



External Assessment Report 2012

Subject(s)	Psychology
Level(s)	Higher

The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers 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 question papers and marking instructions for the examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

External Paper

There was a decrease of approximately 500 candidates this year. There were, however, seven new centres.

Overall, performance in the exam increased slightly again, which reinforces the view that centres are now accustomed to the revised syllabus and question paper structure. This was particularly noticeable in Section C (the essay questions) where candidates generally made good attempts to answer the questions, as opposed to simply depositing information without reference to the question asked.

Candidates continued to demonstrate good knowledge and understanding, as well as improving their skills of analysis and evaluation. Candidates did not always use research evidence, however — something that should be encouraged in teaching.

Research Investigation

The average mark was fractionally higher than last year and consistent with those of previous years. It had been hoped that it might have increased, especially after the online workshop and seminars provided by SQA for those new to teaching the RI.

Most centres followed the research briefs provided, allowing candidates to maximise their marks. A few centres deviated slightly from the briefs without any penalty to the candidates, but a few centres deviated in a more serious manner, resulting in candidates losing marks. There was a marked increase in the number of ethical issues raised by markers this year — the most frequent was the inclusion of participants' names, eg on consent forms. A few centres also used participants under the age of 16, which is inappropriate.

Generally, candidates followed the required report format and used appropriate terminology, but there were several who did not. Occasionally the present tense and first person were used. Reports are generally written in third person and in past tense when referring to previous research.

Several candidates also submitted their Log Books, which in fact included Investigating Behaviour Unit NAB evidence. This is not required for external assessment.

Presentation was generally good but, as last year, many candidates included their results in the appendices, and raw data and calculations were often missing.

In the Discussion section, as in previous years, candidates continued to be generic in terms of their evaluation. Those candidates who were more specific in identifying problems in the research, and who suggested solutions, gained higher marks. Suggestions for future

research were often poor, as highlighted last year, often suggesting simply using a larger sample rather than something more meaningful and related to furthering the research conducted.

Many candidates continued to include a bibliography instead of references, although some did manage to use Harvard referencing adequately.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Section B continued to produce some of the higher marks for candidates, but this was by no means universal. Some candidates produced poor responses in this section.

Section C — many candidates produced excellent essays this year, with a significant number achieving full marks.

It was felt generally by markers that there was less 'storytelling' this year and fewer 'common-sense' type answers, with more use of psychological terminology evident.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Question A1(a) on the behaviourist theory of attachment was not always answered well. Many candidates used Bowlby or Ainsworth in their response.

Question A2(a) on a physiological technique for managing stress produced a lot of **non-physiological** techniques.

Question A3(a) on factors affecting eye-witness testimony was not particularly well answered, with many candidates simply referring to the work of Loftus and Palmer, without actually referring to **factors**.

Question A3(b) produced many responses that covered theories of forgetting, but not **research studies**.

Section B (f) was poorly answered. A great many candidates did not seem to know what is meant by **central tendency**.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

As always, centres should follow the relevant documents, eg Arrangements Documents, Course Assessment Specification, etc. The Markers' Checklist for the Research Investigation would also be useful when teaching candidates how to write a report.

Specimen/past papers and their marking instructions should also be useful. It can be very helpful for candidates to attempt past papers, especially essay questions, to allow them to

obtain feedback on their performance. As performance in essay questions seems to be improving, it is likely that this is already taking place in a lot of centres.

Candidates should be encouraged to use appropriate terminology — ‘prove’ and ‘significant’ were often found in question paper responses and in the research investigation. Candidates should also be encouraged to use research evidence when answering questions and to think about **why** that research evidence is relevant.

In the RI, centres must ensure that the briefs are adhered to so that the candidates can maximise their marks. Candidates should be encouraged to elaborate on the points they make, especially in the Discussion section, particularly when identifying problems and suggesting solutions to them.

Candidates should also be encouraged to conduct some independent research of background studies to help increase their understanding of the topic they are researching. Better quality experiences and learning can be achieved, as well as better marks. In addition, this is less likely to produce formulaic reports.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2011	3517
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Number of resulted entries in 2012	3099
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Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark 125				
A	32.9%	32.9%	1021	89
B	20.7%	53.7%	642	76
C	16.5%	70.1%	510	64
D	5.8%	75.9%	179	58
No award	24.1%	100.0%	747	-

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.