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Classical Studies

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.

Moderators commented again this year on the importance of good task design, which includes the choice of appropriate specific features to be assessed against for each task. It should be noted that teachers do not need to cover every specific feature in each task, as this could possibly disadvantage students. Consequently, teachers need to match specific features carefully to each task using only the most appropriate ones. Assessment task sheets need to clearly state the required specific features, as general instructions often tend to lead to general, superficial responses.

Timed tasks within Assessment Type 1: Folio are unnecessary, as the skill of writing to time is assessed in Assessment Type 2: Essays. Including timed tasks in the folio gives rise to the potential of disadvantaging students.

Teachers need to ensure that the topics studied in class are aligned with the subject outline and do not fall outside of the time frames, particularly in relation to the history topics.

Teachers are advised to study only the required three topics (and not more), as this will allow students to maximise the level of depth they demonstrate in each topic.

Teachers also need to use the current performance standards, as the use of superseded ones disadvantages students.

## School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Folio

While it was evident more so this year that a range of response forms are being used, teachers should ensure that they are not sacrificing rigour for creativity. Once again, this is where the choice of specific features in each task is so important. It was interesting to note that there were more multimodal and oral tasks this year. However, please note that a recording of oral responses on CD or USB drive assists moderation. At the very least, a transcript of the oral presentation should be included.

The following discussion deals in turn with each assessment design criterion that the folios were assessed in relation to.

Knowledge and Understanding

This assessment design criterion was done well, with most students showing understanding and engagement with the classical world. There was an obvious enjoyment of this subject shown through student engagement with the topics that they studied.

Within this assessment design criterion, students displayed a solid knowledge of their topics, but needed to show deeper understanding of the sociocultural contexts. Answers to literature tasks (epic, drama, and poetry) need to show an understanding of text type and structural connections in the context of the period and the form. Showing an understanding of these will allow critical understanding and insightful reflection to take place.

Teachers also need to make sure that the tasks set will provide opportunities to show critical understanding and not just factual recall. To achieve this, teachers could consider limiting the number of sources students need to respond to, which allows for increased depth, and builds more opportunities for critical analysis.

To achieve well in relation to specific feature KU3 in creative tasks, the best task designs are imaginative recreations which require personal perspectives and reflection, such as a time-travel task or a writer’s statement. This allows students to take on a specific persona and/or clearly explain their choices within their writing, and allows them to draw on a range of ideas, and then produce insightful reflection. For this specific feature, the less successful folios tended to include broad statements rather than display depth. A general example of this occurs when students discuss the big differences between Sparta and Athens, but not the finer points of contrast. Consequently, they did not consider the subtle yet important differences between the *poleis*.

Research and Analysis

To help students in this assessment design criterion, tasks should have clear instructions explaining what is required of the students. It should also be noted that the specific features covering research and analysis should be offered more than once to allow students to achieve appropriately.

While it is obvious that many students are conducting research (which is quite often extensive), the use of suitable primary sources is frequently missing. Teachers who set tasks to assess only RA1 need to ensure that the description of assessment purposely includes the requirement to include and comment on primary sources. Original primary sources are urged, rather than extracts of a primary source within a secondary source. However, it was excellent to see primary sources such as Herodotus and Plutarch being referred to and incorporated in the folio tasks.

Specific feature RA2 is frequently perceived as the most challenging and therefore the least used specific feature. The highest-level responses in relation to this specific feature synthesised information and reflected on the research, rather than just simply reported the findings. It is suggested that teachers set tasks to allow more analysis and synthesis.

In some cases only internet sources were used, and this can limit the depth of the research and critical understanding. A sole reliance upon Wikipedia was often evident, which can lead to considerably weaker responses. Folio pieces within the higher grade band used sources that allowed for wide and deep analysis and reflection.

With regard to RA3, most students were able to apply relevant terms correctly. This was especially true in the society and religion topics, and represents an improvement from last year. However, students need to not only use the relevant terms, but they also need to show a working understanding of them.

Communication

Task design is also important in this assessment design criterion. Teachers should not set tasks that invite a purely narrative approach, as this limits the students’ opportunity to show critical analysis and informed argument in relation to specific feature C1. Empathy and alternative point-of-view tasks allow students to synthesise information.

In many cases, careful editing and proofreading of tasks was needed to ensure that communication was clear and accurate. Students with fluent and lucid communication often achieved highly, while those with less language control tended to provide more recount, and limited analysis.

