



## Course Report 2017 – External Assessment

Subject	Psychology
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. 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 assessment documents and marking instructions.

# **Section 1: Comments on the assessment**

## **Summary of the course assessment**

### **Component 1: question paper**

The question paper sampled mandatory content across the three sections of the paper, providing candidates with the opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills, including describe, explain, evaluate and analyse.

The question paper performed largely as expected providing a fair and accessible paper for candidates to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they had acquired across the breadth of the course. However, questions 1 (c) and (d) did not perform as expected. This was taken into account when setting the grade boundaries.

### **Component 2: assignment**

The assignment provided learners with the opportunity to demonstrate the following skills, knowledge and understanding:

- ◆ use of research skills to generate, select, organise, interpret, analyse and evaluate information in psychology
- ◆ use of communication skills to present information, including a report on psychological research

Ethical breaches continue to appear relating to confidentiality of participants, individual informed consent, use of participants under the age of sixteen, and potentially risky situations for participants and candidates. Centres are required to ensure candidates apply the British Psychology Society (BPS) Ethical Guidelines while planning, carrying out and writing their assignment. Ethical breaches were so widespread that SQA has written to all centres regarding this. The letter is available on the Psychology page of the SQA website.

# **Section 2: Comments on candidate performance**

## **Areas in which candidates performed well**

### **Component 1: question paper**

#### **Question 1 (b)**

This question was generally well answered. Knowledge and understanding of ethical guidelines were well expressed, with many candidates also able to address how these should be implemented — ie the question was interpreted correctly and responded to appropriately.

#### **Question 4**

Candidates demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of research studies that have investigated conformity and/or obedience. Although the skills of description and evaluation were demonstrated consistently, many candidates did not respond to the command word 'analyse', which limited the amount of marks these responses could be awarded. Analysis marks can only be awarded when candidates extend their responses and show thinking which goes beyond rote learning, for example by providing:

- ◆ implications of theories or the results of studies
- ◆ links to concepts/theories and between studies
- ◆ valid conclusions
- ◆ real-life applications
- ◆ the implications of strengths/weaknesses

#### **Question 2**

Many candidates did explain the Crick and Mitchison's reorganisational theory of dreaming appropriately, but a surprising minority of candidates did not respond to this question at all.

#### **Component 2: assignment**

Overall, candidates produced clear, well-written reports, with detailed introductions and good evaluation 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 unit with relevant knowledge from Social Behaviour and Individual behaviour to select appropriate methods of research and sampling. 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 which candidates found demanding**

#### **Component 1: question paper**

##### **Section 1: Research**

**Question 1 (a):** Responses were often not fully explained or related to the scenario, reducing the availability of marks.

**Question 1 (c):** Candidates were required to analyse the mean scores of an experiment [given in a scenario] in relation to the aim of the research. Most candidates, however, reiterated the mean scores rather than analysed them.

**Question 1 (d):** Candidates were required to *evaluate the research method used in this study by comparing it with **two** other research methods*. The phrase ‘*by comparing it with two other...*’ was missed by most candidates and the majority provided evaluative answers rather than comparisons.

Although candidates evaluated the laboratory method, many did not do so in comparison with two other methods, as required by the question. Many also evaluated research designs instead of research methods. It was evident that some candidates were not sufficiently prepared to answer such a question, limiting the amount of marks that could be allocated to their responses.

## **Section 2: Individual Behaviour**

**Question 3:** A number of candidates responded with topics other than that required. The mandatory topic of sleep, dreams and sleep disorders was most common among these. This suggests that some candidates are uncertain regarding which topics are optional and which mandatory. It also suggests some candidates are unsure whether the optional topics they have studied belong to Individual Behaviour or Social behaviour.

## **Component 2: assignment**

Most of the issues relate to the development of skills such as ‘describe’ and ‘apply’.

