

Principal Assessor Report 2002

Assessment Panel:

Social Sciences

Qualification area

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
included in this report**

Philosophy: Higher & Intermediate 2

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2001 Higher 446 Intermediate 2 49

Number of entries in 2002 Higher 670 Intermediate 2 87

General comments re entry numbers

A continuing increase in candidate numbers is encouraging. Numbers have also increased at the Intermediate 2 level although they remain low. It is not known how many of these Intermediate 2 candidates were specifically prepared for the Intermediate 2 course and how many took it after starting on the Higher course.

General comments

Once again, at both levels there were candidates who produced exam work of the highest calibre. Unfortunately, there were also candidates who performed very badly in the exam. There has been another decrease in the general standard of attainment and this is a cause for concern. There is again evidence that some centres are not preparing their candidates adequately for the study of Philosophy at Higher. There is less evidence this year that candidates are being entered for Intermediate 2 when they would have been capable of achieving well at Higher.

Grade boundaries at C, B and A for each subject area included in the report

Higher Grade	Minimum Mark
A	54
B	46
C	39

Intermediate 2 Grade	Minimum Mark
A	42
B	36
C	30

General commentary on grade boundaries

Notional percentage cut-offs for each grade

Question papers and their associated marking schemes are designed to be of the required standard and to meet the assessment specification for the subject/level concerned.

For National courses the examination paper(s) are set in order that a score of approximately 50% of the total marks for all components merits a grade C (based on the grade descriptions for that grade), and similarly a score of 70 % for a grade A. The lowest mark for a grade B is set by the computer software as half way between the C and A grade boundaries.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

These have remained unchanged from previous years. Essays are out of 25 marks. Half marks are not awarded. Therefore 13 out of 25 indicates a pass in an essay. To achieve an A pass, a candidate needs to achieve 18 out of 25. Grade B is interpolated by computer.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

As has already been mentioned there has been a significant decline in the pre-appeal pass rate and of standards generally in the 2002 Higher Philosophy exam. A comparison of the estimated grades and the grades actually achieved show that generally teachers are overestimating their candidates' performance and so the results will no doubt come as something of a disappointment.

Evidence from the exam scripts suggests that there may still not be sufficient appreciation of how exam questions may differ from NAB questions. In many cases candidates produced essays that looked as if they were almost a rewrite of an answer previously prepared for an internal assessment task but which failed to properly address the question asked in the exam. It may be that the need to pass the internal assessments is leading some teachers/lecturers to teach specifically to these assignments and then using the candidates responses as a guide when estimating candidate performance. Under such circumstances it is likely that candidates will do less well in the exam than they did in the internal assessments. If this is the case these teachers/lecturers would benefit from setting more sampling exam type assessments and using these as a guide to future exam performance.

Evidence from the exam scripts also suggests that some teachers/lecturers/candidates are relying too heavily on the published support material. A number of exam responses seemed to reproduce some of the support material almost verbatim. In many areas of the course it must be understood that the support material is not the equivalent of a course textbook and does not provide sufficient depth to allow the candidates to achieve the highest grades. Teachers/lecturers must use their own expertise to develop and expand on the material in the support materials.

Exam responses also reveal that many candidates have not developed the correct skills and perhaps do not have sufficient knowledge to write appropriate answers in Higher Philosophy. Students should be reminded that philosophy is preeminently about arguments. Far too many candidates are still writing descriptive answers and then, perhaps, adding a final paragraph containing one or two somewhat superficial criticisms with little extra explanation. Such answers are unlikely to be able to achieve anything more than a bare pass.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

There were candidates who did well in all parts of the exam and a few candidates who achieved exceptionally high marks in each of the questions they tackled.

At the Intermediate 2 level candidates again tended to do well in the descriptive parts of the answers but often struggled in the more analytical parts.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Although it was clear that all of the questions could be tackled well by some candidates there were also some common areas of difficulty.

In the classic texts section of the paper it is not unlikely that every year there will be one or two questions that are very straightforward and address the core elements of the texts studied whilst the other questions will be more focussed or tackle aspects of the text that are less central. This is the only way to ensure proper coverage of the syllabus in the exam and, since there is a choice of questions, is entirely fair to the candidates. In the 2002 exam the most straightforward questions were on Aristotle and Hume. However, these were tackled by a relatively small number of candidates and it is reasonable to surmise that candidates entered the exam having already decided on which text they were going to answer. This resulted in a number of candidates floundering in their attempts to answer the Plato and Descartes questions. On Plato the answers often tended towards being a 'rag-bag' collection of everything the candidate knew about Plato without the material being properly marshalled to answer the question; whilst answers on Descartes tended towards simple description instead of the analysis and evaluation necessary to answer the question.

