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History

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Examiners' Report

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Introduction

In the year of the Tomlinson Report and renewed debate on the most effective mode of assessing the achievements of the ablest 16-18 year olds, the *status quo* in the shape of the AEA examination received, in History at least, something of an endorsement from the market-place. There was a significant increase in the number of candidates taking the examination. For the first three years of its operation (2002-2004) the candidature for AEA History was static at around the five hundred mark. In 2005 this figure rose to nearly eight hundred. There was no immediately obvious reason for this increase. AEA is to be given a UCAS points tariff from 2006, but this is scarcely likely to have been an influence on entry levels this year. There is, however, some anecdotal evidence to suggest that universities are taking more interest in the examination for selection purposes. There is evidence of a similar kind which suggests that candidates themselves find the relatively open-ended nature of the examination stimulating and so opt to attempt it. Perhaps too as the examination has bedded down centres have developed a clearer sense of the prospects their candidates have of being rewarded with a Merit or a Distinction and have as result been more confident about making entries. Another possible factor is the headway being made by the 'Gifted & Talented' agenda in schools. At any rate, whatever its causes, the increase is welcome.

The increase in the candidature has not been accompanied by any change in its overall nature. The additional candidates do not appear to have come disproportionately from either the upper or lower end of the AEA ability range. There was in consequence no significant change in the proportions of the candidature awarded a Distinction or Merit. At the lower end of levels of performance, the examiners continue to have some concern about the minority of candidates for whom entry for the AEA History examination does not on the face of it appear to have been a kindness. A candidate whose contextual knowledge is so uncertain that he or she makes reference to 'the Poor Law Reform of 1832, passed by Castlereagh' or to 'the Peterborough Massacre of 1815' is unlikely to be a strong A grade candidate in A Level terms and as such is likely to struggle badly when confronted with the demands of the AEA paper. It is, however, understood that preparing for the AEA examination may promote candidates' overall intellectual development even if they do not come away from it with tangible reward. It is also understood that in some centres the choice of whether to proceed is essentially left to the individual candidate. If candidates themselves are satisfied that the enterprise does not represent a waste of time it is not for the examiners to second-guess them.

In general this year's examination performed its function of discriminating between candidates of differing abilities effectively. The standard deviation for the paper, an indicator of the dispersion of marks, was rather higher than in previous years, and this represented a pleasing outcome. Questions 1(a) and 1(c) worked particularly well. The Section B essays worked satisfactorily, though the most popular options - Qus 2 and 3 - produced some degree of 'bunching' in the middle part of the mark range.

Section A

In terms of the demands it made on candidates' higher-order thinking skills, Qu 1 (a) was, as in previous years, the least challenging question on the paper. Essentially it was a comprehension exercise designed in part to enable candidates to develop their familiarity with the source material and to get them safely under way. The potential difficulty with this kind of exercise, given the ability level of the candidature, is that it will fail in any substantial way to discriminate between candidates of differing abilities, with the result that marks awarded cluster in one part of the available range. In order to prevent such clustering the 1(a) question is of design significantly more demanding than source comprehension questions which might be encountered on an AS or A2 paper. One of the ways in which the examiners seek to inject challenge into the comprehension question is to ensure that material relevant to the answer is dotted through the text as opposed to being concentrated in any one part of it: the whole of the text has to be read and understood if the higher levels in the mark scheme are to be accessed. Another is to ensure that some of the material required for a fully persuasive answer is implicit rather than explicit in the text, thereby offering scope to candidates to display their capacity for making inferences. In some years these and other devices work rather more successfully than in others but this year 1(a) worked particularly well in that it stretched the candidature out. No candidate found the question wholly inaccessible; the majority understood, and explained clearly, the core differences, according to Hobsbawm, between 'traditional' and 'grassroots' history; the ablest understood that in addition to what Hobsbawm said explicitly about the differences between the two in terms of content and technique, there was also a suggestion that one was old-established and the other a comparatively recent arrival.

Centres may wish to note three further points about Qu 1(a) which may assist in the preparation of candidates for future examinations. First, a sizeable number of candidates wrote answers of excessive length in response to 1(a). Three sides were not uncommon. In one or two cases answers to 1(a) were longer than the answers offered to the higher tariff questions which followed. Candidates should bear in mind that Qu 1(a) is a 'starter' question which ought to be despatched relatively briskly: two or three sides of the answer book are neither expected nor required. Second, a significant number of candidates sought to develop or exemplify points they took Hobsbawm to be making with material drawn from their own knowledge. It should be noted that Qu 1(a) is a wholly source-based exercise and that the use of 'own knowledge' is inappropriate and unwanted. Third, a surprisingly large number of candidates, by no means all of them drawn from the less able part of the candidature, did not confine themselves to writing about the differences between 'traditional' and 'grassroots' history but wrote about their similarities as well.

