



**THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND
CUMANN SíCEOLAITHE ÉIREANN**

**GUIDELINES ON THE ACCREDITATION OF COURSES LEADING TO A FIRST
QUALIFICATION IN PSYCHOLOGY**

Ratified by Council: November 2004

1. Rationale

- 1.1. Graduate Membership is a generic concept. If a qualification is to give the basis for Graduate Membership, it must equip graduates to undertake postgraduate work in any field of professional applied psychology (e.g., clinical, counselling, educational, health, occupational or forensic psychology) or psychological research, and thus have the breadth of the syllabus detailed below.
- 1.2. Because Graduate Membership implies eligibility to enter training in any field of professional applied psychology, a course which prepares graduates to enter only one such field cannot be accredited.

2. Criteria for accreditation of undergraduate degrees in psychology

- 2.1. Accreditation of degree courses is considered by the Undergraduate Accreditation Committee on behalf of the Society. However, final decisions on accreditation of courses are made by the Council of the Society once a report and recommendation have been received from the Undergraduate Accreditation Committee.
- 2.2. In order for a degree to be accredited, and thus confer eligibility for Graduate Membership, it must be demonstrated that:
 - (a) psychology has been a main subject (i.e., either the only one or one of two main subjects or, in the case of modular degrees, half or more of the course);
 - (b) there is clear evidence to satisfy the Council of the Society that psychology has not been merely a secondary subject that would normally be regarded as a minor, subsidiary or ancillary subject;

- (c) the course leading to the qualification must meet the requirements of standard and breadth of coverage (the breadth of coverage is defined below and is kept under review);
- (d) external examiners recognised as being psychologists and appropriately qualified are appointed for the course;
- (e) resources provided for the teaching of psychology are adequate at the time of accreditation and throughout the accreditation period. The institution responsible for the delivery of the psychology degree programme will be required to confirm the availability of adequate resources (e.g., budget allocation) on request by PSI at any time during the term of accreditation. Such requests will be formally made to the Head of the Psychology Department.

2.3. Course structure and psychology content

2.3.1. The study of psychology should be spread over at least three conventional academic years (i.e., 3-term or 2-semester years totalling about 24 weeks of tuition per year) in the case of undergraduate degrees; or at least two conventional academic years (i.e., 3-term or 2-semester years totalling a minimum of 24 weeks per year) in the case of postgraduate or conversion courses giving a first qualification in psychology; or an equivalent amount of time in respect of undergraduate degrees and postgraduate or conversion courses respectively.

2.3.2. The study of psychology should occupy at least 50% of the total study time in the case of undergraduate degrees, and at least 75% of the total study time in the case of postgraduate diplomas (i.e., conversion courses). Given the different norms that exist across different institutions, the Society does not set a minimum level for the *annual* proportion of coverage of psychology. However, it is expected that psychology constitute a mainstream discipline within the overall programme relative to the institution's standard treatment of subject areas.

2.4. Syllabus

2.4.1. The course should cover the following core components which are at the centre of the discipline:

(i) Biological Bases of Behaviour
(ii) Developmental and Lifespan Psychology
(iii) Social Psychology
(iv) Personality and Individual Differences
(v) Cognitive Psychology
(vi) Research Design, Quantitative and Qualitative Methods (including Practical Component)

The course should address ethical principles for psychological research and professional practice. The attention of students should be drawn to pertinent codes of professional practice.

To be accredited as giving eligibility for Graduate Membership, courses must cover Research Design, Quantitative and Qualitative Methods (category (vi)). In addition, all courses must contain at least introductory coverage of all other core areas (categories (i)-(v)). It is not necessary that post-introductory coverage of all six areas occurs, but a course is unlikely to be accredited if more than one of these areas is omitted.

