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The Anthropology A-level: A retrospective

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Introduction

In early 2015 the teaching of anthropology in British schools became a national media story. *The Independent* newspaper announced 'Anthropology becomes latest A-level to be axed', whilst *The Observer* relayed the views of academic commentators that this was an act of 'cultural barbarism' (Boffey 2015). The headlines referred to a decision by one of the national exam boards to withdraw the Anthropology A-level (the highest British secondary-school qualification, usually sat by 18 year-olds).

The decision prompted a passionate response from students, teachers and anthropologists from across the UK and internationally, leading to extensive lobbying, an online petition and a good deal of favourable media coverage. The UK had been one of the first countries to develop a stand-alone secondary level qualification in anthropology, and other academic associations had hoped to eventually follow suit. Academics, learned societies and students from across the world signed the petition. Ultimately the campaign was to little effect: the exam board refused to change their position on a qualification they had accredited five years previously. The one consolation was that the campaign made very public the 'commitment and enthusiasm' of those who taught and studied the A-level' (Basu 2016, 2).

The rise – and unanticipated fall – of A-level anthropology is a revealing case-study in the politics of educational reform. Whilst the English combination of deregulated educational provision with centralised regulation of standards may be unusual, the influence of international surveys such as PISA and TIMS on national policy agendas means that central governments are likely to be ever more attentive to questions of educational quality.

This issue of Teaching Anthropology explores the policy instrumentalism that lay behind the 2015 decision, but more importantly aims to capture the commitment and enthusiasm for schools-level anthropology. We offer a series of commentaries and responses from students, teachers and anthropologists, bringing together emotions and politics with history and analysis.

The rise and fall of the A-level

The first article in this special issue, by Mills and Bennett, sets out the longer policy history shaping the 2015 decision. Even before his appointment as the Secretary of State (Minister) for Education in the previous Conservative-led coalition government, Michael Gove had championed a major review of post-16 educational provision. British secondary education has long fostered early specialisation and a narrowly academic focus, with students traditionally studying just three A level subjects from 16 to 18. The introduction in 2000 of a set of intermediate AS-levels, along with the introduction of modular courses, broadened study opportunities for young people. The decision to reverse this decision, coupled with the decision by schools to focus on the key A-levels expected by universities, led to a cull of a number of small and specialist subjects, including anthropology. As the October 2016 postscript to this introduction notes, this loss of diversity and options continues.

The circumstances of the qualification's launch five years earlier stand in stark contrast to its later withdrawal: the development had required close co-operation between the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) responsible, through its Education Committee, for the design of the subject specification, a process in turn requiring the support of the discipline's wider academic community; and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) which, as the exam board or 'awarding body', held responsibility for the adoption and subsequent administration

of the qualification.

Post adoption, the RAI continued to support the A-level in practical terms that included the provision of resource materials and encouragement of university outreach activities. Parentage of the A-level had passed to the awarding body – indeed, individual members of the RAI's Education Committee had been required to sign over their copyright to the subject specification to the AQA – but the Institute retained a strong commitment. AQA's decision to finish with the A-level was, therefore, all the more shocking for its unilateral nature.

The AQA's official rationale for discontinuing this A-level included new government accreditation requirements, low numbers of students sitting the exams, and a lack of experienced examiners. But none of this made sense to the teachers and students who had become totally committed supporters of anthropology in schools. Many, along with the RAI and other academic bodies, expressed their concern privately, soliciting the support of Members of Parliament, and directly lobbying senior AQA officials.

In the next essay, Aimee Middlemiss, a former journalist who initiated and led the *Save Anthropology A level' Change.Org* petition, provides a trenchant set of comments on her experience. Her account of building momentum for the petition, and the challenge of keeping journalists engaged and interested, offers object lessons for dealing with the media. The petition provided a public space for a collective opposition. Within a few days her petition attracted more than 2,000 supporters, including many prominent academics, testifying to the value of retaining anthropology within the sixth form curriculum. The tone was passionate, conveying a sense of real, imminent loss. The campaign quickly gained momentum but, despite eventually collecting almost 6,000 signatures, was to no avail. The appeal was ignored by AQA: the intellectual case for anthropology was not at issue; rather, its 'failure to meet the needs of students' was cited, and evidenced by 'insufficient growth in student numbers'. As a result, the final set of anthropology A-level exams will be sat by students in the summer of 2018.

