

Principal Assessor Report 2005

Assessment Panel:

Social Sciences

Qualification area

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

**Psychology (New)
Intermediate 2**

Statistical information: update

Number of resulted entries in 2004	-
Number of resulted entries in 2005	364

General comments re resulted entry numbers

This was the first examination under the revised Intermediate 2 Course arrangements, following the National Review of Psychology. Both the old Course and the new ran in the session 2004-05 (ie 'dual running'), therefore total entries, 491, were split between the two. The majority of these (364) took the new exam, and the total number of 2005 entries, which had increased from 483 in 2004, was in line with the continuing upward trend, although the rate of increase was lower than in previous years. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the Course had undergone major revision, however, the slowed rate of growth at Intermediate 2 is perhaps related to the large increase in Intermediate 1 entries, suggesting that centres are recognising that Intermediate 1 is a more realistic option for an increasing number of candidates.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 100	-	-	-	-
A	13.7	13.7	50	66
B	18.7	32.4	68	56
C	17.0	49.5	62	46
D	7.7	57.1	28	41
No award	42.9	100.0	156	-

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

The distribution of marks shows a relatively small percentage achieving grade A (and very few at grade A1), with the majority of 'pass' candidates fairly equally spread across grades B3, B4, C5 and C6. Possible reasons for the shape of this distribution are presented in the body of this report.

Grade boundaries were agreed at a slightly lower level than in the past, in recognition of the level of difficulty encountered by the revised course. It is anticipated that grade boundaries will revert to their *a priori* level in the next year or two.

This was the first examination under the new arrangements, therefore comparison of statistics with previous

years is of limited usefulness, however, the main difference lies in the lower percentage of grade A candidates.

One similarity with previous years also deserves comment: It was disappointing that the overall entry from some centres attracted a low average mark, suggesting that candidates had been entered at an inappropriate level. It was clear that many candidates in such cases would have comfortably achieved at Intermediate 1. Attention has been drawn to this issue in the past, in relation to the old Courses, but unfortunately it appears that many candidates continue to be disadvantaged through being entered at an inappropriate level.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Comments on the question paper

As this was the first examination under revised arrangements, many of the general comments below involve comparison with the old exam.

Feedback from markers and other teachers indicates that the exam fully conformed to the Course Assessment Specification, and to the assessment objectives and content of the course.

The quality of answers showed that, overall, candidates had coped reasonably well. On the whole, although responses were naturally of varying standard and marks were generally lower than in the old exam, they were appropriate in almost all scripts, in the sense that they demonstrated that the demands of the questions had been understood by the candidate.

In contrast to the old exam, very few candidates mistook the instructions as to which questions they should answer; only a handful of candidates mistakenly answered more than one of the option questions C2 – C5 (all other questions were mandatory, so there was no other opportunity for error).

Candidates appeared to find the exam more manageable than in the past, in terms of the *quantity* of material they had to write in order to gain marks. Although the exam duration in the new Course had been increased from 1½ to 2 hours, the average length of candidates' scripts was shorter; however, the *quality* of answers was greater in terms of the knowledge and skills demonstrated. Very few candidates appeared to have run out of time, or suffered fatigue, in contrast to the old exam: there was less evidence of deterioration in quality of answers (or handwriting), towards the end of scripts.

Markers found the allocation of 100 marks for the QP appropriate; in the past, it had been felt that 60 marks did not adequately reflect the effort of the candidate and quantity of material they had to produce. Also, in the past the prohibition on half-marks had been regarded as unreasonable (for some questions with low mark allocations, it had been well nigh impossible to differentiate marks between good, poor and middling candidate performance, without using half-marks); in the new exam, markers felt no necessity to award half-marks.

In the option section, where candidates had to answer one question from C2 to C5 (representing four Social Psychology topics), C5 was very rarely chosen (Social perception topic), and numbers choosing the others were fairly evenly distributed across C2-C4.

Some specific questions were problematic:

- The mark allocation for C1(b) was over-generous
- The wording of A2(b) did not clearly state the requirement of the question.

Candidates' answers to these problematic questions were therefore interpreted generously; it should also be noted that these were mandatory questions, ie all candidates were affected equally, and both had low mark allocations. The question paper setting team will address such issues in future exams.

Marking instructions were found by markers to be effective and non-problematic.

General comments on candidate performance

Candidates appear to have performed more poorly overall this year than in previous years; the disparity in mean marks may be attributable largely to the major differences between old and new Courses/exams, to which teachers and students are having to adapt. In addition, it is likely that marks in previous years were inflated; as was made clear in the Review, the old exam had poor validity in terms of eliciting, measuring and differentiating the kinds of skills required at Intermediate 2.

