

The Context

Until recently, few students came to University with previous experience of Psychology. Students had little knowledge but many preconceptions about the topic. This has changed over the past few years with the increasing popularity of the A level and more importantly the introduction of the SQA Higher.

This means that students can have a reasonable grounding in the subject, but not to the same extent that Mathematics and Physics perhaps can. However, there has been an improvement in the knowledge that students have on entering. The department has seen this as an opportunity to attempt a subject specific bridge across the School/University gap.

The project has two separate parts. Firstly 200 Level 1 students completed a questionnaire towards the end of the second Level 1 semester. This asked them about their experience of psychology before university. It also asked the student to assess the impact that this experience had on their progress throughout the year.

The second part was the development (ongoing) of an online resource that attempts to bridge the School/ University divide.

Preliminary Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to examine the extent and impact of previous experience of studying psychology (PEP below) with specific emphasis on the SQA Higher.

The questions focused on:

- I. How did the PEP prepare the student for using certain specific academic skills such as report writing and citing in text
- II. How did the student feel that PEP prepared them for the key academic topics taught in Level 1

In all, 200 students filled out a questionnaire. There were 36 students out of the sample that had completed the SQA Higher, and a further 16 completed the A Level. 26 student had complete other qualifications and pre-university courses. This still left 122 of the sample who had no formal experience of Psychology before University. This somewhat justifies the department's disinclination to rely on previous knowledge.

Questionnaire findings

It was decided that because the focus of the project was on the Higher, that only the Higher responses would be examined. The key questions that were of interest were I and II above. The responses are on figure 1 and 2. It can be seen that in terms of skills there are large difference between the preparedness for each skill. The key issues were the low scores for statistics, APA formatting and researching and reading materials

Questionnaire findings (cont..)

The question II was concerned with sense of preparedness for each academic topic in level one. Again there is variation with the topic. The topics that show low preparedness are statistics, perception and cognitive neurosciences. These are not covered extensively in the Higher curriculum. However, they are also the topics that cause students the most issues within the Level 1 course and beyond.

Figure 1: Responses to Question 1 (higher scores indicate stronger sense of preparedness)

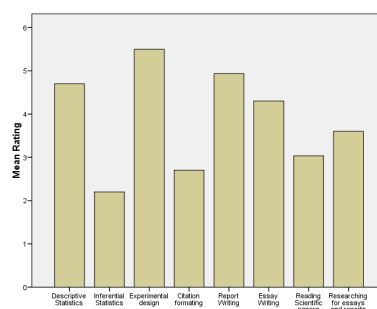
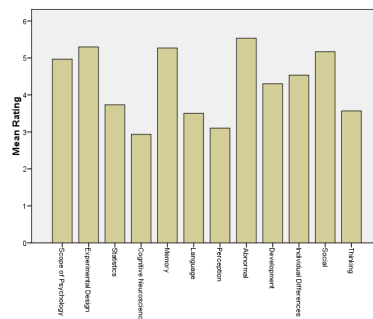


Figure 2: Responses to Question II (higher scores indicate stronger sense of preparedness)



The Resource

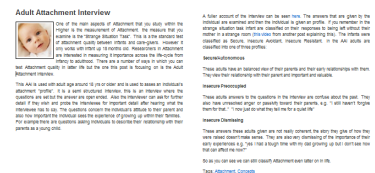
Armed with the results above, we had a clear picture of what topics and skills the students felt confident with and those they did not. The focus on the resource was to:

- > Introduce students to Degree level content related to topics from the Higher curriculum. This would give students understanding of what University level psychology contains, while using topics that they had covered and were comfortable with.
- > Introduce students with the Higher to subject-specific skills such as using APA format and close reading of online resources. This aim arose from the questionnaire result which identified these skills as those that the students felt unprepared for.
- > Introduce students to areas of psychology such as cognitive neuroscience that are not covered in the Higher but are important in the degree programme. Again, this arose from the results above indicating these are topics that cause level 1 students difficulty.

Description of Resource

The online site was developed using Wordpress blogging tool. This was used for the ease of use and access for authors. There are around 15 posts already on the website dealing both the topics from the higher and skill based material. The posts on Higher topics were structured so that a proportion was a recap of the material that would be presented in the Higher classes or from with the textbook (the first paragraph in the example below). Then there is more advanced information on the topic leading off from the basic information.

Figure 3: Example Post



The other posts are focused on the development of key skills. The ones on the site are focused on citing sources within text and the production of a "reference section". It is intended to attempt to provide some critical evaluation exercises based on simple web resources e.g. BBC articles on psychology studies.

Evaluation

Although we have not formally evaluated the website with pupils, we have done some work with teachers of the Higher including one who unusually teaches across the University/School divide (she teaches the Higher and Degree work at University of the Highland and Islands). The comments were in general positive and they liked the tone and the underlying rationale.

One worrying comment was that the Higher is wide in breadth covering a wide number of topics. The concern was that students may become sidetracked by the more in-depth information. This has led us to increasing the emphasis where the higher material ends and the more in-depth material begins.

Future Directions

Future work will focus on expanding the number of articles. Also we are recording a series of podcasts on higher topics that will be available from the site, that follow the rationale for the posts. These will be intended to be used for both private and classroom use.

Website

<http://wordpress.psy.gla.ac.uk/>

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