



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

Sociology

SCLY2

(Specification 1191)

**Unit 2: Education with Research Methods;
Health with Research Methods**

Report on the Examination

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SCLY2

General

This examination produced the full range of responses from students. Most students completed the paper, although there was some evidence of a relatively rushed response to the final question attempted (usually Question 09 or Question 18). Correspondingly, as in previous examinations, many students spent far too long on the shorter questions, notably Question 02, Question 08 and Question 17. In these instances, a phrase or short sentence would have been enough to earn the marks available for each point asked for by the question, yet many needlessly wrote whole paragraphs in response. Schools and colleges need to make very clear to students the requirements of the short (2-, 4- and 6-mark) questions so that they have more time to tackle the higher-value questions at appropriate length.

There was a general tendency for students' knowledge of sociological material to outrun their understanding of it and their ability to apply it appropriately to the set question. To take one example, Question 04 required students to deal with the role of cultural factors in social class differences in educational achievement, yet many presented knowledge of these factors in relation to ethnic rather than, or as well as, class differences.

As in previous examinations, there were significant centre-based differences in the quality of responses to the Methods in Context questions. Some schools and colleges continue to treat these as straightforward 'methods' questions, where students present a list of strengths and limitations of the method with little regard for the requirement to apply this knowledge to the particular issue in the question – beyond, in some cases, a rather ritualistic reference to the issue at the end of each paragraph. Instead, it is essential that students link at least some of these strengths and limitations to specific aspects of the issue in the question in order to show ways in which the method might be *particularly* appropriate or inappropriate to the study of this issue.

In relation to the 'methods' questions, 09 and 18, schools and colleges must note that the focus of the answer should be on the *advantages* of the method – as specified in the question – and not on giving a 'balanced' response where half the answer is an unlinked account of the method's disadvantages. Any references to particular disadvantages need to be tied in closely to the advantages that the student has identified.

The illegibility of handwriting continues to be a problem for some students: if a script proves unreadable despite the best efforts of examiners, it is impossible to reward the student's efforts. Schools and colleges and teachers owe it to such students to identify their needs in advance of the examination and to take the appropriate steps, which may include the use of a word processor or an amanuensis. Further guidance on this matter can be readily obtained from AQA. For further information and advice, please see the AQA website http://web.aqa.org.uk/admin/p_special_2.php or email specialneeds@aqa.org.uk.

Section A – Education with Research Methods

The great majority of students chose this section of the paper.

Question 01

This question was generally answered well, usually in terms of ability plus effort equals reward, or the notion of equal opportunity. Some scored one mark for a partial response, such as the notion of equality in society.

Question 02

Most students achieved full marks on this through reference to negative labelling, institutional racism, anti-school subcultures or similar. Unfortunately, some students wrote about home background factors, or about class or gender. Some students earned partial marks through mentioning labelling, subcultures etc without conveying a negative (eg racist labelling). Some students wrote excessively long answers, when a short phrase for each point would have sufficed.

Question 03

This was generally answered reasonably well, with very few scoring in the bottom band. Most students were able to outline at least one reason and usually two or three, such as gender domains, career opportunities, coursework, or primary socialisation, though accounts of these were often descriptive rather than analytical, with relatively few sociological concepts and not always fully explicit in their connection to subject choice. For example, some identified gendered career opportunities as a reason but failed to explain what kinds of subject choice might result from this. Some weaker responses focused on gender differences in achievement rather than on subject choice. Some others did focus on subject choice but were unable to offer plausible descriptions of these choices (for example, some erroneously suggested that boys opted for vocational courses while girls chose academic ones, without any recognition that gendered choices occurred within each of these types of course). Effective evaluation was uncommon, but when it did appear it tended to be in terms of policy initiatives to reduce gender differences in subject choice. However, a few of these answers became excessively concerned with demonstrating that such gender differences were disappearing.

Question 04

Many students had a good knowledge and understanding of a range of relevant cultural factors, including speech codes, subcultural attitudes and values, parental expectations and encouragement, cultural deprivation, cultural capital and pupil subcultures. This knowledge was often applied effectively to the issue of social class differences in achievement and sometimes formed the basis for a sophisticated evaluative response that reached the top mark band.

