



External Assessment Report 2011

Subject	Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies
Level	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

Performance overall was in line with the performance in 2010. Candidates performed well in the Christianity: Belief and Science Unit but experienced difficulties with the Morality in the Modern World Unit; this was taken into account when setting the grade boundaries. Questions on the World Religion Unit were well answered with no significant issues being reported. Buddhism was by far the most popular religion with Christianity the second most popular. Once again, Crime and Punishment was the overwhelmingly popular moral issue. Encouragingly, a small number of candidates had been presented in Global Issues.

Markers considered the exam to be simultaneously fair and challenging both in the breadth and depth of its content. The questions were considered to be clear and the revised layout also helped candidates identify the steps towards the more demanding Analysis and Evaluation (AE) questions.

Once again, the proportion of S6 candidates was greater than S5 candidates at 60:40%. As in previous years, the vast majority of candidates do RMPS as a 'crash' Higher and, once again, the ability to do this successfully is due to the high quality of teaching and course content in many centres in S3/4 core RE. Teachers are to be commended for their commitment to the subject area.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Morality in the Modern World: Candidates managed Question 1 (a)–(c) well. There did not appear to be issues with the content being covered in this area. Centres appear to be aware of the changes that have taken place in the Course content.

Christianity: Belief and Science: Markers commented on how well candidates coped with Question 3 (a)–(c). On paper, the question looked challenging but candidates managed to answer the question well and to tackle the AE question effectively. No major issues were reported with the other questions.

In previous years, some candidates simply listed features and therefore missed the opportunity to gain marks; this year there has been an improvement with more candidates giving descriptive answers often characterised by decent explanations. Teachers and candidates are to be commended for their work in this area.

World Religion: Candidates displayed good recall and analytical skills.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Two main areas were demanding:

Sources

The use of sources was rather sparse. Whilst this does not disadvantage candidates there needs to be recognition that the use of sources can enhance the quality of an answer, especially in relation to AE questions. Marks are not deducted for failing to use sources but marks can be gained for using sources appropriately. Candidates should be encouraged to do so in future.

Evaluation

Questions 1 (d) and 3 (b) of Morality in the Modern World caused significant difficulty because candidates did not appear to have a full appreciation of what 'evaluate' means. Markers found this aspect of the performance frustrating because evaluation of views is at the heart of what RE teachers do during class discussion. It would appear that candidates have difficulty in transferring this skill to paper. Markers agreed that whilst the questions were valid, candidates of all abilities seemed to struggle with these questions. A number of suggestions were made as to the cause of this and they included: the additional layer of difficulty in Question 3 (b) when asking candidates to adopt a stance and evaluate its view of a statement; misunderstanding the meaning of 'evaluation' and the teaching of evaluative skills in class. The central marking and grade boundary process dealt appropriately with these issues

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

General

Evaluation

There is some clarification needed here. Evaluation can have many definitions but the one most associated with education is that of Bloom. In Bloom's taxonomy, evaluation is defined as making judgements about ideas or materials. There are other evaluating activities associated with Bloom's taxonomy and they include: appraising, comparing, contrasting, criticising, defending, relating, arguing, and supporting. Candidates, on the whole, have not had difficulty with these skills in the past. The problem this year was the use of the word 'evaluate'. When this word is used candidates are being asked to make some kind of judgement on an idea. This judgement could involve its strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, benefits and difficulties, rightness or wrongness, validity, acceptability and effectiveness. Much will depend on the question asked.

Below are two candidate responses which highlight the difficulties candidates encountered with Question 3 (b) Medical Ethics:

'Embryo selection is right in all cases.'

Evaluate at least one secular view of this statement

Candidate 1

Attempts to destroy embryos which carry genetically inherited diseases could be considered as an act to eradicate imperfection which is perhaps a slight against those who have deformities, diseases or are disabled and is thought to give the message that is not worth living for those who are not perfect. The manipulation of embryos could lead to the selecting of embryos to create designer babies in that embryos are altered to determine their hair and eye colour and perhaps behaviour traits. It is a secular concern that these designer babies may only be available privately due to their high cost and feared to, if allowed, create a new form of elitism, a perfect race. This may bring with it new forms of racism and discrimination against the designer babies and those who have been concerned naturally and is considered to be morally wrong.

Another secular viewpoint is that of the humanist, they only believe in one life and therefore wish to live that life to the full as they believe in no God or afterlife. They believe that it is up to themselves to improve the lives of their fellow humans and therefore by selecting embryos they can eradicate disease or perhaps find new cures and treatments which would reduce suffering amongst humans and therefore make life better for many and improve their way of life.

