

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Social Sciences

Qualification area

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

Sociology
Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of resulted entries in 2003	521
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Number of resulted entries in 2004	600
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General comments re entry numbers

2004 saw a significant increase in candidates, which shows an improvement in the continued upward trend since Higher Sociology began. As with previous presentations, there continues to be a number of candidates that should have been presented at Intermediate 2, as they have demonstrated a lack of understanding of the material at Higher.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards

A	26.7%
B	21.2%
C	16.0%
D	5.2%
No award	31.0%

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

With regard to the external assessment, this session saw a significant increase in the overall percentage of candidates who received an A pass, a small percentage rise in those who achieved a B pass and a reduction in the proportion of candidates who achieved a C pass, compared with the 2003 exam. Differences in the data for the outcomes of external assessment and course awards is influenced by the receipt from centres of information on the outcomes/achievement of internal assessment. As Higher Sociology is in its fifth year of presentation, it is likely that assessors have become more familiar with the learning and teaching material and the nature of the Unit and Course assessment to ensure that candidates are increasingly better prepared.

Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	26.7	26.7	160	94
B	21.2	47.9	127	80
C	16.0	63.9	96	67
D	5.2	69.1	31	
No award	31.0	100*	186	

*Rounded down from 100.1 per cent

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

This session saw the reintroduction of the *a priori* pass mark to 67 out of 135 available marks. This only represented a marginal change from previous sessions – in 2003 the pass mark was 66. The other grade boundaries for 2004 remained the same as in 2003.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

- This was the third year of the one paper/four section format for the Higher Sociology exam.
- Candidates scored marks from across the range, with some attaining almost full marks to a couple of candidates achieving no marks.
- Candidates achieving no marks or very few marks invariably wrote very little that was relevant or nothing at all on their exam booklets.
- It continues to be clear that a significant number of candidates are being presented for Higher when they should ideally be presented for Intermediate 2.
- Candidates who left Section A until last often found that they had run out of time to complete all of the questions.
- Some candidates spent a disproportionate amount of time on the questions in Section A, with overly extended answers despite the lower scoring on these questions.
- Many candidates continue to write a large volume of material for the essay responses.
- Some patterns emerged where most candidates from given centres responded to some or all of the essay questions in a fashion that did not maximise their potential for attaining marks.

Top candidates

- Tended to write consistently well across all sections and questions.
- Responses to questions in Section A tended to be accurate and more concise.
- Essays tended to be reflective of the instructions laid out in the questions – eg discussed either the aspect, features or changes, as required, rather than a blanket approach to all of these.
- Essays tended to be well balanced in terms of theories and studies.
- Essays tended to be effectively and consistently evaluative.

Average candidates

- Responses to questions and sections of the exam paper occasionally inconsistent – eg Section A may have been comprehensively answered but the essays may have been weaker or inconsistent.
- Either Section A or an essay question may have been left out by the candidate.
- Inclusion of studies but not theories or *vice versa*.
- Inclusion of one theory and/or study instead of at least two.
- Theories were included but were not always sufficiently contrasting.
- Theories and/or studies were not always evaluated or were poorly evaluated.

Poor candidates

- Some sections and/or questions remained unanswered.
- Answers were descriptive not evaluative.
- Answers reflected common sense rather than sociological analysis.
- Answers were provided primarily in bullet point format.
- There was limited or poor use of theory and/or studies.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Section A

- Generally well answered, with many candidates in lower bandings, or not passing, doing well.

Section C

- Candidates generally answered question C3 on deviance well.

Section D

- Candidates generally answered questions D1 on the family and D4 on the mass media well.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Section A

- A3. Some candidates compared either Marxism or functionalism – rather than the common points of both these structural perspectives – with action perspectives.
- A6. A significant number of candidates indicated a quantitative rather than qualitative research method. Many candidates indicated questionnaires instead of unstructured interviews, but were credited if the description was correct. Many candidates indicated research methods that do not fall within the curriculum, such as surveys and case studies; this was often consistent within given centres.

Section B

- Some candidates discussed the Weberian perspective on social mobility, despite having discussed Marxism and functionalism as the theories.
- In some centres, candidates discussed feminism without appropriately tying it into a discussion on social class stratification.
- Too much space was given by some candidates – usually most from given centres – to discussing caste in substantive detail as part of the essay introduction.

