



## **General Certificate of Education**

# **General Studies 6761** *Specification A*

**GSA6      Society, Politics and the Economy**

## **Report on the Examination** *2008 examination - January series*

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## **GSA6 Society, Politics and the Economy**

### **General points**

The increased entry for this unit that was a feature of January 2007 was maintained in 2008. However, a familiar January pattern emerged with a marked contrast between levels of achievement. The synoptic unit presents a demanding but fair test designed primarily for students reaching the end of an A2 course. It is perfectly reasonable for some students to enter this examination in January rather than June and, at the top end of the range, there were a few very good, even exceptional, performances. However, set against that, there were many candidates who lacked both the knowledge and range of even more basic skills to secure a mark that came even close to a Grade E and this served to depress overall performance.

In some cases, it was again the case that very little preparation had been done for the Case Study questions. Without this, chances of any sort of success are extremely low. Those who had prepared, and were able to blend information from the extracts with their own knowledge, were able to produce at least Level 2 answers to Questions 1-4 although relatively few had the analytical skills and consistency of approach to reach Level 3 across a range of questions.

Data interpretation in Question 1 continues to present problems to many candidates. However, it was pleasing to see how many made a genuine effort, even though levels of success varied, to deal with the possible implications of material in Extract A for the National Health Service. In addition, few candidates were able to deal critically with Question 3 based on the arguments of a General Practitioner who questioned the extent to which he and his GP colleagues did enough to merit the substantial pay rise that they had been awarded recently.

Performance in the essay questions was often limited and few candidates reached the highest level. Question 5, about freedom and the law, proved surprisingly popular but was often attempted by weaker candidates who underestimated its demands and quickly ran out of relevant information. Question 7, on the dangers of drug taking and an appraisal of punishments, was more successfully tackled although most candidates stressed that their knowledge was not based on personal experience. Other common weaknesses included a preference for narrative and description rather than analysis and appropriate supporting examples.

### **Section A: Case Study**

#### **Question 1**

Answers to this question were distinctly variable and it was clear that not all candidates understood what was meant by 'implications' in the context of the data and comments. Some candidates failed to recognise that Extract A extended beyond Figure 1 and, as is so often the case, many answers took each figure separately and made mainly descriptive comments, some of which were extremely vague and generalised. While there was some welcome criticism of media headline-grabbing in Figure 1, few candidates noticed that the comments were made some time ago and also, in prophesying doom for the NHS, failed to acknowledge that it is very difficult to devise a health system that can respond quickly to the pressures of sudden, seasonal peaks in illness.

Preparation for this type of question is essential and it was common to blame the NHS when the problems were more likely to be with the patients or a result of other factors. For example, the NHS was blamed for the fact that the average life expectancy in Glasgow was appreciably lower than in a more affluent part of London. The contribution of factors such as personal lifestyle

choices and the incidence of poverty were usually ignored. Similarly, though the NHS was praised for the continued rise in life expectancy few were shrewd enough to mention the implications of the demands made by an ageing population.

### **Question 2**

Not all candidates recognised that, although Extract B provided evidence that suggested that there was at least a financial and structural crisis in the NHS, it also contained counter-arguments supporting an alternative interpretation. Weaker answers were essentially both descriptive and unbalanced and could barely see beyond tabloid-style headlines and tales of woe. More discerning candidates provided much more balanced and informed analysis, often concluding that, although the NHS faced difficulties, there was sometimes only limited evidence to support claims of the existence of a 'crisis'.

### **Question 3**

Too many answers to this question simply summarised the observations of Dr Tim Winch, often adding that the pay rise given to general practitioners was unjustified. This was often accompanied by anecdotes about the alleged absence of GPs from surgeries, the difficulties of making an appointment and the fact that evening and weekend services are often handled by deputising services.

Some candidates knew that they had to look for bias and quickly pointed the finger at Dr Winch – seemingly oblivious to the point that Dr Winch was arguing against his own position as a GP and that of his colleagues and was almost acting as a 'whistleblower'. Few were able to say that, although some of Dr Winch's arguments might have some validity, the job of a GP remained very demanding, that before the pay rise there had been concerns about shortages of GPs and that Dr Winch sometimes relied on rather generalised comments with limited supporting evidence.

### **Question 4**

As in 2007, answers to this question, where time is usually pressing, were a bit longer and sometimes slightly better than usual. There were a number of comments based on personal experience and many candidates engaged well with the material. These range from those who agreed with all that the sources said about the excesses of teenage behaviour to those who criticised the excessive use of generalisation and stereotype. There was also a widespread feeling that young people were not understood by adults and that it was unfair to criticise young people for binge drinking when adults set such a bad example.

Few candidates were as candid as the one who wrote: "We are supposed to be indulging in smoking, drinking, drugs and under-age sex and we are most unhappy. It's rubbish. Drugs and sex are great." It was a comment that perhaps suggested that some of the claims made in the extracts might have been a little more accurate than many candidates were prepared to admit and also served to illustrate the different perspectives that can be found across the generation gap.

## **Section B: Essays**

### **Question 5**

Many candidates started brightly but often ran out of ideas at a very early stage, often showing a surprising and rather naïve faith in the benign qualities of human nature, arguing for greater personal freedom and less interference from the government. Others pointed to the *Lord of the Flies* effect, suggesting that the freedom to take certain actions must be balanced by freedom from the less desirable consequences of some of these actions.

Some answers were simplistic while others were quite subtle, exploring the distinctions between legal and moral behaviour and demonstrating that, although some actions were not illegal, they could be distinctly annoying.

### **Question 6**

Privatisation is largely a distant memory and few candidates were sufficiently well informed to deal adequately with its theory and practice. The minority who answered this question either ignored its first part or dealt with it in a paragraph before examining it in the context of the NHS.

Most candidates are not aware of the extent to which the gap between the NHS and private medicine has narrowed. They realised that some of the benefits of private provision were not widely available to the population as a whole and that the American experience was not necessarily one that they would like replicated in the UK. .

### **Question 7**

Answers to this popular question were not always well-balanced. Most candidates wrote quite knowledgeably, if sometimes too lengthily, about the dangers of non-medicinal drugs but sometimes said relatively little about the efficacy of severe punishments. Others said little about the impact of drugs but wrote at length about what they considered to be deterrent punishments. Lengthy prison sentences were often prescribed, usually without the recognition that drug taking is sometimes almost as big a problem in prison as it is on the outside.

Better answers emphasised the importance of identifying and punishing drug dealers and major criminals who controlled the trade. Such answers often stressed the importance of more investment in drug education and in the rehabilitation of those unable to break free from their addiction.

### **Question 8**

There were some thoughtful and considered responses to this question. Many answers recognised that politicians and international leaders often had an unenviable task in front of them, that they were often faced with intractable situations, and that they were human beings as prone to human error as anyone else. While Tony Blair and George Bush were often criticised for their role in the war in Iraq, it was also recognised that many others must have contributed to the decisions that were taken and (often later) criticised. Unfortunately, not enough candidates had the breadth of knowledge to develop and support their ideas fully. Thankfully, there were only a small number of rants about the inadequacy and duplicity of politicians.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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