

Accounting

2015 Chief Assessor’s Report

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## Overview

Chief Assessors’ reports give an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, the quality of student performance, and any relevant statistical information.

## School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Skills and Applications Tasks

The skills and applications tasks provide an opportunity for all learning requirements from the subject outline to be explored throughout the year with varying assessment design criteria included in each task. Central moderation for this year showed an increase in the number of teachers who are providing high-quality and varied tasks that allow students to display their knowledge and skills and perform at all levels of the performance standards.

Throughout moderation it was very clear that teachers had taken into account feedback and guidance provided at clarifying forums and in previous Chief Assessor’s reports to develop packages of tasks that integrated topics appropriately — in particular, tasks that assessed the concepts from the Environment of Accounting in context and in relation to other topics, rather than as a stand-alone item.

It was also clear that teachers had thought about the five to eight individual tasks that they presented to students, and, critically, about how those tasks were delivered as a package. It is noted that, while the subject outline allows for up to eight tasks, there is no requirement for a learning and assessment plan to have this maximum, and consideration should be given to the particular cohort being assessed. Some well-designed packages only provided the minimum five tasks but still gave students multiple opportunities to respond to particular specific features of the assessment design criteria. It was apparent that these tasks had been supplemented by formative material along the way so that the moderated pieces showed the peak of each student’s achievement, rather than some early developmental work. This approach recognised the fact that as student-knowledge develops, evidence of their achievement against the performance standards may also increase. The moderation panel appreciated seeing the teacher feedback and evidence of grading decisions that supported this approach.

Individual tasks that assisted students in their preparation for the final examination by using similar styles of questions were well designed. It is important for teachers to note that while using previous examination questions as a basis for assessment tasks provides a good level of consistency, it is critical that the previous examination questions are developed into new and distinct questions that take into account the particular students they are delivered to.

There were some very good examples of tasks that both challenged students while still providing opportunities to show achievement across the full range of performance standards. The best designed examples enabled students who achieved at the highest levels to fully complete all aspects of the tasks within the required 60-minute time-limit, and they also challenged lower-performing students who may not have completed all tasks but were still given the opportunity to show achievement at those lower levels. These well-balanced tasks had a good mixture of simple written and practical questions, which allowed all students to demonstrate achievement, and a range of harder questions requiring higher-order responses, which allowed some students to demonstrate achievement at higher levels.

It was pleasing to note that more teachers are recognising the knowledge and skills students display in steps and calculations within tasks. Evidence of this practice was visible in tasks where teachers provided preformatted documents when appropriate, thus allowing students to focus on the content and to display their ability to apply knowledge rather than remembering generic formats. These tasks were complemented by feedback and assessment decisions from teachers that focused on the process rather than the final outcome. Good assessment decisions were evidenced by teachers recognising that students were achieving at a particular level even though a minor error might have meant that their final answer was incorrect. These approaches to assessment clearly showed a teacher’s willingness to base the ultimate decision about achievement on performance standards, with the marks awarded for particular tasks being supporting evidence, rather than being the critical component in the decision.

Assessment Type 2: Report

The report, as a piece of school-based assessment, has continued to be embraced by some teachers who have developed interesting and well-designed questions for their students. As was the case last year, moderators noted that the best examples of reports were similar in style to past examination questions, but had been clearly modified and developed so that they appropriately targeted the particular students. This type of design ensured that a full response could be made within the 60-minute time-limit and ensured that the data on which the report was based was unseen, as required by the subject outline.

The majority of reports seen were of a similar format, with students required to complete four to six ratio calculations and then use additional data to comment on in their reports. This design works well, as it allows students to focus the majority of their time on creating a report that shows understanding, interpretation of the calculations and data provided, and communication skills. It was noted that while this format is commonly used, it is important to provide the right type of data so that students can achieve against the full range of performance standards. Reports that provided simple data, with little or no comparative figures, limited the ability of students to show achievement at the higher levels. On the other hand, reports that only required four calculations, but then provided excessive comparative data or complex scenarios, often resulted in superficial answers when students attempted to comment on all aspects.

The best report formats provided the extra information and a significant event in the case facts, but ensured that this material was limited to a manageable amount that could be fully discussed within the allocated time. High-performing students were able to make reference to all of the information provided, as well as make links between different ratios and back to the income statement and balance sheet data to explain why changes had taken place. Students who performed at the lower levels provided responses that were limited to identification of the direction of changes, but without any real interpretation of the cause of any changes. These less successful types of responses were also evident where a large number of calculations were required, limiting the time to focus on the report, or where excessive extra data was provided, necessitating a superficial discussion of all data rather than a deeper discussion of a limited number of factors.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Examination

General Comments

The 2015 examination was structured slightly differently than before, with five questions provided for students to answer. The level of content in the examination was not increased, but instead the material was spread more evenly over the five questions. The change was in response to feedback that certain questions in the previous examinations were unnecessarily long and complex. This redistribution of the questions appears to have assisted students, as the mean scores for each question had less overall variation, with only a 6% difference between the best and worst answered questions compared to a 12% range in the previous year.

The overall performance of students was comparable to previous years, In 2015, the first question in the examination was the most successfully answered, while Question 5 recorded the lowest overall performance - but there was very little variation among the five questions.

As with past years, the practical sections of questions were answered well, with the most successful students being able to achieve at the highest level by combining their practical application with a sound understanding and communication of the theory components of the questions. What was pleasing to note was that very few examination papers had completely blank questions, indicating that the majority of students had the opportunity and were able to respond in some way to all parts of the course. There also appeared to be a more balanced approach taken by students. Rather than focusing heavily on the practical aspects of the course, there were a number of good attempts at the extended-response sections.

