

GCE 2001

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Report on the Examination

General Studies

Specification A

- Unit GSA1 Culture, Morality, Arts and Humanities
- Unit GSA2 Science, Mathematics and Technology
- Unit GS3W Society, Politics and the Economy

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Kathleen Tattersall, Director General

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General Studies

Specification A

Unit GSA1: Culture, Morality, Arts and Humanities

The majority of candidates appeared to cope reasonably well with the passage and topic and to have sufficient time in which to attempt all parts of the test. The passage was adapted from an arts feature which originally appeared in *The Economist*. The theme was a familiar one and close enough to candidates' own experience for its overall drift to be on the whole well understood. One part of the text which candidates frequently failed to appreciate correctly was paragraph 7 dealing with 'political correctness', where many misinterpreted this as a criticism of Shakespeare, rather than of those modern productions which sought to address the issue through 'contrived' adaptations. Thus Shakespeare's 'political incorrectness' became a problem for modern audiences, which is not the point the author is making. The best candidates scored highly on Question 1 and were able to produce substantial and mature answers to Question 2. Weaker candidates tended to write inappropriately brief and incomplete responses, and their style and quality of expression showed little or no advance beyond GCSE standard. To that extent the examination differentiated effectively between the most and the least able candidates, but the examiners felt that many candidates were not yet ready to tackle the demands of this test, even with concentrated teaching and learning on a full range of topics for the unit. In this part of General Studies, breadth of understanding and maturity of thinking probably have a higher premium than a single term in the sixth form allows.

Question 1

The 25 multiple choice items worked well with a balanced range of easier and more difficult items and an average facility of 56%. They also discriminated effectively between the stronger and weaker candidates on the test as a whole, with a mean point biserial of 0.35. More straightforward items with facilities over 70% were 1.7, 1.10 and 1.17. The most difficult with scores under 35% were 1.4 and 1.16. Only 1.16 failed to discriminate satisfactorily, with a large number of candidates opting for alternative B, but even here the strongest group of candidates realised that the references were all deliberately incorrect (A). The questions had been pre-tested with a Year 12 cohort of students and the overall test mean showed a 5% improvement over the original pre-test scores. These compared very closely with equivalent scores for the arts/social science comprehension in the A level examination in recent years, which provided a very useful comparative base for grade awarding purposes.

Question 2.1

Almost all candidates pin-pointed the language of Shakespeare as a problem for modern audiences, but stronger candidates were able to explain this in some detail and score higher marks. References to religion (the Bible), mythology and problems over changed beliefs (e.g. the supernatural) were also common, as were the complexity of Shakespeare's plots, the length of the plays and the speeches. The differing expectations of different groups within an audience was also frequently cited as a problem.

Common weaknesses were accounts which were too vague, brief and unsupported by references or examples, and which did not cover a full enough range of points. Too much literal quotation from the text did not always reveal full understanding and the most common failing here was over-use of the phrase 'historical perspective' without seeking to clarify what this meant. There was also confusion over the theme of political correctness and its significance in the passage.

Question 2.2

Candidates tended to concentrate their responses on the perceived advantages of film, sometimes at the expense of those of stage plays, and generally less attention was paid to the limitations. Films were seen as more accessible to a wider audience, could take advantage of a more visual representation, realistic locations, sound effects, and were able to exploit the use of 'big-name stars' (which was usually seen as good). The theatre was recognised for its immediacy, intimacy, authenticity, and where acting skills could be more easily appreciated.

The potential limitations of film, which tended to be neglected, were a loss of authenticity and of emphasis on the beauty of the language, too many changes detracting from the original text (often mentioned but needed to be explained or exemplified), excessive emphasis on 'stars' and commercial appeal (often seen as a strength). Rather too much was made of the ability to re-shoot scenes in films until they were perfect, compared with 'blunders often made' on stage, perhaps forgetting that plays also undergo considerable rehearsal.

