

# Attitudes of optometrists towards their profession

Chris N French and Don F C Loran

Part four (continued from September 30)

## Mid-career training

Over half of qualified ophthalmic opticians reported that they had taken part in mid-career training (refresher courses etc) in the last five years (see Table 2). Seventy per cent intended to take part in mid-career training in the next five years and virtually the same proportion felt that such training should be mandatory as in the United States of America. There was no evidence that the respondents' sex or length of professional experience was a factor in their attitude, but 79 per cent of students thought that mid-career training should be mandatory although this figure is within sampling range of the figure for qualified OOs.

It is clear that the profession harbours a very positive attitude towards continuing education, a feeling undiminished amongst those who have been most recently trained. It is hoped that the teaching institutions have the will and resources to respond to this, encouraged by the BCOO.

## The professional bodies

Despite significant evidence of variation in male attitudes towards the GOC and BCOO with experience, the order of satisfaction with their work remained virtually unchanged (see Fig. 14). The Association of Optical Prac-

tioners came out top, followed by the British College of Ophthalmic Opticians and then the General Optical Council. The average attitude towards the GOC appeared neutral, expressing neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. Female attitudes were similar. This pattern of findings is to be expected and appears to reflect the differing roles of the three bodies with regard to the profession's members.

The spread of opinion is made more explicit by the histograms at the top of

Table 2

## Behaviour, intention and attitude towards Mid-Career Training

52 per cent have taken part in MCT in the last five years  
70 per cent intended to take part in MCT in the next five years  
71 per cent feel that MCT should be mandatory as in the USA

*The above proportions are estimates of GOC Register opinions as responses have been weighted according to each respondent's age and sex to correct the bias in our sample. Amongst the students, 79 per cent felt that MCT should be mandatory, but on a chi-square test this proportion does not differ from that for qualified ophthalmic*

Figure 13, and these also permit a direct comparison with attitudes towards selection, training and examination procedures.

## Concern about professional developments

Members of our sample were asked how concerned they were about certain professional developments pertaining to monopolies and advertising. (This was before publication of the recent

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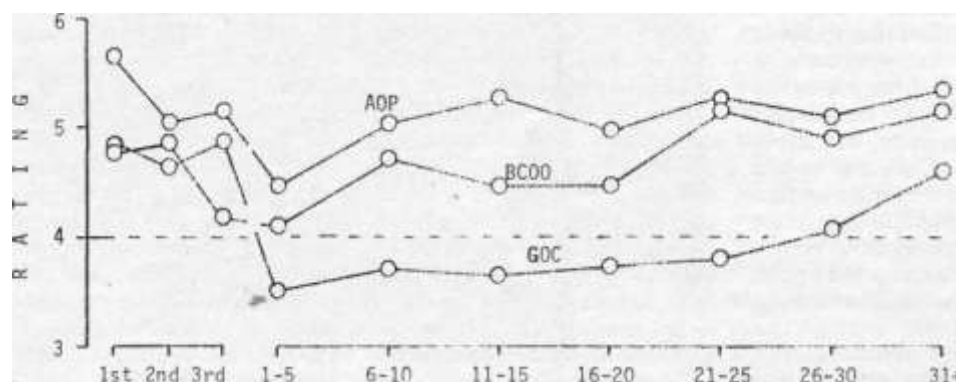


Figure 14. — Satisfaction with the work of three optical bodies and length of experience. These graphs show the average male attitudes towards three bodies. A rating of 1 indicates 'very dissatisfied' and 7—'very satisfied'. Analysis of variance revealed no change in male attitudes towards the AOP, but there were significant shifts in attitude with length of experience towards the College and GOC

