

Business Studies

Advanced GCE A2 H430

Advanced Subsidiary GCE AS H030

OCR Report to Centres

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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Overview

It is hoped that centres find the enclosed Principal Examiner reports to be of use, in conjunction with the increasingly detailed mark schemes which are published, initially on the OCR Interchange website. A lot of time and effort is put into the writing of these reports, with every single member of each examining team having the opportunity to contribute. I know that many centres do use these reports as part of their teaching, especially when it comes to sessions with candidates on examination technique. It is this issue which I would like to raise first as it is a common theme in many of the individual unit reports.

There are a number of comments throughout the following reports where the cause of many poor responses was weak examination technique. Examples of this include: not following the rubric in the answer booklets (on unit F291 where some candidates ignored the headings provided in the answer spaces); attempting to give an evaluative answer when one is not required by the key word of the question (on unit F291 and on the A2 optional units); failing to make use of the quantitative data provided (on units F292, F294 and F297); not reading the question carefully enough (giving advantages instead of disadvantages, providing one reason instead of two or vice versa, ignoring the phrase 'other than' and not focusing an answer on the specific functional area, such as on unit F296).

A second common theme within the reports is the positive evidence of increased attempts by the candidates to give an evaluative answer (where relevant). However, in too many cases this was just a repetition of earlier points. Evaluation is much more than just a summary of what has come before. It requires judgments to be made and for these judgments to then be justified. For example, many candidate responses attempted to state which particular factor was the most important or the most likely to work or to be relevant. However, for this to be evaluative, there needs to be a reasoned and logical support of why it is the best, most appropriate or most likely to work.

Third, there is still a significant issue with many candidates producing wholly or partly generic answers. This is frustrating for examiners as, in many cases, the candidate appeared to know a large amount of business theory but did not appreciate the need to answer in the context of the case study. In a suite of examinations, where the vast majority of questions are case related, this will always hamper the number of marks which can be awarded for any particular answer. Finally, it is pleasing to note that most candidates managed their time well in the examinations, with no significant evidence of them running out of time. In fact, it continues to amaze the examining teams as to just how much some candidates are able to write under the circumstances.

F291 An Introduction to Business

General Comments

While it is accepted that with a case study of around 300 words very strongly contextualised responses cannot always be written, many answers were essentially a generic list of points which could well have applied to almost any of the businesses which have ever appeared on this paper. Such answers are not 'wrong' but rarely get out of Level 2 of the mark scheme because of the lack of analysis and context. This was particularly an issue on Questions 2(b), 2(c) and 5. Candidates do need to give some thought as to the context of the business in the case and the information they have been given about it.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 Any of the usual examples of differences such as ownership, control, raising finance, and likely objectives could have been mentioned.

As ever with this type of question many candidates answered as if it had asked for private company and public company differences. This was not a question designed to 'trick' candidates but to see if there was an understanding of these two different sectors of the economy. An understanding of the 'traditional' differences is important given that many 'public sector services' are now delivered by the private sector, e.g. refuse collection and (some) health care; the distinction between the two sectors can get blurred. This is an example of the sort of 'real world' knowledge which candidates studying business should have and it needs to be built on the clear understanding of the 'textbook' differences.

There was a problem for some candidates with examination technique on this question. Whilst a simple brief comment was sufficient for 'an outline', many candidates did not offer it. The differences needed to be outlined not merely implied; an answer which stated 'The private sector aims to make a profit and the public sector does not' was only worth one mark because the difference (presumably 'the public sector aims to provide a service') was not explicit.

Also, the difference being exemplified had to be shown within one 'difference'. Thus a candidate answering as follows would only score two marks.

Difference 1: 'The government owns public sector organisations' (1 mark)

Difference 2: 'Private sector firms have to raise finance themselves (1 mark) and are owned by private individuals'.

The two outlined differences asked for had not been produced in this response. This disregard of the requirement of the question was also an issue on Question 2(b).

- 2 (a) It is encouraging to note that a very sound knowledge and understanding of the two methods of training was, on the whole, demonstrated. There was very little confusion between the two.

However, as on Question 1, examination technique was often poor on this part of the question. The question asked for two differences. The paper accordingly had two spaces clearly labelled 'Difference 1' and 'Difference 2' to emphasise this. This did not mean 'Difference 1' was for a comment about on the job training and 'Difference 2' was for the corresponding comment about off the job training. Those candidates who approached their answer like this did not score well because they had not answered the question which had been set. This rubric issue is something that some centres clearly need to address.

- (b)** An understanding of the nature of internal recruitment was clearly shown, with the overwhelming majority of the candidates at least able to access Level 2 of the mark scheme. The key to gaining the highest marks was to make an analytical reference to the benefits of this type of recruitment to Mars. It was certainly valid to state that internal recruitment is likely to be cheaper than external recruitment since less money would have to be spent on advertising the position and the selection process; but this, in itself, is not analysis. Those who pointed out that money spent on recruitment has an opportunity cost (although the term did not have to be used) and that any money saved could be spent elsewhere in the firm on, say, further expansion for Mars or product development scored achieved level 3.

Some candidates stated 'It means there is no need to advertise or interview'. This is not correct. At least some advertising would be necessary and it is hardly credible that an employee would not be interviewed for an internal post; any business not doing so opens itself up to claims of discrimination by those who did not get the job.

The question asked for the benefits to Mars, yet a sizable proportion of the candidates wasted time and effort by explaining the disadvantages of internal recruitment. As has been stated in previous reports, it is essential that candidates take the time to carefully read the question. It does pay to have a sound understanding of examination technique; this was not a level 4 'discuss' or 'evaluate' question. Examiners do not negatively mark but there was no additional credit available for 'the other side of the coin'. Those who did answer the actual question set, tended to score well. This part of the question proved to be a good discriminator.

- (c)** There was a wide range of marks on this part of the question due, in part, to the fact that many candidates did not attempt to address the issue of what criteria may be used to judge Mars' success, e.g. sales (value or volume), expanding market share, revenue, or profit. Although not essential this was an obvious route into the highest levels of the mark scheme.

