

What is happening to A-level psychology?

Phil Banyard indicates why we should be worried

Psychology is under attack. A-level psychology is the recruiting sergeant for undergraduate study but the future is looking uncertain. Psychology is not included as a 'facilitating subject' by the Russell Group in their advice on A-level choices. This means the examination results do not count towards the latest school league tables and do not appear in the latest summaries of national results. We are being written out of the script.

Since the start of this century, the number of undergraduate psychology students in the UK has more than doubled and now stands at over 60,000 (Trapp et al., 2011). This growth has created jobs. A rough calculation based on 30,000 extra students since 2000 suggests there are up to 1500 more lecturing posts. These lecturers generate research activity, which in turn creates research posts.

If the demand for our undergraduate courses declines, there is little doubt that this will be followed by downsizing in many departments. So there is a bubble growing... it hasn't burst yet but someone is standing very near to it with a pin in their hand. For this reason alone we need to have a mind to what is happening in the school sector, and whether the coming changes in A-level being pushed through by the government will have any impact on the demand for undergraduate psychology courses.

To cut to the chase, the simple and worrying answer is that the changes to GCSE and A-level are likely to have a substantial impact. That impact might well put students off from studying psychology at A-level and then undergraduate level as well. Although many higher education psychology departments are only dimly aware of the A-level in their subject, its popularity is a clear driver for university applications. Any weakening in A-level demand will inevitably have a knock-on effect in HE.

But let's start at the beginning. Psychology has been a relatively late addition to the school curriculum. It was

in the late 1960s that the British Psychological Society (BPS) set up a working party to look at the way that psychological issues were being taught in schools and colleges. The discussions were led by John Radford, then Head of Psychology at West Ham Technical College and now Emeritus Professor at the University of East London, who was subsequently invited by the Associated Examination Board to write and examine an A-level in the subject. Such were the concerns about the adult nature of the material that it was only offered to a selected group of 25 centres until the mid-1970s. During the next 20 years there was exponential growth (Radford & Holdstock, 1996) and although the pace of expansion has slowed, the number of entries continued to grow each year until 2013 when it registered its first fall. It is currently the fourth most popular A-level in the UK with over 55,000 awards in 2013 for the full A-level and nearly 100,000 awards for the AS (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2013). Psychology has been in the top eight subject choices for the last 10 years (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2011).

The growth in demand for the subject has not been symmetrical across the demographic. The proportion of males taking an A-level in psychology currently stands at 25.6 per cent of the total entry and they perform less well than females with only 9.9 per cent obtaining a grade A or A* compared with 19.5 per cent of females (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2013). Interestingly at the halfway point of A-level (AS examination) the gender split is slightly reduced with 29.9 per cent of the candidates being male, though their performance is still weaker than the females. The genderisation of psychology has attracted a lot of speculation (e.g. Radford & Holdstock, 1995; Sanders et al., 2009), but it is not fully understood.

Psychological literacy

Many A-level psychology students go on to apply to read the subject at university

questions

Why has the study of psychology become so genderised?

Why do our male students do so much worse than female students?

resource

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but the majority do not (see Hulme, this issue). As a result, the A-level is the only psychology they will study, and so these courses are in a position to have a profound effect on the nation's understanding of psychological concepts. With over 100,000 people taking these courses every year for over a generation, the nation is becoming psychologically literate through this route.

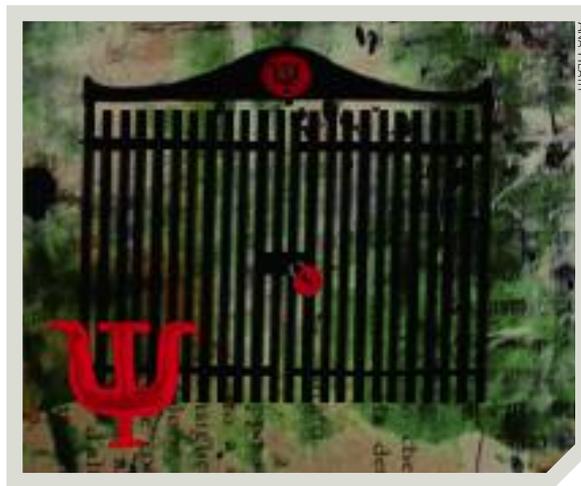
The term 'psychological literacy' was first used by Boneau (1990) in a study to identify key concepts in psychology. Subsequently McGovern et al. (2010) use the term 'psychologically literate citizens' to refer to the outcome of a course in psychology that results in students becoming 'critically scientific thinkers and ethical and socially responsible participants in their communities' (p.10). It is clear that in the UK the most common qualifications that students finish their studies in psychology with are AS and A-level. The psychological literacy of the UK will therefore be defined by these courses, and this is the second reason for psychologists to take an interest in A-level reforms.

