

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

History

Qualification area

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

Higher History

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002 (final)	7,901
(Pass mark stage)	7,607

Number of entries in 2003 (pre appeal)	8,084
(Pass mark stage)	7,625

General comments re entry numbers

Entries have largely stabilised following several successive years of increase.

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

A	73
B	63
C	53

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 pre-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 syllabuses evolve and change

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

The grade boundaries are unchanged from 2002.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The overall performance of candidates showed a continuation of the trend for more candidates to achieve the standards required for a pass, but there were fewer examples of scripts of very high quality than in 2002. At pass mark stage, this resulted in a slight increase in the pass rate, but in a minor reduction in the proportion of candidates achieving Band A. These were very much in line with centre estimates. The pre-appeal figures show a pass rate of 77.7%, of which 14.9% were A passes.

Across all three elements of the examination, markers reported a continuing decrease in the number of very weak scripts, perhaps implying that as centres become more familiar with Intermediate courses fewer candidates are being presented inappropriately at Higher grade. This makes the higher level of presentations, combined with a marginally higher pass rate, all the more gratifying.

These observations are supported by markers' comments about evidence of hard work and sound preparation, supported by a number of reports across all three elements that markers had seen many examples of work that could be best described as competent but not outstanding.

Syllabus areas selected were very similar to those in previous years, with no major changes noted. There appears to be a continued slight trend towards more centres teaching the Large Scale State: USA in Paper 1 and Special Topic 8: The Origins and Development of the Cold War 1945 – 1985 in Paper 2.

Looking at the three elements, the overall performance in the Extended Essay continued to improve, with the mean score going about 60% of the available marks for the first time. The mean score in Paper 2 also rose marginally on 2002, continuing a trend evident for the past four years. However, the significant improvement in Paper 1 that occurred in 2002 was reversed, with the mean score being in line with those for 2000 and 2001. This may be explained by the frequent references in markers reports to an absence of very high quality work in their allocations, though some did note that more scripts than in previous years displayed qualities meeting the criteria for Band B.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Paper 1

The most encouraging aspect of markers' reports on Paper 1 was that several referred to improvements in essay structures, with some noting better uses of introductions and conclusions. Other markers, however, were less positive about these aspects, as some candidates continue to use the introduction and tell the examiner what they intend to write about – "This essay will look at..." As in past years, there was also evidence of sound knowledge and understanding on historical content, even if it was not always used to the most productive ends (see below).

Markers reported good answers in response to particular questions or contexts. Some good work was reported in Option A: Medieval History and in Option C: The Large Scale State (both the USA and Russia). In other areas, specific questions mentioned included:

- Question 2 on the Liberal reforms
- Question 6 (a) on the growth of nationalism in Germany
- Question 8 (a) on the Weimar republic
- Question 9 (a) on the impact of Nazi rule on people in Germany

Despite the critical comments in the next section about responses to Question 1 on democracy, some markers also reported that, where a candidate answered this question as intended, the answers were sometimes of a very high standard.

Paper 2

Here, many markers commented that the overall standard of answers was satisfactory or better, with rather more very good scripts and certainly fewer very weak scripts. Candidates demonstrated very good skills in source comparison, especially in Special Topics 7 and 8, with more candidates than in previous years supporting their answers with detailed point by point comparisons. Perhaps in this case the change to rubric assisted candidates, though in both of the above Special Topics the sources themselves provided good opportunities to display the skills.

In Special Topic 7, candidates also responded very well to the eight mark question, with better use of recalled knowledge to identify omissions from the sources. Some markers found it encouraging to read the depth and analysis present in many answers, as more candidates treat this type of question as a mini-essay, with brief introductions and conclusions. Similar good work was reported in Special Topics 2 and 8.

The cartoon used in Special Topic 7 Question 1 was more accessible to candidates than the responses of some teachers might suggest. In practice, though some did find it difficult, many candidates were able to interpret the source effectively, with considerable numbers noting the use of irony (and identifying where the cartoon was iron, so this was more than a taught formula). Where they were less successful was in identifying the problems facing Britain and France as a result of Hitler's actions.

Other than in the eight-mark questions, markers' reports on the use of recalled knowledge were mixed. Some reported that the more successful candidates were able to introduce relevant substantiating facts into their answers, and relate these successfully to points taken from the sources. Others were less positive, noting that scripts at or below the borderline frequently failed to use recalled knowledge to support evaluations of the sources.

Extended essay

The overwhelming view of markers is that this element of the examination continues to offer candidates the opportunity to display their best work, an opportunity that the majority seize emphatically. The vast majority of candidates produced work at least competent enough to pass, with a higher number than in previous years worthy of marks at the higher grades; most noticeably, more candidates were receiving marks at Band B instead of Band C. This is very encouraging, suggesting that good teaching and preparation is helping candidates slightly above the borderline to maximise their potential.

Once again, markers remarked on the amount of effort and research that candidates had put into their preparation. They also found that more candidates than in previous years were attempting to present an argument, often showing awareness of historical debate, and evidence of a wider range of research than merely the class texts and notes that have sometimes appeared to be the main sources on which some have relied. Markers noted more examples of analytical approaches and less emphasis on narrative, though this has not yet been translated into similar approaches in Paper 1.

