

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

J250/01 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 1 series overview

J250/01 is the first of two foundation tier papers that determine the Biology content of the GCSE (9-1) Gateway Combined Science A course. The paper assesses content from specification topics B1-B3 and CS7. 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 and working scientifically from Appendix 5e of the specification. Question 17 overlaps with the Higher Tier paper.

Most candidates attempted all questions and very few questions were omitted. Questions 15 (c) and parts of Question 17, in particular 17 (a) (i), had the highest omission rates. Candidates performed less well on questions assessing AO2 in which they had to apply their knowledge and understanding. Questions assessing knowledge and understanding (AO1) were generally answered better than those assessing AO2 and AO3.

It is important for candidates to read the questions carefully and highlight the command words within the question. On the level of response Question (14 (b)) many candidates only addressed one area which restricted their answers to Level 1. Many candidates only ticked a single box on Question 16 (a) rather than the two boxes requested in the question.

Candidates that were more successful on this paper were able to apply their knowledge and understanding across all of the topics.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• addressed both parts of Question 14 (b) giving reason(s) for the effectiveness of different methods of contraception and explaining how hormones can be used to prevent pregnancy • recalled that blood travels through the lungs when it passes from the right side of the heart to the left side (Question 15 (c)) • recalled the differences between type 1 and type 2 diabetes (Question 16 (b)) • could explain how osmosis leads to a vacuole increasing in size when a cell is placed in water (Question 12 (c)) • calculated means (Question 17 (b)) and correctly read data from a graph (Question 17 (c) (i)).	• could not recall the order of the components of a reflex arc (Question 11 (b)) • did not identify the nucleus or recall its function (Question 12 (b)) • could not state a function of root hair cell and explain how it is adapted to perform this function (Question 13 (c)) • confused type 1 and type 2 diabetes (Question 16 (b)) • did not show their working on Question 17 (b) when calculating the mean • did not tick the appropriate number of boxes in Questions 13 (b) and 16 (a).

Section A overview

Section A consisted of 10 multiple choice questions. It was pleasing to see that all candidates attempted these questions. Candidates tended to do better on Questions 4,8 and 9 and less well on Questions 1, 3 and 5. In many cases where candidates changed their answers they tried to overwrite the previous letter. If they wish to change their answers they should be encouraged to cross out the previous answer and write the new answer next to the box.

Question 1

1 Which chamber of the heart pumps blood to the kidneys?

- A Left atrium
- B Left ventricle
- C Right atrium
- D Right ventricle

Your answer

[1]

A majority of candidates did not identify the left ventricle as the correct answer. Right atrium and right ventricle were selected in equal proportions by candidates who answer this question incorrectly. This Question assessed AO1.

Question 2

2 What is the shape of a **red** blood cell?

- A Biconcave
- B Cuboidal
- C Cylindrical
- D Spherical

Your answer

[1]

Most candidates identified statement A as being correct. This question assessed AO1.

Question 3

3 Which statement is correct about **anaerobic** respiration in plants?

- A It produces glucose.
- B It produces carbon dioxide.
- C It produces lactic acid.
- D It produces oxygen.

Your answer

[1]

Most candidates did not identify carbon dioxide as the correct answer. Many appeared to confuse the products of photosynthesis with that of respiration. Glucose was the most commonly selected answer. This question assessed AO1.

Question 4

4 What are **proteins** made up of?

- A Amino acids
- B Fatty acids
- C Glycerol
- D Sugars

Your answer

[1]

Most candidates correctly identified proteins are made up of amino acids. This question assessed AO1.

Question 5

5 Which statement describes the relationship between insulin and blood sugar levels?

- A Insulin decreases blood sugar levels.
- B Insulin has no effect on blood sugar levels.
- C Insulin increases blood sugar levels.
- D Insulin only effects blood sugar levels in type 2 diabetes.

Your answer

[1]

Most candidates recalled that glucose has an effect on blood sugar levels. Options A and C were selected by almost equal numbers of candidates with fewer than half selecting option A. This question assessed AO1.

