

thinking outside the box

BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

This month, we speak with Dr Patapia Tzotzoli – a clinical psychologist with an entrepreneurial drive. We chatted about her various interests, what the web-based services she is developing can offer struggling university students, and the doors opened by training in psychology to a broad range of careers.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself: your background and your current work?

I am a clinical psychologist, chartered by the British Psychological Society and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. I'm currently working as a neuropsychologist at Queen's Hospital, Romford, as well as running two businesses. The first is a private practice, based across Bank and Harley Street, where I offer clients psychological therapy in person or via Skype. The second is iConcipro Ltd., a support provider for students based on web technology solutions. The variety and challenge of these three projects satisfy different urges, ambitions, and goals, - the need for this is a core aspect of my personality. I have a personal website (www.patapiatzotzoli.com) where you can find out lots more about my work, read my blog or get in touch.

What is iConcipro, and what does it offer students?

iConcipro is a spin-out company following an award I received in 2011 from King's College London's Graduate Business Plan Competition, called the "Lion's Den Challenge". Our service is an online system, called MePlusme, which addresses the psychological and educational needs of students in higher education. Using our system, students in a private space can explore their difficulties either by answering an interactive questionnaire, which helps identify the issues they are facing, or by going directly to a list of techniques where they can choose which are relevant to them. Either route leads to a tailor-made set of animated videos. These videos present well-established psychological and/or study skill techniques, the effectiveness of which has been demonstrated by extensive scientific research. Students can practice these techniques over time, using a rating system to monitor their progress. There is also a social network which allows students to connect anonymously with others to provide mutual support. With the financial support we received from the Technology Strategy Board (Smart Award) we carried out a proof of concept study in five universities across the UK. Data from almost a thousand students confirmed there is a need for support, and gave us the green light to strive for our next milestone: building the system and running a feasibility study.

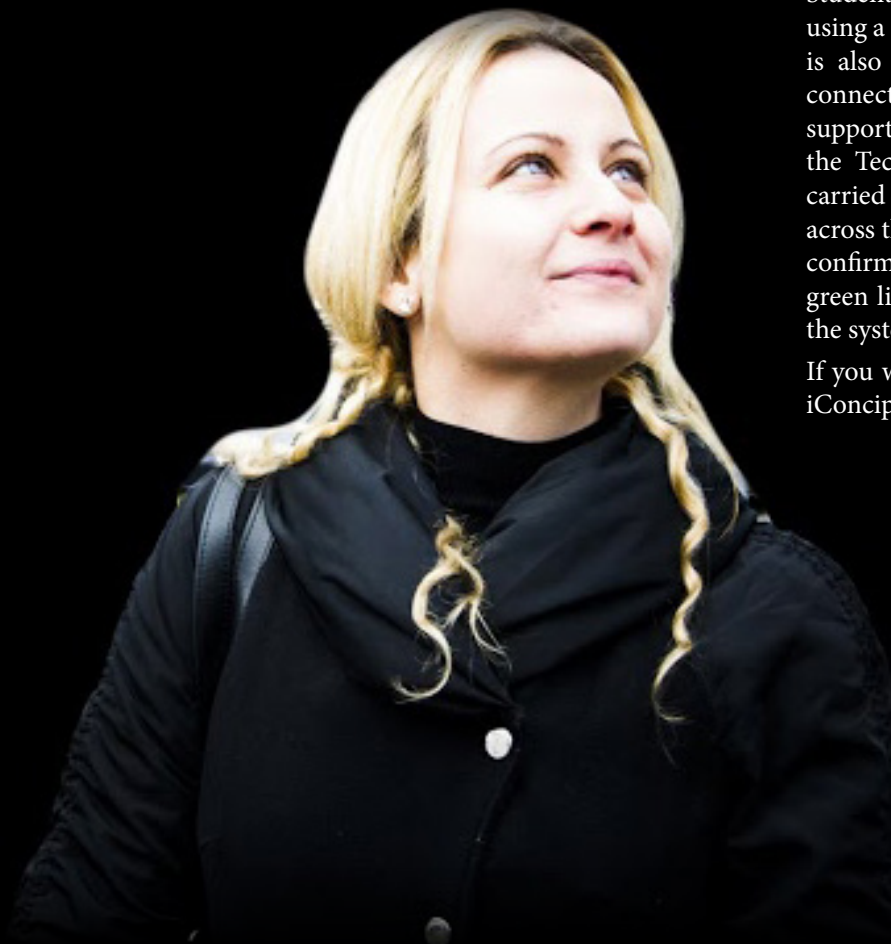
If you want to keep up to date with developments at iConcipro, you can sign up at our website:

www.iconcipro.com .

