



Scottish Higher Education  
Funding Council

*Report of a Quality Assessment*

*in*

*Psychology*

*at the*

*University of St Andrews*

## **Introduction**

1. Assessment of the educational provision in Psychology at the University of St Andrews was carried out by a team of 5 assessors, including an Industrial Assessor. The visit to the University was from 25-27 November 1997. Provision in this cognate area was the responsibility of the School of Psychology. It offered a BSc and an MA honours degree (Single honours psychology), BSc and MA joint honours degree programs, and BSc honours degrees in Neuroscience, and in Behavioural Biology. The assessment was based on the Institution's own self-assessment of its provision submitted up to June, 1997, on the scrutiny of other documentation that was made available to the assessors, and on the observation of facilities, teaching sessions and student work, and on discussion with students, School lecturing, technical and administrative staff, staff with specific responsibilities at institutional levels, and other appropriate senior institutional staff.

## **Curriculum**

2. The University had a clear mission statement, and aimed to attract high quality students and provide them with a quality curriculum delivered by active researchers teaching at favourable staff-student ratios (SSR). The school mission exemplified this approach, and the ethos translated to all levels of the psychology curricula.
3. There was an awareness of the need to address the issue of wider access at the institutional level, but this was not yet widely developed. The emphasis within the school was on setting high standards of entry and of progression to honours. The primary responsibility for students who did not progress to honours was at the faculty level. Assessors also found little clear evidence of planned support in the school for certain students who might need additional help, such as mature and non-standard entry students. However, such students were, at the time of the assessment, very small in number. Although there were developing procedures for applicants with non-standard qualifications, there appeared to be no proactive procedures for their induction and support at the school level at the time of the visit.
4. The curricula had been approved by the British Psychological Society for graduate membership and for the graduate basis of registration. Courses were aimed at giving a thorough grounding in scientific psychology, up to research standard, rather than having a vocational orientation, and assessors found this aim to be realised. Options for course choice were limited, but the range of material covered by the courses was broad, and there was coverage of all of the major areas of psychology. The development of the material over the four years showed well thought out and systematic progression. The curricula were up to date, and at the honours levels included much that was state of the art.
5. The curriculum design was essentially and successfully aimed at imparting an appreciation of Psychology as a pure science rather than as an applications subject. There was no clear evidence that any other systematic consideration

of the needs of society and the economy had been directly made in the design of the curriculum.

6. There was a high standard of transferable skill acquisition, which was progressive over the years of study. In particular, the methodology strand enabled a clear progression of analytic, design, and statistical skills to a high level, and was very well documented, with substantial handbooks. This strand had a specific co-ordinator dedicated to it. The progression of both practical work requirements and essay work fostered good communication skills, and teaching observation revealed a capacity for oral presentation in the students observed.

## **Environment and Resources**

7. The School had a core site which was a conversion of the old University library, and which provided first class accommodation. Space pressures resulted in the main from the provision of Level 2 laboratory space within this building. Space was excellently managed. Teaching and research space were in close proximity and student space was provided at the very hub of the building, and assessors discerned a very positive intellectual atmosphere. Students social space brought them into steady contact with staff. Assessors noted that wheelchair access was technically possible, but only through the use of a service lift.
8. The teaching laboratories were well-equipped, with audio-visual and computer facilities, but there was a need for more space for Level 2 provision. There was evidence that this issue was being systematically tackled, and possible solutions had already been arrived at, through the use of the old library hall in the school. There were specialist laboratories available for research, and a developmental study facility associated with a nursery, and these facilities were also used for teaching purposes, providing first rate support at the honours level. Importantly, these facilities offer a clear practical link between teaching and research.
9. The University was found to support the School's very favourable SSR and very stringent entrance and progression criteria, which provided the basis for a first-rate provision to capable students. This resulted in controlled numbers of highly selected honours students, with extremely good staff resources. There was a good balance in terms of age and experience amongst the academic staff. The range of academic staff expertise was very wide, and covered the major areas of psychology. The appointment pattern of the last few years reflected a concern with good curricular coverage, while at the same time there was no compromise of the quality of research. All academic staff were active researchers, the publication rate was high, and they were equally committed to teaching to a high standard. The School had an impressive complement of demonstrators and technicians. All were clearly well-trained, knowledgeable about the discipline, and enthusiastic about their role within it.

