



Principal Assessor Report 2007

Assessment Panel:

Business Education

Qualification area

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

Business Management Advanced Higher

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The gap between centre estimates and performance in the final exam narrowed this year. This is welcomed and indicates that more centres appreciate the high standard required of pupils at this level. Nevertheless, many centres still appear to have unrealistic expectations for their candidates. This was the first year of the introduction of the Business Report. There is evidence that some centres did not fully realise what was required and may have overestimated their candidates' performance in this element as a result. Very few candidates scored over 35 marks for the Report and contributed towards a reduction in the percentage of top grades awarded despite an increase in the pass rate.

The Business Report

Whilst many candidates had clearly put some effort into the preparation of the report, there were also many poor submissions. In a sizeable minority of cases candidates appeared to have been misdirected by their centres, leading to the production of reports which, while sometimes well researched, did not meet the criteria. Several schools failed to submit the NAB on Researching a Business with the Report, despite the clear stipulation in the marking guidelines in the Specimen Paper that everything in the Analysis section - and some parts of the Evaluation section - must be justified with reference to the NAB. One centre allowed all but one of its candidates to write a report on the same organisation. This practice is unacceptable and reports produced on this basis will not be accepted in future; each candidate in a centre must research a different organisation.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Markers commented that many candidates had made a good effort to get to grips with the new arrangements. There were some high scoring reports where candidates had followed the guidelines closely and provided clear justification for their findings.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Some candidates did not understand what the term "strategy" meant, and confused strategic objectives with strategic decisions. Others' "strategies" consisted of a list of tactical decisions with no evidence of any overarching strategy.

Other problems stemmed from the poor quality of research carried out for the NAB - for example, several candidates found it difficult to explain how their strategy fitted in with the organisation's objectives owing to inadequate analysis of those objectives in the NAB.

There was some confusion between area (d) of the Analysis section and area (a) of the Evaluation section, so that several candidates wrote about similar matters in both sections. On this occasion points were credited, unless repeated in both sections; however the marking scheme in the Specimen Paper has been amended to clarify the situation for future years.

Several pupils made points unjustified by reference to either the NAB or supplementary evidence in the appendices; these were awarded no marks.

Many candidates had clearly taken some time to edit their reports to ensure they stayed within the word count. Others who did not take the same care sometimes achieved high marks owing to the length of their reports.

The principle adopted by the marking team was to try to ensure as far as possible that no candidate should benefit from breaking the rules. Therefore, a penalty of 5 marks was applied to reports between 3,850 and 4,500 words, and one of 10 marks to those over 4,500 words.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Centres need to explain what is involved in the Report to candidates at an early stage in the course. Terms such as “strategy” need to be fully explained at the outset. The quality of the final report is to a great extent dependent on the quality of the strategy on which it is based. For the purposes of the Business Report the term “strategy” refers to a sequence of actions an organisation intends to take to achieve its strategic (long term) objectives.

Candidates should be instructed each to choose a separate organisation. This could be from the public, private or voluntary sector, but, as a general rule, small local organisations tend to provide easier access to information than larger businesses.

Candidates need to be aware that the Researching a Business NAB is not just a hurdle to be got over, but an essential foundation for a sound Business Report. Candidates with poorly researched NABs had little material to back up their Report and tended to score low marks. The more research that goes into the NAB, the greater the likelihood of being able to analyse and justify the business’s strategy.

Candidates should be made aware that all points made in the Report should be justified with reference to either the Researching a Business NAB or additional information in appendices.

Candidates need to be made aware of the maximum number of words allowed and the penalty for exceeding it. They should realise that the penalty incurred is likely to outweigh any gain from writing at excessive length. They will need guidance about how to edit their Reports appropriately and make difficult choices about what to leave out. This process is demanding and time consuming, but also an excellent preparation for further study.

The exam

The average performance of candidates in the exam was almost exactly the same as last year. However, there were significant differences in the pattern of results: this year there were fewer very high or very low marks. As in previous years, many candidates demonstrated little in-depth knowledge of the syllabus in their answers to Section Two. Most appeared to be aware of the need to develop points, and several wrote at great length, but much of the “development” was repetitious or vague. This is very disappointing, and comments in previous PA reports about the percentage of candidates who have relaxed their attention to study owing to having unconditional offers for university, or have had little teacher contact time would still seem to apply. It is to be hoped that the new expanded syllabus which has been placed on the SQA website will help future candidates to prepare more appropriately for the final exam.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Most candidates allocated their time very effectively and very few failed to finish the paper.

Section One was in general tackled well and most candidates now seem to be aware of the need to relate their answers to the case study material. However, as in previous years, very few took the opportunity to score development marks by using the financial information to back up their answers.

Question 3 on motivation was well answered and it is clear that candidates are now very comfortable with answering questions of this type. Question 4(a) on force field analysis was generally better tackled than in the past, with fewer candidates offering answers consisting of brief headings, and more offering meaningful discussion of drivers and resistors.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Candidates did less well when answering questions related to Higher work – e.g. on groupings and ICT – where they tended to produce under-developed answers more appropriate to Higher than Advanced Higher level.

Question 5 posed a particular problem. It was based on the topic of organisational groupings in the Higher syllabus. Although the Arrangements Document clearly states that “the content of lower levels underpins [the Advanced Higher] award” (page 8), most candidates had clearly not retained this information, and the question was badly answered. Many candidates simply copied out material from the case study, gaining few or no marks. An allowance has been made in the pass mark to compensate for the difficulty it posed this year.

Surprisingly, some candidates did not recognise that “information and communications technology” in questions 2 and 7(a) meant ICT. Knowledge of European Monetary Union and Transfer Pricing in question 7(b) appeared to be lacking. Answers to question 8(a) on government influence tended to be vaguely worded and imprecise.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

As was the case last year, many answers to Section Two questions revealed inadequate knowledge. As a first step, candidates need to ensure that they are familiar with the syllabus. The new Guidance document supporting the syllabus available on the SQA website could be used by both teachers and candidates as a pre-exam checklist to ensure coverage of all the topics.

The need for as much exam practice as possible remains. From the beginning of the Advanced Higher course candidates need to be made aware of the depth of answers required at this level. It is recommended that the use of bullet points be discouraged, as it almost inevitably leads to briefly expressed list-type answers which earn very few marks. Later on in the course, once the material has been learned, candidates need to develop the ability apply their knowledge in the context of particular questions, taking note of both the subject matter of the question and the “command word” used e.g. “explain” as opposed to “discuss”. The need to develop answers fully should be stressed and examples of where pupils have done this - e.g. in NABs - highlighted.

Candidate responses to this year’s exam in the main showed little knowledge of the wider business world, and this is a pity, as they could use this knowledge to exemplify and develop their answers. They need to be aware that the current business issues and topical case studies they discuss in class are not just interesting for their own sake but can be used to add value to their exam answers.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2006	295
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Number of resulted entries in 2007	216
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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 - 150	-	-	-	-
A	1.4	1.4	3	102
B	14.4	15.7	31	87
C	35.6	51.4	77	72
D	18.1	69.4	39	64
No award	30.6	100.0	66	-

General commentary on passmarks and grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create mark schemes which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum 50% of the available marks (notional passmark) and a very well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70%, it is almost impossible to get the standard absolutely on target every year, in every subject and level
- Each year we therefore hold a passmark meeting for each subject at each level where we bring together all the information available (statistical and judgmental). 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 senior management team at SQA
- We adjust the passmark downwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly more demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- We adjust the passmark upwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly less demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- Where the standard appears to be very similar to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries
- 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 are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. And just because SQA has altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry 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
- Our main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.