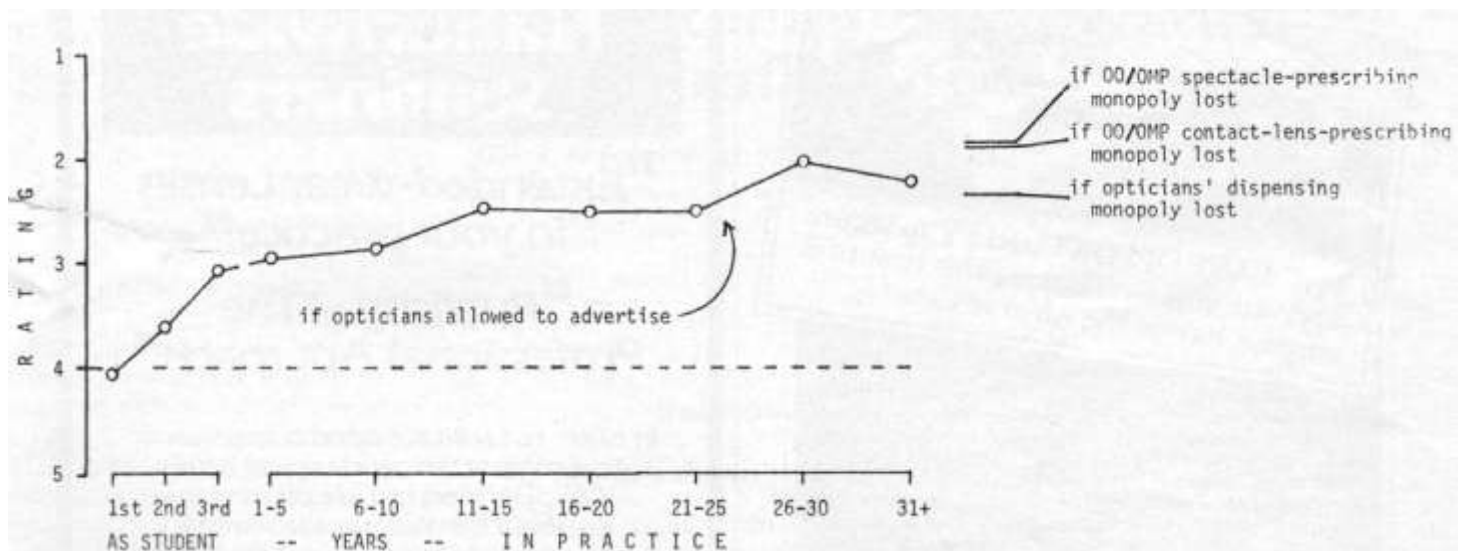


Figure 15— Concern about possible professional developments and length of experience. The questionnaire asked 'If the following monopolies were lost or rules abolished how concerned would you be?' A rating of 1 indicated 'very concerned' and 7 'very unconcerned'. For three hypothetical developments the amount of concern expressed by men was independent of experience according to an analysis of variance, and the average response is shown on the right. However, there was a significant attitude change towards allowing opticians to advertise and the graph for this is shown

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Office of Fair Trading report.) A high level of concern was expressed for all four possible developments (see Fig. 15). It was interesting to see a very definite change in attitude with experience. First year students who had just begun to study optics were on average neither concerned nor unconcerned about the possibility of advertising being allowed, but there was a fairly rapid and then apparently continuing increase in concern with the amount of professional experience. It would seem clear that the change over the first few years at least represents a change taking place within the students as they acquire the attitudes of their professional peer group, but we have less confidence in the small residual change amongst the registered OOs. A separate analysis on the registered male optometrists suggests that even this change could be ascribed to sampling ( $F=1.8$ , d.f.= 6,373, ns). Thus even here we fail to find firm evidence of differences in attitude between young and old. There were no significant differences amongst male and female student opinions.

### Media coverage and publicity

The average OO was quite definite in his attitude towards media coverage, considering that in recent years it had

been unfair (see Fig. 16) with the registered OOs expressing their feelings more strongly than the students. Despite this there was a small tendency to put the blame for adverse publicity at the door of the profession itself,

although this trend was less apparent amongst female students.

There was some sign of depression amongst the registered optometrists and this reached a peak amongst those qualified for between 6 and 10 years.