Question 6

6 What is the role of **mitosis** in a multicellular organism such as a human?

- A To make gametes
- B To make genetically different cells
- C To make genetically identical cells
- D To make stem cells from body cells

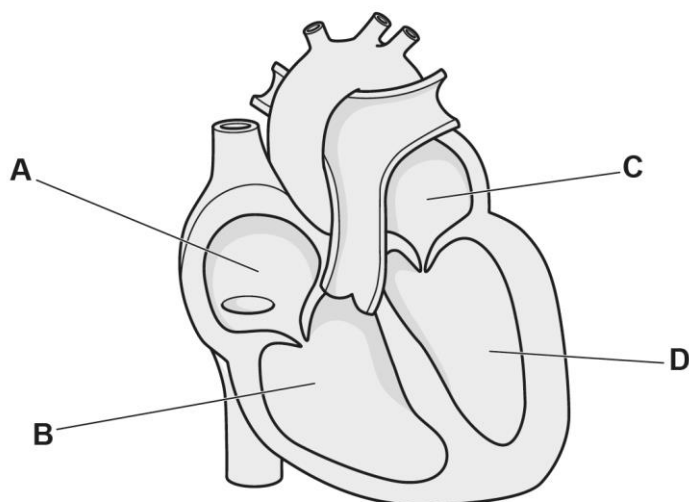
Your answer

[1]

A majority of candidates identified option C as being correct. The other options were selected in equal proportions. This question assessed AO1.

Question 7

7 Which label is pointing to the **left ventricle**?



Your answer

[1]

Around half of the candidates correctly identified the left ventricle. The other options were selected in equal proportions. This question assessed AO1.

Question 8

- 8 Four students measure their reactions by dropping a ruler and measuring the distance the ruler falls before they catch it.

Each student does this five times.

The table shows their results.

Student	Distances the ruler falls (cm)				
	4	4	5	6	8
A	4	4	5	6	8
B	3	5	6	6	9
C	5	7	9	10	10
D	4	4	5	7	9

Which student has results where the median and the mode are equal?

Your answer

[1]

Over two-thirds of the candidates correctly identified option B. Again, the other options were selected in roughly equal proportions. This question assessed AO2.

Question 9

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

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

Your answer

[1]

Almost three-quarters of the candidates identified the testes as the source of testosterone. This question assessed AO1.

Question 10

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

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

Your answer

[1]

Over half of the candidates identified oxygen. Options A and B were the most commonly selected incorrect answers. This question assessed AO2.

Section B overview

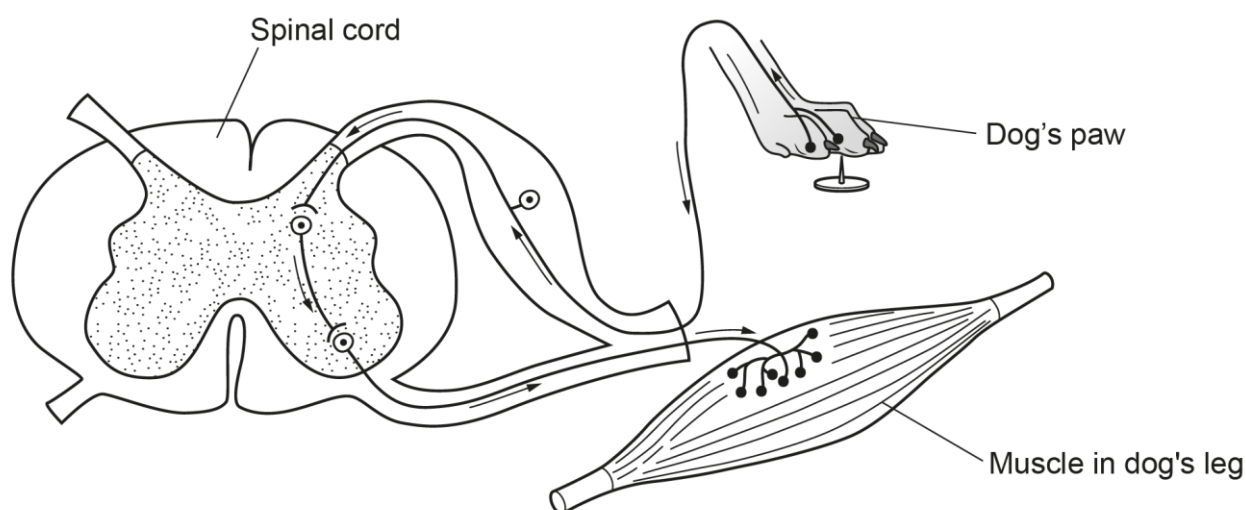
Section B consisted of structured questions ranging from 1 to 6 marks which cover all of the assessment objectives. Question 17 overlaps with the Higher Tier paper and has a common mark scheme.

