

# Student Guidance Notes

## Guide 12

### **P10 Test of Professional Competence in Management Accounting (TOPCIMA) – Understanding the assessment matrix**

#### **Introduction**

Understanding the assessment matrix is the key to success in the TOPCIMA case study exam. For the first time in any CIMA exam you know, before you go into the exam room, exactly how your performance will be judged. This factsheet provides a detailed analysis of each of the assessment matrix criteria, and explains how you should change the way you prepare for the TOPCIMA case study in the light of those criteria. You can find the assessment matrix on page 8 of this guide.

#### **The overall approach**

After reading through your exam script the examiner will select, for each criterion, the description that best applies to the script. The appropriate mark (from the box chosen) will then be awarded. When all the criteria have been assessed, the total mark will be calculated by adding up the marks given for each criterion.

The published generic matrix contains the descriptions to be used in the real exam, however the mark allocation alongside each criterion may be changed. In this way the distribution of marks can be adjusted to suit the nature of a specific TOPCIMA case study, for example, one involving a greater or lesser knowledge content.

The specific assessment matrices for past Case Study exams are available on the CIMA website - visit <http://www.cimaglobal.com/casestudy> to download these and other resources. Please bear in mind that some support material may relate to case study exams under the previous syllabus, where a different assessment matrix was used.

As in any exam, you must achieve a minimum of 50 marks in order to pass the case study. In common with all exams, there are obviously a number of ways to achieve 50. It is not necessary to pass every criterion, so a poor mark on one may be offset by a good mark on another

# The assessment criteria

## A. Technical

*“have a sound technical knowledge of the specific subjects within the curriculum”*

Unlike the previous Case Study exam, the TOPCIMA directly credits the quality of your technical knowledge. The reason for this is that, whereas the old Case Study was designed to be sat alongside the Final Level strategy papers (where knowledge was tested), the TOPCIMA is a concluding stand-alone assessment of all your professional capabilities and competencies.

The ‘syllabus’ for the TOPCIMA is the whole of the CIMA qualification. This means that ‘knowledge’ includes your knowledge of numerical techniques as well as your knowledge of theories and approaches. This is another difference between this assessment matrix and the previous one (where numerical skills were treated as a separate criterion). However, rather than knowledge being less highly rewarded in the TOPCIMA than the old Case Study, the opposite is true. There are now three criteria looking at different aspects of knowledge (see B and C below).

Notice that ‘relevant’ is a word that appears in each of the pass level assessment matrix descriptions for this criterion. You should not try to cram every knowledge area into one case study. The idea is to use only those knowledge areas that clearly apply – either to your analysis of the pre-seen and unseen material, or to the options you are considering. If the examiner thinks that you are trying to ‘force’ knowledge into your answer, you will not gain credit on this criterion because the knowledge is not relevant. You will also find it difficult to gain marks for ‘application’, as it is not possible to apply irrelevant knowledge.

## B. Application

*“can apply technical knowledge in an analytical and practical manner”*

It is not enough simply to have the technical knowledge – you must be able to apply it. This means application to the specific organisation, situation and facts given in the pre-seen and unseen materials. This criterion looks at how well you are able to process the given data into useful information by application of your knowledge. This also includes the use of relevant financial and numerical data in your calculations.

It is important to recognise that much of the knowledge gained from textbooks does not apply perfectly to real world situations. Sometimes such application will be limited, due to weaknesses and limitations in the model or calculation. Other times, such application would be simplistic, and possibly misleading, due to the context of the case.

## C. Diversity

*“can extract, from various subjects, the knowledge required to solve many-sided or complex problems”*

The TOPCIMA is designed as a multi-disciplinary case study. You should try to look at a range of different viewpoints when applying your knowledge. A good Chartered Management Accountant is a manager first and an accountant second. This means taking a broad business or commercial view.

