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Psychology

2015 Chief Assessor’s Report

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## Overview

Chief Assessors’ reports give an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, the quality of student performance, and any relevant statistical information.

## School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Investigations Folio

In this assessment type, students collect primary data that they use to formulate their own research question. In the proposal phase, students should decide whether they will use qualitative or quantitative data — not both. The 1500-word limit does not allow students to do justice to a discussion of both. Some proposals exceeded the separate word-count of 250 words. Students should refer to the SACE Word-count Policy and note that words beyond the limit are not assessable.

In order to effectively address all four assessment design criteria, teachers should guide students to choose a research question beyond a basic ‘before and after’ comparison of means and to use appropriate terminology in the construction of the question. The proposal should clearly indicate whether a relationship or a comparison is being discussed.

Relevant sections of the proposal that address the investigation assessment design criterion, such as the hypothesis and the description of data used to address the hypothesis, should be included in the introduction section of the report. It is beneficial to include a description of how the independent variable was manipulated (in an experimental design) and how the dependent variable was measured, along with a reference to any scales used, if relevant. A description of how the sample was determined is also useful in this section. There is no need for a description of the method since it has been provided in the approved research design.

Students are discouraged from presenting many tables and graphs, as it is difficult to analyse this much information within the word-count. Raw data should not be presented in the results section, except if a scatter plot is used.

The best reports contained thoughtful and detailed evaluation of the investigation design. They discussed the quality of the data, strengths and weaknesses of the design with suggestions for improvements, and ethical considerations that were specific to the study. Competent students were able to describe how the validity and reliability of the data affected possible conclusions that could be made.

Some students reused comments from the discussion section of their group investigation in their individual investigation, thereby limiting the breadth of their discussion and not demonstrating analysis and evaluation specific to the investigation. Extensive scaffolding or templating of tasks is discouraged, as it can limit students’ ability to demonstrate perceptive analytical skills.

Assessment Type 2: Skills and Applications Tasks

In this assessment type, students are required to use their knowledge and understanding of psychology in a range of tasks that may be:

* posed in new and familiar contexts
* routine, analytical, and/or interpretative
* individual or collaborative

The majority of the student evidence was in written form, although a minority was presented in oral form. Most sets of tasks consisted of mainly tests with one or two assignments. Student evidence of learning was validated more consistently within this assessment type, and teacher judgments in assessment were more accurate when tests were being used.

Although marks are used to assess test questions, teachers need to use the performance standards to assign grades. There is no set conversion of test percentages to grades and some students awarded E grades based purely on marks were moderated to higher grades based on performance standards.

The design of tasks sometimes caused downward adjustment of grades because students could not demonstrate sufficient evidence across all design criteria. Students awarded A grades in sets of tasks primarily based upon knowledge and understanding were adjusted downwards. Questions that used scenarios and reviews of unfamiliar texts or media clips provided opportunities to assess the other criteria of application, and analysis and evaluation. Teachers are also strongly encouraged to devise new and unfamiliar questions, as student familiarity with past examination questions can reduce analytical and evaluative questions to simply recall questions.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Examination

The examination was in two sections: short-answer questions worth 80 marks and extended-response questions worth 40 marks. The overall mean percentage was 63%.

The mean percentage for each question is shown below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| **Mean %** | 69 | 73 | 77 | 60 | 69 | 42 | 56 | 53 | 68 | 68 | 82 | 51 | 62 | 61 |

Many students demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of the concepts covered in this course. Answers generally could be improved by more consistent use of appropriate psychological terms and responding to the specific situation of the question, rather than providing generic answers. Students should pay attention to the key verbs used in questions and respond accordingly, and explain abbreviations if used.

Section A: Short-answer Questions

*1(a)*The vast majority of students referred to the Yale communication model of source, message, channel, and audience, with source (credible and/or attractive) and message (evoking a positive emotional response towards cyclists, e.g. sympathy) the most common responses.

