



Course report 2019

Subject	Modern Studies
Level	Advanced Higher

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report 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 documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

Section 1: political issues was the second most common area of study. Within this, ‘power and influence’ (question 1) and ‘living political ideas’ (question 3) were the most commonly-attempted questions by candidates.

Section 2: law and order remains the most popular area of study. Within this, ‘understanding criminal behaviour’ (question 7) and ‘responses by society to crime’ (question 8) were the most commonly-attempted questions by candidates.

Section 3: social inequality was not attempted by any candidate.

The question paper performed in line with expectations, and feedback from the marking team and from practitioners suggested that the question paper was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand.

Extended-responses (questions 1–3, 6–8 and 10–13)

Similar structure and framing of the extended-response questions allowed candidates to access the questions and apply their knowledge to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the statements within the questions, while also attempting to make international comparisons. Direction within questions to include ‘reference to the UK/Scotland and any other country/countries’ supported candidates in adopting a comparative approach. The quality of the comparative analysis and evaluation differentiated candidates.

Research methods (questions 4, 9 and 14)

Questions 4,9 and 14 across all three sections referred to the same research method — case studies. Candidates were less familiar with the stated method in question but were able to analyse and evaluate their own alternative method(s). The quality of analysis, evaluation and the overall conclusion differentiated candidates.

Source-based questions (questions 5, 10 and 15)

Source-based questions across all three sections, although from different organisations, all contained evidence of focus group research and were of a similar, challenging but accessible, reading level difficulty. This ensured equity in the level of difficulty of questions for all candidates irrespective of their area of study. Source content allowed candidates to analyse, evaluate and comment on key aspects of validity and/or reliability including provenance, sampling approaches, recording approaches, source evidence, source omissions and contemporary relevance. The quality of analysis, evaluation and the overall conclusion differentiated candidates.

Project–dissertation

Candidates continue to perform, on average, better in the project–dissertation than the question paper which is in line with previous assessment diets.

Most candidates used titles from the ‘Advanced Higher Modern Studies Approved List of Dissertations’ document. Candidates who developed their own dissertation titles produced insightful dissertations on contemporary issues.

Most candidates were familiar with the project–dissertation’s assessment criteria and developed an approach that suited this. In presenting their findings, almost all candidates attempted to:

- ◆ justify an appropriate complex, contemporary political/social issue for research
- ◆ evaluate research methodology
- ◆ use a wide range of sources of information
- ◆ analyse the issue
- ◆ evaluate arguments and evidence
- ◆ synthesise information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence
- ◆ organise, present and reference findings using appropriate conventions

Overall, candidate performance in the project–dissertation improved from previous years and represented the strongest performance by a cohort since the current course was introduced.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Most candidates displayed good political and social knowledge and understanding of the issues raised in the extended-response questions. However, some candidates were clearly unprepared for aspects of the question paper.

Extended-responses (questions 1–3, 6–8 and 11–13)

Across the assessable criteria for the 30-mark extended-response, strong candidates produced high-quality responses containing the following features:

- ◆ **Analysis:** responses identified and analysed key factors which were developed and related to the question throughout the main body of the response. Contemporary supporting evidence was presented in support of analysis and evaluation with the source or origin attributed. Analysis of key issues integrated evidence from an international comparator to compare, contrast, analyse and evaluate the issue in relation to the UK/Scotland and other countries. High-quality responses also contained reference to ideas and/or theories or the academic arguments of others.
- ◆ **Comparison:** responses compared the UK/Scotland with a relevant comparator country or countries throughout the essay. Evaluative and overall conclusions commented on the extent of difference or similarity between the UK/Scotland and the comparator country or countries cited.
- ◆ **Evaluation:** responses provided implicit as well as explicit conclusions and considered and evaluated alternative views or theories in relation to the question. Overall conclusions were justified and included a reason for rejecting or accepting alternative arguments.
- ◆ **Synthesising information to structure and sustain lines of argument:** responses had a clear line of argument that flowed from an organised and logical sequence of ideas. A developed conclusion, rather than a summary, was offered which directly addressed the question and offered a judgement based on the evidence presented.

Research methods (questions 4, 9 and 14)

Candidate performance was broadly in line with previous years. Most candidates correctly interpreted that the question required analysis of an alternative method(s) to that of case studies in order to reach an overall conclusion on the most suitable method. Strong candidates' responses analysed more than one alternative method to that stated in the question. High-quality responses also contained the following features:

- ◆ **Analysis:** quality analysis detailing knowledge of the benefits and limitations of using case studies in research. High-quality analysis of case studies which included supporting evidence from candidates' own knowledge, research experience or use in academic research. Analysis of approaches to conducting surveys, for example online, by telephone or face-to-face, was also relevant and credible. Examples of official statistics

referenced and analysed included Office for National Statistics (ONS), National Records of Scotland, UK and Scottish Government Statistics, among others.

