

Examiners' Report/
Principal Moderator Feedback

January 2012

GCE Applied Business (6918)
Paper 01

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GCE AS Applied Business 6918: Investigating Marketing

Investigating Marketing, 6918 is written directly to the Assessment Objectives with (a) covering knowledge and understanding (AO1), (b) research and application (AO3), (c) analysis (AO2) and (d) evaluation (AO4) with each strand (a)-(d) contributing to the requirement of producing a marketing mix for a new or existing product (or service).

There can sometimes be a mismatch between the requirements in the assessment criteria for (d) where an evaluation of the mix proposed in (c) is required but some Centres seem to require candidates to examine 'external influences' on the mix instead. In the end, this often amounts to the same outcome where better candidates have built these into an evaluation of the proposals made in (c).

As with all the applied units, the choice of product or service to be marketed is crucial and poor decisions here can lead to problems throughout the work.

Administration:

Most samples of the work were again received on time together with the appropriate forms and were signed to indicate authenticity. In general, marks on the work conformed to those on the 'OPTEMS' with occasional discrepancies.

Annotation of Portfolio Work

The minimum requirement for annotation of portfolios is laid down in the Code of Practice to be identification of where a candidate's evidence of criteria coverage may be found in the work. There were still a few examples where little or no annotation was evident and moderators were left trying to identify where and how marks had been awarded. The recommendation to annotate by reference to 'Mark Band' achieved and 'Strand', 'Theme' or 'Area' covered eg MB1a, MB2b etc is still not being followed by some Centres but, however this is done, it is worth emphasising again the importance of clear annotation and internal standardisation for the benefit of candidates as well as for external moderation purposes.

Presentation of Portfolio Work

The preferred format remains loose-leaf or treasury-tagged sheets that can be easily opened and read. Although less in evidence, there still remains the issue of inaccessibility and unsuitable presentation of some of the portfolios with work either tightly packed into plastic wallets (that split on opening), left in ring binders or clipped into plastic folders (this simply makes the process of extracting the work more laborious than should be the case).

General Issues:

For this series it appeared that much of the work seen was resubmitted from earlier series and, as a consequence, there was little at the higher level. The approaches seen continue to vary from the academic to a more applied approach where the assessment requirement is more directly met in a practical way through a suitable choice of product or service enhanced by clear research linked to the Unit requirement of producing a 'marketing mix'.

There was, as ever, evidence of candidates working with materials from the 'SAMS' (marketing cereals), a selection of 'healthy' chocolate products (wishful thinking), variations on, and gadgets for, MP3 players and the like. There were again some Centres that adopted an integrated approach to the tasks and some where research was a preliminary to the identification of the product or service to be marketed.

Again, in most cases where the work followed the Unit requirements a more accurate outcome was likely. Most candidates were able to access all of the strands (a)-(d) and there was evidence from the limited samples of coverage of each Mark Band.

There was again a tendency in some cases to link this Unit with 6917 (and sometimes with other Units) and attempt to cover both sets of criteria at once. This can produce some confusion with regard to what is required for this marketing Unit. There was still some evidence of rather 'academic' approaches eg candidates producing masses of theory on sampling or pricing without the required 'application' to a suitable choice of product or service to be marketed or re-marketed.

Centre assessors are still not always assessing against the relevant criteria or are not fully reflecting the omissions or inaccuracies in the candidates' coverage of these criteria in their assessment decisions. Also, assessors do not always use the assessment objectives listed against the assessment strand (a) – (d) (in this Unit each strand relates to a single assessment objective ('AO') and each must therefore be addressed) to focus their assessment decisions on the candidates' knowledge, ability to apply knowledge, use of methods of obtaining information for analysis or their ability to evaluate and reach reasoned conclusions as appropriately directed. Lenient assessment involving the higher mark bands is often due to the assessor not using the operative verbs in the assessment criteria for these mark bands to identify valid evidence. Consequently, lengthy descriptive and theoretical work is sometimes over rewarded.

The assessment requirements can be met more directly in a practical way demonstrating knowledge and understanding of marketing principles and concepts whilst applying these in context. In the cases of the best work an integrated approach was again apparent with the choice of product or service justified by careful research from several sources that, in turn, informed the final choice of marketing mix. Weaker approaches were still found where candidates tried to launch or re-launch a whole range of products or services (sometimes a complete business or brand) and this

made for real difficulties when detailed consideration of the 'mix' was attempted e.g. it was difficult to come up with effective pricing when candidates often regurgitated pricing theory to cover a range without arriving at any actual prices.

As mentioned in previous reports, the best approach found (as with Unit 6917 Investigating Business) was when candidates took simple products or services and came up with practical suggestions for a suitable marketing mix that incorporated a clear idea of product, price, promotion and place (distribution) ie the '4P's' (or some variation) linked clearly to the market research. Weaker work underestimated e.g. the costs of promotion and advertising and made assumptions about budgets that would be unsustainable in reality. This emphasised again the need for clear, simple ideas, costs and prices. In the best cases, candidates were able to produce e.g. mock-ups of advertising and promotional campaigns as part of the mix and these added to the whole approach.

Quality of Written Communication 'QWC'

This is now the fifth series since the inclusion of marks for 'QWC' in Strand (c) of the Unit specification but still few assessors appear to specifically record the marks available for the level achieved. Up to 3 marks for 'QWC' can be given in (c) and these are part of the total mark available for the strand which remains at 18. In general, where such marks had been given, these appeared to have been beneficial to candidates.

