

A stranglehold on the development

IN 1967 rebellious heads of department met at Brown's Hotel in Mayfair, to protest against the Society's move towards a national curriculum. The Society wanted to specify not only a curriculum but also the teaching time allocated to every element in it. The heads argued that university departments should maintain their autonomy and decide themselves what and how much they should teach. They believed the bureaucratic tail was seeking to wag the academic dog. But they lost the battle. For many years the Society has accredited the psychology degree and has awarded GBR (the graduate basis for registration) to approved degrees.

As the teaching of psychology spread from a handful of old universities to the whole higher education system, heads have found Society accreditation a useful political tool. They have used the threat of withdrawal of accreditation by the Society as a means of securing enhanced facilities for their undergraduate programmes. But my argument is that whatever the advantages of the past, the benefits of GBR are no longer as clear as they were.

Not only are the benefits questionable, but GBR has done a great deal of harm. The national curriculum has restricted innovation and inhibited creative approaches to psychology. And worse than this, the Society has actually failed to protect resource allocation to psychology, depressing the amount of income per student and available to support teaching, and thus lowering academic standards. I will argue that other bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) are doing what the Society should have done, but more effectively and more openly.

The graduate basis for registration

The Society tells applicants for psychology degrees to ensure the degree has GBR. Otherwise, with a non-accredited degree, they will not be able to enter postgraduate professional training. The legitimate aim of GBR years ago, when the Society began



*At his Distinguished Contributions to the Teaching of Psychology Award Lecture **TONY GALE** argued that the Society's accreditation of the psychology degree has hindered the growth of the discipline.*

accrediting undergraduate degrees, was to exert central control on standards and to demonstrate the rigour of the discipline. By taking the degree this seriously the Society wanted to ensure an enhanced reputation for psychology and to confirm its respectability and scientific status. And so, over the years, the notion emerged of GBR as a gold standard for the degree.

Nowadays the Society's Graduate Qualifications Accreditation Committee (GQAC) vets applications for the recognition of degrees. The way psychology is taught in the UK is based on the Qualifying Examination (QE), as the QE curriculum is a yardstick against which applications are evaluated. It sets out seven key areas of psychology, and in the QE regulations each major topic within each area specifies a recommended body of knowledge. Candidates for the exam sit five examination papers, and while some compensation for failure is allowed, they must pass the paper concerned with experimental design and statistics. Of the seven key areas a degree course must cover at least five.

This modest degree of flexibility is the reason the Society has called the QE 'a yardstick and not a template'. But the Society insists that the graduate's final assessment must include tests of their knowledge of the key areas. This creates an enormous headache for people responsible both for teaching timetables and for examinations, since the Society's requirements often conflict with a university's policies on assessment.

An accredited degree must also be taught by a full set of qualified staff with a broad range of psychological know-how, must be supported by adequate laboratory

resources and technical and clerical staff, and must require students to conduct an individual psychological research project. The external examiner for the degree must be a psychologist of sufficient standing. These requirements have been very helpful for heads of department in securing appropriate resources from their universities.

If you have your GBR-approved psychology degree you do not sit the QE. Candidates for the QE are typically graduates of other disciplines who wish to transfer to psychology. More recently, many QE candidates have a non-accredited degree in psychology, because with the rapid expansion of the discipline their

of psychology?

university recruited them before it had secured GBR from the Society. By passing the examination they demonstrate the minimum standard of third class honours and are thus eligible to apply for professional training.

But apart from sitting written examinations, candidates for the QE have to produce a portfolio of practical work, which makes rigorous demands. They must submit independent research, use a variety of research methods, demonstrate competence in the application of statistics, and draw upon several substantive areas of psychology. In spite of the fact that GBR is essentially based on the QE, the GQAC does not insist on such a strict requirement for accredited degrees.

Well intended but lethal?

So the QE has three purposes: as a gold standard, as a qualifying examination, and thus as a source of income for the Society. There is a board of examiners made up of distinguished psychological scientists,

representing key areas of the discipline. They take their work very seriously and ensure the examination is rigorous and assessed in a manner consistent with good psychometric standards. But while GQAC has succeeded in several ways, it has failed in others.

The student:staff ratio in psychology has gradually crept up to over 20:1, hardly an appropriate staffing requirement for a programme that includes extensive practical work and small group teaching. The Society is a weakling when it comes to putting its foot down over resources. If it presses too hard, refuses GBR, and the university in its turn refuses to provide adequate laboratories and staffing, the confrontation could end with the university shutting down the course. GQAC is terrified at the thought of putting psychologists out of work. The university could decide that offering psychology just isn't worth the cost. So, rather than bite, the GQAC has barked, and the unit of resource has been progressively depressed.

But if psychology is a science it should surely be funded at the level of a science? Why should biology have more staff, more capital resources, and a higher annual budget? The GQAC has stopped short of setting out minimum requirements for laboratories. The notion of adequate laboratory resources has been interpreted in a particularly liberal way.

Heads of department have been complicit in this trend, particularly as psychology has become more and more popular. Universities have used the income allocated to them for burgeoning psychology courses to support other disciplines, such as engineering and languages, for which demand has waned. They have embezzled cash meant for psychology teaching.