Quite a large number of responses never got beyond Level 2 of the mark scheme because all that was produced was a glorified list of possible factors. It is encouraging that most candidates did know about the huge range of factors affecting the operation of a business, but this needed to be analysed and put into the context of the question.

To gain marks for analysis, examiners were looking for a clear reference as to how the factor would affect the success of Mars, positively or negatively. Evaluation could have been achieved by a weighting of the factors or/and a consideration of factors in the short term and long term. For example, better candidates made the argument that Mars could be adversely affected by recession as its products might be considered luxury non-essentials; however, as most are impulse purchases requiring a small cash outlay the impact would be negligible in both the short and long run. Whether one agrees with this statement or not, this was good use of the context and a sensible evaluative comment.

- 3** This was not a topic which has been frequently examined on this paper but candidates were able to tackle it confidently. The use of a loan or retained profit were the most popular choices. Although Mars is family run private company candidates nevertheless did receive credit for mentioning the possibility of Mars having issued more shares.

As this was a question asking for analysis, some implication for Mars of the chosen source was required to access Level 3. Candidates who clearly selected a source of finance and offered a reason as to why it would be appropriate scored well. It was not enough to gain Level 3 to simply state something like 'Of course if they take out a loan they will have to pay interest'. Alternatively, a comment that "if Mars already has a large loan it may be hard to get another one as the bank may think Mars' cash flow won't be good enough to repay it" would have been acceptable.

It needs to be mentioned that just as there has been a confusion between ‘cost’ and price’ before on F291, answers to this question frequently showed a confusion between ‘borrowing’ and ‘lending’. It was not correct to state ‘Mars could of lent money from the bank as a loan’ or ‘They may lend it from the bank in the form of a mortgage’. The correct business terminology is important.

Sources such as an overdraft, hire purchase, or leasing, were only acceptable if it was made clear that these were to be used to buy (some of the) factory equipment and/or fixtures as opposed to the building itself. These are short term sources of finance not at all likely to be used for very large capital purchases. Although, as a six mark ‘analyse’ question, candidates were not expected to compare or contrast different sources of finance many candidates actually made this very point.

- 4 (a) This was a question which has been asked before and most candidates were able to gain both marks from identifying the usual ways of judging size, e.g. capital employed, profit, turnover, number of employees etc. Responses such as ‘growth’ or ‘market share’ were not acceptable.
- (b) This was the first time that a question on diseconomies of scale has been asked and it proved to be a good discriminator, even though it had a very low mark allocation.

As the stem of the question made reference to Mars becoming ‘too large’ no credit was available for comments such as ‘these happen when a company gets too big’. There was also no credit for a comment along the lines of ‘this is where costs rise as output rises’; this should be self-evident to a candidate even on the introductory AS level module. Those candidates who stated that it meant a rise in unit/average costs as output expands (‘as the firm grows’ was also acceptable) gained both marks.

Those candidates who made no reference to unit costs but knew that increasing output might cause the firm a problem were still able to obtain a mark as long as the problem (e.g. with communication, coordination, motivation, etc) was clearly identified.

- 5 The concept of stakeholding is well understood by the candidates and their teachers and so there is no necessity in this report to consider all of Mars’ stakeholders and their needs but, as stated above, there was often an issue with context on this question. Although examiners understand that with a short case study very strongly contextual answers cannot always be written, many answers here were too generic. Candidates do need to give some thought as to the firm in the case and not just produce textbook knowledge of every stakeholder they can think of. For example, Mars is a company and so it was curious to see a reference to Mars’ shareholders and then a couple of paragraphs later one on ‘Mars owners’.

Two examples of an appropriate way to answer should suffice.

Firstly, the customers of Mars are obviously a key stakeholder. Clearly candidates had been, rightly, taught that growth usually equates with a business owning more factories, offices and/or outlets. This meant that there were often comments such as ‘Customers would benefit from Mars having more shops to buy the chocolate from’ or ‘They can open more shops that are local and convenient for people’. Candidates presenting such comments simply did not stop to think that Mars does not actually own the shops its products are distributed through.

Better answers to this question focused on whether Mars might benefit customers by lowering prices due to economies of scale - and many candidates pointed out that this would be beneficial in a recession - and/or whether Mars might raise its prices due to diseconomies of scale which would not benefit consumers - again, especially in a recession. These sorts of comments, particularly when the likely extent of the price change was mentioned, scored well.

The local community as a stakeholder was another popular choice. Answers centering around 'creating more jobs and giving sponsorship' were valid but the better answers pointed out that the 'local community' which benefited from new factories might be in another country (such as in the example of the Czech Republic) and so this particular UK stakeholder may not benefit at all from the growth.

Others made reference to external costs from Mars' factories affecting the community which, again, was valid, but some answers treated Mars almost as if it were a coal fired power station with no controls or limits on its emissions. There were sometimes comments about 'huge levels of pollution affecting everyone' with 'smoke and fumes everywhere'. More considered answers were along the lines that there might be congestion around a new factory at particular times of the day affecting local residents, or the destruction of the natural habitat on which the factory was built. Some candidates weighed up whether this loss of habitat would be offset by the gain in jobs and the subsequent local multiplier effect; in essence a cost benefit analysis. Such answers were well rewarded.

It needs to be stressed to candidates that a little time spent on considering the context of the business is important with this type of question.

It is pleasing to report that more answers are becoming evaluative. There was some evidence that the candidates had learned to give both sides of an argument and could come to judgment about an issue albeit, sometimes, a simplistic one. This evaluation could have been achieved by justifying which stakeholder(s) gain the most - and why. Contrasting short term costs and benefits with those in the long run was also a route into Level 4.

It was very rare to see this question not answered quite fully and so it was apparent that there was little, if any, time pressure on this paper.

F292 Business Functions

General Comments

Performance on this examination compared to the same session last year was a little better, with plenty of evidence that many candidates had prepared the pre-issued material, about a small confectionary business, thoroughly. In fact, there is growing evidence that centres are maybe over-emphasising during the preparation time on Section B, to the detriment of performance on Section A.

There was virtually no evidence of any time pressures amongst candidates and all questions were considered to be accessible.

