



# **Geography Higher External Assessment Report 2008**

**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 2008 examination was the first to be marked in whole marks rather than half marks and as a result the mark allocation for each question and for each paper was doubled. This did not seem to cause candidates any difficulty although as always a small minority appeared to run out of time.

Overall the standard of response was much better than that in 2007 with a significant number of markers commenting on very good and excellent performances in which candidates displayed very sound knowledge and understanding of material. One particularly pleasing feature was that many more candidates were bringing specific named examples to their answers, something examiners have been seeking for many years. Markers also noted a lack of very poor responses and candidates presented at an inappropriate level. Based on the sample below these factors are reflected in improved mean scores in both component papers with Paper 1 increasing from 30.8 out of 50 (61.6%) to 62.3% and Paper 2 increasing from 28.4 out of 50 (56.8%) to 58.7%.

This year it has become obvious that a number of centres are making excellent use of the full range of information available on the SQA website both on the subject page and on the Understanding Standards site. This is enabling them to prepare their candidates very well for the examination with a consequent improvement in performance. However as will be suggested in the 'Advice to Centres' section of this report it is important that the information learned is applied appropriately to the questions set.

Qu.	Topic	Mean mark	Question choice as % (Sample size : 821)
1	Lithosphere	14.04 out of 20	
2	Biosphere	9.99 out of 16	
3	Population	12.33 out of 18	
4	Urban	9.63 out of 18	
5	Atmosphere	8.25 out of 14	52.3
6	Hydrosphere	9.51 out of 14	47.7
7	Rural	7.59 out of 14	60.0
8	Industry	7.04 out of 14	40.0

Qu.	Mean mark (Sample 981)	Question choice as % * (Sample : 981)
1	28.44	67.8
2	27.10	11.4
3	30.56	20.8
4	23.72	15.3
5	20.78**	0.8
6	29.45	83.9

- \* Candidates must attempt one question from Questions 1 – 3, and one from Questions 4 – 6.
- \*\* Apart from one centre, all of the candidates in the sample were ‘idiosyncratic’. i.e. all other candidates in their centres tackled either Question 4 or Question 6.

## Areas in which candidates performed well

In Paper 1 excellent performances were noted in Questions 1 (Lithosphere), 2 (Biosphere) 3 (Population) and 6 (Hydrosphere). In question 1 (a) candidates were asked to identify features of coastal erosion and deposition from an Ordnance Survey map. This is the first time they have been asked to do so and they did so exceptionally well. In part (b) they were also able to write very good explanations of the formation of a stack. (Answers on sand bars were significantly fewer and generally didn’t score as well.)

Question 2 tested vegetation succession across Sand Dune systems. Some years ago a question such as this would have caused candidates great difficulty. However this year it produced a number of excellent responses with many candidates demonstrating a clear understanding of the relationship between plant species and the dune environment. (This was also a question in which there was a marked difference in performance between centres.)

In Question 3 (a) most candidates scored very well, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the links between birth rates, death rates and population change, (and in part (b)) of the implication of the population structure for countries at Stage 5 of the Demographic Transition Model.

In Question 6 (a) most candidates scored well although in part (b) few were able to fully develop their explanations of the differences between the urban and rural hydrographs.

In Paper 2 there was much evidence of very good candidate performance in the following areas : Question 1(a) – description and explanation of features of carboniferous limestone, Question 3 (c) – the benefits and adverse consequences of river basin management and Question 6(a) (ii) on development differences between countries in the economically less developed world and (c) on malaria. A particularly pleasing aspect was the increased use of named examples in these questions.

## Areas which candidates found demanding

In Paper 1 there were a number of areas where performance was relatively weak. Prime amongst these was Question 4(a) which sought information about the site and situation of a case study city and (to a lesser extent) (b) which examined traffic management. Site and situation of a city has been asked a number of times in recent years yet very few candidates seem to understand the meaning of each of these terms and then apply them to their chosen city. For example references to Edinburgh’s growth being due to tourism and financial services showed little comprehension of the significance of its site and situation. In part (b) many candidates could not identify specific methods used by their city to tackle traffic management issues making vague references to traffic lights, roundabouts and one-way systems.

A second area of difficulty in Paper 1 occurred in Question 5 on global climate change. Many candidates chose to dwell on the *process* of global warming rather than on its *physical and human causes* and many answers were confused and reflected a lack of specific information.

The two questions in Part C also caused some difficulties but for different reasons. In Question 7 (a) (Rural Geography) few candidates seemed to identify the need to relate their chosen system to the reference diagram and instead simply described the system and then in part (b) many struggled to distinguish the *changes* in the system from the *causes or impacts* of the changes. This is a very similar problem to that identified in last year's examination.

