

EXAMINERS' REPORT

AM SOCIOLOGY

FIRST SESSION 2018



L-Università
ta' Malta

**MATSEC
Examinations Board**

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 2814/5/6
matsec@um.edu.mt

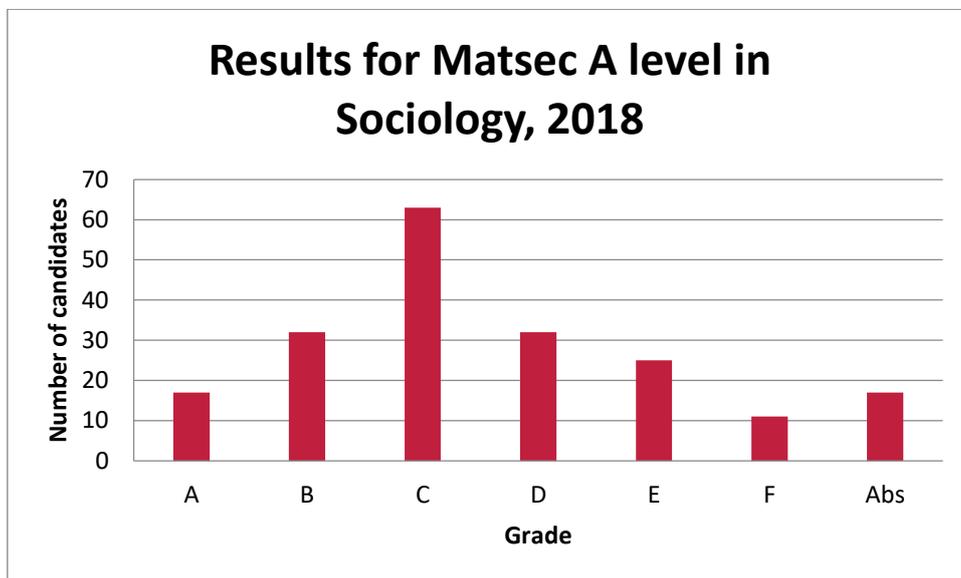
www.um.edu.mt/matsec

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

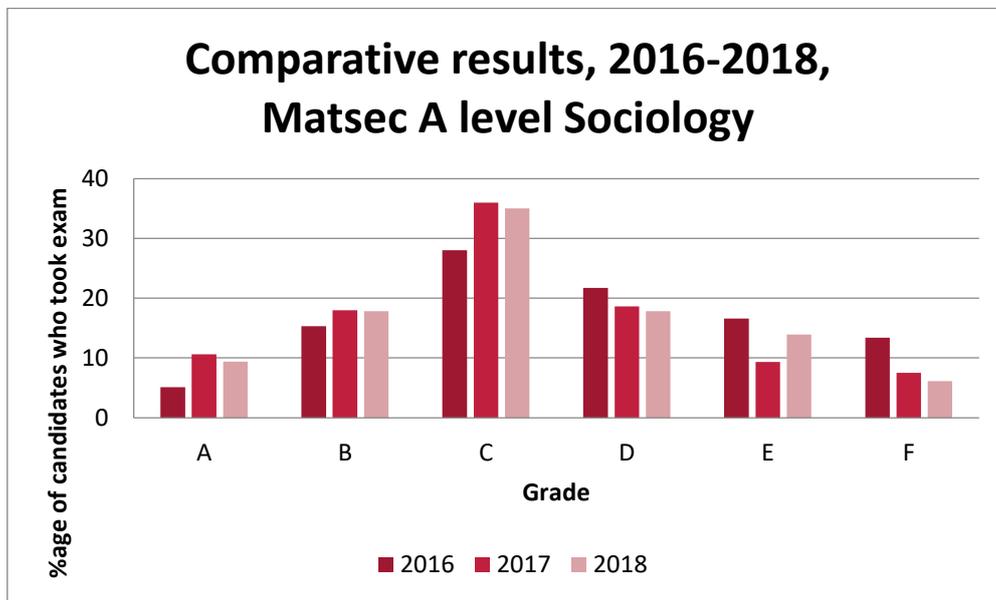
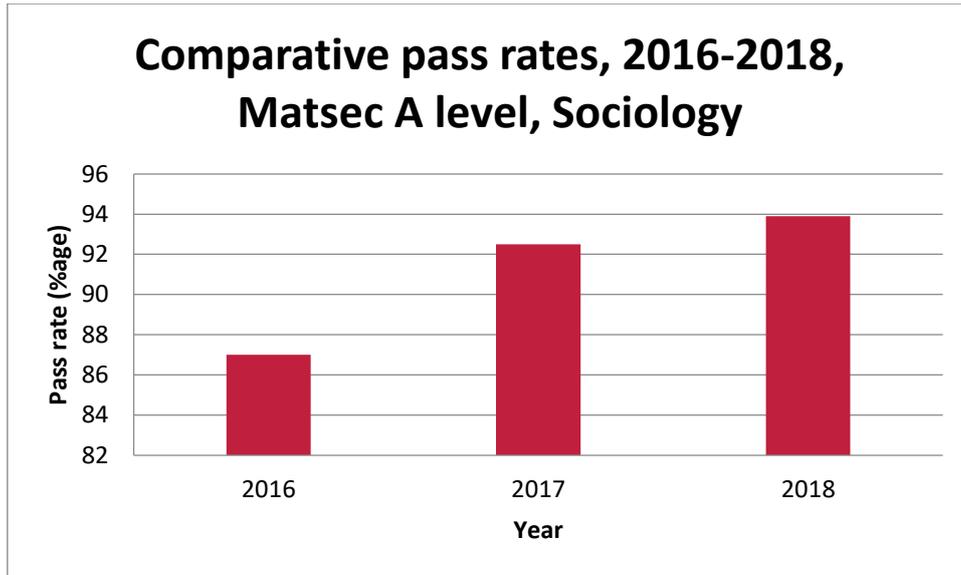
I Numbers, rates, comparisons

