



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

General Studies B

GENB4

(Specification 2765)

Unit 4: Change

Report on the Examination

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GENB4 Change

General

It will be noted that the mark scheme for this paper, as for other papers in this subject, has undergone alteration this year: what was a five-level, is now a four-level scheme; and level descriptors are expressed as a continuum from 'very good' through 'good', 'fair' and 'weak', to 'poor'. This is an examiners' convention, however, designed to spread marks; it will have no effect on the ratios of students scoring this or that final grade.

From the students' point of view, nothing has changed: the paper is as it has always been; and the same features of an essay-response to a question are looked for – a clear understanding of the task, an intelligent (brief) engagement with the text or texts provided, and a drawing on personal experience and knowledge to provide evidence in support of claims made.

Quality of argument is what is looked for, above quantity; it pays, therefore, to think ahead about what there is to be said – but this does not call for a page-length plan. All that needs to be laid out in advance are the illustrative points that are to be included and their order in the overall argument. Can it ever be safe to launch into an hour of writing without giving a thought to what one will write, first?

Question 1

It was not necessary, but perhaps it was advisable, to give economic, political, and ethical reasons for the public's having a better understanding of what science is and of what scientists do, in this systematic way – and the different kinds of reasons were discernible in most responses. Few students dared to disagree with Lord Sainsbury, and those who did gave what proved to be spurious reasons for preferring ignorance to enlightenment.

Nevertheless, there is a case for saying that we cannot all be experts and that we have to leave the important scientific decisions to those who are better informed than we are – and this is where a response might start. An essay plan might look something like this:

Science is best left to scientists,

BUT the public needs to understand

- 1 economic: how science creates jobs (engineering), goods (IT products), and services (gas CH); feeds us (hydroponics); cures us (antibiotics);
- 2 political: what our taxes are spent on (wind turbines, LHC, nuclear reactors)
- 3 ethical: carbon-based fuel policy; 'defence' spending; GM technology.

Many students were able to give general examples of contexts in which a better public understanding of science might have economic, political, and ethical implications; but specific examples were always more telling. When a student could point to a particular behaviour (such as observing science-based limits to alcohol consumption), rather than making a general reference to healthy living, marks accumulated.

Illustrative examples aside, it was always good to see reference not merely to *what* it is that the public might be better informed about, but *why*, and, indeed, to what extent it might be expected of us that we be better informed. Several students reflected usefully on their own science education, in order to substantiate judgments of inadequacy. Oddly, and sadly,

those who admitted to being students of science A Levels often found it as difficult to be specific as their benighted non-scientific peers.

If ‘science is all around us’, as many students claimed, it might be expected, following a taught course in General Studies, that they be able to specify what aspects of science the public should understand.

Question 2

It would have been legitimate, in a good answer, to mention drug-addiction, and the contribution that the birth-rate might make to economic growth; but these were not what the question was about. Here is what a quick plan for a suitable answer might look like:

Economic growth might be expected to benefit everyone,

BUT, what we find is that

- 1 wealth (in the West, in China, in India) tends to stay in the hands of the elite
- 2 growth sits alongside gross inequity in health, and social problems (USA)
- 3 economic growth often negatively affects quality of life (pollution, noise, rapid urbanisation – Rio de Janeiro, Bangalore).

Well-primed students will think of local and experience-based instances, before or having begun writing, that will give body to this framework. It may be that students of economics and geography were favoured in such a question – but the news is full of items illustrating the failure of trickle-down theory, and of the negative implications of ‘development’.

Of course, it would have been perfectly legitimate to argue the other way, as long as students who chose to do so (and there were those who did) could cite some specific positive social outcomes from economic growth: spending on health facilities locally, or an upgraded public-transport system. In a recession, though, it is easier to think of closures (of heart-surgery units, of Sure Start centres) than it is of openings.

Well-chosen examples will lend conviction to an argument, and make it the more persuasive – and, having spent five minutes planning, it is worth giving as many minutes at the end to drawing the conclusion that will answer the question.

Question 3

This was not a question about the (mass) media; and it certainly wasn’t a question about whether the media should intrude into the private lives of celebrities. It was a question specifically about ‘the new “social media”’: Facebook, Twitter, interactive websites, YouTube, mobile communication – any information that might ‘go viral’. This was not a question that can be said to have favoured any particular A-Level constituency.

A few minutes’ planning might have come up with this:

It might be said, we cannot have too much information,

BUT, there is too much when:

- 1 the press intercepts voice-mail messages (Leveson enquiry)
- 2 the private becomes public (Ryan Giggs on Twitter)
- 3 revealing details on Facebook and the risk of predators
- 4 the supplanting of editing and responsible journalism, by gossip.

Whilst the fact that social media enabled rioters to communicate rapidly with each other in UK cities, in 2011, it was worth mentioning that the police, using the same media, were able to apprehend ring-leaders. Furthermore, much of what we are hearing about the atrocities being committed in Syria is thanks to activists with mobile phones.

It was a question that could genuinely be answered either way: what was important was that students build a case, and that they support it by reference to examples familiar to them all. Such a question is what General Studies is about.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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