



External Assessment Report 2015

Subject(s)	Modern Studies
Level(s)	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report are prior to the outcome of any Post Results Services requests.

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

A total of 142 centres presented candidates for Advanced Higher Modern Studies in 2015 — an increase of 14 from 2014. Candidate numbers are still rising with about 850 presentations — a 12% increase over 2014.

92.6% of candidates presented were in S6, with 4.3% not having studied Modern Studies previously.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Dissertation

An increased number of candidates produced high quality dissertations — the standard is improving year on year. The [Improving Performance report](#) is helpful in maintaining the high standard. Comments in previous external assessment reports (EAR) are still current.

Successful candidates had:

- ◆ chosen their topics carefully and ensured they were based on the study theme and contexts they were studying
- ◆ submitted their hypothesis to SQA for approval (by 1 November)
- ◆ planned their dissertations carefully
- ◆ chosen an appropriately focused hypothesis that ensured good quality in-depth research
- ◆ chosen a hypothesis that was based on a current issue with a relatively narrow focus
- ◆ chosen aims that linked directly to the hypothesis and lent themselves to analysis and synthesis rather than description
- ◆ used a suitable selection of primary and secondary sources/research methods, the results of which were well integrated into the dissertation — generally, the best primary research was carried out on an individual rather than on a class/group basis
- ◆ read appropriate academic texts — not necessarily books but, for example, government reports
- ◆ attributed evidence clearly by means of consistent referencing and a bibliography
- ◆ researched, analysed and synthesised evidence and related it directly to the hypothesis
- ◆ used current and detailed evidence
- ◆ drawn sophisticated conclusions that directly related to the hypothesis
- ◆ fully, but succinctly, justified and evaluated specific research methods used in relation to gathering information linked to the hypothesis
- ◆ written between 4500 and 5000 words in the main body of the dissertation
- ◆ provided full, numbered appendices that included correspondence, interviews carried out, survey questions and results and anything else relevant to the research
- ◆ proofread their dissertation
- ◆ used 12-point font with double line spacing and a word count on each page

Essays

A majority of candidates displayed good social, economic and political knowledge and understanding of the issues raised by the essay questions. Few candidates were not prepared for this paper.

In Study Theme 1: Comparative Politics and Research Methods, all four contexts were answered to a high standard. Generally, candidates who did this study theme produced more sophisticated answers than those who answered Study Themes 2 and 3.

In Study Theme 2: Law and Order and Research Methods, the most popular questions were Contexts B and D. Many candidates brought their dissertation research into their answers and this is commended as good practice.

Very few candidates attempted Study Theme 3: European Union and Research Methods. An increasing number of candidates produced high quality essays. These candidates had:

- ◆ answered the question that was set and did not use a pre-prepared answer
- ◆ planned their answers before writing them
- ◆ structured their answers with a focused introduction, analysis, synthesis and conclusions that directly related to the question set
- ◆ developed points
- ◆ analysed the issue in depth and ensured that all sides of the argument were covered
- ◆ used relevant and current evidence/exemplification that was often referenced
- ◆ used appropriate quotations, for example, from academics
- ◆ compared and contrasted the UK (including Scotland) with the USA in Comparative Politics essays
- ◆ developed conclusions (and not just summaries) that directly related to the question and attempted to reach a decision based on the evidence in their essay
- ◆ had implicit as well as explicit conclusions
- ◆ engaged with the question in a manner that suggested they really understood the issue
- ◆ stuck to the time limit of one hour suggested for each essay

Research methods

A number of candidates produced high-quality answers, but there were still a significant number who displayed limited knowledge and understanding of research methods. The better candidates had:

Question 5 (a)

- ◆ addressed all parts of the question (before, during and after an interview) and linked the answer to the relevant group that were being interviewed, eg voters, prisoners, EU migrant workers
- ◆ developed points they were making
- ◆ focused their answers
- ◆ addressed the actual question that was set
- ◆ used real, relevant and detailed evidence to support their answer

Question 5 (b)

- ◆ addressed the question as set
- ◆ developed points they were making
- ◆ used real, relevant and current evidence that was integrated into their answer

Question 6 (a)

- ◆ answered the question as set, which was about the extent to which the source was trustworthy
- ◆ developed points they were making

- ◆ directly referred to the source
- ◆ focused their answers
- ◆ come to an overall conclusion about the extent that the source could be trusted by a social science researcher

Question 6 (b)

- ◆ developed points they were making
- ◆ used specific research evidence to exemplify their answer

Areas which candidates found demanding

Dissertations

Poor planning generally led to a poor quality dissertation. Note the mark allocation for the dissertation: 10 marks is given for the planning stage; 25 marks for analysis, synthesis and evidence; 10 marks for conclusions that address the hypothesis. Many candidates lose marks unnecessarily by not focusing enough time and effort on their planning and conclusions: these two sections are worth 20 marks out of 45. Planning is the key to a quality dissertation.

Several hypotheses were so broad that it is difficult to test them in any depth. Aims/research questions must relate to the hypothesis. Aims should ensure that analysis and argument are possible. Chapter headings are not helpful as the candidate can lose focus and this can lead to too much description, which is not good practice.

Many candidates' bibliographies suggested lack of appropriate high-quality reading. Often there was lack of appropriate sources used; an overuse, in many cases, of general internet sites such as Wikipedia and BBC News. Actual newspaper articles were consistently not specifically referenced.

