

Examiners' report

GCSE

COMBINED SCIENCE A (GATEWAY SCIENCE)

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
Combined Science A (Gateway Science)**

J250

For first teaching in 2016

J250/07 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 7 series overview

J250/07 is the first of two Higher tier papers that determine the Biology content of the GCSE (9-1)

Gateway Combined Science A course. It assesses content from specification topics B1 - B3 and B7. This paper is not synoptic and so does not contain any material covered by topics B4 - B6. There are also questions that involve the assessment of key mathematical requirements from Appendix 5f of the specification. The first question (Question 11) overlaps with the Foundation tier paper.

On the whole candidates seemed well prepared for the challenges of this Higher tier paper. Candidates are to be commended for attempting most questions. The omit rate was low for most questions.

It is particularly pleasing that to note that the following questions were answered well:

- Question 11b: the majority of candidates were able to correctly calculate a mean from the given data.
- Question 11cii: candidates were confident in using the graphical data to draw conclusions.
- Question 16a: candidates showed a good understanding of the nervous system and were able to identify correct statements about the function of the different parts.
- Question 16c: the level of response question saw the majority of candidates achieving Level 2 or above. Candidates showed good knowledge of the names of the hormones involved in fertility.
- Question 17b: the majority of candidates were able to use the data to work out the percentage change in mass.

In questions where an explanation is required, candidates should be encouraged to use the number of answer lines and the marks for the particular sub-part as a guide to the length of their responses. Candidates should also make sure that they use appropriate biology terms correctly in their responses.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• showed a solid understanding of endocrine control and could apply this to the procedure of IVF (Question 16) • showed an understanding of the limiting factors in photosynthesis and could relate this to the information displayed in a graph (Question 13 (a)) • showed a good understanding of enzyme activity and could explain how temperature affects this (Question 14 (a) and (b)) • showed an understanding of osmosis and could use this to explain change in mass (Question 17 (c)) • showed working steps in calculations (Questions 11 (b) and 17 (b))	• showed a seeming lack of knowledge of practical procedures (Question 11 (a) (iii), (a) (iv) and Question 13 (b)) • were unable to explain the effect of low temperatures on enzyme activity (Question 14 (b)) • showed a seeming lack of knowledge of the regulation of thyroxine levels in the body (Question 16 (b)) • were unable to expand their evaluation beyond the information given (Question 16 (c)) • struggled to convey their ideas scientifically (Question 13 (b))

Section A overview

Section A contains multiple-choice questions. This section of the paper is worth 10 marks and covers AO1 and AO2 content. Candidates performed particularly well this series on the multiple-choice section of this paper. Questions 1, 2, 5 and 6 were usually answered correctly. Question 7 proved to be quite a challenging question in this section, with only some candidates showing knowledge of factors affecting enzyme action.

Where candidates decide to change their answer, they should be encouraged to cross out their original answer. They should then write the correct answer next to the box, rather than try to write one letter on top of another.

Question 1

1 What is the main source of **testosterone** in the human body?

- A Adrenal glands
- B Pancreas
- C Pituitary gland
- D Testes

Your answer

☐

[1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select C.

Question 2

2 Which substance has a net outward movement from plants during the day?

- A Nitrates
- B Nitrogen
- C Oxygen
- D Urea

Your answer

☐

[1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select A or B.

Question 3

3 What is the definition of **resolution**?

- A How large an image is compared to the object.
- B The shortest distance apart that two objects can be and still be seen as separate objects.
- C The magnification of an eyepiece and an objective lens multiplied together.
- D The wavelength of light used to view an object.

