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Society and Culture

2015 Chief Assessor’s Report

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## Overview

Chief Assessors’ reports give an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, the quality of student performance, and any relevant statistical information.

In 2015, the number of students enrolled in Society and Culture again increased in both the 20-credit subject and the 10-credit subject, with a significant percentage increase in the latter. It was pleasing to see that the quality of the work submitted was again excellent; students continue to exhibit a strong engagement with contemporary issues and topics which are not only relevant to their own lives, but at the same time demonstrate a broader societal and cultural focus. The achievement of students in school assessment was largely consistent with that of previous years. It is clear that most teachers understand and are able to apply the performance standards with confidence.

Overall, the moderators were pleased to note that teachers had structured their tasks to cater for a wide variety of student abilities and interests, and endeavoured to maximise students’ success. Evidence was provided against the performance standards in a variety of formats — written, oral, and multimodal — however, the most popular remain written folio tasks. While teachers are encouraged to give students choice where possible, it is recommended that clear guidelines are set so that students achieve the best outcomes possible.

The moderators were again pleased at the generally high standard of packaging of materials for moderation, with an emerging trend by some teachers to submit all their students’ work in an electronic format, on USB drive or disc. Teachers are reminded of the importance of this submission adhering to the SACE Board guidelines, so that the work may be easily accessed by moderators. Including the assessment plan and set of task sheets is also important. Because the main aim of moderation is to confirm teachers’ judgments, the inclusion of materials indicating how teachers have reached their assessment decisions makes this process much more straightforward. It is also most helpful if students’ work is clearly marked with students’ names as well as SACE registration numbers.

## School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Folio

There was a high degree of adherence to the subject outline requirements for the folio assessment type, with most students in the 20-credit subject completing four written tasks which promoted engagement with contemporary social and cultural issues. Tasks which provided opportunities for students to develop their skills of social inquiry and required students to investigate issues via both primary and secondary sources clearly advantaged students, particularly in their achievement against the investigation and analysis, and evaluation and communication assessment design criteria. The most successful student folios contained a variety of task types, which typically provided opportunities for student choice; for example, in the selection of issues to be investigated and in the method of presentation. There were some excellent examples of topics and tasks which had clearly been tailored to suit the needs, abilities, and interests of specific student groups.

Well-designed tasks typically contained scaffolding questions and/or clear instructions that explicitly addressed the performance standards. However, where too much scaffolding was included (for example, in tasks with mainly short-answer questions), this tended to limit opportunities for in-depth analysis, particularly if the questions were designed to produce factual or descriptive responses rather than consideration of the complexities of issues.

Students were advantaged by tasks which required them to explicitly examine social change in response to contemporary issues; for example, in their consideration of the underlying causes of issues and how they might be specifically addressed. Where students had been provided opportunities to examine diverse perspectives of stakeholder groups in relation to contemporary issues and the ways in which they affect each other, they were more able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the ways in which societies and cultures are connected and interdependent.

The most successful student folios also provided strong consideration of a range of ways that power structures operate in society, including the role and influence of groups such as governments, organisations, media, lobby groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and consumers in both local and global contexts.

Task design disadvantaged some students by preventing them from achieving at higher grade bands against the specific features of the assessment design criteria. Features of tasks which limited the opportunity for students to demonstrate their learning in relation to the performance standards included the following:

* Tasks with a lack of focus on contemporary social and/or cultural issues; for example, by considering world leaders of the past in response to the People and Power topic. These types of tasks disadvantaged students because they generally required a recall of facts rather than an analysis of contemporary issues.
* Tasks with a narrow focus and limited perspectives. Examples of these types of tasks, which significantly disadvantaged students, included several pieces of work in student folios with an overly historical, legal, or religious focus. Moderators observed that some students had completed several tasks which were too closely aligned with other subjects, for example, Legal Studies, various history subjects, and Religion Studies. In these instances, students were restricted in their capacity to demonstrate achievement against the Society and Culture performance standards.
* Responses to films which tended to invite description and/or student opinion rather than in-depth analysis of the issues.
* Folios which used the same content and/or resources in two different tasks. These folios hindered students from demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of a range of aspects of issues.
* Tasks which did not invite social inquiry. Such tasks prevented students from demonstrating their achievement in the higher grade bands. In many instances, students were disadvantaged where they relied on a limited number of easily accessible secondary sources to investigate issues.
* Tests or tasks where students had clearly been given a limited amount of time. These disadvantaged students. Similarly, overly restrictive word-counts prevented students from achieving in the higher grade bands.
* Group activities for the folio with a lack of evidence of individual student achievement. The lack of evidence made it difficult for moderators to confirm assessment decisions.

