

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATION

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

ENGLISH

MAY 2017

EXAMINERS' REPORT

**MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD**

**IM ENGLISH
MAY 2017 SESSION
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

The table below outlines the candidates' results for Intermediate English.

Table 1: Grades obtained by the candidates

GRADE	A	B	C	D	E	F	Abs	Total
Number of candidates	55	138	228	159	116	118	29	843
% of Total	6.5	16.4	27	18.9	13.8	14	3.4	100

Generally, the results for 2017 follow a similar trend to previous years. However, there was a noticeable difference in the number of candidates as it decreased by 254 when compared to 2016. This dip in numbers did not affect the overall performance, and similar to last year, all examiners highlighted that the superficiality in approach across all sections remained one of two major weaknesses in the candidates' work. The other problematic area that resurfaced is poor coherence which is often characterised by lack of logic in candidates' writings.

Oral Paper

Overall, candidates performed relatively well in this component. The range of reading passages and topics were handled quite well by candidates. Nevertheless, similar to the observations made by examiners in the written performance, oral examiners commented on how candidates seem to find it challenging to organise their thoughts about the topic of their choice in preparation for the 'Long Turn'. They are often incoherent in the way they discuss the topic.

Written Paper**SECTION A – LANGUAGE****Language Essay**

The candidates' strengths and weakness in the essay writing component may possibly be grouped into ideas concerning content, language use and format/structure. Needless to say, the efforts of the better candidates evidence a quality of content, command of language and writing skills that are consonant with the level expected in this examination. On the other hand, the weaker efforts tend to disappoint in one, more than one or all of these. It is, for example, encouraging to find narratives written in a short time and under examination conditions that are a pleasure to read and one cannot but commend candidates who produce texts that convey a sense of maturity in what is supposedly a resignation email. In contrast, some candidates still seem to believe that unbridled sensationalism, exaggeration and overloaded content are necessary to enhance the quality of a text. Such shortcomings have less or nothing to do with language proficiency and seem more linked to believing one can get away with naivety. A number of candidates demonstrate limited shortcomings in language use. Their choice of vocabulary, spelling, syntax and expression match the level of English language proficiency expected in this examination. Unfortunately, too many candidates have language problems – some not very serious, others much more serious - which problems undermine their efforts in this component. It is disheartening to come across texts where most of the sentences are defective for one reason or another. Text format/organisation remains the biggest challenge for candidates. In texts that permit a degree of creativity in organisation (such as narrative and descriptive titles), too many candidates fail to use this to their advantage. Often, particularly in the narrative, candidates abuse rather than use intelligently the organisational freedom a particular text permits. In texts where format tends to be fixed (the report), and theoretically, candidates need only satisfy the expected format, one still comes across efforts that completely ignore convention. The efforts of a number of candidates suggest they have understood how to write a proper introduction (approach, focus and signposting) and how to structure paragraphs (topic sentence, support and closure). Most candidates, however, still seem adamant in presenting their ideas in an erratic and incoherent manner. Conclusions are usually weak in most essays.

- a. Most of the candidates who attempted this title interpreted it correctly by focusing on the metaphoric meaning. Rather disappointingly, however, the majority of these narratives were just acceptable with stories being about teenagers who manage to survive bullying or some inferiority complex and teenagers who, against all odds, gain international success in the world of sports or fashion. Too many seemed intent on writing 'ugly duckling stories' about teenagers who reunite after a number of years and the former outshines the others. One feels that many candidates still believe sensationalism is necessary to write a good narrative. A number of candidates wrote good narratives. The stories were interesting, content was balanced, organisation was good and language use was valid. Some candidates stuck to the literal meaning of breaking down walls. Stories about breaking down a wall to enter a haunted house or to save somebody were disappointing. A few wrote about the breaking down of the Berlin Wall. This had potential whenever it was taken beyond just the physical destruction of the structure.
- b. Too many efforts were disappointing because most candidates failed to describe the evening and resorted to narrating what usually happens on a good summer's evening. The majority of the efforts were about beach barbecues with family and friends. The weaker efforts were predominantly narrative texts with limited description. Again, too many candidates seemed to believe that just underlining such barbecues as big family meetings with an abundance of food and drink and requiring a lot of preparation was enough to achieve the task. Some candidates were better. They still wrote about a barbecue with friends or family but were clearly more concerned with describing the fire, the warmth, the smells and tastes, the breeze, the sky and the special connection between the members of the group. The best efforts tended to lack an underlying narrative but presented a dominant impression with good choice of language and proper handling of text organisation.
- c. The essays on this title could possibly be divided into two distinct groups. The better efforts tended to be written by candidates who also declared a serious interest in music. Their answers showed a

better overall command of content, better control of the range of points that could possibly be handled in the essay, were enhanced with reference to theory and a general sense of being in touch with what they were writing. These answers were often pitched correctly in more than one way. On the other hand, some candidates seemed to struggle to organise their thoughts properly, their efforts lacked development of ideas and they produced texts that felt erratic. The weaker efforts were essentially limited to the singular idea that every culture has music and that while not everyone can understand another language besides one's mother tongue, everyone can enjoy music, which ideas were repeated through different examples rather than developed.

