



## Course Report 2016

Subject	Modern Studies
Level	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

# Section 1: Comments on the assessment

## Summary of the Course assessment

### Component 1: Question paper

The question paper consists of two sections, totalling 90 marks. It is structured in the same way as the specimen question paper (SQP) and exemplar question paper (EQP), incorporating a mixture of 30-mark essay questions, where candidates answer two extended-response questions from a choice of three, and two mandatory 15-mark questions, one research methods question and one source-based question.

The question paper largely performed as expected. Feedback indicates that it was positively received by centres, and that it was felt to be fair and accessible for all candidates whether they attempted Section 1 – Political Issues & Research Methods, Section 2 – Law and Order & Research Methods or Section 3 – Social Inequality & Research Methods.

The majority of candidates understood what was required, and were able to complete the two required sections in the allocated time.

### Extended responses

Similar structure and framing of the extended-response questions across all sections allowed candidates to access the questions and apply their knowledge to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the statements within questions, whilst attempting to also make international comparisons. Most extended responses made reference to international comparisons.

The quality and integration of international comparisons within a coherent line of argument was variable, as expected, and acted to distinguish between low and high quality extended responses. Few extended responses gained full marks, with the Grade Boundary for the Upper A band being adjusted accordingly. A review of marking principles will take place to account for this issue.

### Research methods questions

The 15-mark research methods questions were fair to all candidates and were of equal difficulty across all three sections. Questions comprised the same two stated research methods — online surveys and face-to-face interviews. The only difference across questions was the scenario within each question, which reflected issues applicable to each section's coverage, ie political, law and order or social inequality issues.

Candidates were familiar with both methods presented in the 15-mark research methods questions, and in most cases were able to draw on their knowledge and understanding of social science research to critically evaluate both given research methods and reach a conclusion on the suitability of both.

The need to link analysis and evaluation of the research methods to the issue in the scenario contained in the question acted to distinguish between lower and higher quality responses. Criteria for the conclusion element also worked well to distinguish between lower and higher

quality responses. Concluding remarks which were simply summaries gained minimal credit, whereas high quality responses clearly outlined and justified which of the research methods was preferred and were highly credited as a result.

### **Source-based questions**

The 15-mark source-based questions were fair to all candidates, being of equal difficulty across all three sections having been drawn from a similar source, The Guardian newspaper, and of broadly equal length and textual difficulty.

Candidates were able to analyse and evaluate the trustworthiness of the source whilst applying their knowledge of social science research to make an overall judgement on the trustworthiness of the source in question. The source content allowed candidates to analyse, evaluate and comment on key aspects of validity/reliability, including provenance, source evidence, source omissions, bias and contemporaneity.

In the analysis criteria for the source-based question, the necessity to focus on at least two key aspects which affect the trustworthiness of the source acted well to distinguish between high and low quality responses. In the evaluation criteria for the source-based question, the requirement for candidates to refer to additional research or sources and judgements to include consideration of alternative approaches acted to distinguish between quality responses and those which were considered worthy of gaining full marks.

### **Component 2: Project-dissertation**

The project-dissertation largely performed as expected. Feedback indicates that it was positively received by centres, with most candidates attempting dissertations that drew from the updated Advanced Higher Modern Studies Approved List of Dissertations documentation.

A significant number of candidates continue to develop their own dissertation titles and use the advisory title approval service using the Advanced Higher Modern Studies SQA website. This is perfectly acceptable and allows some candidates to produce project-dissertations that are unique and on a contemporary issue.

The majority of centres and candidates have familiarised themselves with the new assessment criteria for the project-dissertation and developed an approach that fits with this. In presenting their findings, the vast majority of candidates' project-dissertations attempted to:

- ◆ justify an appropriate, complex, contemporary political/social issue for research
- ◆ evaluate research methodology
- ◆ use a wide range of sources of information
- ◆ analyse the issue
- ◆ evaluate arguments and evidence
- ◆ synthesise information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence
- ◆ organise, present and reference findings using appropriate conventions

Grade boundary evidence and marking experiences suggest that the new marking criteria for the project-dissertation resulted in a slight inflation of marks in this component comparative to previous years. A high quantity of candidates achieved high or full marks in the 'organising, presenting and referencing findings using an appropriate conventions' assessment criteria. It is felt that too many easily attained process marks are available in this element. Review of current marking principles will consider this issue further.

## Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

### Areas in which candidates performed well

#### Component 1: Question paper

A majority of candidates displayed good political and social knowledge and understanding of the issues raised by the extended response questions. Few candidates were unprepared for the paper.

