AQA

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

Sociology   SCLY2

(Specification 1191)

Unit 2: Education with Research Methods;
Health with Research Methods

Report on the Examination

SCLY2

General

The examination produced a wide range of responses from the poorly prepared to some outstanding examples of sociological knowledge and imagination. There seemed to be less of a tendency to write overly long answers to the shorter questions this year and candidates generally attempted all the questions required. This undoubtedly raised the overall performance of many candidates as a result.

One notable feature of very many answers to the questions on research methods and methods in context was a lack of basic knowledge about the concepts of reliability and validity. As these are central to an understanding and evaluation of sociological research methods, this often seriously undermined candidates' ability to make coherent or accurate points in relation to the questions. Centres need to ensure that their candidates are able to explain and apply these key ideas to the range of research methods that they encounter in the specification.

Very pleasingly, it is clear that more centres now appreciate the importance of the key AO2 skill of Application in answering the Methods in Context Questions 05 and 14. This year, many candidates were able to identify and evaluate a range of ways in which their chosen method might be applied to the specific issue in the question, and scored high marks as a result.

Examiners frequently lament the poor quality of candidates' handwriting. This year was no exception, with many barely legible scripts; centres would be well advised to review their candidates' handwriting and consider the alternatives available for those for whom this is likely to be a problem. For further information and advice, please see the AQA website http://web.aqa.org.uk/admin/p_special_2.php or email specialneeds@aqa.org.uk.

Section A – Education with Research Methods

This section was by far the more popular of the two on this paper.

Question 01

Although some candidates had no knowledge of the concept, most were able to explain it in terms of wanting or obtaining rewards in the present, present-time orientation or similar. Some candidates who were unable to offer an explanation or definition scored one mark for a suitable example, such as 'going out instead of revising'. Some repeated one of the two terms in the question (usually 'immediate') without explaining it and so scored one mark. The commonest incorrect response was to claim that immediate gratification referred to a reward given by a teacher for good work.

Question 02

Most candidates performed well here, with policies such as academies, league tables, Ofsted inspections, parental choice, or formula funding. Some answers revealed a lack of understanding of marketisation by identifying inappropriate policies such as the tripartite system, EMAs or Sure Start. A small number of candidates had no understanding of the term 'policies' and usually gave an account of concepts such as labelling, cultural deprivation etc instead. A few candidates wrote far too much for this question, when all that was needed was a few words of identification for each policy.

Question 03

Among the weakest answers, many candidates did not understand the term 'function' and instead wrote about educational policy or factors affecting achievement. Other weak responses identified functions in very commonsensical terms (for example, 'the function of education is to educate the young'). More successful answers were able to identify one or two functions, but many of these lacked concepts or elaboration and tended towards a list-like rather than a more analytical account. The best answers drew on a number of perspectives – usually functionalism and Marxism, but feminism and the New Right also appeared. These answers dealt with a range of functions, such as child-minding, secondary socialisation, skills provision, selection and role allocation, the reproduction and legitimation of class inequality or of patriarchy. At this level, candidates made accurate use of a range of relevant concepts, such as meritocracy, achieved and ascribed status, particularistic and universalistic norms, the hidden curriculum, the myth of meritocracy, the correspondence principle, and ideological state apparatuses. Use of two or more perspectives often facilitated candidates' efforts to generate evaluation.

Question 04

There were relatively few very poor answers to this question, but unfortunately very good answers were also scarce. The weakest responses were usually limited to a sparse account of labelling, anecdotal in application and lacking reference to studies, specific social groups or even to educational achievement. At the other extreme were much more successful answers that focused clearly on factors and processes within schools. These factors and processes included labelling, the ideal pupil, streaming and differentiation, the self-fulfilling prophecy, polarisation and pupil subcultures, the A* to C economy, the ethnocentric curriculum, coursework, the feminisation of education, teachers as role models, teacher racism and institutional racism. These successful answers gave clear, conceptually detailed, analytical accounts referenced to appropriate studies and explicitly applied to differences in the educational achievements of different social groups (usually class, ethnic and gender groups). In these answers, evaluation was well focused and explicit so that, for instance, accounts of external factors such as cultural, linguistic or material deprivation were clearly linked to an assessment of the importance of internal factors such as labelling or streaming. Some candidates also used studies such as Fuller's to argue that labelling explanations are too deterministic.

However, more commonly, candidates produced 'catch all' accounts of underachievement consisting of a run-through of one or two internal factors (usually labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy, and often not extending much beyond what was in the Item) followed by a similar, juxtaposed, list of material on external factors not applied to the question. Some of these answers offered a broader range of social groups, while others were confined to only one – usually social class. The question (and the Item) invited some final relative assessment of the importance of internal versus external influences, but this rarely appeared. The conclusion, when present, was more commonly a rather repetitive summary of the essay's content.

