

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	A	B	C	D	E
Mark range:	29-36	23-28	16 - 22	8-15	0-7

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The extended essays submitted this year for Social and Cultural Anthropology presented a wide range and variety. This variety accounts for a significant difference in degrees of success. As has been true in previous sessions a large number of essays submitted for the subject were not anthropologically grounded nor did they present anthropological approaches or focus. This accounts for the shortcomings of a significant amount of essays.

While many candidates were successful in framing their arguments by referring to anthropological concepts, readings or sources and applying appropriate methodologies, a significant number of essays addressed research questions that were not suitable for the subject, or did not frame their analysis within any anthropological perspective. Too often an essay which showed evidence of hard work and sincere effort received significantly lower marks than might have been expected by both the candidate and supervisor. The lack of a specific anthropological focus hinders the possibility of attaining high levels of achievement.

Unfortunately, despite warnings in the guide, and past warnings, it remains clear that many schools continue to permit candidates not enrolled in the Social and Cultural Anthropology Diploma course to write essays on the subject. Furthermore, from comments registered by their supervisors, it is often apparent that the latter are not always realistically evaluating their candidates' work.

A significant proportion of essays should either have been submitted under a different subject or appear to have been submitted with the assumption that Social and Cultural Anthropology is a catch-all category for essays that would have a difficult time fitting anywhere else. Social and Cultural Anthropology is a discipline with its own goals, methods and ways of posing questions, and common sense is no substitute for a background knowledge on the subject. Though the above mentioned is a recurring difficulty, it is also worth mentioning that there has been an improvement in the quality of extended essays, clearly resulting from some schools working more closely with the guide.

Some frequent choices which have often led to weaker essays include addressing a "social problem" and relying too strongly on subjective assertions, value judgments or common sense. In some cases, the issue presented could have been suitable for a social and cultural anthropology EE, with the proper analytical framework. This would have been the case in many essays that dealt with health issues, like obesity and anorexia, which were popular topics among students, reflecting a wide, legitimate concern among the candidates. Many essays on obesity were based solely on medical sources, ignoring the very important alternative perspectives that some anthropologists (e.g Greenhalg 2012) have provided on this issue, demonstrating how the intensified medicalization of the problem of weight, and the pressure to be thin marks a major cultural shift in Americans' concern in the current public discourse.

An extended essay could be very interesting if it took anthropological works on such a topic as a point of departure and applied it to the candidate's own acquaintance with the problem in question. However, for the most part "social problems" essays betray a lack of awareness of the particular insights that anthropology can bring to the social problem.

Unfortunately, many essays frequently introduced polemical arguments, offered opinions, and proposed prescriptions. A few of these essays present unacceptable research questions which were based on moral judgments, irrelevant issues or even prejudice. (For example some essays addressing educational issues related success at school to ethnicity, including biased, essentialist statements).

A large proportion of essays addressed topics on popular culture. These may include social networks; media, fashion; sports and life stories of popular figures (Disney princesses, teenage vampires; manga and animé; the life of Miley Cyrus). Again, some of these could have resulted in successful essays if appropriately dealt with. As previously stated, because of the lack of anthropological background in how the social and cultural anthropologists approach these topics, essays that focus on popular culture tended to be unsuccessful.

In contrast to the above, it is worth noting that candidates producing suitable essays of an anthropological approach are very often successful. These essays allow candidates to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the method and aims of the discipline.

Some examples of successful essays range from classic issues of anthropological concern such as Durkheim's theory on ritual and its contemporary application to a political process; to more contemporary interests such as the analysis of football and nationalism from a symbolic approach as well as an examination of the discourse of the NGOs and its dispute with traditional authority in a developmental project in Ghana; or an ethnographic account about identity formation in immigrant students.

Globalization and modernity continue to produce interesting investigations strongly related to the candidates' personal concerns and experiences. Some examples include the negotiation of cultural identity in bi-cultural contexts, global and local interactions focused on a grounded analysis of religious practices and an analysis of transnational political practices in Bolivian migrants.

Gender issues appear to be another area of interest to candidates: an ethnographic account of the role of wives of the military with an interesting reflexive approach; the changing economic role of women in transnational contexts, from an analysis of the role of remittances.

These essays were successful not because they simply poured ethnographic content into established theoretical moulds, but because they showed initiative in demonstrating how topics of interest to candidates might be approached anthropologically. Also, these candidates were successful because they produced balanced, nuanced arguments, bringing critical perspectives to bear.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

As stated above, arriving at an appropriate, anthropologically grounded research question proves to be a challenge and bears consequences on the essay as a whole. A large proportion of candidates failed to present sufficiently focused research questions, although only a few proposed inappropriate topics. It was occasionally the case that the research question was stated in the abstract, but was not presented and addressed in the Introduction as required by the criterion.

Criterion B: introduction

Most candidates did not adequately establish an anthropological context for their research questions. The most successful essays were able to frame the research question in an anthropological context,

relating it to existing knowledge on the topic, and defining leading concepts. Poorer essays tended to introduce personal opinions or irrelevant arguments in the introduction.

