

Why interdisciplinary degrees will produce the graduates of the future



Dr Donna Lloyd, Dr Ruth Ingram, Dr Ellen Poliakoff, FBMH
Teaching and Learning Conference, UoM 2025

Donna.Lloyd@manchester.ac.uk, Ruth.Ingram@manchester.ac.uk,
Ellen.Poliakoff@manchester.ac.uk

Introduction

- If it were possible to reverse engineer the ‘**graduate of the future**’, what would the ideal degree programme look like to produce such a person?
- Surprising advances occur when researchers work across/outside their disciplines → success systematically emerges across rather than within traditional academic boundaries^[1]
- But (in UK HE) joint honours degree programmes seen as **educational anomaly** for their cross-disciplinarity

¹Shi, F., Evans, J. (2023). Surprising combinations of research contents and contexts are related to impact and emerge with scientific outsiders from distant disciplines. *Nat Commun* 14, 1641. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-36741-4>

Introduction cont...

- Joint honours degrees in Australia:
 - popular with female students, providing a ‘transdisciplinary education’, giving them an edge in the post-graduate job market^[2]
- But these benefits may not always be fully realised:
 - administrative difficulties?
 - perceived or actual lack of support?
 - felt absence of a learning community?

²Russell, A.W., Dolnicar, S. & Ayoub, M. (2008). Double degrees: double the trouble or twice the return? *High Educ* 55, 575–591.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9076-2>

Introduction cont...

- Joint honours degrees in UK^[3]:
 - students feel excluded from ‘institutional norm’ (becoming an ‘out-group’) when dominant social group is single honours
- This perception extends throughout UK HE culture, even in relation to subject-specific QAA benchmarks
 - blinds institutions to the advantages of joint honours degree, including lack of recognition for the very specific skills developed as part of the joint honours experience

³Weissmann, E. (2012). Excluded from the institutional habitus: the joint student experience. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37(2), 261–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.645451>

Aims

- Explore the perceptions of joint honours students towards their degree programme, to identify:
 - the reasons why they enrolled on a degree combining subjects
 - how they identify with the different subjects
 - the positive/negative experiences they've had
- With the goal of making recommendations for the design and delivery of such degrees as a growth market in the future



Method

Participants:

1st year students
on BSc Cognitive
Neuroscience
and Psychology
at UoM

Respondents:
19/62 students
in the cohort

Survey:

Online
questionnaire
through
Qualtrics

Analysis:

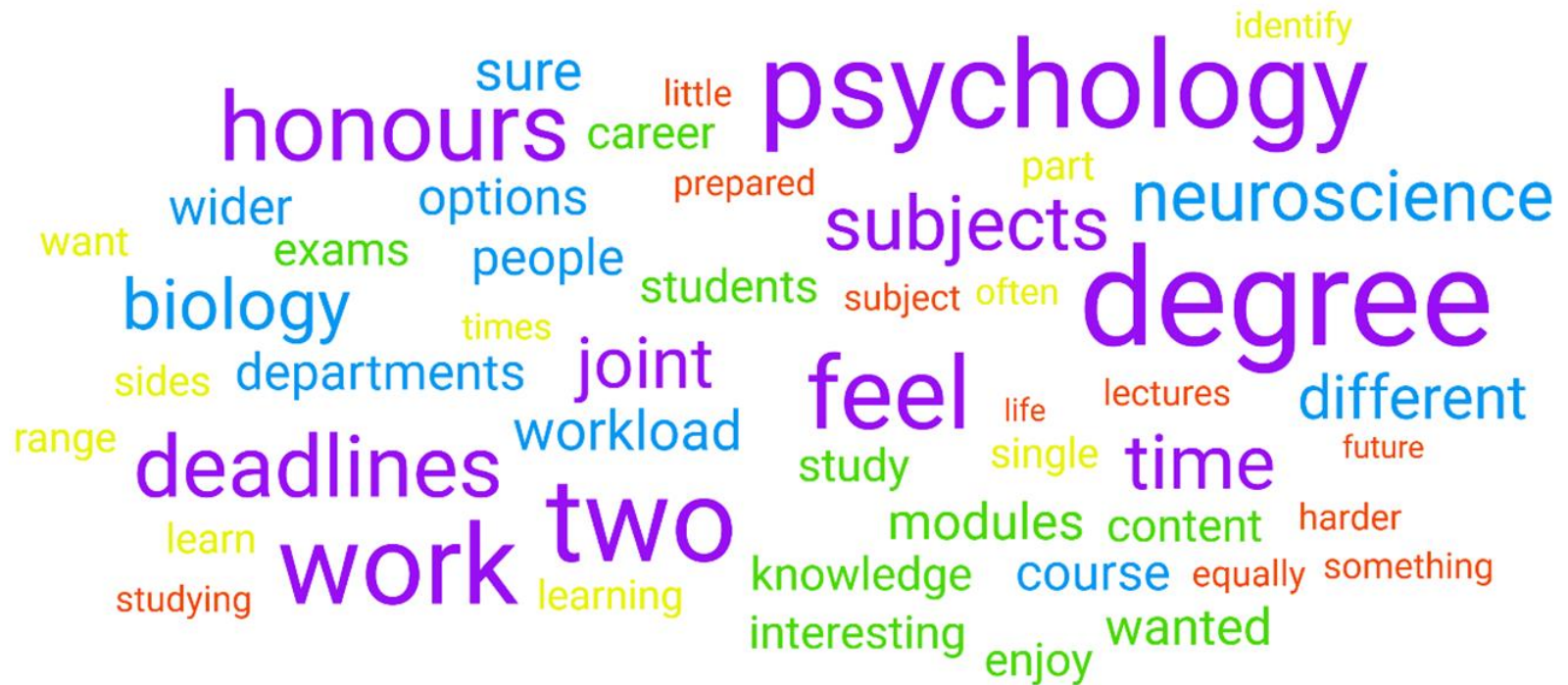
Thematic
Analysis of free-
text responses
(next slide)

