

Candidates' Performance

Principles of Question Design

The Liberal Studies Curriculum forms the basis of the public examination. As a result, the characteristics of the public examination mirror those of the curriculum. As stated in the Curriculum and Assessment Guide, "the curriculum aims at integrating, applying, consolidating and broadening the foundational knowledge of every student through studying a range of contemporary issues in different contexts." (Section 2.1) By the same token, the public examination of Liberal Studies is designed in accordance with the principles of being issue-driven and assessing candidates' thinking skills, such as, their abilities to "analyse issues, solve problems, make sound judgments and conclusions and provide suggestions using multiple perspectives", as well as to apply "relevant knowledge and concepts related to contemporary issues" (Section 5.3 of the Curriculum and Assessment Guide).

Contemporary issues are authentic and complex by nature which inevitably embrace different parts of the modules of the curriculum. The questions in the public examination should therefore be designed by means of a cross-modular approach where the concepts extensively connecting different modules of the curriculum could be employed in formulating responses. It should be emphasised that in the Liberal Studies public examination, module content, concepts, knowledge and thinking skills have never been bounded by any structural-type framework. Instead, they should be genuinely and dynamically interwoven in a matrix, reflecting the nature of contemporary issues.

In Paper 1, data about social issues in multitudinous forms (such as tables of figures, graphs, cartoons, texts and so on) provide contexts for further analysis in response to the questions. In Paper 2, candidates are required to draw on more extensive range of knowledge and concepts with the help of stimulus materials to discuss the issues in depth.

The public examination is designed to assess candidates' thinking skills and their abilities in applying the concepts that they have learnt in the curriculum. The assessment objectives related to the written examination are broadly reflected in its various papers and question items. Candidates need to apply relevant knowledge and concepts in order to make judgements about issues. However, the examination does not aim at assessing factual knowledge. Candidates' ability to transfer the skills and concepts from their learning experiences to the task of analysing a variety of social issues effectively is significant to the fulfillment of the assessment requirements of the public examination.

Paper 1

Question Number	Performance in General
1	Satisfactory
2	Fair
3	Weak

Question 1 This question is about the causes of obesity and the controversy of whether obesity is a global health problem. It assesses candidates' skills in interpreting different forms of data, using the information provided to explain and to make judgements. Candidates may make use of concepts related to public health, globalization, personal growth, quality of life and the relationship between socio-economic development and health in formulating their answers.

- (a) Candidates were expected to interpret the cartoon and explain the causes of obesity in relation to lifestyles and eating habits.

Most candidates were able to identify and explain the causes of obesity by extracting relevant information from Source A. More able candidates demonstrated their skills in conceptualising and explaining clearly the causes of obesity with reference to the cartoon. On the other hand, some weaker candidates were unable to elaborate on the causes, indicating their inadequate knowledge of the issue. Some of them suggested irrelevant causes such as pollution, or put the wrong focus on the relationship of globalization and the popularity of junk food, rather than elaborating on how the habit of eating junk food or fast food could lead to obesity.

- (b) In this part of the question, candidates had to explain and justify the extent to which the sources support the view that obesity is becoming a global health problem.

Only some stronger candidates were able to examine the usefulness of both sets of data as supporting evidence for the tendency of the problem of obesity to become global. Quite a large proportion of candidates failed to make full use of both sources. Some candidates showed a weaker ability in analysing the quantitative data in Source B regarding perspectives for and against the claim. Also, they had difficulties in interpreting the cartoon. Many of them just made use of the right-hand side of the cartoon and explained the causes of obesity, neglecting the holistic message underlying the cartoon which is an analogy between the obesity problem and global environmental problems, thus missing the gist of the question. Some candidates also misinterpreted the question as “to what extent do you agree with this view”. As a result, instead of examining how the sources supported the given view, candidates explained whether they agreed with it or not.

Question 2

This question requires candidates to discuss the controversy related to actions harming or benefiting the interests of society, the exercising of Legislative Councillors’ rights and socio-political participation, in the light of the incident of filibustering by some Councillors. Candidates may make use of various concepts learned in the curriculum, such as socio-political participation, quality of life, rights and responsibilities, and the political structure of Hong Kong in formulating their answers.

