

Defending the honour of psychology A-level

Matt Jarvis considers rigour and transferable skills

Over the last decade the growth of psychology in schools and colleges – in particular at A-level – has been phenomenal. Around 55,000 students completed psychology A-level in 2010 with almost 82,000 completing AS-level. These numbers are particularly impressive given that psychology is so under-represented in the secondary curriculum (Rowley & Dalgarno, 2010). However, like any high-profile success story, psychology A-level is now ‘there to be shot at’.

Questions about the rigour of ‘new-fangled’ subjects like psychology are nothing new. In the early 2000s John Dunford, then General Secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, spoke of the ‘hidden scandal of A-levels’, singling out psychology as a subject that did not compare in difficulty to maths or the physical sciences. Arguments in defence of the rigour of psychology were swiftly marshalled (see for example Jarvis, 2004; Morris, 2003), and for a time attacks on psychology receded.

The debate has recently been reignited, however, with some elements of the press picking up on the University of Cambridge’s Trinity College classification of A-levels as Category A: ‘generally suitable’ (for study at Trinity), Category B: ‘more limited suitability’, and Category C: ‘suitable only as a fourth subject’. Psychology appears in the ‘more limited suitability’ category, and the *Telegraph’s* education correspondent claimed that

‘thousands of teenagers are effectively being shut out of prestigious institutions after taking subjects such as media studies, dance and psychology in the sixth form’ (Paton, 2011).

Had the bad publicity been confined to the right-wing press we could perhaps have ignored it. However, the factoid that psychology is a ‘banned A-level’ has ‘gone viral’. Posts appeared on influential

LAURA RUDD



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Matt Jarvis leads the Psychology PGCE at Keele University
matt.jarvis2@btinternet.com

websites, including mumsnet and thestudentroom, to the effect that students taking psychology A-level are barred from entry to top universities. Given that mumsnet is an important influence on parental opinions about education, and that thestudentroom has similar status amongst students, we can take it that the reputation of psychology A-level has taken a knock. If this leads to a reduction in the numbers of able students opting to study psychology in the sixth form there will be a knock-on

effect for the whole profession.

The *British Journal of Photography* has responded to the identification of photography as a ‘soft’ A-level with a vigorous rebuttal (Laurent, 2011), equipping photographers with arguments to defend their subject at A-level. As psychologists we can similarly respond – provided we have the necessary data – tackling the argument on at least two levels. First, what have the aforementioned ‘prestigious institutions’ actually said about psychology? Second, what sources of evidence can we bring to the debate on the rigour of psychology A-level and what do they have to tell us?

What do ‘prestigious’ universities really think of psychology?

If there are indeed ‘banned subjects’ amongst elite universities, then students most certainly have a right to know. However, looking beyond the hyperbole, what has actually been said in relation to psychology is actually quite mild. Much of the recent publicity has been triggered by the Trinity College classification, and the first thing to stand out is that psychology falls in Category B. Given that there are 20 subjects listed in Category C, including Accounting, Computing, Environmental Science and more, it seems decidedly harsh for the *Telegraph* to single out psychology as one of just three subjects in a piece containing terms such as ‘banned’ and ‘substandard’. To give further context to the Trinity College list, representatives of Trinity College have been clear that their classification is not based on the difficulty of A-level subjects but on their ability to prepare students for a degree at Cambridge. In this they have taken into account the potential for each subject to develop transferable skills like essay writing. Seen in that light the list no longer seems so damning.

In response to requests for clarity from many quarters including the government, the Russell Group, which represents 20 elite UK universities, has

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issued guidance on the usefulness of a range of A-level subjects (Russell Group, 2011). The tone of this document is appropriately measured (if conservative), and there is no mention of 'banned subjects', although prospective students are cautioned about taking exclusively vocational subjects at level 3. Psychology is flagged as a 'useful' subject in relation to a range of degree subjects including psychology, nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, speech therapy and sociology. We might take issue with the omission of psychology in relation to teacher training and the natural and medical sciences, but overall the Russell Group guidance is certainly not anti-psychology.