Almost all candidates attempted this section in full and very few question were omitted. It was encouraging to see a very high response rate for Question 14(b), the level of response question. However, as noted below, fewer than half of the candidates attempted to address both parts of the question which restricted their answers to Level 1. Throughout Section B a large proportion of the candidates gave answers that repeated parts of the stem of the question. They should focus on answering the question directly rather than restating the question itself.

Question 11 (a)

11 The nervous system allows the body of animals to respond to the environment.

The diagram shows a reflex arc of a dog stepping on a pin.



(a) Moving a paw away after standing on a pin is an example of a reflex.

Explain how a reflex arc prevents harm to the dog.

.....

.....

.....

..... [2]

Fewer than half of the candidates gained marks on this question. Many candidates attempted to describe the reflex arc rather than stating how it prevents harm. This question assessed AO2.

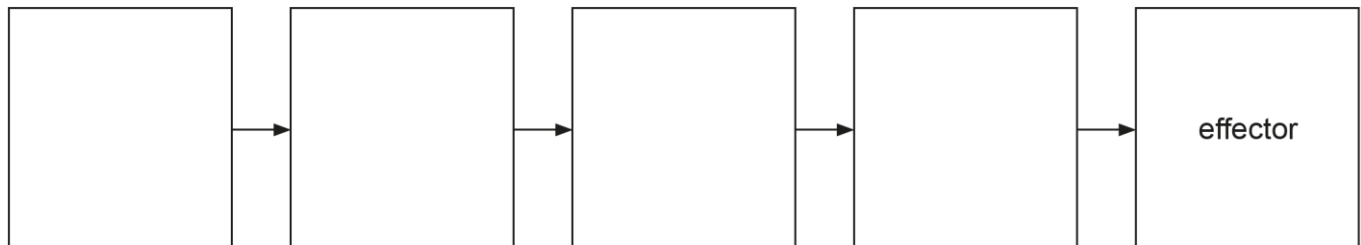
Question 11 (b)

(b) Complete the flow diagram to show the order that structures are stimulated in this reflex arc.

One has been done for you.

Choose words from the list.

motor neurone receptor relay neurone sensory neurone



[3]

Most candidates gained zero or one mark on this question which asked the candidates to recall the correct sequence of the reflex arc. Higher scoring candidates overall often gained all three marks on this question. This question assessed AO1.

Question 12 (a)

12 Microscopes are used in biology to see objects too small for the human eye.

A student makes a microscope slide of a layer of onion epidermal cells.

(a) The student uses a coverslip to make the slide.

Describe the function of the coverslip.

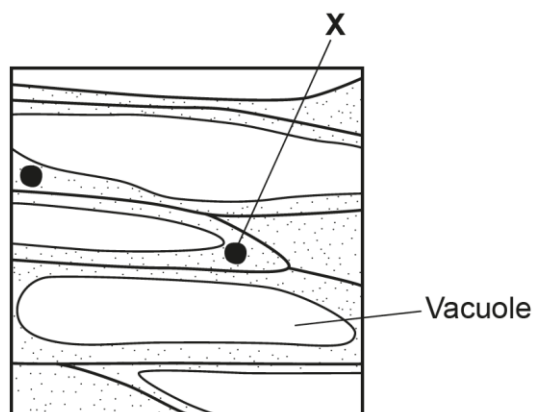
.....

 **[2]**

Fewer than half of the candidates gained marks on this question. Many answers communicated the idea that it makes the cells easier to see without further qualification. This question assessed AO1.

Question 12 (b)

(b) When the student looks down the microscope, they see an image like the one below.



Identify **subcellular structure X** and describe its function.

Name

Function

[2]

Fewer than half of the candidates gained marks on this question. If the nucleus was correctly identified, the function was also correctly stated in most cases. This question AO1.

Question 12 (c)

(c) The student prepared the slide by covering the onion epidermal cells with water.

The student looks at the cells again after one hour and the vacuoles look larger.

Explain why the vacuoles look larger.

Use your knowledge of **transport in cells**.

.....

.....

.....

.....

..... [3]

A majority of candidates stated that the vacuoles look larger as they had absorbed water. Higher performing candidates then went on to describe the process by which this occurs. This question assessed AO2.