The syllabus for the TOPCIMA is the whole of the CIMA qualification. However, if there is a ‘core’ syllabus for the TOPCIMA, it must be Management Accounting – Business Strategy. All TOPCIMA case studies will look at the strategic issues within an organisation and industry so, of all the papers, P6 is the one to concentrate on. The other strategy papers (P3 and P9) will, of course, feature regularly in the TOPCIMA, as they look at more specialised aspects of strategy. However, material from the Managerial Level papers (and even, occasionally, Certificate) may also feature in a TOPCIMA case study.

It is not necessary to try to study the entire syllabus again, as you will be able to identify any relevant knowledge areas from the pre-seen material.

When evaluating a situation, and formulating your arguments, it helps to deliberately think about different viewpoints. There are two ways you might do this:

- ◆ Think carefully about issues relating to the three Strategic Level knowledge areas; business strategy, financial strategy and risk & control strategy. Make sure that you try to identify issues in each of these three areas.
- ◆ Think about the issues from the point of view of each different stakeholder, or functional manager, mentioned in the case. Take time, for example, to consider HRM, marketing and quality issues, not just financial ones.

## D. Focus

*“can solve a particular problem by distinguishing the relevant information from the irrelevant, in a given body of data”*

Necessarily, with about twenty pages of information contained in the pre-seen and unseen material, a significant proportion of this will turn out to be irrelevant to the key issues. This criterion looks at your ability to ‘sift through’ the mass of data provided, and pick out only those facts that should be used in order to formulate a valid argument.

Information may be relevant for a number of reasons:

- ◆ It is a fact required as an input to a theoretical model or calculation.
- ◆ It forms part of an argument, or evidence to support it.

Information may also be irrelevant for the following reasons:

- ◆ It is contradicted or negated by another fact.
- ◆ It is not required to support an argument.
- ◆ It relates to a relatively minor issue, which you choose not to deal with.

## E. Prioritisation

*“can, in multi-problem situations, identify the problems and rank them in the order in which they need to be addressed”*

There are many different ways that issues can be prioritised, but there are two things that you must do to gain good marks against this criterion in the TOPCIMA case study:

Your issues must be *‘clearly prioritised in a logical order’*, so you must choose some appropriate rationale for your prioritisation, bearing in mind the situation described in the scenario. The basis used to prioritise issues might be timescale (short-term to long-term), scale of impact (most significant to least significant), degree of risk (highest risk to lowest risk), or anything else that you feel to be most appropriate.

You must present your answer *‘based on a clear rationale’*, so you must explain the basis on which issues have been prioritised, and justify why you feel that basis is appropriate.

This is a difficult skill to master, and you should practise prioritisation of issues in as many case studies as possible. You might find it useful to use groupwork, either in class or in study groups. After discussing a case study, each member of the group can identify and prioritise what they believe to be the most important issues, then give a short presentation explaining their rationale. The group can then vote on which approach seemed the most appropriate, and which rationale was most clearly expressed.

## F. Judgement

*“appreciate that there can be alternative solutions and understand the role of judgement in dealing with them”*

In order to satisfy this criterion, there are two things that you must do:

- ◆ You must recognise that, in any strategic situation there is a range of alternatives available to the organisation. You should identify, evaluate and rank these options.
- ◆ Having done this, you must then exercise professional judgement in selecting what you think to be the optimal solution.

In identifying the options available, you might develop clues provided in the case, or you might use strategy models such as Ansoff’s product/market matrix or Porter’s generic strategies.

In evaluating and ranking options, you might use the tests of suitability, feasibility and acceptability. This might involve SWOT analysis (suitability), cost-benefit analysis (feasibility) or stakeholder mapping (acceptability). All of these, if relevant, could also gain credit for ‘knowledge’, ‘application’ and ‘diversity’

## G.Integration

*“can integrate diverse areas of knowledge and skills”*

Obviously, with all these different skills being tested, there is a temptation to write content into your answer specifically to satisfy certain criteria. This criterion checks whether you are able to integrate the various skills and knowledge areas into a cohesive answer. There should be a balance between the various skills, so that overall the report feels professional, rather than contrived.