Your answer

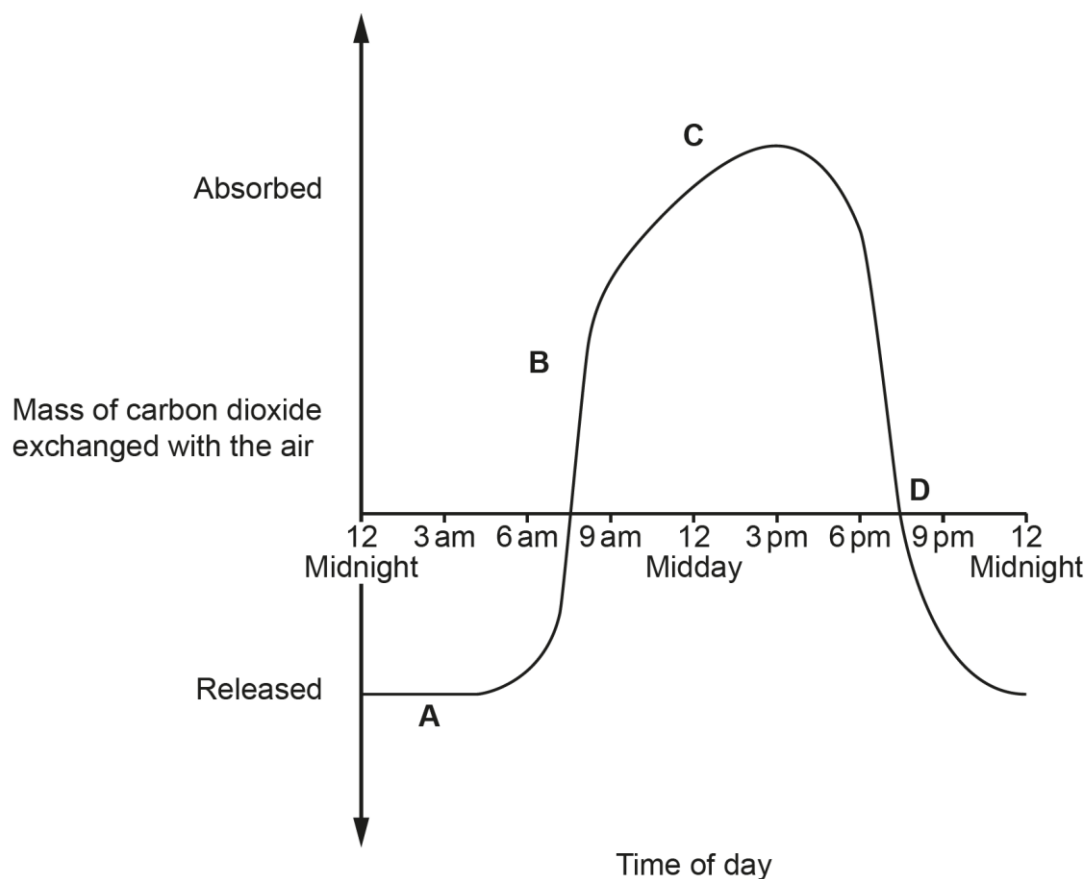
[1]

Over half of the candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select C.

Question 4

4 The graph shows the mass of carbon dioxide exchanged by a plant with the air during 24 hours.

Which letter shows when the plant is respiring but **not** photosynthesising?



Your answer

[1]

This question proved quite challenging with approximately half the candidates selecting the correct response. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select B or D.

Question 5

5 Which statement describes the structure of DNA?

- A A monomer made of one strand
- B A monomer made of two strands
- C A polymer made of one strand
- D A polymer made of two strands

Your answer

☐

[1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select A or B.

Question 6

6 Which process do cells go through when they specialise?

- A Differentiation
- B Meiosis
- C Mitosis
- D Osmosis

Your answer

☐

[1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select B or C.

Question 7

7 A scientist is investigating the action of amylase enzymes on the digestion of starch into maltose.

What would **increase** the rate of reaction?

