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

Communication and Culture   COMM3

(Specification 2625)

Unit 3: Communicating Culture

Report on the Examination

General

Candidates are getting better at doing this paper. Each iteration of COMM3 has seen a small but perceptible improvement in candidates' underlying knowledge, their powers of self-expression, their ability to bring theories and concepts to bear upon issues raised by the question and their examination technique. In past years it was not at all uncommon for examiners to discover quite a few scripts in their allocation which featured answers of less than half a side, elaborate doodles in place of answers, stream of consciousness writing or, sometimes, pristine blank pages. Perhaps it is a sign of the times that instances such as this are vanishingly rare. The mark scheme refers to 'answers that do not constitute a serious response to the question', but such answers are so hard to find that the mark distribution chart reveals few answers achieving Level One.

We are very confident that COMM3 continues to do its job: it discriminates successfully between the performances of candidates at all levels of ability. A maximum mark of 40 out of 40 is not uncommon and this is as it should be. Sometimes a mark of 40 is given because the answer fulfils the requirements of the mark scheme and includes all that might reasonably be expected of an A Level candidate. On other occasions, a mark of 40 is awarded because the quality of the answer massively exceeds what might reasonably be expected of an A Level candidate. In any event, it is interesting to note that the incidence of the maximum mark of 40 is equal to or greater than the incidence of all marks between zero and ten in the case of all six questions in this exam.

Past versions of this report have noted the tendency of some candidates to reproduce 'rehearsed' answers; those which barely acknowledge the question. Such answers are gradually declining in number and it is gratifying to see that most responses demonstrate a confident ability to apply theoretical material and key concepts rather than simply demonstrating to the examiner a familiarity with technical terms. Candidates should not feel under any compulsion to offer detailed explications of, say, postmodernism or market liberalism. It is much more relevant and important (in the words of Assessment Objective AO3) to 'apply your knowledge in the context of the question'.

The scope of A Level Communication and Culture, characterised by the phrase 'the meanings and practices of everyday life', is almost limitless, so it is encouraging to see a range and diversity of examples and references in the work of our candidates. This, surely, is the most effective way to demonstrate the skills of application alongside an underlying knowledge of the subject. It is undoubtedly a consequence of a teaching style that instils confidence through practice in the use of conceptual toolkits. Conversely, it is rather disappointing occasionally to encounter script after script in which identical interpretations of identical examples are offered.

Section A
Question 1

The topic here was social networking. Surely, this is a field of endeavour, a cultural practice, which is familiar to every candidate. However, there was certainly no expectation that candidates should have undertaken a formal study of social networking as it is not the function of the Section A topic to test subject knowledge. Rather, it is a test of the ability to scrutinise, interpret, analyse and, ultimately, evaluate two contrasting arguments about an area of contemporary cultural practice and/or an issue in contemporary culture.
The very familiarity of social networking proved, unfortunately, to be something of a stumbling block for a number of candidates. It is a topic on which many hold strong views supported by extensive personal experience, but the lengthy elaboration of such views and experiences did not necessarily constitute an appropriate and relevant response to the task set out in question 1. It would certainly be worth reminding students, as they prepare for Section A of this examination, that they are required to engage with the two arguments rather than the topic. This means that the best answers will address most if not all of the very specific issues raised by the questions whilst weaker answers deal only in general terms with the topic. This is not to say that answers should avoid, at all costs, extemporizing on themes suggested by the arguments, but their core business must be the detailed, explicit scrutiny of just what it is that the arguments are proposing.

It was good to see so many answers ranging well beyond the simple 'theory-spotting' approach sometimes seen in earlier exams. Not only were market liberalism, critical political economy and postmodernism well represented but also technological determinism, globalization and environmentalism all featured in a very diverse range of conceptual approaches. As noted in the most recent examiners' report, candidates should not, in future, expect to find a pair of arguments that straightforwardly align with two of the 'compulsory' theoretical approaches indicated in the specification. Centres not already familiar with them will find the past, mark schemes and reports valuable in the preparation for future exam series.

Examiners once again observed that there was a tendency to assume an 'approved' approach to the topic in hand. This led some candidates to excoriate the evils of social networking in no uncertain terms, sometimes even castigating themselves for their own 'bad habits'. It is rather worrying that such tactics are based on a serious misinterpretation of just what it is that examiners are looking for in Section A or, indeed, anywhere in Communication and Culture assessment. It is absolutely not the case that there is some sort of 'party line' that will be rewarded. Certainly, there is room for a small degree of polemical self-expression, but personal opinion should always play a secondary role to analysis, explanation and evaluation. Candidates are much more likely to be rewarded for using personal experiences to illustrate conceptual responses to the arguments than they are for trying to second guess examiners' prejudices. Examiners are, of course, without prejudice.