In general, candidates probably found the exam demanding, in that questions were varied and relatively unpredictable, requiring a variety of skills. The questions sampled knowledge, rather than attempting to elicit 'everything' the candidate had learned (as in the past). In contrast to the format of the previous exam, where questions were highly predictable, candidates were required to interpret the question, select relevant material from their own knowledge, and manipulate that knowledge to create their answer, expressing abstract ideas in their own words. Because the exam demanded such skills, many candidates may have found it challenging; by the same token, however, markers found they could effectively discern whether there was genuine 'understanding', and felt that their differentiation of performance between grades was more accurate.

Although a number of aspects of the exam were in general problematic or 'difficult' for candidates, it should be stressed that there was also a high standard of performance in these areas, from some candidates; this suggests that the whole range of candidate ability was catered for, in terms of both providing opportunities for the strongest candidates to demonstrate the highest level of skills, as well as the opportunity for weaker candidates to demonstrate skills of an adequate standard.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Overall, the 'size' of answers was quite well tailored to the mark allocations.

The research methods question, section B, was unproblematic, with most candidates performing well or adequately. Performance in Sections A and C was more varied than in Section B.

In many cases, candidates had clearly differentiated the types of demand of different questions, as shown in the 'command' words 'describe', 'explain' etc.

Many 'weaker' candidates were able to demonstrate adequate skills of knowledge and understanding, in spite of limited use of specialist terminology.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Although, in many cases, candidates had clearly differentiated the types of demand of different questions, some candidates lost marks through giving one-word answers where they were asked to ‘describe’. This suggests that they had failed to use both sources of information (command word and mark allocation) which indicate the nature/size of answer required.

Where a question specified a number of elements in the answer, eg ‘**one** example of a trait’, ‘**two** functions of NVC’ etc, it was not uncommon to find answers giving more than the specified number; many candidates evidently need more guidance on following such instructions.

In general, the 10-mark questions, which required the most **discursive** responses, were rather poorly addressed; A2(c) and C2(e) responses were particularly weak. However, these questions do conform to the Course and Unit specifications, in terms of Outcomes and content, and a small number of candidates did perform well in these; even candidates who performed poorly had generally understood what was required, and gained some credit.

Questions requiring a description /explanation of **concept(s)**, whether a low-mark or high-mark allocation question, were often poorly answered, eg A2(a)(i), A2(a)(ii) and C2(e). Responses often featured ‘common-sense’ or over-simplified points, in everyday language. In terms of stage of intellectual development, this type of requirement (ie for explanations of abstract concepts) is appropriate for Intermediate 2 candidates, however skills of expression need to be developed through practice. Again, many candidates did respond to such questions competently.

A related problem was that a number of candidates failed to gain marks due to presenting answers in a **notes-style format**, sometimes as a list of bullet-points, rather than sentences; in such cases, evidence of understanding was not always apparent. For example, it was not enough for a candidate to simply state ‘poor ecological validity’ in evaluating research; those who gained higher marks were those who demonstrated that they actually understood this concept, by explaining it. Therefore, candidates should be encouraged to write in sentences, and to explain the specialist terminology they use. Candidates should be aware that their knowledge, understanding, analysis and evaluation cannot be fully expressed in abbreviated notes.

In some answers there was evidence of rote-learned wording, either from support materials or where questions were similar to those in the NABs; however, such material did not always answer the question asked.

Knowledge & understanding / analysis & evaluation: A key difference between old and new courses is that assessment objectives are now more clearly defined, and more clearly operationalised as Outcomes and PC. These are tested in an explicit and transparent way in the QP; each item demands knowledge & understanding, or knowledge & understanding PLUS analysis & evaluation. The nature of these required skills is fully explained in the Course and Unit Specifications and Assessment documents. **Candidates typically had greater difficulty demonstrating ‘a & e’, than ‘k & u’, and generally found it hardest to achieve ‘a&e’ marks in the 10-mark questions** (one in QA2, and one in each of C2 to C5). Such questions typically asked for a discussion, or analysis, of a range of influencing factors, or different explanations /theories of behaviour, sometimes requiring reference to research evidence, or an element of comparison / contrast. Question C1(e) was very poorly answered; often candidates gave a reasonable description of the EPI, however, most failed to evaluate it. Centres are therefore encouraged to thoroughly prepare candidates for this aspect of assessment, explaining what is meant by the different kinds of skills required, helping them develop the ability to identify the nature of the demand of various types of assessment items, and providing practice in demonstrating such skills.