Section A: This section continues to be a very good discriminator, with performance having a significant impact on the final grade awarded to the candidate. Overall scores were slightly better than last year. A common mistake was for the candidates to be too vague in their answers or to produce examples which are not specific enough to that term. There is a definite lack of revision of key business terms.

Section B: Many candidates engaged well with the nature of the case study and most showed evidence of evaluation by concluding with a judgement about the most appropriate course of action for TSL. Some responses continued to be purely generic, even though there was a vast range of evidence to draw on within the case study. Candidates must appreciate that a contextual answer is not one where the name of the firm is simply inserted, nor is evaluation the summarising of earlier key points. Many responses could be placed in Level 3 but to achieve at the top of this level, and then to advance to Level 4, a real attempt is needed to weave the case and the data into the answer, to link concepts, to explain consequences and to then show a reasoned argument.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) The most common correct answers were rent and utility bills. Many answers were too vague: loans, rather than loan repayments; machines rather than maintenance/depreciation; wages without amplification. There was also a common misconception that any fixed cost must also be an overhead. Most candidates correctly identified at least one overhead.
- (b) This part of the question was generally well done, with most candidates achieving one or two marks. Wrong answers arose from candidates confusing the term with above-the-line promotion or promotion in the workplace. Some candidates seemed to think that using the word 'local' made any form of advertising below-the-line.
- (c) This part of the question required a correct definition of the term 'labour turnover' and it proved to be a very good discriminator. Most candidates had a rough idea of the term but could not fully articulate it. Too often there was either no sense of proportionality, or no mention of a time period. A rarer mistake was to confuse labour turnover with sales turnover per worker.
- (d) (i) Less than half of all candidates gained full marks on this break-even calculation. It would be advisable for candidates to give the formula for a numerical question before attempting it; this would gain at least one mark and then give a foundation to work towards the correct answer. A number of candidates confused profit with break-even, i.e. calculating £75 and then not proceeding to work out the break-even point from there.

- (ii) The term 'margin of safety' was once again not understood by most candidates. One in five candidates did not even attempt this part of the question. Many candidates who correctly calculated the break-even level were then unable to calculate the margin of safety. Wrong answers also included calculations as a money value rather than output. The own figure rule was employed so that candidates could use their wrong answer for break-even to calculate their 'correct' answer for margin of safety.
 - (e) This part of the question was well answered. Candidates described an autocratic leadership style where employees have little input into the running of the business. This could then be linked to the demotivation of staff or poor decision-making as a result of fewer suggestions. Weaker responses were repetitive and so did not distinguish well enough between their two ideas. A common error was for the candidates to equate an autocratic leader with a 'nasty' or 'strict' personality. This is an incorrect generalisation to make and so was unrewarded. Other answers which could gain no reward were where the question was misread so that advantages of an autocratic style were given.
 - (f) This was another part of the question which differentiated very well. Better answers recognised the increased start up costs, the repetitive nature of the work involved or the inter-dependency of the process, going on to give either a reason for these or an implication for a business. Answers which gained less reward, if any, were once again those which were less focused on the specific characteristics of flow production. For example, issues of stock control can apply to any form of production and flow production does not automatically lead to poor quality. Another common misconception was that a firm using flow production could only make one style of product at a time.
- 2
- (a)
 - (i) This part of the question was well answered. The main reason for not gaining the mark was a lack of precision, with answers of 'during the fourth year' or 'within four years' being too vague.
 - (ii) A good number of candidates correctly answered this part of the question. Some candidates correctly calculated the annual return but then stopped, or divided by 90,000 rather than 60,000. Some forgot to divide the return by five years.
 - (b) This was the best answered of the extended questions and candidates were able to effectively engage with the case material. Better answers were ones where the candidates had clearly and contextually analysed the results of the investment appraisals by judging them against the targets set by Hamza. These answers then went on to consider at least one other factor (as the question required). For example, the staff at TSL are already demotivated, so a new flow production line might exacerbate this problem. Additionally, answers related the discussion to how the investment might help achieve the firm's objectives or might help/hinder other issues facing the business.

The very best answers then achieved a Level 4 mark by making a sensible and justified judgment about whether TSL should go ahead with the proposal or not. Centres are reminded that when a question asks for a decision to be made then one is necessary for a Level 4 mark to be awarded.

Weaker answers were characterised by focusing too much on the investment appraisal (in extreme cases, considering the advantages and disadvantages of using investment appraisal methods in a generic sense) or completely ignoring the investment appraisal data. Centres are reminded that Question 2(b) is designed to follow on from Question 2(a) and is, therefore, likely to require both a quantitative and qualitative component to the answer.

Other answers which gained little reward were those which offered alternative proposals or wrote at length about how the new production line could be financed or suggested additional costs which would have already been incorporated into the net cash inflow data given in the question.

- 3 This was the least well answered question. Although this was a topic flagged up very clearly in the case there was evidence of a lack of preparation by candidates of the quality section of the specification.

Better answers, of which there were few, suggested using initiatives such as quality circles, benchmarking or ISO in order to improve quality at TSL, as well as helping to deal with the issues of demotivation demonstrated by the performance indicators in Table 3. Evaluation was achieved by judging which method was the most appropriate or useful to a business of TSL's nature, although this was rarely attempted.

Weaker answers lacked real contextual analysis, focusing instead on different proposals, such as quality control, quality assurance or TQM, but with little evidence of the implications for TSL's business. There was a generally poor understanding of quality initiatives and many of these answers sounded more relevant to a company such as Toyota or BMW than a relatively small sweet manufacturer. Repetition was common and no judgement or justification attempted.

- 4 It is becoming very repetitive but it is also very true to state that once again the 'marketing question' proved to be very challenging. The most successful approach to this question, about the use of market segmentation, was to show how the marketing mix could change to attract the youth market (for example, more attractive modern packaging and placement at point of sale displays for impulse purchases). Evaluation could then come from recognising the limitations of market segmentation, such as the issue of market separation when charging the same price for small tins for the youth market and for larger traditional tins for the older market, or from the difficulties of improving the youth segment and at the same time maintaining the current older segment. Another route into a Level 4 mark was by considering the importance of using segmentation in order to achieve TSL's long term objectives – without segmenting and targeting the youth market it was unlikely that these objectives could be achieved.

