August 2007.

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Publications/LabourMarketAnalysis/Skillsindemant.htm> accessed 2 October 2007.

<sup>xvii</sup> NSW Health Workforce Development and Leadership Branch, *Profile of the Psychologist Labourforce in NSW, 2003*.

<sup>xviii</sup> AIHW 2006