Comments on candidate performance in particular types of questions

The types of questions producing the greatest variation in standard of answers were those with a **research evidence** or **applied emphasis**:

Questions involving research evidence

1 Questions on a single research study

Questions demanding description etc of a single research study were well answered, possibly because these were quite similar to certain questions in the old exam. However, candidates should be aware that credit is awarded not so much for details of methodology, but rather for understanding of the relevance of the findings to the psychological topic being studied.

One specific area of such questions where candidates performed poorly was in questions asking for a ‘strength’ of a research study (eg A1(d)); often, instead of giving a strength, candidates simply stated that the findings were ‘good’ or ‘significant’, or explained conclusions or interpretation of findings. Candidates should show evaluation of research (including ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’) mainly in terms of methodological features (eg validity, sampling, control etc); ethical commentary can also gain credit.

2 Use of research evidence for other questions

It was pleasing that some candidates from a number of centres often referred to research evidence in their answers, whether or not this was demanded in the specific question, and gained credit accordingly. Marks thus gained were often ‘a&e’ marks; indeed, candidates should be aware that reference to research evidence is usually an ideal opportunity to show skills of analysis and evaluation.

Not surprisingly, most citations of evidence were made in response to questions with a higher mark allocation, but research references also appeared occasionally in those with low mark allocations. This suggests that some candidates, at least, were beginning to ‘think psychologically’, in that they showed an appreciation of the importance of supporting explanations of behaviour with evidence. However, this skill was noticeably absent in the scripts from some centres.

In some cases, candidates attempted to answer a question on a concept or theory, simply by describing one piece of research (eg Bandura, for QA1(c), Piliavin et al for QC4(c), Ekman, or Eibl-Eibesfeldt, for QC3(d)), in which case only low marks could be awarded. Again, an issue is the ability to identify the demand of the question.

Questions with an applied emphasis

A1(e) and C1(f) both focused on applied aspects of the topic (content of all topics in sections A and C include an applied element). Responses varied greatly in standard: weak answers were often little more than ‘common sense’, conveying rather vague points in everyday language. Good answers used appropriate terminology, gave detailed descriptions (eg of the use of psychometric testing, in C1(f)), and were sometimes supported with research evidence. A number of candidates failed to identify what the question required, and wrote instead about, for example, Piaget’s theory rather than its use in the classroom (A1(e)).

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

These recommendations are based on feedback from markers, as well as drawing on the good practice that is already in place in many centres.

1. Centres are strongly encouraged to ensure candidates are entered at an appropriate level; far better to enter a 'weaker' candidate at Intermediate 1, and be reasonably confident of their achieving an award, than have them struggle throughout at Intermediate 2 level only to receive no award at all. Given that Course content is identical for both levels (though assessment demands are of course different), movement between levels is feasible: some centres already allow flexibility in this respect by running 'bi-level' classes termed 'Intermediate' rather than 'Intermediate 2'. Students are informed that a decision will be made about their level of entry, ie either Intermediate 1 or Intermediate 2, after reviewing their progress a few months into the Course (eg after the first Unit). Such an approach not only facilitates more appropriate entries and higher overall achievement rates for candidates and centres, but also helps avoid a blow to student self-esteem where in an 'Intermediate 2' class they feel they are having to 'drop down' to Intermediate 1.

2. In preparing for assessment, centres should encourage candidates to:

- Develop the ability to identify the nature of the demand of the question, by interpreting 'cues', in terms of:
 - length of answer required (cue - mark allocation)
 - type of skills to be demonstrated (ie k&u / a&e, cues – command word(s) and mark breakdown)
 - number of items required (where applicable, eg **one** factor, **two** criticisms etc; cue – number is always shown in bold)
 - what the question is actually about (cue - wording of question resembles Unit content they have learned).
- Apply skills of both knowledge & understanding, and analysis and evaluation, to **all** areas of content, as set out in the Course and Unit specifications.
- Develop discursive writing skills, especially expression/explanation of concepts.
- Incorporate research studies into their learning about **every** topic (and every aspect of each topic). Then, in assessments, they should make frequent reference to such research evidence, even where not specifically requested in the question, but especially for questions with higher mark allocations.
- Avoid a rote-learning, 'surface' approach and instead develop a 'deep learning' approach, involving confidence in their ability to answer 'unseen' questions, using their own knowledge and understanding, rather than memorised, but possibly meaningless (to them) material.

Centres are urged to help candidates develop such skills by providing plenty of opportunities for practice, in the form of class / homework tasks and formative assessments, followed by detailed feedback.