Question 2.3

This question tended to produce the lowest marks, perhaps because it was the broadest and last. It was also the question designed primarily to test Assessment Objective 4 (Demonstrate understanding of different types of knowledge and of the relationship between them). Nevertheless most candidates were able to mention the value of drama as entertainment, relaxation, escapism, and providing opportunities for social interaction. A fair number went on to explore our inherent interest in other people and what happens to them, the benefits of what we can learn about others and ourselves, of experiencing an emotional outlet, and the ability to form moral judgements and develop values in a 'safe' environment without personal risk. A few mentioned the creative side of human nature and our love of, fascination for, stories. These latter points and the level of understanding and appreciation required to make them reflect the kind of response examiners were looking for as evidence of AO4.

Typical weaknesses were the failure to address 'why' in the question or to develop reasons behind the most general and superficial (e.g. 'drama is prominent in cultural life because everybody has a TV and drama programmes are amongst the most popular, and drama is a cultural activity'). A small number of candidates also allowed themselves to be side-tracked and confused the question with one on censorship. (Was this the influence of the specimen test done in preparation?)

Candidates should be aiming to use the whole page provided in the answer book for their answers to these questions, as a single half-page paragraph is unlikely to be enough. Responses need to be entirely focused on the question and sufficiently detailed with illustrations or references to show understanding. Arguments need to be supported with examples. In this respect candidates tended to do better if they used their own words rather than relying on too much literal quotation from the passage.

Unit GSA2: Science, Mathematics and Technology

Section 1

Questions 1-25

The topic of volcanoes was seen as one which would be accessible to non-science specialists. The questions functioned satisfactorily and as expected in most cases, producing a mean facility for the test of 56%. This outcome is comparable, allowing for the lower level of demand of the AS, to the normal outcome for the corresponding science comprehension component in the current A level General Studies examination.

Four items proved relatively easy and these were Questions 4, 11, 12 and 21, each answered correctly by 75% of the candidates. Only Question 13 proved notably difficult with a facility of 34%, the key (D) losing out marginally to distractor C.

Three questions, 5, 9 and 14, failed to discriminate satisfactorily, though they produced acceptable facilities for the keys and no high-scoring distractors. In Question 7 the key (B) trailed distractor A by 6%, the majority of candidates underestimating the proportion of silica content.

Section 2

Questions 26-50

The questions were generally answered in line with expectations, and had a mean overall facility of 51%. They also discriminated very well between the stronger and weaker candidates on the test as a whole.

Five items had a facility greater than 65% (26 – calculation, 28 – explanation of formula, 29 – network of relationship, 30 – depreciation, and 32 – averages) and no items had a facility lower than 35%.

Only one item (33) had a distractor (D) that proved more popular than the key (A) – (i.e. a diagram showing possible positions after either one or two moves rather than after **exactly two** moves). The question still discriminated well. Perhaps this was a case of jumping to conclusions and not reading the detail of the question carefully enough.

The item which discriminated least well, but still satisfactorily, was 48. This included the use of the exponential function, which some candidates may not have met in work outside General Studies by the time of the examination. Nevertheless the facility was still 43% and all the distractors had significantly lower responses than the correct response.

The mean facility for Unit 2 overall was 54%, with 78% of candidates scoring 20 marks or more. The examiners felt that the relatively limited number of candidates entered for this unit at this stage achieved a better level of performance than the similar number entered for Unit 1 and much smaller number for Unit 3.

Unit GA3W: Society, Politics and the Economy

Question 1

Virtually all candidates were able to identify three ideas put forward as the most effective ways to solve the problem although some answers relied too much on literal quotation from the text. In this test it is important that candidates seek to use some of their own words to demonstrate full understanding of the arguments and it is essential to identify all the relevant points for full marks. Often little attention was paid to the folly of believing in an ‘instant solution’ to the battle against drugs. More crucially, too many candidates failed to explain, or even identify, phrases such as ‘glamorous hype’ or ‘take control of their own lives’.

Question 2

Most could identify which individuals were being criticised but could not always give accurate reasons. Some suggested, incorrectly, that the criticisms were being made by the author of Source B, Jay Rayner. In fact, Rayner was being generally supportive and offering some backing to those like Keith Hellawell who had advocated more openness, often in the face of criticism by Labour politicians fearful of attracting adverse publicity and losing votes. Senior government figures like Clare Short and Mo Mowlam might not have been setting good examples for someone in their position, but the Labour Party’s overriding preoccupation, it was claimed, was with the ‘politically dangerous’. Therefore, almost any talk of actions which might hint at a liberalising of existing drugs policy was looked upon with disapproval by members of the government frightened of offending certain groups of voters.