Answers which gained less reward tended to use the case to describe how TSL segment its market without answering the question about how this knowledge might then help TSL to improve its marketing and sales. Many answers also became distracted about the issue of TSL's limited market research without showing how this was relevant. Too many answers also focused on the past (how TSL segments its market) rather than the future (what should TSL do).

There were also a number of answers, which gained zero or very little reward, where candidates diverged from the question to write about the problems of niche marketing or whether TSL should or should not go ahead with the idea to sell more products to the youth segment.

- 5 This question was answered well, with candidates displaying a good understanding of non-financial motivational techniques and using Appendix 2 and Table 3 to contextualise their analysis in order to access a Level 3 mark. They could then justify which method was most suitable for TSL in order to achieve Level 4. Most aspects of making sweets are routine in nature and largely repetitive and this must have an impact on such ideas as job enrichment or empowerment. On the other hand, job rotation or job enlargement would be more appropriate and may help with other issues facing TSL, such as absenteeism. The very best answers referred to the past culture of the business – traditional and resistant to change – which might make it very difficult to introduce appropriate motivational techniques.

Instead of discussing the practical application of motivation to TSL, many candidates wrote long answers describing the experiments and ideas behind Mayo, Herzberg, Maslow, et al. This sort of answer gained less reward, usually staying in Level 1 or Level 2. The specification very clearly distinguishes between motivational theory and motivation in practice and this question was very much about the latter.

A source of confusion was the difference between job enlargement, job enrichment, job empowerment and job rotation. Candidates need to be clear that job rotation is part of job enlargement which is where the worker does a greater variety of tasks at the same level of difficulty, that job enrichment is increasing the complexity or responsibility of tasks and job empowerment is delegating the authority to make decisions.

Some answers spent a disproportionate amount of time in explaining why the workers were demotivated without ever getting around to (or only briefly) answering the question. There was also the occasional discussion of financial methods (pay and bonuses) that could not be rewarded.

Summary

- No evidence of timing problems, with answers of an appropriate length.
- A better grasp of key business terms found in the specification is required to enable candidates to score more marks in Section A.
- Answers in Section A need to be more tightly focused on the concept in the question.
- Answers to Questions 3 and 4 showed evidence of answers that were almost completely generic or not focused on the question.
- Questions 1(d), 1(f), 3 and 4 were the least well answered and Questions 1(a), 1(e) and 2 were answered best.

F293 Marketing

General Comments

The June 2012 F293 Marketing paper has been once again a successful vehicle in providing an assessment opportunity for the candidates to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to a given context. The accessibility and format of the paper appeared to be on a par with the January level of interpretation and performance and the construction of the case study material, answer booklet and questions was interpreted appropriately by the majority of the candidate entry. The context of the June 2012 paper for marketing was one set in the furniture industry with a company seeking to develop and change, with decisions on potential direct selling distribution strategies and geographical diversification being high on the potential list of priorities. The context remains a key aspect of the skill assessment for candidates and how they can apply their knowledge and this has again been vital in the application of the mark scheme. This was particularly evident on Question 5 (see below).

In line with the common structure for the setting of this paper, the questions and mark allocations for the June 2012 series were consistent with previous series and centres should be confident that this will remain the case in the future. The expectation that candidates are able to demonstrate a range of skills appears to be suited to the current paper structure and the time pressures of the examination appear to be managed by candidates. Candidates remain able to demonstrate many or all of the skills but too often there is still an emphasis on demonstrating knowledge without applied context and this remains a reason for some candidates writing a great deal for what may seem to be limited reward.

The most common skills gap appearing in the preparation of candidates for this paper would appear to centre around the effectiveness of the evaluative comment which candidates are able to demonstrate, with many not achieving this level of skill on all of the questions where such marks were available. Candidates can be developed to make judgements on the points that they are writing within the context of the business and the market which they are studying. This can be identified within the text as the answer builds and also in the conclusion. All too often, neither of these approaches were used by candidates which effectively limited them to achieving a Level 3 on the mark scheme.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 This question required the candidate to calculate the changes in total contribution between two periods which, on the whole, many candidates found very straight forward. Some candidates misinterpreted the question with contribution per unit being their focus and unfortunately, others were not at all able to demonstrate the ability to complete this question. In terms of the marks scheme, its application was effective as many candidates scored full marks, although many failed to score at all. 'The own figure rule' was applied effectively to ensure that candidates were not over penalised for arithmetic errors.
- 2 This question required candidates to analyse two factors **other than costs** which the business should consider when setting prices. Many candidates found this very accessible to achieve the top marks; however, many of them misread the question and completed answers based on costs and their influence on the setting of prices – which failed to answer the question. Many candidates completed this question very well with the skill of analysis being appropriately demonstrated with the reasons for, and the consequential effects of factors being considered and articulated very well.

- 3 This question required the candidates to consider the implications of developing markets in Europe for the furniture products with an evaluative judgement on the points raised being the higher order skill required in order to achieve full marks in the mark scheme. Many candidates introduced very current issues occurring in Europe and the European economy in their answers to excellent effect and this was generally to the benefit of these candidates in terms of the strength of their answers. Many candidates demonstrated the ability to identify the salient points regarding the proposed developments in Europe, however, more often than not, they then failed to apply a relevant judgement as to the importance of the points being made. This could have been considered in terms of the criticalness of the points being made in relation to this development with some judgement on the scale of the venture, short term and long term implications or risk being common themes for the better candidates.
- 4 This question required the candidates to analyse the need to reduce the sampling error in market research in relation to the business in the case study which proved to be challenging for many candidates. It appears that this question focussed upon an element of the specification which, although not complex or great in terms of teaching requirement, proved difficult at times for candidates to explain. Theoretic understanding of sampling error and its implications were sometimes lacking, as was the ability to apply this to the situation described in the contextual material.
- 5 This was the question which proved most challenging in terms of accessibility on the whole of the F293 Marketing paper in this series. Candidates seemed firstly to have had some difficulty in identifying what they would like to see in a market research plan and few were able to apply this to the 'stem' of the question which focused on direct selling. Candidates all too often provided theoretical knowledge of the different types of market research available but very few were able to 'recommend and justify' a plan to doing this. The broad and generic responses to this question meant that in the implementation of the mark scheme, many candidates were held within Level 2 as 'no context was displayed'. This meant that many candidates, who had written comprehensively in their minds in terms of answer length, were receiving disproportionate marks due to the lack of context or higher order skills demonstrated.
- 6 This question was, on the whole, very well answered by the majority of candidates. Answers were generally written in the context of the case and the structure of the answers was particularly pleasing for the marking panel as clearly much work has been done with candidates in relation to the standard format of this style of question over a number of series and across the option papers. Candidates were generally able to consider the cause, effect and knock-on effects of various points from different perspectives with a focus on human resources, finance and operations, as well as marketing. The ability of the candidates to articulate any evaluative judgement on the points raised in their answers remains an issue and a challenge for teachers and candidates alike.