A total of 197 candidates registered for the exam. Of these, 180 took the exam and 17 were absent. The pass rate (Grades A to E) was of 93.9%. By far the highest number of candidates got a C, with a very even spread on either side. The table and chart represent these figures.

GRADE	A	B	C	D	E	F	ABS	TOTAL
NUMBER	17	32	63	32	25	11	17	197
% OF TOTAL	8.6	16.2	32.0	16.2	12.7	5.6	8.6	100



The volume compares well to the two previous years. In 2016, a total of 185 registered of whom 157 took the exam; in 2017, a total of 190 candidates registered for the exam of whom 161 took the exam. The pass rate for the candidates who took the exam was significantly higher than that of the two previous years. The pass rate in 2016 was of 87%; in 2017, it was 92.5% (see chart below). There was a strong comparability in the candidates' performance (see charts below).



The candidates' sharp improvement in performance in 2017 over 2016 was sustained in 2018. This suggests that the 2017 reorganisation with respect to greater clarity of questions, better synergy between the Board and sixth-form teachers, and overall coherence of the exam papers and syllabus, was fruitful in the long term.

The following sections discuss the candidates' performance in detail, by paper and question.

II Detailed analysis

Paper 1

Paper 1 was designed to assess candidates' knowledge of the core thematic area of Culture and Identity in the Sociology Advanced level syllabus. Candidates were asked to answer all the four questions in the paper. The questions asked were the following:

1. Mass culture is often frowned upon by the social elites that see themselves as the holders of high culture. Discuss.
2. Why is socialisation so important in the formation of culture and identity?
3. Different forms of social stratification may affect the formation of identities. Discuss.
4. In what ways are the media and identities related?

Most of the short essay questions required students to analyse content and not only understand or simply memorize the chapter in the book; this approach ranks high in the learning objectives in Bloom's Taxonomy. All questions were straightforward apart from question three. Several candidates were off-tracked by the term social stratification in this question. However, the lack of comprehension of this is quite troublesome - It demonstrates how candidates were unable to draw connections between different concepts and studies in the syllabus but instead treated them as separates with little or no critical analysis.

Candidates were assessed in terms of their competence in understanding key concepts but also in terms of their references to theoretical material. A good number of candidates could explain concepts related to the subject matter but failed considerably in making reference to sociological studies. Another flaw in the responses was the lack of ability to present an in-depth insight on the subject matter and to supplement definitions of concepts with contextual examples. Most candidates provided answers duplicating basic facts and concepts instead of engaging with more analytical and evaluative material.

Candidates who failed this paper were those who presented short responses with garbled information, little proof of knowledge of the subject matter, no theoretical references as well as presenting statements of opinion inadequately supported by evidence.

Style and Presentation

A good number of candidates answered the questions by defining key concepts. However, most essays lacked adequate structure and length. Most responses also lacked a proper logical flow and did not address different theoretical perspectives. The vast majority of responses reflected a poor command of the English language.