The integration of quotations is improving generally, with the sophisticated responses demonstrating this. Appropriate acknowledgment and integration of sources was found in the higher grade bands. There was some confusion over which method of acknowledgment to use. Either footnoting or in-text referencing is acceptable, as long as only one is chosen and is followed through to the bibliography. Teachers and students are urged to read the SACE document, ‘Student Guide to Referencing’.

Assessment Type 2: Essays

When students are completing their essays, teachers should ensure that the rubrics from the subject outline are followed. This assessment type must be completed as an essay under exam conditions with the 1-hour time allowance. Reading time should be incorporated within this, and no notes are allowed. The essay question that a student chooses to answer is to be clearly indicated on the piece of work.

Each assessment design criterion that the essays were assessed in relation to is discussed below.

Knowledge and Understanding

To enable impressive knowledge and understanding to be displayed by students, teachers should not set essay questions that ask for similar ideas and knowledge to the ones that have been included in the folio.

Knowledge of the topics studied was clearly evident in the essays. Students need to use evidence to show an in-depth understanding of the texts and events. They also need to use appropriate examples to address each aspect of the set task to show critical understanding and discerning information selection.

Research and Analysis

The importance of task design is particularly evident in this assessment design criterion. Consequently, teachers tend to address this assessment design criterion in Assessment Type 1: Folio rather than Assessment Type 2: Essays, particularly specific features RA1 and RA2. Specific features RA3 and RA4 can be applied in this assessment type with more certainty.

The essays could be made stronger by making more specific and discerning references to the relevant texts, rather than including chunks of narrative. Too much narration does not allow purposeful engagement with the question. The better responses included incisive analysis and synthesis (RA2). These responses considered the differing points of view in the consulted sources.

Defining a clear contention in the introduction, and then developing this point of view throughout the essay assists students in achieving well in RA4, as this allows the students’ essays to present a comprehensive point of view.

Communication

Teachers should ensure that questions set for the timed essays are manageable, as this often enhances the students’ ability to answer in an informed and controlled manner. When realistically achievable questions are offered, most students can understand what is required of them, and then produce arguments with a coherent and logical progression.

Integration of shorter quotations and specific references to primary sources are often characteristics of more successful essays. Acknowledgment through referencing is required in this assessment type and many students did well in listing the sources of their evidence, both primary and secondary, in their written work.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Special Study

It is encouraging to observe students taking advantage of the scope available to them in the subject outline by pursuing topics which compare classical epic literature to contemporary texts such as *Game of Thrones* or *South Park*. New territory was also explored with comparisons made between Japanese mythology and Greek and Roman mythology, or between Samurai culture and Spartan culture. There were also some interesting new topics which discussed NATO and the Delian League, in addition to an innovative study exploring the battle strategies of the Romans and specific Chinese dynasties. One student investigated Socrates and then Leonardo da Vinci as, ‘men before their time.’

Comparisons between events or individuals of the classical world to the current world are popular, but students are reminded that at least 50% of their study must be located in the classical world. It is excellent to see special studies on material culture, featuring solid discussions on archaeology and architecture.

Discussions of Athenian and Spartan women continued to be popular. When students undertake this type of comparison, it is vital that they keep historiography at the forefront of their study. The role of women in the family, religion, distinctions between status groups, and subtleties in power must be critically evaluated. Analysing the power nuances and supporting these with primary and secondary sources can make for a better-quality argument.

Religious studies and military history were also popular topics, both of which generally demonstrated solid knowledge and understanding of concepts and key figures. Comparing contemporary military films and historic events was common. Students are advised to move beyond listing events or compiling narrative recounts in these studies, and should contextualise their discussions and evaluate similarities and differences in analytical arguments.

Students are also reminded to undertake topics that can be argued effectively in 2000 words.

The assessment design criteria that the special studies were assessed in relation to are dealt with in more detail below.

Knowledge and Understanding

The majority of students demonstrated a solid grasp of their special study topic. It was obvious that students had appropriate knowledge and understanding of the time period relevant to the scope of their study, or the key events and people involved. Students were able to discuss individual contributions to the classical world, with studies on philosophers, generals, or emperors being popular.

Studies of historic events were also common, with students illustrating sound knowledge and understanding of various battle campaigns or political strategies. The more sophisticated studies were able to demonstrate impressive critical understanding of their chosen area of study by skilfully comparing various sources, and therefore showing both depth and discernment of knowledge.

