

Principal Assessor Report 2005

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 2004	600
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	635
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General comments re resulted entry numbers

2005 saw a small increase in the number of candidates sitting the final exam. This continues to show an upward trend since Higher Sociology began. There was a significant increase in the number of candidates achieving an A pass, which is arguably down to a number of factors. These include the introduction in 2004-2005 of alternative NABs for Understanding Human Society 1 and 2 and hence less incidence of assessment overload for candidates, and also what appears to be centres' and candidates' positive responses to the 2004 PA Report regarding many candidates not focusing on the instruction in the essay questions.

Correspondingly, there was a slight decrease in the number of B and C passes, with fewer candidates also receiving a D or No Award.

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, though there appeared to be far fewer examples of this in 2005.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 135	-	-	-	-
A	38.9	38.9	247	94
B	16.1	55.0	102	80
C	13.5	68.5	86	67
D	3.0	71.5	19	60
No award	28.5	100	181	-

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

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 decrease in the number of candidates who achieved a B or C pass. The number of candidates receiving a No Award or D decreased fairly significantly.

As Higher Sociology is in its sixth 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.

The creation of an alternative set of NABs with a significantly reduced volume of Unit assessment is also likely to have contributed positively to the overall increased pass rate and to the increase in A passes, as

centres would have more time to help candidates focus on the instruction in the essay questions and thus answer the questions more directly. Previously, many candidates provided responses that discussed issues that were not related to the question, but may have related to the topic and Unit assessment. The 2004 PA Report clarified this as a problem, which now seems to have been addressed by many centres. As a result of the latter, more candidates completed their response to their final essay question in 2005 compared with candidates previously.

This session saw a continuation of the *a priori* pass mark of 67 out of 135 available marks. The other grade boundaries for 2005 remained the same as in 2004.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

- This was the fourth year of the one paper/four section format for the Higher Sociology exam.
- Candidates scored marks from across the range, with a small number attaining 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 but seemingly falling number of candidates are being presented for Higher when they should ideally be presented for Intermediate 2. There appeared to be less evidence of such candidates in 2005, which is to be welcomed.
- Most candidates answered questions consecutively, though candidates who left Section A until last often found that they had run out of time to complete all of the questions.
- There was evidence of more candidates completing all of the questions in 2005, whereas in other presentations a reasonable number of candidates appeared to have run out of time before completing their final essay question. There were many more completed final essay questions in 2005 than previously, which is likely to have occurred as a result of more candidates focusing directly on the instruction in the essay questions than ‘hedging their bets’ by covering the features and changes and aspects instead of focusing on the one which the question specifically asked for.
- 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.
- Most candidates do reasonably to very well in Section A.
- 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, though there is a declining incidence of this compared with previous presentations.

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.
- Some such candidates managed to provide responses demonstrating ability well exceeding Higher.

Average candidates

- Responses to questions and sections of the exam paper were 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 or were entirely irrelevant.
- 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 overall, doing well in this section. Candidates achieving A passes invariably achieved very high marks in this section. This is consistent with previous presentations.

Section C

- Candidates generally answered question C3 on deviance well. This is consistent with previous presentations.

Section D

- Candidates generally answered questions D1 on the family and D4 on the mass media well. This is consistent with previous presentations.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Section A

- A6. Many candidates gave more limited responses to operationalisation, such as not explaining the sub-stages.
- A7. A small number of candidates related to qualitative instead of quantitative methods of gathering data in response to this question.

Section B

- Some candidates discussed studies supporting different theoretical influences to the theories they introduced earlier in their essays.
- 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.
- A number of candidates – often most or all from given centres – avoided writing an introduction defining class stratification.
- Some candidates included discussion on the aspect of social mobility in an abstract fashion while not linking it directly to the rest of their response.

Section C

- C3. Some candidates appeared to have a difficulty identifying and evaluating studies, using instead broad sweeping references to sociologists who had carried out studies in the area being discussed.

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.

General

- Some candidates were either unprepared for the exam or had taken insufficient time to read and understand the questions being asked of them.
- 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, though this was substantially less of a problem than with previous presentations.

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.
- There appears to be a greater consistency in candidate responses, particularly for essay questions.
- Avoidance of repetition in responses is important in terms of attaining marks and effective time management.

Section A

- There appears to be an increased number of candidates writing concise yet comprehensive responses. However, some candidates are still filling up to one-and-a-half pages for restricted response questions that only carry 4 to 7 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 research method that generates qualitative data when the question asks for a quantitative one.
- There is little value in candidates writing responses to research methods that are not within the syllabus (ie case studies and surveys).
- Candidates must avoid bullet-point responses, as no more than half the available marks can be achieved.
- Where candidates are asked to explain, they should not describe.

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. However, since the 2004 PA Report, there is more evidence of candidates focusing on the question posed.
- 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. However, since the 2004 PA Report, there is more evidence of candidates focusing on the question posed.
- 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, poverty and welfare, etc., before discussing the theories and studies. However, some – but far fewer than previously – 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.

Sections B, C and D (continued)

- 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.
- Centres should inform candidates that where grades/marks are given for Unit assessment, these do not reflect the bandings in the external assessment – ie a candidate achieving 70 per cent (A pass) in the NAB would be seen as performing at a B pass level in the exam. Therefore, candidates should be made aware that additional effort on the knowledge and understanding and analysis and evaluation is required for the external assessment.