The Psychological Society of Ireland

Cumann Síceolaithe Éireann

The Psychological Society of Ireland

Guidelines on the Accreditation of Undergraduate and Conversion Programmes

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Introduction

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) is the learned and professional body for the profession of psychology in Ireland. The Society has grown significantly since its foundation in 1970 and now has over 3000 members. PSI aims to promote excellent psychological practice by setting high standards of professional education and conduct for the profession.

The primary aim for which the Society was established, as stated in the Society's Memorandum of Association, is to 'advance psychology as a pure and applied science in Ireland and elsewhere'. To further this aim the Society advocates, establishes and maintains high standards of professional training for members of the Society and the profession. Furthermore the Society seeks to establish and monitor standards of ethical behaviour, competence and practice within the profession.

What is accreditation?

Accreditation is both a status and a process. As a status, accreditation provides public notification that an institution or course meets standards of quality set by PSI. As a quality assurance process, accreditation involves education providers working in partnership with the PSI to ensure that programmes not only meet agreed minimum acceptable standards but to promote best practice and continuously seek ways in which to enhance the quality of psychology education and training. The accreditation process involves both self-evaluation and external peer review.

The PSI, as the professional body representing psychology in Ireland, acts as the accrediting body for undergraduate and postgraduate education and training in psychology in Ireland.

Accreditation of programmes that lead to a first qualification in psychology allow for graduates of those programmes to gain Graduate Membership of the PSI. Graduate Membership is defined as being for those who have graduated from a PSI Accredited Psychology Undergraduate course with a Second Class Honours or above, or from a PSI Accredited Psychology Conversion course with an overall pass mark of 50 percent.

Accreditation of programmes 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.

Statutory Registration

The Health and Social Care Professionals Act was passed into law in 2005. Under this Act, Psychologists, along with eleven other professions, will be regulated. The Society welcomes this development.

The purpose of statutory registration is to protect the public. In order to do so a Registration Board will be established to register psychologists working in Ireland. It is anticipated that in future the evaluation of training for psychologists will come under the remit of the Psychologist's Registration Board. The Society will urge the Board to adhere to current

standards for accreditation of psychology courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. To ensure that standards are maintained for future education and training courses, the Society will continue to offer accreditation of psychology courses in third level institutions.

Accreditation Requirements

The sections below set out the accreditation requirements for the accreditation of Undergraduate and conversion programmes that give a first qualification in psychology. The requirements detailed are intended to be interpreted and applied flexibly, such that programmes may develop distinctive identities and provision that makes the most of particular staff strengths, or strengths that are reflected in the strategic priorities of their department/school/unit or institution. Throughout the process the information sought, and questions asked by reviewers, will be designed to give education providers every opportunity to confirm the ways in which they meet accreditation requirements. The accreditation requirements include six areas: programme design; programme content; ethics and ethical practice; programme delivery; resources and facilities; and quality assurance and enhancement.

1. Programme design

The design of the programme must ensure that successful achievement of the required learning outcomes is marked by the conferment of an award at the appropriate academic level.

1.1. Psychology is the main subject
    1.1.1. Psychology is the 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).

    1.1.2. There is clear evidence to satisfy reviewers that psychology has not been merely a secondary subject that would normally be regarded as a minor, subsidiary or ancillary subject.

1.2. Credits and award level
    To be eligible for accreditation:
    1.2.1. Undergraduate programmes must comprise a minimum of 180 ECTS credits, at least 50 percent of which must comprise psychology content, and be at level eight on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

    1.2.2. Conversion programmes must comprise a minimum of 60 ECTS credits, at least 75 percent of which must comprise psychology content, and be at level eight or nine on the NFQ.

1.3. Duration of studies
    1.3.1. Minimum and maximum periods of study for programmes leading to a first qualification in psychology are not mandated. Full-time undergraduate programmes are typically delivered over at least three years. Full-time conversion programmes are typically delivered over at least one year. However, programmes seeking accreditation may propose longer or shorter durations of study where

these are appropriate for the specific design of that programme, for example with regard to the study mode of the programme. It is expected that individual education providers will have in place regulations governing the maximum permissible period of time that may elapse from initial enrolment to completion, regardless of individual circumstances, to ensure the currency of their knowledge, their competence, and the award conferred upon them.