Qu 1(b) offered candidates an opportunity to do some empirical history - that is, to construct an historical explanation and to offer detailed and relevant evidence in support of the claims put forward. A fully convincing answer to the question set called for three things: sufficient contextual knowledge and understanding to focus on a specific decision; the ability to explain clearly and systematically the ways in which the 'common people' influenced the decision in question; and the ability to evaluate the extent of this influence, which involved being able to point to other influences and factors at work. A significant minority of candidates fell at the first hurdle, proving unable to identify and explore a specific decision. What was usually offered instead was a narrative of an historical episode in which the 'common people' were heavily or centrally involved. Examples include the outbreak of the French revolution, the civil rights movement in the post-war United States and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The majority of candidates, however, were able to discuss a particular decision, though in some cases (the decision to appease Germany in the 1930s, for example) the level of specificity was not high. Answers which stretched the meaning of 'specific decision' somewhat were nevertheless considered on their merits. What distinguished highly from moderately successful responses to 1(b) was the ability to offer well-founded comment on the extent of the common people's influence: middling quality work tended to confine itself to a consideration of 'ways' and neglected 'extent'. Examples of specific decisions which produced work of impressively high quality were the deposition of Somerset in 1549, Louis XVI's decision to call the Estates-General in 1789, Alexander II's decision to end serfdom, Gladstone's decision to return to active politics in 1876, Lenin's decision to introduce the New Economic Policy and Nixon's decision to withdraw US forces from Vietnam. A marked feature of middling-quality work on the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act on the one hand and Nixon's decision to withdraw US troops from Vietnam on the other was the depiction of the relevant decisions as outcomes of a kind of people's crusade against reluctant and recalcitrant politicians. In the process a complex historical reality was over-simplified. Perhaps some candidates were projecting their preconceptions about contemporary British politics on to the past.

The least impressive answers to 1(c) were those which consisted of little more than a set-piece description of a well-known debate among historians. This kind of rote-learned historiography, in which no use at all was made of the sources and the question set was scarcely acknowledged, let alone answered, did not score highly. Happily only a small minority of candidates found themselves in this position. Better, though less than fully convincing, work was produced by those who recognised the relevance to the question of the issue of subjectivity in historical writing, who accepted with alacrity the opportunity to write about it, but who wrote about little else. One-dimensional answers of this sort tended to derive very largely, or exclusively, from the candidate's own knowledge, with the sources being seriously neglected. This was a significant weakness given that one of the central purposes of the question was to assess candidates' ability to produce a coherent synthesis based on the sources and 'own knowledge'. The number of candidates who were able to produce such a synthesis was, however, encouragingly high. Other characteristics of the best work, apart from the ability to synthesise sources and 'own knowledge', were the deployment of a range of ideas and the use of concrete, as opposed to hypothetical, examples. A less welcome feature of many answers, including some at the higher end of the range, was sweeping assertion about the readiness of historians to engage in either manipulation of the evidence or outright falsification in order to buttress their position in debate. The principal targets of such assertion were the unlikely trinity of Richard Pipes, Sir John Neale and Daniel Goldhagen. Overall, though, this was a question which was well done and for a high proportion of the candidature represented their best effort of the four.

Section B

The most popular essay options were Qus 2 and 3. Qu 4, on gender history, was the least popular option but when attempted it was often done very well indeed. The best single essay seen by the examiners this year was an attempt at Qu 4 - one which not only had a number of shrewd and penetrating things to say about the partisanship or otherwise of gender history but which also did full justice to the issue of the difficulties involved in writing it. Responses to Qu 5, by contrast, were often disappointing, with candidates often defaulting to generalised observation on the merits and drawbacks of television history and in the process failing to address the specific issue raised in the question set. In addition supporting evidence was frequently sparse.

The weakest attempts at Qu 2 consisted either of loosely-structured descriptive writing relating to historical episodes in which 'chance' featured or of descriptions of particular intentionalist-structuralist historiographical debates offered without adaptation of any sort. In addition there were one or two who saw in the question an opportunity to off-load stock answers relating to counter-factual history. An encouraging number, however, sought to define and explore the role of chance and offered their case studies within the context of a clear overall argument. In the main answers were more convincing on the role of chance as opposed to the impact of long-term social and economic trends. At the top of the range were a significant number of very impressive answers which combined a clear understanding of the nature of history with a high degree of conceptual and historiographical sophistication.

Qu 3 was in general well answered. Some responses amounted to little more than potted histories of one or two failed careers but many tackled the question head on, addressing not just failure but also the ending of careers. Many sought with success to categorise careers, distinguishing, for example, between those experienced in democratic as opposed to authoritarian political systems. In the strongest work, the range of exemplification was quite exceptional, with candidates moving confidently between the ancient, early modern and contemporary worlds. Special mention should be made of the candidate who not only wrote on this question with poise and assurance, scoring highly, but who also correctly identified the author of the quotation (Enoch Powell).

Standards of written English in the papers seen were in general high - at the top end of the range impressively so. A few old friends, however, made an unwelcome reappearance. The use of the grocers' apostrophe in the plural form of Nazi (Nazi's) was as much the rule as the exception. There was too quite a rich crop of homophones, by no means all of them from less strong candidates. They included 'out of sink', 'brake down', 'aloud' (for 'allowed') and 'populous' (for 'populace'). No doubt examination pressure was to blame for these lapses. It's not clear whether the same can be said for the colloquialisms into which a number of candidates lapsed. More than one opening paragraph was launched with the phrase 'For starters' and the use of 'down to' for 'because' was not uncommon. Also far from unusual was the use of 'incredibly' to mean 'very', as in assertions to the effect that this or that was 'incredibly important' or 'incredibly significant'.

Statistics

9846 Advanced Extension Award History (798 candidates)

| Grade | Max. Mark | Dist | Merit | U |
|----------------------------|-----------|------|-------|-------|
| Raw boundary mark | 60 | 38 | 30 | 0 |
| Cumulative % of candidates | | 27.4 | 65.2 | 100.0 |

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