

OCR Report to Centres

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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

English (J350)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

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A641 Reading Literary Texts

General Comments

In this fourth session of the new specification, where centres are aggregating for the first time, there were the largest number of entries to date. Centres continued to take up the option to use themed tasks, either with a set text such as *Of Mice and Men* or with their own choice such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Macbeth*. The task regarding sympathy was a very popular option in this series. It was a matter of concern that a significant number of centres had some or all of their candidates entering forbidden combinations, usually of Steinbeck with either Duffy or Zephaniah. Centres must be clear that the requirement is to select **one** text from Different Cultures and one from Literary Heritage and these must be taken from the poetry and prose and **not** Shakespeare. Choosing *Of Mice and Men*, *Tsotsi*, *Notes from a Small Island* or *The Kindness of Strangers* means that the poetry must be Owen unless the centre opts for the themed task with their own choice of Literary Heritage poet; choosing to enter for Duffy or Zephaniah would require the set prose text to be either *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Withered Arm and Other Wessex Tales*.

Although there was some clear variation in terms of length, each task was generally well within the 1000 word limit recommended so that the each candidate was not going over the total of 3000. Some may have benefited from developing the ideas further in order to access bands 1 and 2. The candidates appeared to have completed the tasks within the time limit allowed. Where notes were included with the work, they were very helpful in clarifying how the final task had been produced.

There was evidence of personal engagement, a sound and often detailed knowledge of the texts and a generally clear focus on the task. It was pleasing to see that centres had generally worked within the spirit of controlled assessment by thoroughly preparing their candidates without strait-jacketing them by means of providing a specific plan. The move from coursework to controlled conditions has seen some evidence of greater variety and independence of response, albeit to tasks set by the board, where candidates have used notes to develop their own ideas; there is a freshness of response and a sense of enjoyment in the folders submitted. However, moderators have also reported concerns about heavily structured and teacher-led responses and these centres have been instructed to include the candidates' notes in the next submission.

The social and historical context of texts was addressed in all three tasks, although there was some tendency to begin with a brief biography of the writer or the conditions at the time of writing. In the course of the essay there were often intermittent comments on context not grounded in the text or used to illuminate understanding. However, the very best used it to develop their exploration of the characters' loneliness in *Of Mice and Men*, the pride and honour of male characters in *Romeo and Juliet* and the ways in which Owen shows that, for soldiers, war was not a sweet and noble thing.

Whilst it is evident that candidates are using the PEE (point, evidence, evaluation) chain to enable them to comment on language, it was noted by moderators that it can become rather limiting and sometimes hinders the development of ideas about the text if the essay is simply set out in this way, especially where PEE is written down the side of the response. It does not allow for a cohesive response. In addition, candidates repeated the quotation in their explanation or simply translated it. "In this quote" frequently opened a sentence and references were often overly long. The ability to explore the effects of language, especially in poetry essays, as opposed to either explaining the meaning or give a general statement such as "This makes the reader feel sympathy" or "This shows that Owen was bitter about war" indicates that the candidate is appreciating how language works and often signals a move into band 4. Below this

level, candidates often resorted to narrative and straightforward explanation of quotations and this generally indicates performance at band 5 and below.

In awarding band 3 and above, the focus on the writer needs to go beyond merely naming him/her and must show an awareness of the writer's intentions, closely supported by an analysis of the techniques employed and their effects, becoming more perceptive and sophisticated for bands 1 and 2. One moderator referred to centres referring to "analysis" in relation to anything that involved language and close reading. The phrase "secure critical response" from the band 3 criteria was also used regularly, especially where writing sounded confident or assured, rather than in response to language.

Candidates were well prepared, and the quality of the responses was generally consistent across all three genres, with that on poetry being sometimes slightly stronger. In some folders, there was, however, evidence of development of skills over time and in these the second or third essay was stronger. It was pleasing to note that, in general, there was a clear focus on the task and candidates had a secure understanding of the texts.

Most of the assessment, annotation and summative comments were clear and helpful. The majority kept strictly to the band descriptors and the most useful identified examples of the criteria in the body of the response as well as giving a concise summary at the end or on the cover sheet. There was more variable quality of annotation and commentary in this session with some essays showing no signs of being marked other than a final number on the cover sheet; centres are asked to ensure the essays are fully annotated with comments at the end as a means of justifying the final marks rather than being addressed to the candidate. It should also be noted that the cover sheet requires summative comments from the teacher rather than details of the question answered. Evidence of internal standardisation was usually apparent in centres where marking was consistent and the individual moderator's report to centres has requested that this becomes standard practice in future sessions where this was not currently the case.

The presentation of the folders was reported by moderators as a cause for concern, often not doing justice to the quality of the responses. The essays need to be headed up with the candidate's name, centre and candidate number as well as the details of the task and it is preferable that the separate pages are attached with staples or treasury tag rather than being placed in plastic wallets.