Misconception



It is important to note that in chemistry concentration refers to the amount of solute in a given volume of solution so the expression 'high concentration' on its own is taken to mean a region of more solute. Therefore, stating water moves from an area of high concentration to low concentration is not correct. To avoid this misconception, it is best to describe the movement in terms of water potential. During osmosis, water moves from an area of higher water potential to an area of lower potential across a partially permeable membrane.

Question 13 (a)

13 Plants and animals have stem cells.

These are cells that have **not** undergone changes to become specialised cells.

(a) Which process do stem cells go through to become specialised cells?

Tick (✓) **one** box.

Differentiation ☐

Resolution ☐

Respiration ☐

[1]

Most candidates correctly identified differentiation as the correct answer. This question assessed AO1.

Question 13 (b)

(b) The table gives features of different types of stem cells.

Complete the table by putting **one** tick (✓) in each row.

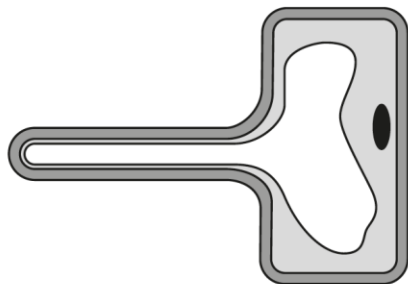
Stem cell features	Adult stem cells only	Embryonic stem cells only	Both embryonic and adult stem cells
Only found in the embryo			
Can form specialised cells			
Can form many types of cells			

[3]

Most candidates gained at least one mark on this question with a majority identifying embryonic stem cells are only found in the embryo. Only a small proportion of candidates ticked the correct box in the third row. This question assessed AO2.

Question 13 (c)

(c) One type of specialised cell in a plant is a root hair cell, shown in the diagram.



Give a function of a root hair cell and state how it is adapted for that function.

Function

.....

Adaptation

[2]

Fewer than half of the candidates were able to describe a function of the root hair cell. A very small proportion identified that an acceptable answer to this question was given in part 13(d) which gained credit here. This question assessed AO2.

Question 13 (d)

(d) One role of a root hair cell is to move ions into the plant **against** the concentration gradient.

State the name given to this type of transport.

..... [1]

Around one-third of candidates correctly stated this process is active transport. Diffusion or osmosis were common incorrect answers. This question assessed AO1.

Question 14 (a)

14 Hormones are important in the menstrual cycle.

(a) Draw **three** lines to connect each **hormone** and its **role in the menstrual cycle**.

Hormone	Role in the menstrual cycle
FSH	causes an egg to mature in the ovary
Oestrogen	maintains the uterus lining
Progesterone	thickens and repairs the uterus lining

[2]

Almost half of the candidates gained both marks on this question. There was no detectable pattern in the responses given by candidates scoring zero or 1 mark. This question assessed AO1.

Question 14 (b)*

(b)* Contraception is used to prevent pregnancy. The effectiveness of a contraceptive depends on the method and if it is used correctly.

The table shows the typical effectiveness of three methods of contraception.

Method of contraception	Typical effectiveness
Contraceptive implant	>99%
Combined pill	91%
Condoms	82%

The contraceptive implants and the combined pill contain hormones.

- Explain how hormones can be used to prevent pregnancy.
- Suggest reasons for the differences in the effectiveness of these three contraceptives.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

..... [6]

Around two-thirds of candidates scored zero or gave a Level 1 response to this question. Many of the candidates who gave a Level 1 response commented on the effectiveness of the condom. Addressing either part of the question was sufficient to reach Level 1. To reach Level 2 candidates needed to address both parts of the question. Many candidates confused the contraceptive implant with the intrauterine device (IUD). Very few candidates stated that the contraceptive pill and implant contain high levels of hormones such as progesterone and oestrogen. Higher level responses often noted that the hormonal contraceptives prevent the maturation and/or release of the egg. This question assessed AO2 and AO3

Exemplar 1

Contraceptive Pill/implant Both have Pregnancy hormones to trick the Body into thinking your Pregnant because of the hormones which then stop the ovaries sending a egg to the uterus as the Body thinks it's 'Pregnant'.

