

Attitudes of Past Students towards the Complexity of Advanced Level Biology Curriculum

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The first detailed exposure in Biology for Sri Lankan students is through the Biology subject in the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A/L) curriculum. However, only a limited number of students are successful in getting selected to national universities through the highly competitive A/L examination. Students work hard to excel in this examination, which is an enormous stress for students. It is argued that increased stress and resulting problems are due to the complexity of the A/L Biology curriculum and that the content should be simplified. However, society has mixed feelings about simplifying the A/L Biology curriculum. Some believe simplification would alleviate the burden and stress on students while others think simplification would not allow students to develop the required competence in Biology and would make them unprepared for higher education and jobs, and not enable them to understand contemporary biological issues and biological problems in daily life. These diverse opinions on the current debate on simplification of A/L Biology curriculum has not been studied adequately. Therefore, the present study was conducted to assess the attitudes of past-students of A/L Biology, who sat for the A/L examination after the year 2000, towards the complexity of the A/L Biology curriculum. A survey was conducted by using-questionnaire guided interviews with 100 past A/L Biology students; current university students in Biology related fields, professionals with degrees and professionals without degrees.

The subject depth was considered adequate by majority of the respondents (80% or more) in all three categories. The extent of topics covered was also considered adequate by 75% of current university students, 63% of professionals with a degree and 67% of professionals without a degree. Around 70% of respondents in all three categories believed the complexity was at an optimum level. Thus, the general opinion of respondents was that they preferred the existing complexity of A/L Biology curriculum. More than 60% of the respondents were of the opinion that students face financial difficulties during their A/L studies. Ninety two percent of current university students felt stressed during A/L studies while only 47% of professionals with a degree and 55% of professionals without a degree felt stressed. More than 50% in each category enjoyed A/L Biology studies and around 40% had mixed feelings. Ninety percent of respondents in all three categories believed A/L Biology is helpful in their present careers and in daily life. Sixty percent of the respondents believed that there are job opportunities for people who have done A/L Biology. Ninety seven percent of professionals with a degree and all current university students were of the opinion that A/L Biology is very important for university education. Ninety nine percent of the past students used private tuition classes for A/L Biology studies and believed that extra support is essential to complete the syllabus and detailed learning. They were sarcastic about the role of government schools and teachers and suggested that the current system of teaching at schools should be improved.

Majority of the respondents believed that it is not necessary to change the depth, extent and current level of complexity of the A/L Biology curriculum but it is important to include more applied aspects of Biology and practical sessions.