

## LAW AND PSYCHOLOGY ADMISSIONS TUTORS' PERSPECTIVES OF HOW A-LEVELS PREPARE STUDENTS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDY

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### Abstract

With August comes the annual and often frenzied media coverage of examination results and inevitable conclusions drawn about (typically falling) educational standards (see Billington, 2006). Regardless of whether such conclusions are justified, or justifiable, debate continues throughout the year in the general media over the perceived utility and worth of current A-level qualifications in particular (e.g., Asthana, 2007; Paton, 2007), or education standards in general (e.g., Iggulden, 2006). Notwithstanding the contribution of the media, there has been some credible research undertaken which has found there to be a widely-held perception that current A-levels may be of questionable benefit in preparing students for studying at university (Association of Colleges, 2006). This paper appraises that research and describes a study that was conducted to ascertain the extent to which Higher Education Admissions Tutors for Law and Psychology Bachelor degrees considered A-levels prepared students for university study. Results of the present study indicated that the majority of admissions tutors agreed that a range of GCE subjects, to varying degrees, adequately prepared students for study at university.

### INTRODUCTION

#### A-levels

There has been some research into perceptions of the benefit of A-levels generally in preparing students for study at university. As part of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, a series of focus groups were conducted to investigate university lecturers' and admissions staff expectations of the education and training of 14 to 19 year olds (Wilde, Wright, Hayward, Johnson, & Skerrett, 2006). Over 250 participants from 21 higher education institutions across England and Wales took part in the focus groups. The majority of participants perceived there to be a general decline in the literacy and numeracy skills of school leavers, to the extent that some institutions were providing additional support in literacy and mathematics, although details of this support were not reported. Moreover, some participants considered that degree courses might need to be lengthened to account for the additional resources and time needed to support the limited literacy and numeracy skills of current applicants.

There is further evidence to indicate that this may be an issue for some universities, with a recent article by Frean, Yobbo, and Duncan (August 15, 2007) in *The Times* reporting on a small survey of universities' provision of study skills or essay-writing classes for undergraduates. Of the 117 universities approached, 26 of the 47 that replied stated that they offered classes in study skills or essay writing. Although many universities offer such classes as a matter of course, Frean et al. quoted staff from four universities who stated that these

classes were a new initiative in response to poor literacy skills among students. However, the article does not specify how many of the responding universities had introduced such classes as part of a new initiative, or whether they were components of pre-existing (or recently expanded) study skills programmes.

Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Association of Colleges (2006) found that many students considered A-levels to be of questionable benefit in preparing them for university study. This survey of 1,027 first-, second-, and third-year undergraduates (446 males, 581 females) found that only 58.6% of respondents slightly or strongly agreed with the statement "Doing A Levels adequately prepared me for my current university course". Of the remaining respondents, 17.7% disagreed (either slightly or strongly) that A-levels prepared them for their course; 23.7% were neutral or did not know. However, this study was somewhat limited in that it only asked a single general question relating to A-levels.

Although the above examples illustrate that there are negative views surrounding the perceived utility of A-levels, the evidence is largely anecdotal and unfocussed. The present paper describes a study that aimed to expand upon this limited previous research, and to determine the extent to which Higher Education Admissions Tutors, those individuals who organise and co-ordinate the selection of students who apply for admission to undergraduate degrees, perceive that A-levels prepare students for university study. However, for reasons discussed below, the present study focussed upon the opinions of Law and Psychology Admissions Tutors.

### **A-level Law**

The commissioning of this study arose from AQA's Senior Subject Officer in Law and Psychology's awareness of anecdotal evidence suggesting that some careers advisors and university admissions tutors consider A-level Law to be unhelpful in preparing students for studying Law at university. To illustrate, a teacher of A-level Law stated in the Spring 2003 issue of the *Association of Law Teachers Bulletin* that, although almost all universities consider A-level Law to be an acceptable subject for admission to a degree course, "*...there are still some individual lecturers (and some careers advisers) who try to discourage students from taking this option*" (Deft, 2003). These contradictory opinions of A-level Law are apparent in the published entry requirements for Law degrees at individual universities, with the majority of universities' admissions criteria either not specifically mentioning A-level Law at all, or simply including it in a list of accepted subjects.

