



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

Sociology

SCLY2

(Specification 1191)

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

Report on the Examination

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SCLY2

General

Most students completed all the questions in their chosen section. However, judging by the evidence of responses to the final question (usually Question 09 or 18), some may not have managed their time effectively and not written as much as they could have done. Correspondingly, there was some tendency to write too much for Questions 02 and 11 (each worth six marks). Students should be discouraged from writing lengthy answers to such short questions: a brief sentence is normally enough to score two marks for each of the three points required by the question.

Pleasingly, there was some evidence that more students are coming to understand the specific demands of the Methods in Context Questions 05 and 14, ie that they must demonstrate the skill of Application if they are to access the higher marks. However, too many continue to treat these as if they are 'pure' methods questions that require only an account of the chosen method's strengths and limitations, without reference to the particular issue in the question. Teachers should also note the particular importance of the Items that are provided to support answers to these questions and encourage their students to study, reflect on and develop the points made in them.

The illegibility of handwriting continues to be a serious issue for a significant and perhaps growing minority of students. Clearly, if a script is unreadable in whole or in part, the examiner is unable to credit the student's responses. Teachers and centres are therefore urged to assess the legibility of their students' written work (and especially their writing under time-constrained conditions) and where necessary to take appropriate steps, including the provision of an amanuensis or a word-processed answer. Further guidance on this matter can be readily obtained from AQA. 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. Teachers are further advised to take action in good time to address this problem before students sit their examinations.

Section A – Education with Research Methods

The majority of students chose to answer the questions in this section.

Question 01

Students scored full marks for answers such as that education mirrors the workplace. Some scored one mark for answers that suggested a link between the two institutions but without recognising that one mirrored or reflected the other.

Question 02

The most commonly suggested criticisms receiving credit were, that the education system is not meritocratic, that it instils ruling-class ideology rather than societal values, and that it fails to prepare students adequately for work. Some students failed to gain full marks because they simply criticised one or more ways in which the education system works, wrongly assuming that these were functionalist views.

Question 03

Less successful answers to this question had no real idea of what a policy is and instead presented one or two thin points from studies of class and achievement. However, the great majority of students were aware of one or more relevant government policies, (notably the tripartite system, comprehensive schools, Sure Start, Education Maintenance Allowances, tuition fees and various marketisation policies) although a few concentrated on school rather than government policies. Accounts of these policies varied in degree of detail and accuracy (and sometimes with confusion over chronology), but the best were able to explain clearly the key features of the policy named and its possible aims in relation to class differences in achievement, with specific reference to relevant sociological concepts such as material or cultural deprivation or deferred gratification. These answers went on to offer an evaluation of the extent to which each policy may have narrowed or widened class differences in achievement. A few students wrote excessively long answers to this question.

Question 04

A common limitation of many less successful answers was an inability to distinguish between different ethnic groups and their achievements. These tended to make the erroneous assumption that all minority ethnic groups underachieve (despite the information contained in the Item). Some used the offensive term 'ethnics'. Many of these answers ended up presenting sociological material on underachievement (eg on labelling, material deprivation, etc) that was generic and lacked substantive reference to ethnic groups via relevant studies. Alternatively, studies that were actually about social class differences were made to act as proxies for ethnicity; for example, many students asserted incorrectly that Bernstein's concept of restricted speech codes applied to ethnic minorities. By contrast, better answers focused on at least one named ethnic group (most often Black Caribbean) and offered some relevant explanations, such as family structure, the ethnocentric curriculum, teacher racism, institutional racism and material and cultural deprivation. The best answers distinguished clearly between different ethnic groups, organising their answers around a range of conceptually detailed explanations (often grouped into 'internal' and 'external' factors) evaluated by reference to relevant empirical studies. Many students also took their cue from the Item to discuss the differential impact of class and/or gender on the achievements of pupils of different ethnic backgrounds. This often produced effective evaluation, but some less successful answers instead strayed into lengthy but poorly applied accounts of class and gender differences in achievement without reference to ethnicity.