- A Decreasing the enzyme concentration
- B Decreasing the pH to 2
- C Increasing the pH to 7
- D Increasing the temperature to 70 °C

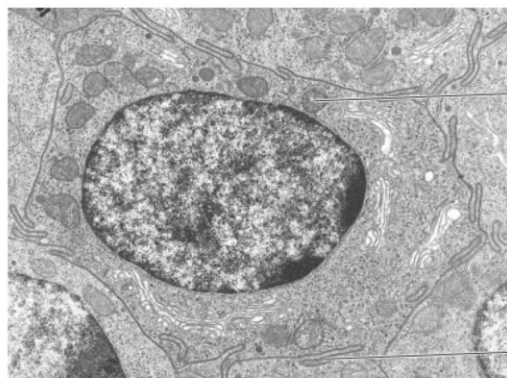
Your answer

[1]

This was the most challenging question in this section, with over half of all candidates selecting an incorrect response. The most commonly seen incorrect response was B or D.

Question 8

8 How is this image of a cell generated?



- A Electron microscope
- B Hand lens
- C Light microscope
- D X-ray machine

Your answer

[1]

Around two thirds of the candidates correctly selected A as their response. The most commonly seen incorrect response was C.

Question 9

9 Which row correctly shows the role of glucagon?

	Effect on blood glucose concentration	Effect on the liver
A	decreases	increases breakdown of glycogen
B	decreases	increases take up of glucose
C	increases	increases breakdown of glycogen
D	increases	increases take up of glucose

Your answer

☐

[1]

This was a challenging question in this section, with about half of all candidates selecting an incorrect response. Incorrect responses were fairly evenly shared between A, B and D.

Question 10

10 Which sub-cellular structure is **not** found in eukaryotic cells?

- A Chloroplast
- B Nucleus
- C Plasmid
- D Ribosome

Your answer

☐

[1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly. Where there was an incorrect response, candidates tended to select B.

Section B overview

Section B consisted of structured questions ranging from 1 to 6 marks, covering AO1, AO2 and AO3. This section includes short (1 mark) questions as well as questions requiring longer answers, and one level of response question. Question 11 was an overlap question with the Foundation tier paper. The majority of candidates attempted the level of response question.

Almost all candidates attempted all questions and there was no evidence that candidates ran out of time. There didn't appear to be any specific questions that were attempted by very few candidates

It was pleasing to see that candidates showed the mathematical skills required for this paper, as the majority of candidates answered these questions well. However, many candidates frequently omitted to show working for calculations, which meant where they had made an error and gave an incorrect answer response on the answer line, they couldn't gain any credit or error carried forward for the working.

Question 11 appeared to be quite challenging for a number of candidates. This question was testing their practical knowledge of using a potometer. Around half of the candidates couldn't name the practical apparatus. Very few candidates could describe how to measure the area of a leaf. There was a lot of confusion between reliability and reproducibility.

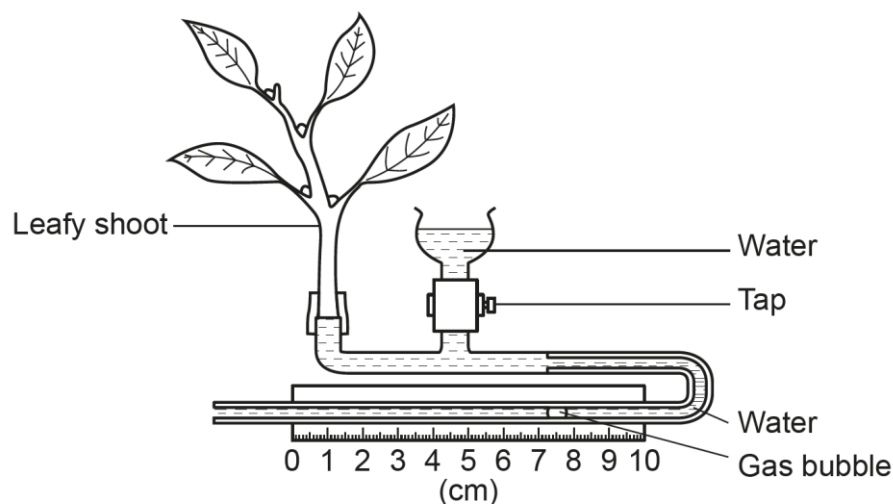
Question 16 was testing knowledge of coordination and response. The names of the hormones involved in control of fertility appeared to be reasonably well understood but responses are often confused the roles of these hormones. The hormones involved in the control of metabolism were less well understood.

