Course report 2019

Subject	Economics
Level	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

Candidates were able to complete the longer question paper using the increased time allocated.

The question paper produced several opportunities for candidates to clearly show their knowledge and understanding of economic theory. However, some candidates did not appear to know such theory in sufficient depth to gain high marks, and in some cases, candidates struggled with the theory, resulting in no marks being awarded. Examples of this included confusion between the Law of Diminishing Marginal Returns and Diminishing Marginal Utility; mixing up public and merit goods; mixing up The Business Cycle and the Circular Flow of Income, and rather than describing internal and external economies of scale, instead describing economies and diseconomies of scale.

The question paper also required the application of theory to specific criteria in certain questions. It is important that candidates read these questions carefully, as at times responses included good theory which was irrelevant to the question asked. Examples of this type of confusion included failure to relate globalisation to effects on national debt; failure to relate fiscal policy to reductions in income inequality; and failure to relate advantages of a depreciation in the value of sterling specifically to firms.

Adjustments were made to grade boundaries to recognise some of these complexities in the question paper.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected, with many candidates achieving very good marks.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Section 1
Question 1 was generally well done. Although some candidates struggled slightly with the diagram in 1(c), candidates performed well in question 1(e).

Candidates answered question 2(e) well, with many candidates taking the opportunity to label the axes with allocation of resources specific to the question.

Section 2
Question 3 produced good responses from those candidates who read the questions carefully. Unfortunately a small number of candidates misread parts (b) and (d), and described downward sloping demand curves, and diminishing marginal utility.

Certain parts of question 4 caused some candidates problems, however many scored very well in part (a), with good in-depth knowledge of fiscal policy. Candidates also demonstrated good knowledge on the limitations of using national income statistics in part (b)(ii).

Question 5 contained several particularly well done questions, including parts (a)(i) and (ii), as well as parts (b) and (c).

Assignment
The majority of candidates produced well-structured reports, following SQA guidelines. Well-structured responses tended to meet the criteria to attain higher marks, and also demonstrated clear 'signposting'. For example, *'I was able to conclude that.... because evidence in Source 6 demonstrated that …..'*

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Section 1
Question 1(c): Some candidates did not correctly interpret the market effects on the diagram.

Question 2(c): Many candidates were not familiar with the Public Sector Net Cash Requirement (PSNCR).

Question 2(d): Candidates demonstrated good understanding of globalisation but some were unable to apply this specifically to potential effects on the national debt.

Section 2

Question 3(e): Some candidates appeared unclear on the distinction between internal and external economies of scale.

Question 4(b)(i): Very few candidates were able to clearly describe the difference between GDP and GNP.

Question 4(c): A significant number of candidates confused 'The Business Cycle' with the 'Circular Flow of Income'.

Question 5(d)(ii): Many candidates were unclear on the role of the 'International Monetary Fund'.

Assignment

Some candidates were unable to attain high marks in the later sections of the report, namely the 'Analysis and Evaluation' and 'Conclusions' sections due to their selection of topic. Examples of poor practice in this regard include selecting a topic which lends itself well to the description of straight theory. For example, *'Unemployment/Inflation in the UK'*, which leaves no scope for analysing or drawing conclusions. Better practice is to select topics which are based on a significant current economic issue, and are based around a core question.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Centres should re-familiarise themselves with the content of the course specification to ensure all aspects of the course are included in lesson planning, and candidates are prepared for questions on any topic.

Understanding Standards documents and course reports should be referred to in order to help candidates prepare for the different techniques required and the range of question styles being examined. For example, explain, distinguish.

Candidates should be encouraged to ensure that they read questions very carefully, and they are ready to apply their theory knowledge to different aspects of the economy/economic agents as required.

Assignment

Since the introduction of a word count this year, centres should take careful note of SQA's guidance. Candidates should be reminded that the report title and word count should be noted on the reverse of the flyleaf when submitting the assignment. Candidates should also be reminded of the maximum word count, listed in the course specification. Any candidates who exceed the word count of 2,000 by more than 10% had a penalty applied.

Candidates should give careful consideration to the title of their report. Some candidates chose 'historical' topics, and in writing about events which have already happened, they found it very difficult to earn analysis marks. Similarly, topics with very wide titles such as *'The impact of fluctuating exchange rates on the UK economy'* did not lend themselves well to earning analysis marks. More focused titles, phrased as a question such as *'What is the impact of a weakening pound on the UK economy?'* were able to score more highly.

In the introduction, when describing the overall purpose of the assignment, candidates should do more than simply restate their title.

In the research section, candidates should avoid repeating the same explanation regarding the validity of each research source. A range of explanations should be provided referring to both the reason the source is considered (for example, is it up to date?) as well as an explanation, for example, the date the source was generated. There is no need to provide summaries or extensive details of the actual findings in this section, since they are not mark worthy and tend to eat into the word count.

It should be noted that marks are not awarded for findings, but rather for the analysis of the findings. Candidates should not therefore quote lengthy findings in the body of the report. Nor should detailed economic theory be quoted. It is the application of relevant theory that gains marks at Higher level, rather than straight theory itself.

In the conclusions/recommendations section many candidates failed to attain high marks due to the fact that they simply repeated previous analysis without any attempt at summarising. Some candidates also included new information in this section, not mentioned

previously or directly relevant to findings. This should be avoided. Another reason for some candidates attaining low marks in this section is due to a tendency to describe the consequences of a conclusion rather than clearly justifying the reasons for the conclusion being reached.

A useful tip is to recommend candidates insert their report title into a header in their document. Candidates who did this tended to be more succinct and focused as well as less likely to wander too far away from the reason for their report.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	656

Number of resulted entries in 2019	583

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	40.3%	40.3%	235	81
B	23.0%	63.3%	134	68
C	16.8%	80.1%	98	55
D	12.5%	92.6%	73	42
No award	7.4%	-	43	-

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.