

May 2017 extended essay reports

Social and Cultural Anthropology

Overall grade boundaries

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

The range and suitability of the work submitted

This session has provided, like previous May sessions, examples of essays at varying levels of achievement. It continues to be a concern that while some essays clearly demonstrate a candidate's anthropological knowledge and understanding, reflecting a good background in the subject, a significant number of essays submitted were not anthropologically grounded, nor did present any anthropological approach.

Supervisors themselves appear to be unaware of the expectations and nature of this task, and senior examiners involved in EE assessment in Social and Cultural Anthropology continue to stress the recommendation of not encouraging students to write an essay in the discipline if they have not studied it. Too often it was evident that the students were taking the opportunity to dig deeply into topics that interested them and it is a shame to see how when lacking knowledge in the subject, hard work and sincere effort receive significantly lower marks than might have been expected by both the candidate and supervisor. The lack of a specific anthropological focus hinders an essay's possibility of attaining high levels of achievement.

Despite the issue above, it is encouraging to read some excellent productions from candidates who developed successful essays, well-grounded in anthropological theory, concepts and sources; applying appropriate theories and methodologies.

Areas of anthropological interest that were explored included studies on the body and subjectivity – from different theoretical perspectives- like a very well-informed and focused analysis of self-flagellation as a communally practiced ritual (Shi'a community in Kashmir) or the exploration of non-normative sexualities from post-structuralist approaches. Globalization and modernity also were topics of interest to candidates: Based on the analytical framework of Appadurai's scapes, an examination of Trobrianders' cultural resistance to Western colonialism, as well as an examination of the role Shamanism in the context of modern South Korea resulted in successful essays.

Some candidates have shown their interest on political issues, producing works which focused on conflicts between the state and its indigenous minorities, as well as other essays analysing state violence. As examples of productions resulting from candidates' interest in power issues there was an analysis on Karen Ho's 'studying up', and an exploration on the use of space and social stratification based on Setha Low's work.

It is noteworthy that this session the number of students who showed an interest in topics related to gender and feminist theory has increased, a trend continuing from last year. Some examples include the analysis of gender and morality in changing contexts, gender relations at the workplace, domestic violence, and sexual violence. Despite the varied qualities of these productions, it is positive to see that this discipline is providing the opportunity for young students to reflect on these increasingly relevant current issues.

The focus on popular culture or cultural consumption continues to be the interest of many students and often produced good essays. These essays included research on the relationships between sports and gender, or between musical genres and class or ethnic identities, or explored other cultural practices. For example, an essay focused on the roles black-owned beauty salons play in the lives of African American women. However, many essays which dealt with areas of student interest (hip hop, rape culture) were devoid of anthropology, proving again that a topic of interest for the student will not result in a successful essay if not backed by subject knowledge.

Too broad approaches and topics, like 'American culture' or 'Women in India', or a comparison of educational systems in US and China result in vague, descriptive essays. Among weaker essays, candidates were not able to demonstrate appropriate levels of critical thinking and analysis. These just took what they read as given and were not able to evaluate texts in relation to a research question or topic. A concerning trend in this last session, was the number of essays that were too short – just over 2,000 words in some cases, and quite often about 3,000.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

Too many research questions continue to be too broad for a short research paper and/or are studied in a non-anthropological manner. Many students had trouble formulating a clear research problem that was anthropological in nature. Many topics were simply not appropriate for the subject area.

Criterion B: introduction

Stronger productions could locate their chosen topic in a valid academic field. Some, however, simply repeated the abstract or produced limited and unsubstantiated generalizations that did not constitute 'context', or only provided a personal interest as

justification. Many students developed the context for their topic without relating it to the subject area.

Criterion C: investigation

Stronger essays showed evidence of satisfactory planning and drew from appropriate sources, whether focusing on ethnographic materials or analysing a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective. Many essays did not sufficiently place their data in context. 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. Too many EEs did not cite any anthropology texts in their references, nor presented any evidence of the use of any anthropological resources.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Some candidates showed that they had done a great deal of academic research relevant to their topic, although in many cases, superficial academic knowledge was demonstrated. A good number of candidates were successful in integrating clear and explicit evidence of specific and relevant anthropological readings into their discussions. Many were able to demonstrate some knowledge of anthropological concepts and relevant theory, in some cases also discussing methodological issues. Many showed knowledge in their topic, but not in the discipline. Some EEs were based entirely on journalistic or non-academic resources which limited the student's ability to place the material in a suitable academic context.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Stronger essays presented a persuasive and solid argument supporting their essays with sound data, anthropological concepts and theories. A number of essays demonstrated appropriate use of resources to construct well-organized, coherent arguments, and were able to justify their arguments drawing on data they had presented. Weaker essays presented straightforward or narrative accounts, sometimes just listing information. Some offered moralistic positions, or set up to find the answer the student wanted to get. Some students compensate for not really understanding the topic they are researching by using very long quotes from texts which they stitch together with short sentences. These students are not really writing their EEs at all – they are editing – usually in ways that do not make a great deal of sense – the work of others.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

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.

The stronger essays demonstrated capacity of analysis, interpretation and evaluation materials presented in their EEs but as most were not in the field of anthropology these skills were not always appropriate to the subject. Some students do not understand the theories

they claim to be applying to data and so make implausible arguments on the basis of not understanding how theory and data are linked.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject:

Those candidates who studied the subject were able to use discipline specific language appropriately. Language ability generally was very variable with some very sophisticated writing in a small number of cases and some very weak English even among what appeared to be native speakers in other cases. It is a pity that teachers do not seem to correct grammar and spelling that is sometimes so poor that it makes understanding difficult.

Criterion H: conclusion

Most students did produce conclusions that were consistent with the material discussed in the EE. Few, however, were able to do more than re-state material from earlier sections in the EE and very few were able to suggest appropriate limitations or creatively synthesize the findings of the EE.

Criterion I: formal presentation

Many students were able to meet the satisfactory or good levels of formal presentation no matter what the quality of the content of the EE. A minority of students are not including title/content pages. Some students are not properly citing materials – e.g. a footnote to a passage in the EE without making clear how much of the text is a direct quote and how much a very close paraphrase. Too many bibliographies did not include web pages for online materials.

Criterion J: abstract

While many abstracts did serve as a sound synopsis of the EE many others failed to include one of the 3 required elements.

Criterion K: holistic judgement

This was very variable and often depended on selecting a good topic for study and then being able to find sufficient and sometimes creative resources with which to learn about the topic and to answer sound research questions.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

As in point 1 above. While it is always a good idea to encourage students to research a topic they are interested in teachers should dissuade students from writing in disciplines they have no background in and on which they struggle to find any written materials. Students writing on anthropology need to read some anthropology.

If students are interviewing or gathering their own data this needs to be discussed in the EE and not simply presented as 'interview results' in the final work.

The use of Wikipedia sites to gain knowledge of anthropology is not usually sufficient to make an EE one that should be submitted as a Social and Cultural Anthropology EE.