Many candidates made good use of the additional pages at the back of the paper, especially when answering the level of response question. However, some candidates continued their answers below the answer lines provided or, in some cases, along the edges of the page.

Question 11 (a) (i)

11 Plants need to move water and other molecules through their stems.

(a) A student uses this apparatus to estimate water uptake by a leafy shoot.



(i) State the name of this apparatus.

..... [1]

Just over half of all candidates responded correctly. This was a frequently unanswered question. Where candidates did not know the name of the apparatus, they would often guess incorrectly.

Question 11 (a) (ii)

(ii) Describe how the student can use this apparatus to find the rate that the gas bubble moves in cm/minute.

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..... [2]

Many candidates confused this with the photosynthesis practical and suggested methods that involved counting the number of bubbles being produced over time. A common misconception was that rate = distance x time. Where 1 mark was given, it was usually for finding the difference between the start and end point of the bubble i.e. distance moved.

Question 11 (a) (iii)

- (iii) To find this estimate of water uptake in 10 minutes, the student took measurements for 60 minutes and divided their answer by 6.

Suggest why they did this.

.....
..... [1]

This question wasn't well understood by the majority of candidates, with only a third of all candidates being given the mark. The most commonly seen incorrect response was "to find an average", but without explaining why this would be an improvement.

Question 11 (a) (iv)

- (iv) The student wanted to check the **reproducibility** of their results.

State **one** way that they could do this.

.....
..... [1]

This question wasn't well understood by the majority of candidates, with many getting repeatability and reproducibility confused. Repeat the experiment three times was the most common incorrect response. The idea of getting someone else to do the same experiment was seen quite often, but not many linked it to the idea of the comparing results.

OCR support



Our [Language of Measurement in context](#) resource can be used with candidates to help familiarise them with the term reproducibility.

Question 11 (a) (v)

- (v) The student wants to extend their experiment to investigate the effect of leaf area on the rate of water uptake.

Suggest how the student could measure the area of a leaf.

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.....

..... [2]

This was not a practical that many seemed familiar with, with over half of all students not being given any marks. Some had the idea of drawing squares on, or cutting the leaf into squares or triangles, but did not develop this to explain how it could be used to estimate the area. A commonly seen incorrect response was the idea of using displacement. Where 1 mark was given, it was usually for the idea of measuring length and width and multiplying them together.

Question 11 (b)

- (b) The student then investigates the number of stomata on the upper and the lower surfaces of one of the leaves from the shoot.

The table shows their results.

Leaf surface	Number of stomata per mm ² of leaf surface		
	1st result	2nd result	3rd result
Upper	28	26	33
Lower	47	48	52

Calculate the mean number of stomata on the **upper** surface.