The most commonly studied topics included Cultural Diversity, Youth Culture, Social Ethics, Technological Revolutions, People and the Environment, A Question of Rights, and People and Power. Within these topics, it was clear that the majority of students had investigated relevant and contemporary social and cultural issues; however, moderators did observe a reliance on older tasks in several schools. It was encouraging to see schools that had taken the opportunity to redevelop or create new tasks in response to emerging social and cultural issues.

Assessment Type 2: Interaction

Most students in the 20-credit subject completed one group activity and one individual oral activity for this assessment type.

Moderators noted that there was good variety in the types of social action undertaken, and that students appear to be responding well to this task.

Successful social action examples included:

* raising awareness about an issue by educating groups of students (class groups, assemblies, school campaigns)
* raising money for charities and organisations within school and/or community contexts
* designing gardens/car parks in public places
* undertaking social action which was connected to the chosen issue.

The quality and quantity of evidence presented for the group activity varied significantly, with a disappointing number of students failing to submit sufficient evidence, which made it difficult for moderators to confirm grades where evidence of the nature of the social action and the individual contributions of students was not discernible.

Moderators reported that there were a high number of students who did not submit an individual evaluation of their contribution to the social action. There was also limited evidence, or sometimes no evidence, of collaborative evaluation of the social action in a number of student packages.

Where the work undertaken by a group was only evidenced in one student package, it was frequently difficult for moderators to locate the work of an individual student, particularly in instances where no names or SACE registration numbers had been provided to indicate which students had participated in a group.

The best packaged evidence of the group activity was found in schools where each individual student package contained evidence of this task, including:

* evidence of inquiry into the chosen topic or issue
* records of group meetings, including evidence of collaboration
* visual evidence of students undertaking the social action
* transcripts and/or PowerPoint presentations of social action presentations or group debriefings and collaborative evaluations, with individual students clearly identified
* individual student evaluation of the social action.

It was evident that some students had completed tasks which had not given them an opportunity to engage in social action. In these instances, students were significantly disadvantaged.

Students tended to be more successful when undertaking the oral activity independently. In a number of instances where students had completed the oral activity within a small group, it was difficult for moderators to confirm the assessment of the individual performance of students when no system of identifying the students in a video had been provided.

The best evidence of the oral activity included:

* a transcript of the oral presentation
* copies of PowerPoint slides or screen prints of multimodal presentations when used
* good-quality audio-visual recordings.

Many oral tasks undertaken as a group were assessed against the collaboration assessment design criterion, with no evidence of collaboration provided. Teachers are also reminded that the investigation and analysis criterion is not required to be assessed in the interaction tasks.

In a number of schools it was difficult for moderators to determine which was the group or oral task, particularly if the oral task had also been undertaken as a group. It is helpful for moderators to have tasks and assessment sheets attached to all pieces of student work.

The group and oral components of this assessment type are separate tasks. In a small number of schools it was apparent that a presentation delivered as part of the group activity was also assessed as the oral activity. Students were disadvantaged in these instances.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Investigation

The overall standard of investigations in 2015 was consistent with that of previous years. The most successful investigations featured:

* effective analysis of a range of sources, both primary and expert secondary, and a range of perspectives
* a focus on contemporary and/or controversial social issues
* adherence to the structure suggested in the current subject outline
* the use of consistent referencing.

Markers commented that students were successful when teachers had supported them to understand and use the skills of social inquiry. Students should also be encouraged to draft and edit their report.

As in previous years, a wide and interesting range of investigation topics were selected by students. However, this year markers noted a trend away from very local issues, the majority featuring contentious issues for Australian society as a whole. While some perennial favourites again appeared, such as body image and under-age drinking, these topics were less popular than in previous years. Topics were also prompted by recent global events, such as the need for new anti-terrorism measures. Such topics resulted in successful investigations when the hypothesis or guiding question was clear and well-focused, and led to analysis and evaluation from a variety of perspectives.

Topics recently in public debate and the media, led to the most successful and most interesting investigations. Examples were based on issues such as:

* laws concerning disability in the workplace
* the legalisation of medical marijuana
* anti-halal campaigns
* racism in sport
* domestic violence
* the ‘ice’ epidemic
* online gaming
* LGBT acceptance
* the 3 a.m. curfew / ‘one punch’ legislation and violence
* closure of the Repat Hospital
* constitutional rights for Indigenous Australians
* nuclear energy and storage of nuclear waste.

Markers commented that global topics tended to be less successful where they lacked a specific focus, such as ‘climate change’ or ‘the problem of drugs in society’, as these topics are typically too broad to be dealt with in depth within 2000 words. Students achieved better results with clearly defined topics with a specific context.