Noticing this siphoning of money, the funding council threatened to reduce the unit of resource from laboratory to classroom teaching level. They argued that since universities were spending the cash on other disciplines, it clearly wasn't needed for psychology, which could be

taught on the cheap and without the accoutrements of science. The marginal cost of mere bums on seats in a lecture theatre is tiny. This threat was a clear indication that GQAC had failed to maintain appropriate levels of resources, one of its key perceived benefits.

So both the GQAC and the heads of department failed for several years to support the quality and standards of the psychology degree. It is also questionable whether it is right and proper for the Society to charge fees for the QE and make graduates of other disciplines produce a portfolio that has greater depth and breadth than the practical work typically produced by students on GBR-accredited courses. It is doubtful whether graduates from accredited degrees could pass the requirements of the QE practical portfolio. Many departments have lacked the resources to support independent student practical work, using a variety of research methods. Such a lack of even-handedness is contrary to the Society's stated support for equality of opportunity.

And there is a major problem with the QE. The examiners for the QE have complained that the performance of candidates is weak. Many candidates fail the practical portfolio requirement. Performance in the written examinations hardly ever achieves a class 2:1 standard. Even candidates who have achieved a class 2:1 in their non-accredited degree typically fail to achieve a similar standard in the QE. Each year the examiners wring their hands in despair and question the purpose of the examination. One has to ask whether a third class pass is sufficient as an entry qualification for professional training.

Do other people do it better? At the same time changes elsewhere in the higher education system must make us ask whether the GQAC and the Society's accreditation role are any longer necessary. The QAA subject reviews involved actual visits to departments, meetings with students, inspection of their work, scrutiny

of the curricula vitae of staff, observation of teaching sessions, auditing of laboratory facilities and support staff, evaluation of the curriculum, teaching and assessment, and procedures for quality assurance and quality enhancement. The GQAC has until recently depended on paper exercises and has rarely sought to verify the validity of departments' claims or to evaluate the actual experience of students. Instead it has huge piles of paper to plough through at each meeting at enormous cost both to the Society and the time of committee members. But the main criticism is that even its feeble bark is worse than its bite.

Departments now pay the Society an annual fee, which represents about one tenth of the annual income for a single student, for occasional GQAC visits to courses. This nugatory fee could not possibly ensure the degree of thoroughness expected of subject review. Because the cost of good-quality visits far exceeds the income heads are willing to pay the Society, we members are subsidising a scheme that supports jobs for psychologists by accrediting their departments, whether they are Society members or not, and whether or not they encourage students to join the Society. Imagine the cost to the Society of full-scale QAA-type visits.

At the same time the QAA has conducted a national benchmarking process so that psychology and other disciplines will be assessed against a set of requirements that specify what skills, analytic powers and learning outcomes are expected of the degree. Benchmarking will drive the future evaluation of courses.

Apart from subject review of individual disciplines, the QAA has been auditing the procedures in individual universities designed to protect quality and standards. While the methodology of audit has constantly changed and is at present entering a new phase, the continuing aim has been to determine whether the university has sufficient evidence to have confidence in the quality and standards of its awards. So the university context in which the psychology degree is taught is subject to stringent audit. The QAA protects the interests of students, their parents and the tax-paying public.

Confidentiality: The English disease?

While subject review and QAA audit lead to reports which are public documents, the Society keeps its deliberations confidential. Even the reports of the Society's postgraduate training committees, which

scrutinise postgraduate professional training courses, are confidential. You can't go into the Society's website and read about the Society's judgements on a particular course.

Is it cynical to suggest that the Society is protecting the jobs of psychologists, rather than protecting the public by ensuring high professional standards? Is the Society acting as a trade union, operating restrictive practice, or as a scientific and professional body that sees the protection of clients as a key obligation?

What is accreditation for?

Why accredit the psychology degree at all? Other disciplines do have external accreditation but they typically confer a right to practise on the graduate. So it is right for engineers, doctors, nurses and occupational therapists, among others to

'The Qualifying Examination is inflexible and has put a straitjacket on the degree'

have the stamp of accreditation of professional public bodies on their degree certificate. In contrast the Society has explicitly supported the view that the three-year degree (or four years in Scotland) does not prepare the graduate for practice. The Society has promoted the distinction between pure and academic psychology on the one hand (the degree) and applied professional psychology on the other. A degree in psychology does not allow you to practise psychology.

The pure/applied distinction is probably fallacious. It is not true that practice must follow science. Major psychological contributions like psychometrics arose out of social need (how best to educate slow learners) and were stimulated by national crisis (the testing of some two million military recruits in the First World War). Intelligence testing was not based on theory and experimentation on the nature of intelligence. And we might question whether students get a better perspective on the discipline by reading about laboratory-based work, or by focusing on social and applied problems, which for many are more intrinsically motivating. Compare a UK student's experience of psychology with that of a graduate from Germany or The Netherlands. There, students meet with clients and implement real interventions.