Once again the question on Industrial Geography (Q8) was not well done. Part (a) sought information on the environmental impact of traditional industry yet few, despite the reference sketch, could say much beyond 'pollution' but instead wrote about the factors which led to the growth of the traditional industry in the first place. Similarly in part (b) it was expected that candidates would be able to describe the location factors for modern industrial location *in their case study location* – yet many wrote about location factors in general.

However of all of the areas which candidates found demanding the most disappointing was in the (small but noteworthy) number of candidates who made simple errors with grid references in Question 1 : seriously inaccurate references, references with northings before eastings and the inappropriate use of 4 figure references were all noted by markers.

In general there were fewer areas of difficulty in Paper 2. However there are a number of areas where performance was not as strong. In Question 1(b)(i) where information on the opportunities of the landscape for a variety of land uses in a named upland area was sought too many answers dealt solely with recreation/tourism activities and failed to mention land uses linked to farming/forestry etc. In addition many candidates fail to link land uses directly to aspects of the physical environment. Part (c) was the weakest part of this question with few candidates able to develop specific points on conservation strategies.

Once again Question 4 proved challenging for a number of candidates. Part (a)(i) was based on a table of data yet many candidates simply re-wrote the data rather than analyse it and identify the changes. In part (a)(ii) candidates seemed unable to explain why the pace of urbanisation in EMDCs had slowed or to give any indication of the existence of counter-urbanisation. Of the choices offered in part (c) 'out of town shopping' dominated responses and this was only adequately, rather than well, done with a number of accounts failing to provide sufficient case-study detail.

Question 6 as usual was the most popular question in Paper 2 and once again in general it was tackled reasonably well. However one area of concern relates to part (a)(ii) where explanation for differences in levels of development between ELDCs is examined. In a significant number of centres candidates seem simply to have memorised a list of different countries and a single reason for each being either relatively well-off or poor. This list is then re-written but fails to demonstrate any real understanding of *why* the country is at a particular stage of development.

## **Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates**

As indicated previously one of the gratifying features of the 2008 examination was the significant number of centres which seem to be acting on advice from the SQA notably in the use of specific named examples. This was most apparent in Paper 2 – Questions 1, 3 and 6 where there was a very marked improvement in this. There now appears to be a gap opening up between centres where this advice is heeded, given to, and then applied by candidates, and centres where this is much less evident. It is essential that the repeated exhortations made in External Assessment (previously Principal Assessor's) Reports for candidates to be able to bring named examples to answers is underlined to candidates.

Another key message this year is linked to the Industrial Geography topic in Paper 1. Once again few candidates made a good job of this question. The course specification requires the study of one industrial concentration in the EU. Candidates must therefore be able to bring to their answers (for example) named - cities /ports /industries/ companies /industrial estates /government or EU initiatives /transport links such as motorways *in their case study region*. It is not sufficient to write vaguely about location factors in general. (The same criticism can be applied to Urban Geography (Q4) where a similar paucity of specific named examples exists: where are all these Park and Ride schemes?). The use of named examples has improved in many parts of Paper 2 – now it needs to improve in Paper 1.

The 2007 PA Report made reference to the need for candidates to be aware of the specific focus of questions. This advice remains germane as indicated previously with regard to Paper 1 Q 7.

In addition in two areas this year much time was wasted by candidates including content which was not required. Prime amongst these was Paper 1 Question 1(a) which sought only the identification of features from the OS Map. A significant number of candidates not only *described* the map evidence but also *explained* the formation of their identified features and then went on to repeat their explanation of formation in part (b). Paper 2 Q6(a)(i) suffered from a similar problem with candidates *explaining* their choice of indicator rather than merely *describing* it.

Clearly many centres are working hard with candidates and using the commercially produced study guides as well as the on-line information from the SQA. This is good practice and it should be adopted by all centres. However to further assist candidates they must be encouraged to read the questions carefully and then apply the knowledge they have acquired to respond to the actual questions set. They must also be encouraged to move away from the mechanical re-writing of learned material to demonstrate greater understanding of its nature. Knowledge itself is important but it is in its application that it gains value.

## Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2007	7,292
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Number of resulted entries in 2008	7,197
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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 - 200	-	-	-	-
A	29.3%	29.3%	2,112	140
B	22.7%	52.0%	1,631	121
C	20.4%	72.4%	1,466	102
D	9.0%	81.4%	650	92
No award	18.6%	100.0%	1,338	-

### 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.