

World studies extended essay

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Extended essay

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For grade boundary information, please refer to the Grade boundaries for Diploma programme coordinators document available on the PRC.

The range and suitability of the work submitted

As always, the best WSEEs are truly outstanding and capture the best aspects of a DP education. The least suitable essays lack conformity to the WSEE model in several ways: no DP subjects are mentioned or applied; subjects not offered in the DP are claimed (e.g. law, medicine etc), there is no global issue or local case study, the global issue is not contemporary, etc. It follows that the range and suitability of work submitted is very wide.

Some essays demonstrated a passionate involvement evident from the candidates. It is important however that such passion is not misplaced, as this can sometimes result in an overly subjective approach. This was especially prevalent in RQs associated with identity in the CLI theme, which were often taken as **a cue for an exploration of the writer's own existential condition rather than serious academic research** into questions associated with identity *per se*. Similarly, there was a tendency to approach the essay in very general ways and the challenge of framing the research question often defeated the best intentions of the candidate.

Topics chosen were generally relevant and contemporary, and centred on an issue of global significance; however, the latter was not always clearly identified. A good range of countries were used as local case studies, although some candidates compare two states/provinces rather than venturing outside their own country, thus limiting evidence of global consciousness. Candidates have become more adventurous in choosing the disciplines to integrate, particularly between humanities and science subjects; however, whilst some such essays were exceptional, others were weak because candidates lacked knowledge and understanding of both subjects. On the one hand, those who actively chose and embraced WS did very well; on the other hand, there are still some essays that are shoe-horned into WS because they do not fit a single-subject EE, and these tended to score at the lower end.

At the highest end of the marking range, there were many essays that utilized fascinating and fresh research questions that were able to capture the interdisciplinary requirement of a WSEE alongside elements of the Learner Profile.

This session's essays brought a wide range of topics, although pandemics and COVID-19 were a common topic across a number of themes. The majority of these topics configured well into WS and conveyed within them a range of ideas, issues studied and global perspectives. Yet, many other topics were poorly conceived and failed to fulfil the requirements of a WSEE, which was a way to trigger the caps in Criteria A, B, and C, at 4, 4, and 3 respectively. The following are scenarios that trigger the caps:

- The two IB subjects necessitated for the interdisciplinary approach were neither mentioned nor clarified in the essay. In some cases, it is not until the reflections that the subjects are stated.
- **The topic chosen was not "contemporary" (within the lifetime of the student). There must be a reference to a contemporary issue, even if that is from a historical framework.**
- The subjects stated and used are subjects not offered by the IB such as law, medicine, epidemiology.

The WSEE provides candidates with an excellent opportunity to broaden their horizons, demonstrate global consciousness, and showcase the IB Learner Profile, and almost all of the EEs showed at least some level of global awareness; as such, it should be encouraged.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

Candidates seemed to perform well against criterion A as most successfully outlined the issue in a global context while explaining the need for an interdisciplinary approach. The most successful essays were explicit about the justification for the IB subjects in question while explaining the contemporary global issue.

Candidates who were careful to state clearly the local case study while outlining the issue of contemporary global importance and indicating the subjects used in the research generally managed the task well. The range of research was also an important factor in the success of the work and those candidates who were able to explore the two subjects in a specific manner with a sustained focus on the RQ were able to use this approach as the foundation for their work. It is important to re-state the RQ in the introduction if only to locate it among these core elements. It was not uncommon for candidates not to base their work on a local case study or, if they did so, to place that case study in a wider global context. The common recourse of making a whole country into a case study usually resulted in research at a level of generality that precluded it from the higher achievement levels in criteria B and C. Those candidates who really focused on a manageable case study that was precise and with careful parameters had a far better chance of writing critically about it within the 4000 words, and were also likely to use research in a deeper more curious manner, replacing the generic approach with more specific and enriching work.

Identification and explanation of the topic, RQ, and methodology were challenging for some, with many candidates having difficulty developing an RQ sufficiently focused for a 4000-word essay thus leading to topics/RQs that were too broad and/or vague for systematic investigation.

The best essays generally held the shared characteristic of having detailed, specific and ‘complete’ methodologies. However, a number of essays lacked specificity in terms of methodology, instead often providing a superficial and vague explanation of the sources the essay will use. The methodology should also include how the subjects will be used, why the subjects were chosen and the need for an interdisciplinary approach. Likewise, for those few essays in which the students decided to utilize a survey, experiment, etc, the methodology must be appropriately explained. The methodology can include the specific models, theories or concepts being used.

