



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

General Studies A

GENA4

(Specification 2760)

Unit 4: Science and Society (A2)

Report on the Examination

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GENA4 A2 Science and Society

General Comments

The Case Study theme in this session was *diet, exercise and sport* and this seemed to be well received by most candidates. Many students were quite well-informed about the main topics and showed awareness of key issues and areas of discussion. Generally speaking, the sources were used effectively by those who had prepared adequately and, with centres now able to teach to the material, a good standard in Case Study work is becoming established.

Essay performance was, as is so often the case, more variable. Some candidates write with considerable fluency. They are well informed, demonstrate analytical skills and have a keen sense of critical awareness. Other candidates, despite the choice of essay themes available, continue to struggle. Some seem to find it difficult to fill a single page of A4 – either because of poor time management or, more usually, lack of knowledge.

Sometimes, potentially good candidates either fail to develop points fully or answer unevenly, focusing mainly – or even only – on one part of the two-part questions that are asked. Unfortunately, the lack of appropriate examples to support arguments remains a perennial complaint although this was less evident in this series in at least some answers to Question 6 and Question 8.

Individual Questions Section A (Case Study)

Question 1

Performance on this question was better than it has been previously perhaps, for the first time, because the question reminded candidates that Source A contained Figures 1-6. Certainly, far more candidates in this session based their answer on most, or all, of the figures even if some did so too descriptively.

Stronger candidates focused on the question and extended their interpretation across the 6 figures even though some did so in a way that provided more of a 'list' of the different figures under consideration. The strongest candidates maintained a focus on the implications for politicians and health professionals, using the data to support their arguments about issues such as the implications of growing obesity levels and poor diets. These candidates moved towards a brief conclusion – necessary to reach the Level 3 mark band – using clearly referenced figures which, as required, were confined to data that appeared in Source A.

Weaker candidates either wrote about the data descriptively or tended to use it in rather generalised terms, often neglecting implications for politicians. Only a small number of candidates strayed beyond data within Source A, for which no credit was available.

Question 2

Candidates were allowed to draw from both Source B and C to answer this question on the potential difficulties faced in limiting the consumption of junk food by young people.

Weaker candidates tended to write descriptively or generally. Sometimes their answers were based on information not contained in either source or, in some cases, using points from Source B while neglecting the main message in Source C.

However, there were Level 3 answers which used a two-dimensional approach looking at school meals and favoured alternatives (foods often high in salt, sugar and fat) from Source B and the business side of supplying junk food from Source C.

This was usually a well-answered question and, though a few candidates quoted their own schools as places where leaving the premises at lunchtime was strictly controlled, most felt such methods were both draconian and impractical – though not everyone was clear about what ‘Orwellian’ meant.

The more perceptive sympathised with local food retailers in current economic conditions and a few pointed out that the advertising budget of major companies was far in excess available for those concerned with promoting healthy eating. Some, almost surreptitiously, admitted a preference for the taste of chips and burgers.

Question 3

Question 3 asked candidates to consider the success of initiatives to increase participation in sport and the use sport as a way of raising self-esteem. Some, with the scope to use their own knowledge, referred very effectively to schemes in their own area but they tended to be in a minority. Those who used Source D did not always go far enough, sometimes making little of the views of Dame Kelly Holmes.

A few candidates were quick to claim that sport was not something that could be used to increase an individual’s self-esteem but what they said tended to be based on opinion and assertion rather than arguments. Other weaker answers either neglected the participation of females in sport or concentrated on this almost exclusively. Surprisingly the straightforward statistics in Source D (such as the increase in cycling following British success in the last Olympic Games) were not always read with sufficient care, leading to some false assertions being made.

The best answers offered some analysis based on issues such as the spur of the Olympic Games, the emergence of more informal sporting pursuits, and the role of government in encouraging new sporting initiatives and opportunities. Such answers also incorporated the need for more female role models in sport and wider media coverage of successful womens’ teams.

Question 4

Now that candidates have an additional 30 minutes for their answers, time is less of a factor for this question and, on this occasion, answers tended to be both longer and better than has been the case previously.

The main weakness was in answers that summarized the views of Dan Roberts in Source E, and Dr Max Pemberton in previously unseen Source F, not always accurately, instead of comparing and contrasting them using a more critical approach.

Most understood the emphasis that Dan Roberts placed on sustained diet and exercise in the quest to keep fit but not all identified his more empirical approach or his warnings against sensationalised and distorted reporting.

Similarly, there was a lot of quoting from Source F involving ballet dancers, celebrities like Dawn French and Kate Moss and humourless nutritionists but not everyone understood the points that Dr Pemberton was seeking to make or his underlying philosophy, shared by the source of his article, about the importance of individual freedom to choose.

Individual Questions Section B (Essays)

Question 5

Although fairly popular, this question on social class was not usually well done. Some candidates wrote extensively but had so little knowledge that they were able to say very little. There was some, often highly imperfect, sociological theorising and most candidates were more comfortable writing, often at length, about social class in Victorian times rather than in its contemporary context.

Few doubted that elements of ‘envy and prejudice’ were not unrelated to social class but were largely unaware of the main determinants of social class or the extent to which it had any relevance to life in contemporary Britain. Many cited the recent marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton (a ‘commoner’) as evidence to prove that social class was no longer relevant while better answers included the royal wedding, the rise of celebrities from humble beginnings and the emergence of ‘chavs’ as an indication of greater fluidity among social classes.

Question 6

Most candidates were able to score reasonably well on this question which combined NIMBYISM and the environmental impact of wind turbines with alternative sources for the generation of energy.

Unfortunately, fewer candidates were able to answer both parts of the question with equal success. Many were critical of the householder for putting ‘selfishness’ before the nation’s need to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, but there were those who recognised that the householder was also expressing genuine concerns and the extent to which an increasing number of applications for the construction of wind turbines were being rejected after strong local objections.

Those who did present both sides of the NIMBYISM case were often unable to say much about alternatives to wind turbines. Conversely, some candidates showed commendably wide knowledge of methods such as solar, wave, tidal and geothermal. Fewer mentioned nuclear power or why we continue to rely heavily on fossil fuels.

Question 7

A few candidates were quick to defend scientists and showed a good knowledge of scientific processes and checks that were made on scientific impartiality in research while conceding that, on some occasions, genuine mistakes might be made.

Most, however, did little more than take their leads from the question, mentioning the MMR controversy, accusations of flawed climate change research, supposedly inaccurate weather forecasting and the extent to which scientific findings might be influenced by the interests of fund providers. Unfortunately, they rarely had the knowledge to use the examples effectively and were mostly unable to add much to the debate.

There was some generalised understanding of how the aims of scientists and politicians might conflict but too many people simply used this as an opportunity to air some general prejudices about politicians. Hardly anyone sought to explain why scientists are one of the most poorly represented occupations in parliament.

Question 8

There were many answers to this question about the reasons for the presence of British troops in Afghanistan and the case for remaining in that country. The best were outstanding in terms of the knowledge demonstrated, their analytical skills and the balanced appraisal which well-reasoned arguments produced.

Perhaps understandably, given the human cost of war, some answers mixed emotion and reason and it was surprising that very few candidates pointed to the lessons of history which, over a very long period, show the difficulties experienced by all countries who get involved in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

There was a surprising amount of confusion in some responses. Not uncommonly Afghanistan was confused with Iraq and the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction and vast oil reserves, Al Qaida became synonymous with the Taliban and – perhaps even more surprisingly – Saddam and Bin Laden became one and the same person. Despite this, the outstanding answers in Section B were to this question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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