Question specific comments

THEMED TASKS

*To what extent does the writer make you feel sympathy for **one** or **two** characters in the text(s) you have studied?*

This task was used effectively across all three genres, especially with regard to *Of Mice and Men* and a selection of Owen's poems. Candidates made their selection from virtually all the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, reflecting on how issues of racism, sexism and the impact of the American Depression (and the itinerant lifestyle) affected those on the ranch. The appreciation of prejudice as well as an awareness of Lennie's mental difficulties encouraged some strong personal responses, often grounded in detail from the text, and the best explored the ways in which Steinbeck's language affected the reader's feelings of sympathy. In responding to Owen's poetry, candidates identified the horrific conditions, the youthfulness of the soldiers sent to fight and both the physical and mental suffering of the soldiers. As can be seen in the comments relating to the set task on Owen, the best responses were grounded in an appreciation of the language and structure of the text.

How does the writer present particular attitudes and beliefs in the text you have studied?

This task was used with regard to *Macbeth* and was well focused on context with candidates making reference to James 1st and the divine right of kings, witchcraft, the supernatural and superstitions. Lady Macbeth's evil nature and her controlling personality were used to challenge the idea of women being inferior in the Elizabethan period. Macbeth's kingship was explored, showing awareness of his sins and his guilt. There was appreciation of dramatic effectiveness but a need for more analysis of language. There were also some responses to Owen, with candidates opting to write about *Dulce et Decorum Est*, *Disabled* and *Spring Offensive* and these tended to take the same line of argument as those responding to the set Owen question, in that he challenges the attitude that it was a noble thing to die for your country.

PROSE OR LITERARY NON-FICTION

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

"Guys like us are the loneliest guys in the world". How far does the relationship between George and Lennie challenge this idea?

A substantial number of responses still tended to focus on the ways in which characters are lonely, some of which went on to look at how George and Lennie's relationship makes them different. Many omitted to explore this and therefore lost focus since the task focuses explicitly on this relationship. The best answers used other relationships to highlight what is different about George and Lennie and some explored the extent to which either or both of them are lonely in spite of their friendship.

The responses to this task showed candidates enjoying the opportunity to write about the central relationship and appreciating the contextual reasons for characters' loneliness, referring to the lack of stability, trust and harshness of ranch life. Some of the stronger, secure middle band responses explored the differences between the relationship between George and Lennie and that between others on the ranch, often picking up on Lennie's cry of "Not us, because I got you to look after me and you got me to look after you" to reflect on how this avoid them being lonely. There was some insight evident in comments referring to the way that even George and Lennie were, at times, lonely. There was a tendency, even in the stronger middle band responses, to explore the ways in which Steinbeck presents the theme of loneliness and discuss which characters are lonely and why, rather than using examples of these other characters to show how the relationship between George and Lennie is different, hence losing a focus on the question. To access the top bands, candidates needed to ensure a tight focus on the task set with quotations being used to show an understanding of the writer's purpose and of how meaning is created. Lower band responses generally commented in a straightforward way on how and why characters are lonely, with some reflection on how George and Lennie support each other, but there was a greater degree of narrative where the relevance was implicit.

Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson

Explore the ways in which Bryson creates entertaining descriptions of the hotels and other accommodation he stays in during his tour of Britain.

This session saw this text being used for the first time with evidence of appreciation of the humour and straightforward understanding of the language devices used. At band 5, this tended to lead to an explanation of the reference used, with some commentary of how it created specific effects beginning to show at band 4.

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

*Explore how Austen makes **one** or **two** characters appear ridiculous to the reader.*

The character chosen by the candidates who opted to write on this task was Mr Collins, and this elicited relevant responses to him in terms of his behaviour and attitudes, especially towards Lydia, Elizabeth and Lady Catherine. The higher band responses focussed not only on what he does, but on the means by which Austen presents him to the reader, with some exploration of the letters, with some evident appreciation of the humour created at his expense.

DRAMA: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Romeo and Juliet

*How does Shakespeare show the importance of pride and honour to **one** or **two** male characters in the play?*

Whilst Tybalt, Capulet and Romeo were the characters generally selected for exploration by candidates, the roles of Mercutio and Friar Lawrence were also chosen. As was seen in January, some candidates diluted the strength of their exploration by dealing with too many characters, and centres are advised that the instruction to deal with one or two characters as the central focus of the response is to enable them to deal with them in more detail and depth. Most responses began well but then lost focus and there was a tendency to recount the scene, rather than analyse.

Candidates showed a strong engagement with the play. The strong middle band responses seen showed a secure knowledge and understanding, with some awareness of how characters revealed their sense of pride and honour in different ways, and some appreciation of the difference between pride and honour. To access the top two bands, candidates needed to explore the language and dramatic devices used to present pride and honour in the male characters, using short, apt quotations as the basis for analytical comment rather than explanation. Lower band responses tended to focus on characters' actions, often leaving the link to pride and honour more implicit than explicit, and using quotation to support an account of events. Such quotations were often introduced by paraphrase and then followed by a translation. It was pleasing to note the sustained use of the text at virtually all levels and the absence of confusion with the modern film version of the play. An understanding of the difference between pride and honour was only really apparent at the higher levels where there was perceptive exploration of these concepts.

Julius Caesar

*Explore how Shakespeare presents ambition and its consequences in *Julius Caesar*.*

There were a small number of responses to this text, focussing on Caesar's abuse of power and the dilemma faced by Brutus, with some appreciation of its consequences and the way it led to the deaths of characters. The understanding of the characters and their actions was at a straightforward level, with some relevant textual evidence used to support ideas. Comments on quotations tended to explain and paraphrase rather than analyse, and a more critical response would lead to an award of a mark in band 3 and above.

