



General Certificate of Education

Geography 6036

Specification B

GGB5 The Synoptic Unit

Report on the Examination

2007 examination - June series

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

GGB5

General

This exam provided a very varied test for candidates, covering a wide range of skills and areas of understanding. Most candidates showed real synoptic ability, managing to move from one part of the subject area to another and to see clear links between the different areas. The paper as a whole proved to be demanding and it was difficult, even for very good candidates, to score top level marks on all four questions. As a result the paper differentiated well.

Although candidates appeared to find the paper demanding there was very little evidence of candidates running out of time. In fact they often scored their best marks on the final question where they were able to respond in an open-ended and creative way.

Question 1

Most candidates were able to describe the climates of the four stations reasonably well although there are two points of advice that could be given to some candidates.

Try to avoid what is sometimes described as “data waffle”. That involves describing the data in great detail, but indiscriminately. Data wafflers write without making reference to the key features of the data and tend to miss the significance of what they are writing about. Examiners gave more credit to answers that picked out maxima, minima and so on.

Manipulate the data where that might be relevant. In this example good candidates worked out the total rainfall for each of the stations, and the best went on to work out the percentage differences between the highest and the lower totals.

Most candidates compared the rainfall totals between the four stations and then generally went on to compare patterns. Most made the fairly obvious comparison between Tanga, with its high total, and the rest.

Moderate candidates noted that all four stations had seasonal rainfall patterns. However, only the best went on to see that the wet season became shorter as one moved south and that, in the most southerly station, the two wet seasons merged into one.

It was clear that those candidates who observed these subtleties during their comparison then had far more to write about in their explanation stage.

It appeared that the candidates who did see these subtleties had done really good, detailed preparation work with the Advance Information Booklet (AIB).

The explanation of the patterns produced very clear differentiation. Again it showed a big difference between candidates who had prepared well and those who went in to the exam lacking clearly focused preparation.

The best candidates had a good knowledge of the mechanisms causing the formation of the ITCZ and its migration. They also knew and understood how the Southeast Trade Winds affect the area.

Poorly prepared candidates tried to explain the rainfall patterns in terms of what they could remember from their study of general principles of meteorology and so tried to explain the patterns in terms of relief rainfall. This led to a lot of confusion as the data clearly did not fit the explanations that they tried to develop during their answering.

Question 2

This was the question that proved least successful as a differentiator. There was enough information in the photos for everyone to write in some detail and so all but the weakest reached Level 2. Many then went on to make reference to the possible ages of the trees in the photos, making good reference to the AIB. Such work moved the answers up within Level 2.

Unfortunately many candidates' descriptions lacked either precisely observed detail or any reference to a context of learning from the rest of the GCE geography course.

Detailed observers referred to the variety of shrubs in Photo A, the varying heights of the trees in the different areas shown in the photos, the different types of grass cover in different parts of C and D or E and F, and so on.

People who put their descriptions in a context of good learning sometimes made references to the different types of 'open' and 'closed' savanna, or to 'parkland', 'shrub' and 'grassland' savanna. In other cases they used their knowledge to develop and expand their descriptions. For instance, having seen and described the acacia trees they went on to add that such trees had deep roots to seek ground water supplies or narrow, tough leaves to reduce transpiration and protect from animals. Of course they were not asked for *explanation* of what they saw but, within their *description* these candidates made relevant reference to their geographical knowledge and understanding.

Question 3

There were two main ways of approaching this question. Both were perfectly valid and both approaches often led to good Level 2 marks. Candidates who combined the two approaches were often able to reach good Level 3 standard.

The first approach relied on the information in the AIB. Very few candidates fell into the trap of 'lifting' large sections of data without adding their own ideas to link the material. Most of this group actually produced quite logical and well thought-out answers.

The second group relied much more on their learning from the taught part of the GCE course, often comparing Tanzania with their own case study area. Ideas and facts about one area could be applied in this area to good effect.

When these two approaches were combined candidates were able to produce excellent answers. They were genuinely synoptic, showing true geographic ability.

The question did include the phrase "To what extent..." Beforehand the examiners had felt that this would make the question considerably more difficult for candidates, especially those of moderate and lower ability. However, our fears were not really justified. Although a definitive answer is impossible – even for ecologists who study the area – most candidates made a good attempt to work out some sort of answer. Of course they usually ended up sitting on the fence and not committing themselves....but that is what the experts do.

Question 4

This question was fun to mark because answers were so varied and unpredictable. Candidates generally showed a very good understanding of the geography of the area and wrote synoptically with a good sense of place. Unfortunately many of them did not understand the meaning of the word 'poaching' and thought that it was synonymous with 'hunting'.

Very early on in the marking process examiners had to agree to accept this mistake and to accept the wider definition...but it was clear that those who made the mistake were rather limited in the way they could develop their answers. In fact some got round the problem they had created by differentiating between 'illegal poaching' and 'legal poaching'!

Once again it is important to emphasise that, during the preparation period with the AIB, all candidates must make sure that they understand the meaning of every word in the booklet whether those are technical geography words or words in less common usage in the general use of the English language.

Despite that problem candidates were able to discuss a wide variety of themes in their answers. These included:

- interrelationships and feedbacks within natural ecosystems
- overgrazing, desertification and climate change
- the effect of poaching in the Serengetti on animal migration patterns throughout East Africa
- human population increase and competition with wild animals over resources
- tourism, including both 'camera safaris' and 'big game hunting'
- pressures on the population leading to urbanisation
- planned culling of animal herds by national park wardens
- the sale of rights to cull to rich tourists, where comparisons were often drawn with schemes already operating in neighbouring countries

(As a matter of interest candidates who referred to such hunting – legal or illegal – often assumed that the main customers would be 'rich Americans'. The Principal Examiner's research suggests though that most of the hunters at present come from the oil rich Gulf States.)

Some candidates even tried to apply ideas from their studies of Malthusianism to the animal populations of the Serengetti. Such attempts were admirable, but even good candidates struggled when they went on to try to apply Boserup's ideas – necessity is the mother of invention – to the same animals.

Finally, with reference to this question, it was interesting to note that very few candidates took a totally anti-hunting view. Whilst most were generally in favour of schemes to protect the wild animals almost all were very pragmatic, accepting that some hunting might be necessary to preserve the ecosystem in its present plagio-climax state.

The following points have all been made before in Examiner's Reports but they are still relevant as they are the things that distinguish between moderate and good candidates.

Good candidates:

- understand the meaning of every word in the AIB.
- have spent time checking where the AIB can be linked to the material studied during their two year geography course, and then prepared to make references to that coursework when relevant
- write precisely about data that is provided, looking for patterns and key features rather than just repeating lots of disconnected details
- look for relevant connections between different aspects of geography in all of their answers on the paper
- remember that they are writing about a real place and so avoid superficial generalisations
- try to look at issues on a variety of different scales, from a variety of different points of view and with an understanding that the issues will change over time.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.