Short Essay Questions

Question 1: Mass culture is often frowned upon by the social elites that see themselves as the holders of high culture. Discuss.

Most of the candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the main differences between mass and high culture. Most candidates (69%) presented a generic response and defined concepts related to the subject matter, with little or no reference to studies. Only few candidates managed to connect this to Bourdieu's study on Distinction or to present contextual examples. Candidates who failed this question were those who did not refer to any related concepts, studies or examples.

Question 2: Why is socialisation so important in the formation of culture and identity?

Candidates on average got the highest marks (42%) in this question. Primarily candidates needed to elaborate on the reasons why the process of socialisation is vital from a structural and social action viewpoint. High marks were allocated to candidates who referred to different theoretical approaches to the understanding of the socialisation process and the formation of culture and identity. In particular, candidates needed to focus on the way cultural and individual identities are created by the wider social forces making up the social structure of society.

Question 3: Different forms of social stratification may affect the formation of identities. Discuss.

This was the question that candidates found the most difficult, with 13% of candidates failing to obtain a pass mark. Candidates needed to focus on the impact of class, gender and race on identity formation. Some responses confused social stratification with subcultures and did not demonstrate that they understood or could discuss the impact of social stratification on identities. Candidates who scored the highest in this question were those who could define and elaborate on different forms of social stratification with reference to studies and contextual examples.

Question 4: In what ways are the media and identities related?

For this question, candidates had to refer to different studies related to how the media affect identities. There are various studies and examples on the impact on the media in the construction of identity which could have been utilised by candidates answering this question. Therefore, candidates were assessed on their ability to analyse and connect different parts of this topic rather than relying solely on memorizing a particular section. Candidates needed to refer to Postmodern studies on the media saturated social world in contemporary society but also apply this with reference to the role of the media on ethnic and gender identities, on patterns of consumption, and on the changing patterns of class in media representations.

Paper 2

General

This paper was structured into four questions each tackling separate thematic areas, these being the family, religion, gender and sexuality, and welfare and social policy. It required two answers from the four questions, both carrying 50 marks. There was a significant discrepancy in the popularity of each question, with some being tackled more than others.

The overall performance was satisfactory with the majority of answers presenting a well-developed and coherent argument. Most of the answers showed a good grasp of sociological knowledge with references to specific theories and concepts. Candidates were rewarded if their answer tackled the question and if it also included some critical engagement with the sociological arguments presented. They were also rewarded in the application of theories and concepts to historical or contemporary examples. The weaker answers generally failed to engage with the question or statement provided, most of which did not follow a logical line of thought. This was most evident in cases where answers were clearly memorised, possibly because, similarly to the previous year, candidates only tackled the general theme without considering what was specifically being asked of them in the question. There was also a small number of instances where candidates attempted to answer the question but failed to do so due to poor understanding of it, and consequently did not succeed in answering it well. This was most noticeable in cases where there was a significant disparity in the quality of the two answers presented. The weakest answers neglected the sociological element altogether and simply presented an answer drawing on general knowledge.

In terms of presentation and skills, a few answers lacked a clear argumentative flow, as evidenced by disconnected paragraphs and weak structure. This showed a lack of planning of how the question will be tackled, prioritising the reproduction of information instead of engagement with the question. Weak English writing skills was evident in a number of cases, and, while these were not penalised for the wrong use of diction or weak grammar, it often impacted on the candidate's ability to get the point across especially as a result of poor sentence structure. In a smaller amount of cases, a possibly poor understanding of the question led to answers which were largely off topic.

The length of the answers varied from half a page to more than five pages, although length of answers did not equate to quality. Generally, however, the shortest answers were lacking in detail while the longest often went beyond what the question was asking in terms of content.

Q1: Balancing work and care responsibilities remains a gendered challenge. Discuss this with reference to the feminist perspective on gender roles and domesticity.

(Thematic area: Family)

This question was by far the most popular among candidates. The general level of quality among the answers was satisfactory. Most answers made use of the feminist perspective to argue in favour of the statement in the question. They elaborated on changing forms of the family while discussing through feminist theories how this is not necessarily bringing about gender balance in work and care responsibilities. The excellent answers engaged with concepts such as 'the symmetrical family' and 'the New Man' and provided feminist critique to the same concepts in order to show how women have a dual burden or even a triple-shift, using Delphy and Leonard's and Duncombe and Marsden's terminology. Most answers also discussed three different feminist perspectives: Radical feminism, liberal feminism and Marxist feminism, with the weaker answers simply listing these perspectives without linking them to the question, or in some cases even confusing feminist perspectives with functionalism.