Many students collected impressive information; however, the most successful studies displayed evidence, and reflective comments on that evidence, to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of complex attitudes and beliefs within the classical world. The choice of sources often shaped the depth of understanding. Students who relied solely on Internet or generic sources were often limited in their knowledge and understanding.

Studies of social history were popular. Some students presented insightful discussions on the role of Greek or Roman women grappling with the complexity of status groups, official and unofficial power, and the implications of political and legal parameters. Many students showed knowledge and understanding of a topic, but the more well-informed essays engaged with the subtleties of diverse values from the classical world.

Research and Analysis

Many students conduct extensive research on their selected topic. The ability to select and control information often determines the quality of the discussion. Having access to primary texts online can make it easier for students to find quality source material. It was good to see more students avoiding entry-level sources such as Wikipedia and Horrible Histories, and increased attempts being made to engage with sophisticated texts and more credible secondary sources.

Strong essays displayed astute selections from the research material and skilful developments of an argument from beginning to end. The most sophisticated special studies integrated research material as evidence to support their point of view. Therefore, taking the step from simply writing about information collected, to analysing the material and reflecting on it made for a more informed and persuasive argument. These more successful essays moved beyond using evidence to merely support a point of view, to critically evaluating the sources. Effective essays could discuss the gaps and silences in material, as well as tensions within and between sources.

Students who could incorporate appropriate terminology from the classical world into their discussion added strength and credibility to their point of view. Historic literacy in terms of religious events, social organisation, or military terms was generally solid, highlighting that students are being encouraged to use the correct vocabulary in their discussions.

Students with well-constructed questions that invited deep discussion were in a better position to engage fully with their research. When a question asks for a biography or historic narrative, then students can be trapped into simply providing a recount of events. However, when the question design asks for argument, then students are better able to compare and contrast sources, and reflect on what their research suggests. This type of incisive, critical analysis then allows for a fuller engagement with their topic, and the development of a vibrant, informed argument.

Communication

Most special studies were written in a formal essay format with a clear and sound structure. The majority of students used appropriate conventions including an introduction stating an outline of the essay, paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion to summarise their discussion. On the whole, students polished their work by editing and proofreading so that the majority of essays were clear, and explained ideas in a sequential way. Nearly all special studies were within the 2000-word limit.

When students selected source material and integrated it with reflective comments, they were able to create a sophisticated and meaningful argument. For example, the better-quality responses were able to integrate short, effective quotations into the writing. Students struggled to control their arguments when they included large quotations that were often disconnected from their discussion. This block quoting or over-quoting is often reflective of communication at the C or D level.

The most refined special studies were fluent in the selected material and development of a logical argument. These essays were well planned and engaged with the intent of the question. Many arguments in the A band were able to pose a contention, integrate selective evidence, and work with flair towards a solid conclusion. Students are encouraged to refine their question so that it allows for analysis and the development of a thoughtful point of view.

Successful studies acknowledged source material in a consistent manner. Whether using in-text referencing or footnoting, most students demonstrated competency in acknowledging their research material. When visual images were used, they were usually discussed within the body of the adjoining paragraph, and were correctly acknowledged and labelled. Special studies on material culture benefited from visual images as evidence to support the point of view being developed. However, irrelevant images should be avoided, such as images of statues of prominent figures discussed in biographical studies. Visual images of battle strategies are best used when the immediate paragraph comments directly on tactics and topography.

Almost all special studies featured bibliographies, and students generally demonstrated a clear understanding of how to compile one appropriately. There were examples of only websites being used, but it was heartening to see an increase in more balanced bibliographies that included primary and secondary texts, as well as Internet sources.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers, and as these assessment decisions are then reviewed by moderators, it is important for teacher grades and marks to be evident on all student work.

Pleasingly, most schools used the external assessment cover sheet from the SACE website. Most teachers and students carefully ensured that all external materials were de-identified in terms of school and student by using SACE registration numbers. Almost all schools had correctly observed the need to submit special studies devoid of marks or annotations.

Most teachers were conscientious in the packaging of student materials. However, some points for teachers to note are listed here:

* The learning and assessment plan (LAP) should be included.
* It is helpful to have the task sheet attached to each task.
* Include task sheets which have the specific features and performance standards clearly identified to allow for easier moderation.
* SACE numbers need to be clearly displayed on student work.
* A word-count on each folio piece is of assistance.
* Organise each student’s work by assessment type.
* To ensure consistency, please make sure that tasks presented for moderation match those presented in the LAP or, where changes have been made, that these are reflected in the addendum.
* If including CDs as evidence, please ensure that they are functioning.

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