

Examiners' Report January 2008

GCE

GCE Religious Studies (8560)



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6582: Investigations

Religious Studies coursework remains a much-valued component of the specification that provides candidates with an opportunity for independent learning.

The additional topics and titles have continued to attract an increasing number of high quality responses from candidates. For example, in the topic entitled 'creative expressions in religious life', it is clear that some candidates have seized the chance to research a topic of interest to them and as a result produced an interesting, scholarly piece that exemplified a high level of sustained critical investigation and analysis. Some candidates made effective use of their studies and interest in the creative arts by submitting investigations on visual art, film studies and liturgical music.

Another topic Religion and Science has increasingly attracted more candidates who produced very interesting work.

The high number of students who are achieving an excellent mark is a testimony to the seriousness with which coursework is approached by both centres and candidates.

Successful candidates displayed skilful investigative techniques based around thorough literature searches, resulting in careful selection and adaptation of material leading to a clear exposition of knowledge and understanding. Good candidates maintained a reasonable balance between the demands of Assessment Objective 1 (AO1) and Assessment Objective 2 (AO2). Material for AO1 was presented in a scholarly fashion and was fully justifiable through a sound referencing system and bibliography. It was encouraging to note obvious interest in the subject evidenced through reading and research, the best candidates showed clear evidence of reasoning and sifting through arguments so as to highlight strengths and weaknesses of various views. The most able candidates were consistent in providing excellent verification of references, which is demanded in Level 4. The standard of work produced by the best candidates showed that previous years' high standards have been maintained and in some cases raised.

A larger number of centres are offering a broader range of titles and this suggests that students have a wider choice that meets the creative needs of more able candidates.

Good practise was clearly evident in that centres have been marking efficiently and professionally referring to the AO1/AO2 objectives in the mark scheme either on the essay or on the assessment form. These centres showed first class attention to administrative procedures and effective annotation by Centre assessors helped to fully justify their marks and there was strong evidence of internal moderation.

Essays that achieved the higher levels of AO1 used a range of appropriate sources and candidates demonstrated clear understanding of the issues involved through the perspectives/structure brought to their work. Higher levels of AO2 clearly argued a case throughout the essay that culminated in a thoroughly justified conclusion.

Candidates must provide explicit evidence of meeting the requirement of both assessment objectives. This is particularly the case with attention to AO2; less able candidates tended to tackle the AO2 component in an 'add on' fashion which resulted in a one paragraph conclusion instead of considering a range of views, drawing out the strengths and weaknesses of arguments and then formulating substantiated conclusions. A number of the more able candidates produced good research but failed to answer the question set. Candidates must pay close attention to the title of their investigations. In some cases there appears to be a tendency to write in general terms about a topic and only incidentally on the precise title.

There is room for improvement in both assessment objectives - this might involve choosing a question that steers clear of unnecessary biographical detail or improving research through using resources that are aimed at a higher level. Too many candidates at the lower end used material that is intended for GCSE work or downloaded material from the internet. Internet sites must be used critically to avoid using material that is difficult to digest or that clearly does not meet AS requirements. It was evident in the work of less able candidates that there is an increased use of the internet that is not balanced by the appropriate use of good relevant books.

There are study skills issues that emerge each year that merit attention and would help to improve the quality of work of less able candidates. One of the distinctive features of coursework is the facility of developing bibliographical skills. Many candidates are competent in constructing bibliographies. However, there continues to be a few problems with some candidates making elementary mistakes. Page 64 of the specification contains a few basic rules such as the 'bibliography should include author, date, title and publisher and/or place of publication. The bibliography must be arranged alphabetically in order of the author's last name'. A significant problem with a number of candidates is that although they may have constructed a bibliography there was too little evidence of referencing skills. Some candidates used references for primary texts such as biblical sources, but failed to provide basic references for secondary sources. One of the criteria for level 4 AO1 is 'excellent use of factual material, from a variety of sources, verifiable through references'.

Some essays can be improved by a systematic attempt to improve paragraph techniques that avoid short paragraphs devoid of analytic content. On the other hand candidates who write very long paragraphs, which show a lack of discrimination in the selection of material, would benefit from learning how to sign post their paragraphs efficiently to relate to the overall essay plan.

Some centres select one title for all candidates and provide a resource booklet for the candidates. While such an approach guarantees a certain level of success, it may be more difficult for the originality of better students to stand out. Other centres limit the range of titles for their students. This approach encourages greater originality whilst ensuring a good level of response; essays from these centres were usually well referenced and accessed a variety of resources and there were diverse levels of responses to the same title. Some centres allowed their candidates the full range of choice. These centres often produced pieces of coursework, which was original, well researched and critical. These investigations were interesting to read and this approach often allowed the candidate to explore a topic they were interested in or passionate about. However, a few centres that adopted this approach must be aware that a diverse choice of titles also demands a diverse range of appropriate resources which must be reflected in the bibliography.

Administration

Most centres sent their work in to meet the deadline and followed the procedures accurately.

However, there was a range of administration issues which centres should beware of:

- The coursework was not sent until requested by the moderator. Coursework should be despatched to arrive with the moderator by the deadline published each series on the examination timetable.
- Work is sent to the wrong address. Please send work only to the address on the OPTEMS form.
- The work of the highest and lowest candidate was not sent if they were outside the pre-selected sample. Please ensure that the work of the highest and lowest mark is included with the sample if it is not already part of the sample.
- OPTEMS forms. The top OPTEMS form should be sent to Edexcel c/o Pearson Assessment and Testing. The yellow copy should be included with the sample sent to the moderator.