#### Extended responses (Questions 1–3, 6–8 and 11–13)

Across the assessable criteria for the 30-mark extended response, high quality answers contained the following features:

**Analysis:** High quality responses identified and analysed key factors in the introduction, which were then developed and related to the question set throughout the main body of the essay. Contemporary supporting evidence was presented consistently throughout the response and referenced or attributed.

Analysis of key issues included detailed evidence from an international comparator country or countries which went beyond simple description of the issue in that country in isolation and went on to integrate the coverage to compare, contrast, analyse and evaluate the issue in the comparator country in relation to the UK/Scotland. Quality responses also made reference to ideas/theories or the academic arguments of others which were referenced, analysed and evaluated.

**Comparison:** High quality responses compared and contrasted the UK/Scotland with a relevant comparator country or countries throughout the essay. Contemporary supporting evidence from international comparators was presented, which was accurate and detailed with comment offered on the extent of difference/similarity between the UK/Scotland and the comparator country or countries raised.

**Evaluation:** High quality responses provided implicit as well as explicit conclusions, and considered and evaluated alternative views and theories in relation to the question. Overall conclusions were justified and included a reason for rejecting or accepting alternative arguments.

**Synthesising information to structure and sustain lines of argument:** Quality responses had a clear line of argument that flowed from an organised and logical sequence of ideas. A developed conclusion was offered (not just a summary), which directly related to the question and provided a judgement that flowed from the evidence presented in the essay and responded to counter-arguments raised in the main body of the essay.

### **Research methods questions (Questions 4, 9 and 14)**

A number of candidates produced high-quality answers that had the following features:

**Analysis:** Quality analysis in this question showed detailed knowledge of the two methods referred to in the question, and identified and analysed, in detail, at least two key factors of each research method. Points were developed and referred to supporting evidence from the candidates' own research experience or other academic research they had studied and which was relevant to the question.

**Evaluation:** Points of evaluation were developed with supporting evidence, arguments or background information. Responses which gained high marks considered and addressed the effectiveness of the research methods in relation to the political, law and order or social inequality scenario outlined in the question. High mark responses also commented on ethical issues related to one or more of the research methods raised in the response. Answers that were awarded full marks often went on to refer to alternative research methods that the candidate considered suitable for researching the issue on top of those methods identified in the question.

**Conclusion:** Good responses to the research method question offered a clear judgment which clearly illustrated the candidate's preferred method in relation to the issue. A justification for preferring one method and reasons for rejecting the other methods was clearly made.

### **Source-based questions (Questions 5, 10 and 15)**

A number of candidates produced high-quality answers that had the following features:

**Analysis:** Analysis and comments showed detailed knowledge of several aspects of the source's trustworthiness. Comment was balanced and considered strengths and weaknesses of the source.

**Evaluation:** Points of evaluation were developed, with supporting evidence drawn from the source as well as the candidate's own knowledge of social science research. Comments on alternative approaches that could increase the trustworthiness of the source were also made.

**Conclusion:** A clear conclusion was offered which flowed from a coherent line of argument and offered a judgement on the extent to which the source was trustworthy in a balanced manner.

### **Component 2: Project-dissertation**

In the project-dissertation, high quality responses had the following features across the assessable criteria:

#### **Justifying an appropriate, complex, contemporary political/social issue for research**

High quality dissertations derived from a title, hypothesis and aims that were logical and linked and which allowed the candidate to analyse and evaluate a relevant, contemporary Modern Studies issue. A detailed introduction was included which explained the contemporary political or social relevance of the issue selected, and its local, national and/or

global significance; and which referred to up-to-date issues or events related to the issue. Part of the introduction included a justification of the aims and an outline of the line of argument and coverage that was to be developed through the main body.

### **Evaluating research methodology**

High quality evaluation of the research methodologies tended to deal with this in a separate, detailed section, rather than as a section in the introduction (an approach which tended to result in a brief, descriptive treatment which earned less of the available marks). Quality responses offered a balanced evaluation of the full range of methods used by the candidate that went beyond simple description of the methods.

Good quality analysis and evaluation included comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods which were related to the dissertation issue rather than commented on in a generalised manner. Where relevant, comment was also made on ethical issues and considerations surrounding the candidates' application of their selected methodologies. Responses which earned full marks in this element also went on to comment on ways in which the methods chosen could be improved upon.

### **Using a wide range of sources of information**

High quality dissertations employed a wide and varied range of primary and secondary sources of information. Primary sources of information were accurately referenced, academically evidenced in the appendices, and integrated into the main body of the dissertation.

### **Analysing the issue**

Key issues and factors were included and used in a way that went beyond simple description. Analysis led to evaluative comments which were supported by contemporary statistical, theoretical or illustrative examples.