Question 3

To obtain high marks in this question candidates needed to establish the link between the aims and scope of the measures outlined in Source A, the targets set out in Source E and the identification of some successes, failures and potential opposition in Source B. Most felt that A offered some interesting ideas, although these were those of one man, albeit one in a powerful position, and nothing was said about how the ideas were to be carried out. Source E was generally felt to contain clearly set out targets which were easy to read but, like A, nothing was said about methods. Hardly anyone noted that the percentages were largely meaningless without base figures for comparison and only one candidate pointed to the rather jaded, almost cynical source title, *Yet another Tsar is born*. A few even thought that Alan Travis was the Tsar.

Many candidates were much more uncertain in their interpretation of Source B and it was often argued that the Source was of little use and too negative because it carried some reported criticisms of Hellawell. There was often considerable copying from the source, usually with little or no focus on the strengths and weaknesses, which were central to the question. More perceptive candidates saw that there was a key point to be made in B about the need for the support of politicians for ultimate success, together with pointers to what might be beginning to work and could usefully be developed. Good answers looked critically at the origins of each source and the stance, which might not be one of neutrality, taken by their authors and the newspapers or magazines concerned.

Question 4

Many candidates struggled with this question and some clearly did not understand how to apply even the simplest test which might have helped to establish if someone was ‘telling the truth’. This was particularly the case with Source C which some felt had been written by William Hague, leader of what was already a Conservative government. This led to an erroneous focus on the merits, or otherwise, of a more ‘hard-line’ approach designed to act as a deterrent to drug takers.

Most candidates recognised that the author of the source, Polly Toynbee, was expressing her opinion but then spent too much time re-writing material that they had been given and calling the probity of assorted politicians into account. Only a few tore into Polly Toynbee for making an unsubstantiated attack on the Conservative Party as part of her role as a journalist working for an essentially left-of-centre newspaper. Ms Toynbee may, or may not, have been correct in her assertions, but it needed to be pointed out that she produced no evidence to support them. Only the best candidates concluded that the source’s title, *Mo and the Drugs Tsar Both Tell the Truth, Others Don’t*, was possibly a long way from where the truth might reasonably be found.

Candidates were less inclined to misinterpret Source D or to agree with all its claims. Consequently, those who scored few marks on Source C fared rather better when they moved to D. Most understood that its opinions represented a form of ‘truth’ based on bitter personal experience but that this version of the ‘truth’ was distorted by generalisation and overstatement fuelled by strong emotion. Better answers recognised that some drugs were used for legitimate medical purposes, that doctors are divided about the effects of certain drugs and that, in describing the condition of the estate, the source’s author went on to generalise from a specific experience. The recommendation to watch *Trainspotting* was not felt to be a very practical proposition and some thought it would have the opposite effect to the one anticipated by the writer who, though anonymous, was usually identified as ‘she’. Only a few questioned the potential unreliability of anonymity and the extent to which the source might have been ‘adapted’ by the local newspaper.

To reach the highest marks on this question candidates had to unpick a lot of detailed points about the origin and nature of the sources and their authors, and to understand fully what Source C in particular was about. The best candidates tended to preface their answers by taking as their starting point some idea of what constituted ‘truth’ in a general sense and how this could be related to each of the sources. This suggested that they had examined, in their preparation, the implications and significance of Assessment Objective 4.

Question 5

This question required candidates to undertake a detailed synthesis of themes and points made in all of the sources and too many answers suggested that insufficient attention had been paid to the extent of response required for fifteen marks. Many began promisingly but, perhaps because it was the last question, attempts were most often too brief and picked up only a few marks at Levels I and II. Some answers which were longer sometimes tended to quote extensively from the sources without linking them to the targets, or pursued more of their own agenda, either calling for greater political openness in discussing the drugs problem or, less frequently, for stronger deterrents. There were a few good answers which took each of the targets in Source E, related them directly to the aims in A, their potential for success or failure in B and the broader intractability of attitudes to the problems shown in C and D.