Record sheets and statement of authentication forms for each candidate must be sent to the moderators. The record sheets can be found on page 100 of the specification.

Section A: The Study of Religion

Popular topics included responses to the titles related to 'A study of creative expressions in religious life'. Some candidates offered studies of film, which were clearly thought out; however, weaker candidates could improve their study by addressing in more detail the theological theme that underpins the films/directors they are investigating. Popular topics also included the psychology and sociology of religion with some candidates focussing on an in-depth study of an important scholar related to these areas such as Marx, Freud and Jung. In this section the studies offered were of a consistently high standard with the best works being of undergraduate level. Weaker candidates generally penalised themselves in the AO2 section rather than on the AO1 element.

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

Popular topics included mind-body topics, religious experience, religion and science with some candidates focussing on an in-depth study of an important scholar such as Descartes or Kierkegaard. In this section the studies offered were of the usual high standard. The best quality essays displayed evidence of philosophical analysis and reasoning. Most of these topics were thoroughly investigated by candidates with access to commendable sources. There were some exemplary investigations on Religious Experience that were superbly referenced throughout and tightly argued. It was pleasing to see a greater interest in the Religion and Science titles. In this area there were some excellent studies by the best candidates; however, a general area of improvement would be to update the range of sources accessed within the religion and science field. Weaker candidates generally penalised themselves in the AO1 section rather than on the AO2 element in religion and science studies; the weaker candidates studying a particular philosopher also penalised themselves in the AO2 objective rather than the AO1 objective.

Section C: Ethics

As in recent years the coursework in this field ranged from high standard work to that which made little progress beyond GCSE level. The best essays on medical ethics were well informed and explorative and offered a scholarly exegesis of how religious teachings and philosophical influences impact on ethical issues. There were more investigations on the issue of homosexuality, animal rights and equality that were well thought out and achieved a high level.

Essays on abortion and euthanasia still predominate. It is often in these essays that candidates present a great deal of information, but fail to focus on the philosophical and ethical arguments related to the debates or the demands of their selected study. Some candidates presented too much biological information or a range of definitions and pictures that were a prelude to a piece of work hovering around GCSE level. Some moderate candidates presented a very wide range of views such as several Christian denominations often accompanied by Islamic and Jewish perspectives. In these essays candidates sometimes get bogged down in the detail and AO2 suffers. Weaker candidates might benefit from focussing on a narrower range of views, but to explore and analyse these views in more depth. Many essays in medical ethics could have benefited from the use of an essay structure that lent itself to better quality analysis of key concepts such as autonomy, quality of life, sanctity of life, ensoulment and personhood.

Candidates answering the Martin Luther King and Malcolm X questions, with a few exceptions, tended to be too biographical/historical and did not include enough theological assessment in the evaluation and comparison of their lives. Only a few of these were of Level 4 standard. This topic required attention to the ethical issues surrounding human rights and equality - again the bibliography used by many candidates was of GCSE level.

Section D: Religion

Some candidates produced very well researched essays, which displayed good investigative techniques of analysis of key concepts and beliefs with careful weighing up of evidence and reasoning; the best candidates supported their argument with careful critical scholarship.

Whilst there was an awareness of different points of view in titles which demanded a balanced knowledge of two religions there was a great deal of depth shown on one view and a limited view for the comparison religion - this one sided approach meant that the demands of the question could not be fulfilled. This was particularly evident in essays that were comparing the teachings of Islam with another world faith. Many candidates also included much irrelevant detail that was not required for the question they were answering. In these cases it should be noted that a key consideration for any candidate is the choice of title and then meeting the demands of that particular title throughout the investigation. A great majority of candidates appreciated differences in belief and their research conveyed the desire to understand in greater depth a view they did not ascribe to. The candidates offering an essay in World Religions produced work reflecting a serious interest in religious belief that was generally supported by well-informed teaching and good resources

Section E: Old testament/Jewish Bible

Candidates at the top end produced impressive pieces of work with commendable scholarship and use of an outstanding range of academic material. Middle/lower range candidates used material that they did not understand or found it difficult to critically analyse.

There appeared to be a decrease in the number of candidates offering Old Testament investigations.

Section F: New Testament

As in recent years the coursework in this field was of a high standard, with excellent presentation and generally good use of scholarship and resources. The most popular topics were homosexuality and miracles. There were very few pieces on the ordination of women.

Candidates at the higher end produced scholarly work with an impressive attention to detail and focus on argument. Candidates (in the minority) at the lower end relied on sources that are of GCSE standard.

Section G: Christianity and the Christian Church

The topics presented were varied, with good knowledge on aspects of church teaching. There were some outstanding essays on the influence of Christian thought, which employed a range of sources and arrived at a substantial conclusion. A few candidates produced essays on Church history, whether the early church or the reformation. Generally, these were either excellent or disappointing; the best essays were scholarly, well-written and researched pieces of work and the weaker essays did not tailor their responses to the assessment objectives or the demands of the title.

Final Word

Congratulations to so many students who display excellent powers of investigation, competent referencing and bibliographical skills. There was great evidence of genuine interest in Religious Studies and rigorous attempts to pursue this in greater depth. Coursework offers an opportunity for rewarding independent research that short exams cannot begin to verify. Good practice is evident in the majority of centres and candidates are aware of the dangers of plagiarism and have progressed in their efforts to substantiate their argument with properly referenced sources. Many candidates know how to address explicitly AO1 and AO2 objectives.

Statistics for 6582

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	50	40	36	32	28	24
Uniform boundary mark	150	120	105	90	75	60

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