However, the main shortcomings were a somewhat limited range and depth in many accounts of cultural factors, together with a strong tendency to offer 'catch all' answers that juxtaposed descriptions of material and/or school factors alongside accounts of cultural factors, without using these explicitly to evaluate the importance of the latter or to analyse the relationship between cultural and material factors. Many students also failed to link the various factors they described specifically to class differences in achievement, while some took 'cultural' to refer to ethnicity and focused on this rather than on class. Most appeared to think that cultural factors were purely home-based and made no reference to in-school cultural influences such as pupil subcultures. However, some good evaluation was achieved, for example by using Keddie's critique of cultural deprivation or by showing how school factors such as labelling might be based on teachers' stereotypical views of pupils' cultural characteristics such as their speech code.

Question 05

Some students were unaware that they need to demonstrate the skill of application in answering this question and thus presented a 'methods only' response that scored relatively few marks. Although many displayed sound knowledge of the practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations of their chosen method, they did not go on to apply this knowledge to the investigation of the particular issue in the question, or indeed even to the study of education in general. Rather, such students seemed to think that the odd passing reference to the issue was sufficient.

Among weaker answers there was often only very limited knowledge of the nature of official statistics or documents; there were also some basic errors, such as conflating validity and reliability. Some students attempted to address both methods, or to introduce other methods, and this resulted in poorly focused answers. Another common shortcoming was to discuss the usefulness of official statistics (for example, league tables) to parents in selecting a school to which to apply, rather than how they might aid sociologists in studying the application process. A few students took 'ownership' of the question, telling the examiner how they themselves would go about conducting the research. In many cases, this led to a rather narrative, descriptive approach rather than one that applied the features of the method to the issue in the question.

On the other hand, there were centre-based responses that clearly demonstrated an understanding of the nature of the task. Students from these schools and colleges were able to examine how far the method was appropriate for gaining data on applications and admissions. For example, answers considered issues such as the usefulness of official statistics on free school meals as an indicator of the social class of pupils admitted, or the use of documents relating to admissions such as school websites and prospectuses, application forms, entrance tests and references from primary schools. For example, some students distinguished between blank application forms easily obtainable from a school and the completed forms which would be confidential yet potentially more useful. Some considered looking at appeal documents to find reasons for refusal to see if there were class or ethnic patterns, while others discussed reasons why parents or schools might distort documentary material such as information given in applications or prospectuses.

Some students, while unable to apply the methods to the particular issue in the question, were able to apply them to investigating educational issues more generally, and gained some credit for this. For example, some discussed the ethical issues associated with using their chosen method to research pupils and schools, the availability of various educational documents or the usefulness of league tables in studying a variety of educational issues.

Question 06

Most students recognised that a change in behaviour was involved, but some left implicit the idea that in the Hawthorne effect the research participants know or believe that they are being studied. Such responses scored only one mark. A few students did not attempt this question.

Question 07

Most students were able to gain full marks here, for example through reference to danger of retribution when the researcher's cover is 'blown', lack of informed consent, 'going native', or problems recording or remembering observations. However, some gave characteristics of covert participant observation (for example that 'people don't know they are being observed') but without showing why this might be a problem of the method. At the other extreme, some students spent too much time explaining the 'problems' in great detail.

Question 08

The majority of students had no difficulty identifying two types of sampling used by sociologists (usually random and snowball), although some proceeded, unnecessarily, to describe them, sometimes at length. A few students did not understand the question and listed research methods instead of sampling techniques, or mistook the idea of a sampling frame for a sampling technique.

Question 09

Many students offered a fair range of advantages of unstructured interviews but these often did not go much beyond a descriptive account rather than analytical account of related features such as rapport, open-endedness, trust, depth, detail of data and so on. Better accounts linked these to issues of validity or located unstructured interviews within the positivist-interpretivist debate. However, answers often displayed significant weaknesses. As in previous examinations, many students offered 'catch all' answers that listed the limitations of the method (often at excessive length, given the set question) without relating these in any way to the advantages that they had identified.

By contrast, better answers avoided excessively long accounts of disadvantages, used them sparingly and linked them to stated advantages to demonstrate explicit evaluation. Unfortunately, many answers that focused on the set question of advantages confined themselves largely to practical issues to the neglect of theoretical or ethical advantages. Where theory was discussed appropriately, it revolved around concepts such as *verstehen* and understanding social reality from the actor's perspective. However, some students confused key concepts, particularly validity and reliability. Others made dubious assertions about the ethical status of the method, such as that it presented no ethical problems because interviewees had given their informed consent to be interviewed and could therefore withdraw at any time. There was also a related tendency to assume that such interviews would necessarily put interviewees at their ease, neglecting the possibility that interviewers might take a challenging approach (cf Becker's interviews with high school teachers). Examples of studies using the method appeared infrequently and were often described rather than used analytically.

