



#SaveAnthropologyAlevel: the campaign which tried to retain anthropology in British schools.

Aimee Middlemissⁱ
University of Exeter

At the end of the 2015 winter, as freezing rain hit the west facing windows of my Wednesday night anthropology A-level evening class at Truro College in Cornwall, we were moving into Unit 3: Global and Local Societies. Globalisation, technology, communication, identity and diaspora, resistance, conflict and opportunity: my students, aged from 18 to 60, were connecting these ideas and the experiences of others to their own lives in moments of revelation, excitement and despondency. I was about to encounter the same meshing of the global and local, the same complexity of emotional reaction, in the campaign to save the subject which so engaged us all on those Wednesday nights, in response to the AQA (Assessment and Qualification Alliance) decision to cancel the anthropology A-level.

For the next few months, #SaveAnthropologyAlevel fought to be heard through new technologies such as Twitter, email, and the petition website Change.org, and through the older media of radio and press. It called upon a global group of individuals whose passionate identification as anthropologists made up their own diaspora, and who behind the scenes and publicly tried to use the power invested in their institutions to resist a decision they believed to be against the public good and to have been made on the basis of economic cost analyses. Time and again, the connected world the A-level students were studying was revealed to me as I tweeted and emailed requests and thanks for support from a laptop in a Cornish cottage. And when, ultimately, the campaign failed and it became clear that AQA's decision to axe A-level anthropology could not effectively be challenged, my students and I felt that powerlessness and ineffectiveness which can characterise local experience in the face of the huge and other wider world.

When in January 2015, AQA quietly announced its decision to axe A-level anthropology, the first response from me was that it was not obvious who would contest this. I had assumed, as I worked part time teaching the relatively new A-level in remote, rural and peripheral Cornwall, that somewhere out there was a big community of engaged anthropologists and teachers who would have a say in a decision like this. I just didn't know any of them. A flurry of emailed outrage from other A-level teachers and the RAI revealed my ignorance – there were so few of us! And some of the few were employed by AQA as examiners and could not openly campaign against their employer. The RAI and its education committee, which I became aware of for the first time as a body not somewhere in abstract academe but concretely and actively embedded in the existence of the wonderful A-level it had created, had no say in the cancellation of the qualification it had created. It appeared to have not even been consulted by AQA, despite the hours of time it had put into the development of the specification.

So who could run a public campaign against AQA's decision? The academics were all involved in full time work elsewhere, the RAI Education Officer Emma Ford was doing sterling work connecting people and creating a presence for the A-level online, but there was no dedicated press office. And an authentic campaign should be run by the people it affects rather than by institutions. Tentatively, on 29th January, some of the A-level school and college teachers started to act, sharing ideas on email about how we could make our voices heard before AQA. To save our A-level, we needed to be able to put pressure on AQA to get the decision reconsidered, in particular public pressure, which cannot be so easily ignored. In the meantime, the teachers, students and academics from the RAI started to write private letters of protest to AQA, hampered by the refusal of the awarding body to give out the email addresses of those responsible for the decision. Teacher James Harvey wrote to every member of the AQA executive and Council. My own letter of protest was answered by a Customer Support Advisor at AQA:

Despite our best efforts take-up [of A-level anthropology] has been much lower than we had hoped. Low entries in a subject also make it more difficult for us to ensure that we have sufficient experienced examiners and can award the qualification reliably. So while we do our best to respond to the needs of teachers and students by adapting our qualifications and creating new ones where we can, this also means not continuing with others when they no longer meet the need of students.

As an education charity, we have to make decisions about how we most effectively use our resources, for example balancing our desire to maintain a wide portfolio of subjects with investing in subjects that meet the needs of many students (email from Chris Waite, 30/01/15).

It appeared that AQA were not interested in engaging in private dialogue with teachers of the A-level, preferring to deflect criticism and media attention. The decision was announced quietly on the subject website; the number of students affected was claimed by AQA to be very small; other forces such as the government's A-level reforms and Ofqual were invoked, making it seem like a small bureaucratic decision which was causing a few teachers with a vested interest to whinge. Indeed, the response to my complaint read:

I appreciate that this has been disappointing news but I hope you understand why we had to do it. Thanks again for your feedback (email from Chris Waite, 30/01/15).

