

# A-level psychology: Is there a way forward?

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*Since its introduction in the early 1970s A-level psychology has grown in popularity to become the fourth most popular A-level. During this time it has also been heavily criticised by the media and higher education for its lack of rigour and practicability. Issues such as the lack of subject specialists, damaging changes made by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and an arrogant and dismissive attitude shown by universities plus failures by the British Psychological Society to inform decision making, have transformed A-level psychology into the poor cousin of undergraduate psychology and psychology teachers into a form of academic underclass. This paper examines the reasons behind such derision and attempts to offer some solutions in an attempt to get such issues firmly back on the agenda.*

**Keywords:** A-level; Pre-tertiary; QCA; soft subjects; schools; sixth-form colleges; coursework.

**B**ENEATH THE weighty barrage of criticism levelled at pre-degree psychology by many (including schools and the higher education community) lies a complex series of issues that have been occasionally discussed but rarely addressed or assessed in any practical way. For many of those involved it appears that the more these issues are raised the further away any final conclusions appear to be, leaving the likes of A-level psychology to the mercy of its critics. As Hollin and Hollin (2009) recently pointed out, many universities see A-level psychology as irrelevant and unwelcome, an opinion that reeks of arrogant elitism and disrespect towards those who work tirelessly to promote psychology within schools and sixth form colleges. A re-evaluation of the genesis of such derision is well overdue and in order to fully understand the current situation it is perhaps prudent to step back before moving forwards.

A-level psychology has come a long way since the first candidates sat the exam in 1972. Back then the exam was sat by a mere 275 students and the subject was offered by only one exam board. Compare that with the 2009 exams which attracted more than 52,000 students sitting specifications from five different exam boards, making psychology the fourth most popular subject

at A-level. The subject itself has changed considerably over time with the most recent changes taking place in 2008. In 1977 students were expected to produce 12 reports and had to endure an half-an-hour oral exam where the candidate's understanding of research methodology and statistics was rigorously tested. Over time the reports became less and the oral exam disappeared. The practical component, however, remained in the form of coursework which often required candidates to plan and run a small-scale investigation, usually in the form of a strictly controlled laboratory experiment. The investigation then formed the basis for a 2000 word report that included a literature review and statistical analysis. The coursework component was withdrawn by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) following the latest revision.

Since those early days A-level psychology had become a major business venture with publishers constantly producing new texts for each and every change to each exam board specification, leading to what Simon Green has described as 'the cookbook approach' (Green, 2007) to psychology teaching. Teachers now find themselves inundated with publications advertising the latest training course or CD-ROM packed with PowerPoint presentations and teaching

ideas. The vast majority of these courses remain very expensive and are, on the whole, quite poor in their content. Nevertheless, with so many non-specialist psychology teachers battling through the A-level syllabus the majority of courses remain heavily subscribed (if often pointless). With the popularity of psychology in schools and the vast amount of resources available one would think that psychology teachers (specialist or not) would have very little to complain about. However, this calm tranquil river possesses a strong undercurrent and psychology teachers are forced to deal with derision and ambivalence from the press, schools and (most disconcerting) the academic psychology community.

### **Psychology in schools**

Over the past few years teachers of A-level psychology have become accustomed to having to defend their subject against media accusations of being 'soft'. August has become open season on a number of subjects, including psychology, as the press compare them unfavourably with traditional subjects such as physics, chemistry and mathematics. Of course, the media have their own agenda and most teachers, while irritated, concern themselves little with such misrepresentation. It would be hoped, however, that A-level psychology teachers could seek support from their own institutions who must, one would think, hold all academic subjects in high regard ('soft' or otherwise). However, some have described the rise in the popularity of A-level psychology as a 'hidden scandal' (*The Independent*, 14 August 2003) claiming that it represents even more evidence of exams being 'dumbed down'. Furthermore, few schools believe it necessary to employ specialists to teach certain subjects including psychology, leading to a significant difference in the quality of teaching. The specific reasons for this are complex and involve issues surrounding recruitment and, the more worrying view, that psychology is easy to teach. The utilisation of non-specialists often results in