The few universities that do refer to A-level Law specifically in their admissions criteria generally state that studying Law at school confers no particular advantage or disadvantage (e.g., University of Bristol, "FAQs about undergraduate admissions", n.d.). There are, however, some exceptions. For example, Lancaster University ("Admissions information", n.d.) advises potential applicants to take other subjects unless they have a particular reason to study Law at A-level. In a more revealing example, Churchill College, Cambridge state on their admissions information web page that, although they "*...do not frown upon the taking of law at A-level, [they] do not in any way require it or even recommend it. Because [they] believe that the more 'traditional' and rigorous A-level subjects provide the best preparation for the study of Law...*" ("Admissions information: The courses: Law", n.d.).

In terms of other less "traditional" A-level subjects, Law degree admissions criteria generally do not include A-level General Studies as a subject that contributes to entrance points, with

the majority of universities going so far as to explicitly exclude it. In addition, some Law Schools (e.g., Lancaster, Warwick, and Liverpool Universities) actively recommended Law-related work experience as a way for students to gain some insight into the profession, enhance their curricula vitae and show their commitment to pursuing legal studies. This does, however, raise the question of why studying law at A-level might not similarly give students at least some insight into the Law profession or show a student's commitment to pursuing legal studies. Furthermore, despite the fact that Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) were not listed as a requirement for any offer of a degree and that there currently is no AEA in Law, AEA results could provide information to allow admissions tutors to differentiate between applicants, especially for high demand courses. This corresponds with research commissioned by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) which comprised a survey of schools and colleges that entered candidates for AEAs during 2004 (Qualifications and Skills Division, 2005). This survey found that teachers and some university faculties considered the AEA to be an effective preparation for study of that subject at degree level, through encouraging the development of higher-level skills over and above a standard A-level.

In addition to the above, there is the students' perspective, with anecdotal evidence showing that many first year undergraduates report being glad that they had taken A-level Law as an introduction to the subject (Deft, 2003). Therefore, considering all of the above, the obvious attractiveness of AQA Law to A-level candidates (over 18,800 entries for AS/A2 June 2007 awards), and that much of the related evidence is anecdotal, it was apparent that this issue was worthy of further investigation.

As a consequence, a questionnaire was constructed to survey Law Admissions Tutors' opinions of the degree to which they felt that specific A-level subjects (including Law) prepared students for studying Law at university. However, while composing the survey items and ascertaining the composition of the sample, the researcher decided to widen the scope of the study somewhat. Accordingly, the questionnaire was constructed to determine the extent that A-level subjects were useful in preparing for university study generally, in addition to studying Law in particular. Furthermore, a number of factors led the researcher to decide to include Psychology Admissions Tutors in the survey. First, it would provide a larger and broader sample. Second, Psychology and Law are similarly specific in focus, in that they are both professional degrees, the two disciplines are often combined at honours degree level (e.g., Swansea and Staffordshire Universities). More importantly, the cited arguments that subject-specific A-level Law confers no particular advantage or disadvantage to studying undergraduate Law should, notionally at least, also apply to the similarly subject-specific A-level and undergraduate Psychology.

### **A-level Psychology**

An inspection of the published entry requirements for Psychology degrees at individual universities found a pattern of admissions criteria that was broadly similar to that of Law. To illustrate, Psychology A-level was not a stated admissions requirement for studying Psychology in the majority of universities; see, for instance, University of Bristol ("Undergraduate admissions statement", n.d.) and University of Bath (Bonugli, 2007). However, in contrast to admissions criteria for Law degrees, there were a number of universities that considered A-level Psychology to be a subject that was, for example, preferred (e.g., Queen Margaret University, "BA/BA (Hons) Public Relations and Psychology", n.d.), desirable (e.g., Birkbeck, University of London, "Psychology (BSc)", n.d.), or

recommended (e.g., University of Derby, "BSc (Hons) Psychology", n.d.). Some universities considered A-level Psychology to be a science and consequently included it on their list of accepted science subjects (e.g., University of Oxford, "How to apply and selection criteria", n.d.). Note that this practice is likely to become more common given that A-level Psychology has recently been reclassified by QCA as a science subject, with specification changes having the potential to make this subject acceptable to yet more university admissions tutors.

