

**2008**  
**School-assessed**  
**Coursework**  
**Report**

**Philosophy GA 1 and GA 2: Unit 3**  
**Philosophy GA 1 and GA 2: Unit 4**

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**UNIT 3**

This report is provided for the first year of implementation of this study and is based on the coursework audit and VCAA statistical data.

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

Overall, most assessment tasks audited were able to satisfy the requirements of the new *VCE Philosophy Study Design*. In general, tasks had been conscientiously prepared, paying close attention to the key knowledge and skills listed in the study design, and communicating clear expectations to students. Nearly all tasks gave ample opportunity for students both to be challenged and to demonstrate excellence. Many schools had used the opportunities afforded by the new design to develop interesting and innovative tasks, while being thoroughly observant of its stipulations.

In previous years a strong degree of task-sharing among teachers and schools was apparent. This was a good sign of collegiality in a discipline area for which there is frequently only one representative in any school. It is to be hoped that these inter-school links continue, aided by the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools and other less formal networks. Perhaps much less duplication of tasks between schools this year is an indication that Philosophy teachers are gaining confidence in their own abilities to set tasks, or it may simply be due to there being less material in circulation in this first year of the new study design. In any case, it was pleasing to note more independent setting of tasks this year, reflecting considerable diversity in approaches to teaching and assessment, and with tasks tailored to best fit particular student cohorts. It was further noted that though schools may have developed assessment ideas on the basis of suggestions given in the 'Advice for Teachers' section of the study design and in the 'Assessment Support Material' section of the assessment guide, no verbatim duplication of these suggested tasks was observed.

In cases where assessment tasks failed to match the study design, this was typically due to schools recycling old tasks which do not reflect the current design, either with respect to the knowledge and skill requirements for the outcome, or even with regard to the text list being used. All teachers of Philosophy are urged to adhere rigorously to the key knowledge and skills of each outcome, as listed in the study design, and to double-check that the text list they are using is up to date.

All schools audited had observed the mandate to include an essay among the assessment tasks for Unit 3, usually designating this style for Outcome 2. Consistent with the style of the exam, all schools audited had opted for at least one task requiring short-medium responses to a series of questions. However, beyond this it was pleasing to note much more diversity in the styles of tasks set than had been apparent in the past. Outcome 3 was particularly encouraging of oral and multimedia presentations, emphasising student-centred approaches. Research reports, true/false exercises and multiple choice formats were also employed.

There was also far greater diversity in the styles of assessment criteria used this year. While many schools used the rubrics offered in the *VCE Philosophy Assessment Handbook*, most realised that these are not mandatory. In many cases, it seems that teachers are finding these a

useful basis from which to develop their own criteria and assessment guidelines for students, without necessarily giving students copies of the rubrics. It is important that the assessment criteria fully reflect the skills and knowledge listed in the study design, and that careful consideration is given to the relative weighting of each. In general, skills of analysis and evaluation should be given roughly equal weighting, with comparative analysis and comparative evaluation (the latter is also referred to as 'critical comparison' in the study design) additionally required in Outcomes 2 and 3.

It is worth including some clarification on these points. When the study design refers to skills of 'analysis', this implies the identification and understanding of views and arguments in the texts, including the ability to fully reconstruct arguments and differentiate premises and conclusions. 'Evaluation' tasks require students to offer views and arguments – whether their own or those of others (including those of authors of other set texts) – which support or rebut the views and arguments being studied. 'Critical comparison' means weighing up the relative strengths and weaknesses of two or more views or arguments and reaching conclusions about which is to be preferred. It is obvious that most teachers (and therefore, one would hope, their students) are clear on these points, but confusion and ambiguity were apparent in some of the tasks audited.

Further on the issue of clarity, the importance to Philosophy of clear and precise language cannot be over-emphasised. Most schools are including this as an assessment criterion, which encourages students to see this as a key skill – which it is in every outcome. However, it is disappointing that some teachers fail to model this skill in their own setting of questions for assessment. There were several instances in school assessment tasks where it was difficult to discern what questions actually meant. Grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors sometimes exacerbated this problem. Teachers are urged to proofread their tasks for students with utmost care, while likewise encouraging students to reach the highest standards of language precision and correctness.

One other point worth raising is the issue of mark allocation, an extremely important aspect of task-setting. There were many instances where quite complex questions were asked, surely requiring numerous points to be made for a satisfactory answer, and yet just one or two marks had been allocated. In general, students should be aware of mark allocations for their responses and be entitled to consider these a useful guide to the expected fulsomeness of their answer. Sensible mark allocations are also needed, of course, when teachers come to assess; it must be really difficult to decide how to award marks in an evaluation question if a maximum of only two marks can be given! In many of the best-designed assessment tasks, teachers had produced accompanying model answers to guide them while marking, so there was a clear sense of how various answers might be ranked.