Evidence for the rigour of psychology A-level

The second question concerns the actual rigour of psychology A-level. There are procedures for comparing the relative difficulty of A-level subjects, though none of these is without controversy. The Curriculum Evaluation & Management (CEM) Centre at Durham University monitors relative achievements in different A-levels. When GCSE scores are controlled for, A-level outcomes as measured by UCAS points can be compared by subject. The last two published comparisons in 2002 and 2008 both placed psychology around the centre of ranked subjects.

The 2002 CEM figures suggest that psychology is more rigorous than history, geography or English A-level, though less so than maths or the traditional sciences. 2008 figures rank psychology in the 'difficult half' of A-levels, at 16th of 33 subjects, below history, maths and the three traditional sciences but above English, geography and law (Coe et al., 2008). It is interesting to note that in spite of this, history and geography made it into Trinity College's 'Category A'.

CEM analyses are certainly the most statistically sophisticated to date, the latest figures being arrived at through Rasch modelling. However, their validity depends on the assumption that relative outcomes at A-level are principally a product of subject difficulty. In fact

differential attainment across subjects may owe as much to aptitudes and motivation as it does subject difficulty. This is hard to unpick from the data but the fact that general studies, which is generally disliked by students and widely delivered as a bolt-on to student programmes, emerges from the 2002 figures as the 'hardest' subject (the 5th hardest in 2008) suggests that differential motivation is likely to be a contributing factor. Survey findings that the majority of students rate psychology as their hardest but most interesting subject (McGuinness, 2003) support this interpretation and suggest that CEM analyses may underestimate the rigour of psychology.

When it comes to judging standards across subjects, there are alternatives to mathematical modelling. One such is the intersubject comparability method used by the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA). This involves a panel of experts reviewing the demands of A-level assessment and comparing marked scripts across different subjects. QCA (2008) reported on an intersubject comparability study of psychology, biology and sociology, concluding that standards in the three subjects were comparable and that any apparent disparities were due to different assessment methods.

Judging the relative difficulty of subjects at any level is notoriously difficult, and there is no universally accepted protocol. However, Rasch modelling, intersubject comparability and student surveys all place psychology at least in the more rigorous half of A-level subjects. All the available data thus supports a more than acceptable level of rigour. To criticise psychology for falling near the middle of the subject range for difficulty would be to adopt an

inequitable 'killjoy' position that psychology (unlike traditional subjects) has to justify its existence by being the toughest A-level.

Lessons from the debate

Suggestions that elite universities dislike psychology A-level and that psychology is generally less rigorous than other A-levels can be firmly refuted. However, as reflective practitioners, we should look beyond self-defence to what lessons can be learned from debates like this. For example, by omitting psychology from their Category A subjects, Trinity College suggest that psychology A-level does not foster transferable writing skills as well as some other subjects. In this they may well be correct. Successive curriculum changes have reduced the assessment of extended prose in psychology A-level, while school league tables have led to teachers focusing more strategically on preparing students for the ways they will be assessed at the expense of non-assessed transferable skills. The role of essay-writing in psychology A-level has diminished greatly since 2000 and report-writing has disappeared altogether since 2008 (Jarvis, 2011).

Thus whilst a strong case can be made for the general rigour of psychology A-level, the same can not necessarily be said for its suitability as preparation for studying at university, even studying psychology. One professor I spoke to bemoaned the difficulties in teaching students 'acculturated into A-level', and this sort of anecdote is perhaps supported by the evidence: for example, Betts et al. (2008) demonstrate that neither having A-level psychology nor achieving highly in it conveys any advantage for degree performance.

Conclusions

Analyses of the relative difficulty of A-level subjects have been favourable to psychology, and psychology A-level is actively recommended by the Russell Group as helpful for many degree subjects. Thus we can be quite confident in saying that recent media comments are unfounded, and it is important that we actively do so. However, the recent debate about 'easy A-levels' provides an opportunity to reflect on the recent developments in psychology A-level, and it seems that as we enter the consultation period for the next A-level revisions there is a case for looking beyond debates over content towards opportunities to foster better development of meaningful academic skills.