The significance of having a clear and focused research question cannot be overstated as this is frequently the reason for a considerable number of essays performing poorly. Thus, to perform well, the research question must lend itself to an evaluative discussion rather than a narrative or descriptive one, and the research question, global issue, case study, two IB subjects and methodology must be established.

At the top end, candidates took time in their introductions to make clear the contemporary global issue and how the DP subjects and learning could be applied to gain novel insights reinforced by a case study and an explanation of methodology. At the lower end there was sometimes no introduction to set the scene and an assumption that the reader would fit the material to the model. Sometimes the global issue was clearly established but never revisited, the conclusion being applied to the case study only.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

The demonstration of knowledge and understanding for the majority of essays was quite strong, but often one subject seemed to dominate the other. The best essays were those that successfully integrated the two subjects while demonstrating good knowledge and understanding.

The two subjects are crucial with regards to the way research from the respective academic areas is applied, generating both knowledge and understanding. Candidates had very different ideas about relevant knowledge and a number of essays were replete with information that had little connection to

the RQ. The understanding that emerged from such superficial approaches was usually of questionable value for the work. Candidates who were able to address the requirements of the higher achievement levels demonstrated a clear awareness of the research methodologies of their chosen subjects and were able not only to explore these but also relate them to the common focus demanded by the question. The application of research was usually successful in direct relation to its quality, specificity and source origin.

Knowledge and understanding were often affected by the performance in criterion A, with continued lack of adherence to the WSEE framework, especially where only one DP subject was used or where DP subjects were not identified, leaving examiners to guess. Clear adherence to the interdisciplinarity of the WSEE is essential to a demonstration of solid knowledge and understanding of terminology and concepts from two disciplines. Where candidates demonstrated knowledge and understanding for two DP subjects, they usually did very well.

A WSEE requires knowledge and understanding to be shown of two IB subjects in an interdisciplinary manner. To successfully take the theories and concepts of two IB subjects, the methodology and sources must be carefully considered, and the interdisciplinary approach must be understood. This also requires good guidance on behalf of the supervisors, especially as a way to avoid descriptive and narrative essays.

When it came to essays that generally received lower marks, they did so for quite a few reasons. One of the most common reasons was a continuation from one of the key requirements from criterion A – the two subjects. If the essay listed no subjects, one subject or inappropriate subjects, this had a great impact on the amount of knowledge and understanding that could be shown. It also often triggered the mark caps, unless an appropriate subject was to emerge. However, letting subjects emerge, should be avoided. Another reason for poor performance in this criterion was a subject being a surrogate for a particular article or theory. So, while knowledge and understanding of a particular article or theory might be shown, it was not necessarily knowledge or understanding of the subject. Likewise, often the subject knowledge and understanding seemed to be superficial and used more to allow a student to choose a specific topic rather than to aid in a discussion. For example, geography was used to allow the essay to compare two locations without discussing and analysing geographic factors (environmental, economic, social, political, etc.) or a simple discussion of money being used to as a way to demonstrate economic knowledge and understanding. The topic needs to apply two subjects equally and effectively to ensure an interdisciplinary approach.

The highest scoring essays used ‘effective’ and ‘appropriate’ knowledge and understanding of the topic and to have employed accurate terminology, theories, models, etc.

Criterion C: critical thinking

This criterion proved to be the most challenging as many candidates were unable to demonstrate critical evaluation of the evidence while providing a synthesised argument.

The importance of analysis as a functioning part of a clear argument is fundamental to addressing criterion C and for this analysis to work it should derive from a critical understanding of sources and their relationship to the RQ. The critical approach to research where the candidate evaluates sources and builds a discussion based on their premise and meaning that integrates the two subjects is really what the WSEE model is based upon. It is regrettably too often the case that the candidate looks at the RQ as a problem **to be solved rather than explored or speculated upon. Rather it is a question to be “answered” and the quality of the research experience is thereby often lost.** Students should be reminded of the importance of counterarguments.

There was sometimes a tendency to replace careful reasoning with passionate and often highly rhetorical flourishes, which were trapped by an ownership of the work that reflected a too intrusive subjectivity in the argument. Such works favoured opinion over objective understanding, and this would have had

implications for the marking. A passionate interest in the subject is always great to see, but this must be balanced with the need to produce an academic, researched piece of work.

