
New Degree Helps Tackle Needs of Children with Autism

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The first Masters degree in Ireland aimed at addressing the needs of children with autism has been launched at the University of Ulster.

From September 2006 the University's School of Psychology at Coleraine will offer an MSc in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). The course is aimed at education and health professionals who are working with children and adults with autism. It will also benefit people working with learning disabilities, general behaviour management, parent training, community development, adult mental health or gerontology.

The new Masters programme was spearheaded by the community work of Dr Mickey Keenan, who set up the charity Parents' Education as Autism Therapists (PEAT). PEAT has been working alongside the School of Psychology to help plan the course. The charity has long been campaigning for autism intervention that is based upon sound scientific evidence. ABA is the only intervention and educational approach that has strong scientific evidence to support it. The course team, which includes Professor Julian Leslie, Dr Mickey Keenan, Dr Denis O'Hora, and Dr Robert Bones, have secured an International Development Grant from the Association of Behavior Analysis International in America to help fund the programme.

Professor Leslie, Course Director said: "Professionals will now be able to access accredited training in ABA which will give them the additional skills to make a real difference for children with autism. This is a real step forward for autism treatment here.

"The course is the only one of its kind in Ireland and it is intended that graduates will become Certified Behaviour Analysts. The content of the course has been approved by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board". Dr Tony Byrne, father of two children with autism and Chairperson of PEAT said: "Parents are delighted that the University is taking such a pro-active role in addressing the needs of children with autism in our community. At last professionals who want accredited training in ABA can access it in Northern Ireland. This is only the beginning and we hope to continue our work with the University to establish a research and treatment centre. The Masters degree is good news for families living with autism in Northern Ireland."

The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB), is a non-profit corporation established as a result of the identification of credentialing needs by behaviour analysts, agencies within several US state governments, and consumers of behaviour analysis services.

Its main purpose is to develop, promote, and implement a voluntary certification program for behaviour analyst practitioners. For a number of years, this program has held certification examinations in the USA and this has now been extended to the UK. It provides the only internationally

recognised certification for practitioners of applied behaviour analysis. The aim of BACB is to ensure that those applied behaviour analysts who practise in the community are sufficiently well qualified to do so.

For further information on the course contact Professor Julian Leslie on jc.leslie@ulster.ac.uk or Dr Mickey Keenan on m.keenan@ulster.ac.uk

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