Answers referring to direct experience and/or mere exposure were answered well.

The routes of persuasion were also often discussed. The majority of students referred to the scenario; less successful students, however, simply defined the central and peripheral routes of persuasion and did not address the specific situation referred to in the question.

*1(b)*Generally, students who performed well demonstrated that they understood the distinctions between the key verbs used in the examination. For example, in this question, they recognised the difference between ‘state’ and ‘describe’. The vast majority of answers referred to some type of scale, with a rating scale being the most common. Good answers had a specific example of how the scale would work (e.g. ‘participants rate their opinions on a scale of 1 to 5’ or similar). Some students wrote a scale with the varying strengths, that is, ‘1 = strongly dislike to 5 = strongly like.’ Less successful students simply rewrote the question and stated ‘rating scale’; for example, ‘one subjective quantitative measure to measure attitudes towards cyclists is a rating scale’ or ‘participants indicate their opinions on a Likert scale’. Such answers *name* a quantitative measure rather than *describe* it as required in the question.

A common mistake was for students to refer to either objective quantitative measures or qualitative measures. Interviews or surveys with open-ended questions were also common incorrect answers.

*1(c)*The vast majority of students obtained full marks for this question, although there were some rewritings of the question and a management technique simply named (e.g. ‘one impression management strategy Calvin could use is dressing well).’

The most common error was the citing of verbal strategies rather than nonverbal, in particular the content of what Calvin should say (e.g. ‘Calvin needs to explain why cyclists have just as much right to be on the road as motorists.’)

*1(d)*This question was generally answered well. The majority of students referred to both upward and downward examples of social comparison with Suri. Less successful students revealed their confusion very clearly (e.g. ‘Suri could make an upward social comparison to Tania in regards to her cycling as this will make her feel better about herself as she is a better cyclist’).

*2(a)*It was rare for students to get full marks for this question.

The most common correct answer was in relation to the adaptive function. However, many students simply defined this function of attitude (e.g. ‘Brandon can maximise his reward of getting a good education’). The self-expressive function was the second most common response. Most answers referred to Brandon telling others he enjoys education. Only rarely did students refer to anything else (e.g. wearing his school jumper with pride).

*2(b)*Students understood this concept well. Errors, if they did occur, included examples of behaviour affecting attitude (‘If Brandon goes to school every day, he will have a positive attitude towards education.’) Other students referred to factors affecting attitude formation, such as attitude specificity or attitude strength.

*3*Students had difficulty applying ethical issues to the scenario. Consequently, many of the answers were generic.

Some students failed to realise that the software was already in place and referred to an ‘experiment’ that the social psychologists were going to undertake. The most common ethical issues referred to were confidentiality (keeping identities and searches confidential) and informed consent (consumers being informed of the tracking).

It was very common for students to describe their first issue well but not their second. Students who discussed confidentiality and privacy often repeated themselves.

*4(a)*This question was generally answered well.

Those students who failed to obtain full marks often cited the fight-or-flight response in their answers without explaining the benefit of arousal in response to a threat. Some incorrect answers referred to arousal always needing to be low to be beneficial to health.

*4(b)*The most common error involved students not providing an example as required in the question, and simply defining the Yerkes–Dodson law.

The best answers referred to moderate levels of arousal being best for optimal performance and explained how very low or very high arousal can impair performance. The most common example used was completing an examination.

*4(c)*The most common therapy cited was cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). However, many students found it difficult to write two points on CBT relating it to arousal. Other answers referring to CBT focused on changing thoughts and perceptions, but did not address the behavioural component of the therapy.

*4(d)*Very few students gained full marks for this question.

Many students referred to a general sleep-hygiene technique that did not relate to jet lag (e.g. don’t take naps during the day). Many incorrect answers referred to ways of preventing jet lag rather than overcoming it. A common answer here was to travel westward.

The most common correct answer was to travel to the destination a few days or weeks before the performance to help the circadian rhythm adjust to the new time zone.