Question 05

This question clearly differentiated responses from different centres. As in previous examinations, some centres seemed not to have highlighted to their candidates the importance of the skill of Application in answering this question; many candidates wrongly assumed that the occasional brief reference to 'truancy' or 'truants' was sufficient. Consequently, candidates who scored well on the other questions sometimes scored less well here – the maximum mark for an answer solely about the chosen method with no application to education was 11/20, and this was achieved only by answers that were conceptually sound and considered a range of practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations. Another type of response that scored poorly was one that recycled large sections of the Item with no real development of the ideas extracted from it and with only limited or implicit links to features of the chosen method. Pleasingly, however, fewer candidates than in previous examinations made the error of answering on both methods rather than selecting just one of them.

However, many candidates were able to offer at least a few research characteristics of groups in education, such as pupils, teachers, heads or parents. A minority of candidates, but more than in previous examinations, were able to identify some factors relevant to the specific issue in the question, in this case truancy, such as involvement in other deviant activities, problems of finding truants (since, by definition, they are often absent from school) or parents withholding consent for fear that their children could be stigmatised. Similarly, heads and governors might be reluctant to allow access to the school for fear of the school's image being "tarnished with the stigma of truancy when in competition for parental approval in a marketised system". However, some candidates who showed insight into the nature of truancy were held back by an inadequate grasp of the features of their chosen method – for example, being unaware that official statistics are often already in the public domain, or ignoring the 'participant' aspect of participant observation.

Question 06

A fair number of candidates offered a sound explanation, usually referring to 'truthfulness' or, in a few cases, the idea of 'a method that measures what it seeks to measure'. However, it is disappointing to note that many candidates had no idea of the meaning of this central concept. This lack of knowledge was also evident in the failure to apply the concept appropriately in answers to other questions on the paper. In particular, a significant number of candidates failed to score because they confused or coupled the term with reliability or accuracy. Others answered in a circular way, generally to the effect that validity involved valid data.

Question 07

This was generally not well answered and many candidates were unable to give an accurate and complete explanation of a sampling frame. Frequently, candidates had no idea of the meaning of the term. These answers sometimes equated it with a pilot study or with a specific type of sampling. Answers that showed a partial knowledge of the term usually focused on the idea of a target or research population, without referring to the idea of a list of its members. Some candidates noted that a sampling frame was the source from which a sample was obtained, without giving any indication as to the term's substantive meaning. However, most candidates were able to define a sample, usually in terms of a group selected to participate in research.

Question 08

Among the most commonly cited problems were that documents might be outdated, unrepresentative or hard to access or interpret. Failure to score marks was often the result of citing characteristics (for example, 'bias') rather than problems as such. Other candidates failed to score for claiming that documents lack validity without qualifying the point in some way (given that documents are generally thought of as offering more valid, insightful data). Similarly, some coupled the terms 'invalid' and 'unreliable' in such a way as to demonstrate that they understood neither. Others failed to score by referring to the problems of official statistics rather than documents.

Question 09

Answers to this question were often quite thin, indicating that many candidates either had not studied experiments as a research method or had done so in an incomplete way.

Some weak responses misunderstood the nature of the question, taking 'experiments' to mean 'research methods'; consequently these answers offered a range of general points about research methods (such as problems of time, cost, obtaining a sample etc) with very limited if any specific reference to experiments. Some confused field experiments with participant observation and wrote at length about the latter.

More successful answers showed some basic descriptive knowledge of laboratory and field experiments, and occasionally of the comparative method/thought experiments or natural experiments. These answers typically were able to give an account of one or two problems such as issues of ecological validity, control, ethics or problems of reliability. Some of these answers drifted into often lengthy accounts of the advantages of experiments, and many were uncertain as to the difference between reliability and validity.

The best answers offered coverage of two or more types of experiments, often developing analysis and evaluation through comparison and contrast of these, for example noting the tension between artificiality and naturalness, reliability and validity, or the Hawthorne effect and lack of participants' informed consent. These answers drew upon a range of relevant examples, including Rosenthal and Jacobson, Rosenhan, Milgram, Bandura etc and located their discussion within the theoretical framework of positivism and interpretivism.

Section B – Health with Research Methods

Very few candidates chose to answer the questions in this section.

Question 10

Few candidates were able to offer a satisfactory explanation or definition of the term or to provide a synonym for it.

Question 11

There was a wide variety of responses to this question. Many candidates scored highly by identifying differences in standards of living, diet, climate, spending on or availability of health care, and cultural practices. However, in some cases candidates mistook differences between ethnic groups for international differences.