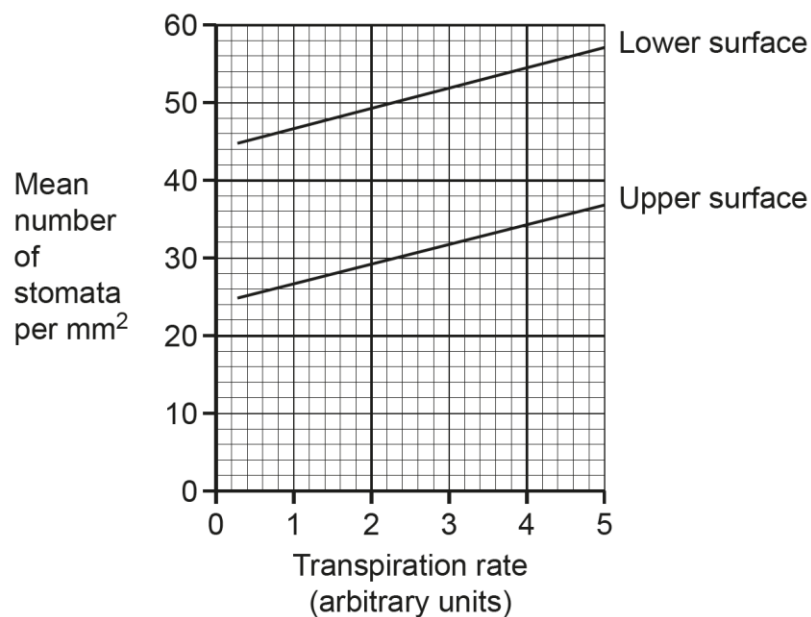
Mean number of stomata = per mm² [2]

Answered correctly by a significant majority of candidates.

Question 11 (c) (i)

(c) The student then finds this graph as part of their investigation.

It shows the relationship between transpiration rate of plants and the mean number of stomata on the two surfaces of the leaves.



(i) The mean number of stomata on the lower surface of the student's leaf is 49 per mm².

Use this value and the graph to find the transpiration rate for this plant.

Transpiration rate = arbitrary units [1]

The majority of candidates responded correctly.

Question 11 (c) (ii)

(ii) Suggest **two** conclusions that can be made from the trends shown in this graph.

1

.....

2

.....

[2]

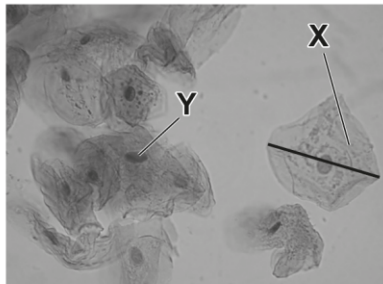
The majority of candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. The most commonly seen not credited response was for the idea that the upper and lower surfaces increased at the same rate or gradient.

Question 12 (a)

12 The image shows cheek cells magnified at 550 $\times$.

(a) Calculate the actual length of the cell marked **X**.

Use the line on the image.



Actual length = mm [2]

This question was responded well by a significant number of candidates. The most commonly seen error was not converting successfully to mm.

Question 12 (b)

(b) State the function of the sub-cellular structure labelled **Y**.

.....
..... [1]

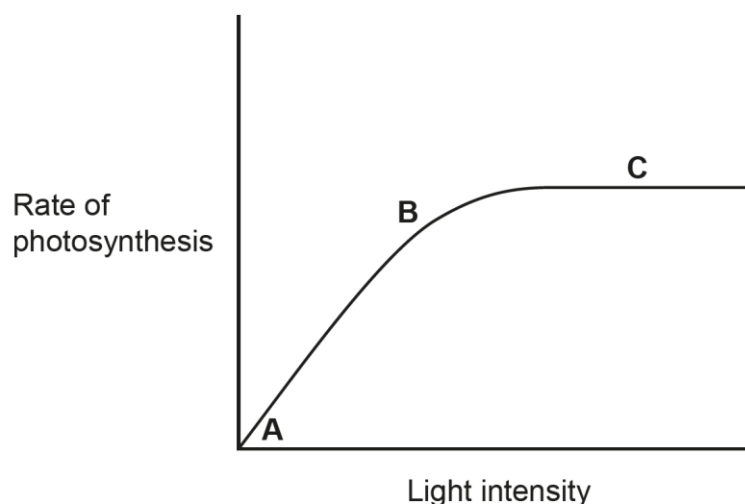
This question was responded well by the majority of candidates. A few candidates correctly identified it as the nucleus but then described its function as “the powerhouse of the cell”.

Question 13 (a)

13

(a) Photosynthesis is affected by many factors.

