

High-quality science A-level

Good for students, universities and the discipline



Martin Conway
(University of Leeds,
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In the mid-1990s psychology became the most popular science subject for prospective undergraduates. The discipline has maintained that pre-eminence for over a decade and continues to expand while other sciences contract. Why is this? As always there are many reasons. However, I believe that the main reason was a coming-of-age of psychology in the 1970s and 80s, and particularly of cognitive psychology. This led to a striking broadening of the curriculum in all areas. I well remember teaching my first ever course in neuropsychology, a topic unheard of when I took my undergraduate degree and now a standard part of psychology. But, of course, it is not just in neuropsychology that this coming-of-age has taken place. Consider virtually any area of the discipline and one can see striking advances in theory and findings and major inroads into applied problems of central concern to the individual and society.

Students are fascinated by our subject – around 130,000 of them are currently taking AS- and A-level psychology each year. The success of the discipline at undergraduate level is now being repeated at A-level. Why, then, are we in universities so ambivalent about A-level psychology? I think that the reason is straightforward: the A-level curriculum simply does not fit the standard university psychology degree.

Indeed, there are several A-level psychology curricula, all with different strengths and weaknesses. This complicates matters further. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) move to reclassify A-level psychology as a science A-level from 2008 provides the opportunity to create a standard scientific and representative curriculum – it is an opportunity we should not miss. Well-

prepared students coming into our degrees will allow us to provide a more advanced scientific training. Moreover, as the student population in psychology at A-level and degree level consists of more than 75 per cent women, it provides an important route for women into science.

Thus, a standard science A-level, based on the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmarking criteria, would provide all students with a new and interesting way into science, and universities with well-prepared undergraduates. Such an A-level in psychology would surely become an entrance requirement.

Finally, there is one further important implication of a standard high-quality science A-level: there is no point in having a science A-level like this if it does not lead into properly resourced scientific psychology degrees. Are you listening, higher education funding councils?



Peter Banister
(Manchester Metropolitan
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the Society's Membership
and Professional Board)

I agree that psychology has become one of the degree success stories of the last 10 years or so, and there are probably many reasons for this. These would include the growing media exposure of the discipline, as well as the developments in cognitive psychology that you mention. There is now a growing trend to expect psychological explanations for many phenomena, and to expect expert comments on them. In particular, the role of the psychologist within forensic psychology has caught the popular imagination in such areas as psychological profiling, and accounts of the social psychological dynamics in television shows such as *Big Brother* indicate the public interest in human relationships. This needs to be born in mind when discussing potential developments in psychology at A-level.

The proposal by the QCA to reclassify A-level psychology as a science is to be applauded. Given the general decline in the popularity of science subjects at secondary level, its reclassification as a science will help the discipline to contribute to the scientific literacy of the population of the country. An A-level in psychology, with its basis in scientific approaches, should help to make a more critical and inquiring populace, and this is what we should be striving for.

It must be remembered that many people who study psychology at A-level do not go on to study the discipline at degree level, and that the A-level (and the AS-level) should be recognised as important free-standing qualifications in their own right. It is thus vital that we should discuss what contributes to such an A-level, but we should also remember that different parts of the United Kingdom have different educational systems.

The QCA is in the process of laying down new general guidelines for the A-level which are based on the QAA psychology benchmarks in terms of general curriculum coverage, but it is up to the individual examination boards to decide what precisely is covered in the curriculum. There are a number of boards in different parts of the UK, and they all interpret the guidelines differently. Thus the current position is that despite the emphasis on science there will be considerable variation between the boards as to what is actually taught.

Added to this there is the problem that many of the people teaching psychology in schools and colleges do not have degrees in psychology, and may tend to concentrate only on certain areas of the discipline. Until psychology can achieve a more common curriculum across the country at the secondary level, there is likely to be considerable continuing ambivalence on the behalf of degree admissions tutors.

Martin Conway
Psychology is undoubtedly popular with

the media, but I suspect that is because psychology as a science now has much of general interest to communicate across a broad range of areas – areas that are often of concern to the public. But my point is that psychology is only able to make these contributions because it has matured as a science. It is the continued development of psychology as a science that concerns many of us and this can only take place if we are able to deliver high-quality scientific training.

A science A-level psychology is an important milestone in securing high-quality scientific training in our discipline and we should not miss the opportunity to integrate it with our undergraduate degrees.

Peter Banister

I agree that making A-level psychology a science is a good move forward, and should help raise the profile of the discipline nationally. In this particular context, it is interesting to note that the recent government White Paper *Science and Innovation* does not mention psychology at all. Hopefully the

reclassification of the A-level will help to remedy this situation. For the change to have a major impact on undergraduate psychology, however, it needs to be much more standardised across the country and we need to be reassured that the discipline is being adequately taught at secondary level. Such developments may occur over time, but we are still in relatively initial stages here.

There is an additional problem in that admissions tutors also have to face other agendas. One of these is the need to demonstrate that higher education institutions are widening participation, which means that many undergraduate places are provided to mature students who have studied access courses, for instance under the auspices of the National Open College Network. Again, this makes assumptions of a common initial experience on entry into an undergraduate course difficult to sustain.



Martin Conway

Perhaps regardless of the commonality or otherwise of pre-

degree routes, the important point is that people in higher education should start giving pre-degree psychology some thought. Perhaps we've been too quick to dismiss it either as not that useful for a psychology degree or even as a hindrance. If academics are not happy about how the next generation is being nurtured, then it is partly their responsibility to do something about it.

Peter Banister



Yes, and they could go about that in a number of ways. Perhaps admissions tutors could rethink the consideration they give to A-level psychology in their decision making; perhaps university academics should be a more visible presence in sixth-form colleges; perhaps there could even be more university-based resource and training for the teachers themselves.

At the end of the day, as you say Martin, these are exciting times for pre-degree psychology, and it's high time that counterparts in higher education woke up to them.