The QE and the pure/applied distinction have distorted the discipline and the

undergraduate degree. To satisfy GQAC curriculum requirements departments have to create a programme that has little room, except in the final year, for much choice or innovation. The QE is inflexible and has put a straitjacket on the degree. As a result critics of the typical psychology curriculum have accused it of being over-academic, unquestioningly positivistic, eurocentric, phallogocentric, ageist, about observing and not listening, and detached from everyday experience.

Do we really need GBR?

And what is all this for? Is this price worth paying? GBR may confer a qualification but it is one that can be enjoyed by only some 5 per cent of graduates, given that entry to professional training is so restricted. Is the Society, in protecting GBR, committing misrepresentation and misleading thousands of students each year, since in reality so few can go beyond the first degree?

When the typical age of entry to clinical psychology is 27 can we expect entrants to remember what they studied six years before and anyway – won't psychology have moved on since they graduated? And do professional trainers really trust all 100 or so departments with GBR-accredited degrees to have prepared their trainees adequately?

Bureaucracies persist in their obsessional behaviours long after they have any real purpose, and GBR and the GQAC are a good illustration of dysfunctional behaviour. If undergraduate accreditation were to end we could release psychology departments from the GBR straitjacket and allow teachers to determine the curriculum, enabling them also to implement an educational programme that best exploited the intrinsic interests of students. The discipline could be creative: it could experiment, explore, flourish.

A new entry to training

What would postgraduate professional training courses do? Could they do something better than depend on the undergraduate accreditation processes of the Society that offer such a modest guarantee of quality and standards? Instead of GBR for undergraduate level we could have a postgraduate entrance examination, designed by both academics and professional trainers and based on a functional analysis of what knowledge, skills and experience are required for entry to professional training.

It could be state of the art. Candidates

would not depend on a qualification taken some years before, where the knowledge they once had is out of date. They could take the examination when they considered they were ready for entry to professional training. It could produce a transcript that would tell selectors about the strengths and areas for improvement of each candidate. Candidates would know, if they are unsuccessful in securing a training place, what they need to do to improve their chances.

If trainers are seeking candidates with appropriate life experiences, such as those gained now by psychology assistants prior to entry to clinical training, then the examination could include appropriate assessments of what the candidate had learned in practical contexts and their ability at applying theory, formulating problems and possible solutions.

The psychology degree in the UK has moved towards the North American model, where the first degree confers relatively little credit and a master's level qualification is essential. Psychology departments could offer a course that prepares candidates for the new

postgraduate entrance examination, but that should not prove necessary if the post-degree curriculum were clearly specified. At the same time, without the constraints of GBR, departments could be released to teach a more innovative and challenging curriculum for their undergraduate degrees.

Some have argued that current professional training is over-specialised and that generic training would be more appropriate as a first stage, prior to professional specialisation. The abandonment of GBR and the development of a new, postgraduate qualification might assist in the process of moving towards the training of psychologists as general problem solvers first, before they opt for a particular set of human problems. But that is a topic for another, non-provocative, essay.

What about the Society itself? What could it do if it abandoned GBR? It could stop being protectionist and precious and allow membership to anyone who shows a genuine interest in psychology. There would still be chartering, Divisional membership and all the professional trappings, but we could return to the

early days when you didn't need to be a psychologist to be good at asking psychological questions. For example, those teachers of 40,000 A-level psychology candidates (who in spite of teaching psychology cannot currently gain access to Society membership without a struggle) could become members, thus giving the Society more than a passing interest in A-level. The hypocrisy of the QE could be jettisoned.

GBR: Good Bloody Riddance! So GBR should go. The Society has failed to protect standards. Other mechanisms are now in place to protect the psychology degree. The Society should devote its accreditation resources to ensuring that professional training courses are up to scratch, demonstrating its commitment to protect the public. Other, more effective bodies are there to protect the quality and standards of the first degree.

■ *Tony Gale is a past Honorary General Secretary and President of the Society. For some years he was Chief Examiner and Registrar for the Qualifying Examination.*

Call for Nominations

President 2004/5

Nominations are required for the election of the person who will be the President of the Society in 2004/5. The person, who will be elected by the Members at the Annual General Meeting of the Society during the Annual Conference 2003, will serve as President Elect for the year 2003/4 and become President in 2004/5, finally serving as Vice President in 2005/6.

The Board of Directors has drafted descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the honorary posts, and has outlined the requirements and the time commitment demanded for the post of President over the three years.

A nomination pack, which includes the role descriptions and a standard nomination form, is available from Barry Brooking, Chief Executive of the Society. The pack also gives details of the nomination process approved by Council.

NOMINATIONS

Nominations should reach the Society's office not later than 1 October 2002. To ensure validity of nomination you should use the standard nomination form, which gives details of the information and signatories required.

VOTING

The Office will, if contested, be decided by postal ballot, immediately prior to the Annual General Meeting 2003. Voting Papers will be sent out during February and will be returned to Electoral Reform (Ballot Services) Ltd, which will administer the count and announce the results to the President before the meeting.

Election will be by proportional representation on the basis of a single transferable vote if there are more than two candidates.