Section B
Question 2

Previous examiners' reports are beginning to have an effect and there were fewer (though still some) instances of answers that misconstrued 'intersections' or that dealt with two sites of culture sequentially. On the other hand, a familiar polarisation was once again evident here; there were more marks at the top end and the bottom end of the range for question 2 than for any other question. As previously advised, candidates should only attempt this question if they have explicitly prepared material, including case studies, on one of the intersections. Also, it is a good idea to start by identifying the two chosen sites.

For well-prepared candidates, the open nature of this particular intersections question generated some superb responses that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the subtle relationships between selected sites of culture. Several detailed explorations of fictional space and places such as Pandora, the setting for the film *Avatar*, fell into this category.

Question 3

Surprisingly, given the range of opportunities made available by this question, the 'generic' question was not particularly popular on this occasion. It also drew a number of relatively poor responses including those which drew on too many different theoretical approaches and those which failed to address the evaluative dimension ('Which […] have you found most convincing and why?'). A brief concluding statement such as 'postmodernism seems to me to be the best perspective' does not really go far in this direction.

At the other end of the scale it was very encouraging to see evidence that candidates have thought hard and deeply about the implications of our theoretical approaches. The quality of their answers reflected a style of teaching and preparation in which a high premium is placed on debate and discussion.

Question 4

Candidates responded very well to the stimulus quotation here and were obviously familiar with the idea that places and spaces have stories to tell. Only a few fell back on the rehearsal of a case study example or examples and most were able to foreground the 'story' in their answers. Equally legitimate interpretations dealt with stories of class, gender, ethnicity, regional, corporate and even personal identity.

Whilst responses often warmed to the notion of 'story' in this context, the key concept *narrative* proved rather more problematic; not least because it was often ignored altogether or implicitly elided with story. The best answers were able to use elements of narrative theory productively and relevantly to produce convincing insights into the meanings of a place or space. It was particularly important here to show some awareness of the dynamic and contested nature of such meanings.

In view of previous comments in these reports, it was good to see that case studies based on direct and first-hand experience predominated over those based on secondary research.

Question 5

The 'fictions' question remains second only to question 6 in terms of popularity. Examiners were impressed by the range and depth of candidates' knowledge and understanding and it is clear that some excellent work is being done in preparation for this area of the specification. Children's stories, fairytales and films such as *Avatar, Pocahontas* and *Pretty Woman* were all fertile grounds for case study material. Recurrent phrases and terms such as 'underlying meanings', 'enculturation' and 'ideological messages' all suggest that candidates are really coming to terms with Fictions as a site of culture. Many answers confidently explored areas such as gender identity, class conflict and ethnocentrism in relation to their chosen texts.

In response to the stimulus quotation, some candidates boldly asserted that fictions such as fairytales can teach us nothing about reality. This intriguing and perfectly legitimate approach was not, unfortunately, well-supported by a quality of argument and evidence to match its potential. Most answers agreed with the quotation, offering complex and sophisticated justifications for the proposition that fictions perform ideological work.

Narrative theory, particularly the versions devised by Propp and Todorov, were much in evidence, though perhaps it is worth noting that the simple labelling of characters as, say, hero, dispatcher or donor does little in itself to demonstrate the ideological functions of narrative structures. Stronger responses moved effortlessly between general considerations of the cultural significance of myth and very specific analyses of apposite case studies.

Question 6

Students of A2 Communication and Culture remain fascinated by the form and consequences of consumerism and by the multiple implications of desire for material artefacts. Hence, question 6 is easily the most popular of the Section B questions.

Quite understandably, the objects that feature most prominently in discussions are those targeted most forcefully at the teenage consumer: fashion items, clothing, footwear, mobile phones, laptop and tablet computers and so on. Examiners felt that the most productive case study examples were usually those of the individual's own choosing, perhaps used as an effective contrast to a group-based investigation. There was some excellent work on advertising and marketing strategies in response to the 'What I own is who I am' stimulus quotation, and also some very insightful work on the nature of brands. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* remains influential, but it was impressive to see that her specific examples have largely been replaced by the candidates' own (and often more contemporary) illustrations. Designer brands such as Abercrombie and Fitch, Jack Wills and Ted Baker were considered, with many responses able to offer sophisticated analyses of the subtle variations of identity made available to the consumers of each brand.

Most of the theoretical approaches utilised were those that are highly critical of consumerism: pessimistic postmodernism, the Frankfurt School, Veblen and Bourdieu. A few picked up ideas such as the 'savvy consumer' and the 'resistant consumer' but these were few and far between suggesting that here, perhaps, is scope for some alternative approaches in the preparation for question 6.

One of the features of an answer placed at the top level of the marking range is an ability to grapple with the assumptions of the question and there were a number of responses to question 6 that did precisely that. With the very nature of personal identity being held up for examination by the quotation, there was plenty of opportunity to engage with key issues at the core of Communication and Culture. It was a really positive endorsement of our subject that so many candidates are able to do this with confident, fluent proficiency.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

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