



Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Social Sciences

Qualification area

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

Philosophy: Higher & Intermediate 2

Statistical information: update

Intermediate 2

Number of entries in 2003 (pre appeal)	108
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Number of entries in 2004 (pre appeal)	101
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Higher

Number of entries in 2003 (pre appeal)	723
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Number of entries in 2004 (pre appeal)	766
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General comments re entry numbers

The number of candidates taking the Intermediate 2 showed a slight increase.

It was pleasing to see the significant increase in the number of candidates attempting Higher after the slight fall in 2003. This was particularly so as some had suggested that the introduction of a 'D' grade and the removal of an automatic 'A' at the lower level for those who narrowly missed a 'C' pass would tend to result in more candidates being entered for the Intermediate 2 rather than the Higher.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards and grade boundaries

Distribution of awards (Intermediate 2)	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	46.5	46.5	47	42
B	12.9	59.4	13	36
C	11.9	71.3	12	30
D	2.0	73.3	2	27
No award	26.7	100.0	27	

Distribution of awards (Higher)	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	18.1	18.1	139	54
B	29.0	47.1	222	46
C	26.0	73.1	199	39
D	8.9	82.0	68	35
No award	18.0	100.0	138	

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

At Intermediate 2 the pass rate has been somewhat variable over the years. The big increase in the pass rate this year is largely accounted for by the big increase in the number of candidates gaining an A grade.

At Higher the results for 2003 were disappointing and it was hoped that 2004 would bring an increase in the pass rate. An additional factor in 2004 is the fact that there was an increase in the time available for the exam. The time was increased from 2h15m to 2h40m, nearly a 20% increase. It is likely that this is a major factor in the big increase in the overall pass rate.

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.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

The grade boundaries have again remained unchanged at the Intermediate 2 level.

In 2003 it was decided that the exam was slightly harder than it had been and the grade boundaries adjusted accordingly. This year the boundaries have reverted to what they were before 2003.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

At the Intermediate 2 level there continued to be some candidates who appeared to have no appropriate knowledge of the subject but this year much more noticeable was the number of candidates who seemed as if they would have been quite capable of attempting Higher. In some cases the evidence suggested that they would have performed well at Higher. From the way in which candidates answered some of the questions it was clear that many of them had been taught in bi-level classes and this probably brought up the level of their response.

At Higher the performance of candidates was once again relatively even across the questions. A number of the markers commented that the performance of candidates was generally better than in previous years and, as has already been explained, this may well be due to the extra time allowing candidates to demonstrate what they are capable of doing.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

In the Higher, the highest average scores were gained on the Social Philosophy, Aristotle and Hume questions. However, by itself this fact is a bit misleading for these were also by far the least popular questions. Only about 7% of candidates chose to answer either the Aristotle or Hume question, whilst less than 2% of candidates chose the Social Philosophy question. These candidates were well-prepared and were mostly able candidates who generally also gained high scores in their other answers.

Only about 20% of the candidates answered on Logic rather than Moral Philosophy. These candidates gained a slightly higher average mark for this section than the other candidates did for the section they had attempted. However, as seems to happen every year, those candidates who answered on Logic also gained higher average marks in their Classic Texts and Problems in Philosophy answers than those who answered on Moral Philosophy, although this seemed to be less marked than in previous years.

The question on Plato was the most popular one in the paper and was attempted by more than 50% of the candidates. In the Problems in Philosophy section the most popular question by far was the one on the existence of God, which was attempted by over one third of the candidates and attracted 15% more of the candidates than the next most popular question. Other than Social Philosophy it also gained the highest average mark for the section.

In the Moral Philosophy section the question on the death penalty was the most popular and also gained a very slightly higher average mark than the other two questions.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

It was noticeable that candidates from some centres had difficulty moving beyond very descriptive answers. This was so even though some of the candidates themselves gave the impression of being very able. This suggests that, at least in some cases, it is a problem with the way in which the candidates are being prepared for the exam.

In the Plato question candidates were able to deal with the descriptive part of the question very well. The explanation of the theory of Forms and its problems led to answers that were much more varied in quality.

Candidates also seemed to have considerable difficulty in clearly linking these two aspects of the question.

The responses to the Descartes question were particularly disappointing. Although better than the responses in 2003 candidate answers showed many of the same weaknesses. A common problem this year was candidates introducing the wax example inappropriately and in such a way that suggests they didn't even properly understand it anyway.

In the Problems in Philosophy section probably the most obvious area of weakness was in the answers to the Scepticism question. Too many candidates seemed to think it would be acceptable to spend most of the time simply repeating material that would have been more appropriate to a question on Descartes – and in at least one case seemed to be reproducing material that had been learned for a question on Hume. Whilst the information may not be irrelevant, to concentrate on Descartes suggests a lack of knowledge about this topic.

As has happened most years, there were some pupils who answered on the wrong argument for the existence of God. Even more disappointing was that far too many candidates spoke about all three arguments they had studied rather than concentrating on the one argument asked for by the question.

Also as has happened before, many candidates found it difficult to get to grips with the complexities of the Free-will and Determinism question. This year it was this question that had the lowest average mark in the Problems in Philosophy section.

In the Moral Philosophy section, although there were some very good responses to the question on the categorical imperative there were also some very poor responses. Candidates sometimes did not know enough to discuss the theory properly, sometimes appearing to rehash prepared answers on punishment. A number of candidates also unnecessarily introduced information about Utilitarianism.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

It should be quite noticeable by now to those centres who have been delivering the Course for some years that the same kinds of problems crop up year after year. Students would undoubtedly benefit from centres taking the time to specifically prepare candidates for the exam and emphasize the kinds of mistakes that have been made over the years. Although the situation does seem to be improving it is still necessary for more centres to alert students to the fact that a good response to an exam question may not be the same as a good response to a NAB question. There is also the ongoing need to emphasize the need to engage in proper analysis and evaluation and not to rely on descriptive answers.