POETRY: SELECTED POEMS

Wilfred Owen

How far does Owen challenge the idea that it is a sweet and noble thing to die for one's country?

The poems chosen to answer this question often included *Dulce et Decorum Est* (from which the reference to “sweet and noble” in the task is drawn), *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, *The Sentry*, *Dead Beat*, *Strange Meeting* and *Disabled* and it was pleasing to see the level of understanding, with very little confusion or distortion of meaning, evident in the candidates' responses. The students seemed to engage well with Owen's visceral descriptions of life and death on the battlefield and the density of the imagery triggered more clearly analytical approaches, however many candidates found it hard to sustain the quality of their interpretation equally over both or all three poems. There was some understanding of Owen's experiences of war and of how this affected his attitude to it, all being able to see how his poetry expresses his negative feelings. At the lower levels this was expressed in terms of the physical suffering and by reference to the horrible conditions faced by the soldiers, with some relevant quotations used as evidence, whereas the more secure middle band responses also showed some insight into the mental suffering of the soldiers. Whilst there was some awareness of Owen's tone in the stronger candidates' responses, and in the top band 3 and band 2 responses an ability to reflect on how choices of language create meaning, the majority tended to name devices and be more limited in their ability to explore the effect created. At the lower band level, candidates showed some straightforward understanding and often self penalized by writing very little. Although it was evident that only the stronger candidates understood the reference within the question, they were all able to show a grasp of how Owen's poetry reveals the horrors of war, making their responses more directly relevant to the question than was often the case in *Of Mice and Men*.

Carol Ann Duffy

Explore how Duffy presents everyday experiences in her poetry.

It was pleasing to see some lively, personal engagement with the poems, *Before You Were Mine*, *The Good Teachers* and *In Mrs Tilscher's Class* being the most popular choices. All the responses showed understanding of the key ideas in the poems, with those in band 4 moving beyond a tendency to explain and describe into some exploration of how meaning is conveyed. The descriptive details were clearly evocative for the candidates and they enjoyed giving examples; the higher band responses were able to show how the language and structure of the poems were effective in conveying the thematic concerns. In some cases, the more open task of how Duffy represents everyday life led to less well-structured replies.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

In this first aggregation session for the unit there was a significant increase in the number of candidates. There was a clear improvement in the quality and presentation of folders but there were still some areas for improvement from which both centres and candidates can learn for future sessions.

Most folders had recorded all of the candidates' details clearly and accurately on the front sheet and on the individual pieces of work. There were clear detailed comments on the front-sheet about how the centre had balanced candidates' strengths and weaknesses to arrive at a final mark. On the actual responses there were clear annotations which drew attention to the candidates' achievements in relation to the different assessment objectives. These centres also made clear which tasks had been attempted, what the breakdown of marks was for each piece and how they had calculated the final mark awarded.

In such centres it was much less common to encounter clerical errors and discrepancies between the mark on the front-sheet and the mark submitted by the centre. It was also much easier for moderators to understand why a particular mark had been awarded and to support the centres' decisions. In general, centres showed that they were able to apply the mark scheme accurately and even greater confidence in centres' marking was possible when there was clear evidence in the sample folders that internal standardisation as prescribed by the specification had taken place.

It would aid the moderation process, however, if samples were not presented in bulky folders or individual plastic pockets. Inclusion of the candidates' notes is also recommended because it may help the moderator to understand more fully what the candidate was attempting to achieve. Most importantly, centres must ensure that they meet all deadlines for the submission of marks and folder samples.

In the highest bands, students adapted the style of their responses with some assurance to suit the purposes of their pieces, making effective use of vocabulary to engage their audience. At this level candidates would benefit from more careful consideration of how to structure sentences and whole texts more effectively. Although each response should be marked separately the candidates should try to demonstrate (where possible) the range of their writing skills by making sure that there is a significant difference between the content and style of each piece.

In the middle bands, the candidates' responses were usually relevant but expressed in more straightforward language. There was some use of varied sentences with accurate punctuation between them but sentences were often lengthy and not fully controlled. Most candidates at this level could improve their attainment by choosing more effective vocabulary and using paragraphs to guide the reader through their piece of writing.

In the lower bands, candidates expressed some of their ideas clearly but there was such a high level of error that it made most of the response quite hard to understand. Most blurring of meaning was caused by long sentences which linked a rambling series of clauses together. It was noticeable, however, that there were a greater number of candidates in this session whose handwriting made it difficult to award marks.

It was pleasing to note that most centres have taken previous advice in these reports into account and are, in general, submitting relatively short pieces of work for assessment. It is important, however, that responses are long enough to show detailed development and to allow

candidates to demonstrate the effective use of structure. It is hard for candidates to sustain the same level of quality if they are rushing to write an excessively long response when they should be concentrating on crafting and editing their response.

Comments on Individual Tasks

Section A – Media

- 1 *Write an article for a local newspaper entitled ‘The Worst Place in Britain’ in which you highlight the problems and shortcomings of a particular town or area.*

Moderators enjoyed reading these responses and commented on how well candidates engaged with the core task with some relish, providing detailed descriptions of some very unpleasant corners of Britain. In general the task allowed the candidates to adopt a suitable tone and style but there was some uncertainty about the structure of this type of text. There was less evidence of centres providing excessive scaffolding for the response than in previous sessions and, in many centres, each candidate wrote about a different town or city.