Embryo selection for reproductive cloning is thought to be wrong by many as they feel that to tamper with the natural order of things cannot be a positive thing and would do more damage and prevent humans from evolving and reaching the omega point. It is also feared that it could possibly damage the reproductive systems and although it may seem exaggerated eventually eradicate the human species.

The first problem is that the candidate has at no point clearly referred to the question or the statement so we immediately have a problem of relevance. Secondly, the candidate describes general secular views of embryo use. The information is correct and well written but the problem is the lack of reference to the issue in the statement. They have been asked to evaluate a secular view of the statement in the question, not simply explain different secular views. Thirdly, the candidate has not, at any point, clearly discussed the strengths and weaknesses of secular responses to the statement. There is evaluation present but the Marker had to work hard to make the link to the statement. At Higher level the link should be more obvious than this. This candidate scored 4/10 for this answer.

Candidate 2

The secular viewpoints on this issue are the points of utilitarians and Kantians. These secular viewpoints each have those who would agree and disagree with the statement. One argument Kantians would put forward is that the medical staff have a duty to stop suffering and try and find cures therefore by selecting a human embryo this would stop suffering by making sure that a child is not born into this world with life threatening diseases. This is a good argument I feel as by selecting embryos it would mean that by selecting embryos medical staff are doing what they are trained for. It is strong because Kantians would see medical staff doing their duty.

Another reason Kantians would be in agreement with this argument is that if they have the right intentions for selecting the embryo and it is not for social reasons then they would be carrying out the process with the right reasons. For example if they are using IVF to help a couple become pregnant then they are doing this out of goodwill. This is a strong argument as it is a good example of goodwill which is a key belief of Kantian ethics. Therefore some Kantians could find it right to agree with the statement because of their principles of duty and goodwill.

However, there are those Kantians who are not in agreement with the statement as they feel the categorical imperative should come into play. Kantians might feel that by using genetic selection that you are going against the principle of using people. You are killing embryos therefore taking away their potential life. If this was applied universally it could well be seen as murder. I feel that this is a weak argument against the statement because it is far from certain that embryos are human and until that is cleared up this approach will remain weak.

Utilitarians are another secular viewpoint that argue for and against the statement that all embryo is right. Peter Singer feels that embryos used in a lab are completely different from embryos in the womb. He argues that they do not have the potential for life as they have not yet been placed in the womb therefore there is no potential and because of that they can be selected. This is a strong argument as I feel that it is true that an embryo in a Petri dish does not have the potential to live. If it does not have the potential to live then nothing is being taken away from it.

Another argument used is that by selecting embryos you are thinking about the greatest good. If defective embryos are not born into society then they will not create a strain on the NHS or the family of the baby. In this the case the utilitarians would consider the statement to be right. A strong point about this is that it can be argued that financially it is true — we can save money by having less people depending on the NHS and therefore we all benefit because of lower taxes etc.

A weak point about the Utilitarian responses to this statement is that it ignores the rights of the minority. What makes us different from any other

species is that we care for the weak and this utilitarian stance makes us less unique.

This answer is significantly better. It scored 8/10. The structure is simple — describe the moral stance's interpretation of the statement, pick out a strength and then, if you can, pick out a weakness. Yes, there is description, but this is used to tee-up the evaluative point which is then made well. This is the kind of answer we expected (although secular responses could have included groups or individuals too) and seen like this the evaluation looks straightforward and not too demanding. It might benefit candidates if they could see this example of how to evaluate.

Centres requiring support should note that SQA provides both individual centre support and support at authority level through bespoke training.

Finally, a small number of centres made candidates re-write answers in Paper 1 which were done in the same booklet. Two points here: please ensure that Invigilators are aware of the instruction and secondly that where candidates do write the whole of Paper 1 in a booklet they should NOT be asked to rewrite the whole paper. It is a minor administrative inconvenience for the Markers which we can deal with easily at central marking.

Appeals feedback

At the Appeals this year a disappointing number of centres submitted evidence that was either incomplete or invalid. Centres should take care to ensure that the evidence is complete, particularly in relation to sources of questions.

Centres are strongly advised to replicate the exam as closely as possible in prelims. Where this is not possible, centres ought to adjust the cut-off scores. Attention is drawn to the Course Assessment Specification which accompanies the Specimen Question Paper. It should be noted that where a prelim fails to comply with the specification it is inevitable that candidates will be disadvantaged both in their prelim and the exam.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2010	3,152
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Number of resulted entries in 2011	3,756
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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 120				
A	26.2%	26.2%	984	79
B	26.3%	52.5%	988	67
C	21.6%	74.1%	810	56
D	8.6%	82.6%	322	50
No award	17.4%	100.0%	652	-

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, therefore, SQA 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 Head of Service 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.