Criterion C: investigation

The general lack of explicitly anthropological approaches and the lack of resort to anthropological sources limit the marks which could be awarded under this criterion. The more successful essays showed evidence of satisfactory planning and drew from appropriate sources, whether focusing on ethnographic materials or analyzing a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective. In less successful cases, poor organization with regard to research procedure commonly called the effectiveness of their planning into question. Many essays did not sufficiently place their data in context.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Without an explicit anthropological approach and the demonstration of a “sufficient range of appropriate resources” knowledge and understanding of the topic studied will necessarily be strictly limited. A minority of candidates showed that they had done a great deal of academic research relevant to their topic, but in most cases, this research was not relevant to anthropology. In some cases, superficial academic knowledge was demonstrated. In a few cases, essays were based primarily on personal opinion, inappropriate sources, or very selective research that was not critical in nature.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

A number of essays demonstrated appropriate use of resources to construct well-organized, coherent arguments, while many presented straightforward or narrative accounts. Though only a few candidates supported their essays with anthropological concepts and theories (criterion D), many were able to present an argument, supported by some data. In very few cases, was anthropology made relevant to the argument meaning that the marks again remained at the lower end.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

Only the most successful candidates managed to move beyond mere description, offering anthropologically sound generalizations, explanations of the data and discussion of underlying patterns of an anthropological nature. Along with criteria D and G, criterion F requires a sound anthropological approach. A significant number of essays received low grades in this criterion.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Very few candidates received marks on this criterion given that most essays were not made relevant to anthropology. The most successful candidates were able to effectively use terminology specific to the discipline. However, some candidates inserted anthropological terms, phrases, or authors names’ in their introductions, usually in a superficial way, and then failed to use them to build an analytical framework. It is a problem when concepts are used as if they were self-evident or unproblematic and do not require definition. An enduring shortcoming of extended essays is the failure to define concepts, so that doubt remains as to the candidate’s understanding of the concepts.

Criterion H: conclusion

Most candidates attempted a conclusion that was relevant to their essay. Very few of these were solidly related to the evidence presented, nor did they lead to new unresolved questions. Many essays merely summarized the preceding argument. A few essays treated the conclusion as an extension of the analysis, inappropriately introducing new material. A number of essays concluded with value judgments, sometimes polemical in nature, and frequently with prescriptions, often the case with essays examining social problems. Successful essays showed how the analysis bore

directly on the research question, or presented, in the words of the criterion, “a new synthesis in the light of the discussion.”

Criterion I: formal presentation

The majority of essays did fairly well here. A minority of essays were deficient in one or more elements, such as missing page numbers, or vague tables of contents. The most common shortcomings concerned inappropriate and/or inconsistent citation styles, and poorly organized bibliographies.

Criterion J: abstract

Almost all candidates provided an abstract. Many of these contained the three elements listed in the criterion. In less successful cases, the candidate presented concluding remarks and sometimes the research question, but did not outline the method of investigation.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Many candidates demonstrated that they are potentially capable academics, showing a passion and depth of insight for the topics they studied. The extent to which this was well supported with academic research varied. Very few candidates were able to link their essay to anthropology. If their topics were not appropriate to anthropology or their approaches were marred by subjective judgments – as happened in some cases - credits for this criterion remained in the lower end.

Recommendations and guidance for the teaching of future candidates

Overall, the essays demonstrated that there are many IB Diploma candidates who are capable of writing quality research papers, particularly given their age. It is therefore of paramount importance that supervisors make sure that candidates are able to link their essays to the subject of Social and Cultural Anthropology, so their efforts may be rewarded.

Supervisors need to ensure that candidates are prepared to write an essay in Social and Cultural Anthropology, selecting topics appropriate to the subject, and using ethnography and anthropological concepts and theory as a part of the investigation and analysis. The most important task of the Extended Essay supervisor concerns guiding the candidate in the choosing of appropriate, significant, and feasible topics and well-focused research questions within the discipline. Finding the appropriate research question requires careful consideration. Sometimes, students are inclined to address, personal concerns or interests. This could often lead to a strong commitment to the project on the candidate's part, but all too often it also leads to descriptive, uncritical, and un-anthropological exposition. Also, choosing to focus on social problems is often an expression of sincere interest on the part of candidates, but usually this has resulted in loss of connection with anthropology. Teachers need to insure that very early on in their research projects candidates connect their substantive interests to appropriate analytical tools. As this session clearly shows, those candidates whose choice of topic is appropriate to the subject and are familiarized with social and cultural anthropology, tend to produce successful essays.

The supervisor has the responsibility to guide students through an understanding of the criteria which will be applied. Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the candidate will help keep a sharper focus on the project

The development of a proper anthropological argument in the extended essays requires the candidates to demonstrate understanding of the concepts they employ, hence, candidates should be frequently reminded that most anthropological terms and concepts are problematic in meaning, and require explicit definition.

Candidates should also be provided with guidance in terms of how to reference accurately and consistently and to recognize what constitutes proper academic sources; both in terms of print and

online sources. The internet is obviously a great convenience, but candidates too often lack the perspective to evaluate resources, which of course vary tremendously in quality.

Supervisors need to ensure that candidates understand the function of the abstract and include the three key required elements in order to receive the full two marks on this criterion. Supervisors' comments are usually very helpful in understanding the process by which the candidate has come to decide the topic. These comments provide valuable insight into the process of study and development of a student through the course of the EE. This is particularly helpful when assessing criterion K.

It is important to ensure that candidates conducting fieldwork research are aware of the nature of ethical practice in the Diploma Programme.