As with Law admissions, criteria for admission to study undergraduate Psychology generally did not include A-level General Studies as an acceptable subject. It was, nevertheless, clear that there were fewer instances of General Studies being explicitly excluded from accepted subject lists for Psychology admissions, with the admission criteria of the University of Bath and the University of Warwick providing examples of this restriction. In terms of related work experience, Psychology departments showed a similar attitude to their Law counterparts. The University of Bath's admission criteria (Bonugli, 2007), for example, state that relevant work experience could give applicants an understanding of the profession and boost their curricula vitae when seeking work placements at university. Admissions tutors from Law and Psychology also had similar attitudes to AEAs, with the University of Oxford's Department of Experimental Psychology ("How to apply and selection criteria", n.d.) stating that an AEA in Psychology "*provides an opportunity for the most able students to develop further their critical understanding and appreciation of psychology.*"

Insofar as students' opinions are concerned, there is anecdotal evidence showing that some undergraduates considered A-level Psychology to be a helpful introduction to studying Psychology at university. For example, the British Psychological Society (n.d.) state on their Careers and Qualifications web page that many students find that studying Psychology at A-level "*gives a useful insight into the subject and helps them decide if they will be suited to study psychology at degree level.*" It has even been suggested that A-level Psychology should become a pre-requisite for a Psychology degree (Toal, 2007) and that it has the potential to benefit the teaching of Psychology at university (al Yafai, 2007), although the mechanisms by which this may happen were not made evident. Despite the fact that not all A-level candidates aim to go on to tertiary-level Psychology, it is nevertheless a very popular subject with students with over 90,000 AS/A2 entries for AQA Psychology A and B specifications, and over 1,200 AEA entries.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and materials**

This study used a self-report questionnaire survey mailed out to participants. The survey was a brief 19-item questionnaire on a single A4 sheet (Appendix A) asking participants to rate their opinion of the degree to which they felt that certain A-level subjects adequately prepared students for study at university. Responses were made on a four-point Likert-type scale (*Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree*) with a fifth 'not applicable' option. The seven subjects listed were: English, Mathematics, Critical Thinking, Law, Psychology, General Studies, and Information & Communication Technology (ICT). Two additional open-response items provided space for participants to suggest "Other (e.g., Advanced Extension Award, related work experience)" subjects or topics. The questionnaire comprised two sections, the first of which asked respondents to consider the extent to which they felt that the listed subjects prepared students generally for study at university. The second section asked respondents' opinions of how well the same list of subjects prepared students for studying

Law (or Psychology) in particular. The final item on the questionnaire was an open-ended question asking for general comments as a means of providing some qualitative data to gain further insight into respondents' opinions about A-levels.

### **Procedure and participants**

Postal surveys often suffer from low response rates with reported rates ranging from 10% (Alreck & Settle, 1995) to around 30% (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1994) and as high as 60% in the health field (Asch, Jedrzejewski, & Christakis, 1997). This issue was particularly problematic for the current study given the relatively small target sample (initially estimated at approximately 200). Consequently, and in line with a large body of research into mail survey response rates (e.g., Edwards et al., 2002), a number of strategies were employed to maximise the number of people responding to the survey. The questionnaire was short, the outgoing envelope and introductory letter were personalised (where possible), a pre-paid return envelope was supplied, and it was fair to assume that the questionnaire would have been of interest to the majority of participants. Furthermore, to minimise socially desirable response bias, the introductory letter and questionnaire preamble stated that participants' responses would be anonymous. This latter element unfortunately precluded any university-level analyses of the data.

A search of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, <http://www.ucas.ac.uk>) database was undertaken to initially identify higher education institutions that offered undergraduate degrees with majors in Psychology or Law. Individual university web sites were then used to source admissions and other relevant information including the name and title of Law and Psychology Admissions Tutors. If name and title details were not available for admissions tutors, the survey was addressed to the Admissions Office in the relevant School or Department. An introductory letter (Appendix B), which explained the survey and what was required of participants, the questionnaire and a pre-paid addressed return envelope were then mailed out to a total of 76 Law and 94 Psychology Admissions Tutors or Offices (total = 170).

Despite the strategies employed to maximise the response rate, the number of responses received was low for both Law ( $n = 30$ , 39.5%) and Psychology ( $n = 24$ , 25.5%) groups. These rates, and the overall response ( $N = 54$ , 31.8%), were nevertheless comparable with or greater than response rates of previous similar studies (e.g., 27.8%, Chamberlain & Lowther, 2006; 17.5%, Chamberlain & Taylor, 2006).

## **RESULTS**

### **Studying Law at university**

As can be seen in Table 1 below, 73.3% of Law Admissions Tutors either agreed or strongly agreed that A-level Law adequately prepared students for studying Law at university. Although this clearly represents the majority of respondents' opinions, there was nevertheless a significant minority (26.7%) who did not agree that A-level Law prepared students for studying university Law. Considering the modal (i.e., most common) response, as indicated by the shaded cells in Table 1, the majority of Law Admissions Tutors responded "agree" to Mathematics, Critical Thinking, Law, Psychology, and Information & Communication Technology (ICT). In contrast, English attracted a modal response of "strongly agree" and General Studies "disagree".