1.3.2. Given the different norms that exist across different institutions, a minimum level for the annual proportion of coverage of psychology is not mandated. However, it is expected that psychology constitutes a mainstream discipline within the overall programme relative to the institution's standard treatment of subject areas.

1.4. Learning design

1.4.1. Education providers must be able to document intended programme and module learning outcomes. These must include learning outcomes that reflect the specific programme content requirements outlined in the programme content section.

1.4.2. Education providers must be able to document the intended programme and module learning outcomes, and the ways in which these are mapped on to the programme content and assessments, showing constructive alignment.

1.4.3. Education providers must have in place a teaching and learning strategy that ensures adequate breadth and depth of coverage of the core curriculum areas outlined in the programme content section, in a form that is appropriate for the programme's mode of study. The teaching and learning strategy for blended and online provision must be explicitly designed for those study modes recognising, for example, that teaching and learning may be asynchronous, and that blended/online learners (as well as providers) should be empowered to track and check learning, progress and achievement.

It is necessary to demonstrate that the distinctive demands that blended or online learning will make on infrastructure and systems, which differ from full-time face-to-face contexts, have been taken into account on blended/online programmes. (For example: IT facilities, etc.)

Programmes may provide broad coverage of core areas at introductory or foundation level. Where this is the case, progression and depth of knowledge must be provided at post-introductory level. It is not necessary that post-introductory coverage of all six areas (as outlined I Section 2.3 below) occurs, but a course is unlikely to be accredited if more than one of these areas is omitted. 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.

Reviewers will explore the rationale for coverage of individual core component areas only where an area is represented very narrowly, or where a major topic (as listed below) is missing.

1.4.4. Students are entitled to expect a learning experience which meets their needs, and which is underpinned by competent, research-informed teaching, and a supportive

and enabling learning environment, as appropriate to the programme's mode of study.

1.5. Assessment design

    1.5.1. A programme-focused assessment strategy must be in place that maps clearly on to programme and module learning outcomes, incorporates a wide range of formative and summative assessments, and which reflects students' development of knowledge, skills and competencies as they progress through their studies, as appropriate to the mode of study. Assessment strategies adopted in blended or online learning must be explicitly designed for the blended/online learning context

    1.5.2. Stated learning outcomes and their assessment must be appropriate for both the related National Awards Standards for the NFQ level of the programme and the core content requirements described in the programme content section. Each of the core content areas specified in the programme content section must be assessed at the appropriate level, but need not be assessed separately (with the exception of the independent research project).

    1.5.3. Assessment of psychology components must contribute at least 50% of the elements determining a student's final award.

    1.5.4. Education providers must include a statement in their programme handbook(s) advising students that, in order to be eligible for PSI Graduate Membership, they must pass the independent research psychology project, and gain at least a Lower Second Class Honours degree, or its equivalent (i.e. an overall pass mark of at least 50 per cent for conversion programmes).

    1.5.5. Assessment rules, regulations and other criteria should be published in a full and accessible form and made freely available to students, staff and external examiners.

    1.5.6. Assessment practices should be fair, valid, reliable and appropriate to the NFQ level of the award being offered. Assessment should be undertaken only by appropriately qualified staff, who have been adequately trained and briefed, and given regular opportunities to enhance their expertise as assessors, as appropriate to the programme's mode of study.

    1.5.7. Education providers should have in place policies and procedures to deal thoroughly, fairly and expeditiously with problems which arise in the assessment of students. These should include the grounds for student appeals against assessment outcomes, and the process that students should follow if they wish to pursue an appeal.

    1.5.8. Education providers should ensure that detailed and up to date records on student progress and achievement are kept. Throughout a programme of study, students should receive prompt feedback about their performance in relation to assessment criteria so that they can appropriately direct their subsequent learning activities.