Judicious mark allocation is also crucial to giving students the opportunity to excel, and to achieving a broad spread of marks amongst a cohort. Of course schools differed with regard to how challenging their assessment tasks were, which is to be expected, particularly as some schools do not offer Year 11 Philosophy. It is entirely acceptable for there to be considerable variation in time allocations and conditions for tasks, including whether notes may be consulted, whether topics were issued prior to assessment, and so on. Most schools showed a sensible approach to scaffolding tasks to meet the needs of their students, with expectations of student independence increasing as the Unit progressed.

## **SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

### **Unit 3 Coursework**

#### **Outcome 1**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse and evaluate the philosophical viewpoints and arguments in the set texts in relation to the good life.

#### **Task type options**

The student's performance on this outcome should be assessed using at least one or more of the following formats:

- essay (at least one for Unit 3)
- and
- short-answer responses
  - test
  - written analysis
  - written exercises
  - written reflection
  - presentations (oral, multimedia)
  - dialogue (oral, written).

#### **/40 marks**

Short-answer questions were overwhelmingly favoured in assessment of this outcome, with the Greek philosophers the typical focus. Most used this outcome to test students' basic textual knowledge, saving more challenging questions for other outcomes. There were a couple of examples of schools dividing the 40 marks equally among the texts, providing four short tests to establish students' grasp of each Unit 3 philosopher. Others divided the 40 marks in other ways, a few setting a combination of short questions and essay-style questions, and one school included oral components to this outcome.

Precision of language and sensible mark allocations were hallmarks of the best-designed questions, leaving students in no doubt as to what kind of material they should be drawing on, the degree of detail required, and the amount of time that should be spent. These elements are important if assessment tasks are being regarded, to any extent, as training for the examination.

What stood out most about the tasks audited for this outcome was their heavy emphasis on comprehension and analysis, rather than evaluation. This is understandable, as evaluation is a higher order task, and this outcome was typically administered within the early weeks of the Unit. Certainly students should be discouraged from criticising an argument before having fully understood it. However, the key knowledge and skills would tend to suggest a roughly even mark allocation between analysis and evaluation in Outcome 1, not difficult to achieve considering that evaluation questions should attract more marks.

There is also an issue that often analysis and evaluation questions will ride in tandem, so that if a student missed the marks for one, they will also fail the other. For example:

1. What argument from Socrates finally persuades Callicles to concede defeat on the question of whether good and pleasure are the same? Reconstruct this argument. (5 marks)
2. Evaluate this argument. (6 marks)

Some teachers overcame this problem and prompted well-informed evaluation by instead using this approach:

Below is a reconstruction of an argument from the Gorgias. [standard form reconstruction follows]

1. Who delivers this argument and what effect does it have on his opponent? (2 marks)
2. Evaluate this argument. (6 marks)

Unfortunately, a few schools had overlooked the changes to Outcome 1 altogether and had recycled tasks only applicable to the old study design, which did not require argument evaluation in Outcome 1. This was the most common reason for tasks failing the audit for this Unit. It is worth highlighting here the most frequently ignored elements of this outcome, quoting from the study design:

- (Students should know) objections and criticisms that can be raised in response to the viewpoints and arguments proposed in relation to questions on the good life in the set texts. (*Key knowledge point 5*)
- (Students should be able to) offer justified critical responses to philosophical viewpoints using clear and precise language. (*Key skill point 3*)
- (Students should be able to) offer relevant criticisms of arguments by assessing the plausibility of premises, any assumptions made, showing whether the conclusions follow from the premises, and/or by analysing the potential consequences for the good life. (*Key skill point 4*)

Most tasks presented for this outcome showed very direct focus on the text. This is fine, but it is worth highlighting the following points of key knowledge that should not slip beneath teachers' radar nor escape assessment. Teachers are encouraged to give greater emphasis to concept development in future assessment of this outcome:

- concepts used in the set texts in discussion of the good life, including morality, happiness and human nature, and any ambiguities which arise from them;
- further concepts used in the set texts and in discussion of the good life, including values, hedonism, egoism, freedom, pleasure, pain, purpose, meaning, virtue, altruism, wisdom, ontology, self-restraint, justice, equality, and any ambiguities which arise from them;
- viewpoints and arguments in the set texts relating to questions such as:
  - How do ontological views about the nature of people affect ideas about the good life?
  - What can an understanding of human nature tell us about the good life?
  - How relevant is religious belief to living the good life?
  - To what extent are humans free to choose their own lives?
  - What does the good life have to do with being (morally) good?
  - If being moral conflicts with your self-interest, why should you be moral?
  - What is the nature of happiness?
  - What is the role of pleasure in the good life?
  - What place does the practice of philosophy have in the good life?
  - What is the relationship between the good life for an individual and broader society?

A final point to make is that students should not be expected to demonstrate knowledge and skills beyond the scope of this outcome. For example, some schools asked questions on Epicurus and King for this outcome. It is fine for these thinkers to be studied as supplementary material, particularly pertinent to Outcome 3; however, students should be able to achieve full marks in Outcome 1 without having specific knowledge of texts beyond those set. Likewise, comparative philosophy is *not* expected for this outcome; it is assessed in Outcomes 2 and 3, and should be excluded from Outcome 1 tasks.

