

Psychology at Samuel Whitbread Academy

Intent

By studying the AQA A level Psychology curriculum students will discover just how varied the discipline of psychology is. They will be exposed to a vast array of different viewpoints, behaviours and methods and ultimately come to understand just how complex human behaviour is. Students will study topics which make them see certain behaviours in a new light and develop empathy and understanding from those suffering from mental health disorders.

Students will realise that the world is not black and white and that humans don't have total control over all that they do, that ultimately some behaviours are pre-determined. Students will discover that some psychologists disagree with the idea that our behaviours are mapped out at birth and that humans have choice and free will to behave independently. Ultimately by studying Psychology at A level our students will develop skills of reasoning, debating and consideration of viewpoints different from their own.

It is our intent to help our students develop knowledge and understanding about what causes or motivates humans to behave in the way they do, what impacts choices they make and how early experiences can shape all later behaviour. They will develop understanding that research is not done in isolation, that it is conducted to give society a better understanding of how to help mediate problem behaviours and individuals who are suffering.

Whatever career students go on to have, by studying A level Psychology, they will be better equipped to deal with colleagues, customers and superiors.

At the start of year 12 we introduce our students to 2 topics we feel give them the skills and knowledge required to navigate the rest of the course. These topics are Approaches and Research Methods and come from the Paper 2 curriculum. The knowledge gained in Research Methods allows students to understand the principles of researching and how different methods are used to investigate human behaviour; this then allows them to effectively evaluate research studies they come across in later units. Knowledge of Approaches allows students to see the differing perspectives psychologists have on the causes of human behaviour and introduces them to concepts and theories they then have to apply to behaviour in later units. The focus at this time is on the AS level methods – this topic is double weighted and some of the concepts needed to be understood are tricky, hence Research Methods is split across the year with the first half taught at the beginning of year 12 and the second half at the end of year 12. These 2 topics are taught in the first term of year 12, with completion late in the Autumn term.

Following on topics from Paper 1, Introductory topics in Psychology are introduced, Psychopathology, Attachment, Social Influence and Memory. These topics give our year 12 students a taste of the wide variety that psychology offers in terms of understanding human behaviour. Each topic is taught by one teacher, and two topics are taught at a time, to allow students to develop their understanding of that topic over a longer period and to allow them chance to review notes and embed the knowledge over time. The study of these topics allows students to develop their understanding of Developmental, Cognitive, Social and Abnormal psychology and give them a taste of the different disciplines. Throughout the study of these topics, students have to use their skills and knowledge learnt from term 1 in Approaches & Research Methods as they are expected to be able to, for example, apply behaviourist theories such as classical and operant conditioning to the development of phobias and the building of an attachment bond. Throughout they are exposed to research methods questions that are contextualised within the examination papers so regularly review and practice those skills. These 4 topics are taught from later in the Autumn term, through to the first half of the Spring term when they are completed.

The final half term/term is focused on completion of Paper 2, Psychology in Context, with the teaching of Biopsychology. This in depth look at the role that biology plays in the development of human behaviour really allows students to see psychology in a scientific way. It gives them greater understanding of how our biological systems can cause us to behave in certain ways and how the environment interacts with genes for example to express certain behaviours. Completion of the Research Methods also takes place here where students are introduced to the A level content, with a focus on looking at psychology as a science and how results of studies are either significant or not by looking in more depth at statistical testing.

Students are then introduced to Paper 3 (Issues and Options) topics of Issues and Debates where they explore some of the major issues that psychologists seek to both address and debate such whether behaviour is due to nature or nurture and to consider how much culture bias there is in psychological research. This topic seeks to challenge students to draw upon what they have learnt over the past academic year and consider it in a different context. During this term, students are also preparing for their end of year 12 IPE exams.

Throughout the year students are encouraged to complete independent prep work which can include; review and re-writing of notes, watching films with a psychological theme and writing a review, or creating revision resources. Students have to upload their prep work once a month for the Head of Department to review. In addition, students are asked to also complete two guided reading tasks once a month, where they are exposed to either an article closely linked to a topic they are currently studying or something from another area in psychology.

Key Stage 5: Year 13

One hour a fortnight in year 13 is assigned to prep review and wider reading. Students have uploaded prep before the lesson for teachers to review and offer advice on. The hour is dedicated to reading articles either related to topics they are currently studying or exposing them to psychology beyond the curriculum. They are encouraged to reflect on what they have read, reach conclusions, and offer commentary on the merits of the studies referenced in the article.

Year 13 starts with a review of Biopsychology ahead of an end of topic test. Students at this point also reflect on their year 12 IPE results and set targets for the year ahead, with a focus on the year 13 IPE exams in December.

A-Level research methods is completed where students add the final touches to their understanding of researching in psychology by looking at how a formal psychology investigation is written up and apply their understanding of methods to extended writing in designing of investigations in 12 mark questions.

Part way through the autumn term students begin to study Aggression and Schizophrenia, looking in depth at specific human behaviours and seeking to explain them from multiple perspectives and debating how far our behaviour is due to environmental or biological influences. Students have to learn complex theories and explanations of behaviour and be able to use evidence to discuss the merits of each using the skills of extended evaluation they have been developing.

Following their IPE on Psychology in Context in December, students start studying their final topic of Relationships alongside Aggression in the Spring term. Amongst other areas, this unit explores the world of virtual relationships and looks at how our evolutionary past affects mating preferences in the modern day.

Towards the end of the Spring term, students prepare for a final IPE in Paper 3, following this, students begin to revisit topics from Year 12 with a focus on embedding the knowledge and applying it successfully to exam questions.

Impact

At completion of the AQA A level, students will have learnt 11 topics which cover a wider variety of differing opinions, ideas, theories and explanations of human behaviour. They will have developed skills of evaluation, analysis and application of knowledge. They will have learnt the importance of independence, organisation, hard work, discipline and self-motivation during the study of a content heavy curriculum.

The number of students taking A Level Psychology has consistently been high. Many students who achieve highly at GCSE go on to study the course at A Level. Currently, there are over 40 students in Year 12 and Year 13, and this number continues to remain high.

Many students are inspired by what they study and go on to study Psychology at university and go on to have careers in areas such as Educational Psychology, counselling and the police force. Between 2019 and 2021, over 40 students have gone from studying psychology at A Level to undertaking it in some form at University.

Throughout students are challenged to reach their full potential, stretch themselves and encouraged to go above and beyond their targeted grades. They develop a belief they can achieve and have transferrable skills that can directly benefit them in future careers, university degrees or apprenticeships.