General Points

Many candidates coped adequately with Questions 1 and 2, but began to struggle with 3, and did not devote enough time and attention to 4 and 5, which carried 30 marks (60% of the total). This tended to depress the total marks gained out of 50. Too many candidates did not seem to have sufficient maturity of understanding and expression at this stage of their course to deal with the complexity of the issues being presented. There were some good, sometimes outstanding, responses which appreciated the different origins of the sources and the range of views, fact and opinion represented in them, but these were infrequent. Too many of the small number of candidates entered seemed to have little clear grasp of what was required and revealed a fairly low standard of analysis, appreciation and expression. The work of these candidates suggested that they had insufficient prior experience of the sort of assessment demands and techniques to be found in an examination of this nature.

Generally more time than a single term is required to gain greater experience of evaluating source documents of all kinds on a range of topics related to the specification. These might include the use and interpretation of broadsheet and tabloid articles and other texts, government reports and statistics, letters to the press, knowledge and understanding of political, social and economic standpoints, examination of what is meant by fact, opinion, bias, generalisation, hidden values, truth and so on. While some candidates were fully and commendably aware of how journalists and newspapers can influence the tone and content of their articles, many showed only a limited awareness of this.

It was also the case that candidates tended to do better if they adopted a systematic approach to each source and, where appropriate, commented on the origins of each in relation to others. Only a few, for example, said something about *The Big Issue* in Source A and that Polly Toynbee's views in C reflected the political stance often taken by *The Guardian*. Candidates who showed this sort of awareness often did well overall. Some rudimentary knowledge of current events and key figures in public life, political parties, government and opposition can also be expected as a basic requirement for a fuller understanding of this unit. Without this grasp of the essential features of social, political and economic life, candidates cannot expect to reach high marks.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Unit GSA1 Culture, Morality, Arts and Humanities

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	
Boundary Mark	35	31	27	23	19	

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Question 1 (OTQ)	25	25	14.1	4.3
Question 2 (Structured Writing)	25	25	10.4	3.9
Total	50	50	24.5	7.1

Unit GSA2 Science, Mathematics and Technology

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	
Boundary Mark	35	31	27	23	19	

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Section 1 (OTQ) + Section 2 (OTQ)	50	50	26.8	8.5

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Unit GA3W Society, Politics and the Economy

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	
Boundary Mark	32	28	25	21	18	

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Source analysis	50	50	20.9	7.3

Definitions

Boundary Mark: the minimum (scaled) mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

Mean Mark: the sum of all candidates' marks divided by the number of candidates. The mean (or average) mark measures a central tendency of a mark distribution (provided that the distribution is not skewed).

Standard Deviation: a measure of how widely candidates' marks are spread about the mean mark. When expressed as a percentage of the Maximum mark (scaled), small standard deviations indicate that the marks are "bunched" and large standard deviations indicate a wide spread of marks. In general, the marks of approximately two-thirds of all candidates lie in a range of plus or minus one standard deviation about the mean mark.

Objective Test Keys

Unit GSA1

Question 1

1.1-C; 1.2-B; 1.3-A; 1.4-B; 1.5-C; 1.6-D; 1.7-A; 1.8-B; 1.9-A; 1.10-C; 1.11-C; 1.12-D; 1.13-C; 1.14-C; 1.15-A; 1.16-A; 1.17-C; 1.18-D; 1.19-A; 1.20-B; 1.21-D; 1.22-B; 1.23-C; 1.24-B; 1.25-D.

Unit GSA2: Section 1

1-A; 2-D; 3-A; 4-A; 5-B; 6-B; 7-B; 8-D; 9-B; 10-B; 11-A; 12-D; 13-D; 14-D; 15-C; 16-A; 17-C; 18-C; 19-A; 20-A; 21-B; 22-C; 23-C; 24-A; 25-B.

Unit GSA2: Section 2

26-B; 27-A; 28-C; 29-B; 30-B; 31-D; 32-D; 33-A; 34-C; 35-D; 36-C; 37-C; 38-B; 39-C; 40-D; 41-B; 42-B; 43-A; 44-B; 45-D; 46-D; 47-B; 48-C; 49-D; 50-C.