- d. Not surprisingly, most candidates opted for the situation, problem and solution type of discursive essay. This was a valid decision. The majority of essays tended to evidence a limited notion of intolerance and respect focusing nearly exclusively on overt manifestations of bullying and/or racial and/or religious discrimination. These efforts were also limited in the solution/evaluation part of the essay with rather simplistic 'quick fix' solutions such as punishing the perpetrator. The better efforts suggested a finer understanding of the notion of tolerance and respect. Besides the more obvious examples of bullying and discrimination, they also suggested how intolerance and disrespect may be subtle and pass unnoticed. Some spoke of how the school and/or the classroom environment may, for example, in spite of equal opportunity claims, promote a culture that favours the intellectually and socially elite learner consequently reinforcing and replicating the culture outside the classroom. Often, these candidates recognised the difficulty of 'quick fix' measures in addressing this kind of intolerance and disrespect by underlining the complexity of the solution.
- e. Most of the candidates interpreted the title in a literal sense writing about the problem of world hunger and suggesting some solutions to the problem. Some of the candidates who opted to interpret the title in this way drew on knowledge learnt in other subjects making use of some technical jargon. When this was kept in check, it worked to improve the effort; however, in some cases, candidates 'abused' this knowledge from other subjects by including too many unnecessary details derailing their effort with irrelevant information. A number of candidates wrote about both the literal and metaphorical meaning of 'hunger'. These efforts often followed the convention of an opinion or for and against essay structure. Many had well organised paragraphs that included a topic sentence followed by support. Most paragraphs lacked a closing sentence but, overall, the body of the essay was acceptably organised. Introductions and conclusions still leave much to be desired. A number of candidates interpreted the title as a narrative, mostly written in the first person. Some of the stories which were extremely graphic, referred to one's hunger for revenge or success. Vocabulary and language use were considered adequate.
- f. Of the text types included in the Intermediate programme of study, report writing is unequivocally the most structured, definite and easy-to-follow format. It is difficult to imagine those preparing for this examination not being aware of this and yet, a good number of candidates still fail to include sub-headings or the preamble typical of report writing. In contrast, many candidates profit from the definite format of report writing and not having to struggle with text organisation seems to contribute to their producing well-structured focused paragraphs. In most cases, register is too informal for a report. In this particular task, content was generally valid with the mention of the 'usual' activities such as car washes, sponsored walks and past nights. Only a couple of candidates thought of mentioning organising a cultural event as a fund-raising activity.
- g. Very few candidates chose this title but most of the ones that did, wrote good essays. The best answers were a pleasure to read mainly because they 'felt authentic'. These texts had some common characteristics. The candidates showed an understanding of how committees and organisations work, a mature idea concerning the possible/realistic issues that may lead to a resignation, an ability to pitch what one needs to say (directly in places and through hedging in others), the proper use of register and an intelligent sequencing of the reasons for resigning. The disappointing efforts tended to lack most of these characteristics.

Comprehension

In general, the candidates demonstrated good comprehension skills grasping the main idea and most of the detail in the text and were able, on the whole, to cope with summary writing. It was encouraging to see that candidates fared well in the inference questions. In contrast, they tended to struggle in the questions testing understanding of specific vocabulary items and expressions. There was also a number of well written summaries, where the candidates identified the relevant content and were able to synthesise it in a clear and coherent manner. Poor expression and responses that remained somewhat general without being specific to the context were observed in both comprehension and summary.

- a. This question tested the candidates' understanding of six vocabulary items in the text. Most of the candidates had no particular problem explaining the words 'prioritised' and 'gratefulness' but did not do equally well in the other items. Often their efforts were too general or actually wrong. This was true of the words 'immerse', 'remote' and 'subtle'. Most of the candidates were unable to give the meaning of 'affluent' even though a close reading of the text should have helped them make a calculated guess.
- b. The question depended on an understanding of the expression 'rite of passage'. Too many candidates confused the word 'rite' with the homophone 'right' and proceeded to give reasons as to why young people have a right to travel. Very few candidates explained that this was part of growing up.
- c. Most of the candidates managed to do well in this question. They clearly understood how travelling to poorer countries enriched the author. Ideas in this response were conveyed clearly.
- d. This question required candidates to distinguish between what is essential and superfluous in any travel experience. Again, most of the answers were correct underlining the importance of human interaction and simple experiences over luxury and scenery.
- e. Many candidates answered this question correctly. They were able to define the notion of the American Dream in terms of prosperity and success. It seems that a number of candidates did not need the text to learn what the notion means and, at times, this background knowledge worked against them particularly if they included information outside and beyond the text in their answer.
- f. The candidates' performance in the summary was adequate. Most included the key points in their effort and their ideas were expressed coherently. Some candidates still need to understand that lifting directly from the original text, not presenting the summary in a single paragraph and the inclusion of examples are not desired, and thus, penalised in a summary exercise.

