Course Report 2017

Subject	Modern Studies
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. 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 assessment documents and marking instructions.

Section 1: Comments on the assessment

Summary of the course assessment

Component 1: question paper

The question paper for Higher Modern Studies lasts for 135 minutes and has a total of 60 marks. This is two thirds of the total mark for the course assessment.

The question paper contains a mixture of essay style and source-based questions. These are spread across three units providing choice for candidates.

The most commonly completed options were: Section 1 Question 1(a), Section 2 Question 3(a), and Section 3 Question 4(a).

The two source questions, which all candidates must complete, appeared in Sections 1 and 3.

The question paper as a whole performed satisfactorily.

Component 2: assignment

The assignment has a total of 30 marks (one third of the course assessment's total).

Candidates are required to carry out individual research and write a report under controlled conditions with the help of two A4 pages of specified resources. The controlled 'write-up' should last 90 minutes.

Overall, candidates performed well in the assignment, demonstrating knowledge and analysis of sophisticated social, economic and political issues.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper

Question 1(b)

Many candidates showed a good grasp of the ways in which either the UK Parliament or the Scottish Parliament can hold their respective governments to account. Answers often considered Prime Minister's/First Minister's questions, committee structures and procedures, debates, private members' bills etc. Many candidates successfully discussed the limitations of such factors. A small number of candidates successfully included elements of both the UK and Scottish parliamentary systems in their answer. The House of Lords was often included, showing a high level of understanding.

Question 2

This question proved accessible for the vast majority of candidates. Many came to the conclusion that those living in poverty were more likely to vote 'YES' in the referendum, and supported this with appropriate evidence from the sources. Many candidates also came to the conclusion that older voters were more likely to vote 'NO', again using evidence from the sources to justify this. The three sources were of an appropriate standard and few candidates misinterpreted the statistics.

Question 3(b)

Overall, candidates seemed well prepared for this question. Detailed knowledge and understanding of a wide range of policies was displayed. The open nature of the question allowed candidates to focus on one or more of the following: health policies, welfare policies, housing policies and education policies. In many cases candidates were able to provide UK-wide examples, as well as specific Scottish examples in their responses.

Question 3(d)

Although this question was completed by a very small number of candidates, they did tend to demonstrate appropriate knowledge of the problems facing the prison service which make the aim of rehabilitating offenders difficult, eg overcrowding, short sentences, staff shortages etc. Rehabilitation formed the focus of many answers, with few discussing punishment or the protection of the public.

Question 4(d)

Candidates showed good up-to-date knowledge of their world issue and most were able to focus their analysis on 'countries and their governments' as required by the question. Some answers were very descriptive but did manage to achieve the eight marks available for knowledge and understanding. Under-development in Africa and international terrorism remain the most frequently covered world issues.

Question 5

The vast majority of candidates managed to provide appropriate source evidence to both support and oppose the view in the question. Most candidates successfully selected information that referred directly to the growing 'political' influence of women rather than their influence in the social and economic spheres of Saudi society.

Component 2: assignment

There was continued improvement in candidates' demonstration of knowledge surrounding their issue/topic and the alternatives being considered. The inclusion of an 'Introduction' or 'Background to the Issue' section is now very common, and this allowed many candidates to achieve most, if not all, of the 'background and framing' marks very early in their report.

A DME structure was widely employed to very good effect. Distinct sections with specific, appropriate headings was used by most candidates, and the use of social science terminology and direct referencing of the research sheets has improved markedly.

A statement and justification of the candidate's decision is regularly included at the beginning of reports. Although this is not essential, it does allow a clear line of argument to

be demonstrated. The most effective reports refer back to this decision in the main body of the report and reinforce it in the decision/conclusion section.

Fewer unsuitable topics were studied by candidates this year.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper

Question 1(a)

Many candidates showed very weak knowledge of their chosen electoral system. Often, very basic points were made which lacked expansion or explanation. Many candidates were confused about the names of certain systems and often had only a cursory knowledge of their operations. Examples were often confused, eg figures were given from the 2015 General Election to support a point made about Additional Member System (AMS) and the Scottish Parliament. Many candidates gave 'rote' style advantages and disadvantages answers without focusing on the specific demands of the question.