Many candidates did not provide a clear enough hypothesis in the introduction to gain the mark available. Candidates also tended to identify rather than describe the method and materials used in the method section. Similarly, in the results section, there was much evidence of candidates calculating descriptive statistics without being able to describe why they were doing so.

Very few candidates gained the full marks available for ethics as responses were largely generic with little consideration of the impact the research procedure would have on participants. As outlined in previous course reports, research assignments in which participants are placed in potentially embarrassing or humiliating situations are unethical. This includes replication of some social conformity research, which is conducted within group situations or with the use of confederates and use of invasive questionnaires where participants are asked to provide personal information or opinions on sensitive issues or life style choices. Reports with unethical procedures cannot access the 4 marks available for this section. The continued use of such unethical procedures is a cause for concern.

In the results section, candidates rarely described why the descriptive statistics they used were chosen, which relates to the issue with the development of skills, in this case, of ‘describe’.

Finally, marks for style were often lost due to the use of unscientific and/or informal language.

## **Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates**

### **Component 1: question paper**

It is clear that candidates' knowledge and understanding of the mandatory content is well developed. The main issue this session was with the ability of candidates to correctly decode questions, and to address the required skill of each — eg describe, explain, evaluate and analyse. Centres would be well served by looking at how questions attract marks by consulting past question papers and, in particular, marking instructions (both generic and specific). These documents provide useful information which will help to prepare candidates for future question papers.

Feedback from markers indicates that many candidates entered at Higher level would be better entered at National 5. This would allow candidates to become familiar with a subject that they are unlikely to have encountered before, its subject matter, scientific nature, terminology and the requirement of the application of higher-order thinking skills (evaluation and analysis). This will also help manage the expectations of candidates with the study of psychology before progressing to the greater demands of the Higher course.

Centres should also ensure that they cover all the mandatory content, and that candidates are aware of which topics are mandatory and which are optional topics.

### **Component 2: assignment**

Candidates should be encouraged to provide fully operationalised hypotheses in their introductions.

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). Writing in the third person should also be encouraged — this skill is common to all forms of formal writing and will transfer usefully to candidates' futures in academia and work.

When designing their assignments, candidates should be appropriately supported by centres to ensure that the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines are applied. Where assignments breach ethical guidelines, and there is a risk of physical or psychological harm, candidates are unable to access marks for this section.

Protection of both candidates and research participants must be paramount. Centre staff should be mindful that these are Higher Psychology candidates, and not fully qualified psychology researchers (with a full research support team and ethical committee overseeing the research). The selection of participants must be considered carefully to ensure the safety of candidates and to ensure participants themselves are over the age of 16 years. Materials used within the assignment must be carefully considered to ensure that questions, pictures or other stimuli do not potentially cause offence, anxiety or embarrassment.

Candidates should be encouraged to provide an ethics subsection in the methods section of the assignment providing detail of ethical issues specific to their own research and how these have been overcome. This can include why a certain sample group have been selected, or why certain questions or pictures have been chosen.

Finally, candidates should be reminded to describe, rather than identify, their chosen research method and materials used.

Whilst it was pleasing to see that the conditions of assessment for coursework were adhered to in the majority of centres, there were a small number of examples where this may not have been the case. Following feedback from teachers, we have strengthened the conditions of assessment criteria for National 5 subjects and will do so for Higher and Advanced Higher. The criteria are published clearly on our website and in course materials and must be adhered to. SQA takes very seriously its obligation to ensure fairness and equity for all candidates in all qualifications through consistent application of assessment conditions and investigates all cases alerted to us where conditions may not have been met.

## Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

### Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2016	3591
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Number of resulted entries in 2017	3666
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### Statistical information: Performance of candidates

#### Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	43.9%	43.9%	579	69
B	61.9%	38.1%	816	59
C	69.4%	63.0%	916	49
D	27.7%	73.0%	365	44
No award	75.1%	-	990	-

## 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, SQA therefore 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 Business Manager 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.