Themes
informed by NSS
and TEF
including
teaching quality,
academic
support,
assessment and
feedback and
employability

Method

- 1. Why did you choose a joint honours degree?*
- 2. How do you identify yourself (i.e., with one department more than another or equally with both departments)?*
- 3. What are the advantages of studying a joint honours degree?*
- 4. What are the disadvantages of studying a joint honours degree?*
- 5. How could joint honours students be better supported?*
- 6. What advice would you give to someone considering a joint honours degree?*

Results



Theme 1

- *Transdisciplinarity*
 - **Positives** - broader/holistic knowledge, variety in assessment and teaching methods, greater career opportunities

"I could never decide between the two. For me I love biology and want to be a neuroscientist but I think that the most important thing is to use our knowledge to help others and without the psychology aspect applying that to people becomes lost." [#15]

"The magical combination of having two perspectives. I would never acquire this kind of knowledge having chosen one of the two degrees this course is combining. It challenges me on every step, but I do it because it fascinates me [#11]"

"Greater career opportunities following graduation, experience in learning how to be adaptable within different departments, a more comprehensive view of the subject." [#19]

Theme 1

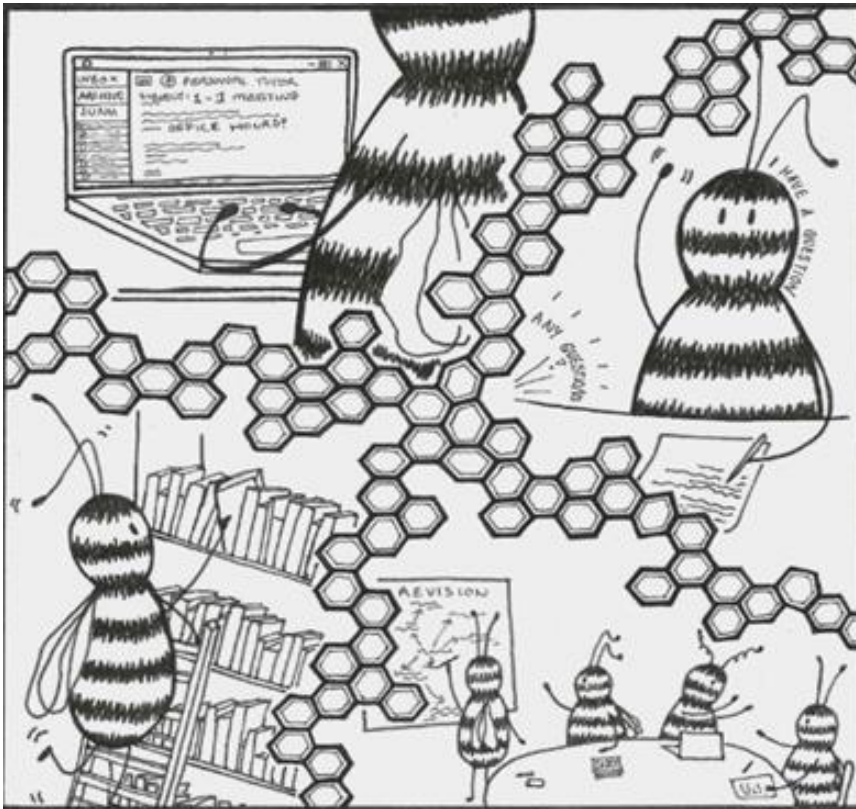
- *Transdisciplinarity*
 - **Negatives** – perceived higher workload, variety in assessment and teaching methods, “bunching” of assessments

