



REPORT ON CANDIDATE PERFORMANCE

Results were generally disappointing, with a slightly lower pass rate than in recent diets.

To some extent this was not surprising; there was an exceptional examination entry for this last diet of the Beyond 2000 syllabus, including a number of ill-prepared candidates.

Most of the problems to be discussed in this report are familiar, and visible from previous examinations. Concern must be expressed that these issues will have an even greater effect under the new syllabus for Paper P10, TOPCIMA.

The main concern is that many candidates are not adequately prepared for the examination, and have made insufficient effort to acquire the specific skills and approach needed to succeed by preparing an appropriate report in the time available.

The examination requirement was again notably clear and explicit, as in recent diets. Well-prepared candidates used the guidance provided to provide appropriate reports. Others demonstrated that they had not acquired the necessary skills in analysing case study material, evaluating the data provided in the pre-seen and unseen parts of the case, prioritising the range of issues presented, and providing clear recommendations on the key issues, as guided by the specific requirement.

Continued indications of progress by successful candidates

1. Most candidates have learnt to handle the mechanics of the examination by the basic preparation of trying a mock examination, and developing the skill of pacing themselves over the three hours. Relatively few have difficulty in allocating their time and ensuring that all requirements are adequately covered. Very few are obviously suffering from time pressure at the end of the examination. The introduction of 20 minutes of reading time in all Professional papers from May 2005 onwards should help candidates to review and balance all the issues involved, without feeling any pressure to start writing before the case is fully understood.
2. Presentation continued to be good – generally much better than the other examinations at Intermediate and Final level. The written English was nearly always reasonable, and was only occasionally difficult to understand, or inappropriate for a formal report. Report layouts were almost always clear and the reports were normally easy to navigate. Some candidates spent too much time on attempting to achieve excellence in report layouts, providing introductions, terms of reference, and other features that would be desirable in a formal report in the working environment with less rigorous time constraints, but which can be sacrificed without significant loss of marks in the examination environment. Reports were not always effective in covering all the clearly indicated sub-requirements of the question, and this often resulted

from report layouts that did not reflect the sub-requirements fully and accurately.

3. Research of the industry background was variable. It was often one of the key differentiators between candidates. The similarity of many scripts suggested an undue reliance on research by lecturers.
4. Recommendations were nearly always feasible and defensible. The reasons supporting the recommendations were less good and were often implied from previous discussion rather than clearly and explicitly stated. Simplistic recommendations were often based solely on stakeholder issues, with little or no consideration of the costs of the alternative proposals or their forecast impact on the various objectives and performance measures. A careful balance was required.
5. Most candidates recognised from the Case Study Assessment Matrix that calculations were expected, and duly provided calculations. The quality and relevance of the calculations varied considerably. Good candidates made sensible if not always very successful attempts to calculate the impact of the various proposals on MGH's financial performance.

Key problems with the MGH case

1. The most common problem encountered by candidates was a failure to review all major issues to provide an effective platform for the prioritisation of issues. This normally arose from failing to prepare some form of position appraisal, probably a SWOT analysis.
2. A related problem was that, while most candidates recognised the governance issues, many failed to recognise the financial issues, the significant and growing deficit, and the poor current performance of MGH.
3. Many candidates spent far too much time on contractor issues. Contractor risks existed – but were far from being the main focus of the case.
4. Calculations were very variable in relevance and technical competence. Calculation presentation was often weak and it was often difficult to see what candidates were attempting to do in their calculations. Some expansion of the explanation of calculations would often have been very useful.

Other key problems

Many problems for unsuccessful candidates were very similar to those in previous case study examinations, and have been discussed in previous reports

1. Reading and meeting the question requirement

As already noted, this was a significant problem.

There has been a pattern of providing candidates with extremely clear requirements with precisely defined choices to be made. This given, candidates are expected to meet precise requirements.

This may well not continue in the TOPCIMA paper. Case studies can be designed with a single very broad requirement – to advise. This would of course imply such

sub-requirements as appraise the situation, prioritise the issues, define the alternative possible courses of action, analyse these with appropriate calculations, and make recommendations supported with appropriate reasons showing that the situation is improved.

The examination has not taken this approach to date, but could well do so in future in the new syllabus with the TOPCIMA examination and a new marking matrix (the TOPCIMA Assessment Matrix). Future candidates must be prepared for this approach.

2. Weak reasons for recommendations

Candidates should read a requirement for recommendations as implying recommendations with reasons.

Some candidates provided feasible and sensible recommendations, but failed to explain why the particular recommendations had been made in preference to obvious alternatives.

3. Financial analysis

There have always been some candidates who provide very weak financial analysis. This time the particular problems were:

- a. Poor analysis of the pre-seen material leading to a lack of recognition of the significance of the growing deficit.
- b. Analysis of the comparison of the leasing charges and the capital costs from the contractor's point of view, rather than that of MGH. Contractor risk is an issue, and contractor profitability is part of this. But the main focus of the case is the MGH choice of proposals to improve performance.
- c. Very weak attempts at valid calculations of the impact on MGH financial performance of the alternative proposals. Many candidates need to improve skills in setting out and explaining comparative calculations.