In terms of other subjects that respondents considered useful in preparing students for studying university Law, four tutors suggested related work experience (e.g., Law-related, “*work with money & people*”), and three suggested students take any Advanced Extension Award (AEA). Other subjects suggested included Physical Education, Art & Design, Sciences, Modern Studies, “*subjects with strong theoretical content*”, and “*the student’s native language*”. Some respondents suggested subjects which engendered skills such as critical thinking, analytical, research, or communication skills. One respondent stated that any subject which helped students to “*develop best effort every time, no second chances*” would help prepare them for studying undergraduate Law.

**Table 1**  
**Response frequencies of Law Admissions Tutors’ opinions that A-level subjects adequately prepare students for studying Law at university (n = 30)**

Subject	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable	Total (n = 30)
English	<b>19</b> (65.5%)	<b>4</b> (13.8%)	<b>3</b> (10.3%)	<b>3</b> (10.3%)	<b>0</b> (0.00%)	<b>29</b> (96.7%)
Mathematics	<b>6</b> (21.4%)	<b>10</b> (35.7%)	<b>8</b> (28.6%)	<b>1</b> (3.6%)	<b>3</b> (10.7%)	<b>28</b> (93.3%)
Critical Thinking	<b>9</b> (31.0%)	<b>10</b> (34.5%)	<b>7</b> (24.1%)	<b>3</b> (10.3%)	<b>0</b> (0.00%)	<b>29</b> (96.7%)
Law	<b>4</b> (13.3%)	<b>18</b> (60.0%)	<b>8</b> (26.7%)	<b>0</b> (0.00%)	<b>0</b> (0.00%)	<b>30</b> (100.0%)
Psychology	<b>1</b> (3.6%)	<b>13</b> (46.4%)	<b>9</b> (32.1%)	<b>2</b> (7.1%)	<b>3</b> (10.7%)	<b>28</b> (93.3%)
General Studies	<b>0</b> (0.00%)	<b>7</b> (25.0%)	<b>12</b> (42.9%)	<b>7</b> (25.0%)	<b>2</b> (7.1%)	<b>28</b> (93.3%)
ICT	<b>1</b> (3.4%)	<b>14</b> (48.3%)	<b>10</b> (35.5%)	<b>2</b> (6.9%)	<b>2</b> (6.9%)	<b>29</b> (96.7%)

### Studying Psychology at university

As shown in Table 2 below, 76.2% of Psychology Admissions Tutors either agreed or strongly agreed that A-level Psychology adequately prepared students for studying Psychology at university, with 23.8% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This pattern mirrors that of Law Tutors’ opinions regarding the study of A-level Law as preparation for studying university Law. Furthermore, the overall pattern of modal responses (as indicated by the shaded cells) is not dissimilar to that of Law Tutors’ responses, with the majority of respondents in both groups agreeing that A-level Mathematics, Critical Thinking, and ICT adequately prepared students for studying their respective subjects at university. The majority of Psychology tutors agreed that English adequately prepared students, whereas A-level General Studies exhibited a bimodal response, with respondents choosing “agree” and “disagree” in equal numbers.

In terms of other subjects that Psychology Admissions Tutors considered useful in preparing students for studying university Psychology, two respondents suggested related work experience, two suggested A-level Biology and one suggested AEA Psychology. Other subjects suggested included natural and social sciences (e.g., History, Geography, Politics), and foreign languages. Some respondents suggested any subjects which encouraged students to be self-motivated and to work independently, developing such skills as critical thinking, analytical, research, or communication skills. One respondent suggested any subject which gave students “*strong literature skills, presentational skills, the ability to relate theoretical ideas to practice and sound emotional competencies (social awareness, interpersonal skills)*”.

**Table 2**  
**Response frequencies of Psychology Admissions Tutors’ opinions that A-level subjects adequately prepare students for studying Psychology at university (n = 24)**

Subject	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable	Total (n = 24)
English	5 (22.7%)	11 (50.0%)	5 (22.7%)	1 (4.5%)	0 (0.00%)	22 (91.7%)
Mathematics	8 (36.4%)	11 (50.0%)	3 (13.6%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	22 (91.7%)
Critical Thinking	3 (13.6%)	11 (50.0%)	5 (22.7%)	2 (9.1%)	1 (4.5%)	22 (91.7%)
Law	1 (5.0%)	4 (20.0%)	5 (25.0%)	1 (5.0%)	8 (45.0%)	20 (83.3%)
Psychology	10 (47.6%)	6 (28.6%)	4 (19.0%)	1 (4.8%)	0 (0.00%)	21 (87.5%)
General Studies	0 (0.00%)	7 (36.8%)	7 (36.8%)	4 (21.1%)	1 (5.3%)	19 (79.2%)
ICT	5 (23.8%)	9 (42.9%)	6 (28.6%)	1 (4.8%)	0 (0.00%)	21 (87.5%)

