



External Assessment Report 2010

Subject	Geography
Level	Advanced 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

The overall performance of candidates in 2010 was poorer than that in 2009. This decline was most evident in two elements of the external assessment. These were the geographical study component of the folio, and the map interpretation questions in the written examination. The issues that examiners identified in these two elements are explained more fully in the following sections.

In general there were few candidates who demonstrated the consistently high quality of work necessary to gain a very good grade in the folio. Many candidates produced good geographical issue essays, but studies generally were of a poorer standard. There were however some very good studies, indicating that it is quite possible for candidates to produce excellent work in this part of the assessment.

Areas in which candidates performed well

As in previous years, the geographical issues essays were generally of a good standard. Nearly all candidates made a relevant attempt to assess their sources critically. Many essays were contextualised clearly, and nearly all essays made use of relevant graphics.

There were few very long essays this year. As very long essays tend to read more like a thesis rather than an essay, this was a general improvement. A good number of essays were of a high standard and a significant number of candidates scored at least as many marks for their essay as for their study, despite the latter having 20 marks more available. However, there were a significant number of essays that incurred the over-length penalty (more than 12 pages plus bibliography); in some cases, all or nearly all essays from a centre were over-length.

Most essay themes were appropriate, and there were a significant number of essays on themes with a degree of originality. Essays tended to be rather more fluent in structure than in previous years, though in some cases critical evaluation was rather formulaic. The use of sub-headings in the essay to indicate parts of the essay (eg source one) is not helpful. Overall it is pleasing to note the continuing improvement in the quality of geographical issue essays. This essay is one of the most demanding parts of Advanced Higher Geography.

In the written examination, most candidates who attempted Question 3 carried out the statistical calculation element correctly. Most candidates made a fair attempt to answer Question 5, the 'scenario' question, with a good proportion scoring 7 or more out of 10.

Areas which candidates found demanding

As already noted, the geographical study element of the folio was generally the poorer part of the folio. The points noted below address the specific weaknesses. The map interpretation questions (1 and 2) in the examination showed that requisite skills were deficient in a

significant number of candidates' responses. Some candidates made quite limited use of specific map extract evidence, identified by grid references, as was required by the questions set.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

The following advice relates to each specified element in the external assessment.

Folio

Centres and candidates must pay close attention to the details of presentation for the folio that are given in detail in the Conditions and Arrangements document. In any case of doubt, centres should contact SQA.

Candidates should not enclose their essay or study in any form of binding or fixed cover.

Study

This generally remains the weaker part of the folio. Many studies are thin in content and/or are based on very undemanding topics. The assessment team are aware of pressure on candidates' time and on issues relating to fieldwork safety. Notwithstanding, a sound geographical study will involve more than one day's field work if primary data is the main data source.

Group data collection is permissible but must be clearly acknowledged by each candidate using the data set. A large data set is expected if group-collected primary data is used, and each candidate using the data must do so in ways that are distinctive and particular to their hypotheses. Identical usage may be treated as plagiarism.

In the presentation of results, it is not sufficient just to use an appropriate technique to analyse data. Results of the technique or test used must be explained as to their geographical context and significance.

Essay

These are generally of a good standard. Formulaic structure and sub-headings are not helpful, and the final product should read as a fluent and continuous essay.

Examination

Map interpretation (Questions 1 and 2)

Some candidates appear to have limited skill in the identification and use of evidence from the 1/25,000 map extract. This evidence forms the core of answers to these questions.

Geographical methods and techniques (Questions 3 and 4)

Candidates must be prepared to comment both on the nature and suitability of techniques and tests, and on the meaning of results. In this latter element, students have the whole data set, in some cases supplementary information, and their atlas to help with their commentaries.

Scenario (Question 5)

Most candidates made a fair attempt at this question.

Points from the 2009 PA report remain relevant to this year's candidates, and are reproduced below.

Specific points relating to the folio:

- ◆ Candidates should give thought to their choice of topic for the Geographical Study element of the folio. Good Geographical Studies are also generally based on demanding topics that also may be related to a theoretical base.
- ◆ To ensure that they have a reasonable size of database for analysis, candidates must consider the amount of time required to get an appropriate dataset through fieldwork.
- ◆ Candidates should make fuller use of relevant acknowledged secondary data.
- ◆ Candidates must produce graphics of a high standard. Blurred computer-generated images and scruffy hand-drawn graphics are not at AH standard. Some location maps are poorly chosen and used.

Specific points relating to the examination:

- ◆ Candidates should read all of Questions 1–4 before selecting which to attempt.
- ◆ Candidates must ensure that they provide the response to the question that is required. For example, annotation means showing a precise location and not simply applying a general label.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2009	888
Number of resulted entries in 2010	873

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark — 100				
A	8.9%	8.9%	78	70
B	23.3%	32.2%	203	60
C	40.0%	72.2%	349	50
D	16.2%	88.3%	141	45
No award	11.7%	100.0%	102	–

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.