*5(a)*This question was well answered.

The most common answers included the presence of vivid dreams and paralysed skeletal muscles. A few students simply stated the features rather than described them. Other students incorrectly referred to sleep spindles and K complexes, features of Stage 2 sleep.

*5(b) (i)* Students most commonly referred to the use of the electroencephalogram (EEG) to measure brain waves in their answers, as well as behavioural observations by researchers.

Again, less successful students tended to simply identify a method without description, and revealed confusion about data types, referring to rating scales and open-ended questionnaires.

*5(b) (ii)* This question was generally done well. The majority of students referred to social desirability affecting either the validity and/or reliability of the data collected.

The most common error was in misreading the question and discussing a disadvantage of *objective* data, as in the previous question. Many students, again, identified a *disadvantage* and did not *describe* it.

*6(a)* This part was well answered by students, with the most common answer being ‘fixed ratio’, followed by ‘partial reinforcement’.

*6(b)* This part was poorly answered. Very few students understood that ‘continuous reinforcement’ is also a reinforcement schedule.

*7* Students who did not get full marks tended to discuss classical conditioning, rather than operant conditioning. Other answers were often vague, without the key terms of operant conditioning being used. Many students could define positive reinforcement but struggled to correctly apply it to the example. Some students described negative reinforcement rather than positive reinforcement. Many students simply reworded the question, failing to add any new information.

*8* Many students correctly identified and described two of the attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation terms. However, many struggled to achieve full marks as they did not relate these terms to the example given, omitting any reference to adults/parents and cooking.

Attention and reproduction were the most common answers given by students.

*9* This question was answered quite well by most students, with many providing more information than was required to gain full marks.

Students who did not gain full marks for this question tended to mention the treatment without linking it to the example of flying. Some struggled to understand the purpose of deep relaxation in the process. Others related their example to a fear of heights rather than a fear of flying, as stated in the question.

*10(a)* Classical conditioning seems to be a concept well understood by students. Part (a) was well answered with most students correctly identifying the conditioned stimulus as the squeaky door and the conditioned response as Scruffy’s excitement.

*10(b)* Stimulus discrimination also seems to be well understood by students. Students who did not gain full marks in this part tended to do so because of poor expression rather than incorrect knowledge. Some students misread the question and described generalisation instead of discrimination.

*10(c)* Many students struggled with this answer. Not many referred to contiguity or gave a good definition, although they were able to mention the importance of closeness in time for conditioning to occur. Generic textbook definitions were also quite common.

Some students discussed contingency rather than contiguity, emphasising the importance of John arriving home consistently.

Very good answers included proficient use of terminology such as ‘conditioned stimulus’, ‘unconditioned stimulus’, and ‘conditioned response’ with reference to components given in the scenario.

*11(a)* Students appear to be highly proficient at reading graphs, with most students correctly identifying the answer as 80%.

*11(b)* Students either received full marks or struggled to get 1 mark for this answer.

Many students referred to evidence from the graph as directed by the question, and then expanded on symptoms of cognitive impairment, such as loss of concentration or poor decision-making.

*11(c)* Most students correctly identified this as an ethics question. Many students named an ethical issue but did not describe it (e.g. ‘harm’ was a common answer). Other students simply identified the cessation of the experiment as an ethical issue, with no elaboration. Some students discussed legal implications rather than ethical ones.

*12(a)* It was pleasing to see that many students understood that the manipulation of the programs watched by the two groups made this an experimental design. However, others believed that simply the presence of two groups was enough for an experimental design, overlooking the allocation of participants into those groups. Students should realise that observational designs frequently make use of existing groupings among participants, such as gender or age differences.

*12(b)* Many students struggled to distinguish between their answers for part (a) and part (b), simply restating their answers from part (a). Students with a more sophisticated understanding of research methods in psychology described the establishment of causal relationships, the greater control over extraneous variables, and the possibility of replication for verification purposes.