    1.5.9. Education providers should have assessment strategies in place that are inclusive and anticipate the diverse needs and abilities of students.

1.5.10. Where reasonable adjustments need to be made for students with disabilities. These should apply to the process of assessment, and not to the learning outcomes being assessed.

2. Programme content

The programme must reflect contemporary learning, research and practice in psychology.

2.1. Education providers are free to structure their programme content in any academically coherent format, which could range from delivering core content areas within distinct, dedicated modules, or embedding coverage across a number of modules. The Society encourages programmes to deliver core content across modules within an integrated curriculum that offers an appropriate pedagogical development of students' knowledge, understanding, and skills.

2.2. The content of a programme must be appropriate to the NFQ level of the programme (level 8 or 9) with regard to the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies. The delivery of content must be appropriate for the programme's mode of study. The quality of developed learning resources plays a distinctive and critical role in blended/online provision and reviewers will specifically examine such resources for blended/online programmes.

2.3. A programme must cover the following core curriculum components which are at the centre of the discipline. It is not required that the coverage of these core curriculum components be comprehensive within an area, so long as there is a sufficient treatment of the relevant area in terms of content and perspectives. There is no requirement for courses to use the same nomenclature for the titles of the components. A broad interpretation is intended:

2.3.1. Biological psychology
e.g. biological bases of human and non-human animal behaviour, hormones and behaviour, behavioural genetics, neuroscience, typical and atypical neuropsychology, comparative and evolutionary psychology.

2.3.2. Developmental psychology
e.g. typical and atypical development across the lifespan including childhood, adolescence and ageing, attachment, social relations, cognitive and language development and cultural development.

2.3.3. Social psychology
e.g. social cognition, attribution, attitudes, group processes and intergroup relations, culture, close relationships, social constructionism, self and identity, and leadership.

2.3.4. Individual differences
e.g. personality, psychometrics, intelligence, cognitive style, emotion, motivation, mood, positive psychology, physical and mental health (including social, biological and cognitive processes), and diversity.

2.3.5. Cognitive psychology
e.g. attention, perception, learning, memory, thinking, problem solving, decision making, metacognition, language, consciousness and cognitive neuropsychology.

2.3.6. Research Methods
Research methods are integral to psychology and students must obtain a sound knowledge of, and a proven ability to use, a range of methods appropriately, including both quantitative and qualitative methods. Knowledge and understanding of how to obtain and analyse evidence is best acquired and demonstrated through extensive and progressive empirical work in laboratory and naturalistic settings through all stages of a programme, i.e. at introductory and post-introductory levels. In all cases, appropriate teaching and learning opportunities must be provided throughout the programme to ensure that all students have direct experience of empirical work.

As they progress through the programme, students should be able to:
- apply multiple perspectives to psychological issues, recognising that psychology involves a range of research methods, theories, evidence and applications;
- integrate ideas and findings across the multiple perspectives in psychology and recognise distinctive psychological approaches to relevant issues;
- identify and evaluate patterns in behaviour, psychological functioning and experience;
- generate and explore hypotheses and research questions drawing on relevant theory and research;
- carry out empirical work involving a variety of methods of data collection;
- analyse, present and evaluate quantitative and qualitative data and evaluate research findings;
- employ evidence-based reasoning and examine practical, theoretical and ethical issues associated with the range of methodologies;
- use a variety of psychological tools, including specialist software, laboratory resources, and psychometric instruments;
- apply psychological knowledge ethically and safely to real world problems; and
- critically evaluate psychological theory and research.

2.3.7. Empirical project
It is expected that a student's development of knowledge, skills, and competencies in research methods and empirical work will be demonstrated by successful completion of an empirical project at an advanced level/stage of the programme, for example in the final year of study (or a piece of work which delivers the same learning outcomes of equal quality). This will normally involve the collection and analysis of original empirical data, or equivalent alternatives such as computational modelling of empirical data or secondary data analysis, such as a meta-analysis.

