

May 2015 extended essay reports

Environmental Systems and Societies

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

The multidisciplinary nature of the subject makes environmental systems and societies (ESS) an ideal subject for candidates who wish to explore an environmental topic or issue of particular interest or relevance for their communities. A wide range of essays varied in standard from excellent to very poor. Almost all of the presented essays covered topics appropriate for ESS. The better essays tend to have two things in common; the candidate has a genuine curiosity or interest about the selected topic and the investigation contains experimental or field work. However, some essays forget or undervalue the relevance of 'the society' and try to justify it with vague references to the population affected by the problem or by means of rather superficial opinion surveys.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

Generally, the research question is clearly defined, although it is not always sufficiently focussed. In some cases the research question is misleadingly or not defined at all. Some candidates from the same school select very similar research questions.

Criterion B: introduction

In some essays the introduction is not defined and it blends into the remainder of the EE

Criterion C: investigation

The lower marks are usually due to an inappropriate or limited choice of sources. Many candidates place too much reliability on Internet, commercial and non-academic sources.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

In most extended essays candidates demonstrate good knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, but in some cases there seems to be serious conceptual confusion. It is

common to corroborate good knowledge in the initial theoretical explanation, but the treatment of the issue sometimes indicates poor understanding. Rarely, the top marks are achieved because candidates tend to pay little attention to the academic context.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

This tends to be one of the most challenging criteria for the candidates. In many cases the ideas are presented without clearly indicating their relationship with the research question and the arguments usually have obvious gaps, not taking into account the information provided or missing completely. Only the stronger extended essays usually have sufficient data to develop proper reasoning.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

Many extended essays do not collect sufficient data and, in the essays that use secondary data, they are at times collected from incomplete or too few academic sources. The lack of firm and clear data prevents full development of analytical and evaluative skills. When the extended essay includes a survey, it tends to be very low-quality without characterizing or balancing the sample.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject:

It is common to encounter EEs that use appropriate and clear language. When it is not the case, it is due more to the lack of a plan and clear ideas than to problems with the use of appropriate terminology. In some cases the candidates abused colloquial expressions and localisms.

Criterion H: conclusion

For this criterion there is a similar number of extended essays in which the conclusion is either a) consistent with the evidence and b) essays in which there is a correct conclusion but only superficially based on the data presented in the body of the EE.

Criterion I: formal presentation

The loss of points on this criterion is related mainly with oversights and inaccuracies in the use or lack of graphic material. Noteworthy is the poor characterisation of locations; normally Google Maps is used, with incomplete data on topography, climate, lack of scale in maps, etc. Other aspects of the presentation are usually well-maintained.

Criterion J: abstract

Sometimes the abstract omits one or more of the required parts, or presents them in an unclear manner (there are still some extended essays with more than 300 words in the abstract which automatically receive a mark of 0 for criterion J).

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Every year an increasing number of candidates treat the extended essay as an extended piece of internal assessment practical work. Supervisors should explain to candidates the requirements for an extended essay and caution them against simply writing yet another laboratory report. The time spent with the candidate ranged from 0 to 20 hours which confirms that many teachers do not read the IB guidelines for the extended essays. It is rewarding to see that in many cases, candidates are being encouraged to adopt a practical approach to their research, using a combination of experimentation and/or field work.

The guide sets out the responsibilities of the candidate, the school and the supervisor. It is not fair to place all the responsibility on the candidate. Assigning an untrained supervisor to a candidate is likely to result in a much lower grade for the candidate.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

The necessary theoretical content for the subject appears to be well treated. Supervisors must assist candidates with the specific aspects of their own extended essay.

While literature-based essays are suitable, those that rely exclusively on web-based sources run the risk of failing to adequately meet particular criteria. Elementary errors in formal aspects include: misapplication of criteria A, B and J; absence of title and number in tables and graphs; absence or shortage of references to footnotes.

On many occasions an extended essay is partially unsuccessful by not having been able to obtain sufficient data to treat the problem. It is recommended that the candidate is sure that s/he will obtain data appropriate for the research question before starting to devote too much effort and work.

Another area to improve is the validity of data. In the case of primary data often the method followed is not properly documented, sometimes very little data is obtained. Some extended essays carried out surveys of dubious validity, without characterizing the sample at all or only quoting the city or neighbourhood where the survey took place. It would be desirable to inform the candidates about the characteristics that a survey must have in order to be credible.

Further comments

The comments of the supervisor are an important element that is considered in the assessment. Many schools ignored it.

Failures in the formal criteria are often replicated through at a school for a given EE subject, which indicates a lack of information or clarity on the part of the supervisor.