- (a) Candidates were required to analyse the sources and explain the message of the cartoon. However, some candidates did not interpret the cartoon properly. They failed to point out the negative attitude of the Hong Kong government towards opposing views as illustrated in the cartoon. Some other candidates did not make good use of Source A (the domination of pro-establishment camp Legislators in the Legislative Council) to explain the government’s attitude.
- (b) In this part of the question, candidates were expected to make use of the sources and explain why some Legislative Councillors might adopt the filibustering strategy. Most candidates were able to identify the unequal status of the two political camps in terms of the political power in controlling the political agenda in the Legislative Council. Stronger candidates were able to fully utilise the information from all the sources to explain why some Legislative Councillors adopted the filibustering strategy, demonstrating good data responding skills.

- (c) This sub-question asks candidates to explain and justify whether they think that filibustering in the Hong Kong Legislative Council harms the interests of the Hong Kong citizens. The candidates generally extracted relevant information from Sources C and D to justify their views. Nevertheless, not many candidates sharply focused their discussion on the dilemma between the need to maintain checks and balances and the need to maintain effective governance from the public interest perspective, reflecting their weak ability in applying concepts related to the issue, such as minority rights, checks and balances, the political structure of Hong Kong especially the formation of the Legislative Council, the legislation process and the electoral methods.

Question 3

This question is centred around the issue of division of labour by gender in families in Hong Kong. In the discussion, candidates may apply concepts such as traditional concepts of the family, modern life in Hong Kong society, gender stereotyping, the impact of globalization, and the relationship between division of labour by gender in families and quality of life.

- (a) Candidates have to analyse the source and explain two social factors mentioned in the source, which could lead to changes in the division of labour by gender in Hong Kong families.

Some candidates simply described the social changes rather than conceptualising the social factors to account for the changes in the division of labour by gender in Hong Kong families, such as higher social mobility for women as a result of the rise in the service industry employing women. Some weaker candidates only copied the information from the sources and described briefly the reasons for the changes in gender roles in the particular family presented in the source.

- (b) This part of the question requires candidates to identify and elaborate on the values reflected through how the roles of men and women are perceived in the source. Candidates were expected to conceptualise the values underlying the views and behaviors presented in the source. For example, some people in the source value gender equality while others think that freedom of choice is essential.

However, candidates in general had difficulties in grasping the concept of “value”. Quite a number of them only attempted to elaborate on a few viewpoints by describing the traditional roles of men and women or the reasons supporting Mr Wong in the source to be a “house husband”, instead of delineating the values, which is the crux of the question.

Paper 2

Question Number	Popularity %	Performance in General
1	33.8	Weak
2	21.2	Fair
3	45.0	Fair

Question 1 This is a question about the controversy of the consultation on waste reduction measures and their effectiveness, which may be discussed with the application of concepts such as quality of life, social participation and social consensus.

- (a) This question requires candidates to explain the difficulties that the Hong Kong government has in achieving a broad consensus among citizens through consultation on the municipal waste charging scheme. Candidates have to identify the value positions of various stakeholders in society and analyse the conflicts that may arise, which impede the achievement of broad consensus.

Some candidates did not focus their discussion on the difficulties in achieving a broad consensus through consultation. They did not make reference to the context of the question and generalise the difficulties. The application of relevant concepts was also inadequate. Some of them put a wrong focus on the effectiveness of the municipal waste charging scheme. More able candidates demonstrated their understanding of the constraints of solid waste management, the various standpoints and attitudes of stakeholders towards solid waste management in Hong Kong. They were also able to explain the difficulties that the government might encounter when devising socially acceptable plans, taking into consideration how the government could strive for social consensus on controversial social issues. Nevertheless, there was still room for improvement in terms of the elaborations and arguments with reference to the issue of municipal solid waste.

- (b) In response to this question, candidates have to justify whether they think that providing economic incentives is the most effective way in comparison with other approaches to solid waste reduction in Hong Kong, such as mandatory reduction and advertising.

Some candidates showed conceptual misunderstanding. They mistook landfilling and incineration, which are treatments to the existing waste, as waste reduction measures. As a result of the misinterpretation of the question, they focused wrongly on the ways to treat waste which has been generated, and scored lower marks. Besides, candidates had difficulties in tackling the question about “the most effective method”. Many candidates were aware of the requirement of comparing different ways to reduce waste. However, they just explained the pros and cons of each way, instead of comparing them with reference to some criteria or a common platform. As a result, most of the comparisons were partial and superficial. Stronger candidates demonstrated understanding of some feasible ways to reduce municipal solid waste. Besides, they were able to explain why providing economic incentives will/will not be “the most effective way” compared to other means.