- 2 (a) *Write a letter to the local newspaper arguing strongly against the views expressed in the article.*

As in the last session this was the most popular satellite task. The straightforward letter format meant that there were fewer of the structural issues that were evident in responses to other tasks. In the best answers, candidates often adopted a persona very different in age and outlook to their own. There was still a tendency to repeat some of the material from the core task whereas this response should add a different perspective and/or different information from the other response.

- 2 (b) *Write the words of a podcast from a person describing how they have been affected by living in the town or area.*

Podcasts proved increasingly popular in this session and many candidates often adopted a very different voice and perspective from the core task. There was less repetition of material from the original response in this task but there was some uncertainty about how to organise material for a podcast.

- 2 (c) *As a follow-up to the article, the local newspaper has organised a competition asking readers to propose a specific suggestion for improving the town or area. The best entries will be printed in the newspaper. Write your entry for the competition.*

There were more responses to this task in this session and they were generally successful. Candidates chose different formats, which was acceptable, because where the task does not specify a format, there is freedom for both candidates and centres to adapt the task to suit their particular strengths.

Section B – Text Development

There is still evidence from some centres’ annotation on responses to the Text Development tasks that, when awarding a mark, they have taken into account candidates’ understanding of the source texts. Although this is understandable it is not the aim of the assessment which is just an opportunity to use ideas from texts they are familiar with to inspire their own writing. It can be helpful if centres indicate which texts have been used but the response should be self-standing.

- 1 *Imagine a meeting between two characters, each from a different text you have read, heard or seen. Write the story of this meeting.*

Responses to this task were much more focused on the meeting between two characters in this session. Candidates are now using a much wider range of texts as a basis for this task, including moving image texts, but there were still some strong responses based on texts that have been set for examination.

- 2 (a) *Write a monologue in prose or poetry in which one of the characters in your story expresses his/her thoughts about the other character.*

There were a small number of monologues in this session. Generally they were able to sustain a voice and develop a character but candidates would benefit from taking more time to plan the structure of this kind of writing.

- 2 (b) *The place where the characters in your story met has become famous. Write a guidebook entry for this place.*

It was good to see a greater number of candidates submitting responses to this task. It enabled them to demonstrate control of a different type of writing and many of these pieces were very enjoyable to read.

- 2 (c) *Ten years have passed. Write a letter from one character to the other describing how life has changed over those ten years.*

This was yet again by far the most popular satellite task. As in the Media section, most candidates found the letter format supportive because it enabled them to structure their ideas clearly. There were many thoughtful and sometimes poignant pieces of work which cast new light on the characters and situations presented in the core task. Less successful responses simply detailed the relatively banal aspects of the character's current lifestyle.

Overall

Centres prepared their candidates well for the demands of controlled assessment in imaginative writing. Candidates from a range of levels of ability clearly engaged well with the tasks set and were able to demonstrate an appropriate level of achievement. It was particularly pleasing to see that many centres are encouraging candidates to produce a range of responses to the tasks rather than producing variations on a theme prescribed by the teachers. Although both approaches are acceptable, greater independence often seems to lead to greater engagement with the task.

A643/A652 Speaking and Listening

General Comments

The entry for both units was large with many centres choosing to use Speaking and Listening to satisfy the terminal rule. With few changes made from the legacy specification, the majority of centres seemed comfortable with the requirements of this unit.

The Training and Guidance DVD was issued to all centres in September 2011. It is a requirement that all teachers preparing candidates for Speaking and Listening watch and discuss the assessments on the DVD, and the accompanying commentary, to ensure appropriate standardisation has taken place in each centre. The Head of English is now required to sign a declaration that this requirement has been fulfilled on Form GCW330 – the record of internal standardisation. This year's DVD, while offering a complete range of tasks across all three contexts, focussed on two particular areas where centres may appreciate more guidance: the Real-life Context, and task setting for the Drama-focussed Activity. It also included a section on the administrative procedures of the moderation process, which many centres may find useful. Please note that future Speaking and Listening footage will be accessible online only.

Task setting

Centres had covered a wide and interesting range of tasks across all three contexts. It was clear that some teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks that would allow performance in the higher bands, while also offering opportunities to less confident students through careful choice of subject matter, role and purpose. Where generic tasks had been set across whole centres or classes, there were fewer opportunities for candidates to achieve their potential, particularly in the lower bands. Centres are advised that task setting is crucial to successful outcomes in Speaking and Listening, and that differentiating the tasks set to match student ability is strongly advisable. The subject matter of a talk, for example, in the individual extended contribution, is a differentiator in terms of awarding marks, as Band 1 clearly states that the talk must tackle 'complex subject matter'. A talk on 'football' is unlikely to fulfil the descriptor for Band 1, however a talk questioning or justifying footballers' salaries would be far more appropriate to stretch more able candidates.