The graph shows how the rate of photosynthesis in a plant is affected by varying light intensity.



Describe how light intensity affects the rate of photosynthesis.

Include how the graph changes from **A–B**, and **B–C**.

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..... [3]

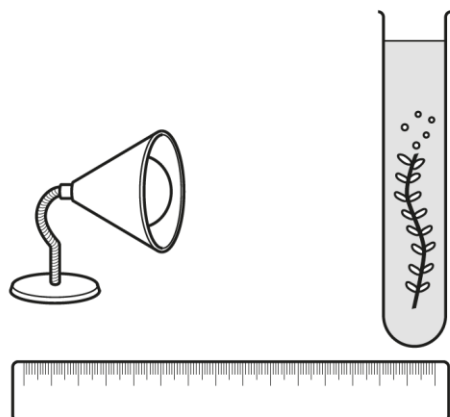
The majority of candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. Marking point 1 (the changes between A-B) was well understood, although a number of candidates just stated that “light increases photosynthesis”, rather than increasing light intensity, increases the rate of photosynthesis. Marking point 2 (the changes between B-C) was less well understood with common misconceptions being that photosynthesis stopped at this point (normally because the enzymes denatured), or that light intensity stopped increasing, or that this was when light became the limiting factor. A number of candidates thought the plant could have ‘too much light’. Some candidates simply described the shape of the graph rather than what it represented,,, e.g. the graph plateaus.

Question 13 (b)

- (b) A student set up the apparatus below to measure how light intensity affects the rate of photosynthesis in a pond plant.

Suggest **two** variables they should have controlled in their investigation.

Describe how they could have done this.



Variable 1

This is controlled by

Variable 2

This is controlled by

[2]

Most of the candidates found this question challenging. Temperature was often correctly identified as a variable that needed to be controlled, but most responses then suggested how to measure it, rather than how to keep it the same. Candidates found it hard to express their ideas scientifically. The most common error was to identify the independent variable or the dependent variable instead.

OCR support



This [Purposeful practical investigating photosynthesis](#) contains a method, practical set up and follow up questions. Alongside the method are questions that encourage candidates to consider the purpose behind the steps they are carrying out.

Question 14 (a)

14 Many biological processes involve enzymes.

(a) Explain how enzymes increase the rate of biological processes.

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..... [3]

The majority of the candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. Marking points 1 & 2 were commonly seen. Some ideas were not fully explained,, e.g. the idea of shape being complementary, or the substrate binding with active site. A frequently seen incorrect response was the idea of the enzyme attaching to the active site.

Question 14 (b)

(b) Explain how temperature affects the progress of an enzyme-controlled reaction.

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..... [3]

The majority of the candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. Marking points 3 and 4 were well understood. For marking point 2 it was often stated that the enzyme had an optimum temperature, but it wasn't always stated what this meant in terms of enzyme activity, so just giving half the story. A common misunderstanding was that this was the point at which the enzymes start to denature. The effect of lower temperatures on enzyme active was the least well understood marking point. Many think that low temperature also denatures the enzyme. Some understood that this would slow the rate of the reaction but were unable to explain why.

Question 14 (c)

(c) Many lizards have a body temperature that matches the external temperature.

In the morning, these lizards often lie in the sun before they can become active and hunt.

Explain why they need to lie in the sun before they can hunt.

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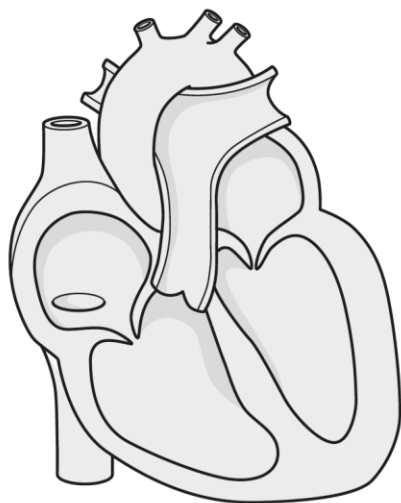
..... [2]

Many candidates found this challenging and did not link this question to enzyme activity. Where 1 mark was given, it was most often for marking point 1. A common misunderstanding was that the sunlight directly supplied them with energy to move. There were also a number of candidates incorrectly stating that energy is made/produced.