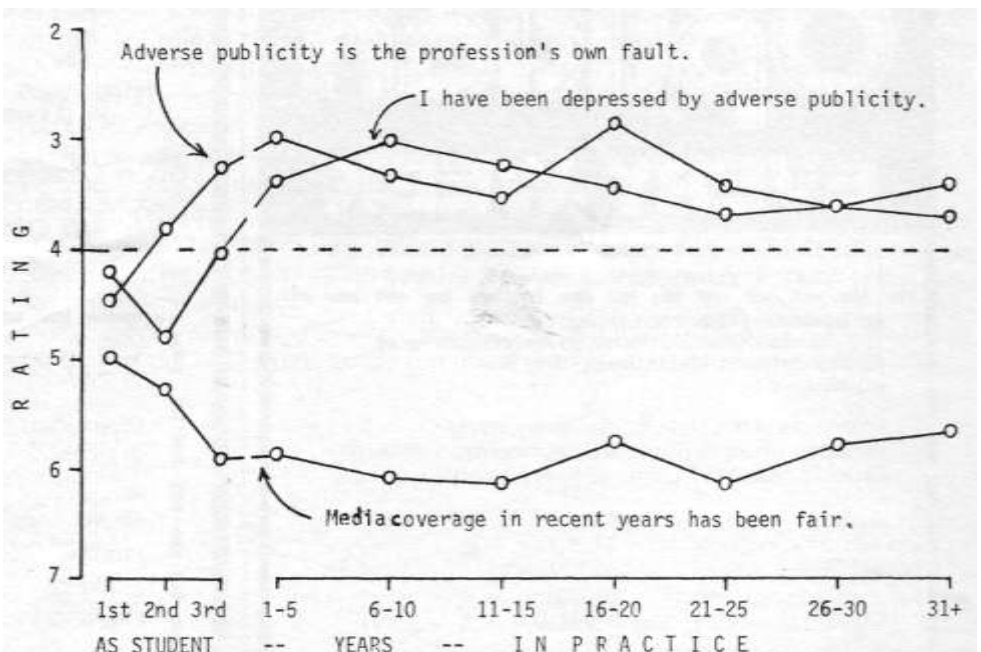


Figure 16—Attitudes towards media coverage and publicity, and length of experience. The question was posed as follows. 'Here are a few statements. Using the 7-point scale please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with them/ 'Strongly agree' was represented by a rating of 1 and 'strongly disagree' by 7. The graphs show how the attitudes expressed by male OOs varied as a function of their experience, analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant change for each

### Charging methods by ophthalmic opticians

We only examined two methods of charging by OOs. The questionnaire made two statements and the respondents' attitudes to these were solicited. The student attitude towards 'a straight mark-up' was on average neutral but this was replaced by a vigorous opposition amongst the qualified OOs (see Fig. 17). Similarly, a mild positive response to 'fee plus materials' was replaced by a stronger positive response. There was no reliable evidence of change in attitude amongst the students or amongst the registered OOs for either statement, and this coupled with a failure to find any difference in attitude between men and women led us to merge the responses into two groups: one for students and one for qualified OOs.

This enables us to contrast the two groups' attitudes and display the spread of opinion (see Fig. 18). Clearly, amongst students there is a broad range of attitudes with some students strongly agreeing and some strongly disagreeing with each statement. When we look at the attitudes of qualified OOs we find a dominant response occurring with almost 40 per cent of the sample strongly disagreeing with a straight mark-up or strongly agreeing with a fee plus materials. But we should not forget the significant minority of around 15 per cent holding

