Studies of Societies

2010 ASSESSMENT REPORT

Society and Environment Learning Area

STUDIES OF SOCIETIES

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Approximately 1700 students undertook Studies of Societies this year, with representation across metropolitan and country schools, and across the three sectors. It is pleasing to note that the enrolment of boys in the subject has increased in the last two years.

The comments in this report are applicable to Stage 2 Society and Culture which commences in 2011, even though amendments have been made to the assessment requirements of this new subject.

Any downward adjustments made at moderation this year were primarily because of a lack of evidence against the criterion of *analysis and evaluation*. Moderators commented that very fluent and detailed description was often mistaken for analysis.

It was difficult to make a sound moderation judgment when the evidence of course work was incomplete. Teachers are reminded to follow the instructions in the Stage 2 Society and Environment *Learning Area Manual* when submitting samples for moderation. All materials should be clearly labelled and have task sheets and/or cover sheets attached. It is difficult for moderators to sort student evidence and guess what a task had required the students to do, or how the teacher had marked the student against the criteria. Moderators appreciated clearly labelled plastic bags containing the entire work of a student, with a label stating 'Highest A', 'Lowest B' etc. Teachers are advised to keep student work after it has been assessed so that it is not lost during the year.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 1: COURSE WORK

The most common areas covered were cultural diversity, social ethics, and human rights. Many teachers started the year with a topic related to contemporary culture, allowing students to engage with the program in an interesting and relevant way. Where students had explored a cultural practice such as the wearing of the Burqa, it was pleasing to note that they had consulted experts in, or adherents to, the Islamic tradition. Many students attached interview transcripts as an appendix to their task, but did not apply the wisdom provided by the interviewee in their discussion and analysis. Some of the course work included in the topic 'People and the Environment' did not focus on the social aspects of the issues chosen.

Moderators commented that more course work adhered to the word limit this year. Many students demonstrated excellent analysis in the form of a brief magazine article. Some students cleverly used appropriate photographic evidence as supporting analysis; however, in some cases photographs had no clear purpose and were not linked to the written content.

While teachers are to be commended for innovative and diverse task design such as photographic essays, pod casting, board games, websites and digital media, care must be taken to ensure that the required task allows the students to meet the criteria for judging performance. For example, if students are required to draw a cartoon or design a poster, and the task states that the criteria are: 'investigation and analysis using a variety of sources; analysis of changes that occur in response to competing demand; knowledge and understanding of a contemporary social issue, and explanation of the impact of social issues on contemporary societies', it is almost impossible for students to show evidence of all these

criteria in a single cartoon or poster unless it is annotated in a very succinct way .

Moderators reported that the most successful tasks were those in which the requirements were clearly expressed in writing. The criteria for judging performance were generally very well used, aiding students' understanding of the requirements. In some cases criteria were stated on the task sheet, but the task instructions did not direct the students to show evidence of these criteria. Some task sheets extended to two or three pages and were difficult to interpret. Occasionally teachers had used criteria that did not come from the curriculum statement. The learning outcomes, together with the criteria, outline the evidence teachers and moderators are looking for in the students' work. It is these outcomes and criteria that make the assessment specific to Studies of Societies.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 2: ORAL TASK(S)

Few schools sent in evidence of this task beyond a marks sheet. Where teachers had sent in audio or video files it was pleasing to see that there were a variety of methods of oral presentation and each had a clear and specific purpose. When students fielded questions from the audience these assisted the student in providing evidence of analysis. The more successful orals had a defined structure and purpose and took the form of a forum, role-play, or debate as suggested in the curriculum statement. In the less successful orals students read from cue cards or a Powerpoint presentation, or gave a 'talk' to the class. These students did not seem to understand the purpose of the oral, and simply imparted information to the class without meeting the oral task criteria for judging performance.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 3: GROUP TASK

There were many excellent group tasks and social actions, including: preparing celebratory food for a nursing home; preparing nutritious recess and lunch food for neighbouring primary school students; participating in Slum Survivor run by TEAR Australia; creating an anti-racist website and Facebook page to combat racism towards overseas students; construction of a webpage publicising the palm oil industry's threat to orangutans; working with local council to create a small community garden; and letterboxing petitions on a local issue and delivering signed petitions to the local member of parliament.

There appeared to be some misunderstanding of the collaboration required in the group task as some students were directed to undertake an individual voluntary social action for a charity or non-profit organisation. Such a task does not allow the students to demonstrate the criterion of *group analysis* of a contemporary social issue, nor the skills of collaboration.

Some group tasks were like mini-investigations with hypotheses and focusing questions emphasising the individual's contribution but not the collaborative social action. Teachers are reminded of the importance of reading the curriculum statement carefully and ensuring that they understand the technical requirements for each assessment. Furthermore, the curriculum statement requires students to provide evidence of their collaborative activity that must be sent in for moderation. Many personal reflections exceeded the 600 words allowed.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 4: INVESTIGATIVE ASSIGNMENT

Markers commented on this year's high standard of many of the investigative assignments. The most successful investigations centred on current issues that reflected diverse viewpoints and vigorously debated concerns in the community. Local issues seemed to lead to better analysis than other broader social issues.