Candidates should be able to make sensible forecasts from the pre-seen part of the case of analysis techniques that might be required, and do some basic revision.

Commentary on candidates' performance in relation to the question set:

Write a report to the MGH Board in which you

- evaluate and prioritise the strategic issues facing MGH at the present time

It was surprising quite how many candidates, despite this specific requirement, and the marks available in the matrix for prioritisation of issues, did not provide a separate report section reviewing the issues facing MGH.

Good candidates were expected to provide, as an appendix to the report, a full SWOT analysis as an overview of the range of the issues, and to focus on the key issues in the body of the report.

Common weaknesses included:

- Failure to provide any SWOT or other position appraisal analysis

- Limited integration of the pre-seen and unseen case information, leading to major factors being ignored
- Lack of any attempt to prioritise issues.

- evaluate the three redevelopment Proposals

The recommendations were generally better than the support given to them by the calculations, financial and non-financial. In many cases candidates reached reasonable recommendations despite their [poor] calculations.

The aim of the case study is not primarily to test numerical skills and techniques, but a minimum of skills is assumed. Insofar as numerical techniques are being tested, the primary interest is whether the candidate understands what ought to be calculated, what results would be relevant to the issues on which recommendations are required, and what techniques might be relevant.

- recommend actions for addressing the strategic issues, including the most appropriate redevelopment Proposal

Most candidates provided sensible recommendations, though weaker candidates only provided limited reasons in support of these recommendations.

It was noticeable that better candidates provided a summary of their recommendations, either at the end of the report or in an initial Executive Summary, rather than leaving separate recommendations at the end of each of the various sections of the report.

Good candidates reviewed the recommendations being made, provided a brief summary of the reasons for the recommendations, linking with the analysis in the report, and demonstrated that the recommendations dealt with the key issues identified in the first part of the report.

Performance Against the Criteria Contained in the Case Study Assessment Matrix:

Prioritisation [of issues]:

The majority of candidates made a reasonable attempt at this, with major issues identified, but not clearly prioritised.

Weaker candidates discussed a few key issues, but failed to provide the broad support of a SWOT analysis or other position appraisal.

Weaker candidates spent significant time discussing the recent history of the organisation, based on the scenario detail. This often read well – but provided little towards answering the question.

Knowledge:

Many candidates could with advantage have spent more time prior to the examination developing a better understanding of evaluation and decision making criteria in the public sector.

The general background of this case was exceptionally easy to research effectively.

It has to be repeated that marks are awarded for the use, the application, and not just the display of appropriate technical knowledge.

Numerical Skills:

Candidates frequently demonstrated skills in calculating the profitability of the various contracts to the contractors, without making it clear how relevant these calculations were to MGH.

Calculations of the financial impact of the alternative proposals on MGH were often sound in principle but poorly executed, with key data ignored, and confused calculations. Clearer layouts for comparative calculations, including columnar layouts, and fuller explanations of the figures used would have helped considerably in a number of instances.

Structure [recommendations]:

Recommendations were generally sensible, but not always supported by clear justification.

It is most important for candidates to recognise that case study examinations always require recommendations, even though the information available is imperfect and incomplete. Appropriate comment on the limitations of the information should be brief, and recommendations made on the basis of the information available with clear reasons given.

There is no “right” answer; marks are given, provided that the recommendation is feasible and broadly sensible, for the quality of the supporting reasoning.

This will be even more important under the new TOPCIMA examination.

Business Communication:

Most candidates reached a standard that was at least adequate.

Format:

The vast majority of candidates provided reports that were easy to follow and to navigate.

More care in aligning the report format with the question sub-requirements would have prevented some candidates from failing to discuss the issues facing the organisation in the expected structured way.

In TOPCIMA, candidates will be expected to adopt a report format that clearly prioritises issues and leads to clear recommendations that deal with the issues prioritised.

Business Awareness:

Weak candidates provided little evidence of appropriate business awareness; more time could have been spent prior to the examination researching the general background of the public sector and health.

Breadth:

Most candidates discussed a range of issues, though the discussion was sometimes adding relatively little to the case scenario.

Candidates who did not provide a full SWOT analysis quite often ignored completely major issues such as the growing deficit.

Depth:

Most candidates discussed the main expansion possibilities, but discussion was at time thin, with little discussion of the relative risks involved, or of the impact of the various proposals on the achievement of the organisation's objectives, or on the various performance measures.

An overall view

The standard, though on average below that for recent diets, was encouraging. However, more needs to be done, particularly in identifying, reviewing and prioritising issues, and identifying possible proposals to meet the identified problems. Looking ahead to TOPCIMA, these areas will become even more important.

Work is also needed on improving skills in deciding what calculation and financial analysis could be useful to support the reasoning in a given case, and skills in making use of the analysis in terms of commentary on the financial and other consequences of strategic choices.

Good reports clearly link recommendations and their expected consequences with the prioritised issues identified.