



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Inter-subject comparability studies

Study 2b: A level English literature, history and media studies

May 2008

QCA/08/3654

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1 Personnel

The team comprised eight reviewers, with as even a spread as possible across the three subjects in terms of their main subject. They were a mixture of existing QCA consultants, those recruited by advertisement and those recruited by approaching awarding bodies whose syllabuses did not form part of the study. All the reviewers were able to consider a pair of subjects in the study; some had sufficient experience to cover all three. One of the reviewers who had a great deal of experience in working on QCA standards reviews was asked to act as lead consultant. The names of participants are provided in Appendix A.

2 Materials

The syllabuses for review were selected, primarily, on the basis of the size of candidate entry. AQA English literature (5741/6741) and OCR media studies (3860/7860) were selected using this criterion. The highest entry syllabus for A level history is Edexcel, but, as a very significant amount of work had focused on this syllabus in the past, it was decided to use OCR history (3835/7835).

Table 1 The syllabuses used for the study

	English literature	History	Media studies
Awarding body and syllabus	AQA (5741/6741)	OCR (3835/7835)	OCR (3860/7860)

The OCR history syllabus, in common with those from other awarding bodies, offered a wide variety of alternative routes to the final qualification. In the interests of manageability, reviewers considered only a sample of the question papers available.

3 Methodology

3.1 Form A

Form A was used to provide a factual analysis of the syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes. A major modification to Form A was carried out in the light of suggestions made by QCA's expert group, which advises on QCA's work in monitoring standards and comparability. Previously, each reviewer had completed a detailed factual analysis of the syllabus and assessment materials, responding to prompts on Form A and logging their responses on the forms. For this study, the majority of the factual analysis was conducted by QCA staff as a desk research exercise and was printed on Form A. The resulting forms were reviewed by the lead consultant and reviewers then completed sections where comment was required. This modification was judged to be very successful as it enabled reviewers to spend their time and focus their attention on making judgements about issues relating to comparability.

Each reviewer completed one Form A for each subject they considered. Some therefore completed two and some three.

3.2 CRAS analysis

The CRAS analysis was used to enable the reviewers to reach judgements about the demand of the question papers, based on the nature of the questions. Reviewers were asked to assess the extent to which question papers made demands in terms of:

- the *complexity* of the processes required to answer a question
- the extent to which the *resources* needed to answer the question were provided on the paper
- the level of *abstractness* of questions
- the extent to which candidates were required to generate a *strategy* in their answers.

To do this, they used a numerical scale and recorded their judgements on forms designed for the purpose.

When this method of analysis was originally used in QCA standards reviews, a four-point scale had been used. Inter-subject comparability studies 1a and 1b used a ten-point scale. For this work, the ten-point scale was judged to be unwieldy and unnecessary (its main purpose had been to encompass work ranging from GCSE to A2) and the four-point scale was judged to be too narrow to enable meaningful distinctions to be made. It was decided to use a six-point scale, which gave sufficient scope for more finely tuned judgements, while retaining

the use of an even number scale to force reviewers to make clear decisions rather than choosing a middle point.

The CRAS forms were discussed at some length during the initial briefing meeting. No attempt was made for this study to standardise reviewers' judgements about the appropriate point on the numerical scale for particular questions. However, reviewers were given a detailed briefing about each aspect of the CRAS analysis and there was a general discussion about particular questions and the ways in which the demands of a particular question could be adjusted by amending the question in terms of *complexity*, *resources*, *abstractness*, or *strategy*. Reviewers commented positively on this briefing, arguing that it gave them a clear, shared understanding of the nature of each of the criteria for the analysis.

4 Findings of the review of examination materials

4.1 CRAS analysis

A summary of the CRAS analysis is given below.

Table 2 Average CRAS ratings for English literature

By unit	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
Unit 1	4.3	4.2	4.3	4.1
Unit 2	4.1	3.9	4.1	4.3
Unit 3	4.6	4.3	4.7	4.4
Unit 4	4.8	4.6	4.8	4.9
Unit 5	4.8	4.3	4.4	4.6
Unit 6	5.4	4.6	5.0	4.8
Overall				
AS units	4.3	4.1	4.1	4.3
A2 units	5.0	4.5	4.7	4.8

Table 3 Average CRAS ratings for history

	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
Unit 1	4.2	3.5	4.0	3.9
Unit 2	4.3	4.7	4.3	4.4
Unit 3	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.5
Unit 4	4.8	4.4	4.5	4.4
Unit 5	4.5	4.9	4.6	4.8
Unit 6 ¹	Coursework			
Overall				
AS units	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.2
A2 units	4.7	4.6	4.5	4.6

¹ This is a personal investigation unit. There is an alternative externally assessed open-book question paper. This was not included in the review process.

Table 4 Average CRAS ratings for media studies

	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
Unit 1	3.9	3.4	3.8	3.7
Unit 2	3.3	3.0	2.9	3.1
Unit 3	Coursework			
Unit 4	4.3	3.9	4.2	4.3
Unit 5	4.4	4.9	4.9	4.9
Unit 6	Coursework			
Overall				
AS units	3.6	3.2	3.4	3.4
A2 units	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.6

Table 5 Summary for AS units

	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
English	4.3	4.1	4.1	4.3
History	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.3
Media studies	3.6	3.2	3.4	3.4

The English literature and history papers were very closely matched across all four criteria. Reviewers judged the media studies AS units to be less demanding on all four criteria.

Table 6 Summary for A2 units

	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
English	5.0	4.5	4.7	4.8
History	4.6	4.7	4.5	4.7
Media studies	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.6

At A2, all three subjects were much more closely aligned.

Reviewers considered progression from AS to A2.

Table 7 Progression from AS to A2

	Complexity	Resources	Abstractness	Strategy
English	+0.7	+0.4	+0.6	+0.5
History	+0.4	+0.6	+0.4	+0.4
Media studies	+0.8	+1.2	+1.2	+1.2

As the separate figures for AS and A2 implied, media studies assessments provided a much steeper incline of difficulty between AS and A2 than either English literature or history.

4.2 AS Comparison

The history units required significant levels of selection, analysis and synthesis, all drawing upon knowledge of the chosen historical periods, to support argument and evaluation. The media studies units required candidates to demonstrate skills of textual analysis and some ability to contextualise that analysis within broader cultural issues.

In terms of depth, reviewers judged that the demands of the history assessment materials were greater than for media studies. This was because of more stringent demand for detailed knowledge and sustained conceptual analysis in the mark schemes. Reviewers found, however, that, in terms of breadth, the media studies assessment materials were more demanding, as they required the development of the skills of practical production, as well as those of conceptual analysis. Overall, however, the history assessment materials were judged to be slightly more demanding at this level.

The English literature syllabus moved from textual analysis towards contextualisation, but reviewers found this to be somewhat uneven and so the overall demand was affected by variability according to the choice of text and examination question. There were some texts that were judged to be particularly inaccessible and this could result in the candidate first having to engage with a very difficult text and then having to engage with a very demanding question. In all the English literature units, the demand of some questions was judged to be too high for AS. This variability in demand made it very difficult to make a judgement about the relative demand of English literature, compared to history and media studies.

There was some difference of view among reviewers as to whether the relative accessibility and familiarity of the type of textual material found in the media studies assessment materials was an advantage or a disadvantage to candidates. Some reviewers argued that the relative familiarity of the media studies material could advantage candidates. Further, some of the materials were potentially very enjoyable and so motivating for candidates. Others argued that the familiarity could predispose candidates to respond in an inappropriate, possibly colloquial way, to questions and so fail to demonstrate their skills.

4.3 A level comparison

Judgements about comparative demand at this level were made difficult by the very different structure of the assessment objectives across the three subjects.

In history, there were common assessment objectives at both AS and A level and so, while there was some evidence of relatively high demand at AS level, when the A level was taken as a whole, reviewers did not find it more demanding than the other two subjects.

In English literature, there were some common assessment objectives across the levels, but also some that were specific to AS level and some specific to A level. Reviewers judged that the level of demand in English literature was greater at A level than at AS level and that this was entirely appropriate. Reviewers were concerned, however, that there was variation in demand, according to question choice, at both levels and this derived from the different ways in which the assessment objectives that required knowledge of the contexts of the literary texts (assessment objectives 5i at AS and 5ii at A level) were interpreted in particular examination questions.

The assessment objectives for the media studies syllabus were arranged so that each unit was designated a specific and discrete assessment objective. This meant that the respective demands of the two levels were clearly differentiated, although the principles of progression and coherence between units were not as clearly mapped as for history or English literature. For the media studies syllabus, the most significant increase in demand, in terms of the presentation of conceptualised and evidenced arguments on unprepared questions, was found in the final unit.

4.4 The nature of the tasks

Some types of task were similar across all three subjects. Continuous prose answers and essays featured heavily in all three of them. All the English literature tasks required essay responses, although there were some instances in which questions were supported by prompts about the key areas to be included within the answer.

All three sets of assessment materials required candidates to respond to unprepared material presented on or with the examination paper. In media studies, one of these sources was a video extract. In both English literature and history, there were tasks that required comparison, synthesis and evaluation across a range of unprepared source materials.

Reviewers judged that the assessment activities were broadly comparable across all three syllabuses. While some individual tasks within media studies represented rather lower demand for synthesis of different sources, this syllabus had, overall, a greater variety of types of conceptual and technical demand, including a significant weighting (40 per cent) for practical production. Reviewers judged that this breadth compensated for the relative lower demand of the assessment activities in media studies. Reviewers found that the range of skills

which English literature candidates were required to demonstrate was narrower than for media studies or history, but they judged that this was balanced by the relative abstractness of many of the tasks and the degree of selection required from increasingly demanding texts in presenting extended arguments.

Reviewers expressed some concern about the extent to which the syllabus and assessment materials for media studies allowed candidates to use prepared material and this concern was borne out at the script review, where there was some evidence of candidates drawing heavily on prepared responses.

4.5 Syllabus content

Reviewers found that the content coverage of all three syllabuses was suitable and broadly equivalent.

The opportunity for breadth of study was judged to be greatest within the history syllabus, but, in view of the wide range of optional areas of study within this syllabus, it was possible for students to focus more narrowly on periods and topics, building knowledge incrementally rather than studying a particularly wide range of content. For this reason, judgements about demand, in terms of content coverage, were difficult to make for history, as they were so dependent on choice of route.

The content coverage for English literature was, for similar reasons, potentially very demanding, but the demand was a function of the choice of texts and it was possible for candidates to select a route through the syllabus that focused on less demanding texts. Two of the Shakespeare texts could have been studied at earlier levels and, although the syllabus points out that candidates should select a text that they had not studied previously, it was not clear how this requirement could be enforced and so it remained possible for candidates to select a more familiar and potentially less demanding route through the syllabus. Further, while the study of literary, historical and social contexts in English could be very wide indeed, the number of optional questions allowed centres to focus on relatively narrow interpretations of the context and for candidates to select questions in line with these narrow interpretations.

The amount of choice within both the English literature and history syllabuses and assessment materials, compared with the relative lack of choice in the media studies syllabus and assessment, gave rise to concern about making judgements about the comparative level of demand. Overall, however, reviewers judged that the apparently heavy demands, in terms of breadth and depth of the English literature and history syllabuses and assessment materials were balanced by the high level of choice of content and examination question, and

so were broadly equivalent to the relatively lower demands, in terms of depth, but higher demands in terms of breadth and lack of choice in the assessment materials in media studies.

4.6 Optional routes

As stated above, the history syllabus allowed for a very large number of optional routes, both in terms of topic areas and of alternative questions. English literature had a coursework/written examination option in Unit 5 only, although there was considerable choice of texts for study within the individual papers. In the media studies syllabus, there was only one route through the syllabus overall, though there were optional areas of study within the overall structure and considerable scope within the two coursework productions for candidates to develop particular interests and areas of study. Reviewers judged that, overall, given the relative demands of the content, this variability in the degree of optionality did not impact on overall demand.

Where options were offered in the examination papers for history and media studies, there appeared to be only minor inconsistencies in demand. This was less clearly the case for English literature, where uneven demand was a concern.

4.7 Synoptic assessment

Reviewers judged that the quality of the synoptic assessments was very sound across all three syllabuses, with the demands of the English literature synoptic unit judged to be very high. Reviewers commended the approaches taken in all the synoptic units and the extent to which these units represented broad, thematic approaches to the subject, integrating knowledge and skills developed throughout the course.