SECTION B – LITERATURE

This section remains one of the more challenging ones for candidates. It is evident that most candidates sit for the exam with good knowledge of texts and plenty of preparation yet when it comes to applying such knowledge, some tend to struggle. Some write 'good' essays which are, however, vaguely relevant to the question being discussed, showing a weakness in processing and selecting specific knowledge to use for a particular discussion.

When planning their work, candidates are encouraged to have a clear idea of what the aim of each paragraph is, ideally providing a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph outlining what is to be discussed. Such planning will help candidates to stay away from unnecessary narration and paraphrasing. Moreover, the introductory paragraph of the essay should distinctly present the main arguments or standpoint of the essay, rather than providing an introduction which has little to do with the rest of the discussion. Conclusions seem to be an even greater challenge than introductions.

The essays on *Purple Hibiscus* were generally strong and demonstrated a good understanding of the text. *The Heart of the Matter* was not chosen by many candidates compared to previous years, but those who

opted for it still struggled with discussing the main aspects of the titles (whether it was conceptual or character-oriented). Handling of thematic issues was not indicative of a deeper understanding of the novel when compared to evidence from answers on *Purple Hibiscus*.

Graham Greene – *The Heart of the Matter*

- a. A good number of candidates opted for this question. The best answers were the ones that explored various aspects of the idea of corruption in the novel. Generally, the body in their essays included acceptably organised paragraphs that clearly focused on some aspect of corruption. Unfortunately, this was not the case with most candidates who limited their response to a very basic 'discussion' to how Scobie becomes corrupt. Even in these efforts the text was, too often, not argumentative but merely a list of episodes related to Scobie. Few candidates discussed corruption against the background of Greenland or moved from the more concrete to the abstract idea of corruption in the novel.
- b. This question was attempted by very few candidates. In general, they were weak attempts only mentioning some facts about Wilson and focusing mostly on Wilson's attraction to Louise. Most did not bother to address the question properly by maintaining a discussion on Wilson's determination to destroy Scobie. The responses tended to feel like random references to incidents concerning Wilson rather than coherent texts.
- c. This was the least chosen question of the three on *The Heart of the Matter*. Candidates were generally able to contextualise the passage, accurately stating what precedes the given episode yet perhaps giving less importance to what follows it. Most candidates discussed characters in relation to the passage, providing relevant analysis yet, once again, a good number of candidates dwelled mostly on Scobie, writing narrative paragraphs on what Scobie does next. Fewer candidates chose to speak about themes such as corruption, inevitability, responsibility, and loyalty present in the passage.

Chimamanda Ngozi – *Purple Hibiscus*

- a. Candidates who chose this question performed well overall. Most of them successfully addressed both the microcosm and macrocosm, and there were a number of detailed analytical essays of very good quality. Responses in this case demonstrated a sound understanding of the text and the amount of varied quotations attested to the fact that candidates were able to engage adequately with the text and adapt their response accordingly. For instance, candidates mentioned a number of characters who struggled and fought for freedom, such as Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice (microcosm), Ifeoma (against the tyranny of the system that suppresses her), Eugene and Ade Coker (through their newspaper), and the people fighting for freedom against the tyrannical rule of the dictator. A number of ambitious responses included reference to Nwakiti Ogechi and the political coups that are mentioned by Eugene. On the other hand, however, there were a number of candidates who fell short of the expected response because they did not include any reference to or discussion of the macrocosm but merely focused on Kambili and Jaja's freedom from their father. In this case, candidates often narrated plot points that focused on Eugene's violent behaviour towards his children, without drawing upon Eugene's position in the community.
- b. The candidates who opted for this question performed even better than those opting for the other essay question on the novel. The main reason is that the other essay expected an understanding and reference to both the macrocosm and microcosm which some candidates did not explore equally well. In this question, there was no such challenge and candidates evidenced a very good understanding of how the religious experience, background and beliefs of the characters colours their behaviour in the novel. Content was relevant and detailed. The better answers clearly included references to incidents in the novel as support to an argument. Candidates who earned good marks engaged in a comparison of the characters and their behaviours rather than just a character description of Eugene and Ifeoma separately, in a stiff chronological fashion. Most of the

aspects candidates were expected to mention, such as the contrast between Ifeoma's liberal mentality and Eugene's fanatical approach to religion featured in the better answers. Some candidates managed to sustain a sense of comparison and contrast throughout their essay showing good writing skills.