*12(c)* Students appear to be highly proficient at identifying variables. Most students answered this well; however, some stated the group rather than what each group was exposed to.

*12(d)* Students did not need to know what ‘matched pairs’ were prior to the examination, as the information was provided to them in the question. However, many students simply restated this information and did not provide an explanation as to why this was undertaken.

*12(e) (i)* Students generally answered this part well. Less successful students merely restated the two means instead of providing a conclusion.

*(ii)* Responses to this question demonstrated student difficulty in differentiating between validity and reliability. Although some students could recite a learned definition, they contradicted themselves when explaining and applying the term to the question.

Many students mentioned sample size, but did not discuss its relevance. Students who answered well specifically made reference to external validity.

*(iii)* The definition of reliability was often done well, although students, again, often contradicted themselves in their application, confusing validity and reliability.

Section B: Extended-response Questions

*Question 13*

The two dot points were generally well addressed, but a number of students discussed two theories for each conception (for example, Eysenck and the big five, followed by Rogers and Maslow), without discussing any one in enough depth for full marks. Occasionally students mistakenly described Freud’s psychodynamic conception of personality.

Some students included entire paragraphs about personality assessment, treatments and/or strengths and weaknesses of different personality conceptions. Teachers are encouraged to stress to their students the importance of addressing the question; information, irrespective of accuracy, does not earn marks if it is not relevant.

* Trait Theory

The most common trait theory used was the big five. It was also the most accessible as it allowed many options for students to gain marks. Many students showed clear concept understanding, describing each of the five main traits and then supporting their conclusions about Katherine with evidence from the scenario. The extraversion–introversion continuum was understood well and applied to Katherine accurately. On the other hand, the traits of being open, conscientious, neurotic, and agreeable were sometimes applied incorrectly to Katherine by weaker students, showing lack of understanding of the terms. Some students had difficulties distinguishing between the words ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscientiousness’. The ‘conscientious’ trait was often misinterpreted as ‘being self-conscious’ instead of hardworking and diligent. Some students confused Katherine’s trait of conscientiousness with agreeableness. The big five trait theory was also often referred to as the ‘OCEAN’ theory. Students should realise that communication marks are jeopardised when psychological terminology is used loosely. A few candidates gave a list of the descriptions of personality from the question but did not relate these characteristics to the traits.

Generally, however, this part of the extended response was done very well and many responses for this section gained maximum credit.

Students who chose Eysenck also frequently achieved high content marks. Again, some students correctly described their trait conception but did not use correct examples from the scenario. A common misconception among students was the definition of neuroticism. Many students wrote that Katherine was neurotic, using the fact that she was calm and unemotional in times of crisis as supporting evidence. There was also much confusion about psychoticism and impulse control.

Allport was not used as frequently as other theories. Explanations were generally vague in relation to central, cardinal, and secondary traits. The better responses included definitions of the terms. Those who discussed Allport often struggled to apply the theory to Katherine.

* Humanistic Theory

A large majority of students discussed Maslow as opposed to Rogers.

The expression of the humanistic theory was often competent, although ‘hierarchy’ was rarely spelt correctly. Varieties of interpretations in relation to Katherine were presented and awarded marks if logical evidence was cited.

Most students had a sound understanding of the theory, but some were unable to interpret/draw from the scenario and link to the theory. A few responses demonstrated an incomplete knowledge of the deficiency needs and what the title represented. Many students struggled to clearly and logically link the stages with the description provided of Katherine. There were also misunderstandings of the movement from one level to another. A number of students misinterpreted Katherine as having ‘love and belonging’ from caring for her mother and sister, as opposed to receiving it herself. Some students assumed that Katherine had achieved self-actualisation but were unable to give a reason why.

Common misconceptions also included Katherine being at multiple stages of the hierarchy at the same time and Katherine being self-actualised while not meeting the love and belonging level. Many students wrote as if self-actualisation were easily accomplished by everyone. Some stated that Katherine hadn’t self-actualised but had reached transcendence.

