



Pearson

Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2018

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level
In Geography (WGE0_03)
Unit 3: Contested Planet

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January 2018

Publications Code WGE03_01_1801_ER

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Introduction

This was the first sitting of WGE03 Contested Planet and the entry was small, however the standard of responses was generally good and encouraging in some areas such as Superpower Geographies where some very good answers were encountered.

Most candidates managed to answer all questions on the examination paper and few 'blanks' were encountered. As might be expected there was variation in the quality of answers but there were many interesting and informed responses.

Contested Planet contains optional topics. Topic B1 Energy Security was more popular than Topic B2 Water Conflicts, and Topic C1 Superpower Geographies was more popular than C2 Bridging the Development Gap. The quality of responses from one option to another was not significantly different.

Centres may wish to consider some general points going forward:

- Compulsory topic A1 Atmosphere and Weather Systems does contain detailed physical process content that demands an understanding of weather system formation and atmospheric processes – this was often lacking in responses to Question 1.
- Neither the Sample Assessment Materials nor the January 2018 examination paper used the command word 'describe'. There are few marks for descriptions, and description should be used as a means to an end i.e. leading to an explanation, not an end in itself.
- Question 3 is a Synoptic Question that seeks to encourage candidates to link two or more topics; answers that focus on only one of the indicated topics are not likely to score well.
- Mark schemes refer to 'evidence': this can come in the form of examples, case studies, data, facts, detailed reference to places, concepts and geographical theory.
- Many questions use the command words 'assess' and 'evaluate' – these are defined in the Specification on page 77. They require higher-order thinking skills that involve candidates looking at several sides of an argument or question, weighing up issues, considering which factors / explanations are the most important and making supported judgements. Failure to demonstrate these cognitive skills limits available credit.

Question 1

This was the least well answered question on the examination paper. It is wholly focussed on physical processes. Figure 1 showed a depression and anticyclone over Europe and North Africa. Many candidates spent a long time describing or comparing the weather conditions in Rennes and Sousse, but not explaining them.

The majority could identify the weather system over Rennes as a depression or cyclone, and often made some reference to fronts and convecting warm

air. Reference to air masses within the depression was very rare (as it was for the anticyclone). Upper atmosphere processes such as the role of the Jet Stream or Rossby Waves were not encountered. In general, explanations of why it was raining in Rennes and not raining in Sousse were weak and not related to ideas around convecting and subsiding air. Wind direction was not explained, although in some answers there was an attempt to explain wind strength with reference to isobar density (often these were referred to as 'contours'). Some explanations relied on the idea that Rennes and Sousse are at different latitudes and that this fact could explain the temperature difference observed. While this is true, it does not explain other elements of the synoptic weather situation – for that, detailed understanding of processes within depressions and anticyclones is needed. Many answers scored low Level 2 marks in the 5-6 range

Question 2a

This question was of a similar style and mark tariff to question 1a i.e. a 10 mark data stimulus question. It was generally answered more successfully and some answers scored Level 3 marks in the 8-10 range, with many others scoring in Level 2 5-7 marks. A weakness was that some answers used the first half-page of their answers describing the trends, rather than explaining them.

Stronger answers tended to group the countries shown on Figure 2, so they explained:

- Rapid decline in forest cover in Nigeria and Cameroon
- Increased forest cover in Italy and New Zealand
- The more variable trends of Thailand

Candidates that explained all 5 trends separately tended to repeat themselves as well as providing thin explanations for all 5 countries, rather than the more in-depth explanations which those that took the grouping approach provided. Overall, there was good understanding that trends in Cameroon and Nigeria were likely to be the result of widespread deforestation, and this was often linked to poverty levels, the need for fuelwood and demand for farmland linked to rising populations. Differences in attitudes and wealth were often used to explain rising forest cover in developed countries, linked to conservation and protection strategies. Quite reasonably, Thailand's recent improvement in forest cover was often explained with reference to ecotourism or tourism in general. There was occasionally a drift into natural disasters as explanations: forest fires are valid, but earthquakes are an unlikely cause of the trends. Reference to the environmental Kuznets curve was only seen once or twice: it does provide a conceptual framework that can be applied to Figure 2.

It's worth noting that the Specification uses the terms developing, emerging and developed to categorise countries, rather than LEDC / MEDC or LIC/MIC/HIC etc. Candidates should endeavour to use these terms as they are the ones that will be used in questions. The use of other country category terminology **will** be credited in responses.