The empirical practical component must lead to the completion of a psychology project or dissertation, assessment of which contributes to the degree classification. The project must be passed and cannot be compensated for. The empirical psychology project will include carrying out an extensive piece of empirical research that requires them individually to demonstrate a range of research skills including planning, considering and resolving ethical issues, analysis and dissemination of findings. Students may undertake their empirical projects as part of a project or laboratory group, provided they are still required to demonstrate requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies individually.

3. Ethics and ethical practice

The programme must evaluate students' understanding of working ethically and within the requirements and bounds of relevant legislation.

3.1.   Ethics and ethical practice are of particular importance to psychologists, and to the Society as the professional body for psychology and psychological practitioners. Students and trainees on accredited programmes need to be able to: identify the presence of an ethical issue (ethical sensitivity); formulate the ethically ideal course of action by identifying the relevant ethical issues and using these principles to consider appropriate actions (ethical reasoning); decide what they wish and intend to do (ethical motivation); and execute and implement what they intend to do (ethical implementation). They also need to develop commitment to the ethical principles of respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity – as appropriate to their level of study.

3.2.   Programmes must include teaching on ethics, as well as the Society's Code of Professional Ethics.

3.3.   Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that all research undertaken by students that involves human (and animal) participants is conducted in line with the Society's Code of Professional Ethics, including explicit mechanisms for identifying and dealing with ethical or professional misconduct.

3.4.   Programmes must ensure that students are taught and assessed on ethics beyond the submission of ethics applications for research projects.

3.5.   Programmes should familiarise students with the distinct role of the Society as the professional body for psychology and the legislative and regulatory requirements that apply to research and psychological practice in the Republic of Ireland. Avenues to membership of the Psychological Society of Ireland, including student membership, should be clearly communicated to students using the recommended procedure for ethical decision making.

4. Programme delivery

The education provider must have appropriate human resources in place to support the effective delivery of the programme, including appointing an appropriately qualified and experienced chair, director, or co-ordinator.

4.1. Staffing strategy:

    4.1.1. Education providers must be able to outline a clear strategy in relation to the leadership and co-ordination of the programme. The Programme Chair/Director must operate with a level of autonomy that enables them to effectively oversee the programme's governance and delivery.

    4.1.2. Providers need to demonstrate that their overall staffing strategy supports the long-term sustainability of programme provision, is cognisant of the varying requirements of different study modes, has the capacity to continue to meet the Society's accreditation standards on an ongoing basis, and supports principles of inclusivity.

    4.1.3. In the interests of providing a positive and coherent student experience, education providers must ensure that students have clear guidance on arrangements for liaising with staff. Programme staff should demonstrably be part of a cohesive organisational unit. For example, the Society would normally expect, for campus-based programmes, that the core programme delivery team to be ideally located predominantly in one department or on one site, or, for distance/online programmes with distributed staff that clear organisational and communication structures are in place to facilitate such organisational cohesion.

    4.1.4. Programmes must have in place sufficient appropriately qualified staff in order to be able to provide a learning experience that meets students' needs, and which is underpinned by competent, research-informed teaching, as appropriate to the mode of study. The staff team as a whole needs to be able to deliver (i.e. teach and assess) across the required programme content (see the programme content section) at the appropriate level, and supervise students' empirical psychology projects.

4.2. Qualifications of Programme Chair/Director and staff:

    4.2.1. Programme Chair/Director

- The Programme Chair/Director holds overall administrative and academic responsibility for ensuring that the programme meets the Society's standards, and for maintaining the accreditation of the programme. The Programme Chair/Director must have the programme as his/her major commitment, and be free to devote sufficient time to ensure its effective and efficient running.
- The Programme Chair/Director must have knowledge and experience of the delivery of accredited undergraduate psychology and/or conversion programmes, with appropriate academic and management skills, and must make a significant contribution to the programme.
- Where appropriate, Programme Chair/Directors may be supported in aspects of their role by colleagues with complementary skills and experience to their own. Education providers may wish to consider the roles that other programme team members may take in relation to the leadership and co-

ordination of the programme as part of their staff development strategy, particularly in connection with longer-term succession planning or to support the development of leadership potential.
- In the interests of the longer-term sustainable delivery of the programme, providers should have contingency plans in place to ensure that an appropriately qualified and experienced individual has been identified who could deputise for the Programme Chair/Director should the need arise (e.g. sickness absence, parental leave, sabbatical).

