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Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2022

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level
In Geography (WGE03)
Unit 3: Contested Planet

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Introduction

This is the January 2022 series for assessment of WGE03: Contested Planet. There were under 20 entries for this unit.

This was a return to a normal WGE03: Contested Planet exam series after several challenging years. Centres and candidates should be congratulated on their efforts to prepare for and sit this examination. Well done.

Overall, the standard of answers was good, and encouraging especially in the circumstances.

It was very pleasing to see that almost all answers focussed on the questions set, and the topic of the pandemic was barely mentioned. It is, of course, not in the Specification and candidates did well to avoid being side-tracked by it.

Most candidates wrote full answers to all questions and there was limited evidence of timing problems i.e., few 'blank' answer spaces or rushed answers.

In terms of the questions that are optional:

- **Question 5** Water Conflicts was more popular than **Question 4** Energy Security (a roughly 60/40 split).
- **Question 6** Superpower Geographies was more popular than **Question 7** Bridging the Development Gap, as in past exams (roughly 70/30).
- The difference in quality of answers between optional questions was very small.

Overall observations

- **Questions 1a, 2, 6a and 7a** were data stimulus questions which directed candidates to a figure in the resource booklet. A small number of candidates wrote their answers with limited reference to the figure, especially Figure 1. These questions test the skill of interpreting geographical data and answers which fail to show this will score low marks.
- Some candidates still waste time describing figures, for which there are no marks: the questions always use the command words 'explain' or 'suggest reasons' i.e., why not what.
- Mark schemes refer to 'evidence': this can come in the form of examples, case studies, data, facts, detailed reference to places, concepts, and geographical theory. This is important in terms of overall mark.
- 15- and 20-mark questions that use the command words 'assess', 'to what extent' or 'evaluate' benefit from a conclusion which is often not included in candidate answers.

It is worth mentioning that some language, very occasionally used, should be avoided. Examples include 'prehistoric conditions' when referring to quality of life in developing countries and the terms 'natives' (indigenous people) and 'jungle' (tropical rainforest).

Country classification

Centres should note that the country classifications used in the Specification (see page 75 of the Specification) are:

- **Developed**
- **Emerging**
- **Developing**

These divisions are based on the **Human Development Index**. Many candidates use the terms MEDC and LEDC, or HIC and LIC. These are perfectly acceptable terms to use in answers, but centres need to be aware that they will not be used in examination questions, or mark schemes

Reports on Individual Questions

Question 1 Atmosphere and Weather Systems

Figure 1 was a map of precipitation over Europe. This Figure and question yielded a very wide range of responses. Several weak answers amounted to a description of the pattern only, for which there are no marks, as the skill being tested is AO1 'explanation'. Most candidates had some ideas about the pattern and many answers made at least some reference to frontal rainfall / depressions (western coastal fringes) and some mention of continentality (east) and high pressure was also common. About half of all answers made some reference to air masses and convection versus subsiding air. Orographic rainfall as a cause was referred to less often.

Some answers referred to the Hadley Cell and ITCZ as a possible cause, but the areas shown on Figure 1 is not affected by this part of the global circulation. That said, some strong answers referenced the Ferrel / Polar cell boundary and the fronts associated with this.

Question 2a Biodiversity under Threat

It was clear that for a very small minority Figure 2, nutrient cycles in natural and deforested rainforests, was not something they had encountered before. That said, most answers made some attempt to explain some of the changes shown.

It was not uncommon for the first third or even half of an answer to be focused on describing the left-hand half of Figure 2, whereas the question was focussed on explaining the changes that have taken place because of deforestation. A minority focussed their answers on the causes of deforestation which was not the focus of the question. There were some stronger answers. The idea that precipitation had decreased because of lower evapotranspiration (local climate change) was often explained and many answers explained why surface runoff and leaching had increased due to the removal of the forest biomass. The central idea that removing biomass leads to a reduction on litter and soil nutrient stores was less often explained, but frequently described. A number of answers explained the left-hand half of Figure 2, then the right-hand half, but omitted to focus on explaining the differences i.e., the changes that had taken place.

Question 2b Biodiversity under Threat

There were many good answers to this question, and it was more common than not for candidates to provide some evaluation i.e., considering the advantages and disadvantages of global / local approaches to conservation and providing a conclusion. The main differentiator between strong and less strong answers was the amount of support provided using examples and reference to named places. Many quite good answers were very generalised and lacked 'real world' support: their argument was often coherent but made limited if any reference to examples such as CITES, or local approaches such as CAMPFIRE. A small number assigned 'local' and 'global' to examples almost at random and lacked a clear understanding of what the two scales might mean. Some examples (WHO, UN, WTO, traffic calming) were either not appropriate to the question or on a completely different topic. A few answers wasted time explaining the cause of ecosystems and biodiversity loss time i.e., a focus on the problems, not an evaluation of the solutions.

Question 3 Synoptic

The synoptic question was answered less well than in the recent past on this occasion. It is a challenging question and would in many cases benefit from writing a plan – because the scope of a possible answer is often large, and some focus needs to be decided upon. There were several issues that affected performance.

Firstly, and perhaps surprisingly, a significant number of answers were unclear on what constitutes a megacity. While 'a city of 10 million or more' was mentioned by many it was not universal: 1 million and 500,000 were both mentioned more than once. Secondly, many of the examples used were not megacities such as New Orleans (hurricane Katrina) or Port-au-Prince in Haiti. Several answers managed to write 2 full sides without mentioning a single megacity by name, and in a few cases also without naming a single specific natural hazard. Examples of both are needed to provide the evidence needed for a Level 3 or 4 mark and should be present even in a Level 2 answer, albeit at a less specific level of detail. Some answers contained phrases such as "megacities are huge countries" suggesting limited understanding.