Question 2b

15 mark questions on WGE03 use the command words 'assess', 'evaluate' or to what 'extent'. While not identical in meaning, these commands share the idea of 'weighing-up' or considering 'how far' or 'how much'. They all require judgements to be made, and all benefit from a conclusion.

This specific question requires consideration of the physical and human factors that influence biodiversity and is asking candidates to judge which are the most important. A significant number of candidates did consider both physical and human factors. Physical factors were often listed with limited depth of explanation – and some important ones, particularly climate / latitude were often only partially explained. The idea of isolation and endemism was often explained much more fully. Human factors – which are largely threats – were often considered in more detail and the use of examples to illustrate the threats was quite common. Mark schemes do refer to the use of evidence, and candidates need to use examples in their responses to meet this criterion. This is the case in all Levels marked answers. Despite a generally good standard there were some issues:

- A number of responses only considered human factors, which no reference to physical factors.
- In some cases the physical factors outlined were natural disasters: on long-timescales these do not have more than a short-term, local impact on biodiversity in general.
- Many answers covered human and physical but did not address the idea of 'relative importance' – they stopped short of making a judgement.

Nevertheless, several answers did provide an evaluation, often along the lines that physical factors have been important over a long timescale, but human threats have become more significant in recent times. In addition these answers often recognised that humans could have a positive impact in biodiversity through conservation i.e. protecting it, if not increasing or restoring it.

Question 3

This question is synoptic. It links together two or more concepts from the compulsory parts of WGE01 and WGE03. In this exam series it linked worldwide population trends and extreme weather hazards. As with other 15 mark essay questions, this question required a judgement to be made i.e. 'to what extent?'

Candidates need to spend a little time thinking about the question. Population trends could be making risks much worse, or only a little worse – or not contributing much to increased risk at all. In addition, there could be other factors that are much more significant in terms of increasing risk such as increased number of floods and cyclones caused by anthropogenic climate change. It could be argued that better management is reducing risk, despite rising population.

Many answers achieved 7-10 marks, usually because they had some understanding of population trends, often linked to increased urbanisation and rising population density in at-risk places. In addition some information – often more sketchy – was provided about trends in extreme weather hazards. In many cases these tended to be two separate accounts that did not fully link population trends to weather hazard risk. The strongest answers broadened their answers out to consider other factors that might be at work. These included the link between global warming and weather hazards, as well as management of hazards – and in the best responses the idea of governance.

These synoptic questions will always require a bit of thinking, because by their very nature they will contain more than one key idea. A small amount of time thinking and briefly planning is likely to pay dividends.

Question 4a

Questions 4a and 5a were the two 5-mark questions, which are point marked. The mark scheme requires that candidates write extended points which are linked to the data stimulus material provided, in this case a graph showing global energy demand in 2010 and projected to 2050.

Quite a number of answers provided generalised reasons for the changes shown, such as rising global population or a growing world economy, which were not linked to the types of energy resources shown. There was also tendency to write a large number of very brief explanations such as 'oil is running out' which were not extended, and not clearly linked to the information provided. A stronger approach would be 'oil demand is projected to decline 180 EJ in 2010 to 140 EJ in 2050 because of peak oil and declining physical supply, which will increase the oil price and encourage switching to alternative energy sources'. That said, there were good explanations linked to the idea that emerging economies would continue to use coal due to its low cost and availability, and many answers recognised that environmental concerns might be the driver behind increased use of renewable. Stronger answers also referred to the rapidly declining cost of wind and solar power.

Question 4b

This was a popular choice of question, more so than the equivalent Q5b on Water Conflicts. The quality of answers varied, but there were many responses that scored Level 3 or Level 4 marks. Most answers were focussed on energy players, but a minority did struggle with this idea and instead focussed on energy issues (such as the Russia-Ukraine gas situation, or the Three Gorges Dam) and in these cases players were often only mentioned 'by accident' in a narrative account of the issues.

Better answers often provided a number of paragraphs each considering different players. OPEC, governments and TNCs were the most common. Individuals and environmental organisations were sometimes referred to. OPEC's role was usually understood quite well, and stronger answers

recognised the limits to its influence. Governments were frequently argued to be the most significant players, especially in countries where state-owned companies were important in energy supply.

Many good answers began with a discussion or definition of energy security. This provided a focus on the question. Weaker responses did not do this and instead tended to 'dive in' with their first player, and not relate the player to 'making countries energy secure'.

