Pearson Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2021

Pearson Edexcel International A Level
In Geography (WGE03)
Paper 1: Contested Planet

Edexcel and BTEC Qualifications

Edexcel and BTEC qualifications are awarded by Pearson, the UK's largest awarding body. We provide a wide range of qualifications including academic, vocational, occupational and specific programmes for employers. For further information visit our qualifications websites at www.edexcel.com or www.btec.co.uk. Alternatively, you can get in touch with us using the details on our contact us page at www.edexcel.com/contactus.

Pearson: helping people progress, everywhere

Pearson aspires to be the world's leading learning company. Our aim is to help everyone progress in their lives through education. We believe in every kind of learning, for all kinds of people, wherever they are in the world. We've been involved in education for over 150 years, and by working across 70 countries, in 100 languages, we have built an international reputation for our commitment to high standards and raising achievement through innovation in education. Find out more about how we can help you and your students at: www.pearson.com/uk

January 2021
Publications Code WGE03_01_2101_ER

Introduction

The January entry for WGE03 is smaller than the June entry, so making generalisations about performance is difficult. In addition 2020-21 has been an unusual and challenging year and performance was less good compared to January 2020 (although not hugely different). A number of issues are worth raising about performance on this examination paper which can be used to inform preparation for future examinations:

- Question 5 Water Conflicts was more popular than Question 4 Energy Security, which is different to the usual popularity.
- Question 6 Superpower Geographies was more popular than Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap – as usual.
- The difference in quality of answers between optional questions is very small.

Some overall observations:

- Use of place-based examples is a weak in many cases, with significant numbers managing to answer 10 and 15 mark questions without any reference to specific geographical locations.
- Most Figures were interpreted successfully by candidates: as a general rule if there is numerical data on a Figure (such as Figures 3 and 4) candidates should try to use this as part of their answer to increase precision.
- Figures should be fully used: for instance Figure 1 shows the track of a hurricane across the whole Atlantic, and most parts of this need to be referred to in an answer.
- Extended writing skills are generally sound, however too few candidates grasp the importance of making a judgement and including a clear, detailed conclusion in the 15 mark and 20 mark essay questions that use high-level command words i.e. assess and especially evaluate.
- Candidates are never asked to 'describe' on this exam paper. That command word is not used on WGEO3 and there is no credit for pure description of a stimulus Figure.

Question 1 Atmosphere and Weather Systems

This question was perhaps less well done that might have been expected. Quite a number of answers seemed to answer the question 'Describe the changes in the track and intensity of Hurricane Irma'. This is a much more straightforward task that providing reasons for the observed changes and drives at the fundamental difference between the command word 'describe' (what) and 'explain' (why). The former is never used on WGEO3. While there was some understanding of the role high ocean temperatures play in providing tropical cyclones with energy, and how loss of this energy over landmasses leads to dissipation this was the exception rather than the rule. The role of trade winds in the hurricane track, or mid-latitude westerlies in pushing systems north then northeast was almost never considered. A number of answers

described in detail the likely impacts of Irma, which was not the question asked. Understanding of basic physical processes is important.

Question 2a Biodiversity under Threat

This question yielded stronger answers than Question 1, although many answers focussed only on the role of climate i.e. latitudinal temperature variation and precipitation, as causes of the variation on biodiversity levels shown. Many answers did make good use of Figure 2 and referred to a range of locations with some accuracy – an essential part of a data stimulus answer. There was generally quite good understanding of the nature of biodiversity. Climate can explain much of the pattern in terms of limiting factors, however there are many other explanations. The role of endemism on islands, and evolutionary divergence was quite frequently part of answers. Altitude ('highlands and islands') was sometimes considered as a factor but rarely. It's worth noting that the terms 'latitude' and 'altitude' were sometimes confused. There were a number of answers that focussed on human factors (deforestation, urbanisation, pollution) despite the question being focussed on physical factors. In addition, some answers argued that natural hazards (tropical cyclones, earthquakes) affect biodiversity when this is not the case.

Question 2b Biodiversity under Threat

The actual use of examples in this question was generally sound with themes such as CITES, BAPs and other global agreements often used. There were some local conservation and biodiversity management examples used such as Campfire, national parks and others. In some cases candidates seemed less sure which were global and which were local – so while the examples used were relevant they were sometimes weakly applied to the question. In some cases there was an excessive reliance on the Kyoto and Paris climate agreements. Whilst these are relevant, they are only indirectly so as neither has biodiversity and conservation as its primary purpose. A number of answers only considered global climate agreements and thus neglected the potential to argue that in some cases 'local' approaches might be better. Few answers came to a convincing conclusion as to which global approach might be best / better although some convincingly argued that a local approach often works better.

Question 3 Synoptic

There is no doubt that these synoptic questions can be challenging although many students rise to the occasion and produce interesting and well-informed answers which often demonstrate good evaluation skills. A number of answers were rather too quick to accept that international migration was easy and possible – whereas for many people it is actually quite impossible at worst, or dangerous and illegal at best. There was, however, a generally good understanding of the need for action of some sort especially in terms of the threat posed by global warming. Although in the minority, some candidates were aware of issues facing the Maldives, Tuvalu and Vanuatu among others and the possibly that 'environmental refugees' might have to have to move elsewhere.

