



## Course report 2019

Subject	Religious, Moral and Philosophical 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**

The question paper performed very well. The ratio of candidates opting for medical ethics remained at around 80% of the cohort. Candidates who answered on religious experience performed consistently well. The majority of candidates answered question 1 in the philosophy of religion section. In the optional parts, candidates preferred questions 3 and 6.

## **Project–dissertation**

The dissertation is worth 40 marks, comprising 8 marks for research and presentation, 8 marks for knowledge and 12 marks each for analysis and evaluation. The dissertation performed as expected. While there was a slight improvement in evaluation skills, evaluation remains the most challenging element for candidates.

## **Section 2: comments on candidate performance**

### **Areas that candidates performed well in**

#### **Question paper**

Candidates performed well in questions 1, 3 and 6, with average marks for each question being above the pass mark. Candidate responses showed significant improvement in the medical ethics section, with an improved focus on the questions asked. Candidates who maintained focus on the question demonstrated this by referring back to the wording and the sense of the question throughout their responses. Good responses were clearly planned and structured, which then led to a cohesive argument.

#### **Project–dissertation**

There was a continued reduction in the number of dissertations which appeared formulaic. Markers observed that styles of titles, variety of approaches and the level of language reflected candidates' individual approaches to their own questions. In more formulaic dissertations, candidates often did not display sufficient interest or passion in researching the issue at the level required, and ran the risk of plagiarism or seeking too much guidance and support from teachers.

Markers commented that there was clearly a good effort overall and the majority of dissertations showed evidence of being well researched. On the whole, candidates who performed well in the dissertation also performed well in the question paper. Many responses across topics within the course were worth commending.

Candidates who chose topics outwith the course, mostly performed equally well. However, candidates must ensure their topic chosen is clearly a religious, moral or philosophical issue.

### **Areas that candidates found demanding**

#### **Question paper**

Across the question paper, some candidates still tended to write everything they knew about topics. Candidates need to take the time to read the questions carefully and plan how to answer that specific question, then refer back to the question. Candidates must answer the given question explicitly, ensuring they refer to it in their aims and at the end of each section as well as in their conclusion.

#### **Section 1**

Some candidates misinterpreted question 1. Many candidates had a very clear understanding of Aquinas' cosmological argument but lacked depth of knowledge about Kalam/Leibniz or other forms of the cosmological argument. Some candidates were still able to access marks by breaking down the first three ways of Aquinas' five ways and analysing and evaluating thoroughly with reference to the question. Some responses to this question were very repetitive.

Atheism was a notable area of weakness and many candidates lacked the depth of knowledge to tackle the issue of the presumption of atheism effectively. Some candidates legitimately applied a broader interpretation of 'presume', and applied their knowledge of

other arguments for God's existence skillfully and with reference to the question throughout. Evaluation remains the most challenging skill in this section.

Candidates should be aware that, in addition to knowing the criticisms of arguments in philosophy of religion, they need to apply their skills further in how they use these criticisms. For example:

- ◆ evaluating whether the argument, criticism or counter-argument is based on evidence, experience or intuition
- ◆ considering the consistency of the argument, whether there are better alternatives or whether academics accept this argument

In section 2, the majority of candidates answered question 3. However, many candidates were descriptive in their approach and did not critique James sufficiently in relation to other academics.

### **Section 3**

Some candidates did not read question 5 carefully and wrote everything they knew about the topic, or provided responses that were not relevant to the given question.

The majority of candidates answered question 6 and did so very well, demonstrating their ability to engage in the moral debate and to pull together the ideas of sanctity of life and personhood. However, some candidates simply engaged in an overall debate about abortion rather than paying specific attention to the question. Evaluation skills were stronger in this section due to the nature of the debate involved.

There were some excellent use of quotes and sources throughout many answers. This is commendable.

### **Project–dissertation**

Most dissertations were well researched, but some candidates limited themselves by using an overly complicated title or failing to make their aims explicit in the opening section or throughout their dissertation. Several candidates did not answer their own question, focusing on the topic rather than their question.