Views from the classroom

In assembling this special issue, we are indebted to the teachers and students who have shared their personal experiences of the anthropology A-level. The first piece in this section brings together comments from Josie Gadsby, Dave Latham and Tomislav Maric, teachers who have played important roles in promoting anthropology in schools. Like many they convey their enthusiasm for anthropology. Several teachers chose to remark on the 'power of anthropology to make a great difference', stemming from the subject's ability to address the real world of these students. Anthropology's potential to transform outlooks was cited; one teacher identified a point at which students turned the spotlight from the behaviour of others to their own, learning to view it from the 'other' perspective. Or, as a student observed, 'anthropology 'really changes your perspective on life. I now value all cultures and can see anthropological aspects in my everyday life...let's celebrate our differences!'

Josie Gadsby describes the possibilities at her college for life after the A-level, whilst also recognising the value to her students, as future undergraduates, of anthropology's interdisciplinary nature and of the transferable study skills it imparts. Anthropology is not the only subject that addresses issues of 'race' and discrimination, but it is well placed to offer a comparative perspective. Dave Latham and Tomislav Maric highlight how, in multi-ethnic classroom settings, anthropology has a unique ability to draw on the highly diverse backgrounds of students to effect discussions and deepen learning.

Anthropology's low public profile, itself a strong motivation for creating the A-level, was a major challenge for many teachers. Some have talked of overcoming the resistance of powerful colleagues based on misconceptions of the discipline, of having to distinguish anthropology from cognate disciplines such as sociology and psychology, and of having to justify a separate space for anthropology in a crowded curriculum. Inevitably, serendipity – being in the right school or college – played an important role in the decision of many students. As one commented, 'A-level anthropology was the best thing about A levels, I had never heard of it till starting college and because of doing it at A level I have continued on with it and incorporated [it] into my degree at University.'

This is a theme of the next contribution by Rebecca Spruce, full of thought-provoking reflections on her own experience of studying for the A-level, and the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. Echoing many of the comments on the petition, she too highlights the strong impact of the A-level on her subsequent study and career choices. Whilst those who signed the petition cannot speak for all their peers, their enthusiasm – 'it was the best subject ever'; it's my favourite subject'; 'had a huge impact on my life'; 'I feel very lucky' - illustrates how

the subject so engages students at pre-university level. One student referred to the depiction of anthropology, popularised by Eric Wolf, as the 'most humanistic of the sciences, the most scientific of the humanities'. Rebecca shares this insight, pointing out that because anthropology engages with many disciplines, it offers students the opportunity to bring anthropological perspectives to all their subjects.

The last piece in this section is by Marzia Balzani. Marzia is in the unique position of having been a Chief Examiner for both the International Baccalaureate and A level. She uses her extensive experience to discuss the examiner's role and its many demands. Juxtaposing the two qualifications, she compares their different institutional cultures, the responsibilities placed on examiners, and the difficult task of protecting academic autonomy whilst influencing the future of the qualification.

Views from the discipline

Our second set of contributions is from anthropologists, looking to the past and future. It starts with an interview with the first director of the RAI, Jonathan Benthall, about early education initiatives, including the first mooting of an A-level in a talk by Prince Charles in 1974. Whilst those involved in developing the A level curriculum and specifications have written about this process (Bennett 2011, Callan and Street 2010, Street 2011), Jonathan's account captures something of the energy and enthusiasm of teachers encountering anthropology forty years earlier.

As RAI Education Officer, Emma Ford is uniquely positioned to bring together different communities of anthropology educators in creative projects and initiatives. Emma argues that whilst the qualification has formally 'failed', the initiatives it promoted have significantly raised the profile of anthropology education, and created a range of new opportunities for outreach and public engagement.

Finally we include a piece by Joy Hendry about the potentials offered by the more flexible Scottish secondary school curriculum. Joy has long been committed to public anthropology and has been a tireless disciplinary advocate for anthropology in schools. She captures the communal nature of these endeavours, acknowledging the many different people and organisations with whom she has worked. Her success in liaising with the Scottish Qualifications Authority to develop some optional units within the 'Higher' qualification reminds us, once again, that there is life beyond the A-level.

Originally we had hoped to include some international comparative contributions in this issue. Sadly, there is little yet to record. Despite many individual enthusiasts and sympathetic schools, few national systems have systematically integrated anthropology into secondary education. Norway is one of the few exceptions, with more than 10,000 secondary students taking a sociology and social anthropology option every year. But even here this can create problems from a disciplinary perspective. Few secondary teachers have an anthropological background, and do not always have the skills to communicate an anthropological perspective in a nuanced way. Perhaps this is why, in the contributions of four international disciplinary associations to the petition, there is a shared emphasis on the importance of young people being exposed to a distinctively anthropological mode of enquiry, values and 'habits of mind', and a shared emphasis on its potential application to an understanding of contemporary problems of inequality, intolerance and prejudice. As the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) noted, the decision to remove A-level anthropology eliminates 'a flagship programme of education [whose] progress is being watched keenly...within those member countries where there is also an interest in introducing Anthropology to the secondary school curriculum'. These associations' contributions are appended to this introduction.