teachers choosing specific topics that play to their own strengths, to the detriment of content. While topics at AS level (representing half of the full qualification) are mandatory, many at A2 are often chosen by the individual teacher or head of department, regularly leading to an emphasis on the social (e.g. relationships) or biological (e.g. biological rhythms, sleep and dreaming) while ignoring many of the cognitive areas, such as memory and attention, that dominate current psychological research. There may also be a temptation to choose topics that are more enticing to pupils such as forensic psychology. More recent trends in education suggest that the skills acquired during teacher training can be used to teach any subject, not simply the one the teacher qualified in, leading theoretically to the situation where very few subjects would be taught by specialists due to the difficulty of recruiting into certain areas (e.g. physics, chemistry and maths).

### **QCA and the A-level psychology paradox**

The QCA reclassification of psychology to a science has done little to change this situation despite the suggestions at the time that the change 'would mean students were likely to be better prepared for university-level psychology in the future' (*Times Higher Education*, 23 March 2007). The change meant that A-level psychology would have to fulfil the same criteria set by the QCA for all other sciences implying that this would include the use of subject specialists. However, to date very few schools consider it necessary to employ subject specialists to teach psychology, a prospect that would appear preposterous for subjects such as physics and chemistry. This may be, in part, due to the inequality of opportunity for psychology graduates wishing to teach psychology in schools, a situation which is only now beginning to change with the appearance of the first specialist teacher training courses in psychology. Nevertheless, the current trend of using teaching staff with

free time on their timetables (or indeed, unqualified teachers) continues unabated.

As a response to the 'soft' subject debate, the QCA published the results of research which compared several subjects in terms of the demands they placed on students (QCA 2008). The figures heavily suggested that psychology was very different from the subject so derided in the media, concluding that psychology was more demanding than both sociology and (more surprisingly) biology. Nationally, A-level psychology results are not particularly high and often substantially lower than subjects thought of as more rigorous such as maths and physics. Several major conclusions can be drawn from this; psychology is a very difficult subject; psychology attracts less able candidates; there is an issue with the quality of teaching; or nobody cares enough to investigate the first three possible conclusions.

Following their reclassification of psychology to the elevated status of science and the conclusions drawn from the comparison study, the QCA then took the most curious of decisions for the new specifications that would take A-level psychology beyond 2008. While other science subjects (most notably biology, physics and chemistry) were to keep their coursework element, psychology was to have it removed, therefore depriving it of the last of its practical elements. Psychology now becomes a theoretical discipline with the only applied content coming from optional topics such as forensic or health psychology. By following such a path the QCA, having already agreed to psychology's scientific credentials, have created a pseudo-scientific discipline, devoid of all applied scientific methodology. While many non-specialists (particularly those with a background other than science) were pleased to see the coursework element removed, subject specialists were left wondering what on earth the QCA were playing at. This course of action appears to have been taken despite earlier warnings (e.g. Rawles, 2006) that A-level psychology must include a range of experimental work if

it was to become acceptable as a pre-requisite for undergraduate study.

### **Psychology and university**

Derided by the media and often unsupported by their own institutions, it would seem solace could be sought within the higher academic community where psychology has been established for more than a century. Surely psychology departments in higher education, eager to promote psychology through all levels of education, would want to support A-level psychology. In reality, the idealistic A-level psychology teacher will be left feeling isolated even here where A-level psychology remains unwanted. Even more disturbing is the implicit suggestion that psychology teachers represent a type of underclass, untouchables who are incapable of passing on the knowledge of such a sacred discipline. Despite the growing number of well qualified psychology teachers, many of whom have been granted chartered membership of the British Psychological Society it is still assumed that they simply cannot teach or simply teach the wrong things in the wrong way. For an individual who has dedicated a significant amount of time and effort into the discipline the attitude displayed by the academic community must feel deeply insulting and demoralising and many may view academic psychologists as arrogant and narrow-minded. This is further compounded by the insistence from universities that A-level psychology is not considered a suitable route to undergraduate psychology and, in some cases, can actually be detrimental. More recently, the think-tank Policy Exchange found that those students taking A-level such as psychology are 'less likely to get places at research universities than those with traditional A-levels' (*Times Higher Education*, 4 December 2009).