Question 2

The contention in the question is about the relationship between national identity and Hong Kong people’s participation in some major events concerning the nation. Candidates are required to apply their knowledge of Hong Kong people’s understanding of national identity, the significance of participation in these events under “One Country, Two Systems”, the building-up of identity, influences in their daily life on identity building, and the multiple levels of cultural identities in Hong Kong, the nation and the world.

- (a) Candidates are required to analyse and explain the factors motivating Hong Kong people to participate in some major events concerning the nation.

Some candidates misinterpreted the question. They merely expressed their personal feelings by quoting cases related to Hong Kong, such as “Retroceding Sheung Shui Station”, “double-not babies”, “milk powder restriction” or individual cases of rude manners of mainland travelers on the MTR, to explain why the behaviours of the mainlanders would arouse the emotions of Hong Kong people and trigger them to take part in some Hong Kong-related cases. Due to their misinterpretation of the questions, these candidates were awarded low marks.

Some bright candidates, however, were able to clearly illustrate the factors motivating Hong Kong people to participate in some major events concerning the nation by giving relevant examples such as Shanghai World Expo, the Olympics in Beijing, and the launch of the Shenzhou rocket. These candidates gained comparatively higher marks because they were able to provide a justifiable and comprehensive explanation of how and why Hong Kong people took part in these events by applying concepts like patriotism, and strengthening of national identity or pride.

- (b) Candidates are expected to justify the extent to which they agree with the statement that Hong Kong people’s participation in major events concerning the nation will enhance their national identity.

Some candidates failed to focus on why participating in major events concerning the nation will or will not enhance national identity. They only explained in general the meaning of these events and the reasons for Hong Kong people to take part in these events. These candidates failed to meet the requirements of the question and hence gained low marks. Some bright candidates explained the significance of Hong Kong people’s participation in these major events concerning the nation and how their views towards national identity and the building-up of national identity could be affected. Candidates in general demonstrated an understanding of the building-up of national identity and were able to justify the impacts of their national identity in their daily lives. Some candidates were aware of the multiple levels of cultural identities that Hong Kong people acquired locally, in the nation and the world, and hence were able to explain the relationship between multiple cultural identities and national identity.

Question 3 This question focuses on the controversy of sustainable development in face of the fast-paced economic development on the mainland. Candidates may make use of concepts and knowledge such as the relationship between the opening-up of China and environmental protection, the direction of national development, measures that fulfill the principles of sustainable development, quality of life, and the relationship between socio-economic development and environmental protection.

- (a) Candidates are asked to analyse and explain the various ways in which sustainable development may help to improve people's quality of life in China.

Some candidates just regurgitated the definition of sustainable development without applying it in the discussion of how the quality of life in China could be improved. Most candidates were able to explain briefly some possible improvements in the social, economic and environmental aspects, for instance, better air quality and more job opportunities. However, they failed to realise that the question requires them to explain how improvement in the quality of life in China could be brought about by measures based on the principles of sustainable development. The answers of most candidates were too general, lacking specific examples and showing inadequate knowledge of the situation in China.

- (b) To answer this question, candidates have to justify whether they agree that economic development should take priority over environmental protection. They are expected to compare and weigh the relative importance of economic development and environmental protection in China with regard to its current development.

Some weaker candidates merely provided separate lists of the pros and cons of economic development and environmental protection and concluded that the one with more points of arguments was better. They just adopted a standard framework of answer by "analysing the question type" without responding to the actual requirements of the question and so the scores they gained were low. Not many candidates were able to justify their argument comprehensively and critically by weighing the relative importance of economic development and environmental protection with reference to a common platform or a clear set of criteria, for instance, urgency, reversibility, the actual benefits and seriousness of the problems in China.

General Comments

Candidates should make better use of the data in the sources in Paper 1. Many data, which were useful to justify and substantiate arguments, were not fully utilised or well integrated in the answers. Candidates should also try to interpret the messages conveyed by all the sources in the question, which might facilitate the formulation of appropriate responses to the questions from various perspectives. The performance of candidates this year shows their weakness in interpreting cartoons, reflecting a need to further strengthen their skills in analysing the content and underlying messages of cartoons.