- ◆ **Evaluation:** responses which gained high marks considered the effectiveness of the research methods in relation to the scenario outlined in the question. High-quality responses also commented on ethical issues related to one or more of the research methods raised in the response. Common ethical issues commented on included honesty, trust, confidentiality and anonymity. For full marks it was not necessary to refer to an alternative research method(s). Common alternative methods analysed and evaluated by candidates included interviews, focus groups and participant observation.
- ◆ **Conclusion:** quality conclusions offered a clear judgement outlining candidates' preferred method in relation to the issue. Justification for preferring one method and reasons for rejecting the other method(s) was clearly and succinctly made.

Source-based questions (questions 5, 10 and 15)

High-quality responses contained the following key features:

- ◆ **Analysis of a source:** detailed knowledge of aspects of the source which affected its trustworthiness including provenance, source evidence, methodology, recording approach or date of publication. Balanced analysis considering strengths and weaknesses of the source, and detailed explanation of how this affected its trustworthiness.
- ◆ **Evaluation of trustworthiness:** use of supporting evidence drawn from the source and candidates' own knowledge of social science research. Reference to alternative approaches that would increase the trustworthiness of the source.
- ◆ **Conclusion:** a clear conclusion stemming from a coherent line of argument leading to a balanced overall judgement on the extent to which the source was trustworthy.

Project–dissertation

In the project–dissertation, high-quality responses contained the following features across the assessable criteria:

- ◆ **Justifying an appropriate complex, contemporary political/social issue for research:** titles or hypotheses and aims were logical, linked and supported analysis and evaluation of a contemporary modern studies issue. Candidates explained the contemporary political or social relevance of the issue and its local, national and/or global significance, and referred to up-to-date issues or events related to the issue. The introduction justified the aims and outlined the line of argument and coverage to come.
- ◆ **Evaluating research methodology:** quality dissertations offered a balanced evaluation of a select range of methods used by candidates. High-quality analysis and evaluation commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, made comment on ethical issues and considerations surrounding candidates' selected methodologies, and commented on ways in which the use of one of their methods could be improved upon.
- ◆ **Using a wide range of sources of information:** high-quality dissertations used a wide and varied range of primary and secondary sources of information. Primary sources of information were accurately referenced, academically evidenced in the appendices, and integrated into the main body of the dissertation.

- ◆ **Analysing the issue:** analysis of key issues led to evaluative comments, which were supported by contemporary evidence, case studies, statistics, theories or examples.
- ◆ **Evaluating arguments and evidence:** quality dissertations included implicit and explicit evaluations and conclusions. Arguments which supported the stated hypothesis as well as alternative views were presented and evaluated, with it being clear which arguments were accepted and which were discounted.
- ◆ **Synthesising information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence:** candidates who produced high-quality dissertations made evaluations or conclusions consistently within chapters, at the end of each chapter, and in their overall conclusion. Points raised within aims and/or chapters built towards and linked to the overall conclusion.
- ◆ **Organising, presenting and referencing findings using appropriate conventions:** candidates who achieved high or full marks in this element produced a well-organised bibliography, which presented source types in a clear and logical manner. References were consistent and in the style of footnotes or parenthetical citations. Appendices included detail on the origin and provenance of the primary or secondary information. Information from appendices was used and referenced in the main body of the dissertation.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Extended-responses (questions 1–3, 6–8 and 11–13)

Some candidates did not refer to an international comparator(s) or made only cursory reference to another country. Coverage focused solely on the UK/Scotland is awarded a maximum of 5 out of the 8 marks available in the ‘analysis’ element and 0 marks for the ‘comparison’ element. Poor responses described rather than analysed the issue, tended to lack supporting evidence, and often presented a one-sided interpretation of the issue.

Difficulties in answering extended-response questions are often due to candidates’ limited understanding of the issue. As a consequence, this leads to candidates trying to turn the question to fit a pre-prepared answer rather than answering the question set.

Common weaknesses shown by candidates in relation to specific extended-response questions were as follows:

- ◆ **Question 1 — Power and influence**

‘Political parties are irrelevant in the 21st century.’ Discuss.