Q2: What is religious fundamentalism, and why is it on the rise in some contemporary societies?

(Thematic area: Religion)

This was by far the least attempted question of all. Of the few who did attempt it, a significant number failed to define what religious fundamentalism is or why it is on the rise. Most of these answers confused the term 'fundamentalism' with religion in general. Thus they only provided a generic and memorised answer with a cursory discussion of the main sociological theories of religion, namely Durkheim's, Weber's or Marx's. Those candidates who successfully identified what religious fundamentalism is generally provided excellent answers with well-developed definitions of the term. Most of these made reference to different types of fundamentalism, such as Christian and Islamic, while attributing the rise of religious fundamentalism in contemporary societies as a reaction to globalisation and modernity. The vast majority of them also managed to successfully mention contemporary examples of religious fundamentalism, such as ISIS.

Q3: Functionalism holds that men and women are fundamentally different. In what ways?

(Thematic area: Gender and Sexuality)

The question in the thematic area of Gender and Sexuality also proved to be a popular one. The majority of answers started by discussing how the terms sex and gender differ, most of which were successful in this regard. This was generally followed by an elaboration on the functionalist perspective, with most mentioning the Parsonian concepts of primary socialisation and adult personality stabilisation, as well as the instrumental and affective role of the husband and wife respectively. The best answers used the feminist perspective in order to provide a level of critique to the functionalist perspective. However a good number of answers failed to provide the necessary argumentative detail to be able to elaborate on the various ways in which functionalists view men and women differently. This was evident in the considerable amount of very short answers by those who tackled this question.

Q4: Despite the affluence of many contemporary societies, poverty still persists. Why do you think this is so?

(Thematic area: Welfare and Social Policy)

Also a popular question with candidates, the average answer started by discussing the two definitions of poverty, namely absolute and relative poverty with some mentioning the works of Rowntree and Townsend to support it. Most answers correctly identified two general approaches to the causes behind poverty: victim-blaming and system-blaming approaches. These also made specific references to the New Right approach, mentioning the dependency culture that welfare may bring about and the underclass while making reference to the works of Murray, Marsland and Lewis. Others also successfully argued through the Marxist approach how capitalism creates wealth yet also sustains poverty, especially of the working class. Some other answers referred to systemic discrimination on the basis of age, gender and ethnicity and how this may lead to poverty. The best answers successfully managed to tie their answer to the first premise of the statement in the question, by providing reasons for persistent poverty in a context of wealthy societies. Others failed to understand the term 'affluence' and did not make reference to the question at all. There was also a general trend where it was clear that the question was not read well and only discussed welfare with no reference to poverty altogether. However, the general level of the answers to this question was quite satisfactory.

Paper 3

General

Paper 3 of the Sociology Advanced May 2017 session presented a set of four questions covering the following thematic areas; media and communication (thematic area 5), crime and deviance (thematic area 6), the environment (thematic area 7) and, race, ethnicity and migration (thematic area 8). Candidates were expected to choose and answer two questions from the four questions presented in the paper.

The essay questions were designed to test candidates' knowledge and understanding of main sociological aspects covered at Advanced level on these four thematic areas. In terms of analytical requirements, the questions focused primarily on demonstrating 'Knowledge' and 'Comprehension' which fall within the lower levels of cognitive thinking of Bloom's Taxonomy and did not specifically request students to evaluate, critically appraise, or carry out in-depth analysis of the subject matter. The essay questions posed were quite specific and straightforward and certain questions also offered suggestive notions as to what was expected in terms of content, which could be referred to by candidates as a guide to effectively address questions posed.

Apart from their factual knowledge on the area under discussion, candidates were assessed in terms of their competence in the subject matter, as evident through their capacity for comprehension and synthesis of theoretical material. This understanding was assessed in terms of their appropriate application of the theory to the particular demands posed by the essay question, as well as in terms of critical engagement and insight through the ability to consolidate such theoretical knowledge through relevant examples. Attention was also given to the structure and approach adopted in addressing the question, and its presentation in terms of clear and logical argumentation and flow of ideas. The fact that these candidates were sitting for the subject at Advanced level was also taken into account in terms of expectations regarding the extent and depth of appraisal provided.

On a general note, as evident from the marks allocated, the large majority of candidates managed to successfully address and interpret the questions posed, with a good number even going beyond the issues and concepts presented in the model answers. Only a very few number of candidates did not attempt to respond to any of the questions presented in Paper 3.