The extended response questions in Paper 2 require candidates to apply higher order thinking skills and related concepts and knowledge in response to the questions. However, some candidates attempted to regurgitate definitions of concepts, instead of interpreting the requirements of the questions and analysing the issues comprehensively. Some candidates just adopted a stereotyped answering framework in responding to all types of questions, without any attempt to think from multiple perspectives, which is the key element of Liberal Studies. This subject emphasises multiple perspective thinking and the consideration of arguments from different stakeholders. As a result, candidates are advised to analyse issues comprehensively and in depth, and explain clearly how their conclusions are drawn and how their standpoints are justified.

Candidates should also try to strengthen their conceptual knowledge of different topics and modules. Higher scores are awarded to candidates who demonstrate their ability to apply relevant concepts to analyse and evaluate the core problems in the questions.

With respect to the teaching strategies of Liberal Studies, teachers may employ controversial issues, which often require students to make meaningful connections across various modules, to help them understand related concepts and the application of them, instead of responding to questions by regurgitating facts. Besides, when discussing controversial issues in class, teachers may help students to build up their skills in understanding question requirements. Responding to the question words or certain phrases of the question, or regurgitating the definitions of concepts or some parts of their notes are undesirable approaches, which will not be awarded high marks. In the class discussions of cross-modular issues, teachers may encourage students to analyse from various perspectives/contexts/positions of different stakeholders, rather than relying on stereotyped answering frameworks as suggested by some books on the market.

To conclude, in accordance with the assessment objectives specified in the Curriculum and Assessment Guide, higher marks are not awarded to any specific answering approaches to the questions in the Liberal Studies examinations. To adopt an appropriate answering approach, candidates should first clearly identify the question requirements, and then provide a focussed answer with relevant concepts and knowledge, by considering and analysing the issues from various perspectives/contexts/positions of different stakeholders, and making informed judgements. Memorisation of extensive facts is not necessary.

The spirit of Liberal Studies is to stimulate and inspire students to develop a mature and analytical mind, as well as enrich their knowledge. Though candidates have shown a certain degree of awareness of the issues and concerns in different areas, to further improve on their performance in this subject, candidates are encouraged to sharpen their intellectual faculty and broaden their knowledge base.

Independent Enquiry Study

A total of 509 schools participated in the Independent Enquiry Study (IES) this year. The Process mark of IES was not moderated and the moderation data of the Task mark shows that 56.8% of schools fell into the 'within the expected range' category, 20.4% of schools giving marks higher than expected, and 22.8% of schools giving marks lower than expected. Compared with last year, more schools were in the 'within the expected range' category and teachers generally had acquired a better understanding of the marking standard of IES.

To further familiarise teachers with the requirements of IES, we continued to hold teacher seminars this year. At the seminars, we analysed students' various levels of performance, explained the marking standards and made suggestions for further improvement, using authentic samples of Product from the 2012 examination. District Coordinators also held group meetings with School Coordinators to share their experience in the progress made with regard to IES, as well as their understanding of the IES assessment. In addition, annotated exemplars of Product from the 2012 examination and samples showing students' performance at different levels were uploaded to the HKEAA website (<http://hkeaa.edu.hk/en/sba>) for teachers' and students' reference.

In response to schools' demand, we implemented a transitional streamlining arrangement for IES assessment in 2013 by reducing the number of assessment stages of IES from three to two, integrating the Data Collection and Product Stages while maintaining the Project Proposal Stage. For this reason, the number of mark submissions was reduced from six to four. Teachers indicated that the streamlining measure had helped to resolve difficulties in differentiating the presentation and analysis of data and to reduce teachers' and students' workload.

Every IES assessment stage comprises two assessment items: Process and Task. The following offers specific comments on students' Process performance and their Task performance of Product Stage:

Performance of Process

As in last year, HKEAA-appointed District Coordinators provided feedback on the Process assessment activity documents for each stage submitted by schools. Some schools developed school-based assessment activities that effectively facilitated students' completion of their Tasks, such as using mind-maps and group discussions for formulating the enquiry question. Improvement was also evident in that there were fewer cases this year than in the last of an over-emphasis on using drafts of Tasks for the Process assessment by schools.