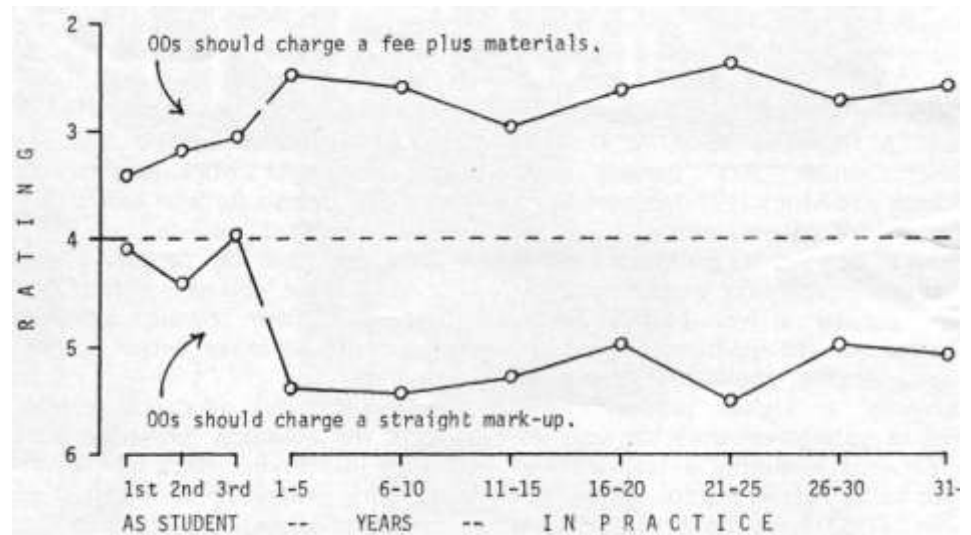


Figure 17—Attitudes towards OO charging and length of experience. The questionnaire explained as follows. 'Here are a few statements. Using the 7-point scale please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with them/ A rating of 1 indicates 'strong agreement' while 7 indicates 'strong disagreement'. Analysis of variance show significant variation with experience for both statements about charging. Inspection and breakdown analysis suggests that attitudes amongst qualified and unqualified OOs are each relatively homogenous and the difference lies between the qualified and unqualified groups

sympathetic views towards a straight mark-up. It seems to us that this change in attitude from student to registered OO is too sharp to be ascribed to recruitment changes but is again due to experiences occurring when optometrists begin to earn their living for the first time. We failed to find any evidence that a person's type of ophthalmic employment affected

their attitude towards charging methods, with analysis of variance tests proving non-significant.

### Discussion

Matters have improved since the early days in this century when the British Optical Association Council resolved that only wives and daughters of members could be eligible for examination (Mitchell, 1982). The increasing proportion of female entrants to the profession over the last 25 years has renewed the profession's fascination with the question of women's suitability for ophthalmic optics. As late as 1972, French and continued on page 16

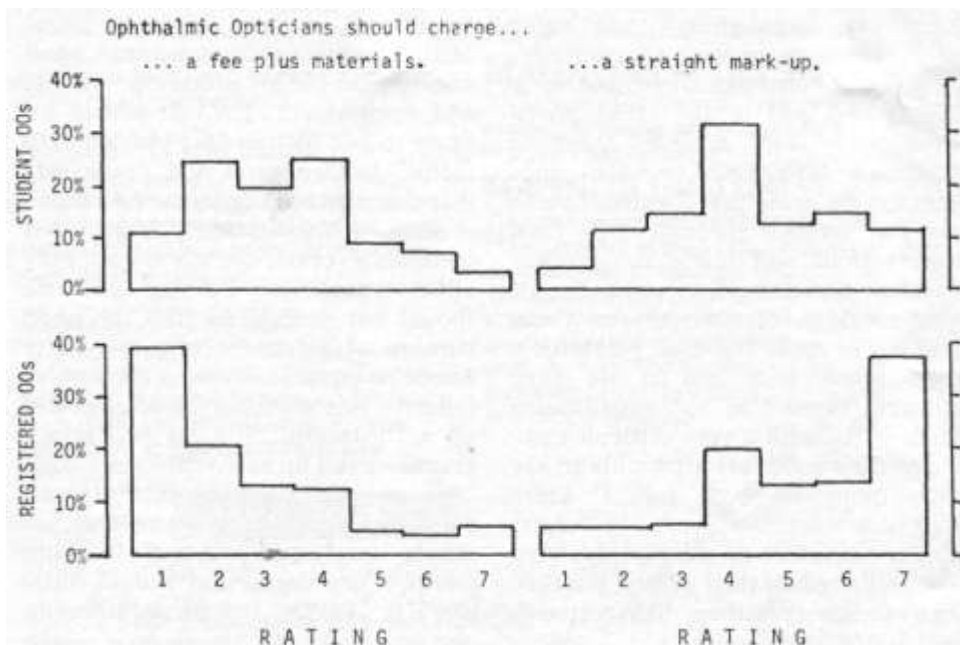


Figure 18—Attitudes towards charging, students vs. registered OOs. As analysis of variance suggested homogenous attitudes towards charging amongst qualified and unqualified groups, with sex and years of experience not important, the data were combined to give the four histograms above. A rating of 1 indicates 'strong agreement' while 7 indicates 'strong disagreement'

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Tomlinson expressed concern about the possibility of bias against women in professional examinations, although follow-up analysis put their minds at rest. At the end of 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act became law. g—Drench and Monk (1976), reporting on a survey of patients attitudes and the views of new female graduates, opined that true equality for women opticians had yet to arrive. French (1982) showed how the apparent favouring of young female applicants (there are currently a higher proportion of women amongst entrants than amongst applicants) is simply a reflection of their better A-level results. French and Loran (1983) have shown that, despite the tendency at present for women to have lower, Full-Time Equivalent values, the manpower situation for the foreseeable future appears good (see Fig. 1).