As a 15 mark 'assess' question there was a requirement to make a judgement about 'players' in terms of which were the most significant in terms of energy security. A small number of candidates did this. For others, the addition of a brief conclusion linked back to the question would have helped them move up a level in the mark scheme.

Question 5a

The number of candidates choosing question 5 was small, making generalisations about performance difficult. In comparison to parallel Question 4a, 5a was answered slightly better on average. Answers tended to focus more on the specific water uses shown in Figure 4 (irrigation, domestic etc) and explain these specifically, rather than provide more generalised 'overview' reasons which was often the case in Q4a.

It's worth noting that answers to Q5a were sometimes very long and continued into the un-lined space below the answer space. Candidates should be aware they 5 mark questions are short data stimulus questions, not essay questions.

Question 5b

This question focussed on transboundary water supplies and the question of whether they always lead to conflict. A key word in the question is 'always', as it alludes to the idea that perhaps they do, or maybe they do not. Most candidates had a clear understanding of transboundary water and used appropriate examples, especially the Ganges, Mekong and Nile. An issue was the fact that many examples and case studies were used in quite descriptive way, and were really 'the story of X' rather than being tied to the question of conflict specifically. It was good to see that 'conflict' was universally understood in its broader meaning and no answers focussed wholly on war or violence.

Most responses seem had some element of assessment i.e. they recognised that conflict was not inevitable and that in many cases attempts at water sharing agreements had been made, even if these had not always been successfully implemented or respected by all relevant players. Reference to the Helsinki and Berlin Rules could have been stronger in most cases, and all examples used were rivers – whereas there are transboundary aquifer situations that could have been included.

Question 6

This was a popular choice in Section C and overall was the most successfully answered question on the examination paper. The standard of answers was generally good. However, there were a minority of responses that only considered military power. This approach is narrow in the context of a question using the command 'to what extent' and makes judgements harder to come by: a few answers got around this by considering military power on a temporal scale, arguing it was more important in the past than today – however, this still begs the question of what has replaced military power as the most important aspect of power in the present day. Some answers referred to cultural and/or economic power only in their conclusion, and then only in passing, whereas a more detailed consideration of one or more other 'pillars' of power would have strengthened their evaluation.

It was quite common for a variation of the 'pillars of power' idea to be introduced at the start of the essay and used a structure to consider military, economic, cultural and political power. This is good practice and the concept provides a ready-made structure for the whole essay. Answers that began in this way tended to end with a decent conclusion, often arguing that economic or cultural power was much more significant than military. Knowledge was generally up to date, examples relevant and recent, and understanding good. Use of online news websites is clearly helping centres keep up to date with the fast-changing world of geopolitics. There were some interesting and well-informed answers to this question which were enjoyable to read.

Question 7

This option was much less popular than Question 6, so again drawing conclusions is difficult. Those that did choose this question usually performed well and answers were similar in standard to Question 6. The question itself sets up an argument, and candidates recognised that one way to answer the question was to bring in the concept of top-down projects (or perhaps Foreign Direct Investment) and compare this approach to bottom-up style development projects. This is similar to Question 6, in that a narrow focus on bottom-up only makes evaluation more challenging in the same way that focussing only on military power does. It's worth noting that 'to what extent' can be achieved by comparing different bottom-up projects and considering how successful they have been. Most candidates find this more challenging than comparing to a completely different approach to reducing the development gap. As with Question 6, examples and case studies tended to be appropriate and relatively up to date, so suited to the question.

Exam format reminder

It is important to understanding that the examination question types and mark tariffs for WGE03 do not vary from one examination series to the next.

However, within Sections A, B and C the questions will vary from one series to another. This variation is random and does not conform to a pattern.

Some important points to note are:

- In Section A, Question 3 is a synoptic question and it will always be a 15 mark essay question.
- In Section A, there will always be a 10-mark data stimulus question on both A1 Atmosphere and A2 Biodiversity but the 15-mark essay question could be on either A1 or A2.
- In any exam series, Section B will either consist of a 5 mark stimulus question plus a 15 mark essay question, or a 20 mark essay question.
- Section C will be the opposite structure to Section B in any given examination series.

Please see the WGE03 Contested Planet Assessment Guide for further details:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/International%20Advanced%20Level/Geography/2016/Teaching%20and%20learning%20materials/Contested-Planet-Unit-3-WGE03-Assessment-Guide.pdf>

