



External Assessment Report 2011

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

There was a significant improvement in overall standards this year. This was seen in all three parts of the external assessment. In the folio there was a small improvement in both elements. Although very poor weather over an extended period during the latter part of the folio preparation period had an impact on field work, geographical studies were generally somewhat better than in previous years. The general standard of the essays remained good. The written examination produced results that were generally better than those of last year.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Folio

Geographical study: There was improvement in the general standard of work submitted, reflecting clearer definition of study topics and specific research questions, and better use of appropriate secondary data. Most studies are now presented to at least a fair standard. The severe weather conditions that prevailed throughout Scotland between late November and mid-February were noted in the assessment of the folios. Notwithstanding difficulties posed by weather conditions, more studies than in previous years had a reasonable data base. Use of relevant secondary data improved many studies.

Geographical issues essay: The high standards of previous years continued. In many respects this is the most intellectually challenging part of the whole AH Geography programme, and it is pleasing to see so many candidates make a good attempt at source evaluation. Choice of topics is generally good, and a wide range of interesting essay themes was submitted.

Written examination: Most candidates answered the first three parts of Question 3 well. The scenario question (Question 5) was done well by most candidates.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Geographical study

For a significant number of candidates the amount of field data in the study remains less than that required for AH level work. In almost all cases, several days will be necessary to produce a good data set.

The explanation of results in many studies is limited. The study must go beyond description of results. Some candidates have poor maps and diagrams in their studies. High quality in all elements of presentation is expected. Most figures are produced by computer. Although this method of production is not in any way mandatory, computer graphics, hand-drawn diagrams and photographs must be clearly reproduced and appropriate. Examiners reported a large number of very poor location maps in studies. Many lacked proper introductions, spent too much time/space on describing very basic methodology and included unnecessary appendices.

Written examination

A significant proportion of answers show poor map interpretation skills.

Commentaries on results of geographical methods and techniques in the Geographical Methods and Techniques questions are often limited. Real data sets are used, so nice, neat results are not to be expected.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

General

Use a 12 point font size; Times New Roman or Arial are preferred print fonts. The exceptions to this would be use in diagrams and footnotes.

Do not put either element of the folio in covers, and only use a separate title page if this does not result in exceeding the page count.

The fullest possible bibliographic support is desirable for both the essay and the study. All sources cited in the text should be included, together with other relevant material that was consulted in preparation for the essay or study. Full bibliographic details are essential. The Harvard bibliographic system is preferred, though is not mandatory.

Geographical study

Make a plan for field data collection in the light of the data requirements for tests and techniques that will be used. The plan will identify what data is needed, how it may be collected and data set size.

Use secondary data to enhance study content and give possibilities for the demonstration of analytical skills. There are good secondary data available from SEPA, MALURI (Aberdeen), small area census data, local and regional public health statistics, etc.

Ensure that all diagrams are clear and relate directly to the main body of the study.

Explain and comment upon relationships revealed in the analysis of data. As real data often throw up results that are not easy to interpret, this is an opportunity for candidates to show their abilities through insights into the study theme.

Appendices with tables of results or blank questionnaires are not helpful. Candidates can make much better use of data when properly incorporated into the main body of the text.

Geographical issues essay

A number of essays are too long. An important part of the essay is the summary of sources. If these are too long, candidates cannot demonstrate effectively abilities in analysis of source material, by identification of key elements within the source. Very long essays often lack focus. A significant part of the page space available should be used for relevant graphics.

Many sources lack intellectual quality. Generally, a selection of newspaper articles without back-up from an academic study will not provide the rigour for most topics.

Essays that are broken into headed subsections may not flow well. There is no specific penalty for using headings. However, the structure of the essay should be clear from the written text with headings to label elements.

Written examination

Many candidates need to improve map interpretation skills. The aim of the questions is to allow candidates to demonstrate spatial awareness in their use of a map, and to show that they can select accurately, and use relevant and identified evidence from the map extract. Candidates should avoid repetition in the various parts of a question. Candidates are advised to use marks as a guide to the detail required in the answer at Advanced Higher.

Candidates should develop their interpretation of the meaning of statistical tests. Candidates should use all the information available. A good answer is quite likely to involve explaining why a result is not significant, and suggesting other possible causes and explanations.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2010	873
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Number of resulted entries in 2011	818
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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	22.4%	22.4%	183	67
B	35.5%	57.8%	290	57
C	27.4%	85.2%	224	48
D	7.7%	92.9%	63	43
No award	7.1%	100.0%	58	-

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, therefore, SQA 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 Head of Service 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.