### Studying generally at university

Responses from both groups of tutors were combined to give an indication of their opinion of how the listed subjects prepared students for university study in general, with results presented in Table 3 below. It is apparent that 76.4% of Admissions Tutors either agreed or strongly agreed that A-level English adequately prepared students for studying generally at university. Employing this criterion further showed that respondents considered that, in descending order, Mathematics (72.6%), ICT (66.0%), Critical Thinking (64.7%), Psychology (59.2%), Law (51.9%), and General Studies (33.4%) adequately prepared students for university study in general. This is reflected in the pattern of modal responses indicated by the shaded cells in Table 3 below.

**Table 3**  
**Response frequencies of Law and Psychology Admissions Tutors' opinions that A-level subjects adequately prepare students for university study in general (n = 54)**

Subject	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable	Total (N = 54)
English	22 (43.1%)	17 (33.3%)	6 (11.8%)	5 (9.8%)	1 (2.0%)	51 (94.4%)
Mathematics	14 (27.5%)	23 (45.1%)	7 (13.7%)	2 (3.9%)	5 (9.8%)	51 (94.4%)
Critical Thinking	7 (13.7%)	26 (51.0%)	11 (21.6%)	7 (13.7%)	0 (0.00%)	51 (94.4%)
Law	5 (10.2%)	23 (46.9%)	11 (22.4%)	3 (6.1%)	7 (14.3%)	49 (90.7%)
Psychology	5 (10.2%)	24 (49.0%)	14 (28.6%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (10.2%)	49 (90.7%)
General Studies	1 (2.1%)	15 (31.3%)	16 (33.3%)	11 (22.9%)	5 (10.4%)	48 (88.9%)
ICT	6 (12.0%)	27 (54.0%)	11 (22.0%)	2 (4.0%)	4 (8.0%)	50 (92.6%)

### Qualitative results

Giving respondents the opportunity to make general comments proved to be a successful strategy with 33.3% of Law respondents and 54.2% of Psychology respondents proffering a comment. Following numerous readings of the text, three main themes emerged. The first and most dominant theme concerned the degree to which undergraduates lacked basic and generic study skills. The second theme centred upon the notion of specialisation at A-level, while the final theme focussed upon the general utility of A-levels in preparing them for university study.

Within the first theme, the most frequent comments related to a lack of basic skills. For example, one tutor stated that students had *“startling deficiencies in numeracy and literacy”* and, as the following quotes illustrate, the comments were unambiguous and uniformly critical of first year undergraduates' English skills.

*“Currently, students come to us lacking basic English skills, despite having 'A' grade at A level for English.”*

*“We find English to be the major problem. Students cannot construct a sentence, spell or use grammar and punctuation properly.”*

*“In my experience, students do not appear to have the basic skill of reading.”*

While it may be tempting to consider these comments to be little more than a general rant or wide generalisations about how standards are declining, it is apparent that tutors considered this a real problem in need of addressing. To illustrate, one respondent stated that:

*“A-levels seem to have engendered in students an overly-formulaic approach to examinations and a belief that poor English is acceptable. So much so, in fact, that we have had to put on a compulsory English Writing Skills course for all first year students. I would, therefore, emphatically agree with those students who do not feel that A-levels prepare them adequately for university study.”*

Within the first theme, much of the textual data related to school leavers lacking specific skills considered by admissions tutors to be important for studying at university. These skills included critical thinking, the ability to analyse and synthesise, and academic rigour. For example, one respondent stated:

*“A major problem is that coursework can be redone before submission and modules retaken. This leads to a 'rehearsal syndrome'. Students feel they can always do things again. At university there is only one chance to get it right. Courses in schools need to develop best effort every time, no second chances. That would better prepare students for university life.”*

In suggesting that universities typically do not allow students a second chance, this latter comment is a rather sweeping generalisation; it is difficult to imagine that university students would not be able to re-sit or re-submit work.