4.2.2. Programme staff:
- All psychology staff contributing to the delivery of accredited programmes will hold, as a minimum, a graduate qualification in psychology and / or a demonstrable track record in research or other scholarly activity of relevance to psychology. Education providers must assure themselves that everyone involved in teaching or supporting student learning is appropriately qualified, supported and developed. This includes: appropriate and current practitioner knowledge (where appropriate) and an understanding of the subject they teach and of the disciplinary scholarship appropriate to the academic level of the students they are teaching; and the necessary skills and experience to facilitate learning in the students they are interacting with, and to use approaches grounded in sound learning and teaching scholarship and practice. It should be demonstrated that staff supporting blended or online learners have previous experience of blended/online provision or have been provided with appropriate induction and training for that study mode.
- The empirical project in psychology must be supervised, taught and examined by psychologists or suitably qualified graduates. The Society considers individuals suitably qualified to supervise the empirical project if they hold, as a minimum, a graduate qualification in psychology and/or a demonstrable track record of research or other scholarly activity of relevance to psychology. Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), or equivalent, may not carry sole responsibility for project supervision.

4.3. Staff student ratio:
4.3.1. Education providers should provide a calculation of their current staff student ratio (SSR) in the evidence they submit in support of an application for accreditation, or in advance of a partnership visit. Undergraduate and conversion programmes must operate a minimum staff student ratio of 1:20, based on FTEs and taking into account staff member other time commitments.

4.3.2. Given minimum staffing requirements, and the range of tasks that programme staff must undertake in order to deliver a quality student experience, programmes with small cohort sizes will require an enhanced SSR.

4.4. Staffing Levels:
4.4.1. There are key roles and functions that the Society considers are essential to the effective and efficient delivery of an accredited programme. Programmes must therefore have sufficient staff with enough time allocated to carry out the range of tasks that are associated with: teaching; developing learning resources (if applicable); organising, co-ordinating and monitoring placements (if appropriate);

training and supporting supervisors or other assessors; research supervision; marking; providing personal support to students; supporting their professional development; and liaising with employers, visiting speakers, and other external stakeholders.

4.4.2. All programmes must pay particular attention to ensuring that staffing levels are such that students receive research supervision at a level consistent with the programme's aims and that research supervision loads for staff are appropriate to enable them to provide adequate supervision at the required level.

4.4.3. Where staff have other duties (e.g. other teaching or practice commitments) these must be taken into account in setting staffing levels and must be such that they do not interfere with the execution of the major responsibility of programme delivery. They must also be reflected appropriately in any SSR return.

4.4.4. As a minimum:
- There must be at least five members of academic staff who, together, are able to carry out the range of tasks associated with programme delivery, including delivery across the core component curriculum (see the programme content section).
- There must be at least one member of staff who is employed full-time on the programme.
- There must be a minimum of 3 FTE staff in total, although providers should be aware that programmes with small cohort sizes are likely to require an enhanced SSR
- The contribution of Graduate Teaching Assistants (or equivalent) and hourly paid staff should not normally be more than 30 percent of the total staff FTE.

4.5. Professional services support staff
4.5.1. Programmes must have access to sufficient dedicated administrative, technical or other learning support staff to support their effective delivery, as appropriate to the programme's study mode. Programme delivery should be supported by the following:
- There should be at least 1 FTE administrative and secretarial staff.
- There should be at least 1 FTE technical/computing staff, who need to be able to support students' experimental and practical work as well as providing any more general technical support.
- For larger provision (greater than around 400 FTE students), additional resources are expected.

