

Social and Cultural Anthropology

This is a supplementary report following the November 2011 session and should be read in conjunction with the full May 2009 subject report and any subsequent reports.

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

Continuing the positive tendency of recent sessions, a larger number of the essays submitted were suitable for Social and Cultural Anthropology. More candidates were successful in framing their arguments by referring to anthropological concepts, readings or sources and applying appropriate methodologies. It is refreshing to find an increasing proportion of essays that address research questions that are suitable for the subject. Framing a precise research question which lends itself to investigation in the registered subject is of paramount importance.

This positive tendency can be interpreted as probably showing that schools -or schools' coordinators- are noting past advice from chief examiners, about discouraging candidates who are not enrolled in Social and Cultural Anthropology as a Diploma subject to write essays in the subject.

The most successful candidates presented well informed topics solidly grounded in anthropological theory. Some examples of successful essays range from a diachronic approach focused on the analysis of the conflicting views of the state and first nations in Argentine history; an examination of the Orientalist discourse about gender through the case of the Muslim veil; or an ethnographic account of a process of conversion to a religious movement, within a symbolic approach. Timely issues were explored, such as ethnographically grounded investigations on plastic surgery, or more 'classic' and equally valid, such as a study on Shamanism. 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.

The least successful candidates were those who did not refer to anthropological concepts, readings or sources, nor made reference to methodological issues of any kind. Some candidates seemed to assume that anthropological relevance inheres in a likely topic, and that it is not necessary to consult or to explicitly discuss anthropological sources, whether concerned with theory or with ethnography. A mere reference to 'culture' or 'social problems' seems to be considered relevant enough to produce an extended essay in Social and Cultural Anthropology. In some other cases, moral judgments, subjective biases or unexamined notions undermined the quality of the essay from the very beginning. Studying

the 'negative' influence of television on teenagers or the decay of family values in modern society are examples of misconceived essays.

Candidate performance against each criterion

A: Research question

There were fewer research questions judged to be inappropriate than in recent years. However, many candidates did not sufficiently narrow the focus of research so as to receive full credit under this criterion. 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.

B: Introduction

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.

C: Investigation

Many candidates showed evidence of satisfactory planning and consulted appropriate sources, whether focusing on ethnographic materials or analyzing a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective. In less successful cases, poor organization and lack of clarity with regard to research procedure commonly called the effectiveness of their planning into question. Many essays did not sufficiently place their data in context. Awareness of the extent to which the observer's position shapes the data continues to be a challenging point.

D: Knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

A minority 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. Some candidates made superficial references to anthropological concepts before beginning largely descriptive expositions which did not reflect anthropological perspectives.

E: Reasoned argument

Some candidates were successful in developing a reasoned argument, while many presented straightforward or narrative accounts. Though many candidates supported their essays with anthropological concepts and theories (criterion D), only a few were able to present a persuasive and solid argument.

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 a clear discussion of underlying patterns of an anthropological nature. The majority remained at a more descriptive level with varying degrees of complexity.

G: Use of language appropriate to the subject

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.

H: Conclusion

Successful essays avoided both simply repeating material from the introduction and introducing new material, but rather 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.” Many concluding sections among these essays simply ticked off the main features of the data presented, and/or the main findings of the analysis carried out. Also, most of the social, problem-oriented essays used the concluding section to present a list of prescriptions, often superficial, and also often containing value judgments.

I: Formal presentation

While some of the generally poorer essays did fairly well here, a minority of essays were deficient in one or more elements, such as missing page numbers, poorly or inconsistently organized bibliographies, or vague tables of contents.

J: Abstract

Most candidates seemed to appreciate the function of an abstract in an essay; the weakest element was that of briefly describing the research procedure followed.

K: Holistic judgment

The purpose of marking according to this criterion is not to require students to make a brilliant contribution to anthropology, but rather to reward students for doing independent work and for showing imagination consistent with anthropological inquiry, even if their knowledge of ethnography and theory are clearly limited. On the other hand, if their topics were not appropriate to anthropology or their approaches were marred by subjective judgments, as in some cases happened, candidates could not expect to do well here.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Guiding the candidate in choosing a topic appropriate to the subject and in focusing the scope of the research question may be the most difficult, and perhaps the most important part of the supervisor’s role. The supervisor has the responsibility to guide students through an understanding of the criteria which will be applied, and helping them to focus on a topic which can be subject to anthropological scrutiny; hence, the recommendation of not encouraging students to write essays in subjects in which they are not enrolled or have no experience. Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the student will help keep a sharper focus on the project.

Successful candidates consistently placed their research questions within an anthropological frame of reference, and typically maintained a critical approach both to their own research, and toward the work they cited. It was obvious in these cases that the essays reflected the conscientious supervision of well-prepared teachers, for which there is no substitute if the EE assignment is to have value.

Supervisors’ comments are usually very helpful in understanding the process by which the candidate has come to decide the topic on which to work and provide valuable insight into the

process of study and development of a student through the course of the EE. This is particularly true when assessing criterion K.

Many candidates list only internet sources in their bibliographies, and usually the citations omit authors' names and even titles, and dates accessed. 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 should have some general knowledge in the field to guide them with their bibliographies, advising students on how to access appropriate resources and document sources.

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