

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Social sciences

Qualification area

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
Included in this report**

Psychology Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2003 (pre appeal)	3062
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Number of entries in 2004 (pre appeal)	2779
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General comments re entry numbers

Higher: This session saw similar numbers for Higher Psychology. Once again much of the uptake has come from school/college links, schools and a small growth from the independent school sector was also noted. Psychology continues to be popular and is now a well established Higher-level subject. Next year sees the implementation of the revised Higher; preliminary indications suggest a small but continued growth of the subject.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards and grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	22.5	22.5	624	119
B	24.1	46.5	669	102
C	20.3	66.8	563	85
D	6.3	73.1	175	77
No award	26.9	100.0	748	

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

A small decrease was noticeable in the number of candidates receiving an A grade; and an increase in the number of candidates receiving no award was also recognised.

A possible reason contributing to this small shift may have been that much of the growth in the subject continues to arise from the school and school/college link sector and hence the candidate profile in the subject continues to change- away from the adult returnee and towards the school age candidate.

General commentary on passmarks and grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create mark schemes which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum 50% of the available marks (notional passmark) and a very well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70%, it is almost impossible to get the standard absolutely on target every year, in every subject and level
- Each year we therefore hold a passmark meeting for each subject at each level where we bring together all the information available (statistical and judgmental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the senior management team at SQA
- We adjust the passmark downwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly more demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- We adjust the passmark upwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly less demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- Where the standard appears to be very similar to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries
- 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 are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. And just because SQA has altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry 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
- Our main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

Based on professional judgement grades were agreed as a priori from session 2003-4.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Higher; many of the comments made in previous sessions remain relevant for session 2003-4

Question Paper-

A varied response but generally candidates were reasonably well prepared at this level. Candidates who were well prepared answered appropriately and in depth. However, significant proportions of candidates remain poorly prepared or **are entered at incorrect level**. Application questions continue to cause confusion and, in the main, are poorly answered by many.

The question paper, although simplified, remains long with a complex rubric and the complexity continues to cause confusion with some candidates; several candidates continue to attempt to answer all questions. The amendments to section A continue to be well received with top candidates answering the discriminating questions well.

Research Investigation-

A varied response but generally candidates performed reasonably well at this level. Once again improvements have been demonstrated since last year as in previous years. Most candidates received a pass mark; with some candidates producing well researched and presented work, well above average. Some centres continue to submit investigations of a poorer quality and, as in previous years, all candidates entered from these centres failed due to poor and/or inappropriate design and/or report writing skills. In several instances it was difficult to relate the projects to Course content. Several ethically questionable investigations continue to be submitted. Several centres continue to include consent forms with names/addresses and telephone numbers of participants, breaking BPS guidelines on confidentiality. A small but significant number of centres continue to use underage participants.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Question A1(b) was answered particularly well with many candidates receiving maximum or near maximum marks.

Concepts in the optional Units are generally answered well; however many candidate responses are of a 'sample answer' nature. As these questions are unchanged from year to year the implication is that candidates are rote learning answers rather than demonstrating an understanding of the concept.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Question Paper:

Question A3 (b) was answered weakly and/or many candidates provided an inappropriate response to this question. Answers tended to suggest that candidates had 'rote' learned the broad content of the

question without actually understanding the nature and importance of experimental design in psychology.

Application questions in all optional Units continue to be poorly answered with the majority of candidates reiterating research related to the application, however the majority still do not actually state how the concept is applied.

The complex rubric of the paper continues to cause confusion in a small number of candidates, leading them to attempt all questions in a section or all questions in the paper.

Research Investigation: many of the comments made in previous sessions remain relevant for session 2003-4

Abstracts often lack detail.

Introductions generally provide rich background information, but fail to logically reach an aim on the basis of the information provided.

Methods sections are often scant and confusion remains over experimental design and the need to specifically state the controls used. Apparatus/participants remain inadequately described in some instances.

The results section remains problematic; often, summarised results and graphs were placed in the appendices rather than in the results section. In many instances the results were not related to the hypothesis. In a small number of centres inappropriate usage of analysis continues to be problematic e.g. Mean and SD being calculated on Nominal data. The minority of centres continuing to use inferential statistics continue to do so poorly. As stated in previous years inferential statistics tend to demonstrate lack of candidate knowledge in terms of understanding of probability and statistical significance. Few if any candidates attracted the 1 mark headroom for inferential statistical analysis. Many candidates continue to speak of significance when using descriptive stats. And many continue to use prove, proven etc.

Discussions often lack actual analysis of findings and rarely suggest further research possibilities.

Most candidates provide a Bibliography rather than a reference section as required in Psychology.

A major and on-going problem is lack of ethical requirements when conducting research. The two main problematic areas are in the 'mock' situations often found in Social Psychology and the continued usage of underage participants. **Both of these practices are non-permissible.**

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Many of the comments made in previous sessions remain relevant for session 2003-4

Question Paper:

Candidates should be instructed to read the paper carefully, questions change on the basis of sampling from year to year.

Examples provided in answers should be of a psychological nature.

Application questions require the candidate to demonstrate how the concept is used in everyday life.

Research Investigation:

The choice of area/topic to be investigated should be kept simple and relevant to the content of the Higher.

Methodology should be kept simple with manipulation of one IV only being recommended.

Ethical implications of conducting research **must** be taken into account. It is strongly recommended that no public 'mock up' situations be used. All participants should be 16 years of age or over irrespective if parental consent is given.

Source information should be current and relevant.

Results – graphs, tables should be presented with adequate titles, legends and explanations.

Workings in appendices.

It is strongly recommended that inferential stats are not used at Higher level.

Discussions should be analytical in nature and refer to aims and hypothesis. Specific limitations and suggestions for improvements are required.

Reference section rather than a Bibliography should be provided. References should be cited carefully.