Psychology is the scientific study of human emotion, cognition, and behaviour. In South Africa, practicing as a psychologist requires professional registration with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). There are a number of categories in which a person may register to practice psychology, including clinical psychology, counselling psychology, educational psychology, research psychology, and industrial psychology.

In order to register with the HPCSA within one of the above-mentioned categories, a professional masters degree in psychology is required. While there are a number of avenues which a person may follow toward entering one of these masters programs, the following outline applies only to the opportunities offered by the UWC Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences. Prospective students who are interested in following careers in educational psychology or industrial psychology are advised to consult the Faculty of Education or the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences respectively.

Qualifications Required for Professional Registration

The UWC Department of Psychology offers opportunities to qualify for professional registration as a clinical psychologist or a research psychologist (we shall be adding counseling psychology in the near future). The following qualifications are required:

1. A first B-degree with psychology as a major subject (3 – 4 years)
2. A postgraduate honours degree in psychology (1-2 years)
3. A professional masters degree in clinical psychology or research psychology (2 years).

Following a first degree B-degree with psychology as major, students are required to enrol for an honours degree in psychology. A minimum average percentage of 65% for psychology in the third year of study is required in order to be considered for the honours degree. However, as the selection process into the honours program is quite competitive, 65% does not guarantee you a place in the program.

Students who have obtained an average percentage of at least 65% for their honours degree may apply for admission into the masters program in clinical psychology or research psychology. It should be noted at this point that the selection process for entry into one of these masters programs is extremely competitive. Right across the country, universities tend to select around 6 – 8 students per year for a professional masters program in psychology. This relates to the reality of the limited availability of internship opportunities (the internship consists of a one-year placement at an appropriate training site and represents the greater part of students’ practical or clinical training). A second factor contributing to the competitiveness of selection into a professional masters program is the intensity of the training and the high level of individual clinical and research supervision required. This cannot be effectively managed with large numbers of students.

While a person’s academic achievement at the honours level of study does play a role in the masters selection process, it is not the only requirement for entry into a professional masters program. Other significant criteria include relevant work and life experience as well as the personality functioning of the candidate. Following a professional career in psychology requires personality features such as empathy, integrity, conscientiousness, above-average intelligence, self-insight, as well as insight into other people and human nature in general. Psychology can be a stressful and challenging career due to the human difficulties that are dealt with, therefore psychologists are required to be relatively stable emotionally and to possess effective coping skills.

Should a person not gain entry into one of the afore-mentioned professional masters programs, they are still able to follow a career in psychology. We also offer masters-by-thesis and doctoral degrees which, although they do not lead to registration as a psychologist, do open doors to a career in psychology. This will be looked at in the next section.

Career Opportunities

Careers in psychology can be very rewarding and fulfilling, albeit challenging. Being allowed entry into the private and often vulnerable sides of others is a privilege, and the opportunity to contribute to the healing and growth of others makes for a meaningful experience of life. Regardless of the form they take, careers in psychology also continuously challenge the mind in its never-ending quest toward understanding human dynamics.

An honours degree in psychology may allow entry into research positions, such as research assistantships. As from 2015, the 6-month practicum, which is approved by the Health Professional Council of South Africa (HPCSA), will no longer be offered in the Psychology Department. Thus, 2015 was the final year in which the practicum was offered.

With a masters-by-thesis degree, a person may also qualify for research positions as well as academic positions (lectureships) at tertiary institutions. In addition, a masters-by-thesis qualifies a person to continue with PhD (doctoral) studies.

A doctoral degree opens doors to high-level research positions, post-doctoral fellowships, and academic positions at tertiary institutions.

Professionally registered clinical psychologists may work in private practice or be employed within organizations such as psychiatric hospitals or educational institutions. Research psychologists may be employed in high-level research positions, academic positions, and may create their own employment in a research consultation capacity.