One might expect, therefore, that now in the 1980s the question of the sex of ophthalmic opticians would be regarded as of little importance as their age or colour, but once again questions are being asked. Many older women do own their own practices, but analysis of our sample suggests that they are 'slower' to take this step than men. In view of inadequate paternity leave, inadequate pre-school facilities and the old-fashioned attitudes of many husbands and society in general in the UK it is not surprising that even in the 1980s it is the woman's career that tends to take second place to the man's when children come into the picture. The consequence of this is the expression of anxiety by some that, with the increase in female numbers, a new generation of *employees* rather than *self-employeds* is being trained. They assume that self-employed OOs are better for the patient and/or profession than employees, an assumption that we do not wish to debate here.

The results of our questionnaire make quite clear that young female aspirations are very similar to those of young and older males: men and women both view owning their own practice as the ideal (see Table 1 for example). It is true that female students tend to see locum work and being a manager for a multiple more favourably than men, but this is understandable in view of the practicalities

of motherhood and the primitive provisions of British society. If we allow ourselves to be swayed by present day female handicaps then perhaps we should also scrutinise the attitudes of the undergraduates to the different aspects of the OO's work. And here we found that women students indicated a greater expected satisfaction with meeting and helping people; giving support to those who have argued that because of their *caring* attitudes women tend to make better optometrists!

Despite the lack of strong feelings against the selection procedures of teaching institutions, there has of late been fairly vocal criticism of their apparent reliance upon performance in examinations such as advanced level GCEs. We feel this criticism is based in part upon misunderstandings. French and Tomlinson (1972) and French (1982) showed how A-levels, although by no means perfect, were a reasonable predictor of performance in ophthalmic degree examinations—better than intelligence tests. It is obvious that admissions tutors do take other selection factors into considerations but the task is not easy. Occasionally the very examiners who have just awarded a student a first class honours degree in ophthalmic optics have been observed to express the opinion that the person in question will make a rather poor optician. However, even with foresight one would *not* have wanted to exclude such a student from the course. Although it is tempting to select people on the basis of personality and other behavioural attributes, it should not lead to the exclusion of those who will achieve academic excellence. Sometimes one also finds lecturers declaring that the student who has just scraped through their final examinations will make an excellent optician, and this view is *not* one of condescension. If we agree on those qualities in applicants that make for a good optometrist and if we then measure these in a quantitative fashion, it is still a very difficult exercise to then construct a formula to say how many A-level points these attributes are worth. In fact, admissions tutors do attempt this very task to the best of their ability, but they acknowledge that they, like everyone else, are fallible.

As the French (1982) attempted to explain, admissions tutors *do* take family traditions into account, they *do* read what school teachers have to say and they *do* carefully consider the observations and recommendations made by interviewers (although this is not always easy with present resources). What they are not willing to do is abandon examination performance as the basis of the selection procedure or uncritically accept the judgments of external referees. It is quite clear from correspondence that tutors receive that some people (often the candidate themselves, friend or relative) would have them accept a particular applicant because of *their* assertion that the person has the ideal personality and attitude of mind for an optician, even though his/her academic attainments are low. Admissions tutors have a responsibility and obligation to use their own judgement and be seen to be as fair and unbiased as they can.

It needs to be said that often one sees a really excellent, warm, caring and capable graduate being rejected for a pre-registration post in favour of a poorer candidate. For some reason the ophthalmic optician conducting the interviews feels that he or she has made the correct choice. In such circumstances it is natural for lecturers to feel a little aggrieved, especially if, as is usually the case, no teacher's opinion has been sought—no reference requested. But clearly we have to be realistic about such matters. There are many factors to be taken into account when selecting people for education, training and employment. No two people are likely to put the same weights on each factor. It is natural and predictable that differences in opinion will occur.