Question 05

This series more students appear to have understood that there is an advantage in Methods in Context questions with actually applying their knowledge of the selected method to the study of the particular research issue in the question. However, the most common shortcoming continues to be simply to list some of the chosen method's strengths and/or limitations with little or no attempt to apply this information to the specified issue, or even to education in general. Among these responses, one can distinguish between those with a sound knowledge of the method and those with only a limited and partial knowledge. However, the best of the former type were able to score a maximum of only 11 marks out of 20 and, to achieve even this mark they needed to have a thorough grasp of the practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations of the selected method, which most in fact lacked.

By contrast, those students who heeded the wording of the question and sought to apply their knowledge to the issue (or at least to educational contexts in general) usually fared better, even when their grasp of the various strengths and limitations of the method may have been less comprehensive. Some of this application was more general, for example, identifying some of the relevant research characteristics of the situation such as the need to gain permission from the school, parents or pupils. However, the best responses were able to link specific features of the research method to specific features of the research issue of streaming. For example, some noted that unstructured interviews enabled rapport to be built up with lower-stream students who might otherwise have mistrusted the researcher as just another authority figure, thereby enabling the sociologist to explore feelings of low self-esteem at having been defined by the school as a failure. A few well-developed applications of this kind would be likely to secure a mark in the top band. Most of the best answers made effective use of the Item and teachers should encourage students to study Items carefully with the specific goal of both developing and applying points from them.

Unstructured interviews appear to have been a somewhat more popular choice than field experiments and some of those who opted for the latter confused them with participant observation. A few students attempted to deal with both methods; such answers only gained credit for the better of the two and students should be firmly warned against this strategy.

Question 06

Students scored both marks for answers that conveyed the idea that operationalisation involves defining concepts so that they can be measured. Some students who were unable to articulate this idea fully were still able to gain both marks by adding an appropriate illustration of how a particular concept (such as poverty or educational achievement) had been operationalised. However, an example with no further explanation could score only one mark.

Question 07

Most students could suggest at least one reason, the most common being low response rate, followed by differential response rate as between groups within the sample (eg lower response rates from those groups less interested, less literate or with less time on their hands to complete the questionnaire). The commonest error was to give reasons for the lack of validity of respondents' answers to the questions (eg that respondents might lie), rather than about representativeness. There still appears to be confusion among a significant number of students as to the meanings of such basic methodological concepts.

Question 08

Students scored marks for answers such as the sociologist's theoretical perspective or their personal or career interests, the wishes of funding bodies, and popular or media interest in a topic. Some students failed to score because they suggested factors associated with choice of method rather than choice of topic.

Question 09

Some responses to this question were rather brief and seemed rushed or incomplete, indicating problems with time management. Less successful answers tended to focus on purely practical advantages of official statistics, while better responses also considered a range of theoretical and ethical issues. In general, answers were better focused on the advantages than responses to similar questions in previous examination series. However, a significant number of students produced prepared answers that listed the advantages followed by a juxtaposed list of disadvantages without making any link between the two. This often rendered up to half the answer irrelevant. Much more effective, but unfortunately less common, were answers that used disadvantages in an explicitly evaluative way by linking them to the identified advantages. For example, some pointed out that official statistics are often freely available to sociologists, but went on to note that this is not always the case because the state may withhold them, for example, on grounds of national security. Some answers lost focus on the set question by digressing into lengthy accounts of the advantages or disadvantages of the various methods of collecting the data for official statistics, such as questionnaires or interviews. Some good answers gave conceptually detailed accounts of theoretical advantages from a positivist perspective, while at the other extreme some conflated the key concepts of reliability and validity. Some were able to use relevant studies (such as Durkheim on suicide) to illustrate their answer, but often a bare mention of, say, the Census was the only example. However, some students made a useful distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' statistics.

Section B – Health with Research Methods

Few students chose to answer the questions in this section.

Question 10

Most students were able to offer a satisfactory explanation, such as that childbirth is treated as an illness, or that doctors have taken away control of childbirth from women.

Question 11

The most common features identified included the idea that doctors are gatekeepers to the sick role, the obligation of the sick to get well by obeying the doctor's orders, and the right of the sick not to be blamed for their illness. Some answers went on, unnecessarily, to offer criticisms of the features they identified.