Section C

- C1. Some candidates discussed features or aspects of education rather than changes that have taken place within education. This suggests that such candidates had prepared responses to past papers instead of focusing on the question being asked.
- C3. Despite the question making reference to definitions of crime and deviance, many candidates neglected to provide any definitions.

Section D

- D1. Some candidates discussed features or aspects of the family rather than changes that have taken place within it. This suggests that such candidates had prepared responses to past papers instead of focusing on the question being asked.
- D3. Some candidates were descriptive in their discussion of some studies, such as the Black Report. Official reports were often used by candidates instead of sociological studies to support the sociological theories used.
- D4. Some candidates provided substantive definitions of the mass media rather than focusing on one of the aspects.

General

- Some candidates were either unprepared for the exam or had taken insufficient time to read and understand the questions being asked of them.
- Although all essay questions ask for theories and studies, questions can sample from across the outcomes within individual Units. Therefore, some exam questions will test particular parts of the Units, such as features, aspects or changes.
- Some candidates were unable to attain some of the available marks for certain parts of the essays because they approached a question incorrectly, by discussing aspects instead of changes, for example.
- The last question answered by many candidates tended to be weaker, presumably due to time running out.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

General

- Candidates must write consistently well across the paper to gain higher marks.
- Candidates need to exercise effective time management – eg no more than one hour for Section A and at least 40 minutes for each of the three essays. Writing copious amounts for Section A and running out of time to write three effective essays is counter-productive for candidates.
- Greater consistency in candidate answers is required. A candidate achieving poor marks on a few questions can affect their final grade boundary.
- Avoidance of repetition in responses is important in terms of attaining marks and effective time management.

Section A

- Previous advice to write concisely and comprehensively remains largely unheeded by many candidates. Some candidates are still filling up to one-and-a-half pages for restricted response questions that only carry 6 to 8 marks – if questions ask for a certain number of features or strengths and weaknesses, then that is what candidates should provide, not more than required. This often involves candidates writing numerous brief references to features or strengths and weaknesses, where they will achieve minimum marks, rather than the requested number of elaborated points.
- Candidates need to read the questions properly – ie there is little value in them writing responses for a quantitative research method when the question asks for a qualitative one.
- There is little value in candidates writing responses to research methods that are not within the syllabus (ie case studies and surveys).

Sections B, C and D

- Candidates must write three consistent essays, as one good essay and two weak essays will result in lower marks. Candidates should also be advised that there is less time to write an essay in the exam than there is in Unit assessment and that the exam questions may well follow a different format than those in the Unit assessment. Centres should be providing exam techniques that reflect this.
- The Unit assessment for Outcome 1 is assessed differently to Outcomes 2, 3 and 4. In the exam, the essay questions may sample from across all four outcomes. Therefore, candidates need to synthesise the knowledge and understanding from all outcomes in order to adequately prepare for whichever question is asked in the exam. As such, the exam questions will vary from year to year and candidates should be informed of this, particularly if they are using previous exam question papers for revision purposes. Candidates must be prepared to answer questions relating to any part of the syllabus.
- Questions should be carefully read and appropriately answered. Although all questions ask for theories and studies, some questions will sample from other outcomes in the Unit, including Outcome 1. If the question only asks for theories and studies, most of the marks will be allocated to theories, studies and evaluation, with, perhaps, 2 marks allocated to an introduction. If this is the case, then candidates should introduce the topic by way of a definition – eg what is meant by class stratification, deviance, work, etc., before discussing the theories and studies. However, some candidates are still providing introductions of up to two pages, though they may have done so for no more than 2 marks. This is often done at the expense of theories, studies and evaluation and the time to write other essays.

Candidates should include evaluation of theories and studies, demonstrating the way the chosen studies support or refute the theories used. Candidates should draw meaningful conclusions from their discussion in order to gain high marks. For the theories, evaluation should include at least one strength and at least one weakness to gain high marks from those allocated to theories. Evaluative points must also be made to gain high marks from those allocated for studies. Further evaluation for the theories and/or studies will attract further marks allocated for this purpose. The Higher Still Support Materials only provide a flavour of what can be included in terms of evaluation. Candidates should be directed towards evaluative comments in textbooks, journal articles, lectures and other classroom activities to enhance their evaluative abilities.