



External Assessment Report 2009

Subject	Geography
Level	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. 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 question papers and marking instructions for the Examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The general standard of candidate performance showed a small improvement from 2008. This was achieved through better performance in the Geographical Issues Essay element of the folio, and in the examination. There has been a small but steady improvement in the quality of essays since the AH programme commenced. Candidates generally include in their essays both an initial contextualisation of their chosen topic and explicit critical evaluation of the sources used for the essay. It is also noticeable that many candidates use graphics effectively in their essays. Most essay topics chosen were suitable, though a few were very broad. This latter makes coherent critical evaluation very difficult. Some candidates used sources for their essays that were limited in useful content and did not give scope for effective critical evaluation.

For 2009 the word limit on essays was rescinded, though the page length limit remained as before. Some essays were very long. It is important to note that some very long essays did not achieve good marks, as their text lacked coherence, showed limited evidence of candidates' abilities to select and organise material, and did not present arguments succinctly. Some of the best essays seen were of very similar word count as was allowed in 2008.

The general standard of Geographical Study remains rather disappointing. The choice of topic by a significant number of candidates was such that it limited the scope of their study. There were however also candidates who chose challenging topics that could allow them to demonstrate a range of geographical skills. Many studies were rather thin in content. Candidates should be advised that an appropriate way of increasing the size of the data used in their study is to use properly acknowledged secondary data as well as data collected in the field. However there were some studies of a very high standard in all respects, which scored high marks.

The examination produced results that were a little better than in previous years. There are two reasons for this improvement in standards. First the majority of candidates performed well in question 5 (the new "scenario" question). This showed that candidates were well prepared to apply their knowledge of geographical methods and techniques to an unfamiliar problem. Secondly a larger proportion of candidates than in previous years attempted question 2 rather than question 1. Many of the answers to question 2 were of a good standard. Overall, answers to the map interpretation and the GMT questions were generally satisfactory, and most candidates produced answers of a reasonable standard.

Areas in which candidates performed well

As noted in the previous section most students demonstrated that they understood what is required for critical evaluation in the GI essay element of the folio. Critical evaluation of source material is a high level skill, so it is pleasing to see that many candidates have an appreciation of what is required. In general the essay element of the folio was the best element in candidates work. GMT questions continue to show that most candidates have a sound understanding of GMTs.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Geographical Studies frequently continued to be limited in data content and rather formulaic in approach. Indeed some candidates revealed a rather formulaic approach to all parts of the external assessment. Whilst this may produce reasonable results it does not encourage the demonstration of flair, which many candidates undoubtedly possess. Some graphics in both studies and essays are below the standard that can be expected. In both parts of the folio some candidates produced very poor bibliographies. Most candidates make extensive use of web sources. The bibliographic list of these should give the full URL (as is shown in the browser heading for the page[s] cited and the exact date of their consultation). All sources *must* be cited in and listed in the bibliography.

Though essays are generally the better element of the folio, some are over long, wordy and lacking in precision. Many essays use subheadings, which though not specifically penalised, tend to make the essay more like a report rather than a coherent and integrated essay.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Specific points relating to the folio:

- Candidates should give thought to their choice of topic for the Geographical Study element of the folio. Good Geographical studies are also generally based on demanding topics that also may be related to a theoretical base.
- To ensure that they have a reasonable size of database for analysis candidates must consider the amount of time required to get an appropriate data set through fieldwork.
- Candidates should make fuller use of relevant acknowledged secondary data.
- Candidates must produce graphics of a high standard. Blurred computer generated images and scruffy hand drawn graphics are not at AH standard. Some location maps are poorly chosen and used.

Specific points relating to the examination:

- Candidates should read all of questions 1 – 4 before selecting which to attempt.
- Candidates must ensure that they provide the response to the question that is required. For example annotation means showing a precise location and not simply apply a general label

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2008	854
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Number of resulted entries in 2009	888
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Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark - 100				
A	19.3%	19.3%	171	70
B	34.8%	54.1%	309	60
C	35.0%	89.1%	311	50
D	6.9%	95.9%	61	45
No award	4.1%	100.0%	36	-

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.