Many candidates failed to restrict their answer to an evaluation of one system and instead described/evaluated two or more systems in isolation. Candidates could only be credited for one system. (Using a second or third system as comparison/part of an evaluation, was credit-worthy).

In general, many candidates who attempted this question appeared to be poorly prepared.

Question 3(a)

A significant number of candidates referred only to poverty as a cause of ill-health, failing to consider other factors such as diet, exercise etc. Very few candidates made any mention of hereditary conditions or of the influence of gender or ethnicity. Some candidates 'flipped' the question and discussed how poor health can cause poverty.

Many responses were vague and generalised in nature and were lacking in any specific Modern Studies detail or up-to-date exemplification.

In general, many candidates who attempted this question appeared to be poorly prepared.

Question 3(c)

Answers to this question were often very simplistic in nature. Candidates were often able to identify alcohol, drug abuse, family influence, etc, as causes of criminal activity but were rarely able to justify these links with up-to-date, relevant statistical evidence. Reference to academic theories such as Strain Theory or to the ideas of specific researchers/writers such as Albert Cohen were very rare.

Question 4(a)

Responses were often generalised and inaccurate as well as exemplification often being out of date. A significant number of candidates analysed the effects of more than one socio-economic issue on the people of their chosen world power, whereas the question clearly

stated that one issue should be considered. This led many candidates to waste time writing responses that could only be partly credited. The highest-attaining candidates in this question considered 'poverty' or 'inequality' as one broad socio-economic issue and analysed how this impacted on the population in terms of housing, education, incomes, crime, health etc.

Question 4(b)

Many candidates who answered on the USA attempted to turn this question to fit a pre-prepared answer on the powers of the US president. Overall, candidates focusing on the USA had little specific knowledge of the US political system and institutions. The knowledge and understanding displayed of elections, parties, pressure groups etc was often weak and simplistic.

Candidates who answered on China or South Africa tended to score more highly as they included more accurate knowledge of the political system and more appropriate, contemporary exemplification.

Question 4(c)

Although the majority of candidates displayed good descriptive knowledge of the issue they had studied, they gave little detail concerning the attempts to resolve the issue or the bodies involved in these attempts. Many answers became little more than descriptions of the seriousness of poverty in Africa or of international terrorism, ie the issue is so serious that it is difficult to resolve. The work of charities, governments, aid agencies, the UN or NATO etc was rarely mentioned.

Component 2: assignment

Although overall knowledge marks continued to improve, many candidates did not score highly when trying to support their analysis in the main body of their report. Many seemed to try very hard in the opening section to include information worthy of background and framing marks, but included little else after this.

Many candidates did not use their research sheets effectively. Many had included useful information but did not reference it or use it at all, instead writing from memory.

A significant minority of candidates included no actual information on their research sheets, preferring to only include URLs. This makes it extremely difficult for markers to award analysis/synthesis marks for source use, especially if the candidate made no actual reference to their sheets. This approach often disadvantaged candidates.

Many candidates did not provide enough detail on their sources, eg 'the BBC' or 'the Guardian'. Best practice would be to provide specific information such as the name of the journalist, title of the article and the date of its publication.

Some sheets had so much information in a very small font that these would have been of little use to candidates during their 'write-up'.

Outright copying of pre-prepared knowledge and analysis was rare, but many candidates included no sources on their research sheets. Instead they included a detailed plan with pre-

prepared knowledge and analysis. In the most extreme cases several thousand words were included, which were joined together by the candidate during their write up, eg six partial sentences on why sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to vote were then joined to form a paragraph with only neutral language and punctuation added. Such responses will continue to attract little credit.

Although the vast majority of candidates did attempt to evaluate the reliability of their sources, a significant majority still missed this out. Many candidates provided only an extremely generalised response, referring to 'the internet' or 'newspapers' without specifically evaluating the websites or publications actually used. Some candidates evaluated sources which were not included on their research sheet, gaining no credit.

