

OCR Report to Centres

June 2012

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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General Certificate of Secondary Education

History Pilot (J938)

General Certificate of Secondary Education (Short Course)

History Pilot (J038)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

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B871 Medieval History

The two options provided no unusual challenges this year. Both produced a wide range of responses often based on sufficient historical knowledge. The majority of candidates made at least some effort to answer the specific question and most used a range of sources. Some of the better ones also made use of interpretations and representations. This year there was no noticeable difference in performance between the two options.

A number of features marked the difference between the better and weaker work. These comprised:

1 Recognising what the question was seeking:

The more successful centres had trained their candidates to ascertain exactly what the question was about and to adhere carefully to that question. This year, key aspects being sought were Saxon and Norman success at governance and the relative weaknesses of John and Henry V. The extremes ranged from those who simply narrated aspects of Saxon and Norman society or the lives of monarchs to those who recognised the significance of the particular wording of the question. Too many candidates focused on a question similar but not identical to that asked. In some centres this clearly reflected a question practiced, sometimes based on a question asked in a previous year. Thus, a number of candidates failed to do themselves justice by equating governance with control or weakness with lack of success. Several centres had clearly advised their candidates to devise some criteria but there were two potential pitfalls when this was done. Sometimes the criteria were generic and not specific to the question, so that candidates devised some criteria for a successful society or a good medieval monarch. The very best candidates, however, used criteria based on the characteristics of effective governance or what might distinguish a weak monarch. The second potential trap was devising some criteria in an introduction and then not organising the response around these criteria.

2 Comparison:

Comparing two societies or monarchs is a consistent feature of the medieval questions. This is a requirement that many candidates found difficult. This competence certainly differentiated well. The lowest attainers made little attempt to compare. The two comparators were seen largely as separate elements with candidates spending the first part of their response writing about Saxons or John and the latter part about Normans or Henry V. If any comparison was made, it was usually left to a conclusion. Those who demonstrated more proficiency kept the two comparators largely separate but at least adopted similar themes across the two societies or monarchs – aspects such as structure and control or finance, religion or foreign policy. Candidates could still achieve success with this approach where they evaluated the relative effectiveness at the end of each paragraph. Although not always the case, many of the best responses integrated the comparisons around themes so that the societies and monarchs were compared throughout the response rather than left to the conclusion. In this case, the conclusion was reserved for an overall assessment.

3 Discussion, argument and explanation:

One often successful feature of the better responses was the establishing of a clear answer to the specific question right at the start of the response. Many candidates realised that the question did not lead to a definitive “right” answer and recognised some of the complexity. They then understood that this needed to be explained. This might have involved, for example, explaining why the methods of governance had both a positive and negative aspect or why a particular monarch found themselves in a weak position. The weaker answers simply reconstructed or described the events. The better answers analysed them.

4 Substantiation:

Good argument always involves backing up the points made. Weaker and shorter answers often contained too much assertion so that the candidates appeared to be making judgements without supporting evidence. The best answers always kept this simple, remembering the mantra that a good argument needs telling evidence but not a plethora. The flow of an argument was sometimes affected negatively by being distracted by too much supporting material, sometimes mixing indiscriminately the substantial with the trivial. An answer that made a judgement and then backed this up with one or two substantial pieces of evidence led to a coherent and convincing argument.

5 Using sources and interpretations:

It was pleasing to see that formulaic and mechanistic use of source material was less common this year but it was still fairly prevalent. The assessment objectives require the use of sources but not as a separate exercise. Many candidates fully understood that this was not a source exercise but primarily an attempt to answer a valid historical question. Sources were thus used to support this answer. The best answers were selective in their use of sources and used them primarily to substantiate the argument. In nearly every case where candidates roamed into source evaluation, whether about the reliability of primary sources, the distortion caused by a vested interest or, even worse, where textbook authors and contemporaries were regarded as totally trustworthy, the impact was negative. A perfectly good argument was often distracted by trite, low level and unnecessary source evaluation. Too many candidates still seemed to think that they would lose marks if they could not find fault with a source. The best evaluation lay with judicious selection and deployment. Another weakness was trying to pretend a source was something it was not. A candidate sometimes found fault with a quotation when it was taken out of context or given a meaning that the compiler never intended. There was no justification in using sources that were heavily condemned by the candidates. It begged the question as to why the candidate had selected it. Sources and interpretations were needed to support the debate not disrupt it.