- c. Candidates who chose the passage-based question did not perform as well as those attempting the essay questions. Again, lack of engagement with the passage and its significance was the major weakness in the efforts. Too often, candidates lap into narrative so their response to the episode in the passage is tangential. There were some valid attempts to discuss Ade Coker and his arrest but this then sometimes led to more narration. Another shortcoming in some responses was the lack of adequate organisation. Whereas a number of them attempted to latch on to the passage from the beginning, the rest of the essay often ran into difficulty when episodes were narrated without a coherent link or purpose. This does not mean that candidates did not show an awareness or knowledge of the text; on the contrary, at times it came across that they wanted to show how much they know, but this worked against them because they did not connect ideas to what was expected of them, appropriately and according to the rubric.

Robert Bolt – *A Man for All Seasons*

- a. The title was generally well discussed, focusing not only on More but on other characters as well. Having said this, most of the answers were rather 'mechanistically' concerned with separate characters as if these were detached from their 'political' role in the play. Indeed, most of the paragraphs in the body of the essays focusing on different characters could easily be shifted around without any effect to the overall organisation of the essays. Few candidates (of the very few who chose this text) actually wrote about characters in relation to each other or mentioned the power of the King or the Catholic church of England at the time and how manipulation was used by institutions.
- b. Most candidates studying More opted for this question and most managed to contextualise the character well in relation to his own self and his relationship with others. Weaker essays discussed various characters and outlined the differences between More and these characters, and thus not addressing the question given fully.
- c. Very few candidates chose the gobbet question and their knowledge of the text was questionable because they were unable to contextualise the passage properly and the points mentioned were rather unrelated.

Ian McEwan – *Atonement*

- a. Candidates who chose this question mainly focused on Briony and her handling of the narrative frame. The main shortcoming here was the lack of depth in tackling the theme of manipulation. Instead, responses were rather superficial and dependent on narrative retelling, often following a chronological approach. Candidates focused too heavily on Part 1 and alluded to or attempted to discuss Part 3 (though not in-depth as Part 1). Some candidates did mention other characters involved in the manipulation, such as Lola, and a few promising responses indicated knowledge and awareness of Briony's attempt to atone via her manipulation of the narrative, by changing Cecilia and Robbie's fate in creating a different world for them. What was lacking here, however, were references to other parts of the novel to substantiate the idea of an alternate reality where Cecilia and Robbie could be together.
- b. Most of the responses to the question focused on the different roles that Cecilia plays in the novel and how she is portrayed. Once again adopting a rather chronological approach, candidates started by describing how Cecilia seems to replace her mother Emily as a caregiver and a maternal figure to Briony. Candidates then attempted to discuss Cecilia's importance to Robbie who was first imprisoned and then enlisted in the war. The most common comparison that was

drawn was that between Cecilia telling Briony to 'come back' when she had nightmares, and writing to Robbie to 'come back' to her from the war. Some ambitious responses included a reference to Cecilia's decision to forsake her family and go against social conventions, not only by standing by Robbie, but also by forging a modest, humble and independent life as a nurse. There were a few responses that also hinted at or referred to the idea that Briony felt she could not be equal to or respected by her sister for what she had done. Cecilia's role in Briony's atonement (or attempt to atone), however, was not handled in a detailed way. Yet, it can be pointed out that when comparing 2a and 2b, it seemed that candidates performed better in the latter question.

- c. Fewer candidates attempted this question when compared to the gobbet question of *Purple Hibiscus*. Candidates showed knowledge and awareness of the passage (and the section of the novel from which it was extracted), and attempted to discuss the characters of Briony, Lola and Marshall, and Robbie and Cecilia. Once again, however, the main issue here was narrative retelling of certain episodes that often resembled a plot synopsis instead of a discussion of thematic concerns such as guilt, atonement, imagination, and manipulation. There were candidates who pointed out aspects such as Briony's deteriorating health, the shocking revelation of Robbie and Cecilia's deaths, and Lola and Paul's lie. However, their responses and discussion were not comprehensive or detailed enough. Instead of discussing how McEwan's authorship distorted the fine line between reality and the imagination, candidates were often concerned with narrating what the characters did or did not do (or say). Whilst these attempts indicated knowledge of the text and characterisation, there was something missing from the analytical perspective.

Chairperson
Examination Panel 2017