When you have no voice, the traditional response is a petition. The day after the RAI confirmed that AQA was cancelling the A-level, I used Change.org to set up a petition: 'Save Anthropology A-level', which called upon the Chief Executive of AQA awarding body Andrew Hall, the Director of General Qualification Development Geoff Coombe and the Qualifications Developer for Social Sciences Gulferm Wormald to develop a new A-level anthropology so that British students could continue to study the subject at A-level. [Note: The decision to remove the anthropology A-level qualification occurred in the context of a general reform of all A-level specifications initiated at this time by the regulatory authority Ofqual – eds.] I had telephoned AQA to try to get a name of someone directly responsible for the decision, but they were unhelpful, so I used their website to try to work out lines of responsibility. The wording of the petition itself was designed to accurately reflect what AQA had done ('decided not to develop the course after 2018') and to be measured in tone, so that we could not be accused of hyperbole. I also tried to touch on the widest possible set of reasons to keep the A-level, so as to attract a variety of signatories, whilst keeping the description of the protest relatively short and readable; nothing kills interest on the internet so much as huge tracts of text. So the petition asked people to support the benefit of teaching A-level anthropology because of the transferable skills of cultural awareness and critical thinking, because of the link to students going on to study the subject at university, and because losing the diversity of A-levels would impoverish future A-level students in the UK. It also mentioned that the course had only been examined from 2011 and therefore that AQA had not given it time to develop and expand, nor had it put resources into teacher training and resource development. The petition was to become in the next few months one of the unifying symbols of the teacher-led campaign to defend the A-level, and an internet-based public space for an outpouring of passionate support for the subject of anthropology in general.

I felt very strongly that there was time pressure in creating a campaign with momentum and that publicity and numbers were the only way of being heard. In my twenties I worked as a journalist in the newsrooms of BBC Radio Four, on the programmes *Today*, *The World at One*, and *PM*. Editorial meetings were about allocating limited airtime to competing interests and stories – why is this interesting to a wider audience? Who cares? What are the party political ramifications? Can we make it controversial? What's the 'peg'? – meaning why is it news today? How can we 'move this on' – meaning what can our news programme add to make this our distinctive story? Getting something into the wider public consciousness via traditional media is all about currency, topicality, speed, scope and conflict. A little story, like the cancellation of an A-level affecting only a few hundred people, is not of national interest unless it gains huge popular support, or the support of a person of national stature, or unless it prompts a wider political row, or it is raised in a national institution such as Parliament. If your story doesn't tick those boxes, it can't compete with news stories about an upcoming national election, celebrities facing abuse charges, conflict in Syria and Ukraine, assassinations in Denmark and Russia.

Once the petition was online, it became an obsession. In the first few days, it circulated amongst the teachers and students via email and Facebook, gathering momentum. Teachers added their arguments about the value of the subject to the petition. First to sign, Dave Latham from Sutton Coldfield argued that 'the skills and knowledge that students can gain could genuinely change the world'. Tomislav Maric in London explained how it had changed his students 'from very judgmental to very open minded people by the end of the two year course', a sentiment echoed by Laura Pountney who said that 'students have grown throughout the course'. Daniel

Huntington in Cornwall used the high student numbers at Truro College to claim ‘the subject is expanding at this very moment. I urge the AQA Board of Executives to consider the student numbers as they presently are and as they will be, rather than as they have been in the past.’ James Mathias commented ‘As a teacher of anthropology, I can see first hand the benefits to my students as they start to appreciate other people's cultures while at the same time gaining a deeper appreciation of their own culture.’

As ideas occurred to us on that first day, we started spreading the word to other organisations, contacting schools, colleges, university departments and academics who might support us, asking institutions like the International Baccalaureate Organisation (who also offer anthropology at school level) to email their contacts on our behalf. We were simultaneously trying to get numbers of signatures on the petition and names of well-known people who might attract media attention. Teachers such as Tomislav Maric, James Harvey and Dave Latham were emailing all their anthropology contacts to whip up support, a campaign on Twitter was tagged #SaveAnthropologyAlevel and kept up momentum through moving videos and photos from students, particularly those of Tomislav in London. There was a fair amount of duplication of effort – Professor Joy Hendry, instrumental in the existence of the A-level and passionately campaigning for its retention, must have been bombarded from all sides as we grabbed bits of spare time to offer ideas and suggestions for action. We were all emailing academic contacts and these people started to both sign the petition and share it with their own friends and contacts. Many, many academics and researchers supported the teaching of anthropology in schools, often from other countries such as Australia and the USA. However, support amongst the more well known academics in the UK was less visible and disappointing. Outside the RAI Education Committee, only a few high profile academics signed or tweeted about the campaign. I also trawled the internet for famous people with a background in anthropology or anything related, tweeting them and emailing their agents as if I were still working for The World at One bidding for interviewees. As all this started to take effect, the petition got over 2,000 signatures in the first five days. Behind the scenes, a lot of work was going on to try to promote the visibility of the petition. Whenever I could, I was checking the names of signatories and trying to email or tweet thanks to anyone who might have further contacts who would sign. I also needed to get high profile signatories’ comments to the front page of the petition, which might be seen by journalists, which involved asking lots of other people to log on to Change.org to ‘like’ new comments. The petition website allowed me to send campaign updates to supporters, so this became both a way of trying to reach supporter contacts and of highlighting campaign successes, media coverage and the support of high profile anthropologists, such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s letter to AQA and Brian Morris’ letter to the Times Higher Education Supplement in which he insisted ‘It is of vital importance that our young people learn something about ‘other cultures’ – the study of which has always been the hallmark of anthropology.’