In the 'problems' section the question on scepticism was not done particularly well. The question was inviting a discussion on the necessity of foundations and the possible alternatives rather than a simple description of foundationalism. Understanding of coherentism was generally very superficial and some candidates simply relied on rehashing information from their study of Descartes and Hume.

The 'existence of God' question again resulted in candidates addressing the wrong argument and many of the candidates seemed to have so little to say on the ontological argument that they padded out their answers with irrelevant information about the other arguments they had studied. A very common problem was that candidates confused the arguments of Anselm and Descartes and used terminology appropriate to one when discussing the other. This indicated a very shallow understanding of the arguments which are in fact quite different from one another. It was such a common problem that it might be assumed that the confusion was already in the teaching rather than occurring in the minds of the candidates.

The freewill and determinism question was done better than in previous years but too many candidates still had an incorrect understanding of compatibilism. Worryingly, there is evidence that this also is not only as a result of candidates misunderstanding but as a result of the candidates being taught the wrong information. Anyone considering teaching this topic must ensure that they have a correct and detailed understanding of compatibilism.

The moral philosophy section of the Problems unit was an area where an over reliance on the support notes was evident. Often candidates were very superficial in what they had to say summarising and dismissing whole moral theories in one or two short sentences. There also seemed to be insufficient understanding of subjectivism which resulted in candidates going on to produce largely irrelevant information on objectivist theories.

The logic section of the paper was found to be slightly more difficult by candidates this year. In particular the fallacies question presented difficulties. Teachers/lecturers and candidates are reminded that they are required to be able to 'evaluate arguments encountered in everyday life' and 'assess examples of arguments in ordinary language in terms of their logical form'. Candidates should not expect to be always presented with the artificial arguments that are often used to illustrate a point in logic.

The questions in the moral philosophy section of the paper often resulted in mediocre responses. Understanding of both utilitarian and Kantian ethics was often very shallow. In a general introduction candidates might introduce the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism but then fail to apply this to the actual question. Often rule utilitarianism was clearly not understood. Kantian ethics was likewise misunderstood. Often the theory was given only the most superficial of explanations. Gross simplifications led to errors in application. Most common was candidates stating simply that one formulation of the categorical imperative means that you cannot treat someone as a means to an end. In response to the Euthanasia question candidates often introduced Kant unnecessarily and were clearly just trying to re-use their internal assessment response of answering the question that had been asked.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Most of the issues identified this year remain the same as last year.

Centres can improve candidate performance in a number of ways: Candidate should be reminded that philosophy is essentially about arguments. Although a certain amount of descriptive material is unavoidable and is even desirable, it should not be regarded as a substitute for the proper analysis and evaluation of the arguments that have been studied.

Candidates should be familiar with primary source material. This is obviously true of Section A: Classic Texts but is also true of other areas of the course. It should be noted that there are various ways of teaching the material on the Classic Texts. The course does not require a detailed analysis of the complete text to be carried out. Undoubtedly, the more able candidates will benefit from being exposed to the whole of the designated extract, whilst the weaker candidates may benefit from mostly commentary with appropriate extracts. However, it is absolutely essential that teaching staff know the textual material thoroughly. Only by doing so can they adequately prepare candidates and assess the usefulness of the various secondary sources available.

Secondary sources should be used judiciously. It is clear that some centres are using introductory material that does not go into enough depth to enable candidates to achieve the highest grades. Other centres are using material that has a particular slant that hinders the candidates rather than helps them.

Over dependence on the HSDU support notes is also hindering candidate progress. Centres should be reminded that these support notes were mostly written for staff to clarify the topics covered in the syllabus and included bibliographies to enable staff to study the topics further. They were not intended to be comprehensive course notes. Background material should be used appropriately. Far too many exam essays have over lengthy introductions giving biographical or background information about the philosophers that may not be relevant to the particular essay being written. Centres would serve candidates better by giving them a more accurate historical perspective so that they don't talk about Anselm responding to criticisms raised by Kant, or in one case saying 'Thomas Aquinas was another philosopher who showed that by using both Kant and Utilitarian ethics it was possible to achieve a just war'!

Many candidates would benefit from an improved exam technique. Candidates must be prepared to write on more than one topic in each section and should be able to answer the question that has been asked rather than simply reproducing a pre-prepared answer. Candidates who, for example, write on the wrong argument for the existence of God and gain zero marks for their answer will need to gain marks of nineteen or twenty out of twenty-five on both of their other essays in order to achieve a simple pass. With only three essays mistakes of this kind can have a disastrous affect on the final grade.