Looking to the future

Anthropology at A-level was unlikely to have acquired the number of candidates required to rival subjects like mathematics, English and history, or well-established social sciences such as economics and sociology. However, as our contributors demonstrate, the popularity of anthropology in the schools and colleges that did accommodate it suggests that mainstream subjects do not necessarily crowd out niche subjects. The same cannot be said of a centralised national examinations system organised around a few awarding bodies subject both to strong regulatory control and commercial imperatives.

So where do we go next? As well as capturing the enthusiasm the A-level generated, our contributors have set out the case for building a presence for anthropology in a range of educational spaces within and beyond the

sixth form. This could include optional modules (such as the Scottish Higher), accessible online content, anthropological perspectives within other A-levels, and anthropology's inclusion in 'enrichment' programmes and extra-curricular activities. These offer to anthropologists in higher education further possibilities of engagement with their teacher colleagues in secondary education.

The lessons learned from this experiment will live on long after the last anthropology A-level student completes their final exam in 2018. Future coalitions of teachers and academics have a rich set of insights to draw on: recognising the importance of alliances between academics and educationalists, the value of producing dedicated teaching resources, and not least the need for strong institutional leadership from within the anthropological community.

Postscript: October 2016

The AQA has recently announced its decision to withdraw Archaeology from its suite of A-levels, along with History of Art and Classical Civilisation. The justifications given – small student numbers sitting the exam (fewer than one thousand sat the A-level in each case) leading to difficulties in maintaining standards of assessment and examiner recruitment – reprise the arguments advanced against anthropology. Again, it appears that the decisions were taken without prior consultation with representatives of the disciplines. Indeed, work was under way on planned revisions to these A level specifications from 2017. Unsurprisingly, the *Archaeology Change.Org* protest petition echoes the earlier anthropology campaign. Anthropologists will have special reason to regret this further narrowing of opportunities for students in humanistic disciplines close to our own.

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Appendix – extracts from 'Change.org petition "Save Anthropology A level"'.

European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), representing 1,900 members: We are dismayed at the prospective termination by the AQA examination board of the recently established A-level qualification in Anthropology. The qualification has been seen, across Europe, as a flagship programme of education and its progress is being watched keenly, not only by professional associations such as the EASA, but within those member countries where there is also an interest in introducing Anthropology to the secondary school curriculum. The decision of the AQA comes at a time when there is an increasing recognition of the transformative potential of Anthropology and an awareness of its growing importance across Europe in the face of new forms of xenophobia, intolerance and inequality.

Professor Monica Heller of the University of Toronto and AAA Executive Director Ed Liebow ***on behalf of the American Anthropological Association***: We are concerned that the four-year trial period that the Anthropology A-level qualification was initially granted is simply too short to evaluate either implementation processes or educational outcomes, and we urge you and your colleagues to reconsider your decision to terminate the qualification when this current cohort completes its course. Our Association [AAA] recently commissioned a Task Force on Anthropology and Education, which observed that anthropology has much to offer in exposing students to distinct modes of inquiry, values, and "habits of mind" in a diverse and increasingly unequal world. Our Task Force also observed that when students are engaged in learning about anthropology, they increase their awareness of cross-cultural understandings and their implications for justice and global sustainability, they are encouraged to foster systems thinking, and they improve mathematics, writing, technology, and presentation skills.

International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES): In a world with dramatic cultural changes, unprecedented mobility and permanent exposure to cultural differences, this initiative was an important step forward to assure that students acquire a basic knowledge of humanity in all its cultural and religious diversity. Ignorance of this diversity or an inappropriate, prejudiced response to it is not compatible with maintaining peace and mutual respect within the multicultural society that Britain has now become.

World Council of Anthropological Associations: We would like to express in the strongest possible terms our stance that this is an unwise move, which will impoverish the educational opportunities available to secondary students in the UK and diminish the capacity of emerging adults to deal as informed citizens with the world's most pressing social and environmental issues.[....] The UK's choice to institute Anthropology as an A-level offering has been widely lauded for providing students with the perspectives necessary to act as national and global citizens in contemporary contexts of multiculturalism, dwindling resources, epidemics and the entire panoply of dilemmas that we face today.