Want to find out more?

Anyone interested in finding out more, can always get in touch directly via email:

Patapia@iconcipro.com



What are some of the most common challenges faced by students today?

Entering university is a huge challenge in itself, as it marks one of the more important transitional phases in the life of a young individual. Overnight, a school pupil becomes a student, and the responsibilities reach completely new levels. And all this is taking place far from home, whilst one feels invisible among a crowd of other students.

For many young individuals, this new setting can be a good match, providing challenges and opportunities to develop. However, for others, it becomes the catalyst for difficulties to start emerging.

A large proportion of students experience psychological or study skill-related difficulties that keep them from achieving their true academic potential and enjoying the university experience to its fullest. On top of these, there are also those students experiencing diagnosable conditions. It is hardly surprising that a number of recent reports have documented the high prevalence of mental health problems amongst students.

At the same time, the obvious sources of formal support available to students, support services provided by their institution, are stretched due to increased demand and recent budget reductions. As a result, there is a higher risk of problems escalating and students dropping out (the figure for which recently rose to more than 22%), jeopardizing career prospects. Therefore, a more practical approach to delivering student support is imperative and urgently needed.

Why did you choose a website as the format for trying to address these problems?

Current technologies can revolutionize health service delivery. Our system is flexible, easy to use, interactive, and online. A website supports the system and animated videos are used to present the techniques, thus translating psychological and educational knowledge into a contemporary and more engaging format. For increased flexibility, the system is also accessible via smartphones and other mobile devices. The technology provides a platform, which facilitates privacy, immediate help, and increased self-efficacy by giving the control back to the students. It permits them to choose when to come in and out of the system, and learn how to improve their personal effectiveness, at their own pace. It also entrusts them to be responsible, and thus accountable, for their own wellbeing and academic competence, which encourages motivation to change and confidence. This acts as an empowering component, removing stigma and supporting self-help.

What psychological approach do you use and why is this appropriate?

iConcipro's system is built on current scientific knowledge and best practice, drawn from both the psychological and the educational fields.

The psychological techniques are derived from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which has a significant amount of scientific evidence supporting its effectiveness in addressing a range of emotional difficulties and associated behaviours. Students are offered techniques from different angles (e.g. cognitive or behavioural) to address the same problem, thereby allowing flexibility to adjust the intervention

according to learning style and preference. This ensures variety and maximum outreach. In addition, the videos seek to normalize student experience and hence engage them in using simple techniques to cope more effectively. The educational techniques aim to help students focus their efforts and develop successful study skills and strategies. The techniques consist of the most up-to-date practical skills, and have been extensively tested and shown to improve students' performance.

On top of these, the system's design also embeds 'hidden' psychological techniques (e.g. nudge theory techniques and motivational emails) to provide structure, enhance engagement, and ensure effectiveness. This intervention is a mosaic built on implicit and explicit state-of-the-art psychological techniques and practices.

What inspired you to do the work that you do?

People ask questions. Psychology gives answers. Emerson, an American essayist, lecturer, and poet defined success as the knowledge that someone breathed easier because someone else helped. I find in this idea an infinite strength to persevere and inspiration to keep creating. Psychology is not panacea but it has a high level of relevance to everything that involves people.

What are your plans for the future of iConcipro?

We are currently developing the system and we have ethics permission to run a feasibility study with UK universities that are already on board. We will then implement a soft launch of this service and prepare for an evaluation study whilst rolling out to the national and international market.

What advice can you give for someone who is thinking about setting up their own business?

Network as if it is your last day – everyday! (By the way, if you are good at this, get in touch with me!)

What opportunities are there for those with psychology training to use their skills in ways other than Clinical Psychology?

Infinite. Psychology is a multifaceted discipline. You can use its knowledge to help others, sell anything, make huge financial deals, raise children, be good at sports, enjoy life regardless what it brings your way...

Where does your entrepreneurial drive come from?

It must be an old defective Greek gene, resistant to systemisation and open to chaos! I suspect observing my father's course over time and, in particular, the sparkle in his eyes every time he was up to something – that must also have had a role in it.

What opportunities are there for people to get involved in the work you do?

At present, the focus is on the development of the system so experienced psychologists with clinical or educational backgrounds can participate in this process. We also have research projects in the pipeline so interested psychologists with research backgrounds can get involved too. This is a pioneering project and an innovative system with commercial prospects, so it is an amazing opportunity both for people interested in having their name involved with this work at these early stages, and also for those interested in opening up career prospects within a company.