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Australian History

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: Folio

It was pleasing to see diversity in a range of task designs in the folio, rather than a total reliance on essays and sources analyses. As in previous years, ‘inquiry and analysis’ was the most difficult criterion to incorporate in the task design. When the task specifically stated this criterion as a requirement to meet the performance standards, it allowed students to meet the higher levels of achievement.

Tasks that assessed only some of the performance standards allowed for greater student success. When designing tasks, teachers need to ensure that students have the opportunity to meet the performance standards at the highest level, and that the tasks are not too prescriptive and only allow for limited analysis or reflection.

It is important that students are supported with tasks that give clear instructions and show which assessment design criteria are being assessed. The variety of tasks included case studies, research of creative works, and sources analysis where students selected their own sources to analyse and reflect upon. These types of tasks allowed students to perform at the highest level because they were able to meet the requirement of using a variety of history skills.

Students are reminded to adhere to the word count of the task and provide accurate and thorough referencing.

Assessment Type 2: Essay

The most successful essays comprised a number of necessary fundamentals, demonstrating a good knowledge of material and a discussion that was coherent, flowed well, and referred to the question/proposition throughout the essay. Another essential skill for students was being able to use effective topic and linking sentences.

The formulation and construction of the essay question is the most critical factor influencing success in this assessment type. Teachers are encouraged to work closely and guide students in the initial stages of this task to help in the formulation of effective historical essay questions. The most effective essay questions have a clear specific focus, including the time frame and place. In order to achieve at the higher levels of the performance standards, the essay questions must allow students to engage in reasoned historical argument.

It was pleasing to see the majority of students using the maximum of five sources in their essays, as well as a consistent form of referencing and a bibliography identifying the main sources and any background reading. Moderators noted some excellent evidence of students carefully choosing and evaluating the most effective sources on which to centre their research. Pleasingly, more students are choosing to use a variety of primary sources, including speeches, diaries, artwork, and propaganda. Students who identified a variety of source types tended to engage more effectively and show a critical understanding of evidence to help substantiate conclusions and arguments.

There were some reasonable attempts at reflection regarding the short-term and long-term causes and impacts of individuals, events, and phenomena. Better responses explored these aspects successfully and constructed a persuasive and logical argument. A number of students seemed to empathise with their subjects and were able to make good observations about individuals and groups.

The most effective essays were those that used the correct conventions of history essay writing, with clearly defined and relevant arguments. Essays that offered a clear counter-argument tended to achieve at the higher level of the performance standards.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Examination

It was pleasing to see that most students engaged with the questions in the exam and focused their responses on areas they had studied throughout the year. Every student attempted the sources analysis. However, as in previous years, there appeared to be a few students who answered questions from topics that they had not studied during the year. There was evidence that time management was an issue for some students during the examination (in that they did not finish the sources analysis). In addition, some students were confused over their choice of topic and started one question before changing to another. Students are encouraged to use the reading time effectively, to ensure that they choose the most appropriate topic for their learning.

The length of responses is an area that may need improvement. Although most essay responses were around two to two and a half pages long — with a few extending to three or four — a number of students only managed a page or a page and a half.

The responses to the sources analysis were generally of a solid standard, especially compared with the essay questions.

Part 1: Thematic Study

Topic 3: Australia’s Foreign Policy, 1890 to the Present (Questions 9 to 12)

This topic remains the most popular of the thematic study topics.

Question 9 was by far the most popular question in this topic. Many responses showed a good general knowledge of Australia's trading relationships, past and present. The weaker responses were largely narrative accounts of this history. The better responses made good use of a range of examples and also grappled with the extent to which trade was the significant factor. A number of students argued that defence was an equally significant or more important influence than trade.

Some indicated that trade was significant and cited specific events such as the First World War, the Depression, and the Second World War as very influential. Others argued that other factors, such as ideology, largely determined foreign policy.

Other significant points that were discussed:

* perception of, and loyalty to, the ‘Mother Country’ — the United Kingdom influenced foreign policy
* change of ‘allegiance’ from Britain to the United States, due to the Second World War — some quoted Curtin’s speech ‘The task ahead’ from 1941 on this topic
* the significance of the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America Security) Treaty
* a growing economy and the need to find viable markets such as China (despite fearing the communist ideology).

Question 11 had a small number of responses. Students identified Australia’s near neighbours — such as Indonesia, China, and Vietnam — and indicated how the relationship with them influenced foreign policy. Initially, the fear of invasion and communism hindered significant relationships with Asian nations.

Several good responses discussed the relationship with the United Kingdom and the United States which determined early foreign policy. These responses then discussed a shift in the attitude to Asia; for example: ‘The election of Gough Whitlam in 1972 saw a significant change in Australian foreign policy leading to stronger connections with Asian neighbours’. A number of the issues were addressed, such as: economic factors, humanitarian initiatives (e.g. the Colombo Plan), multiculturalism, immigration, and war. These aspects determined or influenced Australia’s foreign policy.

