

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

Modern Studies

Qualification area

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

Modern Studies Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	7,801

Number of entries in 2003	
Pre appeal	7,759

General comments re entry numbers

The slight drop in numbers may be explained by an increase in Intermediate presentations.

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

A	56	70%
B	47	59%
C	38	48%

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 syllabuses evolve and change

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

All grade boundaries were lower than in 2002. Possible reasons are explored elsewhere in this report.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

There was an encouraging number of high quality responses — although there were fewer overall than 2002. It was the perception of the extended examination team, prior to the availability of the statistical evidence, that the overall quality of the candidature in 2003 was poorer and that there was a depression at the upper reaches. The statistics confirmed this impression. The feedback on the Paper has been very positive and there is no suggestion that it was in any area more difficult than 2002. There are two main explanations for the poorer performance, mainly in Paper1:

1. The vast majority of candidates attempted either Question A1 or Question A4. Question A1(a) was not well done in that candidates did not give the ‘role’ of pressure groups but, rather, the methods used by them. Therefore, in a mainstream topic there were few high-scoring responses. Question A4(a) was slightly better done but, again, there were fewer high scoring responses than might have been expected because candidates failed to give specific examples or, disappointingly, used FPTP as an example.
2. There were many very poor answers in Section B to what were mainstream questions. One possible explanation for this is that candidates have picked up a signal that, because this section is not now assessed internally it is, somehow, less important and, therefore, they do not give it as much study time as the other sections. It may be, also, that there has been less practice in writing answers in this section.

It is a matter for concern that in questions about immigrants in C9, this year and in previous years when the subject was addressed, candidates refer to African Americans as immigrants. They never were and, although there may be some recent immigrants from Africa, they are certainly not statistically significant.

There is some evidence that candidates have prepared responses and when they see the words ‘pressure group’ (for example) it triggers the response regardless of the tenor of the question.

The range of topics attempted in the examination is a cause for concern. It would be encouraging to see more centres teaching Study Theme 2 which is, obviously a major topic in the Scottish context of the examination. Study Themes 8 (China) and 10 (Europe) also, perhaps, deserve more attention.

There is evidence that a substantial minority of candidates do not understand the implications of ‘To what extent...’. More candidates are analysing and examining in parts (b) but there seems to be a trend to turn all (b) responses into arguments for and against.

In Paper 2 the vast majority of candidates used the report format. When the report format is not used it would appear to be a deficiency in the centres rather than in the candidates. The evaluating questions are well answered and there are fewer over-long responses. There were, however, fewer full-mark answers in the evaluating questions.

There is an anomaly in Paper 2 in that a very able candidate writing an excellent report but scoring badly in the evaluating questions receives a lower mark than a candidate who has been well trained in answering the evaluating questions but does less well in the report. There is an issue to be addressed as to which part of Paper 2 is the better test of the candidate’s ability.

A very few candidates confused PFI/PPP with private healthcare and there was an equally small number of candidates in DM1 who did not connect the political proposal with the social and economic sources. As in previous years, there is a one third/ two thirds breakdown in the number of candidates attempting DM1 and DM2.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Paper 1:

From candidates who did understand the different systems of PR there were excellent responses to A4(a). There were fewer candidates this year answering Question C8 (China) but the quality of the responses was very high. Likewise, C10 (Europe) is not a popular choice, but is well answered by those who do choose it. C12 (Food) is increasingly popular and there are some very high-quality answers (see later, however). C9(a) (Affirmative Action) was generally well-answered. C9(b) (Immigration) — there were as many very good responses as there were poor ones. (see later)

Paper 2

There were many candidates who had an excellent grasp of the requirements of this paper and accordingly scored high marks. The vast majority of candidates used a good report style and there were fewer multi-coloured reports. Candidates are including more background information but some is still too generic

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Paper 1

Candidates do not seem to understand the implications of the word ‘role’ and this was evidenced in the responses to Question A1(a) in particular.

Question A4(b) was generally well answered but a significant minority of candidates gave a list of influences on voting behaviour rather than an analysis.

With the exception of B6(c) (inequalities) there were few high quality responses in Section B.

Many candidates attempted B5(a) (causes of unemployment) but totally confused the reasons for an individual’s difficulty in finding a job (although some of these reasons were credited) with the micro and macro reasons for unemployment.

Many of the responses to B6(a) relied heavily on Standard Grade information re meals on wheels etc rather than on Care in the Community and Sutherland.

The most answered question was B6(c) and the responses were disappointing in that the candidates did not seem able to distinguish between the ‘Causes of’ and ‘Evidence of’ inequalities in health. The value of research is appreciated but candidates must know how to apply the results, eg the always-with-us Bearsden and Drumchapel video.

C7 (South Africa) — there are still too many candidates who do not have contemporary information. C9(a) — there is too much emphasis on the historical debate over ‘bussing’ and not enough understanding of recent events re affirmative action. There is a disappointing number of candidates who refer to African Americans as immigrants.

There is an increasing number of high quality answers to C12 but many candidates are still disadvantaged by the lack of specific reference to Africa.

Paper 2

There were fewer candidates scoring full marks for the evaluating questions. The marks for DM1 and DM2 evaluating questions were similar as were the marks for the reports. Few candidates treat the report as an extended essay but, disappointingly, some still do. Occasionally, this will be one candidate in a centre, which indicates a good centre but a poor candidate; very rarely, there is evidence of lack of guidance from the centre. Candidates must be reminded to give a rebuttal to their arguments in support of the recommendation and include non-generic background information. It is acceptable for candidates to include generic background information and other things being equal, should ensure a 'C' pass but for high marks there must be more robust and integrated information.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

There are not many candidates whose handwriting is difficult or near impossible to read by either the marker or the Principal Assessor but these candidates disadvantage themselves. Centres might explore the different opportunities offered by SQA to avoid disadvantaging such candidates.

There are, still, some candidates who, either because of centre training or some personal need, waste time by rewriting the question before attempting the answer. They often repeat the question at the end 'In this essay I have examined...etc' This is not only time-wasting but is also an inelegant style.

There are still some centres which insist on the need to provide a conclusion at the end of all essays. A conclusion at the end is a sign of a mature candidate so long as it is a conclusion and not, as in so many cases, a summary of previous points. Integrated conclusions are perfectly acceptable and these are signalled by words and phrases such as: 'therefore'; 'and so' ; 'on the one hand... on the other hand..'; 'however' etc.

All centres should train candidates in following the rubric in Paper 2. Most do; those which do not do so seriously disadvantage their candidates.