Question 12

A few less successful answers confused international differences with ethnic differences, while others offered very generalised or stereotyped views of the health problems of less developed countries. Better answers began to identify some specific issues, such as differences in the availability or quality of health care. Among the best answers, reasons such as levels of inequality or average standards of living were outlined.

Question 13

The weakest responses to this question often tended to recycle material from Item C without adding much of significance to it. Better answers were able to present a reasonable account of some potentially relevant sociological material on mental illness, although this was not always well focused on interactionism. For example, some students presented reasonable accounts of class, gender or ethnic differences in patterns or rates of mental illness, but with only brief reference to interactionist explanations such as labelling. The best answers were able to sustain a focus on interactionism and to present a range of contributions, some of which developed aspects of the Item, such as the idea of a deviant career of mental illness resulting from stigmatised societal reaction, or Goffman on the mortification of patients' identities. Some students developed effective evaluation of interactionist approaches by considering the idea that mental illness is a real phenomenon that predates its labelling by doctors and is perhaps caused by structural factors, or by arguing that the extent to which members of a group are labelled mentally ill corresponds to the relative powerlessness or low status of that group.

Question 14

Many of the issues raised by responses to this Methods in Context question are common to the parallel question in Section A and readers are advised to study the comments under Question 05 above. In particular, responses to Question 14 can be distinguished in terms of their grasp of the strengths and limitations of the chosen method and, more importantly, the extent to which they succeeded in applying this knowledge to the specific issue of patients' experiences of Accident and Emergency services, or even to health contexts in general. As with Question 05, the best responses were able to show how far the method selected would be effective in studying the particular issue in the question. For example, some were able to argue that structured interviews would enable the researcher to record the responses of those who would otherwise be unable to complete a written questionnaire due to their injuries, but that the nature of some injuries or conditions (such as drunkenness or severe trauma) would not lend themselves to oral questioning. Similarly, some students noted that (covert) non-participant observation would be an option in an A and E setting where members of the public can enter relatively easily and anonymously compared with many other healthcare settings.

Of the two methods, structured interviews appear to have been a more popular choice than non-participant observation.

Question 15

Students scored both marks for answers that conveyed the idea that operationalisation involved defining concepts so that they can be measured. Some students who were unable to articulate this idea fully were still able to gain both marks by adding an appropriate illustration of how a particular concept (such as poverty or educational achievement) had been operationalised. However, an example with no further explanation could score only one mark.

Question 16

Most students could suggest at least one reason, the most common being low response rate, followed by differential response rate as between groups within the sample (eg lower response rates from those groups less interested, less literate or with less time on their hands to complete the questionnaire). The commonest error was to give reasons for the lack of validity of respondents' answers to the questions (eg that respondents might lie), rather than about representativeness. There still appears to be confusion among a significant number of students as to the meanings of such basic methodological concepts.

Question 17

Students scored for answers such as the sociologist's theoretical perspective or their personal or career interests, the wishes of funding bodies, and popular or media interest in a topic. Some failed to score because they suggested factors associated with choice of method rather than choice of topic.

Question 18

Some responses to this question were rather brief and seemed rushed or incomplete, indicating problems with time management. Less successful answers tended to focus on purely practical advantages of official statistics, while better responses also considered a range of theoretical and ethical issues. In general, answers seemed somewhat better focused on the advantages than responses to similar questions in previous examination series. However, a significant number of students produced prepared answers that listed the advantages and then followed with a juxtaposed list of disadvantages without making any link between the two. This often rendered up to half the answer irrelevant. Much more effective, but unfortunately less common, were answers that used disadvantages in an explicitly evaluative way by linking them to the identified advantages. For example, some pointed out that official statistics are often freely available to sociologists, but went on to note that this is not always the case because the state may withhold them, for example, on grounds of national security. Some answers lost focus on the set question by digressing into lengthy accounts of the advantages or disadvantages of the various methods of collecting the data for official statistics, such as questionnaires or interviews. Some good answers gave conceptually detailed accounts of theoretical advantages from a positivist perspective while, at the other extreme, some conflated the key concepts of reliability and validity. Some were able to use relevant studies (such as Durkheim on suicide) to illustrate their answer, but often a bare mention of, say, the Census, was the only example. However, some students made a useful distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' statistics.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website: <http://www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat.html>

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

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