A-level reforms

The most recent reform of A-levels has come to the end of a consultation period and is being rolled out for teaching to begin in 2015, with the first awards to be made in 2017. The reform is informed by two key reports, the first based on a survey of higher education, teachers and employers on the suitability of A-levels (Higton et al., 2012). This report suggests that there is general endorsement of A-levels by stakeholders, but it also identifies gaps in skills and a mismatch between the subject content in A-level and that required by higher education institutions. The second report is an international comparison of equivalent qualifications to A-level

(Ofqual, 2012). This report raises questions about the demand and challenge of the current A-levels, the breadth and depth of particular courses and of the A-level programme as a whole, and the design of assessments.

One of the changes that is likely to affect psychology is the decoupling of AS from A-level. Currently the AS exams form the first half of the A-level qualification, but the new courses will be similar to A-levels of 25 years ago and have one set of examinations at the end of



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two years study. The issue for psychology is that it attracts a big entry to the AS and this acts as a recruiting ground for the full A-level. This one change might lead to a dramatic reduction in students taking the A-level.

The response of the government to the issue of demand has been to look to HE and in particular to the Russell Group, an association of 24 British public research universities. This is where it starts to look difficult for psychology. The Russell Group apparently do not

look kindly on psychology in schools and do not class the A-level as a 'facilitating subject', by which they mean a subject that is accepted as a general basis for study on most courses at university. The facilitating subjects as defined by the Russell Group are the predictable core curriculum from 50 years ago (Russell Group, 2013). The list is quite short – mathematics and further mathematics, English literature, physics, biology, chemistry, geography, history, languages (classical and modern).

It could be argued that the omissions are as interesting as the inclusions.

Although the Russell Group advice does not stipulate that students are required to take three of these subjects to enhance their chances of being accepted at a Russell Group university, it does say 'If you take three facilitating subjects, you'll have the largest number of degree courses to choose from further down the line' (2013, p.27).

The clear advice being given is that if you study ancient Greek at A-level you are more likely to be accepted onto a psychology degree at a Russell Group university than if you study A-level Psychology.

This might be a part explanation of why the admissions procedures of Russell Group universities have been shown to be unfair (Boliver, 2013). The more modern (relevant and useful?) subjects such as psychology are less likely to be taught in the private sector (Russell Group, 2009; Shepherd, 2011), and so by adopting their negative position to psychology (and other subjects) those universities that want to can maintain the class and regional discrimination they have practised for generations. The danger for psychology is that aspiring secondary schools and academies will follow this lead (if going backwards can be called a

Coventry: Ofqual.

(tinyurl.com/kmvjr7c)

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A-level psychology

'lead') and remove psychology from their curricula. And if the heat goes out of the A-level market it will only be a year or two before HE sees declining admissions and the bubble will have burst.

The Russell Group report has had an impact on UK schools with a new measure added to school league tables that records performance on these facilitating subjects. This will inevitably encourage schools to guide students into these subjects at the expense of others. Among the many problems with this is the lack of any evidence to support the idea that these subjects do in fact facilitate entry to Russell Group universities. In the report it is stated that 'many successful applicants...do have advanced level qualifications in at least two of the facilitating subjects' (2013, p.24), but no evidence is presented to back this up. In fact, the best evidence there is suggests that the most popular A-levels taken by students accepted at these universities are not facilitating subjects. For example, the most common A-level held by students accepted to do medicine at Exeter is psychology (McInerney, 2013).

The remarkable point here is that

the Russell Group advice is written in an authoritative style but is based on no evidence whatsoever. Despite this, the idea of facilitating subjects has developed a legitimacy such that the report of A-level entries by JCQ for 2014 only includes data for these subjects. So, psychology even though it is one of the biggest entry subjects does not warrant a mention. We are being written out of the script.

Doom and gloom?

There are clearly some reasons to be gloomy. These include the attitude of the government to psychology and also the attitude of our colleagues in the Russell Group. On the bright side, in its current format A-level psychology is in rude health and still attracting students. Of these students, about 31 per cent say they would like to continue studying the subject and 15 per cent say they would like a career in psychology (BPS Psychology Education Board, 2013). Last year the BPS published *The Future of A-Level Psychology* to look at how the courses are developing and what can be done to support them. The report is part

of an ongoing attempt to join up the various sectors in education that provide courses in psychology. One of the strong messages from this report was that there is a major disconnect between HE and school psychology with regard to the skills that students are developing during their A-level and also the content they are studying.

So what's to be done? Maybe it is time for university psychology departments to embrace the A-level in their subject and make strong links with local schools and colleges that deliver it. Maybe it is also time to value and promote the A-level, firstly for what it is (a great introduction to psychological ideas) and secondly for its value as a recruiting agent for universities. And maybe it is also time to revisit the undergraduate curriculum so that it builds on our student's prior learning rather than repeating it.



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