4.5.2. The education provider must be able to demonstrate that the support that is provided is sufficient to meet the needs of the provision in question. It is acknowledged that professional services support staff practices vary across institutions and are different for different modes of study. Where shared or distributed arrangements for support staff are in place, the education provider must demonstrate their equivalence to the minimum standards outlined above. There should be a planned approach to the appointment of (or access to) specialist staff to support blended or online learning, e.g., specialist staff with academic, technical or professional expertise in the pedagogy/assessment appropriate to blended/online learning and in educational technology.

4.6. Staff professional development

    4.6.1. Staff are entitled to expect an institutional culture which values and rewards professionalism and scholarship, and which provides access to development opportunities which assist them in their support for student learning. Institutions should support initial and continuing professional development for all staff.

    4.6.2. All core members of programme teams are expected to undertake continuing professional development that is necessary to their role within the programme, and, where appropriate, relevant to their professional practice. It is expected that this would include undertaking relevant research, knowledge transfer and other scholarly activity, and/or attendance at relevant conferences. Opportunities for development should be available to all staff who are engaged in, or are supporting, teaching, research and scholarship.

    4.6.3. Education providers must have a training and mentoring strategy in place to support early-career staff to undertake core roles, including teaching, supervision and assessment of students' work.

5. Resources and facilities

The education provider must have appropriate discipline-specific resources in place to support the effective delivery of the psychology programme(s) they offer.

5.1. The education provider must be able to outline the discipline-specific and general resources and facilities that are in place to support student learning. Education providers must offer students access to learning resources that are appropriate to the range of theoretical and practical work in which they are engaged. Resources will normally include teaching, tutorial, and laboratory space (online and/or physical), learning resources (such as texts and journals, available in hard copy and/or electronically), computing facilities, psychological testing materials, specialist equipment, and software supporting psychological research (data collection and analysis), and other information technology and/or audiovisual facilities (e.g. to enable the recording of practice role plays and competency assessment tasks), as appropriate to the provision and mode of delivery in question.

    5.1.1. To ensure the quality of provision, education providers must have in place adequate and dedicated online and/or physical laboratory resources, facilities, and equipment appropriate to their mode of delivery. This will include facilities to enable students to carry out experimental and other appropriate practical work in a range of core curriculum areas, and must include facilities for teaching practical skills to small and large groups, in addition to supporting individual students' empirical work.

    5.1.2. The Society would normally expect the learning resources provided to include a minimum of 2000 textbooks, an adequate number of which have been published within the last five years; this figure may also include multiple copies of or licences for key texts. Students should also have access to a minimum of 50 current full-text

electronic and / or printed subscriptions reflecting balanced coverage across the core curriculum. This should include both current and backdated issues.

5.2. Education providers should ensure that students are advised of the discipline-specific and general learning resources to which they have access, and are provided with the necessary support and / or training to enable them to make appropriate use of these.

6. Quality assurance and enhancement

The education provider's quality management systems must make regular provision for the periodic review of the validity and relevance of the programme, such that it continues to reflect our standards, and meets the needs of the programme's stakeholders.

6.1. The quality management mechanisms that are in place should provide for periodic review of the programme's aims and intended learning outcomes and content, the strategies associated with programme delivery, and the assessment methods that are used to evaluate students' achievement of the learning outcomes. Overall, they should ensure that the programme continues to reflect contemporary learning, research, and practice in psychology.

6.2. Programmes will appoint appropriate External Examiners whose expertise will be of relevance to the breadth and depth of provision being offered. They will ensure that External Examiners are provided with adequate information to support their role, and that systems are in place to monitor action that is taken in response to any issues raised. External examiners will 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 equivalent psychology programmes.

6.3. A minimum of one appropriately qualified External Examiner should be appointed for a small programme and two for a large programme, or where more than one programme is offered, with expertise that covers the breadth of the programme(s) (and therefore the work that they will be expected to examine).