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

**Communication and Culture          COMM1**

**(Specification 2625)**

**Unit 1: Understanding Communication and Culture**

*Report on the Examination*

**General**

*"So will you rise to meet me*
*And take the gifts I bring*
*My conscience and my history*
*These myths that make me sing"*

*(Asylum, Nick Burbridge)*

The march forward which was described in January's report has continued unabated with yet another increase in the quality of what we're all seeing that is properly being reflected in the rising mean. Real improvements are indications that good teaching is engaging more effectively with the emergent course. This means that rather than being merely 'better at the test', these candidates are in fact 'better at the course'.

The paper itself is not really susceptible to systematic preparation, because despite its predictability, it's pretty much impossible to go in knowing what you're going to write. While knowing your way around the paper is advisable, the only reliable way to succeed is to play the longer game. This is chiefly because of the paper's structure, the sheer amount of work that has to be done and the limited time given to do it. What we get, series on series, are papers that prove more or less 'amenable' to the interests and experiences of the candidates. These 'interests' are both theoretical and practical.

This summer's paper seemed relatively amenable since it offered 'cultural products', 'value', verbal and non- verbal communication and 'holidays', all of which most candidates seemed to want to write about. It also had 'genre' which, perhaps surprisingly, they did not. The ability of so many candidates to offer thoughtful, sensitive, even original answers in not much more than twenty minutes a time is a tribute to all involved in this modest little specification. The quality, both here and across the other units, offers a pleasing endorsement of our proposition that the everyday is worthy of study.

**Question One: The 'culture' question**

Our course concerns the meanings and practices of everyday life and this question offers opportunities to directly address the issue of meaning making with reference to cultural products. It is a classically academic question in that it makes options out of overlapping elements in the process of meaning making, in order to focus attention on conceptual understanding. In short it doesn't matter which you choose, this question is about understanding the premise and applying practice to theory. All this adds up to a demanding ask for AS students so their success (averaging over 13, a good level 3) is to be celebrated. Perhaps the closest to a three way tie in terms of the distribution of choices also suggested that they were only too aware that it didn't much matter where their emphasis was placed. There was a generous understanding given on both sides as to what precisely constituted a cultural product from the smallest mass-produced media device or its software to international landmarks, from the Bible to a football shirt. As ever the paper itself acted as a massive auto-suggestion causing many, almost as if against their wills to address "our clothes" and/or "the building in which you are sitting". Neither proved particularly problematic, though ideally we'd like to genuinely free candidates to work with their own 'best fits'.

We have also been impressed with the variety of approaches - ranging from High versus Low Culture debates to Identity and self concept issues and, as implied, many of the answers are helped by lots of real, specific examples. 'Solid' examples make it much more likely that meanings will be specifically discussed and contested.

### Question Two: The 'communication' question

This was well done, with plenty of room for argument, though largely this was an argument resolved in favour of 'NVC'. More than half of the candidates were swayed, perhaps by the power of the slogan (Actions speak louder than words) to option (b) and did faintly better for their efforts there. 'Words', perhaps lacking a punchy context, were given shorter shrift with not much more than 10% choosing that option. Many more compromised on (c) and used 'adapt' to good advantage. Those who chose (a) found less use for 'reinforce'.

The question seemed to give scope for a pleasing range of theoretical content: not only the vocabulary of NVC, which has become increasingly technical, but also ranging across identity, self-concept and self-presentation. At the same time though examples can sometimes be extreme and lacking in subtlety, they can also be sensitive and enabling. The application of theory to practice was at times admirable. The answer is of course 'all of these'.

What our subject works and thrives on, of course, are examples, ideally the candidate's own and in this section often taken from their own experiences. There was some of that here but also purposeful use of well-designed generic examples which allowed the chosen hypothesis to be tested. Most popular perhaps was the formal interview, usually as a demonstration of the relative importance of NVC from clothing to facial expression. All three options performed very similarly and very much in line with question one.

### Question Three: The 'toolkits' question

After recent innovations we returned this year to a standard media text: the cover of a leaflet promoting a Stratford tourist attraction. Candidates had no problem recognising the key features of the text though some of their readings were a little surprising to say the least. Candidates tend to fare best when texts are 'busy' and some examiners thought that the fact that the text had 'so much going on in it' meant that candidates went into it in some depth.

The semiotic questions have plenty of specific prompts to help focus the candidate's work and the answers reflect a highly secure and in many cases sophisticated reading of the leaflet. However, and as ever, some candidates did fall foul of not reading the questions carefully enough and providing what was asked for. This section regularly produces either the significantly highest or significantly lowest mark on a given candidate's paper: all three questions give full marks at a much higher rate than elsewhere on the paper and 3 (c) has the highest number of avoidees (thankfully only 3%).