Question 15 (a)

- 15** Many large multicellular organisms have a mass transport system to supply all cells with their requirements.

The diagram shows a mammal's heart.



- (a)** Explain how the **left ventricle** is adapted to carry out its function.

.....

.....

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..... [3]

The majority of the candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. Marking point 1 was the most frequently given mark. The idea of generating high force/pressure was commonly misunderstood. Most instead thought that it was so the structure could withstand the high pressure.

Question 15 (b)

(b) Explain why small organisms like amoeba do **not** need a transport system.

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..... [2]

This proved to be a very challenging question for the vast majority of candidates. Where 1 mark was given, it was usually for marking point 1. Many candidates did not understand that an amoeba was unicellular. Quite frequently the small size was mentioned, but this was not related to the ability to simply diffuse molecules all over the cell because of this. Many confused the small size with it then having a small surface area to volume ratio. It was frequently stated that the amoeba had organ systems, just small ones, and maybe a single circulatory system, rather than a double.

Question 16 (a)

16 Animals produce coordinated responses when there are changes to their internal or external environments.

(a) An animal's nervous system is important in coordinating responses.

Put a tick (✓) next to any statements that correctly describe the functions of parts of an animal's nervous system.

Animal nervous system functions	
Effectors detect stimuli	
Motor neurones stimulate muscles	
Receptors stimulate sensory neurones	
Sensory neurones carry impulses away from the CNS	
Synapses physically connect neurones	

[2]

Generally, this question was well responded by candidates. Effectors detect stimuli was a frequent incorrect response.

Question 16 (b)

(b) Hormones are responsible for coordinating longer lasting responses.

Describe how low thyroxine levels would stimulate a response by the body.

Use the words in the list within your answer.

hypothalamus	pituitary gland	TRH	TSH
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.....

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.....

.....

..... [3]

This was a challenging question for many students, with approximately half of all candidates not being given any marks. Most candidates attempted the question using the terms provided. Several made correct statements and then contradicted themselves by incorrectly linking hypothalamus and pituitary gland to the wrong hormone.

Question 16 (c)*

(c)* IVF is a treatment some people use when they have difficulty getting pregnant.

This treatment involves the use of hormones involved in the menstrual cycle and eggs being fertilised by sperm in a laboratory.

Embryos are then transferred into a female's uterus.

This treatment has different results depending on age:

- females under 35 have a 32% success rate
- females aged 40–42 have an 11% success rate.

Name the hormones which are used in IVF treatment and explain their function.
Evaluate the effectiveness of using IVF treatment.

.....

.....

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.....

..... [6]

This question was responded well with the majority of candidates gaining 3 marks or more. Almost all had an attempt at this question, with majority being able to correctly link at least one hormone to egg development, or one hormone to the uterus lining. Despite this, there was still evidence of a lot of confusion regarding the function of hormones. Lower scoring responses were generally describing the role of the hormones in the menstrual cycle without necessarily linking it to IVF. Most had some knowledge of IVF and so could add a low-level comment to the evaluation, such as "it's expensive".