### **Evaluating arguments and evidence**

Quality dissertations included implicit and explicit evaluations and conclusions. Arguments that supported the stated hypothesis as well as alternative views were presented and evaluated, with it being clear which arguments were accepted and which were discounted.

### **Synthesise information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence**

Information from a range of sources was brought together to build arguments and points. Conclusions were made consistently within chapters, in conclusion to each aim/chapter and also within a detailed, balanced overall conclusion. Points raised within and across aims/chapters were linked in a logical manner that built and led to supporting conclusions to each chapter and the overall conclusion.

### **Organise, present and reference findings using appropriate conventions**

Dissertations that earned high or full marks in this element contained a well organised bibliography which sub-divided methodologies or source types in a logical manner. Academic-quality references were present throughout the main body and took the form of

footnotes or in-body citations. Appendices were included which clearly outlined the origin and provenance of the primary or secondary information. Interview transcripts contained full details of the date and interviewee's details and an accurate, verbatim account of the interview. Where surveys were used the questions and the results were presented in a structured and accessible format using tables, graphs and charts. Information from appendices were integrated into the main body of the dissertation to support analysis and evaluation and referenced accurately.

## Areas which candidates found demanding

### Component 1: Question paper

Although there was no area where assessment criteria did not perform as expected, there were extended response assessment sub-criteria where there was under-performance by a substantial number of centres/candidates.

#### Extended responses (Questions 1-3, 6-8 and 11-13)

Areas of difficulty or poor performance in the essays included:

**Analysis:** A significant differentiator in the quality of essay responses was the regard and detail which candidates gave to the 'international comparator country' aspect of the extended response questions. Many candidates either did not refer, or made only cursory reference, to any international comparator. As a consequence, many essays were only considered worthy of being awarded a maximum of 4 out of the 8 marks available in this element.

**Comparison:** Many essays made only a cursory, descriptive reference to an international comparator and lost valuable marks as a consequence. Weak essay responses disbarred themselves from receiving any marks in the 'Comparison' element (worth 4 marks) as they did not make any reference to international comparator countries and focused their coverage solely on the UK/Scotland. In some instances, a failure to address the international dimension saw some candidates self-impose a maximum ceiling of 20 marks, as 10 marks across the analysis and comparison elements are dependent on essays containing evidence of a relevant international comparison.

**Evaluation:** Poorer essays tend to be descriptive and make points that were under-developed and lacked supporting evidence. There was also a one-sided dimension to the issues raised in poorer responses. As a result, there was a lack of any substantial on-going evaluation or conclusions. The overall conclusion in weaker responses summarised points already raised rather than making and supporting judgements.

**Synthesising information to structure and sustain lines of argument:** Some candidates had difficulty in this element because of a limited understanding of the issue in question. Lower quality responses were descriptive, with large sections reliant on single pieces of information, views or evidence.

#### Research methods question (Questions 4, 9 and 14)

Poor responses to the research methods question tended to simply describe the advantages and/or disadvantages of the two methods highlighted in the question. This resulted in a failure to consider the relevance of the scenario as outlined in the question. Weaker answers also failed to comment on ethical issues associated with research methods, or discussed alternative methods that candidates thought may be more relevant to the issue than those stated in the question. Some responses failed to offer any conclusion and were not considered for the 3 marks available for this element.

### **Source-based questions (Questions 5, 10 and 15)**

Poor responses to the source-based questions described features and content of the sources rather than offering balanced, critical evaluation of issues such as authorship, contemporaneity, bias and so forth. Some answers lacked evidence taken from the source or the candidates' own knowledge of social science research methods to support assertions. Weaker responses did not offer any judgement on the extent to which the source was trustworthy and were not considered for the 3 marks available for this element.

### **Component 2: Project-dissertation**

#### **Justifying an appropriate, complex, contemporary political/social issue for research:**

Poor planning of the hypothesis and aims limited weaker dissertations from the outset. A number of candidates' introductions failed to explain and justify the wider relevance of their hypothesis, aims and sub-issues to societal, global or wider ongoing issues.

**Evaluating research methodology:** A minority of candidates did not provide any evaluation of their research methods, while a proportion of candidates offered only a simplistic, descriptive approach in this element rather than critically evaluating the methods they had used.

Many candidates appeared uninformed about commenting on the ethical aspects and considerations related to their chosen research approaches.

Few candidates, explicitly or implicitly, evaluated the potential changes they would make to their research methods to improve the quality of information gathered. Many responses simply commented on 'doing more' primary or secondary research, which was not creditworthy.

**Using a wide range of sources of information:** A minority of candidates continue to rely on a limited number of websites for their information.

**Analysing the issue:** Poorer projects-dissertations took a one-sided approach to analysis of the issues and did not acknowledge or analyse alternative viewpoints and theories.

