



External Assessment Report 2010

Subject	Psychology
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published question papers and marking instructions for the Examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

External paper

Overall performance in the exam was comparable to that of recent years. There was a slight decline in the pass rate which may be accounted for, at least in part, by the substantial increase in entries (nearly 20% increase over 2009) and by the changes to Arrangements this year, which entailed some areas of new content as well as a changed question structure in Section C. Candidates generally demonstrated a good standard of Analysis and Evaluation (AE) skills, as well as Knowledge and Understanding (KU); they also showed strong awareness of the importance of research evidence.

General comments

Research Investigation (RI)

Many excellent RIs were submitted, with Memory topics being the most popular. RIs from some centres were rigid/formulaic; these often met minimum requirements of the Marker Checklist, but real understanding of the relevant concepts and methodology was limited, perhaps due to over-reliance on support.

There was good adherence to ethical principles; however, in some cases, marks were lost because the research design had deviated from the RI brief. Virtually all RIs were properly organised under the appropriate main section headings, however a minority of cases still showed a disorganised method as a result of not using the sub-sections.

Some candidates' introduction sections demonstrated a search for interesting background material; however, many used only the information provided in the brief. The better method sections were those which explained all elements fully; poorer ones tended to overlook details of controlled variables, or description of materials (eg how stimuli for memory research were selected/sourced).

Marks for the Results section were generally good, although raw data and/or calculations were often missing from appendices; this is rather mystifying, given the clarity of the Checklist. In the Discussion part (ii), evaluative points made were mostly generic (eg small sample) rather than specific; for example, limitations of the particular design, such as order effects (repeated measures), or individual differences (independent measures), were often neglected. There was some improvement in the Discussion part (iii), but candidates from some centres continue to neglect or omit this aspect.

The slight adjustment in the method of awarding marks for the 'References' section in the Marker Checklist this year had provided clearer guidance, resulting in candidates generally gaining higher marks for this section. Most RIs showed appropriate formal style, but there remains a substantial minority written in the first person, and/or in present rather than past tense. Standard of presentation was generally high.

Areas in which candidates performed well

External paper

Section A

Question A1 (Early Socialisation) gained the highest average marks in this section, in spite of problems described below. The Memory question was the most popular, and part (a), on Working Memory, was generally well answered, although a number of candidates wrote about the wrong model (ie the Multi-store Model), gaining zero marks.

Section B

Marks for this section were higher on average than for questions in each of the other two sections, a pleasing outcome given that the scenario described correlational research, a design which has proved challenging to candidates in the past. Some candidates demonstrated good application of their research methods knowledge to the specific scenario: for example, in response to the Ethics question (g) some pointed out the possible distress or anxiety caused to participants, which might affect their performance on the driving test.

Section C

For the first time all questions in this section were extended response (essay) questions. Each essay question included a set of three 'prompts' suggesting content and structure. Some candidate scripts showed rather poor quality answers on their last question, suggesting fatigue, and average marks were lower than for the Section A questions, however, overall candidates coped with Section C questions reasonably well. Anecdotal evidence from practitioners suggests that their students found the prompts helpful.

The Atypical question, on therapies, offered the option of eating disorders for the first time. Although this was the most popular question across Sections A and C, few candidates tackled the eating disorders option, the majority preferring to write about therapies for depression. However, amongst those who did choose the eating disorders option, there were some very good answers.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Areas of poor performance included:

- ◆ Answering a different question from the one that was set. The most common example of this was an answer describing a single piece of research, when the question had actually asked for theoretical content. For example, for Question A1 (a) (Early Socialisation), many candidates simply described the 'Strange Situation' research, and for A1 (b), some described a deprivation/privation study. Many responses to C3 (Conformity and Obedience) gave long descriptions of Asch or Milgram studies, without explaining their relevance to 'strategies for resisting..'. Such answers could gain only a few marks.
- ◆ Lack of depth/detail in KU and/or AE. Many answers lacked depth, for example in A2 (a) (Stress), for 'fight-or-flight', most simply described the first stage of the GAS, and gave little detail of such processes as the sympathetic-adrenal-medulla response (SAM), the role of cognition, or the evolutionary basis of the response. Similarly, for (b) — on 'transactional nature' — understanding of the transactional concept was often weak, and

analytical/evaluative aspects such as its relationship to other models of stress, or its ability to explain individual differences in stress, were neglected. In Section C, answers to the question on nature/nurture in Intelligence rarely referred to interaction of influences, for example in terms of concepts such as 'reaction range' or the 'Flynn effect'.

- ◆ 'Common sense' answers. Generally there were fewer such cases this year than in the past, however, Question C2 (Social Relationships), which was on the new area of 'contemporary relationships', did yield some 'common sense' answers. Although candidates from some centres showed thorough learning of the relevant social-psychological processes, others were superficial, using everyday language and neglecting research evidence and analysis.
- ◆ Revised Arrangements. Question A3 (b) — on the Loftus and Palmer (1974) study — was omitted by a number of candidates, suggesting that some centres had failed to follow the revised content in the Arrangements.
- ◆ Section B — Correlation scenario. Although marks for this section were good overall, the two hypotheses questions were poorly answered. Many candidates gave hypotheses of 'difference', or 'effect' of one variable on the other, rather than a prediction of a relationship.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

As always, centres should ensure that all relevant documentation is followed closely, including Arrangements, Course assessment specifications, specimen question papers, marking instructions, and subject update letter(s), to ensure that appropriate content and exam preparation are delivered. The problematic areas described above can be tackled in various ways, such as giving candidates practice using formative assessment (eg past exam papers), with subsequent feedback. In particular, for Section C, practice in essay-writing will help candidates to develop the required skills, including planning essay structure. Although prompts are provided for the essay questions in the exam paper, these are intended as helpful suggestions rather than prescriptive content and should not become a 'straitjacket'; candidates should be made aware that all relevant content can gain credit, and they should therefore use their knowledge of the topic to the full.

In the RI, centres must ensure they follow the chosen brief closely, to avoid loss of marks. To achieve high marks, candidates should be encouraged to not just mention all points listed in the Marker Checklist, but to go beyond the basics. The RI is intended to allow candidates to experience something akin to the 'real-world' research process, from the writing of a 'research proposal' (in the form of the Project Plan and Log) at the start, to the final submission of the research report; it presents an excellent opportunity for candidates to pursue independent 'research' (ie searching for resources), to deepen their understanding, and to develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. By facilitating these experiences and skills, rather than providing a rigid framework for the RI, centres can help candidates achieve better quality learning, transferable skills, and higher marks. The *Higher Psychology RI Guidelines* (2005 — revised version pending) provide invaluable guidance for teachers/lecturers and candidates.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2009	2762
Number of resulted entries in 2010	3293

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark — 125				
A	28.1%	28.1%	924	83
B	21.2%	49.3%	699	70
C	18.8%	68.1%	620	58
D	7.4%	75.6%	245	52
No award	24.4%	100.0%	805	—

General commentary on grade boundaries

While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

Each year, therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Head of Service and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.

The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related as they do not contain identical questions.

SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as Arrangements evolve and change.