Question 12

Many candidates misread this question and wrote (often at considerable length) about health care rather than health chances. This included accounts of women visiting the doctor, women taking their children to see the doctor and macho men not going to the doctor – all with little or no link to the issue of health chances. Better answers focused more successfully on issues such as gender differences in lifestyle, leisure activities and occupation. In discussing men's health chances, candidates considered alcohol consumption, smoking, driving and dangerous or stressful work. Hegemonic masculinity featured occasionally. In relation to women, the dual burden, triple shift, socialisation and poverty appeared.

Question 13

In general, this question was not very well answered and candidates tended to lack reasonable knowledge of the topic. Weaker answers often had little or no idea of the meaning of 'social control' and spent a good deal of their time in recycling material from the Item without adding much of their own, or alternatively focused on another area of the specification such as class inequalities in health. Somewhat better answers could present at least one view of the medical profession (usually Parsons' analysis of the sick role), though quite often lacking detail. The best responses included a range of approaches, such as Illich, Doyal, Foucault, McKeown, Witz and Oakley. These generated evaluation through consideration of issues such as who the medical profession serves and its role in relation to capitalism and patriarchy. Concepts such as iatrogenesis, the medicalisation of childbirth, legitimation, ideology, reproduction of the labour force and ethnocentrism appeared in these answers.

Question 14

Many of the same issues arose in response to this question as in the answers to Question 05 (see comments on this question above). In particular, while candidates were generally able to write appropriately about some of the strengths and/or limitations of their chosen method, the majority found it difficult to apply this knowledge and understanding to the issue of studying diet and health. This meant that most candidates were unable to score above 11/20. Similarly to Question 05, there was a tendency in some answers to quote at length from the Item without adding much to it and with no real link to the features of the chosen method.

However, some candidates were able to make links between the use of unstructured interviews or self-completion questionnaires and one or two features of health in general. Others went further and made specific links between their chosen method and particular aspects of the study of diet and health, such as the advantages or disadvantages of studying an issue that often carries stigma, or how research problems caused by gender, class or ethnic differences in attitudes to or knowledge about diet might be overcome by the chosen method.

Question 15

A fair number of candidates offered a sound explanation, usually referring to 'truthfulness' or, in a few cases, the idea of 'a method that measures what it seeks to measure'. However, it is disappointing to note that many candidates had no idea of the meaning of this central concept. This lack of knowledge was also evident in the failure to apply the concept appropriately in answers to other questions on the paper. In particular, a significant number of candidates failed to score because they confused or coupled the term with reliability or accuracy. Others answered in a circular way, generally to the effect that validity involved valid data.

Question 16

This was generally not well answered and many candidates were unable to give an accurate and complete explanation of a sampling frame. Frequently, candidates had no idea of the meaning of the term. These answers sometimes equated it with a pilot study or with a specific type of sampling. Answers that showed a partial knowledge of the term usually focused on the idea of a target or research population, without referring to the idea of a list of its members. Some candidates noted that a sampling frame was the source from which a sample was obtained, without giving any indication as to the term's substantive meaning. However, most candidates were able to define a sample, usually in terms of a group selected to participate in research.

Question 17

Among the most commonly cited problems were that documents might be outdated, unrepresentative or hard to access or interpret. Failure to score marks was often the result of citing characteristics (for example, 'bias') rather than problems as such. Other candidates failed to score for claiming that documents lack validity without qualifying the point in some way (given that documents are generally thought of as offering more valid, insightful data). Similarly, some coupled the terms 'invalid' and 'unreliable' in such a way as to demonstrate that they understood neither. Others failed to score by referring to the problems of official statistics rather than documents.

Question 18

Answers to this question were often quite thin, indicating that many candidates either had not studied experiments as a research method or had done so in an incomplete way.

Some weak responses misunderstood the nature of the question, taking 'experiments' to mean 'research methods'; consequently these answers offered a range of general points about research methods (such as problems of time, cost, obtaining a sample etc) with very limited if any specific reference to experiments. Some confused field experiments with participant observation and wrote at length about the latter.

More successful answers showed some basic descriptive knowledge of laboratory and field experiments, and occasionally of the comparative method/thought experiments or natural experiments. These answers typically were able to give an account of one or two problems such as issues of ecological validity, control, ethics or problems of reliability. Some of these answers drifted into often lengthy accounts of the advantages of experiments, and many were uncertain as to the difference between reliability and validity.

The best answers offered coverage of two or more types of experiments, often developing analysis and evaluation through comparison and contrast of these, for example noting the tension between artificiality and naturalness, reliability and validity, or the Hawthorne effect and lack of participants' informed consent. These answers drew upon a range of relevant examples, including Rosenthal and Jacobson, Rosenhan, Milgram, Bandura etc and located their discussion within the theoretical framework of positivism and interpretivism.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

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