Apart from relevant content, a good number of candidates also managed to consolidate their response through the critical application of theories and use of contextual examples. Notwithstanding, a more critical understanding and application of sociological theory is warranted, since a good number of essays still provided only a passive 'description' of the theories without making any significant effort to directly link the information presented to the specific requirements posed by the essay question.

On a more worrisome note, a significant number of essays failed to make any reference whatsoever to sociological theory. Indeed, while adequately addressing the question posed in terms of presentation of relevant content and the use of sociological arguments, a substantial number of essays did not back their argumentation through sociological theory or make any specific reference to the works of prominent sociologists in the field

Style and Presentation

The majority of essays addressed the requirements posed by the essay questions through logical and systematic argumentation. In terms of writing style and presentation, however a good number of essays lacked an adequate structure which hindered the flow of argument and

appreciation of the different streams of thought addressed in the essay. In particular, not enough attention was addressed to the introductory and conclusive parts of the essay, with a number of essays foregoing with such need altogether. Whilst not taken into account in the assessment criteria, syntax and grammatical issues arising from lack of a good command of the English language but also from negligence were evident in a significant number of essays.

The average length of the essays was around two pages, which length depending on handwriting style, is personally considered to be relatively short for adequately explaining, elaborating, and discussing the sociological concepts required by the essay questions. Whilst there is the tendency that lengthier writing diverts from the focus of the sought answer, overall, lengthier essays were also more elaborate and detailed in terms of response.

Question 1: The media is often criticised for stereotyping and discriminating against certain social groups. Discuss.

As observed from the data presented above, question 1 was the most popular question, addressed by 33% of the candidates. Most of the candidates who attempted this question did relatively well with 47% fairing in the high, 50% in the medium and only 3% falling within the lower range bracket.

Most of the candidates demonstrated knowledge and understanding of main social groups which are stereotyped and discriminated by the media, by referring to the sexism, racism and elitism conveyed by mainstream media, with some also making reference to media imperialism, feminist and Marxist theory and audience studies. Notwithstanding, a good number of candidates failed to sustain their arguments by referring to sociological theory and provided a more generic response on how the media impacts negatively on certain social groups.

Question 2: What is 'white-collar' crime, and how is it treated differently by the criminal justice system?

Question 2 was the second most popular question, chosen by around 25% of candidates. Most of the candidates who attempted this question did relatively well with 46% fairing in the high, 50% in the medium and only 4% falling within the lower range bracket.

The question entailed explanation of the concept of 'white-collar' crime as well as a discussion of how it is treated differently from other forms of crime, by the criminal justice system. While most candidates adequately responded to the first part of the question by providing a good description as well as presenting examples of white-collar crime, (ex: fraud, tax evasion, money laundering and embezzlement), a good number did not manage to successfully address the second part of the requirement with some even commenting that such crimes are treated less leniently than street crime by the criminal justice system. It is positively noted however, that a number of essays referred to Sutherland's seminal work on the issue as well as to neo-Marxist analysis, including New Criminology and Left Realism.

Question 3: Discuss some of the most important issues addressed in the sociology of the environment.

Question 3 was attempted by 18% of the candidates. Most of the candidates who attempted this question also did relatively well with 59% fairing in the high, 39% in the medium range and only 3% falling within the lower range bracket.

The majority of essays adequately referred to important environmental issues such as global warming, pollution, urbanisation and other environmental problems arising from unsustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns; however fewer essays specifically referred to the social impact of environmental problems by referring to such concepts as environmental justice. In a number of cases, essays presented a general discussion of environmental issues, without making any specific reference to the sociology of the environment or notions of environmental politics. However, on a positive note, a number of essays also adequately referred to sociological theory by referring to relevant frameworks, such as ecological modernization, social constructivism and critical realism.

Question 4: In what ways are the concept of race and ethnicity different?

Question 4 was the least attempted question, chosen by just 14% of the candidates. Most of those who attempted this question also did relatively well with 54% fairing in the high, 37% in the medium and 9% falling within the lower range bracket.

The large majority of candidates demonstrated understanding of the defining characteristics of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' as well as adequately referred to the major differences and social implications arising from such constructs. The majority of candidates also demonstrated an element of critical analysis by referring to examples of racism, racialisation and discrimination on the basis of race and ethnic origin. A good number of essays also demonstrated that candidates endorsed an ideological stance on the issue and were highly critical of racism and xenophobia.

Chairperson
Examiners' Panel 2018