Many candidates failed to score beyond two marks in the decision/conclusion section as they failed to consider or evaluate the reasons why other options were rejected. Answers which only consider/evaluate the chosen option or course of action can only be awarded a maximum of two marks.

A small number of candidates completed assignments on topics that were not considered to be Modern Studies. Many of these appeared to be an attempt to reduce workload by individual pupils. Assignments which attempted to merge topics with RMPS, History, PE and English tended to gain few marks.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: question paper

Centres should continue to emphasise the importance of relevant, up-to-date exemplification in both 12- and 20-mark responses. While some flexibility can be shown during marking towards statistics that are slightly inaccurate, wildly inaccurate guesses can damage or invalidate an argument or piece of analysis. This 'inventive' approach to statistics, which was adopted by some candidates, should be discouraged.

Candidates should also be reminded that their responses need to fit the demands of the question. Centres should emphasise to candidates that 12-mark responses do not attract marks for structure and need not be as long and comprehensive as 20-mark responses.

Conclusions made by candidates in the conclusions source question should be developed and insightful. Candidates should be encouraged to go further than simply re-wording the bullet point in the question. The overall conclusion in this question should also be more than a re-worded summary of the answer given for the two bullet points. Although the same source evidence can obviously be used, the overall conclusion should provide an evaluative judgement.

Centres should also remind candidates that in the accuracy source question, they should provide an explanation when evaluating the reliability of the sources — 'the BBC is reliable as it is respected' is not enough to merit a mark at Higher level. Candidates cannot achieve

more than six marks if they do not include an overall evaluation of the accuracy of the statement in their response.

Component 2: assignment

Centres should ensure that research sheets are actually of practical use to candidates during write-ups. Sources should be clearly attributed and points to be used as knowledge should not be included. Only including web addresses on research sheets can often disadvantage candidates and should be avoided. Detailed plans should not be included. Research sheets should include source materials which candidates can actually use in their analysis. Centres should remind candidates that they should make direct reference to their research sheets throughout their report.

Centres should remind candidates that knowledge marks can be gained throughout the report, and should encourage them to use knowledge (ie points not included on their research sheets) to support the analysis and synthesis of their research materials.

It should be stressed to candidates that their evaluation of the reliability of their sources must focus on sources which are included on their research sheets. Also, rather than making vague comments such as 'I used the Guardian and newspapers are often biased', the candidate should explain what type of bias the Guardian usually shows (ie left-leaning) or perhaps point to an example of this bias included in the Guardian article on their research sheets.

Centres should remind candidates that simply writing 'BK' in the margin or in the body of the text does not mean that a mark will be awarded. Some candidates have been wasting time by claiming marks for very general points. Knowledge marks will only be awarded for specific, accurate and relevant Modern Studies knowledge.

Centres are also urged to be cautious regarding candidates who wish to merge their assignment topic with that being studied in another subject. Topics such as abortion, the death penalty and euthanasia can contain appropriate content (such as human rights issues and the law) but are often weak, with much of the response more suitable to RMPS.

A number of assignments this year attempted to consider the legal implications of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act. Such reports tended to be weak, focusing mainly on the intricacies of Scottish football rather than any credit-worthy analysis of the legislative process, human rights or pressure group activity. Centres are advised to discourage such topics.

Centres should ensure that they are fully aware of the guidelines regarding the write-up stage of the assignment.

Whilst it was pleasing to see that the conditions of assessment for coursework were adhered to in the majority of centres, there were a small number of examples where this may not have been the case. Following feedback from teachers, we have strengthened the conditions of assessment criteria for National 5 subjects and will do so for Higher and Advanced Higher. The criteria are published clearly on our website and in course materials and must be adhered to. SQA takes very seriously its obligation to ensure fairness and

equity for all candidates in all qualifications through consistent application of assessment conditions and investigates all cases alerted to us where conditions may not have been met.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2016	9851

Number of resulted entries in 2017	9319

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	31.9%	31.9%	2974	63
B	22.0%	53.9%	2049	54
C	20.4%	74.3%	1905	45
D	8.1%	82.5%	758	40
No award	17.5%	-	1633	-

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.