6 Balance:

This is never a major problem but there are always some candidates who fall down by producing imbalanced answers. When comparison is a key part of the question, this can be significant. The most common type of imbalance is where one of the two comparators received much more space than another. It was less of a problem with the Saxons and Normans than the monarchs, although overall Saxons received slightly more attention than Normans. With the monarchs, many candidates preferred to write about John rather than Henry. Whilst there was no expectation that candidates needed to divide up the answer equally, there was an expectation that serious attention should have been given to both comparators. The other type of imbalance was the range of elements covered. Some of the weaker candidates restricted themselves to a single element such as control or foreign policy. There was no requirement that a vast range of elements had to be covered to gain the highest marks but better answers invariably identified at least three or four elements.

7 Sustained relevance and length:

The overall length of answers rarely proves a problem, although there are some extremely brief responses from a few centres. If there is a problem it is more likely to be the result of excessive length tied to selection and deployment. Candidates are judged on their ability to discuss a particular question and maintain a coherent argument. Long but less impressive answers tended to be characterised by excessive background – for example, where the Saxons came from or the childhoods of the monarchs. The best answers often defined relevant criteria, expressed which side they were coming down on and then got straight into the comparison. Other distractions amongst the weaker candidates included interspersing superfluous sections amongst the relevant, excessively long quotations, too many sub-headings that affected the flow, diagrams and unnecessary appendices.

8 Overall conclusion

With these candidates representing the last cohort of the History Pilot, it is possible to place their performance in the context of the last few years. Many centres have prepared their candidates well for the demands of the task. It is clear that many candidates find it quite challenging but some superb work has emerged. In nearly every case, this has been when candidates have been encouraged to think and argue independently and not follow a template model. There have always been a minority of centres where candidates' work has a sameness of approach.

The content has been very different from mainstream GCSEs and many centres have reported candidate enthusiasm for this different period of history and the opportunity to provide a greater maturity of understanding to topics last covered in early secondary and primary years. Many candidates have demonstrated a rounded view of this important period of Britain's history. It has also helped some develop greater competence at extended writing, argument and comparison. In many cases it has motivated teachers, allowing them to delve into a period of history not normally part of the repertoire. Taking all things into consideration, this has been no mean achievement.

B872, B873, B877, B878, B880, B881, B882 Coursework

As this is the last report on Coursework for this specification, it seems appropriate to report on ways schools have taken up the opportunities it has presented and to comment on both the good, and the not so good, practice which has developed over the six years of its existence.

It should be said at the outset that large numbers of teachers have relished the opportunity this course has provided to use their creativity. Some extraordinarily innovative assignments, and much excellent history, has been developed. There has been widespread regret at its closure. At best, students have enjoyed addressing issues which interest them, engaging with the skills and methods of a historian and learning to reach their own informed and substantiated judgements.

With 50% of the marks allocated to Coursework (and another 25% allocated to internal assessment in the form of Teacher-assessed work) the initiative has been firmly on teachers to design their own assignments. Support has been provided by OCR in the form of cluster groups (in the Pilot phase), an online Teachers' Guide and consultancy. Chief Examiners' Reports have, each examination session, commented on successful ways of meeting the specification requirements and pointing out things to avoid. Nevertheless, the essential features of success have been much more in the hands of the teachers than with an orthodox GCSE. These are:

- Choosing topics which meet the specification and motivate students.
- Designing questions and tasks which lead all students to address the key features of the unit.
- Supporting students' enquiries by compiling their own resources. For many units, this has meant considerable individual work, with no support from commercial publishers.
- Providing enough structure to the tasks to enable all students to develop their arguments – for example, providing criteria to address significance.
- In many schools, setting up situations where students can present their work through forms other than the hand-written essay. There is no doubt that this has kept many students engaged with their tasks.