Areas of the Specification:

Again, it is worth stating again (as noted above) that each section of this Unit is directed towards a specific Assessment Objective so that, for instance, (a) requires demonstration of knowledge and understanding (AO1); (b) concerns research and findings (AO3) and so on.

- (a) There remains a tendency to over-rely here on the use of theory, and state what is going to be done rather than provide substantiated reasons for the choices made. Simple, clear decisions and reasons for the choice are better than extended discussions of a wide range of possibilities. What is needed is a clear description of the product or service with reasons given for the choices made and for the marketing objectives, segmentation and target market to be clearly explained as well. In some cases candidates continue to be required to investigate the market, brand, range or some generic product rather than a particular product or service and such approaches make for difficulties of analysis. Sometimes, candidates simply appear to be investigating the existing marketing strategy of a well-known business rather than proposing a mix for a new or existing product (or service) as required. Where an existing product or service is chosen it needs to be made clear what proposed changes are being made to this as well as there being some information about the current mix. Often, the actual product or service itself is not well explained (candidate and assessor assuming it too obvious to require any

explanation) and marks were lost as a consequence. Where candidates were guided to a clear choice, the outcome was usually better. There is no need to make the (assignment) brief too elaborate, candidates tend to become distracted by other issues such as product design and lose sight of the requirements of the specification as a result. The target market and segment were usually identified and often defined, but weaker candidates did not demonstrate that they fully understood these concepts through their choice of target market. Some candidates tended to discuss the business aims and objectives of the company rather than explain the marketing objectives that they would set. Better work demonstrated a clearer linkage of the product to the marketing objectives, segmentation and the target market together with some justification for these, thus raising the possibility of marks in Band 3.

- (b) As in previous series this often continues to contain copious amounts of market research theory that is unnecessary. The majority of candidates provided evidence of carrying out both primary and secondary research, although some of this could have been better directed in order to identify or justify the target market, size of market, degree of competition, and to inform the choice of the marketing mix. In some cases the range of methods used tended to be limited to a basic questionnaire and a search of the internet. In order to access the higher mark bands a greater range of methods and/or sources are required. The results were presented in chart, graph and table form and what these showed was stated or described. The stronger candidates analysed their results, drew reasoned conclusions from them and extracted information to be used later to support their marketing choices. There was however less evidence of candidates undertaking comprehensive research using a wide range of relevant resources with comprehensive original analysis. In the best work there was again good evidence of suitable research both primary and secondary as the basis for much of the unit coverage. Where candidates had investigated a wider range of sources (including interviews with relevant people and the use of focus groups) and then linked their analysis to the target market and segmentation highlighted in (a) above coverage tended to be fuller. Sometimes primary data was too restricted or inappropriate eg conclusions based on an unsuitable sample size; or products targeted at teenagers based on a survey of older adults! Stronger candidates were again able to use good research findings to link analysis to the target market identified above or as a basis for a different target market altogether.
- (c) The majority of candidates were able to describe the relevant 'P's' of their marketing mix but this often lacked the detail required for Mark Bands 2 and 3 that could have demonstrated how the product/service was differentiated to appeal to the specific target market; how the promotion and advertising was targeted at the

chosen market segment and how these, along with the pricing strategy, contributed to the marketing objectives. Most linked at least one component of their marketing mix to their research, usually the pricing strategy. However, only a small number clearly linked all their marketing mix to their research and even fewer linked it to their segment. Higher marks arose where the 'mix' developed through links to research findings (from (b)) especially in relation to the target market/segment identified in (a) above. Much theory was also in evidence with weaker candidates failing to apply this to the chosen mix. The 'mix' was too often buried in a mass of discussions about the business or buried in theory eg of 'pricing' and it was often difficult to find out eg what actual price(s) would be suggested. One improvement in this area would arise where the reasons and justification for links between the elements of the chosen mix were fully explained. Sometimes, (c) was done in isolation to the (extensive) research findings that could have informed the '4 P's' so much better and more clearly. In some cases candidates had been encouraged to use marketing tools such as the Boston and Ansoff matrices, product life cycle and so on and many applied these to the mix in an attempt at justification. Again, in reality, the nature of the choice of product or service often rendered discussion of these tools largely irrelevant since they would more commonly apply in the case of larger, multi-product businesses.

NB see comments on 'QWC' above.

(d) This continues to be the least well understood of the four assessment areas. The required evaluation needs to be of the individual components of the suggested mix rather than just of the (nature of) the chosen product or service as was still sometimes the case. In some cases, candidates investigate 'external influences' on the marketing mix and better candidates steer this towards an evaluation of their suggestions in (c) but weaker candidates find this approach difficult. 'PEST' and 'SWOT' - style methods of evaluation were often employed but were not always directed at the marketing mix. The stronger candidates tended to include their justification for their marketing mix along with the supporting evidence when proposing the mix under area 'c'. Better, more specific evaluations arose where candidates used relevant 'SWOT' and/or 'PEST' - style approaches (and their variations) and applied these to the components of the mix identified in (c). In some cases, evaluation occurred throughout the work and in the weaker cases simple, unjustified statements were much in evidence and the whole was more about the tasks or assignment (and how these could be improved) rather than about the required evidence presented. The comments regarding assessment in the 'general issues' above are also relevant here.

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