General Certificate of Education

Applied Business 8611/8613

A2 Portfolio Units

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

General comments

As stated in previous reports, all of the A2 portfolio units require that candidates:

- set realistic problems to solve which are neither too complex nor too simplistic (Requirement A)
- carry out sufficient primary and secondary research to analyse the nature of the problem (Requirement C)
- develop practical solutions which address key parts of the problem (Requirements B and D).

The best candidates are doing this and it is pleasing to come across cogent and informed portfolios that solve realistic problems. Unfortunately, far too many portfolios continue to demonstrate weaknesses in some or all of the above requirements. These weaknesses inevitably restrict candidates from accessing the higher mark bands, especially in Assessment Objectives 2, 3 and 4.

It is still the case that too many centres are adopting an overly theoretical approach to these portfolio units. In addition, a mechanical approach, where candidates systematically work through numerous small tasks, is inappropriate at this level of study.

The best evidence used a 'two-folder' approach where research, analysis and evaluation were located in one part of the portfolio and the answer to the problem was located in another part of the portfolio. The answer to the problem was succinct and cogent because all of the thinking had been done before the solution was proposed. Centres are strongly advised to adopt this approach.

Assessment issues

More centres are annotating evidence with both assessment objectives and mark bands, eg AO2/MB3. However, a worryingly large proportion of assessors are failing to do this. Inevitably, this leads to 'impressionistic' assessment, eg the work 'feels' like it should be MB3! Moderators often have no option other than to adjust the assessor's decisions when faced with this type of assessment.

To repeat the advice given in previous reports:

"Annotation does not need to be copious. However, it does need to be accurate and sufficient for moderators to understand how and why particular marks have been awarded to each assessment objective for each candidate."

Individual units

The following comments should be read in conjunction with previous reports. Unfortunately, it is the case that the same problems were seen this year as in the previous two years. Inevitably these problems, which stem from the issues identified in the 'general comments' section above, will not diminish until centres encourage their candidates to adopt a realistic problem solving approach to the A2 units.

BS08 - Business Planning

Many of the portfolios adopted a problem solving approach and a significant proportion of candidates identified business ideas that were of interest to them and could be investigated at this level of study. The proposals were often not too complex and the best ones made good use of the 'two-folder' approach to give candidates the breathing space to think through the various issues surrounding their business idea.

It was very pleasing to see an increase in the number of community based proposals, ie not-for-profit business ideas. With the increased importance of charities and other not-for-profit organisations, centres are strongly advised to encourage any candidates who express an interest in investigating this sector of our economy.

However, far too many portfolios were mechanistic. It would seem that a series of tasks had been given to candidates that required little genuine thought and resulted in business plans that really didn't 'hold water'.

BS09 - Marketing Strategy

Far too many of these portfolios are spending an inordinate amount of time covering Requirement A (AO1) and far too little time developing a coherent marketing mix. Centres are strongly advised to ensure that their candidates quickly get to the point regarding the chosen marketing strategy. This is only intended to set the parameters of the marketing mix and to help candidates focus on the task in hand. If anything, the opposite is happening!

Small and local business contexts help candidates to focus on developing their marketing mix, eg looking at how a local charity could increase its donations. Marketing plans based on the candidate's Unit 8 business plan can work, but often just restate ideas and never develop the original outline of the marketing mix. It would seem that this approach should be avoided in the future, unless the candidate can convince the assessor that he/she is going to develop the marketing mix.

BS10 - Promotional Activities

This unit continues to produce some genuinely interesting portfolio evidence and both centres and candidates are to be congratulated! Less obvious contexts provide successful platforms for developing promotional campaigns, eg charities and the candidates' educational establishment.

The main issue for this unit continues to be ensuring that the context is understood and that the budget provided is not unrealistic. Small business contexts are definitely preferable and naturally avoid candidates having to deal with large budgets.

BS13 - Managing Information

This continues to be the least popular unit, perhaps due to the misconception that it requires detailed understanding of IT systems. This misconception might also be the reason why far too many of these portfolios fail to consider the real information problem and spend too much time outlining the technical features of the proposed system. If it is never clear why the new system is needed, it does not matter how detailed the description of the new system is as we cannot see the problem that is being solved.

Centres are strongly advised to encourage candidates to clearly define the information needs of the personnel involved. This really does represent the bulk of the analysis in this unit as, once information needs are defined, data requirements can then be determined.

BS14 - Managing Change

As in Unit 10, this unit continues to encourage a practical, problem solving approach. However, a trend might be identified where too much time is spent on Requirement A (explaining the need for change) and too little time on the remaining requirements, ie analysing and outlining the change programme. This problem might be occurring because the contexts are becoming too large, eg rebuilding a school as opposed to changing the use of some classrooms.

The best portfolios show that the candidates understand the motivations of the people involved in the change. They know this because they investigated these motivations and did not make too many assumptions.

BS16 - Managing Resources

Large businesses are not suitable for this unit. They are far too complex for candidates at this level of study to comprehend. Large business contexts inevitably result in candidates producing case studies where it is very difficult for moderators to identify any analysis and evaluation.

Small businesses are suitable for this unit. They allow candidates the possibility of comprehending key operational issues. Small business contexts help candidates to produce problem solving portfolios that home in on key operational issues. They do not encourage candidates to cover every single aspect of the specification's content.

It is strongly recommended that centres encourage their candidates to investigate smaller, local businesses such as restaurants or places where the candidate currently has part-time work and which can be investigated 'in situ'.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.