**Evaluating arguments and evidence:** Poorer dissertations did not offer implicit or explicit evaluations in the main body of the dissertation. Points made did not refer to supporting evidence, arguments, examples or theories.

**Synthesise information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence:** Some dissertations contained large sections drawn from or based on single sources of information, and also lacked a coherent flow, with aims/chapters that were unrelated to each other or which did not address the title/hypothesis.

**Organise, present and reference findings using appropriate conventions:** A significant number of candidates did not use consistent academic referencing conventions, eg the Harvard or Oxford style. Weak bibliographies did not reflect academic protocols, and used generalised citations, ie lacking the full website address/origin/author/date of publication/date of access etc.

Many candidates did not include any appendices, particularly those whose dissertations were reliant on secondary research.

## **Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates**

Centres should ensure all candidates have access to and are familiar with the supporting SQA documentation for Advanced Higher Modern Studies.

Centres should also ensure that all candidates are fully informed and familiar with the assessable criteria used across the question paper and the project-dissertation.

### **Component 1: Question paper**

#### **Extended responses**

Centres should ensure that teaching and course coverage involves adequate coverage of an international comparator country or countries. Centres should consider carefully how courses are constructed to best support candidates in adapting to this comparative element.

The majority of candidates are knowledgeable about the issues studied. However, weaker candidates still have a tendency to offer descriptive responses. To improve this, candidates should be encouraged to do something with their knowledge by applying it to the question. Candidates should focus on answering the question that is set in the paper, rather than turning it into a pre-prepared essay.

Extended responses should also address both sides of the argument with in-depth analysis and synthesis, drawing a variety of information together in support of points. Essays can be improved further with relevant, current and in-depth evidence/exemplification. Candidates should ensure their essays offer a conclusion (rather a summary) which relates to the question that is set.

#### **Research methods questions**

Centres should aim to prepare candidates adequately by ensuring that the key research methods outlined in the course assessment specification are covered in their courses.

Candidates should have the opportunity to practise methods as part of their project-dissertation research or as part of the course to gain greater insight into the benefits, limitations and considerations that must be given to their use. Any study of research methods should aim to familiarise candidates with examples of application in academic studies, as this will support candidates' ability to offer exemplification in their exam responses.

#### **Source-based questions**

Centres can support candidates by ensuring they are familiar with the assessable criteria for the source-based questions and that they have ample opportunity to practise these types of questions. Assessing sources of complex political or social information should form a routine part of any course.

Candidates should ensure their responses go beyond simple description of the source content. Source information should be used to support points and arguments. Candidates should also be aware that they can offer comment on errors and omissions from the source

if relevant. All responses must offer a conclusion that offers a clear judgement on the extent of the sources' trustworthiness.

## **Component 2: Project-dissertation**

Centres can assist candidates in the planning stage by discussion and by ensuring they have an appropriate hypothesis, aims and methods. The project-dissertation process should be started as early as possible in the academic year with firm deadlines set for candidates to adhere to. This will allow centres to give ongoing support and advice to candidates throughout the process.

Candidates must ensure that research methods are justified and evaluated as a natural part of the process of carrying out the dissertation research. Specific methods should be evaluated, ie if a particular website is used in aim one, there could be justification for using that site along with an evaluation of its usefulness, comment on any ethical considerations that were taken account of, and ways in which its use could have been improved on. The most important skill here is the evaluation of the method.

Candidates should aim to use a wide range of sources of information. This may involve primary as well as secondary research. Although primary research is not a pre-requisite for the project-dissertation, it can often act to enhance research and offer further opportunities to acquire knowledge and insight into the issue. Secondary resources can involve a wide range of sources and may include academic texts, journals, newspapers, websites, documentaries and other audio/visual sources, etc.

Synthesis and balanced analysis are crucial to the dissertation and candidates may need to practise these skills. Similarly, candidates should know the difference between a summary and a conclusion, and ensure their dissertation's line of argument builds to the latter.

Consistent academic referencing is essential. Centres may wish to adopt a preferred style which candidates can be encouraged to adopt to aid a consistent approach.

Appendices are crucial evidence of a candidate's research process. Evidence of interviews/letters sent and received should be included. Such evidence must also be used appropriately in the dissertation.

## Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

### Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2015	0
Number of resulted entries in 2016	851

### Statistical information: Performance of candidates

#### Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	24.3%	24.3%	207	100
B	32.1%	56.4%	273	85
C	25.3%	81.7%	215	70
D	9.5%	91.2%	81	62
No award	8.8%	-	75	0

## General commentary on grade boundaries

- ◆ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.
- ◆ Each year, SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.
- ◆ An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related, as they do not contain identical questions.
- ◆ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.