Other points included:

* the need to increase Australia’s population, to ‘populate or perish’; this determined immigration policy and, therefore, foreign policy
* the formation of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and other trade agreements
* the dismantling of the ‘White Australia’ policy
* peace-keeping operations.

Weaker responses tended to narrate the historical events, although many showed knowledge at a reasonable level. The best responses critically evaluated the extent to which ‘near neighbours’ or more distant allies like the United Kingdom and the United States had influenced Australian foreign policy. The best response argued that there had been change over time in response to key events.

Generally, this question was quite competently handled.

*Topic 5: The Unwanted, the Seekers and the Achievers: Migrations to Australia,   
1830 to the Present (Questions 17 to 20)*

Question 17 was the most popular question in this topic, with twelve responses. Quite a few responses did not define or demonstrate understanding about what was meant by personal hardships; for example, responses indicated that ‘People migrated to Australia because of their personal hardships ...’ without explanation of what the hardships were. Better essays identified personal hardships and what this entailed such as no job opportunities, being subject to persecution, and poor living conditions, and explained the significant push–pull factors that made it difficult for people to settle in a new place.

Other discussion points included:

* ‘push’ factors such as economic hardship, wars, and conflicts, which displaced people from war-torn Europe
* ‘pull’ factors such as the gold rushes, better lifestyle, more jobs, which offered new opportunities such as being able to provide for family, and take advantage of family reunion schemes and schemes such as the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme for British subjects
* personal hardships sometimes resulted from ‘forces’ in their own country; for example, the potato famine in Ireland
* persecution and political turmoil, which compelled people to escape their country of origin.

There was considerable variation in the quality of responses to this question. The weaker responses were short and/or lacking in detail.

Part 2: Depth Study

*Topic 8 — Remembering Australians in Wartime: Experiences and Myths, 1880 to the Present (Questions 29 to 32)*

Topic 8 remains one of the most popular depth study topics.

Question 29 elicited a broad range of responses, with some of the weaker responses failing to address it adequately. Most students were able to show a satisfactory understanding of the many reasons why Australians might have felt fear during war or conflict (such as fear of invasion, terrorism, or communism). Better responses were distinguished by an ability to link this fear to an argument regarding the extent to which this affected support or opposition to war and conflict.

A range of answers considered how:

* wars such as the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War affected the sense of fear
* fear motivated Australians to be involved in war or conflict, looking at the links between the Vietnam war, the domino theory, and the need to contain the ‘red scare’ (communism)
* fear could be a powerful motivator, and how propaganda was used to inflame this fear
* fear united but also divided people on the home front, e.g. the conscription referendum in the First World War
* there was an element of fear regarding ‘aliens’, such as interned Germans
* the close proximity of the enemy — e.g. the Japanese in the Pacific, the bombing of Darwin — increased a sense of fear.

Better responses discussed fear as well as identifying other factors that encouraged the Australian people to support involvement in wars and conflict, such as loyalty to Britain, a sense of duty, a need to protect the nation, and a need to protect families.

In response to Question 30, most students agreed with the statement that war memorials, commemorative ceremonies, and creative works presented a one-sided view of war or conflict. Quite a few responses did not give a definition of what a one-sided view was, and several responses demonstrated only limited understanding. A couple of the better responses considered all three categories and argued that other views of war should be considered and presented. Such responses identified that this has been happening in more recent times; for example, allowing former Turkish soldiers to march in Anzac Day parades.

Some weaker responses failed to look at all three categories, but virtually all responses showed a detailed knowledge of the particular works they were discussing. Some students were able to present a very balanced response to the question, identifying bias in specific works and/or developing a counter-argument. A wide range of memorials, films, and songs was discussed.

Points discussed included:

* commemorating only Australian participation in war
* remembering only Australian casualties
* glorifying Australia’s involvement in war and conflict.

Question 32 had a number of responses that were distinguished by the ability of students to provide detailed examples of the experiences of women. The greatest failing was in largely generalising that men served and women worked while the men were away. Some students wrote in great detail, particularly covering the First World War and/or the Second World War. Virtually every student wrote about the experiences of nurses and of women on the home front, although sometimes these responses lacked depth. The best responses were those who recognised that there was considerable diversity in the experiences of women, especially on the home front during the First World War and in the services during Second World War. Stronger responses often recognised that there was also diversity in the experiences of men. A number of students wrote, sometimes with considerable empathy, about the experiences of women as prisoners and/or victims of the Japanese during the Second World War.

Discussion focused on the following issues:

* roles of women prior to war or conflict
* lack of equal rights
* women on the home front: different roles and jobs (filling the jobs vacated by men who went to war)
* women as nurses and their experiences
* female prisoners of war who experienced assaults and poor conditions (confinement, starvation, etc.) similar to the men
* the home front: women joined service groups (e.g. the Red Cross) and supported the soldiers at the battlefront (by knitting socks, sending food packages, etc.).