4.8 Overall syllabus and assessment materials comparison

It was judged that, overall, there was no clear evidence of significant differences in demand.

5 Findings of the review of candidate work

5.1 Materials and methodology

Awarding bodies provided the complete examination work of candidates who had been awarded just a grade A and just a grade E overall. At AS, this meant candidates who had gained 240 and 120 uniform marks in total, with even performance across the units. For the A level candidates, the specification for the work was that it should comprise candidates who had gained 240 and 120 uniform marks in their A2 units, irrespective of the overall grades obtained. Because coursework was not included in the review, the specification for the selection of candidates indicated that their performance should be at the relevant pro rata uniform mark scores on the externally assessed units.² (Although it does not represent a separate qualification, A2 material was used partly for pragmatic reasons and partly because it is graded to a distinct standard, different from both A and AS levels.)

It is worth noting that the candidates supplied for English literature and, especially, history were almost too well selected, covering a very narrow range. The particular method of analysis used, Rasch analysis, made estimates of the ability of the candidates and depended on there being real differences in that ability. Candidates who had gained almost identical results (a difference of perhaps one or two uniform marks out of 300) may have been too similar for the analysis to be as effective as one would wish. The particular nature of the materials supplied for this study meant that it was possible to calculate an estimate of the minimum difference in performance that reviewers engaged in the process involved here would be able to detect with some consistency. This led to further refinement of the methodology, with the scripts for *Study 1b: GCSE, AS and A level sciences* supplied to a different specification.

It should also be noted that, although approaches to external assessment were fairly similar across the three syllabuses, media studies involved a significant technical dimension that was simply not present in the other subjects. This technical dimension also meant that the proportions and nature of coursework differed more for media studies than for English literature and history. As no coursework was included in the study, reviewers did not see media studies candidates' practical productions, worth 40 per cent of their overall A level and representing a very different set of skills. This meant that reviewers' judgements were focused on the aspects of media studies where it most resembled English literature and history and did not take account of the work where its distinctive demand lay.

² In the event, for some reason the English literature A2 candidates had gained significantly fewer uniform marks than specified. The effect of this on the judgements is impossible to gauge, but it means that the results should be treated with some caution.

5.2 Outcomes at AS and A2

Once the analyses were complete, the outcomes were standardised to make it possible to evaluate them. The process involved comparing the points on the mark range judged to be equivalent using the standard uniform mark scale (UMS). In this case, media studies was treated as the anchor subject at AS, so that work gaining just an E or just an A in media studies (or deserving 40 and 80 per cent UMS respectively) was compared to the UMS mark that work judged to be of comparable standard in the other two subjects would have been awarded. In Table 8, candidates producing work of the same standard as that which would gain just an E at AS media studies would have gained marginally fewer UMS marks in history and about a quarter of a grade fewer marks in English.

Table 8 shows the uniform percentage marks gained by candidates judged to be equivalent across the three subjects at AS.

Table 8 The equivalent percentage marks across three AS subjects

Subject	Equivalent mark at E	Equivalent mark at A
English	37.48	80.64
History	39.51	79.37
Media studies	40.00	80.00

At AS there was little difference between the subjects at the grade A boundary. At the grade E boundary the performance of candidates in media studies was judged to be slightly less secure than those in English literature, with history candidates in between. In neither case was the difference large.

Table 9 shows the uniform percentage marks gained by candidates judged to be equivalent across the three subjects at A2.

Table 9 The equivalent percentage marks across three A2 subjects

Subject	Equivalent mark at E	Equivalent mark at A
English	40.56	72.97
History	40.00	80.00
Media studies	49.00	81.88

At the A2 grade E boundary, English literature and history candidates were virtually in line. The performance of media studies candidates was judged to be weaker, although this may have been linked to the absence of coursework in this study.

At A2 grade A, there was very little difference in standard between history and media studies candidates. The problem with the English literature scripts already noted above may have played a role in making the grades awarded seem severe for this subject.

In all cases at AS and A2, the difference between subjects was small: well under half a grade in most instances and rather over half a grade in two.

Appendix A: Reviewers

Sue Butterfield (lead consultant)

Mike Edwards

Richard Hoyes

David Lewis

Graham Lloyd

Stephen Purcell

Lisa Socrates

Margaret Walker