In summary, the June 2012 F293 Marketing paper has been considered to be effective as an assessment measure and provided the candidates with the opportunity to demonstrate the range of skills required by the mark scheme. The application of that mark scheme in a standardised and consistent way has been achieved with the understanding from the team of the demands on the candidates in terms of knowledge, application, analysis and evaluation. It is particularly pleasing to see the general development of candidate answers in response to Question 6 which carries the greatest mark tariff and has remained consistent in its question structure for some time. The learning point from this series onward should be that the development of candidate skills with regard to the structuring of their answers on the other evaluation questions is now needed in order to ensure that the candidates can achieve the highest outcomes for their efforts. Finally, candidates on this paper benefitted from applying current knowledge of up-to-date issues potentially affecting the business in the case study and this may be an additional element which candidates may consider as a part of their knowledge in the future. Marketing is, after all, the dynamic process of meeting the needs of an ever-changing set of potential customers by whatever means may be considered effective.

F294 Accounting

General Comments

The paper proved to be challenging to a good number of candidates and many of the responses showed a problematic level of knowledge in terms of the indicative content of the specification. It was disappointing to see that the general standard of responses was weaker than in the January series.

There is room for improvement and, in particular, candidates must resolve a general reluctance to use quantitative data to analyse and evaluate. This is, after all an accounting paper and it is an issue which will be explored in more detail where relevant.

Candidates must be more aware of reading each question and reacting to clear signposts about the use of tables and other quantitative data.

There was no evidence to suggest that the candidates struggled to complete the examination because of a shortage of time.

The mark scheme relating to this paper has a detailed breakdown of the key financial calculations and other materials which a candidate could have used in responses to the questions.

Comments on Individual Questions

To access the full marks for these two parts of the question, the candidates needed to provide the formula and correctly use the relevant data.

- 1 (a) For this question the candidates needed to state their answer as a percentage.
- (b) For this question the candidates needed to state their answer in pence or as a proportion of £1.

- 2 This question produced a wide range of responses.

The good answers demonstrated knowledge and understanding of earnings per share.

The best responses used their answer to Question 1(b) and compared it with the earnings per share for the previous year. Credit was awarded for recognising the importance of the 25% shareholding of a USA company. This information could have been used to calculate this company's total earnings for both years.

There was evidence of confusion between dividends and earnings per share.

- 3** Good responses used the resource materials to calculate a range of key accounting ratios which enabled the candidates to evaluate the variability terms of financial performance e.g. the very low but improving net profit margin, the worsening acid test ratio and higher gearing.

As with other questions relating to stakeholders, it was only necessary to apply the relevance of these ratios to a few of the key stakeholder groups, e.g. the USA major shareholder, the UK employees and the Chief Executive.

Better responses went on to identify the impact of the acquisition of AQT on LP's financial success.

- 4** This question required the candidates to have a good knowledge and understanding of standard costing.

Good responses illustrated the benefits of implementing a standard costing system by applying the candidates' knowledge and understanding in the context of the resource materials. The key information was included in Table 4, as directed by the wording of the question. A candidate who carried out a variance analysis of this table, either using percentages or absolute numbers, was demonstrating analytical skills.

The best responses went on to question the accuracy of the standard costs and the impact on costs of the questionable quality of raw materials.

- 5** This question required the candidates to have a good knowledge and understanding of accounting conventions.

Good responses used the resource materials to apply a convention to the purchase of AQT, e.g. to the valuation of fixed and current assets, depreciation methods or the provision for bad debts.

The best responses recognised that accounting practices in Ethiopia might be significantly different to those in the UK and so accounting conventions were very important.

- 6** Good responses to this question explored the accounting issues through an extensive review of the accounting ratios e.g. the analysis of AQT's current profitability ratios and a comparison with those achieved by LP.

The better responses explored the impact on these ratios if LP carried out its proposed cuts in direct labour and materials.

As the synoptic question, it was expected that candidates would also explore other issues relating to marketing, human resources and operations management.

In addition, the best responses also evaluated the impact of external influences, corporate social responsibility, attitude to business risk and objectives.

However, exploration of these issues was no substitute for a thorough analysis of the accounting issues.

Ultimately, a high mark was achievable whether a candidate's decision was to agree with LP's decision to purchase AQT or not.

Either point of view could have been supported by the resource materials. The important factor was that the candidate made a final recommendation based on a balanced analysis of the resource materials.

F295 People in Organisations

General Comments

As I have stated in previous reports, there were no obvious signs of any time issues, with candidates being able to write at length. However, yet again, for many candidates more time could and should have been spent reading the case in order to utilise this material and to consequently answer in context. The case study, again, offered candidates many opportunities to utilise the information within the case to help frame their responses ; many candidates did not take advantage of the case information and, consequently, could not gain access to the higher order marks.

The questions allowed the candidates to apply business theory and terminology in order to justify their views. It was disappointing to read instances when a significant minority of candidates do not do this, to their detriment. Quoting appropriate and accurate leadership and motivational theory is an obvious way to access higher marks. Those who did use theories in the context of the question were well rewarded.