Where candidates had 'cut and pasted' to a large extent, this worked to the detriment of their own analysis and synthesis. For more information on plagiarism, see the '[Improving Performance in Advanced Higher Modern Studies](#)' report. There was, sometimes, a lack of attribution of evidence by means of consistent academic referencing and a bibliography. Bibliographies should conform to a more sophisticated format. There are many websites that will advise on this.

Many candidates did not have sophisticated conclusions that related directly to the testing of the hypothesis. Summaries are not the same as conclusions. Candidates should be advised on how to write valid and relevant conclusions.

Several candidates had just described but not justified nor evaluated the research methods used in relation to gathering suitable information linked to the hypothesis. Often, any evaluation was generic — for example, what was good/bad about using the internet — rather than an evaluation of a specific site they had used for the dissertation. Candidates should make an effort to use the vernacular of a researcher such the use of key terms, eg qualitative, quantitative, scope, sampling frame etc.

It is understood why many centres invite experts to answer candidates' questions, but this should be made clear in the evaluation of research methods' section and in the relevant appendix. The candidate's own contribution to these events should be made clear.

There were still a number of dissertations that contained far fewer than 5000 words, and several were below 4000. These candidates disadvantaged themselves in that full research and analysis and synthesis can be difficult to achieve in so few words.

Fully numbered appendices that included correspondence, interviews carried out, survey questions and results and anything else relevant to the research were lacking in many dissertations.

In some surveys and questionnaires, it was quite obvious that the candidate had rushed the product and the process and hence the results were often rather dubious.

Some evidence of research was listed in the appendices but not used in the dissertation, and vice versa.

Some candidates shared the same research with no acknowledgement of whether the research was carried out by one candidate or indeed a number of them.

Several had obviously not proofread their dissertation.

The word count on each page was missing in several cases.

Examination

Essays

Candidates who used a pre-prepared answer rather than answer the question that was set tended to perform poorly. This was particularly the case in Study Theme 2: Section A:

Question 2: The Causes and Effects of Crime in the UK and Question 4: the Penal System.

In Question 2, many candidates merely wrote an essay on causes of crime and did not address the question that was about the cost of crime. In Question 4, there were many answers that looked at how successful rehabilitation in prison is or is not, but very few that actually addressed the issue of **more** purposeful activity being **the** key element in aiding **both** rehabilitation **and** reducing reoffending.

In Comparative Politics answers, candidates should include discussion/evidence from the UK, USA and Scotland, although this need not be in equal amounts. Only answers with all three areas covered can achieve high marks. The quality of answers, in this section, this exam diet, was generally impressive. Candidates planned their answers and used specific, relevant and current evidence/exemplification to support their arguments.

It was refreshing to find some centres delivering Study Theme 3: the European Union. The candidates answering this section had a genuine interest in the topics and performed well.

Research methods

Generally, this section was disappointing. Candidates should read the questions carefully and ensure they cover all aspects asked for. Some candidates listed points. To get a good mark, candidates need to develop three or four points depending on the mark allocation. In general, up to three marks can be awarded for a well-developed point.

- ◆ In Question 5(b) (pilot studies) it was clear that several candidates had no idea what a pilot study was.
- ◆ In Question 6(a), the source must be used overtly in the answer. Some candidates did not do this. Also, the majority of candidates did not evaluate the extent to which the source could be trusted by a social science researcher. This led to a loss of marks.
- ◆ Question 6(b) (ethical issues) similar to Q5(b), several candidates did not know anything about ethics and, indeed, some wrote about *ethnic* issues. Relevant exemplification was often lacking.

Candidates should give specific, relevant and current research examples/evidence in the Research Methods section. The lack of these examples is the main reason candidates lose marks.

Many candidates also lost marks in this section as they seemed to have little knowledge and understanding of research methods. This section is occasionally rushed. One hour should be set aside to tackle the research methods questions.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Dissertations

Centres can assist candidates if they:

- ◆ Take time at the planning stage to discuss appropriate hypotheses and clarify aims and methods.
- ◆ Ensure the number of aims is not excessive.
- ◆ Start early and give firm deadlines to the candidates ensuring, as far as possible, that they are adhered to.
- ◆ Stress that synthesis and balanced analysis are crucial, and that candidates may need to practise these skills. Similarly, candidates should know the difference between a summary and a conclusion.
- ◆ Ensure that research methods are justified and evaluated as a natural part of the process of carrying out the dissertation research. Specific methods should be evaluated, ie if a particular website is used in aim one, there could be justification for using that site along with an evaluation of its usefulness. The most important skill here is the evaluation.

If a candidate does personal primary research, the results of the research are best integrated throughout the dissertation and not as separate chapter.

Appendices are crucial evidence of a candidate's research process. Evidence of interviews/letters sent and received etc should be included. Such evidence should also be used appropriately in the dissertation.

Consistent academic referencing is essential.

Examination

Candidates will improve their performance when:

- ◆ Essays answer the whole question that is set in the paper.
- ◆ Essays address both sides of the argument with in-depth analysis and synthesis.
- ◆ Essays have relevant, current and in-depth evidence/exemplification.
- ◆ Conclusions (rather than summaries) relate to the question set

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2014	785
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Number of resulted entries in 2015	850
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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 - 135				
A	25.6%	25.6%	218	94
B	31.9%	57.5%	271	80
C	25.3%	82.8%	215	67
D	7.5%	90.4%	64	60
No award	9.6%	-	82	-

The Course assessment functioned as intended, therefore no adjustment to grade boundaries was required.

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, SQA therefore 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 Business Manager 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.