Many centres have embraced the requirements of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" with enthusiasm, using the extensive advice on the Training and Guidance DVD sent to centres in September 2011. This is not an extra to the basic three contexts, but must be included as an aspect of any one of them, at the discretion of a centre and as appropriate to the situation. Often a simple adaptation to an existing task is sufficient – a prepared talk presented as a charity representative, or a group discussion in role as the school council, are two examples. However, many centres, or sometimes one or two classes within a centre, have still not fully addressed this requirement. The "real-life context" is more than just subject matter which has to extend beyond the classroom: it is a matter of purpose and audience. Centres with successful tasks for this requirement often linked it to the drama-focussed context or role play of some form: mock interviews, reality shows and government think-tanks, for example. Where centres adapted tasks for the individual extended contribution, candidates adopted a role 'beyond the classroom', or the 'audience' became a real-life context, such as government representatives, or groups of teachers/parents. For the group activity, the students were often asked to consider issues as members of a specified committee or body to give their discussion a real-life purpose. Some centres were able to give their candidates an actual "real-life context", often linked to careers interviews with outside visitors. These were often, but not exclusively, centres with a small entry, and there is, of course, no requirement to bring in outside visitors to satisfy this requirement. A number of centres still set tasks for real-life context which were not valid, for example, general discussions on attitudes to war, various social and moral issues, or a

“talk to the class” on work experience. It is important that centres realise that the real-life context is not simply about real life subjects, but concerned with role, purpose and audience. Most of these tasks, with a minor alteration in terms of purpose or audience could have been adapted to fulfil the requirement properly.

Attention is drawn, for further support and guidance to fulfil the demands of the “real-life context”, to the Training and Guidance DVD issued to centres in September 2011, which carefully explains whether each activity featured can be deemed real-life context or not. There is also a guidance document on the OCR website, and the Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres who would like to seek further advice on individual tasks. Through the consultancy, a centre’s tasks may be validated.

There was evidence that centres are setting much more suitable tasks for the drama-focused activity and there were much firmer links to the assessment criteria for this context. Where tasks were based on drama or other literary texts, many centres had given candidates much more freedom to explore and adapt language in the creation of their roles: a reality TV show based on literary characters, for example. Performing a scene verbatim from a play, usually a Shakespeare play, without any adaptation, does not allow candidates the opportunity to meet the marking criteria, and the vast majority of centres had avoided this approach.

A small minority of centres adopted a heavily literary approach to Speaking and Listening – at times basing all three tasks on the same literary text. This is problematic in terms of the real-life context, as a situation based on literary characters and scenarios is unlikely to truly represent a 'real-life context', but it is also very limiting in terms of offering candidates a chance to explore language usage. It is advisable that the tasks set offer candidates a range of opportunities to extend their skills across different contexts and in different styles.

Some centres linked Speaking and Listening activities with work for A652 Section B: Spoken Language. Tasks set included exploring the language of an interviewer, and there were a few really imaginative tasks linked to TV chefs which the candidates had clearly enjoyed. It is hoped that as centres get used to the new specification, more will take the opportunity of using Speaking and Listening to help prepare candidates for their Controlled Assessment task on Spoken Language.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally held data base of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures, good practice in centres, help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff, for example. It also helps in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. The OCR Controlled Assessment form covers all the necessary elements required by the external moderator.

Centres must remember that candidates’ record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities, or when comments on performance have been “lifted” directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre. Where an Individual Extended Contribution is simply described as 'a talk to the class' it is not possible to assess whether the complexity of the topic was sufficient to justify the mark awarded.

It is also important that all the staff within a centre adopt a common approach to filling in the assessment forms and that good practice is shared. The comments on the forms should aim to explain the marks awarded to the moderator, not offer feedback to candidates on their performances. There was often great variation in terms of teacher comments within centres, some extremely detailed, helpful and personal to candidates, whereas others were brief and impersonal.

It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical or transcription errors. A number of transcription errors were found and CW Amend forms sent to centres, largely because the arithmetical process of adding the three marks and dividing them by three had not been applied correctly.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well-presented records, often word-processed, and it was only a minority of centres, that had to be reminded of their responsibilities.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on the band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' assessment forms should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context. The final mark is based on a mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculation carefully, as mistakes were discovered by moderators. Importantly, no assumptions should be made as to a link between bands/marks and grades.

Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths. An explanation is given, for example, as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band, when on borderlines. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

Good practice is to use cross moderation of groups, joint marking exercises, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department Inset training using filmed evidence, provided by OCR. Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff assessing Speaking and Listening watch and discuss the DVD issued to centres on an annual basis. Although the majority of centres had clearly done this, where there was no understanding of the demands of the real-life context, it was clear that some staff had not seen the DVD. It is advised that the DVD is accessible to all staff throughout the year to confirm standards and offer advice. In smaller centres, with a single teacher working in isolation, it was gratifying to see that the DVD was being used to bring all marks into line with the agreed OCR standard in the vast majority of cases.

The majority of centres had secure and often very rigorous procedures in place, including a day devoted to Speaking and Listening, but again worryingly, a minority of centres had to be reminded of their responsibilities. Centres must have procedures in place to ensure that internal marking is standardised and that a reliable rank order of marks is sent to the moderator. Importantly, the internally set standard is judged against the agreed OCR Standard, by the use of filmed assessments from OCR. Internal standards are confirmed by visits to centres. Some centres are failing to judge their own standards against those on the OCR DVD. Where centres had used the DVD to train staff, it was apparent in their task setting, understanding of the real-life context and in their justifications of the marks awarded.