## H.Logic

*“can communicate effectively with users, by formulating realistic recommendations, in a concise and logical fashion”*

This is an important criterion, and you will notice that it is weighted more highly on the sample assessment matrix. The reason for this is that there are two different aspects to the logic of your answer:

You should demonstrate good communication skills. This means that the language you use should be professional and appropriate, avoiding slang and being appropriately formal. You should also produce a business document, normally a report or a presentation, which has the appropriate format and content. This is a type of business communication criterion, and will reward you for preparing a report that follows all points logically through, from identification of a weakness to the selected and recommended course of action.

- ◆ Throughout your answer, the content should be structured in such a way that the arguments you put forward lead logically to your conclusions and recommendations. Failure to provide recommendations really makes your answer a waste of time, and would not to gain much credit on this criterion.

## I Ethics

*“can identify, advise on and/or resolve ethical dilemmas”*

To all strategic decisions there is an ethical dimension. Business is about compromise and, necessarily, someone must benefit at the expense of another. This criterion rewards you for recognising the ethical issues and, if appropriate, recommending action. Ethics is a broad topic, and you should consider whether the following different aspects are relevant to the case:

- ◆ Personal and professional ethics, as you will often be acting the role of a newly qualified Chartered Management Accountant and manager.
- ◆ Business ethics, as you will be acting as part of an organisation, or as an advisor to it.
- ◆ Corporate Governance, as strategic decisions have an impact on the stakeholders of the organisation.

Social responsibility, as strategic decisions often impact on the world outside the organisation’s boundary.

# Conclusion

Although the TOPCIMA case study is very different to the other CIMA exams, the assessment matrix gives you a great deal of information to help you in preparing for the exam. The key to success is to develop the skills described in the *pass* and *clear pass* columns of the matrix. The only way to do this is to practise lots of case studies. Each time you attempt a case study, assess your answers using the matrix. In this way you will be able to see your performance improve.

# FAQs

<p><b>Question 1:</b> Will there be a pilot paper for the new exam, so I can see the differences between the new paper and the old one?</p>	<p><b>Answer:</b> No. The exam will look and feel very much like the old paper 15 Case Study. The major change is to the assessment matrix.</p>
<p><b>Question 2:</b> Where can I find the detailed syllabus for this paper?</p>	<p><b>Answer:</b> This exam does not have a syllabus, as it examines the whole of the CIMA qualification syllabus, plus other skills. An introduction and overview to the TOPCIMA can be found in student guide S11.</p>
<p><b>Question 3:</b> I have failed the old paper 15 Case Study exam, and must resit the TOPCIMA. What work should I do?</p>	<p><b>Answer:</b> You should read this guide (and student guide S11) carefully, and practise a couple of past case studies. You should then assess your answers using the TOPCIMA assessment matrix, and improve the skills in which you are weak.</p>
<p><b>Question 4:</b> What are the major differences likely to be between the old CIMA Case Study and future P10 TOPCIMA case studies?</p>	<p><b>Answer:</b> Apart from a new set of criteria on the assessment matrix, you should find that P10 TOPCIMA case studies contain a little more irrelevant information, and have slightly less prescriptive requirements. This allows the criteria of 'Focus' and 'Judgement' to be fully tested. There will also be ethical issues in all P10 TOPCIMA case studies.</p>