Better responses discussed the fact that women have had a more active role in war in more recent times (e.g. being able to serve on the front line in Afghanistan). Better responses also identified significant differences in the experiences of male soldiers, between actual fighting and being in the trenches during the First World War. They focused on the horror of war, and the resulting death and destruction. Poorer responses stated that women had similar experiences to men; for example, nurses saw the same horrors of war that men did.

Part 3: Sources Analysis

The sources analysis was, in the main, competently handled.

Students had some of the following issues with this question:

* no numbering or incorrectly numbering questions
* uneven handling of questions: a couple of responses to questions were strong, but were let down by weaker answers to other questions
* use of correct terminology was lacking; for example, many students did not refer to primary or secondary sources
* a few responses had grammatical issues; for example, they used the word ‘bias’ incorrectly by saying ‘the source is bias’ instead of ‘the source is biased’.

Question 45

1. Most students gained full marks, although some misunderstood the simplicity of the question and looked for conclusions rather than information. Very few students made mention of the image in Source 1. A few students did not understand what this question was asking with regard to atomic testing; for example, quite a few students quoted the sentence ‘Australia has had her fingers on her ears too long now…’, which did not relate to the question.
2. Most students were able to explain the impact of the explosion: that it was a large explosion, with the tank thrown two metres sideways; that the vehicle’s sides were blistered, and the men inside were blind for a moment from the flash and force of sand hitting the optics. Students generally described the impact of the explosion upon Colonel Lowe’s centurion tank.
3. Quite a few students had difficulty identifying the attitudes towards atomic testing. Some of the conclusions provided by students referred to other aspects of the source (Source 3). Quite a few referred to the phrase ‘no hazard to humans …’ (without stating the safety aspect) and to the fact that it was ‘impossible to prevent radioactivity’ (but did not identify this as a careless or hasty approach). Many were able to conclude that safety was a concern but very few drew clearly stated conclusions about ‘attitudes’. Many students gained only one mark for this part of the question.
4. Interestingly, students generally had more problems identifying strengths in the newspaper article (Source 1) than in commenting on the map (Source 4) which is a form of source rarely used. However, some students seemed to be confused by the concept of strengths and weaknesses, commenting on the content of the sources rather than on their usefulness and limitations. A few responses did not identify the nature of the sources. Moreover, these responses focused on the content of the source (quoting slabs of information from each source). Better responses identified each source: a newspaper and a map and were able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each. Student responses described the strengths of the newspaper as: it had an eye-catching headline, was a primary source of the time, provided details of the event, and had information that was easy to read and understand. Weaknesses of the newspaper were that the journalist could be biased, the description came from eyewitnesses who were just giving their opinion and perception which could be biased, and the headline was misleading and sensational. In response to the map, students described its strengths as giving a good visual example, being a government map (seen as a strength because the government is viewed as a reliable authority and the source was from a Royal Commission, although this could also be viewed as a weakness because it could have political bias). Weaknesses of the map were that no locations were identified, the creators of the map could be biased, and this sort of technical data was difficult for the ordinary person to understand.
5. Many students did not write enough and failed to cross-reference the sources properly. Nearly all noticed the differences in firing conditions and most were able to state that Source 5 only supported Source 6 to a limited extent. Most were able to identify that the sources did not support each other. Most identified that each source discussed weather conditions and mentioned Maralinga. Better responses included the following facts: that testing was not to be done if it rained, the presence of safety measures and the Safety Committee (Source 6), the difference in dates of publishing, contamination of Maralinga (Source 5), and more information provided (Source 6), mention of scientists by name (Source 6), no risk or danger to persons, stock and property (Source 6), and contamination of Maralinga Village (Source 5), etc. Most students were able to use the evidence from the sources to support their argument. This question was reasonably well handled.
6. Most students were able to answer strongly and provide an integrated response in an appropriate format, with an introduction and a conclusion. Most addressed both sides of the proposition well, and used evidence from all the sources. However, some students treated this as a question that cross-referenced the sources or looked at their usefulness, rather than writing developing an argument. Students usually failed to gain full marks because they did not make explicit (or any) use of all of the sources or did not use the source to address the set question regarding safety. Quite a few responses were rather brief, did not use all the sources, and lacked a conclusion. Better responses used a mini-essay format and were able to define and argue the extent to which atomic tests were carried out safely. In the main, this question was quite well handled.

## 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.

Feedback from moderators showed that work in the folios was mostly well organised, while task sheets allowed students to meet the performance standards. The learning and assessment plans (LAPs) all met the requirements. It was pleasing to see some variation from essays and source analysis tasks, with the inclusion of soldier profiles, research on Asian countries and their relationship with Australia, as well as research on individual memorials.

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