Administration

The administration of this unit, once again, could have been smoother. It is essential that centres familiarise themselves with the deadlines and procedures pertinent to this unit. There was some confusion between the sample required for A652 Section B Spoken Language, and A652 Section A Speaking and Listening, or between moderation of A643 and A652/A where centres had candidates entered for both specifications. OCR intends to streamline the administration of A643 and both sections of A652 next year by ensuring that centres are given a single moderator to cover all components across A643 and A652.

However, even with a single moderator, centres must be aware that the moderation procedures for Speaking and Listening differ from those for the other Controlled Assessments – these procedures are outlined in the Administration section of the DVD and on the accompanying commentary. They are also sent to all centres and a checklist for teachers is provided. All the necessary forms and the instructions can be downloaded from the OCR website. Time was wasted and the moderation process protracted, by moderators having to chase centres for samples and forms when for Speaking and Listening the centre should select their own sample of seven candidates per teaching group covering the range of marks in each class.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examination officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties.

However grateful acknowledgement is made to those who got it right and enabled moderators to meet their deadlines.

Conclusion

Once again attention is strongly drawn to OCR's Training and Guidance materials for this unit available to centres each September. These will build up to provide vital support for all teachers, in assessment and task setting. This September centres will be able to access the filmed assessments on-line and download the accompanying commentary.

The Speaking and Listening unit has always been a real strength for candidates and this is a testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing candidates. Many thanks for the continuing commitment in preparing and assessing the candidates.

A680/01 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Candidates were clearly engaged with the reading material for Section A: the return of the otter to urban waterways (Text A) and attitudes towards magpies (Text B). The two Writing tasks proved to be equally popular across the candidature, though within some centres one question was more popular than the other.

The majority of candidates had obviously been well prepared for the format of the question and answer booklet. The spaces provided for answers reflect the relative weightings of questions. Additional sheets were occasionally used for either Question 2(a) or for one of the Writing tasks. It should be noted, however, that recourse to extra sheets should not be necessary. Please see comments on individual questions below.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice contained in the *A680 Guidance Notes* which can be found on the OCR website: namely that 10 minutes should be spent on reading the two texts; 60 minutes on answering Questions 1 and 2; 50 minutes on their chosen Writing task.

Individual Questions

Section A – Reading

The overwhelming majority of candidates used the correct text in responding to Questions 1 and 2. However, some candidates used material for Question 2(b) when answering Question 2(a), and vice versa. In Questions 1 and 2 candidates are assessed on their reading ability only, so the inclusion of their own views about the topic, however sincerely felt, cannot be rewarded.

Question 1

1(a) – 1(c). Many candidates had been well prepared for the style of questions and produced concise answers in the spaces provided. In practice, the best answers were as short as they needed to be in order to answer the question correctly. The answer for 1(a) (ii) required just one word: 'recluse'. Candidates should be discouraged from trying to cram too many words into the space provided in the hope that they chance upon a correct answer. Whilst selective copying is acceptable for these questions, verbatim copying of an excessive amount of text is not.

1(d). Examiners saw the full range of responses to this question. Successful responses focused clearly on the question topic ('outline what you learn about British otters since the 1950s') and produced a wide range of relevant points largely in their own words – 'as far as possible', as the question says. Less successful responses were less selective and reproduced points that were not made relevant to the question (for example, about canals being graveyards for shopping trolleys). At the bottom end of the range, there was little attempt to tailor the material to the specific demands of the question and points were sometimes copied indiscriminately from the passage, with perhaps the odd word changed. The following relevant advice is taken from the *A680 Guidance Notes*:

'Since this is a WHAT? question, candidates are not expected to use quotations or comment on a writer's use of language. Lengthy introductions and conclusions are not required, and points should be made once only, as there is no credit for repeated points. Candidates should not give their views on the topic.'

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Questions 2(a) and 2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. However, for some centres the number of candidates using extra answer sheets (usually for Question 2(a)) was significantly above average. These candidates run the risk of under-performing in Question 2(b), for which there are more than double the marks for 2(a). There is no need for candidates to be exhaustive when answering either 2(a) or 2(b). For these HOW? questions they should select details carefully and comment on them concisely.

2(a). Successful responses identified right from the start specific features and commented on particular effects they create for a reader. For example, many were struck by the heading 'Magpies on Trial', commenting on the somewhat amusing notion that we could make 'human' judgements about wild birds.

Less successful responses made generic comments about the heading, sub-headings, captions and photographs without focusing on specific details from the text in question: eg 'the heading was easy to read because it was in bold font and made you want to read on', 'the colourful picture makes it stand out' etc. Many answers that ran to a second page contained this type of generalisation that could be true of many media texts. In such cases an excessive amount of writing led to relatively little reward.

2(b). Successful responses contained clear evidence of an ability to analyse relevant detail, commenting on specific ways in which information and language used in the article persuaded readers that magpies are 'Not Guilty!' Some candidates who did not read the question with sufficient care picked information and/or language points from the text that conveyed the magpie in a more guilty light.

When exploring the language used in the text, it is more profitable to link brief quotations to detailed comment on effects. Quotations on their own or accompanied by assertions such as 'This is emotive' do not constitute analysis. Candidates using the antonyms 'negative' and 'positive' should be encouraged to offer more precise detail about what it is they find negative or positive.