One of the lessons of the course has been that teachers, accustomed to a National Curriculum and nationally-provided resources, have needed considerable support in getting things right. This summer, after several years, most schools were successfully achieving the essential features listed above. Nevertheless, many still were not, sometimes failing to comprehend the specification, or misinterpreting assessment guidance.

More specifically, certain features of good responses stand out from all the work seen.

- Dealing with the question in the opening paragraph and making clear what the standpoint of the writer is. The rest of the assignment should then just follow on and develop this argument. In too many examples the Moderator has not found out what the student thinks until the last paragraph. In several cases a perfectly good question has been ignored while the candidate writes a largely factual account.
- Including sources adroitly in the response without stepping aside from the argument and jumping through source evaluation hoops.
- Recognising that some IT presentations – Powerpoint for example – require their own techniques, just as essay-writing does. Too many Powerpoints seen have been simply texts pasted on to a slide. Relying solely on this form of presentation makes it difficult to achieve in-depth analysis because of how little can be put on a screen.
- Best marks are for depth of analysis, not for quantity of coverage. Candidates who exceeded the word limit (1500 words) rarely produced top quality responses.

The Coursework Units

B872/B881 Local History

This unit has consistently produced some of the most interesting and innovative assignments. The support material provided by some teachers is evidence of considerable individual hard work. A good example of an assignment which works well is one that considers the UNESCO designation of Durham Cathedral as a World Heritage Site. The task is to use the text of the designation and assess if it is justified, on the basis of both the past and current significance of the site.

B873/B882 International History

Although this has always been the more popular of the compulsory pair of units, B872 & B873, schools have often struggled to make it work. Topics chosen have sometimes been too diverse (Terrorism), not truly international (Vietnam), or too disparate (Olympics). This year 9/11 was chosen by several schools and, even given its relatively recent history, certainly worked well in meeting the requirement to analyse international significance. The provision of criteria helped students pull their assignments together, albeit sometimes rather mechanistically.

B877 Whose History

There were not many entries for this unit, but those that did tackle it provided some excellent examples of the way this course enabled students to bring together good history and some of its applications. Candidates have to examine a presentation of a historical topic and analyse why it has been presented in that form. Especially worth noting was work on Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi films, analysing them closely and setting them in their context of 1930s Germany.

B878 Change over Time

Very few centres took this option.

B880 Study in Depth

Although some centres managed this two-part Unit well, it presented others with problems. The specification requirement is straightforward: Assignment 1 should address an issue of diversity, focusing on a batch of sources, analysing and evaluating their value as evidence for the investigation; assignment 2 should examine the significance of a particular individual in history, setting his/her impact alongside other factors and individuals.

Those who were successful made use of a small number of sources in Assignment 1, as advised in previous Examiner's Reports. These sources were included in the argument presented by the candidate. In most cases this was done in support of the argument, rather than dominating it, and the critical evaluation was mainly sensible and not formulaic.

Other Centres included too many sources, which tended to receive superficial treatment. In some cases the sources were simply commented on in the order they were presented, with no reference to the main question. Many candidates' evaluation seemed to start and end with reliability; sources need to be evaluated for their usefulness to the enquiry, which would include judgement of their reliability as part of this. Candidates stumbled, for example, at a portrayal of Manifest Destiny: it is obviously not "reliable" as a painting of a scene, but very useful as a portrayal of attitudes and beliefs. Some centres seemed not to have read the Specification and did not refer to sources at all. Assignment 2 was better done, with Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Sitting Bull being popular choices. However, too many fell back on simple biography, with perhaps a simple terse judgement of significance in the last few lines.

Some centres were confused enough to require students to base this assignment, as well as assignment 1, around a batch of sources. Marking was carefully and thoroughly carried out and there was plenty of evidence of internal moderation having taken place. The comments on each candidate's work were most helpful, especially where they summed up the key characteristics of the work in terms similar to those in the generic mark scheme.

Centres should ensure that the correct entry option is used. Several centres this year entered, by mistake, for the repository (option 01) when they actually wanted postal moderation (option 02).