It was pleasing to see that there were fewer instances of candidates answering the question which they had hoped would be asked, as opposed to the actual question.

The ability to offer evaluative comments through justified judgements remains an issue for too many candidates. Weighing the evidence and suggesting which point is of most significance to HHL were obvious routes into the higher order marks which were available.

Too many answers made reference to the same issues, irrespective of the question being asked. Candidates at A2 ought to be discerning in the selection of the material to used for any particular answer.

The quality of written English remains varied. As highlighted in previous reports, paragraphs can be used as an aid to break an answer down into distinct parts, thereby enhancing its readability. Such a technique may also help the candidates to organise their thoughts. However, the overall standard of spelling appears to have improved and it subsequently enhanced the readability of the responses . However, too many could not spell 'dividend', which is of some concern. The standard of presentation continues to be varied, with some, but fewer scripts testing the ability of the examiners in their deciphering skills.

Again, there was a small minority of the candidates who used additional sheets but who subsequently failed to state the number of the question which had been tackled. This omission ought to be eliminated.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) As stated in the previous report, a pleasing majority of the candidates gained full marks for this part of the question. It is also pleasing to report that a large majority of the answers were well presented with clear signs of the calculations undertaken. It remains a worthwhile approach to always state the formula used as a correct formulae can be rewarded if the actual figures are incorrect. There was a small minority of the candidates who were unable to add £315 and £78 correctly. I do think it is reasonable for an A2 candidate to realise that the answer is a value and not a quantity and subsequently a £ sign should be utilised.

- (b) Calculating percentages still remains a problem for some candidates. Showing the working remains essential. Most candidates managed to calculate the difference (£48,000); however, they then found some difficulty in using that figure to gain 17.58%.

Unless the question specifically asks the candidate to give their answer to a specific number of decimal places, it is advisable to leave the answer as it is in order to avoid errors when rounding. It is of interest that few candidates went on to use the answer to this part of the question in their answers for other questions.

- 2 This question was well answered by the majority of the candidates. The consequences of operating a piece rate system could have been positive or negative. However, too many answers lacked sufficient contextual reference to access the higher marks.

Just stating that the quality may suffer is not sufficient at A2. The candidates who went on to indicate the link between piece rate and quality and the subsequent consequences for HHL were duly rewarded. Many who clearly linked the desire to produce more T-shirts and the subsequent ability of HHL to, therefore, meet the growing demand for such T-shirts showed an alternative route to higher marks.

Some candidates were able to suggest that under a piece rate system it may be harder to predict the cashflow of HHL, as a result of the likely fluctuating performance of its employees. Good answers suggested that some of the employees of HHL may respond to being paid by performance (a financial inducement – Taylor); however, it may not be universal (Albert), and would, as a consequence, save HHL money (Table 1) but not necessarily act as a motivator.

Suggesting that such a method of payment may be time-consuming was a popular approach. However, too many candidates stopped at that point and consequently missed the opportunity to access further marks by suggesting that this time could have been better spent by Joe on planning a strategy to meet the rising demand for T-shirts.

- 3 The majority of the candidates knew what a contract of employment is, but did not offer sufficient context to reach Level 3. It ought to be obvious in the modern world that contracts can be drawn up quickly (standardised formats) and consequently changes to the contracts would not be a major issue, especially when HHL employ only 15 staff.

This was an obvious example where candidates ought to ensure that they have spent sufficient time reading the case in order to allow them to make sure that their answers are in context and thus be able to access the higher order marks.

It is also worth noting that the question asked for **one implication for HHL**. Offering more than one implication did not gain additional marks. Several answers offered implications for the employees without then suggesting how HHL would be affected and as a consequence could not access the higher order marks.

- 4 This question proved to be a good discriminator, as, once again answering the actual question became an issue for many of the candidates.

It is of interest that the majority of the candidates suggested that Georgina used a democratic style of leadership. This was, in part, true. However, certain changes had been introduced without recourse to any discussions with Joe, which may indicate an alternate style of leadership. Nevertheless, too many answers offered a range of leadership styles without any real direct reference to the actual question or the case. The question actually asked candidates to consider the consequences for HHL as a result of Georgina's style of leadership. Too many wrote about leadership styles in a generic form and, consequently, lost the opportunity to access the higher marks. Using the context remains a key factor in accessing Level 3 marks and beyond.

Several candidates suggested that hygiene factors might motivate, which is not what Herzberg suggested. Similarly, too many of them wrote along the lines of suggesting a democratic style of leadership would motivate the workers. There is a need to provide a sequential linked argument as to how this may or may not be the case in the context of the case.

The question did not ask what style of leadership Georgian should adopt. There were, however, some good answers which addressed the actual question, using the evidence within the case to support their particular viewpoint.

- 5 This was the most disappointing question in terms of good answers.

Sadly, the majority of the candidates wrote at length about theories, not all being accurate. Too many candidates went on to write that these theories would help HHL, without offering any reasons or development. For an A2 answer, there is a need to have an ability to accurately recall the various theorists and to then use this knowledge to offer an answer to the specific question within the context of HHL, given its present circumstances.

The better answers used the case to suggest that whatever theory is used, bonuses and perks, in the long run may be taken for granted and, therefore, cease to be of value in terms of motivating. Herzberg's motivator may turn into a hygiene factor and consequently frustrate rather than motivate.

Just stating that applying a theory would mean that HHL, because its employees would be motivated, was not sufficient to access marks for analysis and beyond.

The good candidates were able to suggest which particular theory of motivation would be the most likely to help HHL, with an appropriate justification and consequently gained access to the higher marks.

- 6 This question discriminated well, with candidates scoring a wide range of marks.

Candidates are showing a better understanding as to how this question may be answered. The majority of the candidates are now remembering to consider Human Resources Management and 'other issues', and finance appeared, on this occasion, to be the most popular.

Some of the candidates wrote at length suggesting that by giving the employees shares it would mean that Georgina and Joe might lose control of some of the business. Shareholders do not run the business on a day-to-day basis, although they may speak at the AGM. Other answers suggested that by giving shares to the employees would be motivated by being self-actualised. Sadly, they did not attempt to explain why this may be the case. Nevertheless, Joe and Georgina would still have well over 51% of the shares.