Some candidates provided descriptive, one-sided responses which simplistically argued political parties were irrelevant and did not consider alternative perspectives or factors outside political parties such as the media and pressure groups.

- ◆ **Question 2 — Living political ideas**

‘Party politics are influenced more by populism than by ideology.’ Discuss.

Some candidates provided descriptive responses which simplistically described populist political leaders rather than the elements of their policies or legislation which could be deemed populist. Analysis of the influence of ideology often relied on dated, historical descriptions of politics or political parties and did not consider ideology's contemporary, political influence.

◆ **Question 3 — Political structures**

'Decentralisation of power leads to more effective governance.' Discuss.

Some candidates were clearly unprepared for this question, engaged with it poorly or did not answer it adequately. This question should have allowed candidates to discuss a range of factors including localism, devolution within the context of the UK, unitary and federal systems of governance, bi-cameral and uni-cameral legislatures, parliamentary and presidential systems of government, codified and uncodified constitutions, or democratic countries' constitutional arrangements versus countries considered authoritarian or undemocratic.

◆ **Question 6 — Understanding the criminal justice system**

'Effective judicial frameworks allow challenges to the law.' Discuss.

Few candidates attempted this question. However, many who did so, did so poorly and attempted to turn the question to pre-prepared responses on human rights, civil liberties or security issues, without applying their knowledge of these aspects as to how they allowed or facilitated challenges to the law. This question should have allowed candidates to discuss a range of factors such as the rule of law, values underpinning the judicial framework, relations between the legislative and judicial systems, judicial review processes, judicial independence and appointment processes, Supreme Courts, supranational courts, as well as national security, human rights and civil liberty issues which challenge the law.

◆ **Question 7 — Understanding criminal behaviour**

'The social cost of crime outweighs the economic cost.' Discuss.

Some candidates were unprepared for this topic and attempted to apply their knowledge of theories and causes of crime to the question. Key, relevant aspects which could have been analysed in relation to this question included crime rates and victimisation, the physical impact of crime, the emotional and/or behavioural impact of crime, the impact of crime on families, groups, communities and social cohesion, the financial cost of crime for victims, business communities and the wider economy, and the cost of criminal justice.

◆ **Question 8 — Responses by society to crime**

'Punishment can only be justified when it deters further crimes.' Discuss.

Some candidates' responses analysed the 'effectiveness' of punishments in relation to prisons and non-custodial sentences but did not engage with justifying these forms of punishment or consider issues related to deterrence, rehabilitation, retribution or incapacitation.

Research methods (questions 4, 9 and 14)

Some candidates simply described advantages and disadvantages of the stated method in question and lacked development or supporting exemplification. This approach did not take consideration of the scenario outlined in the question with limited marks awarded as a consequence. Weak responses also did not comment on ethical issues associated with one or more of the research methods discussed. Some responses did not offer an overall conclusion and were awarded 0 marks in this element.

Source-based questions (questions 5, 10 and 15)

Weak responses by candidates simply described source content and inferred its strengths and weaknesses. Weak responses also lacked supporting evidence from candidates' own knowledge of social science research. Weak responses did not offer an overall conclusion and were awarded 0 marks in this element.

Project–dissertation

Areas of difficulty or poor candidate performance across the dissertation included aspects of the following in relation to the assessable criteria:

- ◆ **Justifying an appropriate, complex contemporary political/social issue for research:** weak dissertations had poorly constructed hypotheses and aims. Introductions did not explain and justify the wider relevance of candidates' issues and sub-issues.
- ◆ **Evaluating research methodology:** for many candidates the research methodology element remains the weakest component of their dissertation. Weak responses described use of the method(s) or described the advantages and disadvantages of these. Many candidates did not discuss an ethical issue associated with one of their chosen methods of research. A further common omission in this section was a failure to discuss potential changes to improve the research.
- ◆ **Using a wide range of sources of information:** most candidates consulted an adequate number of sources and used a range of appropriate methods of gathering information. However, weak dissertations continue to be based on research gathered solely from a limited number of websites.
- ◆ **Analysing the issue:** some candidates adopted a weak, one-sided approach to their hypothesis, rather than dispassionately assessing their research evidence in a balanced manner. This approach did not acknowledge or analyse alternative viewpoints and theories and reduced the scope for gaining marks.
- ◆ **Evaluating arguments and evidence:** weaker responses did not offer implicit or explicit evaluations in the main body of chapters across the dissertation. Points were descriptive and did not reference supporting evidence, arguments, examples or theories. This approach achieved very little or no marks.
- ◆ **Synthesising information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence:** weaker dissertations contained large sections drawn from, or based on, single sources of information. Poorly-organised dissertations also lacked a coherent flow with aims and/or chapters unrelated to each other or the title or hypothesis. This often resulted in the formulation of weak aims in the planning stage.

- ◆ **Organising, presenting and referencing findings using appropriate conventions:** a minority of candidates did not use consistent academic referencing conventions, for example parenthetical references or footnotes. Weak bibliographies showed a limited range of sources and simply listed website URLs. Many candidates did not include any appendices or did not provide evidence of the provenance of appendix information. No marks were awarded for any of these approaches.

A small number of candidates continue to incur a penalty for malpractice or for exceeding the maximum word count (5,000 words with 10% toleration).

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Centres should ensure all candidates have access to, and are familiar with, the relevant supporting documentation for Advanced Higher Modern Studies. Centres should also ensure that all candidates are fully informed and familiar with the assessable criteria used for the range of question types across the question paper and the project–dissertation.

Question paper

Extended-responses

Centres should ensure that teaching and courses comply with the revised course specification valid from session 2019–20. Candidates should also be familiar with the assessment criteria as laid out in the general marking principles and criterion marking grids for each question type. Centres should also direct candidates to focus on answering the questions set in the question paper and avoid attempting to turn the question to pre-prepared essay responses.

Research methods questions

Centres should prepare candidates adequately by ensuring that the key research methods outlined in the course specification are covered in their courses. Candidates should also be made familiar with the assessment criteria by engaging with general marking principles and criterion marking grids for each question type. Candidates should be directed to make an overall conclusion to research methods questions in their responses.

Source-based questions

Centres can support candidates by ensuring they are familiar with the assessable criteria for the source-based questions and that they have ample opportunity to practise these types of questions. Candidates should be discouraged from simply describing the source content or research methodology. Candidates should make an overall conclusion to research methods questions in their responses.

Project–dissertation

Centres can assist candidates in the planning stage by ensuring they adopt an appropriate hypothesis and aims. Many centres make use of the ‘Advanced Higher Modern Studies Approved List of Dissertations’ document available on the Advanced Higher Modern Studies subject page on SQA’s website to support this process. However, it is perfectly valid for candidates to adapt or modify these as it relates to their issue of study. Candidates should also be supported in selecting their own dissertation titles if they wish to do so. Where centres are unsure about the hypothesis, title or aims that candidates have developed themselves, they can submit a ‘Project–Dissertation Title Feedback Form’, also available on the Advanced Higher Modern Studies subject page.

Centres should discourage candidates from framing aims using the stem *‘To find out...’*. Instead, candidates should be directed to use questions or stems such as *‘To what extent ...?’*, *‘To analyse ...’*, *‘To examine ...’*, *‘To examine the extent to which ...’*.

Candidates should be directed to provide an evaluation of a selected range of methods they used. Analysis of these methods should comment on benefits and limitations of the selected methods, comment on ethical issues related to at least one method, and discuss ways in which the use of at least one method could have been improved on.

Candidates should aim to use a wide and varied range of sources of information. Secondary resources can involve a wide range of sources and may include academic texts, journals, newspapers, websites, documentaries, and other audio or visual sources. Primary research is not mandatory for the dissertation, but it can enhance research and offer further insight or perspectives on issues.

Candidates should be directed to discuss and critically evaluate alternative views and theories as part of their dissertation.

Candidates should avoid summary conclusions and instead offer a conclusion to their dissertation which makes and supports a balanced and considered judgement of the issue and the extent to which it has or has not been proven.

Centres should adopt an academic style of referencing which supports candidates taking a consistent approach.

Appendices are crucial evidence of the candidate's research process. For example, interviews transcripts, letters and/or e-mails sent and received, and survey results can be included. Candidates who only conduct secondary research should be encouraged to include appendices also, for example, statistical or graphical information that they analyse, evaluate and integrate into the main body of their dissertation.

Centres should inform candidates that dissertations must be within the maximum word count (5,000 words plus 10% toleration) and ensure proofreading of dissertations is undertaken before final submission.

Centres should encourage candidates to produce their final dissertations using the following conventions:

- ◆ size 12 font
- ◆ 1.5 line spacing
- ◆ single-sided printing
- ◆ a word count per chapter included
- ◆ an overall word count included

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	841
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	803
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	28.8%	28.8%	231	98
B	24.5%	53.3%	197	84
C	22.8%	76.1%	183	70
D	6.7%	82.8%	54	63
No award	17.2%	-	138	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
- ◆ 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.

Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring 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. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.