Candidates should be aware that simpler titles result in clearer and better written dissertations. Candidates who set out clear aims and concluded with reference to the question throughout their dissertation, as well as at the end, were able to access more marks. This is because they focused on the question and drew clear and explicit conclusions.

Overall, candidates continued to have strong knowledge and analytical skills but struggled to evaluate at the level required for Advanced Higher.

## Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

### Question paper

This advice builds on the advice given in previous years. Centres should cover all areas of the course as candidates will need to be prepared to answer mandatory source questions in each section in session 2019–20.

Candidates should note the following:

- ◆ Always answer the question. It can be helpful to explain early on how you have interpreted the question. Once you have identified the topic of the question, work out what the question is asking about the topic. Avoid writing everything you know about the topic or issue. Markers have instructions to ensure that essays clearly answer the question.
- ◆ You can often sustain relevance by regularly referring to the question throughout your essay.
- ◆ You should refer to sources and be specific. For example, avoid phrases such as ‘Christians say’ or ‘some people’ or ‘religious people’. Show that you know who says what. There is no need to cite chapter, verse, paragraph and page number, but you should cite like this: ‘In Luke’s Gospel it says...’, rather than ‘In the Bible it says...’. Or, when quoting an authority: ‘Pope Paul VI argued...’ rather than ‘Roman Catholics argue...’, or ‘William James pointed out...’ rather than ‘psychologists point out...’, or ‘The BMA supports...’, rather than ‘doctors say...’. You will not be penalised for vague references but you will certainly be given credit for consistent use of more specific sources.
- ◆ Work on developing your evaluative skills. You must engage with the question when evaluating. It is not good enough evaluation at Advanced Higher to state ‘A strength of this is...’ or ‘A weakness of this is...’ Avoid simply listing arguments for and against. Essays like this rarely perform well because they become quite descriptive: you have to do more than this at Advanced Higher. You are likely to gain more marks by using a process similar to this (the ‘examples’ referred to may include: real-life examples, hypothetical examples and the candidate’s own supported reasoning):
  - explain an argument using examples and/or sources
  - support the argument using examples and/or sources
  - give personal or academic criticisms of the argument using examples and/or sources
  - give counter-arguments against the criticisms using examples/and or sources
  - give responses to the counter-arguments using examples and/or sources
  - make concluding remarks on the point and link to the next point
- ◆ Revise all areas of the course as you will need to be prepared to answer mandatory source questions in each section.

## **Project–dissertation**

Candidates should note the following:

- ◆ Remember you are answering your own question so word your question in a way that you can answer it well. Keep it clear and simple.
- ◆ Ensure the aims of your dissertation are clear. If you do not state aims you can lose marks, especially if your dissertation does not have a clear focus.
- ◆ Ensure the content of the dissertation is consistently relevant to the title. Remember to refer back to the question throughout.
- ◆ Always reference your sources. (Note: there is no requirement to use a particular referencing system.)
- ◆ Be accurate in the bibliography. For example, if you have read extracts from a classic text in an anthology or from a secondary source, cite this rather than the complete classic text.
- ◆ Avoid sweeping generalisations, for example ‘All Christians believe...’
- ◆ The dissertation accounts for approximately 36% of the total marks available for the course assessment in session 2019–20. Bear this in mind in terms of how much time you spend researching and presenting your dissertation.
- ◆ Remember that you have full control of your dissertation. You decide the topic and can change or realign it during the research and writing-up process. The quality and quantity of research is entirely down to you. You can decide whether to undertake research that gives you the best opportunity to score well. The marking grid used by markers is on SQA’s website: use this as a checklist to ensure that you meet the criteria for the different skills. Make the most of this opportunity: you do not have the same control in the question paper.
- ◆ A poor dissertation will still make the difference between passing and failing the course: 80% of candidates who failed their dissertation this year failed Advanced Higher Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies.

## Grade boundary and statistical information:

### Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	157
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	175
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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
<b>Maximum mark</b>				
<b>A</b>	32.6%	32.6%	57	76
<b>B</b>	24.5%	57.1%	43	65
<b>C</b>	20.0%	77.1%	35	54
<b>D</b>	7.5%	84.6%	13	48
<b>No award</b>	15.4%	-	27	-

## 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.