



Pearson

Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

Pearson Edexcel GCE in
Geography (6GE04/01)
Unit 4: Geographical Research

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Summer 2017

Publications Code 6GE04_01_1706_ER

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6GE04

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Introduction

In this, the final year of this specification, it is unsurprising that both centres and candidates were familiar with both the philosophy behind this report style paper and the appropriate methodologies for delivering reasonable results that fairly reflect the ability of candidates. What has been increasingly apparent is that the paper discriminates between those, the majority, who prepare carefully for the exam in terms of accumulating case-study knowledge and establishing some understanding of central processes but are inflexible when faced with a title that although firmly based on the pre-release material requires them to interpret and interrogate that material. Only a minority are able to engage with what the French would identify as 'la problematique'; in other words, what exactly is to be debated here? The other distinguishing characteristics of the best reports, some of which are outstanding, is being able to do so through a prism that breaks down impacts both by the nature of that impact - social, economic and environmental for example - but also steps aside from sweeping generalisations about the positive or negative nature of those impacts.

There are lessons to be learnt here for the future. All centres face the introduction of the A level independent investigation with some trepidation and it might help to carry these lessons of this now 'legacy' unit forward for many of the same messages will be pertinent. For example, in the popular area of evaluating the 'success' of rebranding/regeneration only the best candidates are likely to address how success can be evaluated and why short term 'success' for some may be long term failure for others.

Question 1

The most successful approaches could define level of development with accuracy. These candidates knew that emergency funding, technological development, good governance, educated populations etc are all associated with the level of development of a country. Better candidates touched upon exceptions to this broad trend. Nevertheless, the significance of these factors in explaining successful management of tectonic disasters could be compared to the nature of the hazard and the hazard profile.

Weaker candidates often saw HDI or GDP, or some other indicator of development as a separate idea from other aspects of the social, economic or political development of a country. Such an approach often led to insecure analysis of the factors leading to contrasting management outcomes.

As always, the effective use of a model or concept to develop an argument was a characteristic of the best answers. However, too many models led to superficial analysis. The best scripts used one model throughout, as a tool to answer the question, often returning to the model in the sub conclusion. This approach tended to deepen analysis, accessing the highest marks in band A. For example, the hazard risk equation could be applied to all case

studies. Such an approach could recognise that the significance of capacity to cope (level of development) varied in some relation to magnitude and frequency.

Some students used a model for their structure, such as the Park model. This had its strengths. However, an awareness of the different stages did not necessarily lead to an effective engagement with the question.

As suggested in the preamble, far too few students engaged regularly with the phrase 'largely dependent'. As they got into the meat of their answer, some students lost focus on the actual question words and began to address a slightly different question.

The weakest responses made assertive statements, rather than discussed the statement. For example, they would state the GDP of country and then state some figure about the impact of a disaster. There has to be more reasoning and explanation for the connection between development and success of management to make sense.

Question 2

There were many excellent answers to this question which, with its emphasis on management rather than processes also offered more opportunities to more modest students to say something meaningful.

In terms of analysis, although many challenges and opportunities were recognised not all students showed the flexibility to effectively suggest why challenges outweighed opportunities and vice-versa. Sometimes, there wasn't a detailed focus on the players such as the Inuits. The stronger reports showed an understanding that opportunities and challenges change over time due to climate change and technology.

The best responses also made it clear that one person's opportunity was another's challenge so that actually the statement question was incredibly complex. There was a good range of case studies here but sometimes, perhaps, too much focus was made of relict environments when really there are so many challenges to and of polar or alpine/periglacial environments.

Question 3

The best approaches engaged with the importance of scale. This was prominent in the pre-release too. The focus wasn't so much on the effectiveness of contrasting strategies, although this could be relevant. Therefore, students who took a case study by case study approach often lost focus on the statement they were discussing, and drifted towards the merits of their case studies. The requirement, or not, for international action was often tacked on as an after-thought.

Students who structured their answers by scale had a much easier time focusing on the importance of scale in achieving food security, using case studies briefly to back up their points.