Section B – Health with Research Methods

Relatively few students chose this section.

Question 10

Very few students were able to define or explain the term satisfactorily and many answers were no more than guesses. However, some students scored one mark for answers such as ‘the study of epidemics’.

Question 11

The vast majority of students were able to suggest three appropriate reasons, the most common ones being visiting the GP, work, and types of 'risky' behaviour. However, some students failed to include the comparison ('live longer') aspect, resulting in partial marks.

Question 12

There were some very good responses here and very few in the bottom band, indicating that this topic had been well taught. Most students had a reasonably clear idea of the concept of social construction and how it might apply. Generally, disability was covered better with greater evidence, while the body tended to be dealt with in a more commonsensical way. A few covered disability comprehensively but failed to mention the body at all and so were unable to score in the top band. The majority of answers referred successfully to labelling and/or master status (often using Goffman). A few students were able to put their answers into a theoretical context, such as references to feminism in relation to body image or to Marxism in discussing disability in relation to capitalism and ideas of dependency.

Question 13

Many students seemed to have only a basic knowledge of the materialist explanation of social class differences in health chances and there was often confusion between materialist, cultural and other explanations. Some students who scored poorly often drifted off the issue of class and onto that of ethnicity, while some other weak answers were heavily reliant on recycling material from the Item without adding much knowledge of their own. Some showed knowledge of class differences in health care but were not always successful in linking this to the issue of differences in health chances, suggesting a lack of clarity in the understanding of the distinction (and relationship) between the two. Few if any specific studies were cited in most answers.

Analysis and evaluation of materialist explanations tended to be rather basic, while others, such as the artefact and social selection explanations, were often just listed descriptively without being linked evaluatively to the materialist explanation. However, some good responses were able to link materialist and cultural explanations effectively, for example by explaining how culture provides a response to material problems and circumstances, so that the stresses caused by poverty could lead to increased consumption of tobacco or ‘comfort’ foods or to a ‘live for today’ attitude, with negative health consequences. Schools and colleges should note from this example that it is important when presenting alternative views or explanations to bring them into direct debate or dialogue with aspects of the explanation upon which the question is focused.

Question 14

The majority of students seem to have chosen self-completion questionnaires. Unfortunately, few students attempted to apply their knowledge of the method to the particular issue in the question beyond a ritualistic 'tagging on' of a reference to health promotion campaigns at the end of one or two paragraphs. This meant that most students failed to score more than 11 marks out of 20. Where there was some successful application, either to the particular issue in the question or merely to the study of health in general, it was usually through reference to sensitivity, embarrassment or confidentiality, or to some research characteristics of participants. However, very few went beyond merely stating these points without further development. Of the students who chose documents, these tendencies were even more pronounced, along with a greater tendency to copy or recycle material from the Item. There was also a clear difference between schools and colleges in terms of the success of students in showing the skill of application.

Question 15

Most students recognised that a change in behaviour was involved, but some left implicit the idea that in the Hawthorne effect the research participants know or believe that they are being studied. Such responses scored only one mark. A few students did not attempt this question.

Question 16

Most students were able to gain full marks here, for example through reference to danger of retribution when the researcher's cover is 'blown', lack of informed consent, 'going native', or problems recording or remembering observations. However, some gave characteristics of covert participant observation (for example that 'people don't know they are being observed') but without showing why this might be a problem of the method. At the other extreme, some students spent too much time explaining the 'problems' in great detail.

Question 17

The majority of students had no difficulty identifying two types of sampling used by sociologists (usually random and snowball), although some proceeded, unnecessarily, to describe them, sometimes at length. A few students did not understand the question and listed research methods instead of sampling techniques, or mistook the idea of a sampling frame for a sampling technique.

Question 18

Many students offered a fair range of advantages of unstructured interviews but these often did not go much beyond a descriptive account rather than analytical account of related features such as rapport, open-endedness, trust, depth, detail of data and so on. Better accounts linked these to issues of validity or located unstructured interviews within the positivist-interpretivist debate. However, answers often displayed significant weaknesses. As in previous examinations, many students offered 'catch all' answers that listed the limitations of the method (often at excessive length, given the set question) without relating these in any way to the advantages that they had identified.

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Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website: <http://www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat.html>

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion