Statistical Data – Distribution of Grades

This year 545 candidates sat for Advanced Level English. The grade distribution, together with the percentages, is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number of Candidates</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>177</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6.2%</td>
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<th>Grades</th>
<th>Number of Candidates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A – E</td>
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<tr>
<td>A – C</td>
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<td>Fail</td>
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<td>14.3%</td>
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Paper I: Drama, Poetry, Poetry Criticism

William Shakespeare: King Lear or Julius Caesar

John Keats: The Odes; Isabella; Lamia; The Eve of St. Agnes; La Belle Dame Sans Merci;
Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast As Thou Art; When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be;
On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.

Wilfred Owen: Anthem for Doomed Youth; Apologia pro Poemate Meo; Asleep; At a Calvary
near the Ancre; A Terre; The Chances; Conscious; The Dead-Beat; Disabled; Dulce et Decorum
Est; Exposure; Futility; Greater Love; Insensibility; Inspection; The Last Laugh; Le
Christianisme; Mental Cases; Miners; The Next War; The Parable of the Old Man and the
Young; The Send-Off; The Sentry; The Show; S.I.W; Smile, Smile, Smile; Spring Offensive;
Strange Meeting.

Elizabeth Jennings: Selected Poems

Shakespeare

The vast majority of candidates answered questions on King Lear with only 54 candidates answering
one of the questions on Julius Caesar.

As detailed below, there were many good points about the answers on the Shakespeare essays.

A good number of candidates who answered 1A did address the issue raised in this question. These
students explained and illustrated the state to which the majority of the characters reduced
themselves. However, a number of candidates lost marks for one or more of the reasons listed here,
namely (a) they focused entirely on King Lear and ignored the other characters in the play (b) they
focused on the villains and failed to dwell in some detail on King Lear (c) they focused on the main plot
only (d) they discussed how Lear was reduced to the level of a madman yet did not discuss his
madness and behaviour once he was reduced to such ‘nothingness’.

Unfortunately, only a few candidates were capable of actually discussing to what extent they agreed
with the statement in the question, arguing that the statement is not entirely true. These students
argued that in the play one comes across characters such as Cordelia who demonstrate that there is a
certain amount of hope for humanity and that humanity is not entirely reduced to misery in the course
of the play. Candidates need to be trained to fully discuss a statement in a question of this type – it is
a type of question which asks that the statement given is to be ‘discussed’. Such a question entails
that students should think independently and intelligently, and that they are able to challenge notions
expressed in questions set.
The absolute majority of the candidates who attempted 1B ignored the question completely and only indirectly addressed it in the course of their essay. Many wrote an essay on redemption and did not focus on the causes of and process to Lear’s redemption. Others, unfortunately, concentrated on the process to Lear’s redemption but said very little about the redemption itself. Over all, this question was poorly attempted and students were generally less equipped to tackle this question than the first one. There were also candidates who discussed the subplot at length, which was irrelevant to the question set and which, however, demonstrates that candidates assumed this was an essay on redemption and therefore wrote everything they knew about redemption, including information on Gloucester when this was not requested by the question.

On the whole, the students who answered question 2A on *Julius Caesar* did quite well. This question was very straightforward for it did not require candidates to analyse and respond to a given statement. In a question such as this one, there is very little possibility of candidates going off point. In fact, most discussed the loyalty on the part of various characters, especially Brutus, as well as the lack of loyalty on behalf of some characters and its consequences on the plot very well.

Question 2B was attempted by very few candidates, and those who did tackle it did very well. The majority lost marks because they opted to focus entirely on Brutus and did not fully discuss to what extent the statement was true or not. There were a couple of excellent essays which dwelt with insight on Brutus and Caesar. Apart from stating the obvious, these candidates extended their viewpoint to focus also on Cassius and Antony.

These essays proved to be paradigmatic of the type of essay that is desired on Shakespeare at this level.

The weak points largely concerned the linguistic/stylistic aspect of the essays, rather than poor knowledge of text. Those who showed scanty knowledge of either *King Lear* or *Julius Caesar* were indeed very few and were not at all representative of the majority of the candidates who displayed thorough and sometimes comprehensive knowledge of the Shakespeare texts set for examination.

Quite a few candidates (around 43%) did not have a good command of the English Language and this became glaringly clear in the course of their essays where sentence structure was either clumsy or awkward or downright incoherent. Lack of connection between sentences was another weakness and this resulted in fragmented thought processes and lack of continuity between ideas. Quite a few essays were sketchy as if drafted in point form. Serious lack of detail did not help and these essays came across as if students were putting down what they were struggling to remember.

As in previous editions of the examination, there was a strong tendency amongst a high number of candidates to use the past tense when writing a literature essay. This naturally led them to narrate a story rather than to discuss an issue/notion. Others used both the present and the past tenses indiscriminately. Punctuation was largely poor, mixing commas with full-stops and the serious misuse of the possessive was also rife.

Abundant spelling mistakes wrecked havoc with the language aspect of the essay. A lackadaisical habit of seriously misspelt names not only of characters but also of writers is completely unacceptable at this stage. One got the impression that students were spelling phonetically and the examiners took zero tolerance on this issue. Having said that, the odd genuine mistake was never punished. Other grammatical issues concerned lack of agreement between subject and verb, using ‘which’ for people or ‘whom’ instead of ‘who’, the all-too-frequent misuse or incorrect use of prepositions and syntactic muddling of phrases.

An overriding recurrent preoccupation is that of poor planning. This is largely reflected in the haphazard, sometimes random, way in which candidates jump from one theme or plot (in the case of *King Lear*) to the other in the course of their essays without any connecting idea. Generally, students then came back to the original idea at some point later on in their essay. Consequently, the essay as a whole came across as a kind of patchwork that either disconnected or else connected very uneasily.

The weakest essays, which were a minority, lacked detail of any sort. They were sketchy, haphazard and badly-written. They generally relied on irrelevant material and, consequently, these essays just flew off at an impossible tangent. Again, reliance on notes and sources, and sometimes an un-reflected reproduction of them, did not do much to help the flow of the language.
It must be noted however, that compared to last year, there was less reliance on notes by candidates in their essays and overall there was an improvement on the part of candidates when it came to referring closely to the text to substantiate their arguments. In this regard, most of the quotations used by candidates were sensible options made to support arguments rather than using quotations for their own sake. This gave added thrust to the argument and showed that candidates were using their knowledge intelligently and even critically. Direct quotation is necessary; it enhances the argument and shows that the student can think freely and intelligently under examination conditions. The best essays were those that were cogent, well-articulated and well-argued, with textual reference supporting their arguments. These essays were characterised by linguistic confidence and stylistic poise. Narration was a much rarer occurrence too this year.

**Poetry**

With regard to the Poetry questions, as in previous years, the large majority of the candidates sitting for the exam answered questions on Owen.

Around 16% chose to answer the first question on Owen and those who chose to do so did not do very well. The question asked for an insightful and perceptive focus on Owen’s ability to ally the nightmarish qualities, which his poetry is so capable of conjuring, with the social aspect of protest, an aspect that Owen’s poetry is so famous for, as well. Students who attempted this question generally wrote confused and confusing essays, manifesting that they could not really deal with the question set. On the other hand, those who attempted 4B fared much better. These essays were largely comprehensive and detailed not only in terms of knowledge of the actual poems chosen for discussion but there was also confidence displayed by students engaging in cross-referencing, quoting other poets such as Sassoon and even Rosenberg, and generally writing really very good essays. Indeed, these essays contained well-pitched arguments and the range was impressive. Because of an inherent tendency to narrate when it comes to Owen’s poems, and the nature of this question almost made it more easy for students to do so (rather than critically dealing with a subject) the thrust of the argument was at times considerably undermined.

Owen’s poetry is a favourite with students and because of its subject matter students relate to it with enthusiasm and, in some cases, even panache. The downside to this is the fact that writing very passionately about it students tended to overlook the finer aspects of poetry such as rhythm, symbolism, style and more.

Keats was chosen by approximately 10% of the students. Around ten of the essays were of outstanding quality, both in terms of language used and also with regard to concept. As in previous years, critical understanding of the ‘Negative Capability’ theory and reference to Keats’s letters enhanced these essays impressively. These students showed a maturity well beyond their years and their essays really set a benchmark for all the other essays to aspire towards. Most of these students managed to pitch their arguments in a highly critical context, sustaining their points by relevant quotation. They were also able to discuss the ‘Odes’ and the narrative poems with equal ease and confidence within the same essay. These essays (3B) were definitely the best across the three papers.

On the negative side, the large majority of students who opted to answer 3A fell into the descriptive mode. These essays did not manifest any firm argument and the majority of these were well-rehearsed and well-prepared reproductions that did not even relate to the question asked. It was largely all waffle and artificial argumentation, if it could be called that. It was clearly evident that students even misunderstood the question and felt that they were asked to write about the descriptions in Keats’s poems. This took them completely off point and, as far as the questions on Keats were concerned, it was clearly manifested that Keats proved to be a hard nut to crack and these students were certainly not up to the job.

Only three students attempted to answer questions on Elizabeth Jennings. These essays were generally mediocre and weak, both in language and style.
Criticism: Poetry

With regard to Literary Criticism (Poetry), this year’s choice of poem for criticism was ‘The Deaths’ by Jo Shapcott. This poem came across as very direct, both structurally and thematically and most students were able to deal with it intelligently, some of them even using the appropriate critical register. Candidates who wrote well here showed that they could tackle a critical task with confidence and some ease. They understood the nature of critical register, pitch and rigour. They could deal confidently with aspects relating to the tasks set out, namely, style, versification, imagery, tone, first-person narrative, grammar, etc.

As is the tendency with this sort of task, the weak essays in this section were very weak. Quite a few students allowed their imagination to roam and wander aimlessly, literally coming up with notions of the bizarre and the surreal, ghosts and the devil, and many other unbelievable stories. Here, the imagination roamed wild and free, with the consequence that these essays were disjointed, out of context and very poor. Generally speaking, these students showed a dearth of critical knowledge and a weak analytical response to poetry.

Overall, in Paper 1 students did marginally better this year than they did last year. Issues of grammar and syntax need to be addressed very seriously and uncompromisingly. On a general note, students need to be constantly reminded that at this level, they are expected to perform with a certain degree of excellence in their chosen subject.

Paper II: The Novel, Prose Criticism

The Novel

John Fowles: The French Lieutenant’s Woman
John Steinbeck: Of Mice and Men
Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid’s Tale
Anthony Trollope: The Last Chronicle of Barset

This year’s essays were characterized by thorough preparation of the texts but a scant ability to shift the focus of the answer to address the question set, so that relevance to the question was generally incidental rather than purposeful. Time and again, it was indeed saddening to come across responses that showed understanding and knowledge of the text, but remained for the most part unfocused and superficial.

Candidates in the top bracket distinguished themselves by their confidence in handling and expressing complex ideas fluently, their display of critical acumen and their ability to frame their argument within a well-structured essay. Unfortunately, there is still a large proportion of candidates whose writing skills leave much to be desired, in particular where spelling, punctuation and idiomatic expression are concerned. The importance of presenting a properly structured essay should not be discounted. It was common to come across essays without any sense of underlying structure, lacking for instance a substantial introduction and conclusion. A well-structured essay is often the backbone to a coherent and cogent argument.

Two important points must be highlighted: the complete reliance on notes and the substitution of the text by the film version. There were several instances of entire sentences from notes learned by rote used wholesale without any attempt to integrate these both into the style and content of the essay, thus decreasing the essay’s impact and thereby creating the opposite effect of what was intended. The tendency towards the formulaic, with different candidates using precisely the same turn of phrase again and again, is part of this excessive reliance on notes. Candidates’ dependence upon the film version as a substitute for rigorous reading of the text was also evident in the inclusion of details from the films, most notably – and shockingly – when on more than one occasion, a candidate discussed the way Offred finally kills the Commander or referred to her name as Kate.

A general word about the use of quotations: several candidates used quotations judiciously, often weaving these into their sentence structure so that quotations were cleverly integrated into the flow of their answers. Short, apt quotations are generally preferable to whole chunks of text, as they tend to be more relevant. While it may be permissible to err occasionally in the use of the precise words of the text when quoting, candidates should be wary of putting an approximate rendering of the text within inverted commas. Many quotations, especially the shorter ones, depend for their impact upon the
exactness of their wording. For instance passing off “I say therefore I am” (this surfaced several times in the answers) as Offred’s line, makes absolute nonsense of her forceful “I tell therefore you are”. Offred’s reflection on her mother’s comment at the end of chapter 41, “Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations” was garbled so often that its impact and relevance were completely lost. In such cases, close reference to the text and discussion of the comment is preferable to misquoting so terribly.

Of Mice and Men

Almost 50% of the candidates opted to write an essay on Steinbeck, with the first question marginally more popular than the second. Of Mice and Men is a deceptively simple text and in fact, some of the worst essays appeared in answer to this novel. The novel tends to lend itself to a narrative approach, so that on several occasions candidates ended up by treating the concerns set up by the questions very superficially and merely related the story instead of thinking on their feet and shaping the well-worn, often clichéd, material and phrases to the precise demands of the question. Candidates also often referred to the novel as a play, without making reference to Steinbeck’s ‘play-novelette’ term.

The first question dealt with the paradox surrounding the nature of care and protection in the novel. In practically all cases, candidates identified the key moments that should have framed their response, primarily focusing on the killing of Lennie and linking the shooting of Candy’s dog, with the slightly better answers bringing in Slim’s drowning of the puppies. However, very few turned their essay into a mature discussion that went beyond a straightforward account of the main episodes leading up to the shooting of Lennie and the obvious conclusion that George’s action protects Lennie from a worse fate. There was a lot of ‘padding’: for instance, a large number of candidates started off their essays by quoting the descriptions of George and Lennie in the novel’s opening chapter. These are clearly irrelevant unless the candidate links them to the question; moreover, they should be worked into the essay’s argument, not merely trotted off as a list just because the candidate has quite obviously studied them well. Several references were made to Lennie’s brute strength, but very few connected this to the ‘terrible’ side of care and protection. A substantial number of candidates went off at a tangent to discuss the need for care and protection, or instances when these are lacking, instead of focusing more directly on the demands of the question. The best answers located their discussion within the novel’s wider context of failure and futility, exemplified by the symbolic and structural framework of the novel, thus enabling them to explore the paradox inherent in Steinbeck’s vision: Steinbeck is not promoting the ‘cruel to be kind’ notion (a phrase bandied about by several), but is in fact implying that human nature is trapped within a cycle from which there is no escape, made even more horrifying by the consequences of care and protection.

The second question proved to be more challenging, although there were some first-rate responses from the few who perceived what the question was getting at. In most instances, however, candidates produced mediocre to very poor responses. Indeed, the wording “the fundamental absurdity of the human condition” was misread by an alarmingly substantial number. Candidates latched on to the words “human” and “condition” and wrote about the conditions of the workers, humans’ conditions, human conditioning, characters conditioned by humans, human conditions, conditions of human living, humane (and inhumane) conditions – anything but what was implied by the title. This gave them free rein to write about the pet themes of weakness, discrimination and man’s predatory nature, which were all tangential unless these were made properly relevant. Most candidates limited their discussion to the situations of the weak characters, so that answers were usually another version of “discuss weakness in the novel”. Phrases such as “Lennie’s/Crooks’/Curley’s wife’s absurd human condition” kept appearing in the essays, betraying the lack of understanding of the question. The need of the weak to overpower the weaker is certainly not absurd, as so many claimed; what can be argued as being absurd is the shift from victim to victimizer, suggesting that man is caught up in the cycle of his own meanness. Some hinted at the notion of futility implied by the question, but failed to explore its implications. The few who did well considered the novel’s cyclic pattern that reinforces man’s entrapment in his destiny, highlighting the futility of his actions and the bleakness of Steinbeck’s vision. They considered George’s final action and the failure of the dream within this context, bringing out the way that even within relationships of companionship, man remains essentially alone.
The Handmaid’s Tale

The Handmaid’s Tale remains a popular text, attracting over 40% of the responses. On the positive side, the answers displayed a close familiarity with, and enjoyment of, the text, evidenced by the profusion of quotation and the keenness of the discussion. An overwhelming number of candidates opted for the question on power, while there were about 70 answers to the more challenging question on the notion of uncertainty in the novel.

The first question required candidates to consider the way that power is never faceless, but is manifested in the behaviour of people who uphold its systems and structures. What should have been a relatively manageable question on one of the novel’s major themes, proved to be highly problematic for the majority of candidates who opted for this question. The impression gained was that most took one look at the question, saw the word ‘power’ and proceeded to write an essay on the power structures of Gilead, regardless of the question’s implications, with the result that several candidates obtained marks that were far lower than what they were clearly capable of. The overwhelming number of candidates who ignored the demands of the question mostly dealt with Gilead’s regime and the way it tries to control the people through propaganda and religion, language, fear, isolation and so on, oblivious to the fact that in focusing their discussion on the regime, or the ‘elite’ as many referred to it rather inelegantly, what they were in fact talking about was the faceless nature of Gilead. Some answers took the opposite tack and discussed exclusively the characters who subvert the system. A few misread the question altogether and wrote about the importance of facing power, twisting their responses into another version of resistance and rebellion. Several ludicrous assertions were made, suggesting a lack of understanding of both the question and the novel’s wider concerns: Offred has power over the handmaids as she can read the word ‘faith’; Offred’s Commander is the only person allowed to read in all Gilead; among the many things handmaids have lost is the possibility to play Scrabble. Those who wrote focused essays considered the way the faceless regime manifested itself concretely in the behaviour of characters such as the Aunts or Janine. They discussed the complex, at times ambiguous, behaviour of characters such as the Commander who both upholds and subverts the system. They brought in characters like Moira and Ofglen, contrasting the open rebellion of one with the apparent passivity of the other, highlighting the effect on Offred in the closing sequence of the novel. However, very few essays touched upon the finer nuances, such as the paradoxical idea that in rebelling in secret against the regime (as in the secret meetings with Commander or love affair with Nick), the system is in fact being further reinforced.

The second question dealt with the effect of uncertainty in the novel. This was a challenging question, giving candidates who had thought more deeply about the issues set up by the novel an opportunity to display what they knew. In fact, the highest mark out of all the literature essays was awarded to an answer to this question. The weaker essays catalogued, perhaps predictably, a list of ‘what we don’t know’ about the novel and what Offred does not know, at times making rather ridiculous assertions such as she does not know what the word ‘zygote’ means. In such cases, these candidates were hard-pressed to make valid points about the effects of uncertainty, the most common being that Atwood tries to create suspense. These essays also tended to suffer from poor sequencing of ideas, as the points that emerged gave the impression of having been jotted down at random with no thought of how these were linked. The answers in the top bracket considered the way the gaps in the narration calls into question the unreliability of the act of narration and focused also on the effect of the Historical Notes. These candidates dealt with the way Atwood draws the reader into the narrative, making Offred’s story more tangible, creating an underlying tension between the sympathy for Offred and the reader’s frustration, highlighted by the dislocating effect of the Historical Notes.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman

Responses to the text The French Lieutenant’s Woman accounted for 9% of the total essays, with the second question proving to be more popular than the first. There were some first-rate answers from those candidates who had clearly considered Fowles’s purpose in writing the novel and who perceived which chapters to focus on when discussing the meta-fictional aspect of the novel (13, 44, 55, 60, 61.) Candidates who were equipped with, and had understood, the right terminology - such as breaking the frame, historiographic meta-fiction, text of bliss and so on – could engage in a discussion of Fowles’s techniques and the role of the reader, positioning their argument within the existentialist framework of the novel. These candidates considered the narrator’s quandary in simultaneously reinforcing and breaking the frame, and showed how the exposition of the writing process is not merely a virtuoso display in itself but it parallels the evolution of the characters. Many, however, did not really get to grips with the novel’s self-reflexive aspects and discussed techniques used by Fowles to create
complexity, which they did not relate to the question (for instance, the use of epigraphs). Some were unable to distinguish between the fictional persona as a character within the fiction and the novelist John Fowles. Most candidates were familiar with Fowles’s essays on the writing of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*; while some used these to their advantage many others confused Fowles’s writings with comments by the novel’s narrator.

The second question dealt with the effect of the past on the present and produced mostly mediocre to average essays, as candidates came up with predictable answers. Essays were mainly about the characters of Charles and Sarah, making a case for the way actions within the timeframe of the novel’s recent past (such as engagement to Ernestina, affair with Vargueness) affects the present, resulting in superficial responses. Some dealt with the gap between the centuries, but very few discussed the importance of this interplay within the novel’s thematic framework. Only a small proportion located their argument within the novel’s wider concerns of Darwinism and existentialism.

*The Last Chronicles of Barset*

Only one student attempted to answer on Trollope’s *The Chronicles of Barset*. The candidate attempted 5B and generally wrote a discerning and insightful answer, engaging in a wide range to reference and pitching his/her arguments within the wider context of Victorianism.

Generally speaking, when dealing with the Novel the range of textual competence was high, demonstrating much solid work. Arguments were often backed up by extensive quotations and on a number of occasions also by references to other works and/or critics, although these references were not always sufficiently worked into the argument. While there were those candidates who did not focus their knowledge on the demands of the question there were also those who wrote well-written, fluent essays, demonstrating broader reading and a wider understanding of the text in context.

With regard to organisation, structure and grammatical competence, essays, particularly those on Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, on the whole left much to be desired. Random presentation of ideas, broken syntax, confusion of tenses, poor use of possessives and punctuation, atrocious spelling especially of characters’ names: these were some of the main weaknesses in the essays, again at times leading the examiners to wonder how such a candidate could have been allowed to progress beyond SEC level. Few candidates perceived the merits of a good introduction. Most wrote pithy, two-line introductions and then went headlong into the novel regardless.

**Criticism: Prose**

The scene-to-scene progression in the prose passage offered valuable textual markers for the candidates and their attention to this movement made allowance for a varied focus. Candidates were capable of identifying the richness of the imagery, which created such a colourful setting. The language used posed minimal challenges and made the passage accessible; thus limiting problems at comprehension level to the very weak candidates.

Candidates demonstrated a significantly strong awareness of the appeal to the senses and they had the luxury to dwell upon a number of these by exploring their thematic and stylistic relevance. Some candidates chose to comment on some of the most salient images and others attempted to capture them all. However, in such a task as literary appreciation, the quality of the critical engagement is more important than the list of literary features manifested in the passage.

The measure of time and the dominant presence of the narrator held a crucial role in the passage and candidates were sensitive to these throughout their observations in the essays. Interestingly, unlike last year, there was an effort on the candidates’ part to keep their comments on diction grounded to the overall context. It is evident that such an effort was rewarding. Another positive outcome of this task was that candidates were less inclined to paraphrase and more intent on engaging critically with the text.

Unfortunately, there were a number of shortcomings in the candidates’ reading of what will here be referred to as the horses’ scene. Some candidates chose to transform their analysis of this scene into a manifesto condemning the cruelty to animals instead of appreciating its literary value in the passage. Conjecture of this nature based on personal bias should be harnessed as it might turn the critical commentary into a topic debate; therefore, it would lose the characteristic expected in literary criticism convention and approach the kind of content more typical of a language essay.
Disappointingly, one other shortcoming was the reading of the penultimate sentence of the passage: ‘It is time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very bright fire to tempt her: the red light shines out under the deepening gray of the sky’. Generally, those candidates who failed to read the sentence carefully and missed the semi-colon and the colon became disconnected with the ending of the passage.

Finally, as was observed in past years, even though it was slightly less prominent this year, possessing a wide repertoire of literary terms alone is not sufficient to present a well developed critical commentary of a prose passage. As was emphasised in the past, this approach hinders the opportunity to develop a cogent and coherent literary appreciation.

Regarding Paper 2 holistically, generally, candidates are demonstrating a commendable attitude that shows them seeking critical sources for their essays. The amount of knowledge of text shown in these essays is generous and, in some cases, impressive. The major obstacle to writing critically is mainly threefold: (1) the difficulty of expressing knowledge in grammatically and syntactically correct English, and not substantiating this with textual reference (2) relating the knowledge of text to the question asked, and (3) using knowledge to pitch arguments at the appropriate register and helping students engage critically with the text. With regard to the Literary Criticism component of the Paper, although it is encouraging and commendable that students are showing good knowledge of literary terms and techniques, they should master a more critical approach to a prose text and should also develop a more cohesive formal approach towards their writing.

**Paper III: Language Essay, Comprehension, Linguistics**

**Language Essay**

All eight essay titles set in Section A were attempted by the cohort of 545 candidates, in the following order:

(a) 139 (25.5%) candidates  
(e) 105 (19.3%) candidates  
(h) 103 (18.9%) candidates  
(b) 56 (10.3%) candidates  
(d) 45 (8.3%) candidates  
(f) 41 (7.5%) candidates  
(g) 13 (2.4%) candidates  
(c) 9 (1.6%) candidates

Absentees 34 (6.2%)

(a) The joys (and sorrows?) of travel  
‘Travel’ was interpreted as: the journey from one place to another; to move from one place to another, to tour places, considering also, a number of reasons for travelling (pleasure, adventure, health, work, study etc). The majority of candidates interpreted this title as an argumentative writing task where the pros (escapism, learning, self discovery, a sense of adventure) and cons (homesickness, costly, addictive and risky) were balanced against each other in a discussion on travel. Quite a few other candidates chose to write a narrative where their personal travel experience revealed some ups and downs, as set by the title. One particular candidate took the original stance of writing from the point of view of an aeroplane. Although this title was a popular choice, there were no outstanding essays in this group and marks were generally lost for the limited range of vocabulary and generally poor sequencing of ideas, especially in the argumentative approaches. Words were wasted on unnecessarily lengthy introductions, being either too general on travel, or else on different means of transport or even on the history of travel. Overall performance in this title was only slightly better than average. (average score 18.29)

(b) Vegetarianism  
Candidates seem to be very familiar with this principle. Most essays defined vegetarianism, referring also to vegans, discussed reasons for this plant based diet, its health benefits, but some candidates went further and discussed gender and age differences vis-a-vis the practice of vegetarianism and also attitudes towards vegetarians. Approach to essays was mostly argumentative or expository but a handful even incorporated these in a personal narrative which made an interesting approach. Yet, overall performance in this title was just about average (average score 16.77). At times, the writing remained limited and impassive, resembling class notes.
(c) Will Chinese be the international language of the future?
Surprisingly, this was not a very popular choice. Essays attempted in this case were generally satisfactory, with the candidates engaging in a discussion of the likelihood of Chinese taking precedence over the English language and occupying the status of a global language. It was evident that there was a transfer of knowledge from linguistics lectures and Crystal’s set textbook which greatly helped in substantiating the arguments brought forward. Overall performance was one of the better ones (average score 21.22).

(d) No problem lasts for ever
Candidates wrote about ‘problem’ as those difficulties experienced personally or else as a group i.e. problems encountered typically by teenagers or even problems on a more general level, i.e. which society is facing nowadays. The task, however, was achieved only when candidates referred to different ways of solving the problem/s, such as seeking counselling/advice, sharing problems and allowing time to heal. The title, in the majority of cases, was interpreted as a narrative but there was also discursive writing on this opinion. Overall performance in this title was just above average (average score 18.54).

(e) “Wind and wave energy: a solution to the world’s energy crisis?” Discuss.
Candidates were very knowledgeable of the topic generally starting off by describing how these different energy sources operate and then engaging in a discussion of their benefits (caring for the environment and lower electricity bills) and drawbacks (planning required, costly to set up, noise pollution, visual impact on the environment and harm to flora and fauna). Essays, as the task stipulated, were all argumentative. The majority of essays were well-structured and written in a satisfactory repertoire of terminology. Overall performance was slightly above average (average score 19).

(f) “There is no objective reality out there, but we view it through the spectacles of our beliefs, attitudes, and values.” Discuss.
Most of the essays made interesting reading as the candidates wrote about what actually influences one in life. Candidates wrote mainly about politics and religion as well as family and friends; a couple of candidates also applied their discussion to the world of arts and aesthetics; other approaches traced what influences us over the various stages of our lives, starting from childhood right on to old age. Although, the overall performance was the highest in this task (average score 22.25), in some cases, marks were lost when the discussion remained at the superficial level of a mere listing of ideas.

(g) “Punctuality is the virtue of the bored.” Discuss.
The general trend in this group of essays was to either argue whether one is better off being punctual all the time, as this is very often a sign of an obsession or stress or whether people who are more relaxed are happier. A couple of candidates presented this discussion under the guise of their own reflective thoughts as they experienced their everyday life. Such originality was rewarded and contributed to an overall satisfactory performance (average score 21.85).

(h) If only I knew yesterday what I know today...
Candidates engaged in writing about various episodes of regret. The narrative approach to this title made for the better writing provided the plot was not too complicated, the characterisation was convincing and the writing was emphatic in evoking a sense of regret. The small number of essays which attempted to be reflective was indeed poor and marks were lost on waffle. Overall performance was good (average score 19.86).

All essay titles expounded topics that were indeed familiar with the cohort, having been encountered either during intensive reading in the content areas or else were of topical interest. There was a small number of exceptional essays, where marks were awarded for interesting ideas, logical and effective organisation of these ideas, the appropriate voice, specific word choice, expressive writing and the correct conventions of writing per title. At the other end of the spectrum, were essays that showed rather simplistic ideas of argumentation or long winding plots in a vain attempt to reach the stipulated word count. Such instances displayed weakness in both fluency and accuracy, with some candidates still grappling with the discrete items such as, subject-verb agreement; narrative tenses, in particular the present/past perfect tense; basic spelling and even punctuation. Vocabulary, at times, was rather limited with the liberal use of words such as ‘amazing’, ‘epic’ and ‘awesome’ applied to everything.
On a general level, practice in all the four language skills is encouraged, but most importantly candidates are to read widely and extensively, as this will lead first and foremost to a better writing performance and an improved overall language performance. More specifically, candidates would do well to manage the examination time better and to allow for careful planning of the writing task, taking the suggested word count into consideration, as this is an indication that the title has been fully explored and ideas fully developed.

**Comprehension**

As in previous years, Paper III of the May 2011 Matsec session yielded a cross-section of answers varying widely in accuracy and detail. This year’s comprehension passage, was, it must be said, decidedly accessible to readers of English, and this situation should have been highlighted by the answers of students having followed a course in Advanced Level English. While the tone of the excerpt was by turns nostalgic and dry, with the occasional wry witticism thrown in, the author’s thoughts were chiefly rendered in a plainness of language which should have made it easy to follow for most students.

Nonetheless, gaps seemed to be present in a good number of replies, mainly in terms of the underlying points or information that most of the questions required. This latter element was felt most keenly in letter (f), or the summary portion of the question. It is, in fact, a great pity that even in some of the better overall tackling of the comprehension passage, students let themselves down by omitting, or being unable to evaluate, the heart of the question. For example, in this case, students were required to include in their summaries points detailing the manner in which the author and her offspring managed the constant relocations that the father’s job entailed, with all the trials and tribulations that these moves brought with them. Although most students were able to transmit the discomfort and unease that the author clearly puts across, they did not follow that up with the measures that she takes in order to handle her travelling misadventures. This is, perhaps, one of the most common student mishaps with regard to comprehensions – not giving the summary section the attention it deserves. The children’s ‘side of the story’ was also another element neglected here, with far less space being devoted to their reactions.

Letter (e), that is, the question necessitating a distinction between the elements of the four countries where the author’s family had resided produced some intriguing responses. The vast majority of candidates were somewhat literal in their replies, focussing either on actual physical features or landscape traits, rather than the ‘spirit’ of the locations. One answer actually went as far as to state that what distinguished Belgrade from the other places of residence was the use of the Serbian language! Nevertheless, other students compellingly chose to concentrate on certain angles or aspects of the habitations such as the uniqueness of, say, the roads, educational system or, more interestingly, the attitudes which these places fostered in the children. Such answers were naturally the most remarkable for their depth and insight.

Students tended to fare better in letters (b) and (d), though again, the omission of particular crucial details was rampant. In (d), for instance, a large percentage of the students comprehended the term utilised in the question, but were at a loss as to what its implications may be. In other cases, respondents were able to divine the fact that the answer entailed a brief analysis of the term’s effects, but were not able to articulate this detail appropriately enough. However, their attempts, even if semi-successful, were naturally taken into consideration. In (b), the downfall of most candidates was that of explaining the action sought to be remedied by the policy, rather than the policy itself. Such inaccuracies can perhaps be classed in two different ways: either the miscomprehension of the instruction to the student or the over-explication of the text.

Overall, perhaps the most disappointing features of the answers to this year’s comprehension passage comprised the numerous spelling errors evident, especially in the case of words that were present in the passage. Even more unforgivable was the repeated ‘quoting from the passage’ tendency, a factor of replies which unhappily appears to have increased in frequency over the last few years.

In order not to linger on the unfortunate facets of the answers, though, it is opportune to conclude this report by remarking that students seemed to perform very well as far as interpreting the single words given in letter (a). In the main, responses to this question succeeded in satisfactorily approximating the definitions required. Students also turned out reasonably good answers to letter (c), which involved the
appraisal of the author’s words in a specific cultural context, though perhaps the writer’s tone was slightly misread.

**Linguistics**

A small number of candidates read their chosen essay question carefully and made very good attempts to relate their knowledge of linguistics to the topic at hand. Particularly successful candidates also illustrated their answers both with relevant anecdotal experience of language usage and well-sourced quotes and examples from the set texts. In many cases, this lucid and intelligent approach to answering exam questions was also supported by the candidates’ own firm grasp of English language usage and idiom.

On the whole, candidates have good knowledge of the set texts, but they are still hindered by an inability to apply their knowledge to the specific details of the question set, and a disturbing number of candidates display an inability to organise their thoughts into a coherent argument in relation to their chosen question.

Across the three questions, candidates displayed a reasonable grasp of the set texts, but generally struggled to apply their understanding to the specific parameters set out by the question. Candidates should take note that a question requiring comment or discussion should contain some elements of informed discussion, rather than a regurgitation or even close paraphrasing of the set texts.

Additionally, as far as language usage is concerned, the candidates lost marks because of a poor grasp of even some of the basic grammar structures and/or a poor range of vocabulary. At the risk of repetition, I would urge candidates sitting for their A level English paper to be reminded that poor language skills generally will result in being unable to convey a clear message to the reader (examiner), and that a better grasp and range of vocabulary, in particular, will help candidates to refine their answers much more.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, on the whole, a positive point that definitely emerges from this year's examination results shows an inclination in students to deal with texts critically and to engage with ideas creatively. The number of students taking the examination this year was almost exactly the same as last year (545 this year; 547 in 2010) but there is a marked improvement on the results obtained and this is both heartening and encouraging. Students need to be constantly and consistently encouraged to realise their potential: to focus more uncompromisingly on acquiring and consolidating language skills and to better cultivate and enhance their critical acumen when dealing with literary texts. A more rigorous approach to issues of grammar, syntax, punctuation and, particularly, spelling would enable students to write with more confidence, poise, elegance and assurance.

Students need to be reminded that good and correct use of the language is a very significant assessment criterion.

The Chairperson
Board of Examiners

November 2011