In content areas, there were examples of good work in Russian history, interwar Germany and some particularly strong essays assessing Britain's policy of appeasement in the 1930s.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Paper 1

Where candidates performed weakly in this paper, it was often as a result of failure to address the terms of the question asked, with numbers of candidates clearly intent on writing set answers regardless of the phrasing of the question. Comments from three markers illustrate the issue:

“Many candidates do not seem to read the question or frame their answers to fit the question set.”

“Too many candidates were re-wording and re-structuring the issues in the question, to suit their own prepared work.”

“Candidates suffered by having been prepared on last year’s questions and frequently answered those questions and not the ones set.”

It should be noted that several markers also commented that they felt that the question phrasings were “clear and not really open to much misinterpretation”.

This pattern is not new, having been raised in previous reports and at student conferences and in-service events for teachers. It remains the most significant factor affecting candidate performance. If candidates were prepared to read each question and work out what it asks them to *do* it would make a massive contribution to raising standards of performance.

A few individual questions in this year’s examination proved especially vulnerable to the behaviour described above, all of them in Option C. The most serious case was Question 1 on democracy, asking candidates to discuss reasons for the growth of democracy in Britain. Many candidates answering this questions said, in effect, “the most important reason for the growth of democracy in Britain was the passage of reform acts” and then proceeded to list them. In passing, it can be observed that, though the phrasings vary, there are effectively only two basic questions that can be asked on the growth of democracy:

- To what extent had Britain become more democratic by [insert chosen date]?
- Why did Britain become more democratic during the period [insert chosen dates]?

It appears not to matter which of these is chosen, the routine answer is still the same, and amounts to a list of the reforms with some fiddling at the edges.

Though less frequently chosen, answers in general to Question 4 on the National Government tended to be weak. In the Growth of Nationalism section, some markers reported surprisingly poor answers to Question 7 (a) on the process of unification in Germany.

Paper 2

The biggest challenge facing candidates remains that of relating their recalled knowledge to the evidence they extract from sources in order to address the terms of the question. While most can extract relevant detail from sources, and while many can identify recalled knowledge appropriate to the event or issue, these two types of information often appear separately in answers with no evidence that the candidate understands their relationship with each other. The issue here is a close parallel to the point made above about Paper 1 – the importance of question analysis to ensure that the candidates know what to *do* to answer the question appropriately.

In Special Topic 7 this was illustrated in answers to Questions 1 and 4. As noted above, the source interpretation in responses to Question 1 was often more than acceptable, but many candidates did not then use the source evidence to explain the problems that German reoccupation of the Rhineland created for Britain and France. Recalled knowledge offered in answers to this question tended to be brief and to lack focus on the question. The pattern in weaker answers to Question 4 was rather different. Again, candidates were often able to identify points of detail from the source, but relatively few recognised that it was critical of Chamberlain, despite the presence of phrases like “Chamberlain’s great mistake...”, therefore many were unable to evaluate its views effectively.

Although markers generally felt that the introduction of the prompts in the rubric had helped to focus candidates on the correct tasks, some reported that there were still significant numbers who continued to apply formulaic approaches to all questions, commenting unnecessarily, and even wastefully, on source provenances..

Extended Essay

Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose.

The main issue worthy of discussion yet again in this context is entirely predictable. In the reducing number of cases where candidates do not fulfil their potential, most can be traced to the choice of a question title that places the candidate at a disadvantage from the start. These fall into one or more of several categories:

- Titles that positively invite narrative or descriptive writing: “How were the tactics of the Suffragettes and Suffragists different in bringing about the vote for women?”; “What criticisms can be made of Liberal Reforms from 1906 to 1914?”
- Titles that did not give clear guidance to the candidate or are phrased clumsily: “Martin Luther – Saint or Sinner?” led to a narrative of King’s private life; “Can Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement be justified and if not what was the alternative?”
- Titles are over-demanding: “Edmund Burke – Why did he support one revolution and not the other?”; “Labour Movement, Labour Party. Discuss the relationship between the two organisations in relation to their success and survival.”
- Double questions: “Why and with what success did David I encourage the growth of Norman influence in Scotland?”
- Titles are not questions: “The rise of Hitler”

Some markers have expressed their surprise that titles like those cited above are able to survive the scrutiny of staff at the planning phase, though of course candidates may well have been offered, and have ignored, advice from their teachers.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

The main themes arising from this year's diet are:

- There has been a continuing rise in the number of candidates who demonstrate competence at pass level, though there were fewer examples of very high quality work. This suggests that the concentration in earlier years on methods of supporting borderline candidates to succeed have been effective, and that the focus should now be more on higher order skills to assist more able candidates to maximise their potential.
- The key issues in improving performance, both in Paper 1 and in Paper 2, is that of reading the question to be certain that the answer reflects the terms of the question, not simply the regurgitation of prepared, stock answers.
- Performance in the Extended Essay, already impressive, could be improved still further by encouraging candidates to select questions that are phrased clearly, to guide research and planning, and appropriate to the maturity level of the individual.
- In the Extended Essay, some markers continue to be concerned when they receive packets of scripts where all, or almost all, of the candidates have written essays on the same theme, often with the same title or very similar titles. While recognising that this may well result from class teaching on a topic close to the point at which students choose their titles, they continue to feel that this leads to loss of individuality and hence of quality, and may disadvantage better candidates.