B874, B875, B876, B879 Teacher Assessment

This is the last time these teacher-assessed units will be assessed for GCSE. The work from many centres demonstrated how much progress has been made since the Pilot started several years ago. Many of the folders of work were based on well-planned courses that covered the relevant assessment criteria and gave candidates an opportunity to respond to challenging activities and produce worthwhile work. These folders contained a range of different types of exercises many of which were imaginative and appeared to have motivated the candidates.

The sheer range of activities, the different types of work and the range of skills that candidates experienced is much greater than that possible in a traditional GCSE course. Candidates have also had to take much more responsibility for the planning of their learning, and for the content, organisation and presentation of their work. Much of this has been a delight to moderate.

The assessment of these folders by centres was largely accurate although there was a tendency to over-use marks between 45 and 50. This part of the mark range should be reserved for exceptional work at GCSE. Some centres awarded these marks to work that was merely good. Where adjustments to marks were made, there were usually in this part of the mark range, although some centres also undervalued work towards the bottom end of the mark range.

The moderation process went very smoothly this year with nearly all centres submitting marks and samples of work on time and completing all the necessary forms efficiently. Many centres provided detailed comments on each piece of work. However, the most useful comments were the summative ones where teachers produced overall judgements based on a summing up of the strengths and weaknesses of all the work in each folder.

The original aim of these teacher-assessed units was to challenge teachers to produce a course where everything the candidates did was worthwhile and would contribute to summative judgements about assessment. Over the last few years, these units have demonstrated that, when done well, teacher assessment is an enormously rich and effective way of finding out what sixteen year olds are capable of. It is also a very rewarding experience for candidates and teachers.

B874 Heritage Management and Marketing

This was by far the most popular unit. All the candidates were entered for Marketing. It is a disappointment that since the Pilot began there has not been a single candidate entered for the Management option. Most of the candidates appeared to have enjoyed the unit and to have approached their work with enthusiasm.

The main challenge for candidates in this unit is to effectively combine the history and the marketing. There is still a tendency, in some centres, to keep the two separate. This approach is still capable of producing good work and there were many candidates who demonstrated high-level skills and understanding in a series of exercises focused on eg use of sources, causation, and historical context. The best work, however, was usually the product of a well-planned course where all the exercises and activities fitted together to create a coherent folder of work. The weakest part of many folders was the marketing work. At its worst this consisted of surveys of public opinion that were not used to inform marketing plans and plans for the merchandise for the gift shop which could have been about anywhere. The unique feature of this unit is the site, and its past, that is being marketed. The most impressive work came from candidates who used features of the site, and its history, throughout their marketing plans and materials. Historical knowledge and understanding was used to evaluate existing marketing, and it was at the centre of new marketing ideas and plans.

Sites that worked well and produced good work included Roman Caerleon, Kenilworth, Cromford Mill, Hunslet Mill and the planning of a new museum in Bradford telling its 20th Century story.

B875 Multimedia: Bring the Past to Life

This unit had a small entry and the work was varied. In most centres the candidates were given opportunities to evaluate and design a range of multimedia products. The best work was produced when the candidates' historical knowledge and understanding was to the fore in these activities. Unfortunately, some candidates' folders were almost a history free zone, or a series of disconnected pieces of work. However, in many others the course worked as whole and the evaluation of existing multimedia products in particular was based on sound historical knowledge.

B876 An Archaeological Enquiry

Just two centres entered candidates for this unit. They both had very interesting schemes of work using, in different ways, the topic of King Arthur and the archaeological work that has been carried out at Tintagel. One focused on 'Arthur – Man or Myth?', while the other used the work at Tintagel and the story of Arthur as a way to investigate the true nature of the Dark Ages. Both approaches worked.

B879 Missing Pages: The Migrant Experience

This unit has a small entry. The most popular topic was the migration to Britain from the West Indies in the period after the Second World War. There was some good work on both the reasons for migrating and the experiences of migrants after they arrived. The best work often resulted from major pieces of work where the candidates could develop their explanations, analyses and arguments eg 'How far do these sources suggest that West Indian settlement has been successful?'

OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
1 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB1 2EU

OCR Customer Contact Centre

Education and Learning

Telephone: 01223 553998

Facsimile: 01223 552627

Email: general.qualifications@ocr.org.uk

www.ocr.org.uk

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