Markers commented that most students chose relevant and current social issues. However, some students needed better guidance in their choice of topic, some of which were outside the subject scope and stretched the definition of a ‘social issue’, such as ‘the history of [an overseas sports team]’, or were of limited relevance to Australian society, such as ‘the modern police force in [another country]’, or were too broad and lacking in focus, such as ‘violence in society’. Many of these were not framed as issue investigations, but rather as topics for discussion. Better investigations also featured less reliance on a teacher-generated formula of response. There were some instances where all students in a class used the same focusing questions, or the same interviewee, such as the local MP. This scaffolding can be good for some students; however, it is limiting for others.

The most successful students challenged themselves by seeking a wide range of perspectives on their issue and making use of appropriate and authoritative sources, both primary and secondary. Although surveys remained a popular primary source, where students relied on surveys as their major source of information on a topic, this generally led to the lack of sophisticated levels of knowledge or analysis. Better investigations obtained valuable primary data from interviewees with relevant expertise. A variety of opinions were canvassed from local media reporting and local people who were willing to be interviewed. Better investigations also showed awareness of other forms of ethnographic research, such as action research in the form of observation, or the collection of photographic evidence. Better investigations synthesised sources, comparing the perspectives of interviewees with evidence provided by sound, up-to-date and expert secondary sources, identifying bias, and ultimately critiquing or supporting their hypothesis or guiding question.

Students were advantaged when investigations were structured with three or four focusing questions bearing a close relationship to the hypothesis or guiding question. Guiding questions which were open-ended, such as ‘To what extent …?’ fostered depth in analysis and evaluation. Less successful students tended to use emotive language; words like ‘appalling’, ‘vile’, ‘woeful’, or ‘disgusting’ reveal student bias rather than contributing to considered analysis. Some students included interview data, but failed to reveal the expertise or relevance of their source. For example, references such as ‘interviewee 1 said …’ made it difficult for markers to determine the credibility and validity of these sources. Most students were able to use a consistent in-text referencing system in their investigation and included a bibliography. Teachers should note, however, that annotated bibliographies are not required or assessed in the investigation. Students generally adhered well to the word-limit. However, markers commented that as the 1000-word limit in the 10-credit subject makes it challenging for students to address the assessment design criteria in depth, students need to plan thoroughly and write especially concisely.

Better investigations engaged in authentic research, were structured around key ideas or arguments, and included a range of informed opinions. They featured a conclusion that included an evaluative summary of the main findings, provided insight into societal trends, and identified strategies for social change. Students need to be aware of and state the limitations of their research as part of the conclusion to the findings of their report.

In summary, the most successful investigations:

* involved contemporary social or cultural issues that were open to discussion and debate, and had an Australian context
* had tightly worded hypotheses or guiding questions
* structured analysis around focus questions
* used expert primary sources, supported by secondary sources
* evaluated the sources for validity, reliability, and bias
* provided evidence of multiple perspectives on the issue
* explicitly addressed the nature and causes of social change
* considered complex interrelationships between individuals and groups in societies and cultures
* used a consistent referencing system
* contained an insightful conclusion which addressed the limitations of the study
* adhered to the word-limit
* were carefully drafted and edited to ensure the effective communication of ideas, knowledge, analysis, and conclusions.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers. Teachers’ assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators. Teacher grades/marks should be evident on all student school assessment work.

Moderators were pleased to see that most bags included an approved learning and assessment plan, as well as a full set of task sheets with the student work. In addition, variations should be clearly noted on the appropriate forms. Teachers are reminded that this is a requirement of the SACE Board. Many teachers used the addendum effectively to signal amendments to the course, in particular, refinements made in response to clarifying forums.

Moderators praised the standard of packaging this year. For the most part, materials were packaged with care and in accordance with the SACE Board’s advice to teachers. Where work was submitted by assessment type, and clearly identified with students’ names and SACE registration numbers, this was very helpful. Assessment sheets with a clear indication of achievement against performance standards attached to student work, which also included teacher comments, again aided moderators in confirming teachers’ judgements. Material which was posted online (for example, in a Prezi or Weebly format) unfortunately was not accessible to moderators. Teachers are reminded to follow the guidelines for submission of electronic files available on the SACE website, so as not to disadvantage their students.

Markers of the external component commented that much more care had been taken this year by students not to identify themselves or their school in the external investigation.

Students and teachers are reminded that it is not necessary to submit survey questions and/or responses, or interview transcripts, as appendices to the investigation. Markers do not take these into consideration when grading student work. Any analysis of these sources should be included in the main text of the investigation.

## General Comments

The overall quality of student responses across all assessment types indicated that many students showed a passionate engagement with certain topics, and that the majority enjoyed many aspects of their course of study.

Teachers, especially if teaching the subject for the first time, are strongly recommended to attend one of the clarifying forums early in the school year, to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the benchmarks at each level of the performance standards.

Teachers who have participated in marking and/or moderation commented on the benefits of this collaborative experience and the opportunity for professional development. All teachers are strongly encouraged to register their interest in joining one of the assessment panels for this subject.

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