



Course report 2019

Subject	Psychology
Level	Higher

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report 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 assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

The question paper for the revised Higher Psychology course has two sections, one for Individual Behaviour and one for Social Behaviour. Within the Individual Behaviour section candidates are required to answer questions on two topics, the first is the mandatory topic of sleep and dreams and for the second topic, candidates have the choice of either depression, memory or stress. Within the 'Social Behaviour' section, candidates must answer questions on the mandatory topic of conformity and obedience and for their second topic, must choose either prejudice, social relationships or aggression.

The assignment component is well established, with minor changes made to the 'Method' and 'Results' sections. The revised assignment no longer requires candidates to describe their method, materials and sample; instead they are asked to justify their choice of method and sampling technique. The marking instructions in the 'Results' section were clarified and marks re-allocated within the section to provide greater discrimination between A and C grades.

Question paper

The question paper largely performed as expected. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicated it was positively received by centres, and was fair and accessible to candidates.

However, question 1(b), which required candidates to explain the impact of drugs on sleep and was worth 6 marks, did not fully function as intended. The wording may have encouraged some candidates to explain the impact of drugs on sleep in general rather than the impact of specific drugs on sleep. It was concluded that this prevented candidates from accessing the full range of marks for this question and therefore the grade boundaries were lowered.

Assignment

The assignment performed in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested it was comprehensive in terms of coverage, and was appropriately demanding.

Some sections are accessible to all candidates, while others are designed to be more challenging in order to appropriately differentiate between candidates.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Question 6(a), which required candidates to explain two types of discrimination, was well answered, with full marks being fairly common. Most candidates were able to describe two types of discrimination and explain the discriminatory behaviour associated with each, often using an example.

There was an increase in the amount of awards at the upper A band level, which illustrates that there were some candidates who were very well prepared in terms of being able to:

- ◆ provide full evaluations, where required (providing an appropriate strength or weakness and explaining why this was a strength or weaknesses), which were specific to the question asked, rather than generic
- ◆ apply theories/concepts/research to the behaviour described in scenarios
- ◆ analyse theories/concepts/research by providing appropriate:
 - implications of theories or the results of studies
 - links to concepts/theories/studies
 - valid conclusions
 - real-life applications
 - the implications of strengths or weaknesses
- ◆ respond appropriately to the command word in the question by demonstrating and applying the relevant knowledge/understanding/skill

Assignment

Overall, candidates produced clear, well-written reports with detailed introductions and good evaluation and analysis in the discussion section. Candidates were able to draw on knowledge and understanding from course content to inform the design and implementation of their research.

Candidates were also able to combine their knowledge and understanding of the research area of study with relevant knowledge from 'Social Behaviour' and 'Individual Behaviour' to select appropriate methods of research, sampling and analysis. Candidates were able to follow this through with relevant evaluation of the methods used in relation to the specific research, and to provide relevant analysis of their outcome in relation to the topic studied.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Generally, candidates showed little evidence of skills development; particularly the skills of evaluating, analysing and applying (questions that ask candidates to 'explain...with reference to...'). Many candidates provided evidence of their knowledge but found it difficult to use that knowledge appropriately. Also, in general, many candidates gave a narrative account of research studies instead of using them to respond to the question asked. This

suggests that many candidates were not ready for Higher level and may have been better served by being presented at National 5 level.

Questions 5(a), 6(c), 7(c) and 8(c), where candidates were required to use the skill of application, exemplify this issue; candidates could typically give a narrative account of a study/studies that related to the scenario, or an outline of relevant theories/concepts, but could not use this information to explain the scenario.

Questions 2(a), 3(a), 4(a), 6(b), 7(b) and 8(b), which required the application of the skill of evaluation, were also poorly answered. Many candidates found it difficult to locate a study/theory/concept that related to the question asked, and most were unable to explain strengths and weaknesses as required.

Question 3, from the 'Individual Behaviour' section of the question paper, attracted the lowest marks from this optional section. Question 3(a) required candidates to evaluate one study into the working memory model. Many candidates explained the working memory model, or the multi-store model, or evaluated the working memory model (instead of a study) or the multi-store model. This meant that these candidates could not access the 4 marks available because they did not answer the question. Question 3(b) attracted slightly more marks, with many candidates being able to explain coding, capacity and duration in short-term memory.

However, as a key feature of the topic of memory, overall it was less well-answered than expected for a straightforward 'explain' question. Question 3(c) required the application of the skill of analysis to explanations of forgetting. As with other questions requiring analysis, many candidates could not apply higher order thinking skills, as required by the question.

Question 6(b) caused significant problems for some candidates. They were required to evaluate the authoritarian personality theory of prejudice. Many knew how the theory related to explanations of the behaviour of Nazis during World War II, but not much else. A significant minority of candidates did not respond to this question at all.

Question 6(c), which required candidates to apply their knowledge of realistic conflict theory to a scenario, caused candidates particular difficulty. Most provided a narrative account of the Robbers' Cave study without reference to the scenario, and many applied the social identity theory, which could attract no marks as it did not answer the question.

Question 8, which relates to the 'Social Behaviour' option of aggression, attracted the poorest marks overall, although relatively few candidates chose this option. Question 8(b) required candidates to evaluate the importation model of aggression. Most candidates showed little or no knowledge of this aspect of the course specification, so were unable to evaluate it. A significant minority of candidates did not respond to this question at all.

Assignment

Most of the issues relate to the development of skills such as 'justify' and 'apply'.