The strongest answers approached the question by comparing the risk from different hazards such as floods versus earthquakes and in addition considered different types of megacities i.e., ones in the developing world versus those in the developed or emerging world. The answer to the question surely depends on the type of hazard, and type of city? It's worth noting that the question was not a question about developed versus developing countries level of risk: that is a different question but nevertheless was one that some answered.

Question 4a Energy Security and Question 5a Water Conflicts

These optional questions used very similar Figures and question styles, and both were answered equally well. Most answers very suitably concise and few answers became 'essays' which has been an issue in the past with these 5-mark questions. In both cases, the weakest answers tended to describe the trends shown rather than explain them or explain the static difference between the trends for either continent. The real focus of the question was on providing reasons for the projections i.e., the trends in the future and stronger answers were able to do this by explaining that economic development in Asia / Africa would increase demand

for water / energy resources while in Europe limited population growth and a desire to be 'greener' would limit, or even reverse, growth in demand.

Question 4b Energy Security

Energy is a topical subject and many of the essays written in response to question **4b** were good. The general level of understanding around this topic is good. Many answers started with a definition of energy security i.e., affordable, accessible, secure pathways etc – these varied in quality but as a rule a definition is a useful focus at the start of a piece of extended writing. The most common weakness in answers was to essentially provide an extended list of renewable energy types and outline their benefits. This tends to lead to a 'and my next example is' style of writing where each new example adds little to the previous one in terms of argument. Stronger answers tended to focus more on themes and concepts i.e., intermittency / physical constraints of many renewables, economic costs, contrasts between what is needed for energy security in the developed and developing worlds. The general level of support i.e., examples and evidence were stronger in this question than in the comparable **Question 2b**.

Question 5b Water Conflicts

Many candidates seemed reasonably well prepared for this question and most answers, as in **Q4b**, contained evidence, examples and in some cases data. A common weakness was in the details of examples leading to confusion over which countries were involved in specific water conflicts: in many cases the place geography stated was a little erroneous. In some ways this is understandable, but it is important to know which states are involved in, say, the Nile River dispute and avoid throwing in spurious countries such as Israel or Turkey! Revision is important. Nevertheless, good answers often did balance their assertion that water conflicts were common with an equal assertion that they can be avoided with careful management. Very good answers recognised that most 'serious' water conflicts between nations are simpler part of a much wider lack-of-good-relations between 2 or more countries: water conflicts rarely occur in a vacuum.

Question 6 Superpower Geographies

Superpowers has been a popular topic for many years now and many answers to superpowers questions make interesting reading. On the face of it, this series' question was quite an accessible one, however, success really did depend on how far candidates understood concepts of 'hard' and 'soft' power and this was quite variable. Stronger answers tended to define the key terms at the start which provided some structure. While not required, better answers sometimes defined 'smart' power as well. A fairly common theme was to view soft power as largely stemming from social media and global brands, whereas a wider perspective that included political ideology and 'trustworthiness' might have been more helpful in terms of explaining how some countries become more powerful than others – or maintain power once attained. Several answers used the 'pillars of power' to structure their answers and while useful, these are not the same as hard / soft, so answers which only referred to the pillars tended to not answer the question.

Good answers usually had some type of historical geography perspective so were able to compare the past with 'the 21st Century' and thus produce an evaluation that considered soft power in a wider context. Most answers were sound, or better, and real-world examples (Russia-Ukraine, China's BRI, American cultural influence etc) were used to support an argument and conclusion. There was quite a bit of

'fence-sitting' rather than persuasive, confident conclusion writing. Candidates need to be brave: examiners are more than happy to be convinced by well-reasoned and supported arguments and conclusions and have no preconceived view of a 'correct answer'!

Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap

This is the less popular option of the two, but often yields some very interesting answers made more readable coming from candidates sitting in Asia, Africa, or the Middle East with insightful perspectives on the world that contrast with a European perspective – a real strength of the candidature.

Most answers to this essay question were evaluative in nature and engaged with the idea that one way of narrowing the development gap might be 'better' or 'worse' than another. Strong answers often began with a definition of the 'gap' as a useful way to focus and begin. The role of trade as a creator of wealth was usually explained well, and consideration was also given to the downsides of industrial and economic development for some people i.e., the risk of growing inequality masked by a growing economy. Aid was perhaps less convincing in some cases as a focus on 'disaster relief' or 'emergency aid' did not fit well with the longer-term development focus on the question – especially if that was the only type of aid considered. Equally, FDI was considered by some to be 'aid' which it clearly is not. Nevertheless, most answers were successful, and many were well supported with examples of investment (trade), trade blocs, aid examples and critiques.

Exam format reminder

It is important to understand that the examination question types and mark tariffs for WGE03 do not vary from one examination series to the next.

However, within **Sections A, B** and **C** the questions will vary from one series to another. This variation is random and does not conform to a pattern.

Some important points to note are:

- In **Section A, Question 3** is a synoptic question, and it will always be a 15-mark essay question.
- In **Section A**, there will always be a 10-mark data stimulus question on both A1 Atmosphere and A2 Biodiversity. The 15-mark essay question could be on either A1 or A2.
- In any exam series, **Section B** will either consist of a 5-mark stimulus question plus a 15-mark essay question, or a 20-mark essay question.
- **Section C** will be the opposite structure to **Section B** in any given examination series.

Please see the [WGE03 Contested Planet Assessment Guide](#) for further details.