The strongest answers recognised that other solutions – either global action on global warming or local actions to build hazard resilience were likely to be more 'do-able' than migration because of the unwillingness of most countries to accept large numbers of migrants. Question 3 is a 'thinking' question with no formula for an answer, just the willingness to accept a well-argued case with a clear conclusion and judgement. Candidates need to be confident in their arguments.

Question 4 Energy Security

Question 4 was a little less popular than the parallel Question 5 in this series. The question focussed on the local versus global impacts with respect to renewable versus fossil fuel energy sources. In general understanding if different energy sources was good and most answers covered at least one renewable energy source and either a collective 'fossil fuels' or had a focus on coal.
The weaker answers tended to just describe a range of impacts, usually fairly accurately, but without discussion of their global or local nature. Better answer covered the global and local perspective but in most cases lack of an evaluation of which impacts were the more significant. In some cases there was an excessive reliance on one case study, such as biofuels, rather than a broader comparison of energy sources. A number of answers were 'almost there' in terms of content and support but did need a much clearer evaluation that made a supported judgement about which impacts were more significant. Some did argue that the global climate change consequences of fossil fuel use were serious and potentially widespread and were therefore considered more significant.

Question 5 Water Conflicts

A more popular choice than the Energy topic, which is actually a reversal of past trends. In some ways the answers to this question were similar to question 4. Most answers were able to explain a range of physical factors and human factors that affected water supply. However, a significant number considered 'quality and quantity' was one rather than as 'quality' versus 'quantity'. These aspects of water supply are not the same, as it is possible to have a large quantity of water but for than water to be hard to use due to quality issues i.e. polluted rivers and aquifers.
Factors such as precipitation levels, supply for glacier melt, groundwater levels and geology were considered alongside human issues such as unsustainable aquifer use, water pollution, desalination and water management (Singapore was occasionally and very usefully used as an example here). However, as in Question 4 most answers reached only a very limited conclusion if any at all. There was an absence of evaluation in terms of which factors – physical or human – were most important. This skill is crucial in terms of Level 3 and Level 4 marks in particular.

Question 6 Superpower Geographies

Question 6a was probably the least successfully answered across this examination paper, with the possible exception of Question 1. The majority of candidates attempted

to explain the ranking shown in Figure 3, whereas the focus of the question was how the ranking might have been produced. Answers with the correct focus were very rare. It is very important that candidates carefully read questions, especially when the question has a data stimulus Figure, and do not assume the question based on a reaction to the Figure. A very small number of answers did consider data such as total GDP or military spending and explain how this data could have been used as part of a ranking exercise.

Question 6b was fairly successful, however some candidates tried to answer a slightly different question more focussed on the relative ranking of superpowers. The part 'b' question does not relate to Figure 3, only part 'a' does. This is always the case, and is the case in Question 7 on this paper. While relative ranking is relevant to the question of multi-polar (or bi- or uni-polar) world there does need to be some discussion of geopolitical polarity and in some cases this was absent. The question of polarity was not familiar to all candidates. Nevertheless, there were some answers that did grasp the question and often argued that despite the rise of China and other emerging superpowers the world was still, just, unipolar based on the power of the USA. Terms like 'hyperpower' were sometimes seen in answers and some offered good support for their argument based around the 'pillars of power' concept.

Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap

Question 7a was generally answered much better than question 6a and candidates showed a good understanding of the data shown in Figure 4. Most answered focussed on Ethiopia and were not side-tracked by the data on France provided as a comparison. Some very sound explanations were provided of how poor governance and corruption could affect the provision of basic services and how aid could be diverted from those in need.
Question 7b represented a familiar topic to many candidates and there were some sound answers. A small number focussed wholly on investment by TNCs so they were really considering the costs and benefits of Foreign Direct Investment by private companies rather than top-down development delivered by governments and IGOs (sometimes in partnership with TNCs of course). Most answers had useful examples of top-down projects and outlined the costs and benefits of these, with the better answers getting their evaluation from the obvious comparison with bottom-up projects often run by NGOs. In common with other 'evaluate' questions conclusions and judgements were often rather thin and this was a limiting factor in terms of marks.

Summary

There is no doubt that 2020-2021 has been a very challenging year for all candidates and this was reflected, to some degree in the responses to this exam paper. Going forward it's worth remembering:

1. The importance of very carefully reading questions, key words and command words and thinking about question meaning. This cannot be rushed.

2. Responding to the command word. The command ‘describe’ is never used on WGEO3.
3. The importance of evaluation skills, weighing up different sides of an argument and coming to clear, supported conclusions and judgements. This is crucial in the 15 and 20 mark questions for Level 3 and Level 4 marks.

Exam format reminder

It is important to understand 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. 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

Pearson Education Limited. Registered company number 872828
with its registered office at 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, United Kingdom