Students are reminded to:

* include calculations in answers, as this helps markers to award marks even if the final answer is incorrect
* avoid using abbreviations in answers, except for commonly accepted accounting abbreviations in final reports
* clearly answer the question being asked — there is no need to rewrite the question if it asks to list or state an answer; similarly, definitions are not required if a question asks for an example for the case of a particular item.

The following section deals with each question in turn and should be read in conjunction with the examination paper.

Question 1

The formatting for this question is fairly familiar and this was evident with the number of strong responses provided. The best-performing students showed good attention to detail, including correctly apportioning the depreciation on the motor vehicle and the use of correct terminology, such as ‘sales revenue received in advance’ rather than ‘prepaid sales revenue’. A small number of students struggled with the correct classification of items in the reports, but classification was generally well done and was an improvement on previous years.

The written-response answers were reasonably well done, with the best answers showing an ability to not only recall generic concepts, such as comparison to a rule of thumb, but also to apply the case facts and make an informed comment on them.

Question 2

This question was generally well answered, which is a clear improvement from the previous year where the similarly styled question returned the lowest average mark.

The practical aspects of the question were well answered, with good attention to detail and with most variation coming from the extended-response questions. The majority of students were able to provide an answer to the latter, with the strongest responses showing a clear understanding of the concepts beyond memorisation of a generic statement. It was good to see most students correctly identifying the concept of prudence as relating to care and caution, rather than making general comments about overstatement and understatement. This attention to the question was also evident in parts (g)(iv) and (g)(v) where more successful students correctly commented on the size of the total dividend, as the question asked, and focused on discussing the significance of the abbreviation ‘Ltd’, instead of simply what it described.

Question 3

The responses given to this question were of a high standard. Once again the majority of students showed a strong understanding of the practical sections, with high-achieving students able to identify certain key components to include (such as the new interest on the loan) or exclude (such as the depreciation and loan payments).

It was pleasing to see the strong practical responses backed up by informed and well-answered written responses that made good use of the case facts. The best comments on the reasons for changes or suggestions for future improvements included a brief statement that clearly showed how the comment linked back to that specific question. The greatest variation in answers appeared in the part (e) where the more successful students correctly identified that the case provided budgeted information and any suggestions needed to be linked to expected future performance. The best answers then used the expected decline in performance to justify their recommendation going forward.

Question 4

While this question was generally well answered, it did have the greatest variance in practical performance. Students either showed a strong understanding of the concepts required and achieved near full marks, or struggled to differentiate the cash flow from other accounting reports, thus making it difficult for the markers to award many marks.

The written responses were well attempted, with the majority of students able to remember definitions and key concepts. A smaller number of students were able to go beyond these basic definitions, with the best answers referring to the case facts to support discussion. This was particularly true in part (f) where the high-performing students were able to provide specific evidence as required by the question and did not use up valuable time writing out definitions.

Question 5

The final question of the examination had the lowest average mark, although this was still at a solid level and an improvement on the lowest average from previous years.

The practical section of the question was done well, with the majority of students able to provide a good to excellent response to parts (a), (b), and (c). It was clear that some students were unsure of the formatting required for periodic and perpetual inventory reporting and as such included unnecessary information that did not attract marks and used up time.

Correct application of the key concepts was clearly evident in the remaining parts of the question, with the higher-performing students able to make informed comments and provide clear reasoning why they had provided particular answers. This was also evident in part (g) where the best answers were able to separate the social and environmental issues from the specific ethical issue of dishonesty.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers. Teachers’ assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators. Teacher grades/marks should be evident on all student school assessment work.

The moderation panel is seeing clear evidence that the majority of teachers are taking note of the advice provided in the Moderation Feedback Reports provided for each assessment group, and are making minor adjustments as needed. To continue with this improvement, the following points may assist in development and presentation of materials for the next year.

* Attendance at clarifying forums where possible is strongly encouraged to allow teachers to confirm that their approach and types of task are appropriate. Clarifying forums also provide an opportunity to network with other teachers to share and enhance existing tasks.
* For moderation, teachers should include a summary sheet of the grades of individual tasks and a final grade based on the performance standards for a single student. Any relevant information that was considered to determine the final grade (including if particular tasks were given greater consideration in determining the final grade) should also be included, as this assists in the moderation process. The purpose of moderation is to confirm the assessment decision made by the teacher and this is more easily achieved when the evidence used by the teacher to determine the performance standard is clearly highlighted.
* Clear marking by teachers of individual student work also assists in the moderation. In assigning grades, teachers should attempt to indicate which specific features have been assessed and at what level these were performed. It is important that the grades assigned can be clearly linked to the feedback provided in order to allow moderators to confirm grades easily. For example, an overall B+ should have feedback that indicates the majority of performance at the B level with only some elements in the A band.
* Inclusion of a task sheet and mark allocation for each task in the moderation materials is critical, along with a clear identification of the specific features being considered in a particular task. This assists both students, in focusing their efforts when undertaking the task, and moderators, in confirming the performance standard for that specific feature.

## General Comments

In general, the moderation panel members noted the overall improvement in the design of tasks submitted and the expanded opportunities for students to achieve at the various performance standard levels. This reinforced the fact that teachers are working hard to provide the best experience for their students and are making use of the materials provided by the SACE Board.

The importance of task design that fitted within the subject outline and allowed students to achieve at all the performance standard levels was commented on repeatedly during moderation.

A number of exemplar materials were collected during the moderation process and these will provided at the appropriate times through clarifying forums and the online support materials.

Feedback from both markers and moderators was that marking and moderating provide valuable experience for professional development as a teacher.

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