The second theme centred upon the notion of specialisation at A-level, particularly through studying A-level Law or Psychology. Some respondents considered that studying a *“limited range of subjects”* or *“specialising too early”* at A-level put students at a disadvantage and did not prepare them for undergraduate study. One Law tutor stated:

*“In theory these subjects ought to prepare students for the study of Law. However, whilst the majority of students have acquired the required levels of knowledge to get good passes in the subjects studied at school they lack the depth of understanding and application needed upon entering university.”*

A Law tutor commented that *“...students who do study a subject at A level before embarking on undergraduate studies on that topic tend to be complacent and of the opinion that they already 'know' the subject.”* A similar opinion was voiced by a Psychology tutor who found that first year students who took A-level Psychology became bored because sections of the course were repetitive; something that was necessary to give those who did not take A-level Psychology the opportunity to catch up. Another respondent stated that *“A2 Law can be counter-productive – if relied upon too heavily in Year 1.”* This connection between A-level specialisation and the first year of undergraduate study was central to a number of responses, as illustrated by the following statements.

*“A level law gives students a slight advantage in the first year of the LLB but after that students seem to be more evenly placed.”*

*"I don't think that problems arise from A level subjects themselves, but from the lack of academic rigour endemic across the board of A levels. Law, in particular, appears relatively undemanding."*

*"A-level in Law gives university-level law students an edge at the start of first year of the LLB programme, but this edge (familiarity with terms) is short-lived and what matters more are writing skills and critical thinking ability."*

The above comments indicate that studying Law or Psychology at A-level may indeed be beneficial and help prepare students for taking a degree, but that any benefit (i.e., compared to those who did not specialise at A-level) has dissipated by the end of the first year.

The third theme related to the advantages of A-levels generally. However, there were many fewer instances (three in total) of this theme to be found in tutors' responses and all came from Psychology admissions tutors.

*"A-level is an important necessary step before university. We certainly do not want to take people coming after just GCSEs."*

*"All A level subjects are useful in general."*

*"We feel that A levels are generally a good preparation for study at university."*

There are two further responses (both from Psychology admission tutors) worthy of mention, if for no other reason than because they do not readily conform to any of the above themes. The first tutor (Tutor A) provided responses only to the items he or she considered were related to studying Psychology at university and made the following comment:

*"Given I only have knowledge of students' performance in one subject area, there's no way that I can sensibly comment on how useful subjects are for university study in general! I've only commented where we have specific data bearing on the issue (mean degree mark achieved by students holding each type of A level). We do not have enough AEA students to comment objectively but I suspect that these qualifications are going to become more and more important to us."*

The above quote indicates that this respondent did in fact obtain objective data to inform his or her responses, something that was not evident in other responses. It appears that Tutor A collected specific data (i.e., "mean degree mark ...type of A level") relating performance in undergraduate Psychology with performance in A-level subjects. Tutor A's statement draws attention to the present survey's methodological limitations relating to a lack of specific quantitative data regarding the relative benefits of A-level subjects, an issue that will be considered in the Discussion section.

The ideas expressed by Tutor B, the second Psychology admission tutor, echo those of Tutor A. Tutor B also raised the prospect of obtaining data other than the possibly biased opinions of admissions tutors, suggesting that students were the best source of information to answer these questions:

*“It is possible that a survey on admissions tutors’ opinions will result in empirical evidence of biased views but will not get to the heart of the matter. I wonder if you might consider surveying the opinions of the students themselves. They have access to ‘joined up’ information. They know what subjects they took, how prepared they felt when they arrived at uni, how prepared they felt subsequently, how well they did at uni, how relevant A-level study was, etc etc etc. In short, they are the experts...!”*

Finally, of the 54 admissions tutors who responded to the survey, a large proportion (20 Law, 13 Psychology) chose to give additional comments, an indication of the depth of respondents’ engagement with the survey and the issues that it raised. This is reassuring, and given that the aim of the survey was to discover tutors’ opinions about A-levels at both the subject-specific and the general level, strengthens the conclusions drawn in the next section (response bias notwithstanding).

## **DISCUSSION**

In terms of the initial question that led to this study, the results of this study provide some support for the anecdotal evidence suggesting that some university admissions tutors consider A-level Law to be unhelpful in preparing students for studying Law at university. This support, however, does not come without caveats. First, the survey found that approximately three-quarters of responding Law Admissions Tutors held the view that A-level Law was helpful, with a similar proportion of Psychology Admissions Tutors stating that A-level Psychology did adequately prepare students for studying Psychology at university. In other words, opinion on whether or not specialising in a specific subject at A-level for later study at university is helpful is not unique to Law tutors. It was also apparent that Psychology tutors were, generally speaking, more accepting of A-level Psychology than Law tutors were of A-level Law.