I was very concerned about losing momentum in the campaign. For someone with a background in news journalism, any delay between the announcement of AQA’s decision and gaining some press coverage would be detrimental. The RAI had confirmed to the teachers that the A-level was under threat on Wednesday 28th January. As I wrote in an email to teachers and the RAI a few days into the campaign, ‘if we don't get in the news this week then it gets out of date really fast, and then noone will report that a few weeks ago anthropology A-level was axed’. Journalists I was trying to interest in the story were reluctant to cover it due to the low numbers of people affected. The campaign was reliant on the big names of academics and the RAI to attract press attention, but unlike AQA the RAI does not have the resources for a dedicated press office, so it took until Wednesday 4th February to get together a statement for the press. This referred to the decision by AQA as ‘misguided’ (<https://www.therai.org.uk/about-the-rai/rai-announcements/anthropology-a-level> accessed 18/05/16) and hoped ‘it is not too late to reverse this decision’. The relatively mild tone was not the stuff of catchy headlines, but was followed up with a letter to the newspapers by RAI Fellows that prompted a small article in the *Independent* on the 6th of February, and by a letter from former RAI director Hilary Callan printed in the *Observer*. It was positive to get some mainstream coverage, but like all campaigners faced with the conflict between their agenda and that of news journalists, I had some complaints. The *Independent* had relied on the press release by the RAI for a quick and easy news story, rather than interviewing anyone from the RAI, and there had been no right of reply given to AQA’s contentious claim that only 200 students a year were sitting the exam. At Truro College in Cornwall, 100 students were planning to sit the AS level in 2015, so the accuracy of AQA’s figures could easily be challenged. If the RAI had the resources for a dedicated press office, these sorts of issues could have been sorted out in the initial communication with the newspapers. A press office could have followed up press releases with offers of interviews, could have contacted individual journalists and challenged the points AQA was making. I was trying to carry out some of these tasks from Cornwall, ringing and emailing journalists I thought might take up the story, but I had no official position with the RAI, no knowledge of what it was doing in London and no claim to be speaking on its behalf, limiting my access to journalists. Campaigners were in

general so disparate that there was no co-ordination of approaches to press or public figures – the RAI was running one campaign, the teachers another, involving some duplication of effort.

In addition, once the *Independent* had covered the story it would not be of much interest to other media outlets unless something new were to happen – for example, if a political figure were to speak out. The RAI and other campaigners were trying to get political and high profile support, and this allowed the *Guardian* to run the story on 8th February with the strapline of academics are seeking the support of Prince Charles'. The idea of trying to recruit high profile establishment figures like Prince Charles or (then) deputy prime minister Nick Clegg (who both studied anthropology at university) was controversial amongst campaigners, and it is significant that despite vocal high profile support and protest from within the anthropological community, including the European Association of Social Anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association, the Australian Anthropological Society, the World Council of Anthropological Associations and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the campaign did not manage to recruit enough high profile mainstream figures or political support. It received only limited further mainstream media coverage as a result. A couple of articles followed in *The Ecologist* and *The Sunday Times*; Tomislav got his students onto BBC London Radio; and in May the Executive Director of the American Anthropological Association wrote about the A-level for the *Huffington Post*; but generally coverage was short or in low circulation media. Specialist media, such as the BBC Radio Four social sciences programme *Thinking Allowed*, were slow to show interest. I first contacted them about the threat to the A-level in January 2015, and it wasn't until June that they agreed a short interview with Joy Hendry about the A-level and the campaign to save it, prompting the presenter, sociologist Laurie Taylor, to comment 'The more anthropologists the better, so far as we're concerned'.

