

Principal Assessor Report 2005

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 resulted entries in 2004	101
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	161
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Higher

Number of resulted entries in 2004	766
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	800
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General comments re resulted entry numbers

In percentage terms there has been a big increase in the number of candidates taking the Intermediate 2, i.e. and increase of nearly 60%. Approximately 60% of candidates come from S6 and the rest from S5. Very few candidates are entered for the Intermediate 2 course by F.E. colleges.

There has also been another increase in the number of candidates taking Higher Philosophy although this is a relatively slight increase of 34 candidates.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards (Intermediate 2)	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 60	-	-	-	-
A	39.8	39.8	64	42
B	13.7	53.4	22	36
C	12.4	65.8	20	30
D	2.5	68.3	4	27
No award	31.7	100.0	51	-

Distribution of awards (Higher)	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 75	-	-	-	-
A	16.1	16.1	129	52
B	26.6	42.8	213	44
C	27.4	70.1	219	37
D	11.3	81.4	90	33
No award	18.6	100.0	149	-

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 any significant changes in distribution of awards/grade boundaries

At Intermediate 2 the pass rate has been somewhat variable over the years. This year there has been a very slight decrease in the pass rate which is accounted for by a slight decrease in the number of 'A's and a slight increase in the number of 'No Awards'. The percentage of candidates achieving a 'B' or 'C' award has remained steady. It is difficult to interpret these figures as it is unknown what the circumstances are in which the candidates are taking the Intermediate 2 course. Some candidates are easily gaining full marks and it may be that they have been entered for the wrong level. On the other hand it may be that they are very able candidates who have taken the course as an additional subject primarily for interest sake rather than for gaining the course award. At the other end of the spectrum there were candidates who gained very low marks and in some cases zero marks and it is clear that some of these candidates had no intention of even attempting any of the questions.

At Higher, candidates gained lower marks than in previous years. After careful consideration it was decided that this was largely due to the paper being slightly more difficult than in previous years (see below) and as a result the pass mark boundaries were slightly lowered. After this change the percentage of candidates gaining the different grades was comparable to previous years although they were still slightly down on 2004.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

At the Intermediate 2 level, as has already been mentioned, there were some candidates who easily gained full marks and others who gained zero marks. However, there was no discernable pattern to this variation and candidates did not seem to have any particular difficulties with any specific part of the paper. Once again, and perhaps not surprisingly, there was evidence that many of the candidates taking the Intermediate 2 paper had been studying alongside candidates preparing for Higher.

At Higher candidates gained lower marks than in 2004 and were closer to those achieved in 2003. Although these lower marks are undoubtedly attributable in part to a more difficult set of questions there was also evidence that too many candidates were not properly prepared to tackle questions from some parts of the course. There were also the same problems that occur every year concerning irrelevant material and a failure to address the question that had been asked.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

In the Higher, as has often been the case, high average marks were achieved in the Aristotle and Hume questions. However, once again these marks are somewhat unrepresentative as less than 7% of the candidates attempted these questions.

The most popular question in the Classic Texts section was on Descartes, which was attempted by just over half of all the candidates. On the whole these candidates did well gaining one of the highest average scores for any of the questions. However, the range of marks on this question was also one of the widest.

In the Problems of Philosophy section the question on God was the most popular attempted by about one third of the candidates. However, it is the Freewill question that stands out as having the highest average score.

In the Moral Philosophy section there was very little variation between the scores achieved for the different questions. The first of the questions, which asked about intention, was easily the most popular but the highest average score was obtained on question three, which concerned utilitarianism and punishment.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

There were a number of areas in this year's exam that the candidates found difficult. It was noticeable that the candidates attempting the logic option found the questions more challenging than in previous years. Although candidates did not have much difficulty explaining the concepts of validity and soundness there was evidence that students did have more difficulty understanding the implications of these concepts. Candidates also had difficulty recognising the relevant fallacies. It seems that although candidates may know what some of the fallacies are in principle they find it much more difficult to recognise these in practice relying more on superficial clues rather than a clear understanding of the argument.

In the Classic Texts section it was the Plato question in particular that caused problems. Many candidates relied on delivering their standard, pre-prepared response on the Forms despite having little knowledge of the simile of the Divided Line. In some cases candidates all but avoided mentioning the simile. Many others mentioned it as an afterthought and frequently described it incorrectly. A disappointingly large number were

seemingly unable to make any evaluative comment on the simile. Of those who did manage to describe the simile many were not able discuss the Forms in the context of the simile but instead relied on writing about the Forms and the Divided Line as separate topics. Another problem that seems to be specific to certain centres is that some candidates had clearly been taught and coached to answer any question on Plato as if it were a question about political philosophy.

In the Problems section the Social Philosophy question achieved the lowest average score by some way. However, only 11 candidates attempted this question. A number of those attempting this question were weak candidates who also achieved low marks in their other questions. Of the questions attempted by a large number of candidates it was the Induction and God questions that caused the most problems.

With regard to Induction there were too many candidates who did not know enough about Popper's response to the problem. These candidates relied on padding out their essays with material about Russell and Ayer. Many of those who did spend time writing about Popper had only very superficial knowledge of Popper's position and often seemed to be simply repeating things with little understanding.

With regard to the question on the Ontological Argument there were the usual problems of candidates discussing the wrong argument or all three of the arguments that they had studied. A large number of candidates did not seem to have the ability to describe the ontological argument accurately with many seemingly unaware of the differences between the version offered by Anselm and the version offered by Descartes.

In the Moral Philosophy section it was once again the candidate's understanding of the Categorical Imperative that stood out as weaker than their understanding of utilitarianism. The principle of universalising the maxim was frequently misunderstood as was not treating someone as a means only. These misunderstandings led to inappropriate evaluative comments. Unfortunately, as seems to happen every year, there were also candidates who were apparently determined to discuss both Kantian ethics and Utilitarianism irrespective of whether the question concerned only one of these.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Despite what is said in this report every year it is still the case that similar general problems reoccur. Candidates must be reminded that they should address the question asked and not simply repeat pre-prepared answers. The pattern of questions answered suggests that some centres are specifically encouraging students to address a particular topic and it may be that students are only revising one topic for each section. This is a very risky strategy. This is particularly so if the topic itself has not been covered thoroughly – meaning in both breadth and depth. It is noticeable that in some cases many candidates from the same centre will make the same mistake whether this be in the approach to the question or in errors of content. This does suggest a weakness in the preparation of these candidates by the relevant centres. It is hoped that the problems identified earlier in this report can be used by centres not only to assist with evaluating student performance in this past session but also to assist with preparing students for the exam in 2006.