Clearly, synergies between local and international scales are the ideal. But students also needed to explore the strengths of international and local strategies separately. They couldn't just keep emphasising the importance of synergies.

Some candidates recognised that food insecurity comes in different guises: acute, chronic, rural, urban for example. Arguing that different scales of management were more or less important for different types of food insecurity was a good approach. A famine event may well require international action, whereas unequal access to food in a megacity might require a bottom up solution. However, this was a hard approach to maintain and some students lost their way a bit.

Question 4

For the most part, this question was answered very effectively. Many students were able to demonstrate high conceptual understanding with most using a familiar form of the Kuznets curve as their framework for analysis. The best approaches had rich case studies, which were generally well sourced. Weaker scripts often had plenty of case studies, but these were often shallow in detail and, as is a common theme only weakly applied to the question.

The theoretical links seemed slightly more obvious for the candidates to make) and therefore the theoretical links were not just present in the majority of candidate's responses but were well developed and more tightly linked to the question. A significant minority of better candidates thoroughly unpicked the notion of 'culture' before embarking on the question which allowed their discussion to be more complex and hence their appreciation of the question's complexity was more evident.

The use of the curve also allowed for better candidates to show strong evidence of case study selection, as they could be shown to be selected along a continuum on the curve, which supported higher marks for the methodology.

Question 5

Although there were many excellent reports, it is also clear that some students found this statement hard to engage with and it required more than a very cursory consideration in the planning stage.

Of course, both sides of the statement can be supported which some students found challenging as they developed their responses. What the best answers did was to agree with both sides of the statement, but also ask some questions. For example, infectious diseases are being controlled in the developing world due to the work of IGOs and charities, but rural to urban migration is bringing more people into contact with pollution and other potential vectors of disease. The students who felt comfortable agreeing and disagreeing in this way did very well, showing highly developed critical thinking skills.

However, a considerable number of students just wanted to set out the epidemiological transition model and back it up with case studies. This route made it difficult for them to engage with the statement as effectively, which impacted on both their analysis mark and their conclusions, which were dominated by assertive statements that did not follow from their content.

Question 6

Similarly to Question 5, this statement needed to be read carefully before embarking on a tour of well-prepared case studies as “that with successful management” is not an invitation to discuss the success of management, although knowledge of management could be relevant. Rather, the statement asks students to choose case studies that are well managed and then discuss if tourism is increasingly beneficial i.e. over time, or in a cumulative way.

A very effective structure to do this was to look at different rural areas on the wilderness spectrum. For example, management may be argued as being ‘successful’ in Antarctica in limiting the environmental impact, but it is not clear that tourism is increasingly beneficial here given that the ‘benefit’ can only be economic for the companies involved and social benefits for travellers are hard to evaluate. Only a tiny minority seemed comfortable in engaging with an argument of this nature. Whereas, rural urban fringe locations, such as the peak district, can be seen to thrive in locations where tourism is well managed. Students that did distinguish between the social, economic and environmental aspects of benefits did very well.

Weaker scripts wanted to focus on contrasts between successful and less successful management. These answers had some relevance to the question, but it was hard to make them consistently relevant to the question. They could become insecure as a result.

Postscript

As this specification gives way to another, a few general lessons might be worth passing forward, despite the lack of a directly equivalent paper. Perhaps the most important message is a very familiar one in that the best scripts are written by students who can effectively deconstruct questions and introduce elements of complexity into their responses because they take little or nothing for granted. To choose a simple example, if they are asked to evaluate the ‘success’ of a scheme, they will offer an elaboration of what exactly constitutes ‘success’, how it is to be evaluated and whether or not it falls evenly, which of course it will not. They will not write unqualified sentences such as ‘this is good for the people’ – they will recognise that there is always a negative impact somewhere for someone at some time. These skills are not so challenging to teach, but given that students spend a good deal of their education learning how to categorise it requires something of a culture shift to get them to see that the categories are often illusory.