- 2.4.2. The minimum requirement that five of the core areas be covered to Honours level or equivalent (together with instruction in research methods) leaves open the possibility that perhaps half of the remaining time spent studying psychology might be in other areas. When the specified requirements have been met, it would be desirable if this remaining time included modules or units that would familiarise the student with one or more of the following areas: the application of psychology (e.g., clinical, educational, organisational psychology etc.), the different perspectives in psychology (e.g., historical and cultural), and relevant skills (such as those involved in communication and interpersonal interaction). In exceptional cases where the minimum requirements have not been met in full (i.e., where fewer than the minimum of five areas have been studied) these other types of modules or units might be accepted as making up the shortfall, but they could not be accepted as compensating for an inadequate training in research skills.
- 2.4.3. It is not required that the coverage be comprehensive within an area, so long as the course provides a sufficient treatment of the relevant discipline in terms of content and perspectives. Thus, for example, the Biological Bases of Behaviour could include anything classifiable as “biological”, such as one or more of Neuropsychology, Physiological Psychology, Behaviour Analysis, Animal Behaviour, or other related areas; while Cognitive Psychology might include Perception, Memory Thinking and Artificial Intelligence, among other possibilities.
- 2.4.4. There should be a reasonable degree of breadth with exposure to a representative sample of theoretical points of view and methodologies within an area, as opposed to a focus entirely on one sub-discipline or one psychological concept.
- 2.4.5. A specific module or unit may not normally be “double-counted” (i.e., treated as representing more than one of the six specified areas). In order for a module or unit to be considered as representing more than one of the areas specified (e.g., Cognitive Neuropsychology might be claimed to represent both Cognitive Psychology and Biological Bases of Behaviour) it would need to be more substantial than a module or unit covering a single area (at least a pro rata increase on the size suggested would be required). No strict definition of what constitutes each of the six areas is attempted, and there is no requirement for courses to use the same nomenclature for the titles of the components. A broad interpretation is intended. The Society reserves the right to interpret and amend these criteria.
- 2.4.6. No strict definition of what constitutes “substantial coverage” of each of the six components is attempted, but as an example, it could be thought of as

approximately one-sixth of a normal academic year of study for a full-time student. When application is made for accreditation, Course Directors are asked to provide data on the number of hours devoted to tuition and to study in each area and at each level of the course.

2.5. Assessment

- 2.5.1. The award of the degree with Honours or equivalent should depend at least in part on the assessment of a range of core areas of the discipline at Honours standard, that is, well beyond the introductory level. Assessment of psychology components of the degree must contribute at least 50% of the elements determining the final award. Normally, at least a pass grade must be obtained in all core areas that contribute to the final award, and in the final-year project. There must be evidence of academic and intellectual progression within a course.
- 2.5.2. An essential component of any course being considered for accreditation is the assessment of practical work covering research, design and analysis. It is expected that this will be demonstrated by successful completion of an independent research project in the final year of study. This will normally involve the collection and analysis of empirical data, and must lead to the completion of a dissertation, assessment of which contributes to the Honours degree classification. Prior to the project, the course must include other forms of assessed undergraduate practical work. In all cases, teaching and learning opportunities must be provided throughout the course to ensure that all students have direct experience of empirical work. Qualitative as well as quantitative methods should be studied. These must include the generation and testing of hypotheses and research questions, manipulation of psychological variables, exploration or thematic analysis of psychological data, experimental design, non-experimental designs, observational or interview methods, and statistical analysis of data.

2.6. Resources

- 2.6.1. There must be adequate resources available to students on the course in the form of staffing, space and equipment, technical support, and learning resources.
- 2.6.2. The most important resource is the academic staff team who deliver the course. It is essential that at least 80% of the staff team are qualified in psychology to doctorate level or equivalent, and/or have an established research or scholarly publication record in psychology attesting to their having made a significant contribution to the discipline. (It is, of course, highly desirable that 100% of the team are so qualified.)
- 2.6.3. There should be a number of staff in this team who have both initial degree-level and postgraduate qualifications in psychology and are eligible for Registered membership of the Society. It is expected that most of these staff be research active, because this will enhance the quality of the student experience. Because of the range of areas which are central to the discipline

(see 2.4.1, above), it is required that there be at least five appropriately qualified staff (or full-time equivalent). It is required that the ratio of academic staff: to full-time equivalent student be no higher than 1:20. While some teaching can be provided by qualified staff on a part-time or sessional basis, it is undesirable that more than a fraction (e.g., one-third) of the teaching be provided on this basis where the total staffing complement is small (e.g., less than 9.0 full-time equivalent). These requirements are in place to ensure that students on an accredited course have sufficient access to well-qualified teachers to enable them to study a range of areas of psychology at Honours level or equivalent and complete an undergraduate project in one of a range of areas of psychology.