In addition, the majority of respondents held the opinion that English, Mathematics, Critical Thinking, and ICT provided adequate preparation for university study. General Studies was the noticeable exception, with the majority of respondents stating that they did not consider it to prepare students adequately. This negative view of General Studies could be related to the characteristics of the sample (e.g., inter-discipline bias) or the subject (e.g., subject specific-knowledge, transferable skills), however, it is clearly not possible to determine the reasons for this negative opinion within the context of the present study. Nevertheless, it is a view that is reflected in the admission criteria of the many universities that do not include A-level General Studies as a subject that contributes to entrance points.

A sizeable number of respondents (over 1 in 5) did not consider the listed A-level subjects to prepare students adequately for university study in general. This negative view was reflected and expanded upon in the qualitative evidence, with many respondents stating that they generally did not consider A-levels to be adequate preparation for university, with a lack of transferable skills such as literacy and numeracy being a major area of concern. It is doubtful whether poor literacy and numeracy skills can be directly linked with specific A-level subjects in this way, a drawback of the present study’s use of general questions to determine tutors’ opinions. Regardless, this issue reflects the findings of other surveys that have highlighted the concerns of university staff that school leavers are lacking in these skills (Frean et al., 2007; Wilde et al., 2006) and raises wider questions regarding the perceived (and expected)

utility and content of GCE specifications, issues that are beyond the scope of this paper but worthy of further study.

Having said that, there were instances in tutors' responses suggesting that any benefits associated with studying Law or Psychology at A-level were no longer evident by the end of the first undergraduate year. This makes intuitive and practical sense, because unless A-level Psychology, for example, becomes a prerequisite for studying Psychology at university, undergraduate courses will necessarily be taught under the assumption that students have no prior knowledge of the subject. However, this draws attention to an element of contradiction in the responses. It is unclear how, on one hand, studying A-level Law or Psychology can be beneficial in that it gives students some prior knowledge, yet detrimental because it creates complacency or is repetitive. Admittedly, it is possible that these inconsistent responses are a consequence of the general questions used in the survey rather than inconsistencies in the opinions of individual tutors. On a positive note, a number of admissions tutors' stated that some undergraduates found their first year repetitive, suggesting that A-level Law and Psychology specifications comprise elements that are, at least at face value, comparable to degree-level courses.

The aim of this study was to gather the opinions of admissions tutors and it was successful in that respect; there are, however, limitations associated with the survey methodology used. To elaborate, the research question arose from a market research perspective and was related to a specific A-level subject (AQA Law) and a specific sample (Law Admissions Tutors). The post hoc decision to expand the survey to include other A-level subjects and admissions tutors aimed to broaden the research perspective and give the survey greater empirical depth. However, this strategy introduced a number of methodological limitations.

Although response rates were reasonably high (comparatively speaking), the representativeness of the sample is in question given that approximately two-thirds of the intended sample did not respond. It is possible that only those with stronger views took the effort to respond to the survey, thereby introducing a self-selection bias. There is the interconnected possibility that those who did not respond lacked interest in the study or held neutral views. Given this self-selection bias and that the representativeness of the sample cannot therefore be determined unequivocally, the response frequencies reported above and any subsequent conclusions must be viewed with a degree of caution. To illustrate, of the 30 responding Law tutors, eight (26.7%) did not agree that A-level Law prepared students for studying university Law. If we were to assume that all of the 46 non-responding tutors held positive views on this issue, as unlikely as it may appear, the percentage of tutors disagreeing with this statement would fall from 26.7 to 10.5. Other possible reasons for non-response include surveys being lost in the internal or external mail systems, or that people were too busy. Although a follow-up mailing may have alleviated these latter problems to some extent, the survey was anonymous and non-responding universities could not be identified and approached individually. It was decided, therefore, that the possible benefits of a second mailing were outweighed by the cost in terms of available resources and time.

Given the methodological limitations of the present study and that the majority (if not all) of the previous research on this issue has taken a similar form, this study has unearthed an issue that requires further investigation. The present results suggest that awarding bodies may not be fully aware of how their GCE subjects contribute to Higher Education admissions. Further, awarding bodies may lack a clear picture of the extent to which the utility and content of current GCE specifications meet the expectations of Higher Education in general, or