The quality of analytical comment is a discriminator for this question, and candidates would benefit from regular practice at articulating how and why particular words are effective in media texts they encounter during and outside lessons.

Section B – Writing

Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw a full range of performance for the Writing tasks. It was pleasing to see many candidates take the time and effort to plan their answers. Very often these candidates were able to structure their writing more effectively, from a focused and engaging opening right through to a well-considered ending with much evidence of development in between. These candidates often had more interesting things to say because they had taken the time to reflect before writing. As a consequence, their writing was often very engaging, with the sense that material was being consciously shaped for a reader. By contrast, in less successful responses there was writing that became rambling, lost focus or became repetitive.

It should be emphasised that the quality of writing is being assessed, and not quantity. Regular practice at past questions should help to drive home this message. There should be no need for candidates to use continuation sheets for their Writing answer. Indeed, some of the more successful candidates used one of the three pages provided for the Section B answer for effective planning.

Candidates should be encouraged to spend time checking their spelling and punctuation and to take care with their handwriting. Common errors included not marking sentence divisions, confusion over *its* and *it's*, homophone errors (*there/their/they're* and *to/too*), writing one word instead of two (*infact, aswell, alot, incase, eachother*) and writing two words instead of one (*some one, no where, country side, your self, any thing, neighbour hood*). A surprising number of candidates used capitals erratically: for example, they did not feature at the beginning of names but did appear randomly in the middle of words. Past and current clichés included 'he was not in a happy place', 'elephant in the room', and the still ubiquitous 'she is there for you'.

Question 3 asked candidates to write an article for the local newspaper describing what they like and dislike about the area where they live. Stronger responses provided detailed and engaging descriptions of the areas and clear explanation of their likes and dislikes. Less effective answers listed likes and dislikes mechanically, with little sense of the audience and format indicated in the question. Occasionally, there was the jarring use of made-up statistics: '86% of my friends say they will definitely move out of this town but 67% of people my parents' age say they never will' and a somewhat alarming 'there has been a 65% increase in the death rate in my area over the last two years'. For most candidates, the 'positives' outweighed the 'negatives', and really informative answers offered precise details about what was positive or negative. The 'likes' that examiners encountered in answers included green fields, parks, good community spirit and cultural diversity. The dislikes included noisy neighbours or streets, graffiti, fortnightly bin collections and lack of amenities for young people.

Question 4 asked candidates to consider the merits of being with friends and of being alone sometimes. Most candidates offered a balanced approach to the question and many regretted that it was difficult to get the balance right. Some drew on recent experience, in particular, the need to revise away from the distraction of friends. In stronger responses candidates wrote engagingly and candidly about themselves, their personalities and their relationships. They gave convincing portrayals of themselves both as part of the crowd and also as individuals with 'alone time'. Less convincing answers listed details about particular friends (such as hair and eye colour) and what to do during alone time (watch DVDs, play Xbox and go on Facebook). Candidates should avoid colloquialisms such as 'stuff' and 'Me and my mates'. This particular question did not specify an audience or format. However, it should be remembered that the examiner is a very real 'audience'.

A680/02 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

This report may be usefully read alongside the Teacher Guide for A680, which can be found on the OCR website.

Candidates responded well to this paper and, fresh from their own school leaving celebrations, found the subject matter engaging. Both the reading texts and the questions proved accessible. The majority of candidates appeared to be well-prepared for the demands of the individual tasks and most completed the paper. Instances of rubric error and omitted questions were few.

There was evidence from the scripts that candidates were using their time more effectively than in previous sessions, with much fuller responses to the reading texts in Section A, accompanied by briefer but more tightly organised responses to the writing tasks in Section B. Examiners noted improved focus on the wording of individual questions and a correspondingly better understanding of how to meet the demands of the tasks. Achievement on this paper is very closely linked to a clear understanding of purpose.

It would appear that centres are making good judgements in their entry policy and there were fewer candidates wrongly entered for Higher Tier this year. Centres looking to support their students in this component should consider that the more structured approach to reading texts offered at Foundation Tier can prove beneficial for weaker candidates.

Question 1

Performance on this task continues to be somewhat uneven. Most candidates showed understanding of the content of the passage but there was less assurance around the demands of the task. There is a need to deliver a wide range of points, concisely, in a well-organised response. Candidates should show understanding through selection and synthesis. Examiners reported very unbalanced responses which either achieved a wide range through writing at excessive length or delivered a very small number of points, sometimes in just one or two sentences.

It is worth noting that the question did direct candidates to select material, not to summarise the entire article. The best answers kept firm focus on how the adults feel about these celebrations. Weaker answers lapsed into excess detail about the nature of the celebrations. Some candidates, although fewer in number than in previous sessions, drifted into a style of language commentary more appropriate to Question 2. Centres should ensure that all candidates are aware that this type of critical comment has no place in Question 1.

Candidates are directed to use their own words 'as far as possible' here. Examiners did report instances where such was the determination to avoid **all** words the writer had used, candidates began to lose clarity. There is no need to replace, for example, '11-year-old school children' with 'pre-pubescent scholars' or to describe a helicopter as a 'rotary flying device'. Examiners do acknowledge that inevitably some of the words from the text will be used, but what candidates must avoid is quotation and mere 'lifting' of lines from the text, as this does not show understanding.