Critical thinking is a challenge for many candidates. Research was often good but limited to either a single DP subject or to a local case study with no global context. As a result, many interesting essays were submitted which demonstrated solid research and knowledge of the subject/s or topic, but which required engagement with argument, analysis, and evaluation/discussion. Discussion and evaluation are the higher order skills to be aimed for, rather than the descriptive narrative which tends to replace critical analysis. Sometimes, candidates simply provide a narrative list of previous research, with no evaluation or link to the RQ; again, insufficiently focussed RQs have repercussions for criterion C.

In order to do well in this important criterion, there needed to be an integration of the two subjects and an evaluation of the sources, and the research undertaken. This criterion is conclusive of three parts – research, analysis and discussion/evaluation. A WSEE should not be a summary of the research or overly descriptive or narrative, as many essays on the lower end of the performance are. Too often description and narration tended to replace critical analysis. Thus, there needs to be genuine and original discussion/evaluation and analysis and not just quoting sources.

The key to success here is in the integration of DP subject approaches. Where done this always involves critical thinking and leads to high marks. On the other hand, reproduction of course content and huge amounts of data from primary research is not helpful. A further dimension of critical thinking is evaluation of sources, which is rarely accomplished effectively.

Criterion D: presentation

Presentation was generally excellent – layout and structure followed expected standards and formatting requirements were met. When presentation was weak, this tended to be due to missing page numbers, tables of content that listed an introduction, body paragraph/s, and conclusion, or where contents or title page were missing altogether. In such cases, the EE tended to be weak across all criteria. Where diagrams are authored by the candidate, this should be indicated.

Criterion E: engagement

This is a reflective exercise that should be a sustained part of **the candidate's response to the task**. Part of the value of the reflection is that it is a record of an active process, the essay in the making. The candidates who were able to respond to this challenge produced some effective reflections; note that such work was **focused not on the candidate's feelings, but on the learning process**, engendered by the particular nature of the assessment task. Descriptive register was generally not as effective as an analytical register, but the student voice can blend the two and can certainly register emotion just as long as it is connected to the **task as a learning experience rather than simply as an "experience"**.

Many reflections showed an improved ability for analysis and evaluation, communicating a good level of engagement and a clear student voice. Equally, however, there continue to be many RPPFs which are descriptive, communicating limited engagement with the research process and focus, and sometimes simply giving an account of meetings with the supervisor.

Generally, the reflections provided a unique opportunity for the examiners to learn more about the essay **writing process and to hear the student's voice**. What was often portrayed in these reflections was mature, sensible engagement on behalf of the student and when that was the case, the mark reflected that. However, many reflections, on the contrary, lacked details and remained overly narrative, descriptive and procedural, which was also reflected by the marks that they were given. What the examiners are aiming to see is critical and reflexive thinking on the academic journey and personal growth.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

- A number of essays state over 4000 words on the coversheet, and it is vital that students understand that 4000 is the upper limit. The examiner will not read or assess whatever is beyond 4000 words, and as such this can mean that the conclusion is not read or assessed, and this can be self-penalising across a number of criteria.
- The majority of candidates submit work suitable for the WSEE but often fail to adhere to the interdisciplinary, contemporary, and/or global framework of the subject.
- The best essays are those that clearly outline an issue of contemporary global importance while inviting an interdisciplinary approach. Such essays are explicit at the very outset as to the objectives of the essay. Further successful essays are integrative in that they weave the two IB subjects together in such a way that there is a greater understanding of the topic at hand. Finally, successful essays are those that analyse and evaluate the evidence such that there is a nuanced and compelling argument that is coherent and clearly articulated.
- It is important that supervisors understand the requirements of the WSEE in order that candidates be made aware of what constitutes an interdisciplinary essay focused on an issue of contemporary global significance. A thorough review of the subject guide is necessary for both candidate and supervisor, as well as communication between the EE supervisor and other, supporting teachers. Candidates should be advised to pay careful attention to their introduction. Criterion A needs particular attention, so that candidates develop a focused RQ, explain the topic, RQ, and methods, and justify the methods and DP subjects chosen. Critical evaluation and analysis of the research and sources should also be a focus, as this would help candidates to avoid producing descriptive EEs.
- One essential aspect for the supervision of future candidates is that the interdisciplinary approach must be made to be understood by the candidates. The candidates must understand this need when deciding on a topic. The topic should not retrospectively be made to fit into a WSEE theme or into a specific IB subject.
- Some supervisors use their comments to mark the EE, giving substantial commentaries for each criterion. This should not be done. Supervisors need to be reminded that the EE is assessed externally.