Too few of the candidates did attempt to discuss that it may depend on the type of shares offered, whether they would be given away or have to be bought and how they would be distributed. Again, a careful read of the question would have negated many of the generic and vague answers offered.

To suggest that giving shares to the employees would create a 'massive' amount of extra work for Joe, as he would have to rewrite the contracts, suggests that an insufficient grasp of the case was evident. With only 15 employees and with modern technology, rewriting contracts would probably not be a 'massive' task at all. Even if it was time consuming, the net benefit would probably be worth the extra time.

The very good answers discussed if there would be sufficient interest in such a scheme and that for many of the employees, an improved piece-rate would be better for all concerned. Some candidates did suggest that issuing shares might help to compensate those employees who 'lost' income as a result of the piece-rate system. Some good answers indicated that Georgina's proposal amounted to a company share options scheme where the distribution of shares is linked to service.

This is a synoptic question which allows the candidates to draw on their knowledge from any part of the specification. It was pleasing to see that some candidates did just that.

The good candidates answered the question in a strategic manner and considered the implications for HHL in the context of its products and its objectives.

F296 Business Production

General Comments

Candidates got to grips with the case study and there was no evidence of any time related issues. The context of biscuits was readily understood and it was obvious that candidates most had, all importantly, 'visualised' the production scenario and its various nuances. As ever, however, there were a significant number of candidates who failed to score evaluative marks because of little or no attempt at weighing up the specific issues. Analytical marks were much easier to achieve and some good Level 3 responses were noted. Indeed a number were so good that it is a shame that they had no evaluative technique as clearly these candidates had plenty to write about. Evaluation in context is essential. At the other extreme there were a number of candidates who clearly had little clue as to some of the concepts, particularly lean production, and simply talked about very general production principles.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 The most common error with this question was made by those candidates who gave a general answer rather than one strictly related to production (in which case no marks were awarded). The answer needed to refer to the impact on production – of which there was much scope – and be based on food safety legislation (of which the candidate did not need extensive knowledge). Few candidates scored Level 3 as their answers missed production impacts altogether or were vague as to the impact. A very common answer was one which related to sales/marketing (eg more checking meant better biscuits, thus more demand and more revenue). In essence, candidates must read the question more closely.
- 2 Those candidates who knew what lean production was tended to go through the various possibilities (JIT, TQM etc) and give some general advantages and disadvantages. The better answers were specific to the case study and picked up on how exactly they might work in the biscuit factory or how they would be difficult to implement. Alas, some candidates had little idea about lean production and wrote for three sides on (usually) flow production – scoring zero marks. The very best answers got into the idea of the complete culture shift necessary and how easy/hard this might be at BBL. Very few candidates managed to evaluate. Those who did focused on one or two methods which could be implemented, rather than the overall culture issue. Generally, the question was answered at a low Level 3 mark (analysis), but little more.
- 3 More candidates scored full marks than all other marks. The calculation was clearly straight forward enough to be accessible to most.
- 4 It was hoped that Question 3 would be an inspiration for responding to this question equipping, as it did, the candidate with a clear demonstration of two different approaches to costing and some (hopefully obvious) limitations. Indeed, the most written about contextual point was the allocation of overheads issue (the fact that they can be apportioned in hugely disproportionate ways) and a few candidates even quoted the calculation they had just done. Most, however, missed this totally and simply went through a well rehearsed succession of costing methods with scant use of the context. Hence, many scored top Level 2 marks with maybe a hint of 'badly apportioned cleaning costs' to push them a level higher. The approach of arguing that one method was easier to calculate than another was very limiting, apart from the few candidates who really got into the BBL case study and examined the likely experience, professionalism and time at the disposal of the Finance Manager. Again, evaluation marks were hard to come by as too many candidates did 'evaluate' but only very superficially and without applying it directly to BBL.

- 5** In much the same way as the responses to Question 1, too many candidates went for a marketing/finance based answer, rather than relating it directly to production. Some misunderstood the case study and thought that production would take place in the Research & Development facility (ie not grasping what R & D actually is) and gave a production based answer based on that assumption. There were some good answers which did point out that R & D might lead to different ingredients and easier production, impacts on stock control and the like.

- 6** Once again, there were some very good and very extensive answers to this question. Candidates got to grips with the pros and cons of a joint venture and found it easy to contextualise. Very few candidates talked about one functional area – many put together well balanced arguments looking at all Human Resources Management and finance aspects as well as some marketing. The very best answers adopted an evaluative approach all the way through and really examined why some reasons were much more important than others – not simply leaving it to a conclusion at the end. Candidates are, on the whole, getting better at this aspect, but still too many string together a series of analytical paragraphs with a (weak) conclusion (usually repetitive) tacked onto the end.

F297 Strategic Management

General Comments

There was sufficient evidence in candidates' answers to support the view that an estate agency was an 'accessible' context. However, that did not prevent some common errors and misconceptions, the main one being confusion between a revenue target and a profit target. Whilst marks were not deducted for errors, they do serve to undermine the line of argument being laid out by the candidate. Further, and has always been the case, the examiner can only mark what is on the page. Hence, it is vital that the candidate share their reasoning. For example, many candidates held that SLSL could easily gain access to loan capital. However, in the absence of any explanation such a view is unsupported and so does not attract many marks.

Very few candidates failed to offer a response, of some kind, to every question. Where there was no response was made it was typically to Question 1(a) or Question 1(b). There was no evidence of time pressures. Noticeable this session was a more appropriate allocation of time and effort across the questions such that there were few very brief answers or ones which were overly long.

One hazard of a pre-seen case study is the temptation to prepare for a question which is not actually asked. In this session a disappointingly large number of candidates attempted to 'bend' their answer to the question which they wanted rather than to the one which was actually set. This was especially evident in answers to Question 1(b) and Question 3. Candidates must be made aware of the need to carefully read the actual question, to spend a few moments planning their response and then writing fluidly in a way which synthesises case evidence and the subject's theory as set out in the specification.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) That a few of the durations within the network were different to that in the pre-seen material did not seem to bother the majority of the candidates. It has always been the case that small amounts of new, or changed, data may be introduced in the question paper. This position has existed for several sessions, both for this specification and its predecessors (such as 2880). The aim of offering new information is not to trap, rather it is to test the technique and not a candidate's ability to remember an answer by dint of rote learning.