Universities cite several reasons why they refuse to admit A-level psychology into the fold. The issue of subject specialists is one element that resurfaces again and again.

This is still a real problem, yet science graduates remain more than capable of teaching psychology to a high standard and different teachers bring their own expertise to a multi-faceted discipline. If managed correctly, there is no real reason why standards of teaching should slip. Another issue is that of the practical nature of the study of psychology. Universities often feel that A-level psychology does not include the practical element – hands on experimentation and investigation. This is perhaps heavily linked to the issue of subject-specialism. Specialists who feel comfortable with the design and implementation of research would be more likely to include these in their classroom teaching whereas non-specialist from a non-scientific discipline might not. With the coursework element removed, the QCA have effectively moved psychology further away from university recognition. This is perhaps why biology or maths is cited as a more appropriate precursor to undergraduate study in psychology (Hollin & Hollin, 2009). There is also the suggestion that university psychology departments represent active research communities and that undergraduates will find themselves being taught by international experts in their field. This is used as a further reason for rejecting A-level psychology, however, this argument could be used for all disciplines and yet it would be ridiculous for A-level physics to be removed as an entry requirement to undergraduate physics.

Many of these issues have been addressed by the Society on two occasions; BPS (1992) and McGuinness (2003) (Banyard, 2008) although their interest in A-level psychology has remained ‘only marginal and sporadic’ (Banyard, 2008) and arguments in support of A-level psychology (e.g. Conway & Banister, 2007) have been largely ignored. Nevertheless, A-level psychology remains in state of flux, pushed in contradictory directions by the QCA and ignored by academia. The main problems lie in several different areas, including subject specialism, practical

application and curriculum content. These problems have been well publicised over the past few years and yet interested parties remain reticent, thus becoming part of the problem rather than partners in any solution.

### **Is there a way forward?**

In 2006, at a course for psychology teachers run by the National Science Learning Centre in York, Martin Conway of the University of Leeds (and a fervent supporter of A-level psychology) suggested the possibility of a British Psychological Society-accredited psychology A-level. Unfortunately the British Psychological Society’s involvement in setting the content of A-level is relegated to an advisory capacity while the mechanics of it remain with the QCA and the exam boards. Herein there exists yet another problem – for teachers of A-level at least. If the British Psychological Society is serious about pre-degree psychology then they certainly keep such intentions to themselves as no constructive working solutions have yet been proposed. One possible solution would be for the Society to accredit schools rather than A-levels, based on a criterion that could set the benchmark for quality and thus allowing universities to find their way through a myriad of courses. The issue of subject specialism still remains, however, perhaps partly due to the lack of imagination regarding alternative routes to Qualified Teacher Status. An example would be the Graduate Teacher Programme where psychology graduates could be trained ‘on the job’.

### **A dialogue with higher education**

While the higher education community remains shrouded in its arrogance, it must be noted that such criticisms have failed to offer solutions. The majority, it seems, fail to understand, or simply do not wish to understand, the complex nature of A-level psychology in terms of its structure and implementation. Perhaps it’s time for universities to become fully involved in the evolu-

tion of A-level psychology rather than simply being critics of it? Would universities be able to offer workshops or seminars to psychology teachers or their students on the latest research? Could they use A-level students as participants in research and discuss with them how the results will be analysed and interpreted? More importantly, is it possible to get the Society, the QCA and higher education establishments to discuss the issues together in an attempt to move things forward? Or is all this simply idealistic nonsense?

### **Concluding remarks**

The issues surrounding A-level psychology are complex. As psychology at pre-degree level increases in popularity it seems to be moving further away from its undergraduate cousin, fuelled by decision makers who appear to be uninterested in the relationship between the two and ignored by those responsible for the communication of psychology to the masses. Previous debates have proved fruitless, perhaps due to the lack of commitment from those who have the authority to change things and the lack of communication between interested parties. The fact remains that demand for A-level psychology outstrips the availability of those qualified to teach it, but solutions do exist as long as decision makers have the imagination, determination and sheer bloody-mindedness to stand up and make a difference. Otherwise there is a danger that A-level psychology will remain a popular but ultimately irrelevant qualification.

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