The petition attracted some individuals with wider followings – the anthropology graduate and actor Thandie Newton tweeted about it, as did campaigner Russell Brand. My old college forwarded my request for support to Sir Antony Gormley, whose art is informed by his anthropology studies, and he signed the petition, commenting that 'studying anthropology allowed me to understand the culture that I was born into and allowed me to see the diversity of human societies and the infinite subtlety of thought and structure that informs them'. Organisations outside academic anthropology offered support, such as Survival International, who wrote to AQA in support of the A-level, the National Union of Students, and the British Green Party. When the petition reached 4000 signatories, a month into the campaign, I analysed some of the data to send to the Royal Anthropological Institute for use in their communications with AQA. Most signatures were from the UK, but there was evidence of a huge range of global support, with multiple signatories from 59 countries, including most of Europe, the USA, China, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Uganda, Korea, Japan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Not only were people signing, they were also taking the time to leave passionate thoughts about the importance of anthropology in education and in their lives. Some of those public comments are reproduced elsewhere in this Special Issue. By the time Change.org closed the petition for lack of activity, 5929 people had signed. It was heartening and moving to see in the comments on the petition website how passionately the anthropological community feels about its subject, but sadly it was mostly an internal conversation, failing to reach the wider public which ironically was part of the point of the A-level.

The contrast with another threatened A-level is instructive: the campaign to save Polish A-level, running at the same time as the anthropology campaign, gained over 14000 signatures and the intervention of the Conservative Education Secretary Nicky Morgan in April 2015 to guarantee the future of minority language examination. anthropology A-level had no such high profile political backing. We repeatedly tried to engage Nick Clegg, then Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister, because of his anthropological background, but with no success. My local Lib Dem MP failed to respond. Tomislav's approaches to the NUT [the National Union of Teachers, the UK's largest teachers' union – eds.] were unable to gain any further coverage. The Labour party, which might have opposed the Tory plans for A-levels, was preoccupied with the approaching general election and had no time for a minority education issue. I tried to lobby politicians with social science backgrounds in the House of Commons and House of Lords, perhaps to get a question asked of the government which might be picked up by the political press, but the timing in relation to the looming election was poor. The Labour peer and sociologist Lord Anthony Giddens kindly replied to me explaining that the imminent dissolution of Parliament for the election meant we would not get a question in the House of Lords. In addition, the RAI was waiting for the election outcome – it was widely felt at the time that there might be a change of government and therefore the A-level reforms which had prompted AQA to cancel the anthropology A-level might be reversed.

So the campaign ended up being reliant on the petition numbers and names as a means of putting pressure on AQA. However, again we were hampered by the low profile of anthropology as a subject and its lack of

mainstream visibility. A petition of nearly 6000 passionate Anthropologists compared poorly to other public campaigns in this period. We had very few well know names supporting our cause. At the same time as our campaign, in March 2015, a petition on Change.org to reinstate television's presenter of *Top Gear*, Jeremy Clarkson, gained 700,000 signatures in two days. By comparison, the hours and days of effort it took to gain our few supporters was risible. Limited co-ordination between the RAI as the principal academic voice behind the A-level and the teachers running the petition meant that it was unclear how best to deploy the petition. Before and after the election, the RAI was involved in private meetings with AQA and asked me for the petition as ammunition in those meetings, but this meant there was no formal public presentation of the signatures.

By the summer, when the Conservatives had gained a majority in the House of Commons and would press ahead with A-level reforms, and the campaign had been running for six months with little media take-up, it became clear we had failed to save our A-level. My students had sat their exams, and had moved on to other things – amongst them, two had left Cornwall for London to study anthropology as undergraduates, one had plans to work in Africa as a volunteer. The brief collective action in defiance of a cost-based decision to axe a meaningful and rigorous academic subject was over. We were left with the support of a small, friendly and diverse global group of believers, and an enormous sense of despair and lack of power. Those themes in the A-level Unit 3, of globalisation, identity and power, of conflict and opportunity, now had personal resonance in the lives of the teachers and students who tried to protect the anthropology A-level. But in the end, it felt as if we had all been caught up in a narrative of the underdog challenging the Establishment. Or in a myth that ended wrongly as the giant didn't play by the rules and engage in open combat, but simply went into his castle, pulled up the drawbridge, and put his fingers in his ears, leaving us outside, our righteous and flimsy swords waving at thin air.

ⁱ Aimee Middlemiss taught anthropology A-level at Truro College, Cornwall, between 2010 and 2015. She will now be taking her love of anthropology further with an ESRC funded MRes and PhD at the University of Exeter.