Question 2

The question directed candidates to consider **how** features of presentation and use of language had supported the writer's point of view. The most successful answers here offered well-supported analysis of a wide range of points. Responses considered the writer's use of pictures and headings to emphasise the idea of over-indulgence and commented on his use of facts and figures, exaggerated anecdote and expert opinion. Examiners were pleased to see some

insightful exploration of the more subtle suggestions that these celebrations had grown out of unhealthy changes in society. They pointed to the writer's suggestion of guilt-induced, compensatory parenting, the 'Americanisation' of contemporary society, and pressure on children to grow up too quickly. Comment was frequently offered on the use of language that described children as 'precious' and worthy of having their 'whims and wishes... honoured'. Surprisingly few candidates made use of what was quite an accessible point of structure; the article begins with what the writer sees as an outrageous request and ends with that request denied, to his apparent satisfaction.

Weaker responses tended to confine attention to the picture and the headings and achieved little more than description of content. Alongside this, some answers were little more than a list of devices 'usually' found in media texts with brief definition of what a feature, such as a rhetorical question, 'usually' does. Comment must be securely linked to the effects achieved in the given text if it is to earn credit. Centres should prepare candidates to deliver critical comment on how ideas are communicated, not to critique the ideas themselves, or to offer their own opinions on the subject matter, in this case the suitability of these celebrations.

Question 3

Candidates clearly enjoyed this text and found the antics of Charlene and Velma a source of much amusement. Examiners reported that this was frequently the best of the three reading responses. The question asked for comment on use of language and, as with Question 2 the focus was on **how** the writer's choices convey his attitude. Most candidates picked up the writer's mocking tone and his technique of eliciting disapproval by quite lengthy description of absurd excess, undermined by both the age of the child ('This is her 13th birthday'), and the small numbers of participants, ('Thirteen, that's nearly a grand a head') delivered in a short, punchy sentence. The writer's mimicry of spoilt children's voices, 'I want a unicorn and I want it now' drew useful comment, often linked to the reference to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The very few candidates not familiar with this work still made the perfectly valid point that these parties were being compared to something fictional, not of the real world. The contrasts between the natural and the unnatural were usefully explored, considering the petting of the 'de-skunked skunk' alongside the children's wish to run around the garden. Sympathy for 'poor Jasper' was much in evidence, alongside strong appreciation of the scathing description of his mother.

Some candidates did take at face value the opening line 'It looks brilliant now' and concluded that the writer was in fact jealous of these children and their parties. Although this initial false start was often corrected as candidates worked through the article, this does highlight the need to plan the Question 3 response and to read the whole of Text B before starting to write. Candidates exploring the writer's attitude in more depth commented on his apparent ambivalence, finding these celebrations both repelling and fascinating. This article was, of course, a review of a TV programme, a fact which many candidates noted in their answer, showing some insight into why these 'blissfully unselfaware' characters made such compelling viewing.

SECTION B WRITING

Question 4

This proved to be the slightly more popular choice, with candidates finding the familiar format and subject matter very accessible. Candidates of all abilities had plenty to say and some made effective use of the texts they had just read. This is entirely acceptable and where candidates chose to use material on proms and parties, it blended well with other ideas offered.

Candidates were expected to show awareness of their audience on this task and examiners would suggest that this is best done through thoughtful language choice. There is no expectation that candidates will write their own stage directions ('pause for effect', 'look around and point'). Candidates that adopt this approach are likely to lose the fluency of their response. The best responses were well-organised and showed evidence of careful planning. A variety of rhetorical devices were employed, the most popular being the direct question to the audience. It is worth urging a little restraint here. Responses that do little more than constantly batter the audience are not demonstrating a variety of skills.

Most chose to take up a point of view and persuade their audience, others adopted a more reflective approach. The majority of candidates communicated concerns about the pressures faced by children, not just in terms of appearance or fashion but also responsibilities to act as carers for other family members. Some suggested that a little pressure to mature was not a bad thing and that the wish to behave like a twenty-something was the most childish trait of all and best left behind.

As is often the case when marking writing, examiners were left with an impression of strong and sensible opinions held by thoughtful young people. They seemed to look back on their own early years with fondness, expressing concern for the new pressures faced by younger siblings.

Question 5

Examiners warmly appreciated the imaginative, entertaining and effectively delivered narratives that candidates of all abilities offered. Although content involving weddings and family birthdays was largely predictable, most candidates attempted either a thoughtful twist or an engaging personal touch (the embarrassing uncle or the fight between the bridesmaids). A number of candidates said they enjoyed the Royal Wedding more than they expected, including one who had camped in the Mall the night before and gave a most vivid account. The strongest responses tended to offer some reflection on the significance of their experience.

It is becoming clear that candidates who chose a relatively straightforward topic, which they then enliven with good writing skills do achieve more than candidates who over-reach and attempt to deliver a complete short story. As with Question 4 careful planning and a clear sense of direction is a crucial discriminator. Less successful responses were those that lacked balance, with lengthy build-up to the event followed by a perfunctory, 'Everything was alright in the end.' Responses that start with the candidate having breakfast seldom end well, or in the time allowed.

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