The modal group, about 25% of the entry, scored maximum marks for correctly calculating the total float for the 11 activities and then identifying the critical path. The second largest group scored zero, often because, rather than calculate float, they offered the EST of each of the activities and then gave the project's duration instead of the critical path. When a candidate offered a critical path which was not that expected, but was consistent with the floats which they had calculated, the marks for the relevant part of the question were awarded.

It is always disappointing for an examiner when a candidate does not even attempt a question. Here, given that activities A, K and L have no parallel activities (and so must be critical) it is perplexing that a small minority of candidates did not think to offer 0 total float for each and so secure three marks.

- (b) The concept of efficiency lies at the heart of any business, and so a question on this fundamental aspect of the transformational process has been long overdue. Given that candidates had just been engaged with CPA in part (a) it was no surprise that the majority used this as their framework for their answer to this part of the question. However, efficiency need not be confined to a discussion of minimising project duration. Hence, an answer which engaged in ratio analysis to support ways of improving efficiency would have been readily rewardable. Similarly, some analysis of Table 4 would have also been a valid route to answering the question. As has been reported before, because the questions, with the exception of Question 1(a), are synoptic there is no single correct path to maximum marks. Instead, what determines the mark is the skill exhibited by the candidate in constructing their answer.

Typical routes to improving efficiency were staff training, motivation and benchmarking. Often candidates exhibited very good understanding of any/all of these three possibilities. However, unless there is explicit linkage to the context as such the answer is limited to Level 2 because it is generic. The best answers did what was required by offering a strategy. So, rather than identify ways of improving efficiency there was a clearly set out, reasoned, approach which would have been of value to SLSL's owners.

Very few candidates considered what efficiency might actually mean to an estate agency. Might efficiency be measured as sales per viewing? Perhaps it is revenue per employee. Or might efficiency be measured using the primary efficiency ratio, ROCE? Such an approach offered a route into Level 4 in that the steps for improvement depend on what is being sought. Similarly, an approach which seeks to gain a 5% improvement may well look rather different to one that has a 15% objective. Further, given there is no one definition of 'efficiency' in this context, it might well be a strategy which improves sales per branch but which may run counter to a strategy which seeks to improve gross profit margin. In setting out a strategy candidates would be well advised to think about the objective first, before suggesting possible steps.

- 2 An established feature of this unit is a question which links some external change to the strategic direction of the business. Whilst economists may well dwell on a retrospective analysis of the impact on a firm, students of business should be looking forward. Hence the thinking, and so writing, needs to be about what it is that the business should be doing order to response to the external change. So, less 'why' and more 'this means that'.

As in previous series the examining team read some really good discussions of the impact on the business of a rate rise. Many candidates showed a good understanding of interest rates and the impact such a rise might have on SLSL. The pity is that from this promising foundation fewer candidates were able to suggest that, as a result, SLSL might consider doing 'x' in order to continue to be a successful business.

The better answers gave a variety of possible strategic responses to this macro-economic external influence. Often interest rate rises were linked to a fall in the demand for house sales, and so SLSL should look for an alternative income stream. Here, letting management was an often seen as the favourite, and, in many instances, well-reasoned as to why this possibility was being suggested. An alternative was linking an increase in interest rates and expansion plans, often arguing that if rates rise so does the cost of borrowing, making any debt financed expansion less likely. Here, given that SLSL has relatively modest gearing is a possible route into evaluation.

It was exceptional for candidates to comment on the apparent lack of correlation between base rates and mortgage lending (Table 2). This data implied that, despite what the theory may suggest, mortgage lending and base rates are not closely linked. Such an observation, developed and reasoned, offered an alternative path to high marks. For example, it could have been argued that a rise in interest rates might have little impact on SLSL, so it need not deviate from its current strategic direction.

- 3 Answers to this question were generally the least well rewarded on each script. This was because, all too often, the candidates did not write about the management of change. Rather, they wanted to discuss the bonus scheme in operation and how it might be 'improved'. Similarly, despite the stem of the question making it clear that a decision had been taken, too many candidates wanted to discuss the wisdom of the change. Either type of answer was tangential to the question and set the examiner a real challenge in trying to find rewardable content. This, in some way, explains why the modal mark is in the middle of Level L2, and a long way below that seen on Question 1(b) and Question 2. The need to answer the question set cannot be over emphasised.

When an answer was focused on the question it was disappointing that there was so little substance beyond 'communicate' or 'hold a meeting'. The lack of subject support for any suggested action was telling.

The changes which Alistair is going to implement are both within his control, although one is internal and the other external. Further, neither is required by some external pressure. Hence, each of the changes needs its own management. So, with regard to the bonus scheme a first step might be to persuade Penelope of the benefits of the change before seeking to gain acceptance from the employees. Having gained her support, the possibility of holding staff consultative meetings becomes far more sensible.

- 4 It was of little surprise that this 'decision' question was well answered, with the better candidates showing clear strategic thinking in arriving at their view. For most of them this was the highest mark on the script, even allowing for the fact there are an additional five marks available. Good answers engaged analytically with the case evidence, most notably making effective use of Table 5. That resourcing, whether capital or manpower, was an issue in the minds of many of the candidates was encouraging. Again, sensible use of the case data can lead to a likely financial requirement. Also, pleasing was the use of subject theory to support the argument

There seemed to be a relatively even split between expand and don not expand. Those who stated 'expand' cited the revenue opportunities afforded by the move. Better answers calculated the number of houses which needed to be sold to reach the 4% revenue target, and then compared this with the possible market size. The 'do not expand' camp argued that whilst it was a good idea the time was not right. Instead, management needed to improve the performance of Stamton before embarking on an expansion which would, inevitably, absorb a lot of senior management time and attention. In either instance it was the skill demonstrated in the answer, rather than the outcome, which determined the mark awarded.

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