Implant is good for its effectiveness as it is in the Body so you can't forget. Pill is less effective as if you miss one the body ~~body~~ / reproductive system for a few days thinks your not Pregnant so cause ^{more} ~~more~~ risk of Pregnancy and condoms can split so can the risk of sperm entering the uterus and cause unwanted pregnancies. [6]

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Turn over

Exemplar 1 shows a response that was placed in Level 3. This candidate has written a paragraph to address each part of the question in turn. In the first part of their response, they have identified that both the implant and combined pill contain hormones that mimic pregnancy, and an egg will not be released. In the second paragraph they commented on the effectiveness of all three methods. The information on hormones could have been substantiated by naming the hormones in the contraceptives or stating FSH is inhibited so the best fit here was determined to be Level 3, 5 marks.

Question 15 (a)

15 Most animals have a circulatory system that consists of a heart and blood vessels.

(a) Describe the role of the **valves** in the heart.

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

Around one-third of candidates answered this question correctly. Incorrect answers mainly communicated the idea that the function was to pump blood. This question assessed AO1.

Question 15 (b)

(b) Explain why the heart is described as a '**double pump**' in mammals.

.....
.....
.....
..... [2]

Very few candidates gave a correct response to this question. Many candidates did not seem to realise that humans are also mammals and attempted to compare the circulation in mammals with that in humans. This question assessed AO1.

Question 15 (c)

(c) Describe the pathway of a red blood cell as it travels from the right side of the heart to the left side.

.....
.....
.....
.....
..... [3]

Around one-third of candidates gained at least one mark on this question. In many cases this was for identifying that blood travels to the lungs. Many candidates attempted to describe blood flowing through different chambers of the heart rather than describing the pathway it takes from the heart. The highest scoring candidates often gained 2 or more marks on this question. This question assessed AO2.

Exemplar 2

It comes from the vena cava to the right atrium, it then gets pushed through a valve to the right ventricle. After the red blood cell gets pumped through the pulmonary artery to take gas exchange and become oxygenated. Once oxygenated it pumps to the left atrium by the pulmonary vein, then again through a valve leading to the left ventricle. After it is pumped to the aorta, which is where the blood is pumped to the rest of your body. The process repeats. [3]

Exemplar 2 shows a response that gained three marks. They have included some information that was not needed but have correctly stated blood leaves the heart through the right ventricle and then travels through the pulmonary artery and returns to the heart through the pulmonary vein.

Question 16 (a)

16 It is important to maintain internal environments in the human body.

(a) Why is a constant body temperature needed to allow metabolic reactions to happen at the correct rate?

Tick (✓) **two** boxes.

At low temperatures, there are fewer successful collisions between enzymes and substrates.

☐

Catalysts are needed to slow down metabolic reactions.

☐

Enzymes are denatured at high temperatures.

☐

Enzyme production is too fast at high temperatures.

☐

Low body temperatures destroy enzymes.

☐

[2]

A large majority of candidates gained at least one mark on this question with almost half gaining both marks. This question assessed AO2.

Question 16 (b)

(b) Diabetes is a medical condition that can affect blood glucose levels.

Give **three** ways that type 1 diabetes is different to type 2 diabetes.

- 1
- 2
- 3

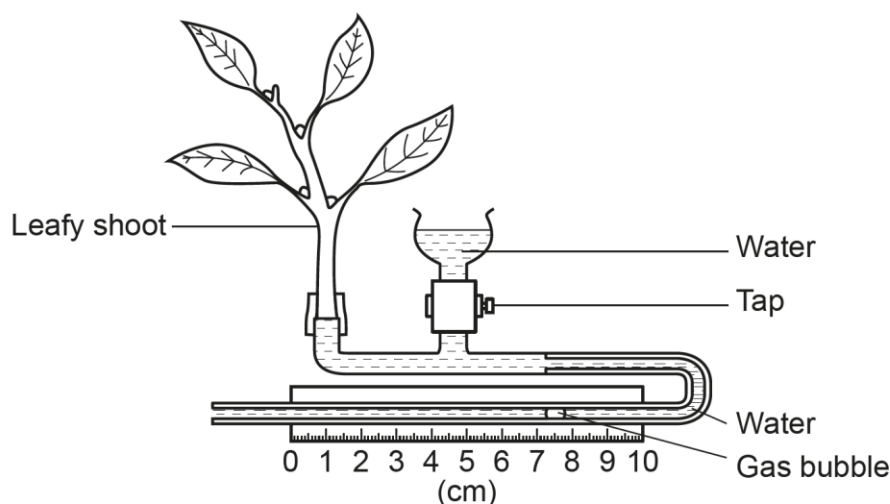
[3]

Around half of the candidates gained at least one mark on this question. Many candidates who did not gain any marks confused type 1 diabetes with type 2 diabetes. Higher performing candidates overall often gained two or more marks on this question. This question assessed AO2.