Many candidates did not provide a clear enough hypothesis in Section B to gain the mark available. In Section C, although most candidates could identify the method chosen for their own research, most could not justify this choice. Similarly, in Section E, there was much

evidence of candidates calculating descriptive statistics without being able to justify why they were doing so.

Again, few candidates gained the full marks available for Section D as responses were largely generic with little consideration of the impact their own, specific research procedure would have on participants. The ethical breaches encountered include:

Deception

A significant number of candidates across a variety of centres submitted unethical reports which replicated Asch/Jenness style conformity experiments which involved deception through the use of confederates or included group discussion in a situation of overt social pressure (see comments below).

Protection of participants

A number of candidates across a range of centres conducted experiments that potentially put their participants at risk of harm. In the main, this occurred when participants were requested by student researchers to behave in ways which could potentially cause physical/psychological harm, discomfort or stress. The use of group discussion as a way of measuring conformity in replications of the Jenness study continues to be used. This is unethical as group discussion may uncover large differences between participant estimations, which may cause distress within those whose guesses differed from the norm. This is a particular risk with groups who are in their teenage years, as many Higher assignment participants are. Other ways of measuring conformity, such as fictitious estimate tables, could be considered.

Further potentially harmful procedures included causing sleep deprivation by asking participants to expose themselves to blue light or to consume stimulants such as caffeine prior to sleep. Any procedure that could potentially disrupt participants' sleep routine is unethical.

Other incidences of potentially causing harm to participants included:

- ◆ being asked to undertake stressful tasks after sleep deprivation
- ◆ showing videos of road accidents to test the accuracy of eyewitness testimony
- ◆ inducing stress by the application of unpleasant noises
- ◆ giving participants their results on a test of prejudice
- ◆ using timed word searches to induce stress
- ◆ using a Stroop procedure where participants had to name the colour aloud in groups
- ◆ debriefing in conformity studies in a way that actively shames participants
- ◆ deliberate lack of briefing and not seeking participant consent
- ◆ requiring participants to solve unsolvable puzzles

Some candidates used questionnaires that could potentially cause harm to participants. This included:

- ◆ personal questions about mental health; sleep disorders and prescribed medication

- ◆ asking for participants' views on their own appearance and the concomitant impact on self-esteem
- ◆ questions about the impact of exam results on stress, which required participants to disclose their exam results
- ◆ invasive questionnaires on prejudice
- ◆ using adapted Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) to measure stress
- ◆ administering questionnaires relating to fatalities to emergency services staff

In addition, some candidates posted questionnaires on social media with no safeguards relating to the scope and type of participants recruited, for example, to ensure that they could only be accessed by friends and family, and those over the age of 16.

Confidentiality

The number of breaches of confidentiality has reduced, but some incidences continue to be identified where participants' names appear, for example, signatures left on consent forms, or by the inclusion of information in the report which could easily lead to the identification of individual participants. It should be noted that there should be nothing included within the body of the report or its appendices that could potentially lead to the identification of research participants.

Protection of candidates

Recruiting participants by having students approach members of the public continues to be an issue as this potentially puts researcher students at risk.

Participants under 16 years of age

Candidates from a few centres used participants under the age of 16. It is clearly stated in the coursework assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

The majority of Higher Psychology candidates are new to the subject. Centres should therefore carefully consider the ability of potential candidates to study a subject with highly abstract content, at this level.

In terms of course delivery, future candidates will benefit from being given guidance and practice on developing the skills required by the course, particularly those of evaluation, analysis and application. Candidates cannot rely on rehearsal alone to do well in the exam and will need to apply higher order skills to the knowledge they have gained. Information and ideas on how to do this are given in the appendix of the course specification. Furthermore, the specimen question paper and the 2019 question paper can be used in class to help students practise these skills.

Finally, centres should pay close attention to the course specification when planning and delivering the course to ensure that all of the content that can be assessed in the question paper is covered.

Assignment

Candidates will benefit from being given support and guidance with the development of the skills of 'justifying' and 'applying', particularly when making decisions about which method they choose in order to fulfil their aims and test their hypotheses, and which descriptive statistic(s) they choose for analysing their data.

Guidance and practice with operationalisation of hypotheses and variables will also help candidates fulfil the requirements of the discipline and the course. This also supports candidates to achieve their aim(s) in more evidence-based ways.

As stated in previous course reports, the ability to treat participants ethically is essential. Candidates must be encouraged to think from the perspective of their participants when devising their procedures. This will involve consideration of their own ability, as Higher candidates, to deal with any overt or unseen internal issues that may arise in their participants from being involved in procedures such as those described above.

They must also be able to explain how their procedures have been made ethical, particularly those that relate specifically to their own investigation. Candidates' research for their Higher Psychology assignment must be ethical and comply with The British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct which can be found at www.bps.org.uk.

Ethical guidance and an overview of the BPS code is provided in the Higher Psychology course support notes on SQA's website (www.sqa.org.uk). Advice is also available in the Association for the Teaching of Psychology (ATP) *Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-Degree Level*, which can be found at www.theatp.org.

Practice with writing in the third person will also be useful. It adds an objectivity to candidates' explanations and is a necessary skill for this subject. Candidates should also be encouraged to avoid the use of inappropriate terminology such as: 'prove', 'significance'

(unless inferential statistics have been appropriately applied) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used).

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	3495
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	3410
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	11.5%	11.5%	392	82
B	14.2%	25.7%	483	70
C	18.9%	44.6%	645	58
D	20.1%	64.6%	684	46
No award	35.4%	-	1206	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
- ◆ 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.

Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring 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. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.