Criterion	Marks	Clear Pass	Pass	Marginal Pass	Marginal Fail	Fail	Clear Fail	
<b>Technical</b>	<b>10</b>	Thorough display of relevant technical knowledge. <b>9-10</b>	Good display of relevant knowledge. <b>6-8</b>	Some display of relevant technical knowledge. <b>5</b>	Identification of some relevant knowledge, but lacking in depth. <b>3-4</b>	Little knowledge displayed, or some misconceptions. <b>1-2</b>	No evidence of knowledge displayed, or fundamental misconceptions. <b>0</b>	
<b>Application</b>	<b>10</b>	Knowledge clearly applied in an analytical and practical manner. <b>9-10</b>	Knowledge applied to the context of the case. <b>6-8</b>	Identification of some relevant knowledge, but not well applied. <b>5</b>	Knowledge occasionally displayed without clear application. <b>3-4</b>	Little attempt to apply knowledge to the context. <b>1-2</b>	No application of knowledge displayed. <b>0</b>	
<b>Diversity</b>	<b>10</b>	Most knowledge areas identified, covering a wide range of views. <b>9-10</b>	Some knowledge areas identified, covering a range of views. <b>6-8</b>	A few knowledge areas identified, expressing a fairly limited scope. <b>5</b>	Several important knowledge aspects omitted. <b>3-4</b>	Many important knowledge aspects omitted. <b>1-2</b>	Very few knowledge aspects considered. <b>0</b>	
<b>Focus</b>	<b>10</b>	Clearly distinguishes between relevant and irrelevant information. <b>9-10</b>	Information used is mostly relevant. <b>6-8</b>	Some relevant information ignored, or some less relevant information used. <b>5</b>	Information used is sometimes irrelevant. <b>3-4</b>	Little ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. <b>1-2</b>	No ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. <b>0</b>	
<b>Prioritisation</b>	<b>10</b>	Issues clearly prioritised in a logical order and based on a clear rationale. <b>9-10</b>	Issues prioritised with justification. <b>6-8</b>	Evidence of issues being listed in order of importance, but rationale unclear. <b>5</b>	Issues apparently in priority order, but without a logical justification or rationale. <b>3-4</b>	Little attempt at prioritisation or justification or rationale. <b>1-2</b>	No attempt at prioritisation or justification. <b>0</b>	
<b>Judgement</b>	<b>10</b>	Clearly recognises alternative solutions. Judgement exercised professionally. <b>9-10</b>	Alternative solutions or options considered. Some judgement exercised. <b>6-8</b>	A slightly limited range of solutions considered. Judgement occasionally weak. <b>5</b>	A limited range of solutions considered. Judgement sometimes weak. <b>3-4</b>	Few alternative solutions considered. Judgement often weak. <b>1-2</b>	No alternative solutions considered. Judgement weak or absent. <b>0</b>	
<b>Integration</b>	<b>10</b>	Diverse areas of knowledge and skills integrated effectively. <b>9-10</b>	Diverse areas of knowledge and skills integrated. <b>6-8</b>	Knowledge areas and skills occasionally not integrated. <b>5</b>	Knowledge areas and skills sometimes not integrated. <b>3-4</b>	Knowledge areas and skills often not integrated. <b>1-2</b>	Knowledge areas and skills not integrated. <b>0</b>	
<b>Logic</b>	<b>20</b>	Communication effective, recommendations realistic, concise and logical. <b>16-20</b>	Communication mainly clear and logical. Recommendations occasionally weak. <b>11-15</b>	Communication occasionally unclear, and/or recommendations occasionally illogical. <b>10</b>	Communication sometimes weak. Some recommendations slightly unrealistic. <b>5-9</b>	Communication weak. Some unclear or illogical recommendations, or few recommendations. <b>1-4</b>	Very poor communication, and/or no recommendations offered. <b>0</b>	
<b>Ethics</b>	<b>10</b>	Excellent evaluation of ethical aspects. Clear and appropriate advice offered. <b>9-10</b>	Good evaluation of ethical aspects. Some appropriate advice offered. <b>6-8</b>	Some evaluation of ethical aspects. Advice offered. <b>5</b>	Weak evaluation of ethical aspects. Little advice offered. <b>3-4</b>	Poor evaluation of ethical aspects. No advice offered. <b>1-2</b>	No evaluation of ethical aspects. Unethical, or no, advice offered. <b>0</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>							© CIMA – January 2005