Those students who chose Maslow’s hierarchy of needs were more easily able to gain maximum marks compared to those few students who related Katherine’s personality to Rogers’ congruence/incongruence model. Most described Rogers’ theory well but were unclear of its application.

*Question 14*

Generally, the highest-scoring answers were those that had clear paragraphs with information specific to the dot points and well-structured information that was logical and flowed easily.

Many students correctly identified parts of the scenario that fitted each of the levels of explanation of behaviour but did not elaborate as required in a ‘discuss’ question.

While defining a term before applying it is useful at times, students should be more critical of their definitions. For example, defining the biological level of explanation as ‘the biological processes in the body’ does not add meaning to the response.

For the biological level of explanation, a large majority of students merely listed symptoms from the stimulus material without elaboration. This list of symptoms often included non-biological symptoms. The better students described the sympathetic nervous system activating the fight-or-flight response, and the release of adrenaline and its effect on the heart rate. Abbreviations such as SNS and BPM were used by some students without explanation.

For the basic processes level of explanation, many students simply identified that Sam had negative thinking patterns, as described in the scenario, without further elaboration. Some students discussed coping strategies and interventions at the basic processes level rather than symptoms. It was common for students to describe Sam’s thinking patterns without linking them to his behaviour. The effect on behaviour was usually limited to a very brief outline of school avoidance. Very few attempted a detailed discussion of any form of conditioning or learning theory. A common mistake was to misinterpret the biological symptoms (e.g. lack of sleep) as basic processes with the suggestion that this was then the cause of the subsequent behaviours.

Excellent answers included discussions of classical conditioning (associating assessment with failure), or negative reinforcement (the aversive stimulus of anxiety removed by school avoidance), or learned helplessness (past punishments resulting in the abandonment of hope).

Most students were able to explain how sociocultural factors mentioned in the scenario could have helped Sam cope with his anxiety, referring to support groups (support from family, friends, and teachers). Well-structured responses included identification of a factor (e.g. support group) and then discussion of how that factor could have helped Sam cope (seeing others with anxiety could have helped Sam realise he was not the only one with anxiety). Better students were able to effectively discuss the reduction of stigma. Sophisticated responses included social comparison to the celebrity to demonstrate their understanding of this level of explanation. However, some students misinterpreted the question and identified risk factors from the scenario.

For the person level of explanation, students should have focused on person factors that could have helped Sam cope with his anxiety. Sam’s characteristics outlined in the scenario could have been used to discuss some coping strategies, such as his willingness to learn and read about his anxiety, his openness to new ideas, and his persistence. Effective statements identified a person factor and described or explained how that factor could have been instrumental in helping Sam cope with his anxiety. Instead, there were often quite detailed descriptions of excellent strategies and therapies to overcome Sam’s anxiety. Some students ignored the question and blamed Sam’s personal traits for his anxiety. Some answers included sociocultural levels of explanation (e.g. the support Sam got from family or friends) in this section.

In summary, there is still confusion in the understanding of the levels of explanation.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers. Teachers’ assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators. Teacher grades/marks should be evident on all student school assessment work.

For moderation of Assessment Types 1 and 2, teachers are reminded to submit the learning and assessment plans (LAPs) with completed addenda for any changes made during the year. Variations — Moderation Materials forms also need to be completed appropriately where required.

All summative assessment items for students in the moderation sample should be submitted for moderation, with clear indication of the teacher’s assessment decisions. As the teacher’s assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators, it is very helpful to see teacher grades, marks, or comments on the student work. When students give oral presentations, evidence in the form of transcripts or PowerPoint slides should be presented. Evidence of student collaboration through the use of self-assessment and/or peer assessment is often useful.

Teachers are also encouraged to seek the most up-to-date information on the SACE website. References to ‘SSABSA’ and the use of outdated performance standards should be avoided.

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