- 2.6.4. There must be sufficient space assigned to the course to enable practical activities typical of the science base of a psychology degree to be undertaken. There should be access to a range of types of equipment to support these practical activities, including those that form the basis of final-year projects. This space and equipment should normally be additional to computers and other information technology which is available for the wider purposes of document preparation, electronic resource access, etc. It is highly desirable that the programme be delivered by staff based in one department, and from one site.
- 2.6.5. Technical support should be available from staff with appropriate qualifications to assist with all aspects of practical work. At least one dedicated technical staff member is required. For larger departments, a minimum of two such staff is required. It is acknowledged that technical support practices vary across institutions: if such resources are to be shared, the full-time equivalent number of technical staff should meet the above requirements, and a statement must be provided explaining how technical support is provided to psychology and how the requirement for appropriate qualification to assist with all aspects of psychology practical work is met.
- 2.6.6. Administrative/secretarial support should be available from at least one administrative staff member. For larger departments, a minimum of two such staff is required. It is acknowledged that administrative work practices vary across institutions: if such resources are to be shared, the full-time equivalent number of support staff should meet the above requirements, and a statement must be provided explaining how administrative support is provided to psychology.
- 2.6.7. Learning resources (books, academic psychology journals, electronic media) should be available to support all levels and areas of study within an Honours degree or equivalent in psychology. It is recognised that much of this may occur through access to electronic journals but a substantial proportion of learning resources available should be actual (e.g., psychology books or hard copies of journals in a library) rather than virtual or potential. Whatever the medium, it is important that students at Honours level or equivalent have access to journal articles in which original research reports are presented, as well as to secondary sources (e.g., textbooks). An adequate collection for a small programme would be expected to contain a minimum of 2,000

psychology textbooks and 30 psychology journal subscriptions (including archives of back issues).

- 2.6.8. If the course is primarily delivered through distance learning, the providers of the course must demonstrate that all issues under headings 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6 are dealt with to ensure that the experience of a distance learning student is equivalent to that of a student taking a course delivered in a particular location.
- 2.6.9. External examiners should be appointed to review the examination of the students on the degree course. They should report on the competence with which the course is taught and assessed, and should compare the attainments of students on the course with those on other Honours degrees or equivalent in psychology. Normally, there should be two external examiners for a large course, drawn from a university or other recognised institution of higher education where psychology is taught, and each should be a Registered Psychologist or hold an equivalent qualification.

3. Requirements for Graduate Membership

- 3.1. To be eligible for Graduate Membership of The Psychological Society of Ireland, a person must hold a first qualification (i.e., a degree or an appropriate postgraduate diploma) awarded at second class honours level or above in psychology following the successful completion of a course that has been accredited by the Society, or which has been awarded by a recognised institution of higher education and which meets the requirements set out in Section 2 above.

A full list of accredited courses is available on request from the PSI office.

4. Accreditation

- 4.1. Accreditation will be subject to an assessment conducted by a panel approved by Council, or on its behalf by the Undergraduate Accreditation Committee. A decision to award accreditation will be based on a conclusion that the course completely complies with these guidelines. Substantial but incomplete compliance may lead to a reduced period of accreditation; an award of provisional accreditation for a limited time, the renewal of which will be dependent on the adherence to a list of recommendations; or an award of conditional accreditation that will come into force after adherence to a list of recommendations is confirmed. Anything less than substantial compliance will be insufficient for accreditation to be awarded.
- 4.2. Accreditation can be awarded for a maximum period of five years. During a period for which accreditation has been awarded, it is open to the Society to conduct an interim paper-based review/reviews of the course to satisfy itself that all accreditation criteria continue to be met. Failure to meet all criteria may result in the withdrawal of accreditation.

Accreditation Checklist

The following checklist will be used to record a course's compliance with accreditation guidelines, for the purposes of an accreditation assessment.

Factor	Section	Degree of compliance
Psychology is a main subject	2.2.	
Three academic years for degree, or two for postgraduate diploma	2.3.1.	
Psychology at least 50% of study time for a degree, or 75% for a postgraduate diploma	2.3.2.	
Course covers five of the following areas, including (vi): (i) Biological Bases of Behaviour (ii) Developmental and Lifespan Psychology (iii) Social Psychology (iv) Personality and Individual Differences (v) Cognitive Psychology (vi) Research Design, Quantitative and Qualitative Methods (including Practical Component)	2.4.1.	
Psychology at least 50% of assessment of assessment for final award	2.5.1.	
Evidence of academic progression throughout the course	2.5.1.	
Practical work	2.5.2.	
Appropriate independent research project in final year	2.5.2.	
At least 80% of staff team appropriately qualified in psychology	2.6.2.	
Some staff eligible for Registered membership	2.6.3.	
Staff research active	2.6.3.	
At least 5 academic staff	2.6.3.	
Maximum staff-student ratio of 1:20	2.6.3.	
At least two thirds of course delivered by full-time staff	2.6.3.	
Adequate quality and quantity of space provided for psychology practical work	2.6.4.	
Programme located in one site	2.6.4.	
At least one appropriately qualified dedicated technical support staff member for small	2.6.5.	

programmes, two for larger programmes		
At least one administrative/secretarial support staff member for small programmes, two for larger programmes	2.6.6.	
Minimum library facilities of 2,000 psychology textbooks, 30 psychology journal subscriptions, and high quality electronic resources	2.6.7.	
At least one appropriately qualified external examiner for small programmes, two for larger programmes	2.6.9.	