Some interesting topics that demonstrated excellent investigation and analysis were: the construction of a community garden in Buckland Park; violence in Hindley Street; neighbourhood security; proposed curfews in the northern suburbs; the consumption of energy drinks; banning the Burqa; the Mt Barker re-development; e-waste recycling; the effects of X-box gaming; cyber-bullying; services for young people with mental illness; culturally inclusive food served in school canteens; the reduction of male teachers in primary schools; the promotion of junior sport; the social benefits of the Adelaide oval re-development; sharing of roads between cars and cyclists; perceived gang violence in SA; the Woodville West transport-oriented development.

The most successful evidence of research, knowledge, analysis and evaluation was demonstrated in investigations where students showed a commitment to, and an interest in, their topic of choice – often such issues were local and/or recent issues. The most successful investigations were well-structured and followed the recommended format in the curriculum statement. These investigations had well-designed focusing questions that ensured all aspects of an issue were investigated as far as possible. Successful investigations also showed evidence of students considering and analysing diverse points of view and then drawing conclusions based on the cumulative strength of the evidence they had gathered. There was evidence of evaluation of information from a variety of reliable sources in terms of the hypothesis or guiding question. In less successful investigations the conclusion seemed to be based on personal opinion rather than solid evidence gained from research.

Placing the issue in context in the introduction helped the markers gain an understanding of why the student perceived the particular issue to be a significant topic for investigation. Introductions that told a story of the student starting out with one topic, and then changing his or her mind added nothing to an understanding of the topic under investigation and simply added words to the word count. There is no place in an investigative report for personal narrative about difficulties, changes of mind, other students having the same topic, or trying out several topics before deciding on one. All words used by the student need to have a purposeful link to the criteria and to the hypothesis or guiding question.

Less successful investigations showed a lack of student understanding about the purpose of a hypothesis – which is to test an assumption, rather than something about which they have already formed an opinion. At times it was evident that the student had formed a conclusion about the issue before the investigation had even begun.

While most investigations were within the word limit, many did not have the word count on the front cover as required, making it necessary for the markers to undertake a manual word count. Students are best placed to verify the word count, as they are able to do it electronically; teachers must also verify the word count. The most successful investigations made full use of the word limit in deep analysis and evaluation.

No identification should appear on the investigative assignment. School crests, logos, colours or any other identifying features should be removed. Students should not introduce themselves by name, school, or state. Only the student's registration number and word count should appear on the front cover sheet. Markers experienced a dilemma if the student had no registration number on the report. This is the only way a particular piece of work can be

identified and tracked against SACE Board result sheets, therefore, without a number students were at a disadvantage.

Students are advised not to choose an issue or topic that has already been publically decided upon, for example: 'SA does not need a desalination plant', when this has already happened. Such a topic does not lead to analysis and debate. Other less successful investigations had vague hypotheses such as: 'the government is not doing enough to …', or 'the government should …'. Such statements show lack of understanding of the role and function of government. Broad topics such as euthanasia, female Prime Ministers, the Australian film industry, same sex marriages, the impact of the Iraq war, cyber-bullying, under-age drinking, hoon driving, and drug abuse, led to poor analysis and unconvincing conclusions. These are not necessarily unsuitable topics, but they should be narrowed considerably in order to be more manageable and focused.

Topics such as shark netting, the construction of the desalination plant, music festivals, dolphins in the Port River, storm water management, cars driving onto beaches, global warming, rising sea levels, and the condition of the River Murray were too often approached from a geographical or biological point of view with little discussion of the social impact. Students and teachers are reminded that the criteria for judging performance centre on the discussion and analysis of a contemporary *social issue* and *social change.*

Students need guidance when using web sites as sources of information. Copying various paragraphs from different sources can lead to unclear and muddled expression, and therefore provide little evidence of knowledge and understanding.

There seemed to be an increase in the number of students using surveys as their main form of primary evidence. Students used survey respondents as if they were experts on the issue, rather than as a means of gaining public understanding or attitudes towards a particular issue. Some students carried out surveys, but did not use the data to support their discussion. Teachers are reminded to provide students with guidance on the purpose of surveys and what constitutes an appropriate sample size.

Some students misunderstood what an interview is, and had given their interviewee typed questions with minimal space for a response. An interview is a conversation in which the interviewer can follow-up interesting lines of discussion and ask for further clarification. Information about the number of interviews undertaken, and whether or not they were pleasant to carry out is irrelevant to the hypothesis or guiding question. Every sentence in the student's report has to count towards strengthening their discussion of the topic under investigation. Personal narratives need to be edited out.

Generally students' referencing has improved and most students used a consistent referencing system. Students are reminded that a reference list documents the sources used in the construction of their discussion. Students need to use sources that investigate both sides of the argument as this facilitates a deeper analysis and a more thorough synthesis of the complexities of the issue. Such an approach also leads to a sound conclusion that is based strongly on evidence, not just on opinion.

Students are reminded that the conclusion is not the place to introduce new data or new lines of argument, nor should it simply state the student's own personal opinion. Students who followed the recommended format from the curriculum statement demonstrated greater success in meeting the criteria for judging performance.

Chief Assessor
Studies of Societies