### Question Three (a) The question of genre

This was an unexpected obstacle, producing the lowest average mark for what is often seen as the 'sighter' question for text analysis/toolkits in a set rising in difficulty. The problem was straightforwardly with the term 'genre' which to all intent and purposes for at least two thirds of our candidates in this artificial context not a term they completely understood or in some cases understood at all.

As genre has always been a term explicitly within our subject as well as in pretty much exactly the same meaning a term outside of it and in common usage, this is interesting. It seems to point to one of our subject's touchstone notions, that "context is all". One suspects that the term was disabled for them to some extent by the text and task. The theoretical perspective informally, but not half-heartedly, introduced in AS is Structuralism, an approach predicated on cultural codes. Here the idea was to help candidates into the question 3 mindset by asking them to identify generic codes in response to a text that might be described generically in a number of different ways. This openness was what gave

candidates problems. Because they were unable to confidently classify the text, the rest fell apart rather. Interestingly most full mark answers defined the genre formally as a leaflet (the answer given above it!) and then spotted 'two features' easily. This is not THE answer but it was the least problematic.

Thus, though it was tending to look as if, as one examiner noted, that "surprisingly, many candidates did not appear to have come across the word 'genre' it was more complicated than that. We were as ever generous in our range of genres which might feasibly be applied: adventure, documentary, historical, even horror. However those who merely talked about the leaflet's audience were usually too far off track. This was very much a learning experience for us all.

**Question Three (b) The question of connotations**

Luckily to offset a slight dip on a) was a brilliant showing on directed connotations, significantly the highest performing question on the paper. As one marker said in her feedback: "question 3 (b) - Much better understood - not a foot wrong...". All the possibilities were taken up in every combination and energetic reading were provided. Quite a few described the timber-framed houses as Victorian and, at the same time as 'of Shakespeare's time', which was a revealing but not problematic connotation. Otherwise they talked of worms and graves and epitaphs (well, at least the Shakespeare logo!). They also in a short space (and space of time) offered very detailed responses, which explains why more than 50% of candidates earned 5 or 6 here.

**Question Three (c) The question of 'preferred readings'**

As implied earlier this was, and often is, the question that candidates either harassed by time or by the specifics of this response 'step aside'. A few of these annotated versions of 'Don't know what 'preferred reading' is' and a further group clearly didn't know but had a stab. Luckily offering an active reading was never going to be a disaster even if the focus was not on 'preferred', most readings of texts are predictably conventional.
For those who did get it there were good marks to be had and this is, after all the start of the 'stretch and challenge' section. The fact that this and question 4 have significantly the lowest percentage marks, despite examiners reporting seeing some of the best work here is a sure sign that here is a job being done well. The key is always the recognition that the text ( from *textus;* something woven) is made through a set of choices and in a text like this these choices seem a little like contrivances! Thus something is being sold in the text as well as through it. The best answers exposed this effortlessly.

**Question Four of 'preferred readings'**

We have come quite quickly to have high expectations of this question, examiners often report seeing the best work here and this year was no exception. However the challenge must not be forgotten or underplayed: not much more than twenty minutes at the end of the paper (so sometimes less) and an unseen passage leading to an unseen and unprepared aspect of contemporary culture to address as a Communication & Culture 'specialist'. Here the passage was a sophisticated set of prompts and the focus the rather more low registered '(going on holiday)'.

Most candidates used prompts to structure a response while others drew more immediately on their own experiences. Either way the key was "to explore some of the meanings" hopefully benefitting from the concepts and contexts provided by the course. Code is always a good place to start, to investigate how 'holiday' is constituted: destination, companions, accommodation, length of stay, time of year. Some quickly built little case studies others managed only the anecdotal and entirely descriptive. The question certainly allowed for a range of interesting approaches which produced some colourful and creative responses from

'Dear Diary' to 'a guide to cultural NVC'. The stumbling blocks tended to be: Insufficient focus on meanings of tourism; reasons for going on holiday or what people get out of it; focus on how good holidays are without any focus on theory or the wider issues. Given all thought this a good question some examiners concluded that some students failed to make the most of the opportunity given to them.

However there was an interesting 'selection' of tool kit from the course and for an unprepared section, it was pleasingly 'attacked' from many, many different angles. Question 4 is proving just the kind of test we hoped it would; accessible but also demanding and discriminative.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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

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