10. Library support was exemplary. There were substantial holdings of major and specialist journals and books, and the library provided a first-rate support system for the provision of multiple copies of core papers for Psychology courses in accordance with copyright restrictions. There was also a first rate video library within the school.
11. Physical IT provision was fair, and assessors found some of the equipment in the computer laboratories to be dated, although there was a definite expectation of early replacement. Assessors found the use of Computer Aided Learning to be very limited. At Levels 1 and 2, introductions to the use of IT were possible through advertised optional courses run centrally. However, there was no evidence that students on psychology courses made use of these facilities, and no evidence that uptake was monitored.

## **Teaching and Assessment**

12. Courses were organised and managed through a defined group of year co-ordinators and through a methodology co-ordinator. The whole was monitored by a Teaching Committee (now a Teaching and Assessment Committee).
13. The range of teaching methods, particularly at the higher levels of the course was broad, including lectures, seminars, tutorials, and practical work, and projects. The methodology courses were particularly well-supported by documentation, and made an extremely good, progressive package. The variety of teaching methods used at earlier levels was not very broad, especially at Level 1.
14. Teaching was of a generally high quality, with much material at honours level reflecting staff knowledge of leading-edge research. Teaching was clear and well-prepared and courses were supported by good documentation.
15. Assessment schemes were clear and explicit. Useful formative assessment was provided, for instance through Level 2 optional essays. Summative assessment relied predominantly but not completely on unseen examinations. It was not clear that the appropriateness of this strategy had been the subject of review. Standards were made explicit in course and module documentation, and significant use was made of standardised marking schemes. Double marking was used as routine for marking carried out by probationer lecturers.
16. Assessors observed a lack of awareness of appeal mechanisms in students and in some staff, and found that there was no information on appeals procedures in the course year handbooks.

## **Student Guidance and Support**

17. Needs were well met through several clear support structures within the University and the school, and students could readily identify people they could turn to for advice of all kinds. The assessors thought advisers of studies took great care with all categories of student, and considered the Welfare Group to be dynamic and proactive.
18. There was evidence of impressive academic and intellectual support within the school, and students spoke well of the level of interest which staff showed for their well-being. Students recognised that progression to honours in psychology required very high standards but felt that they received support, and they accepted the high level of competition to enter honours.
19. There was a good University Careers Office and there was evidence that students from Psychology made use of their facilities. However, there was no apparent evidence of systematic career advice from staff at the School level, it being considered more appropriate that the student Psychology Society organise talks by professionals.

## **Outcomes and Quality Control**

20. There was an impressive commitment to excellence evident in all categories of academic and support staff, and a very positive attitude on the part of the students. Honours students in particular felt that they were part of a good intellectual environment.
21. Students produced a range of work consonant with the overall aims and objectives of the school. The student work sampled was of good quality, and in some instances truly impressive. There was evidence that some of the level 4 project work was of a publishable nature, and that, indeed, it was sometimes published. There was clear evidence of in-depth learning, particularly at the honours levels.
22. Monitoring systems existed in the Department, and there was an annual cycle of review. The review took into account feedback from students, and the comments and recommendations of the external examiners. The monitoring procedures were documented and clear.
23. University level quality monitoring procedures were clear, and provided a means of checking on the effectiveness of the school's performance, and of the efficacy of its procedures. Quality standards were thus regularly and effectively monitored at all levels. It was not clear how destination statistics were used to inform curricular structure, but the high incidence of honours students going on to further university courses and research indicates that the stated goals of the course are broadly successful.

## Conclusion

24. Particular strengths were considered to be:
- the exemplary commitment to academic excellence at all levels, manifest in the students as well as the staff
  - the extremely high quality of the staff complement in terms of research expertise, and the match of the staff to the curriculum
  - a strategy of addressing the breadth of interests and expertise amongst the staff without compromising research strength
  - the high quality of the working environment, and in particular the use of space to facilitate the interaction of staff with each other and with students
  - good library stock, and the high level of support offered to School staff by the library. Also an excellent video library
  - a progressive and carefully managed methodology strand
  - probationer lecturer's marking was routinely second-marked.
25. Areas where improvements could be made were:
- the introduction of students to IT at Levels 1 and 2 by the school and by IT services
  - poor facilities for wheelchair users in the School main building
  - lack of support for students who may need additional help with study skills, such as mature and non-standard entry students
  - communication of appeals procedures to the students.
26. Overall, the quality of educational provision in Psychology at the University of St Andrews was judged to be **EXCELLENT**.