Question 17 (a) (i)

17 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]

Very few candidates correctly identified this apparatus as a potometer. Around one-third of candidates did not attempt to answer this question. This question assessed AO1.

Question 17 (a) (ii)

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

.....

.....

.....

..... [2]

Around one-quarter of candidates gained at least one mark on this question. Many candidates confused this experiment with those used to calculate the rate of photosynthesis where bubbles are counted over a given period of time. This question assessed AO2.

Assessment for learning



This question has asked how to measure a rate in cm/minute. Reading the question carefully indicates they needed to use the ruler on the apparatus to measure the distance moved in a given amount of time.

Question 17 (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]

Fewer than one-quarter of candidates identified this would improve the accuracy. This question assessed AO3.

Question 17 (a) (iv)

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

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

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

Very few candidates identified how reproducibility can be improved. Many candidates confused reproducibility with repeatability. This question assessed AO3.

OCR support



The OCR guide on [Language of Measurement in Context](#) gives an excellent overview of the key terms used in scientific experimentation.

Question 17 (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.

.....
.....
..... [2]

Around one-quarter of candidates suggested a method for calculating area; usually multiplying the length and width to gain one mark. No candidates suggested drawing around the leaf on graph paper. This question assessed AO3.

Question 17 (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]

Almost three-quarters of the candidates correctly calculated the mean. Just over half of the candidates showed their working. Most candidates who scored zero marks did not show any working. This question assessed AO1 and AO2.

Exemplar 3

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.

anomaly?
 ↑ 7 digit
 is that
 counting
 as an
 anomaly?
 —
 $28 + 26 + 33$
 $28 + 26 =$
 $54 \div 2 = 27$
 27

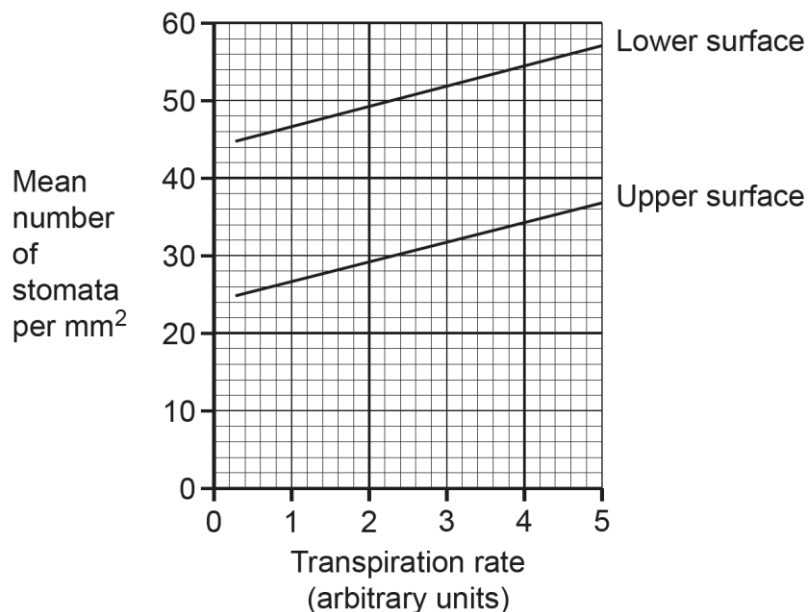
Mean number of stomata = per mm² [2]

In this exemplar, the candidate has gained both marks for the alternative answer of 27 by showing their working in full. They have clearly indicated that they have discarded one result as an anomaly and then shown their calculation of the mean for the remaining values. If no working is shown an answer of 27 on its own would be given zero marks.

Question 17 (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]

Fewer than half of the candidates read the correct answer from the graph. This question assessed AO3.

Question 17 (c) (ii)

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

1

.....

2

.....

[2]

Around half of the candidates gained at least one mark on this question. Where candidates scored one mark the expected answers were given in approximately equal proportions. This question assessed AO3.

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