



Course Report 2015

Subject	Philosophy
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment and marking instructions for the examination.

Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

Summary of the Course assessment

Component 1: Question Paper.

The Question on argument diagrams was a new area to the Philosophy curriculum but was handled competently by most candidates. Question 3 and 4 asked about analogical arguments and explanations which was also new, but did not perform so well.

The balance of questions and assessment areas that didn't function as intended meant that, overall, no adjustment to grade boundaries was required.

Component 2: Assignment.

The open nature of the assignment produced a wide diversity of responses.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Summary of Candidate Performance

Component 1: Question Paper

Section 1: Arguments in Action

The first question on Argument diagrams was new for candidates but of the 4 marks available over 80% of candidates gained 2 or more marks and 35% gained the full 4 marks. Questions 3 & 4 focussed on another new part of the course (analogical arguments and explanations) but these questions were not done so well. Counterintuitively, Question 3 which simply required a restatement of learned material and, in this sense was similar to Question 5 on 'appeals to emotion', was done less well than Question 4 which required them to apply their knowledge. One possible explanation for this is that being a new part of the course the candidates were simply less well prepared. It may be that a number of these marks were achieved by candidates relying on an intuitive understanding of analogies or their knowledge of analogies from English lessons rather than on a clear understanding of how analogical arguments function.

Section 2: Knowledge and Doubt

The questions on Hume should have been straightforward for Higher candidates. Question 7 was the most problematic. The question was intended to elicit an explanation of the specific arguments Hume presents in the text, however, the marking scheme also allowed for a wider interpretation of the question. Even so, over half the candidates gained just 1 mark or less for the 6 mark question. It seems that the majority of candidates were simply unfamiliar with Hume's arguments and were only prepared to give a description of impressions and ideas. That the problem was lack of familiarity with the text is supported by some fairly widespread misunderstanding of Hume's 'missing shade of blue' (Question 8) where only half the candidates gained 5 or more marks out of 10. It was fairly common for candidates to be aware of suggestions as to how Hume might have avoided the problem but to attribute these moves to Hume himself. Very few candidates discussed why Hume didn't avoid the problem in the suggested ways given that it appears to be such a big problem and apparently so easily avoidable. It is important for centres to realise that at Higher candidates must be familiar with the content of the original texts and not just rely on a superficial understanding of the basic principles.

Section 3: Moral Philosophy

The question on Kant was a very open question and gave ample opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of the theory. The average score for the question was 11.6 out of 20, i.e. 58%. Candidates often did better when describing the standard criticisms of the theory than in describing the theory itself. Often important details were omitted or were incorrectly described. There is a suspicion that if there had been shorter more focussed questions candidates would not have done so well. However, with positive marking candidates were able to gain high marks and 14% of candidates gained the full 20 marks.

Component 2: Assignment.

Many candidates chose topics outwith the course but most chose a topic either from the old metaphysics unit or from the new course. A number of candidates had difficulty in presenting an assignment that was appropriate to a philosophy course and either chose a topic that was perhaps more suited to a Religious Studies course or dealt with their chosen topic in a non-philosophical manner.

There were many candidates where there was evidence of effective research and finished assignments that were well-written and argued effectively. However, there was also a tendency for candidates to rely on description and to recite standard positions rather than to develop their own line of argument. This was particularly an issue with candidates who had chosen topics that are typically summarised in introductory textbooks or teaching notes. Plagiarism or near plagiarism was widespread. There were instances of candidates copying their assignment in its entirety from a pre-existing source but more widespread was the instances of candidates copying whole paragraphs without acknowledging their origin. Candidates would sometimes mildly paraphrase the source they were relying on by changing some words here and there thinking that this was enough for them to call it their own work. There were instances of centres submitting assignments from candidates who had relied heavily on the same single source and all that really distinguished them was the success with which they had managed to paraphrase that source. Candidates did not always include a bibliography or acknowledge all their sources and this is particularly concerning when they did not mention a source on which they were heavily dependent.

There is scope for teachers/lecturers to be active in ensuring that candidates choose appropriate topics, that these topics are dealt with in an appropriately philosophical manner, and that sources are used with integrity.

In addition to sources not being identified another administrative error was a failure to state the word count for the Assignment. Most candidates abided by the word limit and there was plenty of evidence of able candidates rigorously pruning their work to stay within the 1200 words. Many candidates were obviously aware of the 10% rule and wrote between 1200 and 1320 words. Sixty-three candidates, i.e. more than 10%, wrote between 1300 & 1320 words. In a small number of cases it would seem that candidates were not aware of the word limit.

Whilst some centres seem to have taken a completely 'hands off' approach to the assignment there were others where all the candidates produced their assignments to a rigid formula. Some candidates were clearly using the information about mark allocation as if it were an essay plan. It was never intended to be used as such and doing so is likely to lead to poorer quality essays.

Despite these problems positive marking meant that candidates were able to gain high marks. The average score for the assignment was 19 out of 30, 14 candidates achieved full marks within the word limit. Nearly half the candidates gained 21 or more marks, i.e. marks indicative of an A.

Section 3: Areas in which candidates performed well.

Component 1: Question Paper

- Question 1—Identifying the conclusion, a premise and the correct argument diagram.
- Aspects of Arguments in Action that required a simple recall of facts.
- Giving an account of the standard criticisms of Kantian Ethics.

Component 2: Assignment

- Giving a descriptive account of a particular position

Section 4: Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: Question Paper

- Question 3 on the distinction between analogical arguments and analogical explanations.
- Question 7 on the arguments Hume used to support his theory of impressions and ideas.
- Question 8 on the missing shade of blue.
- Question 9—many candidates had difficulty accurately describing the fine distinctions involved in Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Component 2: Assignment

- Knowing how to use sources appropriately

Section 5: Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Component 1: Question Paper.

- Ensure candidates are fully prepared on all areas of the course not just those that are easier or more familiar.
- Ensure candidates know that the question paper will sample from the course and they cannot necessarily expect that the topics they find easiest will be the ones asked about in the exam.
- Ensure candidates are thoroughly familiar with the detail of the specified texts in the knowledge and doubt unit.
- Ensure that candidates can explain the various theories and arguments in detail paying particular attention to where fine distinctions are required.

Component 2: Assignment.

- Ensure familiarity with the most up-to-date advice and documentation.
- Ensure candidates have chosen a suitable title.
- Ensure candidates know that they should be arguing a case not just describing positions.
- Ensure candidates know how to use sources with integrity.
- Ensure candidates know how to reference all sources used.
- Ensure candidates are preparing their own assignment and not being overly guided either with regard to content or structure.
- Ensure administrative matters are dealt with correctly, e.g. specifying the number of words in the assignment.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2014	0
Number of resulted entries in 2015	510

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark - 90				
A	30.2%	30.2%	154	63
B	17.8%	48.0%	91	54
C	21.6%	69.6%	110	45
D	5.9%	75.5%	30	40
No award	24.5%	-	125	-

The balance of questions and assessment areas that didn't function as intended meant that, overall, no adjustment to grade boundaries was required.

General commentary on grade boundaries

- ◆ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.
- ◆ Each year SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). 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 management team at SQA.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.
- ◆ 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 and the mix of questions are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry this 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.
- ◆ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.