Task Performance of Product Stage

With respect to deployment of tools for data collection, some students adopted data collection methods that were irrelevant to their enquiry question. They either relied too much on using questionnaire surveys as their tool of data collection, or wrongly believed that all enquiries require first-hand data collection. This shows that some students did not fully master the strengths and limitations of various data collection tools. As a result, these students failed to collect important and useful data and the quality of their enquiry was undermined. Students have to fully understand that the aim for using different data collection methods is to enhance the effectiveness of their enquiry.

With regard to data analysis, some weaker students used statistical charts as the only tool to present their findings, and they failed to analyse them. The stronger students were able to consolidate the findings from different sources of data for an integrated analysis. In their analysis, students need to address the demand and focus of the enquiry question, instead of merely presenting data without demonstrating their relationship with the enquiry question.

One of the prerequisites for students to do well is that the perspectives of their analyses should pertain to the enquiry question. However, the studies that some students undertook were too broad in scope and without a clear focus, and thus the enquiry tended to be superficial. Only a small number of stronger students were able to effectively utilise facts and viewpoints collected from various sources, analyse the enquiry issue from different perspectives, deliberate and discuss it thoroughly, and subsequently arrive at the enquiry findings.

With regard to the formulation of opinions, viewpoints and arguments, the stronger students were able to establish and justify their stances with convincing arguments. However, quite a lot of students were unable to make good use of the data in their analyses, and present findings based on the data collected. Also, many students failed to properly acknowledge the sources of their ideas or arguments, nor did they fully utilise footnotes, endnotes, annexes, etc. for further explanations and acknowledgement of data sources. As a result, their arguments appeared arbitrary and their work might even risk being regarded as plagiarised. Students should be aware that they will be subject to severe penalties for plagiarism in IES. The HKDSE Examination Regulations stipulate that a candidate may be liable to disqualification from part or the whole of the examination, or suffer a mark or grade penalty for breaching the regulations. In the 2013 examination, the IES Product of a candidate was identified as plagiarised work and eventually a penalty of zero marks for the SBA component was imposed.

Teachers should guide students on how to use and acknowledge secondary source materials properly. Students could gain a better understanding of how to cite and acknowledge works they used in the correct format by referring to the examples in the booklet "HKDSE Information on School-based Assessment", which is also available on the HKEAA website (<http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/sba/>).

In presenting the framework of their enquiry process and outcome, stronger students were able to establish their enquiry framework and fully display their enquiry process. They presented the topic, including the focus questions, within the framework and concisely illustrated their enquiry methods, data collection tools, etc. The weaker students, however, could only provide a rough enquiry plan without relevant data collection methods, analyses and illustrations of their enquiry process and results.

In terms of reflection, the majority of students failed to demonstrate insightful reflections on their enquiries. Only a small number of stronger students were able to point out the limitations and errors of their enquiries by reflecting on the process and findings, exploring how much they understood their topics and methods of enquiry, as well as discussing their approaches in future enquiries on the basis of their understanding.

Performance of Products in Non-written Forms

As in last year, there were only a very few Products in non-written forms. Most of them were PowerPoint presentations which were mainly text-based. Some non-written form Products, made up merely of video clips of students' PowerPoint presentations in class, did not fully display students' originality and enquiry ability by taking advantage of the features of non-written form Products. Students should effectively present their enquiry findings through different methods, such as videos, narration, etc.

Conclusion

In general, students' performance was satisfactory. Most students could fulfill the basic requirements of the IES. The stronger students were able to conduct an in-depth study of the topic, with a clear and sharp focus as well as data relevant to its objectives. They were also able to display a high degree of enquiry ability by analysing the findings from different perspectives. On the other hand, weaker students tended to collect data with inappropriate methods, and the enquiry findings they reported were irrelevant to the data they collected. Such students failed to fully master the requirements of IES. Students should bear in mind that relevance of the expected findings to the enquiry question should be the prime factor for consideration when choosing the appropriate data collection method(s). They should not place undue reliance on questionnaire surveys as the only approach, which might result in irrelevant data collection and unfocussed discussion. In addition, the enquiry findings of their report should come from data analysis, and the logical relationships between analysis and findings deserved their critical attention. They should also note that it is the quality of their enquiry rather than the length of their report that is taken into consideration during marking. Most of the stronger students were able to complete their work and fully present their enquiry findings within the suggested word range.