UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

THE MATRICULATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION
ADVANCED LEVEL

SOCIOLOGY

May 2010

EXAMINERS’ REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS BOARD
Statistics

1.0. STATISTICAL DATA

1.1. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 below, overall this year there were 20 less students who registered for the examination when compared to the May 2010 session (292 against 312).

1.2. The number of absentees this year was four less than last year.

1.3. The number of candidates who obtained a grade A-C was 24 less than last year’s in absolute numbers (105 as against 129) and relative weight was down too (36.0 against 41.4).

1.4. The overall number of candidates who obtained a grade D-E was 15 less in absolute numbers (111 against 125), and also registered a lower percentage (38% against 40.0%).

1.5. The number of failures was 22 more than last year’s (55 against 33) and 18.8% as against 10.6%.

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<th>C</th>
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2.0. OVERALL GENERAL COMMENTS

2.1. As in the past year, the three papers were set according to the new syllabus for 2008-2010. Paper I was devoted fully to Sociological Theory. Candidates had to choose three out of five questions each carrying 33 marks.

Paper II was divided into two parts each consisting of three questions. The first part was devoted to Methodology and the second to Substantive Areas namely a) Social Change and Development and b) Social Stratification & Inequality. Candidates were requested to choose three questions two from Part I and one from Part II each carrying 33 marks.

Paper III which was totally devoted to Substantive Areas was divided into two parts each consisting of three questions. Part I was devoted to a) The Family and b) Poverty & Social Exclusion. Part II was devoted to a) Education and b) Religion. Here again candidates were requested to choose three questions two from Part I and one from Part II each carrying 33 marks.

2.2. Generally speaking, in Paper I, the overall perusal of the candidates’ paper indicates that the average standard is less than satisfactory and only a limited percentage seemed to be well prepared demonstrating an ability to construct sociological arguments that were immensely intellectually challenging and refreshingly. A significant number of candidates failed to interpret the questions correctly and provide evidence of a developed understanding of the salient issues at stake.

This was very much evident in question number 4 which requested students to discuss how the transition from feudal to industrial society saw a shift in the dominant mode of social action. Although it is Max Weber who discusses in depth the change in social action with time, the question did not mention him by name, and hence, students tended to overlook the sociological component of the question and submit lengthy responses as how technological advances brought about an enormous increase in output and variety of goods and services which have changed our way of life. Other focused on the way in which industrialisation affected the social order such as conditions of life, health, food production, and public relations, or on its effect on open markets and demand for such good, common interests and enterprises. However, Paper I is on sociological theory and one expects candidates to link the questions with analytical discourses and not empirical discussions.

However, it is noteworthy that a limited number of candidates did very well. These candidates supported their arguments with examples from published sociological studies on Maltese and/or other societies. This is highly commendable. However, it is also evident that even here these successful students approached the exam with a well rehearsed answer paying little attention to the main issue of the question.
Further effort is surely required to better equip students with a deeper appreciation of the sociological schools of thought at the disposal of the sociologist. The responses reviewed denoted that students are not highly familiar with the diversity of social theories pertinent to the sociological discipline. Compared to previous years fewer candidates supported their arguments with examples from published sociological studies on Maltese and/or other societies.

One also noted that certain candidates showed evidence of intensive memorisation of text-book material and subsequently approaching the exam with a rehearsed answer but paying little attention to the main issue in the question. As in previous years, in the majority of cases, the scientific approach to the subject was rarely evident. In fact, many candidates gave superficial answers showing that no in-depth study of the subject was made prior to their sitting for the examination. The answers generally manifested a lack of knowledge of the basic terms or concepts, skills and attitudes.

The lack of intensity when answering questions was again a feature that characterised a number of answers. Advanced level students are expected to articulate their answers and not just write some few hundred words. Additionally, it is objectionable that, at this level, students generally lack the concept of thinking and expressing themselves sociologically in their answers. Moreover, at this level candidates are expected to compare and contrast between the various theories, perspectives and thinkers. Furthermore, there were instances where the essays written were literature essays rather than sociological – scientific essays.

2.3 In Paper II it was noted that in general the candidates’ answers, compared to the previous year, were to a certain extent more sophisticated although there is still room for improvement.

Notably, there were many instances where the candidates tended to adopt a descriptive rather than an analytical approach in their answers. At advanced level the candidates are expected to illustrate that sociology is a discipline with its own founding theories, perspectives and offers critical analysis. Students are expected to articulate on sociological themes backed by sociological theories and analysis.

The candidates are expected to show that they have an adequate level of authority over the subject. This authority is translated in the way they express themselves through sociological theories, classical sociological examples and terminologies used. For a number of cases it may be deduced that the students found themselves finding problems to express themselves in a sociological manner. Noticeably, when the candidates were challenged with a sociological statement, they were hesitant to take a stand and instead preferred to explain the strength and weakness/the advantages and disadvantages.

The style, flow and presentation of most of the essays are far from what is expected at advanced level. Definitely in the answers, the content is crucial, but the chronological flow of the arguments, the logical layout, the rationale used and the examples drawn, also play an important part.
In general, candidates’ preparation on Paper III was average, with many candidates being unsuccessful in obtaining the level expected at an Advanced Level. In effect, although candidates had a satisfactory understanding of various sociological theories, they tended to find it difficult to apply such theories to develop an analytical discussion in reply to the questions. This was particularly evident in the essays regarding poverty and religion. Indeed, these topics were generally tackled through various common sense assumptions rather than by the appropriate sociological theories or, as requested in question 1, by the respective qualitative researches. A few candidates also developed discussions that would have been more adequate or suitable in reply to the other question on poverty.

Theoretical knowledge on sociological concepts on education varied depending on the question. In fact, although candidates generally developed a critical analysis of the subject matter referred to in the first question on education (question 4), candidates generally did not understand the gist of the other question on education (question 5) and vague discussions prevailed. Yet, candidates proved to be better versed on the requested sociological theories regarding the family. Certain students presented arguments which were well-grounded in sociological theory. However, they provided very little critical analysis either in favour, or against, the statement mentioned in the essay question. In so doing, students attempted to merely declare their knowledge without making any attempt to place it within the broad social contexts while considering an argument’s merits or demerits.

### 3. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

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<th>Question No</th>
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PAPER I

3.1. **Question 1.** As can be seen in Table 3, this question was answered by 48.7% or 142 candidates who sat for this paper. The French theorist Lyotard argues that post-industrial society and postmodern culture emerged not related to either science or technology but to changes in language. Language-games serve to justify or legitimate people's behavior in society. They are games in which the participants can try to assert certain things to be true or right. Each statement or utterance is a ‘move’ that may aid the participant in trying to win the game to get their version of what is true or right accepted.

3.2. **Question 2.** 178 candidates attempted this question making it the third most popular question. Here candidates were asked to explain how with reference to Gramsci’s sociology, social developments since Marx’s death tend to undermine his theory. Gramsci suggested that ownership of the means of production was not sufficient to guarantee that that a ruling class would monopoly power in a society. In order to maintain its leadership and dominance - hegemony - a ruling class had to try to win support from other members of society. The ruling class needed to make some concessions to other groups in society in order to win enough support to be able to continue ruling. Thus the state could not always exclusively in the interests of the owners of the means of production and derive power from other hegemonical actions.

3.3. **Question 3.** This was the second most popular question in this paper. It was answered by 67.5 per or 197 candidates who sat for this paper. Here candidates were asked to discuss the statement that functionalism was often criticized because it failed to adequately explain social change. Functionalism has been criticized for what many see as its deterministic view of human action. Its critics have argued that, in terms of functionalist theory, human behavior is portrayed as determined by the system. Parsons, for instance, treats human action as determined by the characteristic of the system per se. However, it is fair to point out that Parsons argued that in the long run cultural changes in values do determine a broad range of change, and developed a concept of pattern variables.
3.4. **Question 4.** In this question which in fact was the least popular question having been tackled by only 95 candidates, the students were requested to discuss whether the transition from the feudal to an industrial society, saw a shift in the dominant mode of social action. To Weber, a social action was an action carried out by an individual to which a person attached a meaning, an action which takes into account of the behavior of others and thereby oriented in its course. Weber believed that in the course from a feudal to an industrial society social action changed from a dominant traditional type to a process of rationalization which involves a clear awareness of a goal such as the action of a manager who wishes to increase productivity or a builder wanting to erect a block of flats.

3.5. **Question 5.** The most popular question attempted by 201 candidates or almost 69 percent of all the answers. Here those who attempted this question were asked to show whether alienation does not or does arise from impersonal market forces but from social relationships. The course of human history, according to Marx, involves a progressive development of the means of production – a steady increase in human control over nature. This is paralleled by a corresponding increase in alienation. Alienation is a situation in which the creations of humanity appear to humans as alien objects. Such creations are seen as independent from their creators and invested with a power to control them. In alienation, workers lose themselves and become strangers in the world they have created.

**PAPER II**

3.6. **Question 1.** In this question, answered by only 41 students, a small number of students confused the term ‘men’ with the term ‘human beings’ and so they did not manage to answer this question as expected. Here the candidates were expected to argue that feminist standpoint theorists have along the years, particularly since the 1980s, pointed out to the fact that the researcher in his/her capacity of data collector, manages to influence the whole process of investigation from initiation to end. Therefore, when men alone were/are the researchers then the empirical results are to a certain degree gender biased in favour of males’ views and desires.

Whilst constructing arguments on the above, the students were also expected to mention amongst others the sociologist Ann Oakley who started off this argument by sustaining that the traditional social science interview was a male driven model highlighting the submissiveness of female researchers.

A good number of those who chose this question showed authority over the topic. For instance some made also reference to the feminist epistemological approach, though others could have been more analytical in their arguments.

3.7. **Question 2.** This was the most popular question in this paper being tackled by 249 or 85.3% of the candidates. Most of the students could explain that participant observation belongs to the qualitative methodology of sociology. They also explained the difference
between ‘participant observation’ and ‘observation’ and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ participant observations.

This indicates that generally the candidates that have answered this question were able to mention the main characteristics of this research technique. To a certain extent, some students also drew as a peripheral argument the contrast between qualitative and quantitative methodology. A significant number of students have also mentioned classical sociological studies that embarked on this research strategy.

Notably, however, most of the students did not outline a clear argument in favour or against the statement posed but they just chose to list the main characteristics and features of ‘participant observation’ as a research method.

3.8. **Question 3.** 80% or 233 students who tackled this paper answered this question making it the second most popular question in Paper II. In this question the students were presented with a scenario and then they were asked to discuss the research steps involved in testing such a statement. The students were expected to at least mention the following research steps: (1) define the problem; (2) review the literature; (3) formulate a hypothesis; (4) select a research design; (5) select the population to be studied; (6) select a sample; (7) carry out the research; (8) interpret the results; (9) report the research findings. By and large, the students could mention a number of the aforementioned steps but a number dedicated their essay discussing ‘solely’ the different sample methods. Whilst, others answered how they would interpret the results before they actually discussed the hypothesis formulation stage. Few listed the steps in a ‘shopping-list’ style without constructing proper arguments. Contrastingly, others mentioned further steps that they would take such as piloting the research before actually starting it. Some students showed authority over the subject by explaining that they would consider triangulating the study to increase its validity and reliability and they also explained these concepts. The latter shows that the students could think analytically vis-à-vis the question posed. Furthermore, the sequential flow was very important in this essay.

3.9. **Question 4.** This question was tackled by 133 candidates. In their majority, the students realised that this question was subtly asking them to discuss Max Weber in contrast to Karl Marx vis-à-vis the sociological concept of social stratification. However, a significant number of students dedicated most of their time discussing Karl Marx’s theory in its totality rather than comparing and contrasting Weber with Marx.

Those who attempted the comparison have based their arguments mainly on the fact that Marx envisaged a two-class society, which will become one following the proletariat revolution takes place, and Weber’s four class society. The middle-class expansion rather than its contraction was also raised as a contrasting issue in a number of responses. However, in their majority the candidates did not delve deeper in Weber’s theoretical views.
The students could have discussed Weber’s notion of social stratification in comparison with Marx’s theories on a number of counts amongst them: class situation, class division, distribution of power, property, ownership and political power.

3.10. **Question 5.** This was the third least popular question having been tackled by only 85 candidates. Here candidates were expected to define the dependency theory and the concept of under development. References, to at least Andre’ Gunder Frank who has discussed the ‘the development of underdevelopment’ with reference to colonial ties and the rise of the nation states; and to Immanuel Wallerstein’s ‘world system theory’ were meant to feature in the answers. The three major factors of dependency, that is, (1) narrow export oriented economies, (2) lack of industrial capacity and (3) foreign debt definitely enhances the answers to this question.

Contrastingly, there were a good number of students who tackled this question analytically. Commendably, some of the candidates have succeeded in comparing and contrasting the dependence theory with the modernization theory on a number of counts. Whilst, others in their answers made reference to global institutions such as the ‘International Monetary Fund’ or the ‘World Bank’ and so this way they have tried to give realistic current examples. Some of the answers were not sociological at all but merely English Literature essays.

3.11. **Question 6.** In this question answered by only 42 students, making it the second least popular question in the whole paper, candidates were asked to elaborate on the statement that sustainable development has become central to debates in social change and progress. In general those candidates who answered this question did not mention any relevant sociological analyses. Strictly speaking sociological analyses must serve as the foundation for their essays.

At this stage of their studies, the students are not just expected to mention the ‘Sociological Notions’ but even the sociologists behind that view, perspective, theory, comment or idea. Additionally, definitions and brief account of terminologies such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘ecologically sustainable culture’, ‘social change’ ‘social progress’ were meant to feature in the answers.

**PAPER III**

3.12. **Question 1.** This question in which candidates were requested to show how qualitative research facilitates an understanding of human experiences of poverty and social exclusion was answered by 106 candidates. Various candidates did not succeed to develop an analytical discussion on how qualitative research facilitates an understanding of the human experiences of poverty and social exclusion. Yet, a few candidates did give an overview of some insights that emerged from qualitative researches on the subject matter. In particular, these candidates summarised Oscar Lewis’ fieldwork, which analysed the human experience of the urban poor in Mexico and Puerto Rico and explained the behaviour of individuals, families and communities in relation to the culture of poverty.
3.13. **Question 2.** The most popular question in this paper answered by 213 candidates as can be seen in table 3. Although some candidates addressed this question in simplistic terms and through various generalisations or common sense assumptions, others presented interesting discussions between conflicting theoretical perspectives on poverty and attitudes to work.

Indeed, candidates explained Charles Murray’s theory on the ‘underclass’ and how persons from poor communities are unwilling to take jobs. Also, other candidates highlighted Herbert Spencer’s theory on ‘dissolute living’ and how some persons are poor because they are too lazy to work. These perspectives were also complemented by David Marsland’s views on how universal welfare provision creates incentives for staying unemployed. Besides, a few candidates substantiated their arguments by giving examples on the current local and European state of affairs on poverty and attitudes to work.

3.14. **Question 3.** The 210 candidates who tackled this question were requested to discuss whether the coming of the symmetrical family was a myth. A good number of candidates delineated Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s analysis on the different stages of the family and the respective conjugal roles thus showing that they knew the meaning of the symmetrical family.

Candidates also explained why the symmetrical family is a myth by outlining theoretical perspectives that prove that the family is not symmetrical. Moreover, candidates complemented their arguments by delving into why conjugal roles are not symmetrical as explained by Young and Willmott. To this end, they summarised Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard’s evidence on domestic labour; Ann Oakley’s views on the allocation of domestic tasks between spouses; Stephen Edgell’s study on decision making, power and conjugal roles; and so on.

Some candidates also presented various empirical and statistical data on the local situation with regards to the subject matter. On the other hand, however, some candidates presented an analysis of how family functions changed over time, without discussing if families are asymmetrical or not.

3.15. **Question 4.** In reply to this question, standardised and consistent discussions were developed by the candidates. Indeed, candidates proved to have a good knowledge of the Marxist perspective on education. In particular, candidates generally gave a short overview of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’ perspective of the ‘hidden curriculum’ of education that shapes the future workforce by creating subservient workers, encouraging the acceptance of hierarchy, giving motivation through external rewards, and fragmenting knowledge. Candidates also argued that this function of education may not always be successful, as demonstrated by Paul Willis. They thus explained how the ‘counter-school culture’ is reflected in the ‘shop-floor culture’, where education may have consequences that are not completely beneficial to the capitalist.
3.16. **Question 5.** This was the second least popular question in the whole paper being answered only by only 325 or 94 candidates. It was somewhat demanding for a large number of candidates. Indeed, a number of candidates failed to understand what is required of them. In fact, candidates tended to focus on the functions of education for the system without linking these functions to manner and style or to educational attainment.

In comparison, other candidates developed theoretical discussions on how manner and style are important for the attainment of educational success. In particular, candidates mentioned Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital and differential achievement, and thus presented an analytical discussion on the manners and style that are required for educational success.

3.17. **Question 6.** Only 63 candidates tackled this question making it the most unpopular question in the whole paper. Candidates described the development of sects and new age religions in industrial societies. They also explained the role of these sects and new age religions in relation to secularisation. Candidates delineated Steve Bruce’s perspective on how sects will prosper in contemporary societies and how new religious movements pose little or no threat to the validity of the theory of secularisation.

Other candidates gave details on Weber’s theory of rationalisation, and how the rational pursuit of goals would gradually erode religious influence, as opposed to the existence of sects and new age religions. Similarly, a number of candidates delineated Auguste Comte’s stages that describe religious decline in society due to an increase in the domination of science on human thinking and behaviour, and the role of sects and new age religions in this regards.

Chairman
Examiners’ Panel