Exemplar 1

FSH is used in IVF before extracting the egg to ensure that the egg is mature. LH is used in IVF treatment to extract the egg as it allows the egg to be released. From the results, IVF isn't very effective as females under 35 have a 32% success rate and females aged 40-42 have an 11% success rate. The reason why the success rate is lower is for older women is because they are getting closer to the stage of menopause where they ~~don't~~ have their cycle stops. 32% and 11% are relatively low percentages. Also, IVF has the possibility to produce multiple embryos which might not be ~~desired~~ desired by the patient. Oestrogen and Progesterone are needed to maintain increase the lining of the uterus and maintain it. [6]

plan)

- ① FSH - egg mature ② Oestrogen - thickens uterine lining ③ LH - releases egg ④ Progesterone - maintains lining of uterus

Under 35) 32% success rate - IVF isn't very effective

40-42) 11% success rate - much lower - ~~menopause~~ menopause - stopping of menstrual cycle

IVF) - risk of multiple embryos (twins)
- low success rate

This response was given Level 3 and 6 marks. The candidate has correctly identified the hormones involved and can explain the function of these hormones. There is an incorrect statement about the role of LH in IVF, but the candidate has shown an understanding of the role of LH within the menstrual cycle, so this was ignored. The candidate then has several evaluation points: they have compared the effectiveness between age groups, they've given a reason why the success rate may be lower in older women, and they've recalled that IVF could lead to multiple embryos.

This fits with the descriptor for Level 3 of having a well-developed line of reasoning which is clear and logically structured. The information presented is relevant and substantiated.

Exemplar 2

In IVF, the follicle stimulating hormone is used to help develop the eggs in the uterus to mature and the Luteinizing hormone (LH) is used to thicken the uterus lining so that the egg is able to stick to it and mature. whoever as ^{uterus} women mature it much harder for the eggs to mature, therefore females aged 40-42 ^{at their age} have only a 11% success rate making IVF not so effective. The females under 35 have a higher success rate of 22% only because the uterus lining is slightly more stronger and able to mature the egg however not by much, ~~it~~ making IVF a not effective way of getting pregnant.

[6]

This response was given Level 2 and 3 marks. The candidate has correctly identified FSH and has linked this to causing the eggs to mature, although they have incorrectly stated that this would happen in the uterus. They have identified LH but have the function wrong. For the evaluation, they have a simple comparison between the effectiveness in the different age groups.

This fits with the descriptor for Level 2 of having a line of reasoning presented with some structure. The information presented is relevant and supported by some evidence.

Question 17 (a)

17 Many substances move in and out of cells, maintaining the internal environment of the organism.

(a) State the name given to the type of transport where ions move against their concentration gradient.

[1]

This was well responded by the majority of candidates.

Question 17 (b)

(b) Water can move in and out of plant cells.

Potato chips can be used to demonstrate this type of transport.

The mass of three potato chips are measured at the start of the experiment and after 20 minutes in 3 different concentrations of sugar solution.

The table shows these results.

Concentration of solution (mol/cm ³)	Starting mass (g)	Final mass (g)	Percentage change in mass (%)
0.0	3.2	4.1	
0.2	3.4	3.8	11.8
0.5	3.3	2.8	-15.2

Calculate the percentage change in mass at 0.0 mol/cm³.

Percentage change in mass = % [2]

This was well responded by the majority of candidates. A number of candidates incorrectly calculated the percentage as negative.

Question 17 (c)

(c) Explain the percentage change in mass shown by the potato chip in the 0.5 mol/cm^3 solution.

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.....

..... [3]

Over half of all candidates were given at least 1 mark on this question. Where only 1 mark was given, it was frequently for marking point 2, identifying that osmosis was occurring. A commonly seen error was to misinterpret the question and respond in terms of explaining what a negative change in mass meant, rather than why it occurred. Many candidates compared the concentration of the solution with that of the other solutions rather than the solution and the potato. A number of candidates thought that the sugar was dissolving the potato.

Exemplar 3

The potato chip had a ~~lower~~^{higher} concentration of water than the sugar solution outside it. So water moves out of the potato by osmosis from a high area of water concentration, to an area of lower water concentration. Therefore the potato chip had a lower final than starting mass.

[3]

This response was given 3 marks. They have correctly identified the process was osmosis, they've stated that water is moving out of the chip, and they have explained that the water is moving from an area of high to low water concentration.

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