Admissions Tutors in particular. As a consequence, there are numerous opportunities for future research. For example, it would be a relatively simple matter to conduct a larger, possibly longitudinal, study to collect data such as student performance by GCE subject and at undergraduate level (e.g., grades by year or degree). This could provide supplementary and more objective evidence as to the comparative benefits to students of studying a specific subject at A-level and subsequently at university. Furthermore, the list of A-level subjects could be expanded to include other specialised GCE subjects such as Accounting, Health and Social Care, Philosophy or Religious Studies. Such a study could include a qualitative component to ascertain students' perspectives on the advantages of studying particular A-level subjects on their undergraduate studies.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study show that the majority of Law and Psychology Admissions Tutors agreed that English, Mathematics, Critical Thinking, Law, Psychology, and ICT adequately prepared school leavers for university study. There was, however, confirmation of anecdotal reports that some university Law Admissions Tutors hold the opinion that A-level Law does not prepare students for studying Law at university. However, results also showed that these Law tutors held parallel views regarding other A-level subjects and A-levels in general, with a similar proportion of Psychology Admissions Tutors voicing the same opinions. That some Admissions Tutors considered that A-levels do not provide school leavers with the skills required for tertiary study, particularly in terms of literacy and numeracy skills, is an area of concern. This is particularly so given that similar opinions are evident in other research and have previously been voiced by university lecturers and admissions staff, as well as students. However, this provides an opportunity to conduct further, empirical research into whether these opinions are well founded. It also suggests that there may be some benefit in widening the dialogue between awarding body specification developers and the Higher Education sector to minimise apparent discrepancies between expectations of Admissions Tutors and A-level outcomes.

Anthony Daly  
2 November 2007

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## APPENDIX A

### Your views on how adequately GCE subjects prepare students for studying at university

A recent survey has found that many undergraduates feel that A Levels did not adequately prepare them for studying at university. Assessment and Qualifications Alliance is conducting research into current views on how well certain GCE subjects prepare undergraduates for studying at university in general, and Law and Psychology in particular. As part of this project, Assessment and Qualifications Alliance is carrying out a survey of university Admissions Tutors' opinions on this topic. Therefore, we would be very grateful if you would complete this survey by indicating the extent to which you consider that the GCE subjects listed below prepare undergraduates for studying at university. Your responses are confidential and anonymous.

Please tick the box that most closely represents the extent to which you agree that the following GCE subjects adequately prepare students **generally** for study at university (from **Strongly agree** to **Strongly disagree**)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	n/a
English	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Mathematics	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Critical Thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Law	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Psychology	<input type="checkbox"/>				
General Studies	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Information & Communication Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other (e.g., Advanced Extension Award, related work experience) Please specify					
-----	<input type="checkbox"/>				
-----	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Please tick the box that most closely represents the extent to which you agree that the following GCE subjects adequately prepare students for studying **Law** at university (from **Strongly agree** to **Strongly disagree**)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	n/a
English	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Mathematics	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Critical Thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Law	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Psychology	<input type="checkbox"/>				
General Studies	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Information & Communication Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other (e.g., Advanced Extension Award, related work experience) Please specify					
-----	<input type="checkbox"/>				
-----	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

Admissions  
Anglia Law School  
Anglia Ruskin University

RESEARCH & POLICY ANALYSIS DEPT

Direct Dial: 01483 556 414  
e-mail: [adaly@aqa.org.uk](mailto:adaly@aqa.org.uk)

14 November 2007

Dear Sir or Madam,

There is ongoing debate in the media over the utility and worth of GCE A Level qualifications. In addition, some students perceive that A Levels may be of questionable benefit in preparation for university study, with a survey conducted by the Association of Colleges in 2006 finding that a large proportion of undergraduates considered that their A Levels did not adequately prepare them for studying at university. On the other hand, there is anecdotal evidence showing that some undergraduates considered A Level Law, for example, to be a helpful introduction to studying Law at university (J. Deft, ALT Bulletin 111). Furthermore, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority commissioned a survey of schools and colleges that entered candidates for Advanced Extension Awards in 2004. This survey found that teachers and some university faculties considered the Advanced Extension Award to be an effective preparation for study of that subject at degree level, through encouraging the development of higher level skills over and above a standard A Level.

As a consequence, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance is conducting research into university admissions officers' current views on the extent to which they consider that GCEs prepare undergraduates for studying at university in general, and for studying Law and Psychology in particular. Therefore, we would be very grateful if you would volunteer to assist in this project by completing a brief single-page questionnaire on this topic and returning it via the enclosed pre-paid envelope, by Friday 8<sup>th</sup> June.

This research is being conducted in accordance with the Research Code of Practice of the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, so please be assured that any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence. Respondents and universities will remain anonymous and will not be individually identifiable at any stage.

Should you require additional information regarding this research, please contact me at the above address.

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Anthony Daly  
Senior Research Officer