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## EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS - MAY 2002

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### Politics

#### Range and suitability of the work submitted

I had begun to think that earlier problems concerning the appropriateness for Politics of some essay topics were being overcome. Not so, it seems. I saw a number of essays sent on to me by examiners that were inappropriate. This is particularly galling when the essay is a good one, or in one case an excellent one. However the range of generic skills that are required in a politics essay are clearly set out and essays have to be marked accordingly. Some candidates were over ambitious and others, for a variety of reasons no doubt, were only minimally tutored so that their topic grew out of hand and the standard of analysis suffered as a consequence. There was a time when the majority of essays were based upon an analysis of local issues and conducted through fieldwork. This kind of sourcing can be very advantageous for those with a soundly focused topic and keen analytical skills. I came across only one of these.

It has to be said though that the examiners and I found a number of topics that were by their nature peripheral to politics and some that though amenable to political analysis used no political concepts that would be a base for such analysis.

#### Candidate performance against each criteria

Some candidates simply do not understand the importance of the research question. Essays should be framed in the form of a clear question or hypothesis. Each of the examiners had examples of essays which did not pose a question and some which did not pose a researchable question. It is true that a good supervisor will offer corrective advice at a very early stage but clearly this isn't always happening. The suitability of the research question seems critical to the framing of the abstract and to forming a genuine conclusion that completes and contextualises the discussion. If the research question was weak or even non-existent then it becomes difficult or even impossible properly to address it.

A number of candidates produced mainly descriptive, often historically descriptive essays that did not embody a very wide range of skills. Others however asked searching questions and approached them rigorously. I have been impressed by the small but increasing number of theory-based essays, several of which employed the whole range of skills to very good effect. It has to be said, however, that relatively few candidates produced balanced analyses testing alternative explanations to their own. Balance, that is to say, was not easy to come by.

The criterion of holistic judgement allows markers to reward properly those essays that go well beyond sound, even comprehensive description. In my experience examiners make good use of this criterion.

#### Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Looking at the material from the examiners, together with my own marking experience leads me to conclude that each of us tends to find that the subject specific criteria in the assessment are usually the weakest element in that assessment. Probably many of the supervisors are not Politics specialists. I have said previously that I would not necessarily expect *political science* criteria of analysis to be used but that should be an understanding of political concepts, culture and

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institutions to inform the discussion. I should conclude by saying that my colleagues and I believe that greater attention should be paid by supervisors and candidates, at the beginning of their research, so that candidates concentrate on what is specifically political (in the broad sense) about their research topic. Some examiners would want to go further in their criticism of lack of input from supervisors and I am clear in my own mind that the time spent with candidates, as recorded on the inside front page, is significantly less than was the general case some years ago. I am persuaded, though, that a minority of candidates insisted on going their own way and eschewed advice. Nevertheless, the discrepancy of hours spent (or at least recorded as having been spent) with candidates is a usually a key indicator of the strength of the essay.

As always, however, each of us saw essays that were truly impressive in every respect and many that represented achievements of which candidates and their teachers could be proud. On the other hand I saw two examples of plagiarism, one of which was the worst I have ever seen. The increasing use of the Internet makes plagiarism a real worry. Moreover, it concerns me that candidates sometimes consult web sites at the expense of books and this kind of sourcing tends to reinforce the tendency not to contextualise and argue a case in more general terms.