“Because we are torn between two departments, the assessments for the courses tied to psychology and biosciences often are mismatched. There are times in the semester where they unfortunately come very close to each other. It also it difficult, there is no doubt about that.” [#11]

*“Can feel like I have more work/exams than my friends who are studying a single honours degree. Also, the fact that exams are marked differently for biology and psychology exams can be confusing.”
[#18]*

“Consider the increased workload, you have to be very organised to stay on top of work but the benefit of getting to study 2 subjects is worth it.” [#8]

'Bee proactive'



Bee Proactive Illustration by Joint Honours student, Jane Morrissey. Created as part of the 'Starting Conversations' project to help students with the transition to University.

Theme 2

- *Employability/careers*
 - **Positives** – keeping options open/having more options

“In order to allow for more possible employment avenues after completing the degree. I felt very anxious about making such a big decision about my future career so early on in life. I feel that doing a joint honours has enabled me to keep lots of options open whilst I decide and discover what exactly I want to do.” [#1]

“More career avenues possible, greater breadth of knowledge. I also strongly feel that the two programmes really compliment each other, giving me a more holistic view of the brain and behaviour as opposed to more biological centred/person centred. At the moment I hope to work in a clinical area so this holistic view will be really beneficial.” [#1]

Theme 3

"I identify myself mainly with the Neuroscience/Biosciences department slightly more than psychology. I feel as though the workload for the Neuroscience component is heavier, and therefore it is natural for me to associate myself with that side of the degree more. Psychology as a programme also has much more of a 'community' feel, and I do not feel as included in that as a joint honours student." [#1]

- *Student voice and sense of community*
 - **Negatives** – not feeling 'seen' in larger single honours cohorts, more recognition of joint honours

"Possibly more sessions with just our course to talk about things that only applies to joint honours courses." [#10]

"Recognition from both sides of the degree programme that we are undertaking a higher workload than others would be appreciated (even just to feel 'seen' and recognised)." [#1]

Discussion

- Choosing a joint honours degree is driven by a desire to mix neuroscience with a more applied discipline, such as psychology, and their **interconnectedness**
- Perceived advantages:
 - broader knowledge base and skill set for graduate opportunities
 - opportunity to experience a variety of teaching/assessment methods (develops adaptability)
- Perceived disadvantages:
 - higher workload

Recommendations

1. Support students to manage **workloads** by:
 - integrating and signposting assessment deadlines
 - provide extra workshops to highlight any differences in assessment and/or feedback
2. Create a sense of 'joint honours **community**' to foster a unique identity by:
 - increasing joint honours specific learning opportunities, events, workshops and outreach activities
 - more opportunity to voice joint honours-specific concerns through staff-student committees/surveys/PD



Recommendations cont...

4. Raise awareness of:
 - unique skill set provided by joint honours degree desirable for employers (i.e., through specific careers events)
5. Recognise achievements of joint honours students creating community cohesion by encouraging students to explore:
 - organising a society, writing newsletters
 - peer mentoring of other students
 - acting as student ambassadors for open days and being student representatives

Conclusion

- **Manchester 2035 Ideas Lab** – Focus on employability and skills in proposals around teaching and learning and the student experience, creating a sense of belonging for every member of our community.
- We would like to champion the development of joint honours degree programmes in UK HE to ensure we can ‘engineer the graduate of the future’, with the skills they need to meet the unexpected and diverse challenges the future will bring.

Thank you for listening.

Any questions?