Also, we must not forget that ophthalmic optics degrees are not only about vocational training and we should not necessarily view the small number of graduates who eventually decide to pursue another profession as failures. Not all history graduates end up as historians. Not all psychology graduates end up as psychologists. This is *not* to suggest that optometry should be viewed in quite the same way, or viewed simply as a course at 'finishing school'. The degree has a dual function: it provides vocational training *and education*.

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At UMIST over the last 20 years, the average A-level science points score for young Home students has risen from 5 in 1964 to 13 in 1983<sup>3</sup>; a change one expects to have been paralleled in other institutions. Before 1964 the entrants did not take a university degree. Does this mean that to-day's degree students are less dedicated and only interested in finishing off their education before gaining well-paid employment? Certainly, it would not be surprising if we had seen large changes in the type of OO being recruited and consequently large changes in the attitudes being expressed.

We were surprised by the stability of attitudes when length of experience was used to group the OOs' responses. For all groups, being self-employed is rated most highly and working in a department store practice least. The rating hierarchy is quite stable, changing relatively little with experience. Student and qualified OOs both rate helping people and detection of pathology very high. There would seem little room for any doubt that the students being recruited either do care a lot about people *or* are soon encouraged to care by their experiences in training, and this provides *no* support for those criticising selection procedures. This does not mean that admissions tutors should rest on their laurels. Clearly we all want to see caring individuals being recruited to the profession and efforts in this direction should be maintained and strengthened.

Where attitude change has occurred it often appears to be fairly swift: the changes in ratings of department store work, 'basic + incentive bonus', optimism about the profession's future, ophthalmic opticians and dispensing opticians, and attitudes towards publicity, media coverage, advertising and charging procedures. In these instances we incline towards the view that these are in the main changes taking place *within* the young ophthalmic optician as they are trained. They are becoming more worldly-wise, they are gaining better understandings of the terminology and they are forming their own moral and ethical views of their future working lives.

At UMIST we have observed that around 70 per cent of the part-time teachers own their own practices and it could be argued that these provide the students with an environment more sympathetic to such work patterns while the students are being trained. However, it is clear that this influence is swiftly counterbalanced with most graduates taking up pre-registration posts within a large group/multiple so that amongst the under 25s (Fig 4) the majority are still so-employed after qualifying.

A few attitude changes appear more complex—both refraction and occupational optics (Fig. 9), and the BCOO (Fig. 14) show significant increases in satisfaction over years of professional experience but none of these attitudes would appear crucial to an OO's make-up. We see little evidence of a generation gap in any of the important attitudes.

It has been suggested that the profession is becoming employee-based. The increasing purchase and founding of optometric practices by 'purely commercial' groups has led some people to deduce that, if current trends continue, before 1990, 70-80 per cent of the profession will be controlled by lay shareholders (FIBO, 1982). We do not know the accuracy of this claim and do not wish to pass any value judgments on such a development, but it is clear from our study that young OOs appear to be just in favour of owning their own practice as older ones.

We do not know whether the profession is really concerned about it

becoming employee-dominated, because we did not ask this question. But if it *is* concerned then the remedy lies within its own hands by providing younger colleagues with reasonable partnership prospects.

## Conclusions

Despite the radical changes in professional selection procedures over the last 40 years and the increase in entry standards in the last 20, it would seem that young OOs are being trained who will have attitudes very similar to the older members of the profession. The caring attitudes of the profession are being maintained, and young women and men continue to aspire to owning their own practice.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr J Daniel Devlin of the General Optical Council for kindly providing us with the statistics for 1965.

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<sup>3</sup>We sometimes wonder whether some of the criticism of relatively high A-level entry requirements coming from established OOs stems from them personalising the situation. They believe (probably quite rightly) that they are good optometrists but looking back on their own education feel that they would never have gained admission to one of to-day's courses with their school attainments. It may interest such practitioners to know that there are many admission tutors in universities selecting students for many disciplines who apparently would not be able to gain admission to their own department with *their* school qualifications. Increasing popularity of subjects inevitably leads to rises in entry standards. But practitioners should not belittle their own school achievements and appreciate that *their comparisons* with to-day do not always make good sense. (It is interesting to note that to-day's schoolchildren have higher IQ-scores than their predecessors!)