### **Assessment**

A variety of approaches were used to assess tasks in Outcome 1. There was general awareness of the assessment handbook rubrics and widespread use of them, but many schools had converted these into assessment criteria. The rubrics seem to have been embraced enthusiastically for assessment of essay tasks.

Sometimes, when questions and their allocated marks had been carefully designed to fit the study design and the rubrics, there was no need for further use of criteria in the marking of short-answer tasks. However, there was often a mismatch between tasks which stated they were using the relevant rubric, but were clearly marked according to allocations per question, which then often did not fully correspond to the spirit or weighting of the rubric.

Clearly neither the study design nor the assessment handbook gives absolute weightings for the various knowledge and skills being assessed in each outcome. This gives teachers considerable discretion. However, the audit process did highlight a number of cases where it was clear that important components of the outcome really were glossed over, if not omitted, and evaluation questions stood out in this regard.

Unfortunately there was some evidence of use of the old criteria, not updated to reflect the new study design.

## **Outcome 2**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to critically compare the viewpoints and arguments on the good life developed in the set texts.

### **Task type options**

The student's performance on this outcome should be assessed using at least one or more of the following formats:

- essay (at least one for Unit 3)
- and
- short-answer responses
  - test
  - written analysis
  - written exercises
  - written reflection
  - presentations (oral, multimedia)
  - dialogue (oral, written).

### **/30 marks**

Essays were overwhelmingly favoured for assessment of this outcome, although some schools offered dialogue (both written and oral), oral/multimedia presentations and medium length written exercises of various kinds.

All set texts cropped up in assessments of this outcome. Students were frequently allowed to choose their own topic from a short list, and often had a choice of philosophers to compare.

The best framing of questions enabled students to realise that they must **analyse, evaluate and compare** the arguments of the set texts, in this outcome. In practice this means students will find themselves:

- analysing viewpoints and arguments of each set text, in relation to the topic
- evaluating viewpoints and arguments of each set text, in relation to the topic
- analytically comparing viewpoints and arguments of each set text, in relation to the topic
- critically comparing viewpoints and arguments of each set text, in relation to the topic
- drawing overall conclusions.

In other words, this is quite a complex task. Many tasks included some form of scaffolding to assist students, who may have been writing their first philosophical essay.

Conditions varied widely, including both seen and unseen topics, both open book and test conditions, and occasional provision for ‘cheat sheets’. Expectations varied in relation to length of essays, from 500 to 1200 words as stipulated maximums, and many stating no limits. Time allocation for essay tasks was typically 60–120 minutes.

There were few problems with adherence to the study design for this outcome, perhaps because of its close resemblance to its counterpart in the old study design.

### **Assessment**

The assessment handbook rubrics were very popular for assessment of this outcome, particular when the essay format was chosen.

Some schools had developed their own criteria, either based on the rubrics or the study design, and these were fine as long as sensible weightings were adopted.

Some teachers are clearly very attached to the old assessment criteria. As long as they are interpreted in such a way that they are totally compatible with the new study design’s Outcome 2 (which is possible), this is passable practice. There is also evidence of teachers being inspired by the criteria published in various past examination reports and basing their own criteria on these. Again, this is fine as long as the new study design is reflected in weightings employed.

### **Outcome 3**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to critically compare the viewpoints and arguments on the nature of the good life in the set texts to other ways of thinking about how we should live, and evaluate their implications for contemporary debates.

### **Task type options**

The student’s performance on this outcome should be assessed using at least one or more of the following formats:

- essay (at least one for Unit 3)
- and
- short-answer responses
  - test
  - written analysis
  - written exercises
  - written reflection
  - presentations (oral, multimedia)
  - dialogue (oral, written).

### **/30 marks**

It is Outcome 3 which makes the clearest departures from the old course and it is here that the most interesting and creative assessment tasks appeared. There are two main strands to this outcome: (i) critical comparison of the set texts with other views and arguments on the good life, and (ii) assessment of implications of adopting the views of set texts in contemporary debates. Some schools perhaps found this too cumbersome to include in one task and so ran two separate tasks adding to 30 marks. It was unfortunately quite common to find schools disregarding any sense of ‘contemporary debates’, even when this was interpreted broadly as ‘modern life’.

Because at first glance this area of study looks somewhat like the Outcome 3 from the old study design, many schools erroneously recycled old tasks, thus missing some key differences in the spirit of the new task.

The old study design required a study of ‘another tradition of thinking about the good life’ (for example, Buddhism, Christianity, modern consumerism ...) and asked students to compare this with the views of the set texts and with contemporary and/or the students’ views. This tended to lead students to studying additional *content* – for example, Buddhist ethics – for assessment of the outcome. While the new study design *may* include study of other faith traditions, the outcome is now much broader in scope, asking students to identify views and arguments on the good life occurring in much more fleeting contexts, whether on billboards, in a letter to the editor, a song lyric, a political argument or in a conversation with a friend. The idea is that students will be constantly *applying* the ideas in the texts and *comparing* them with the wider contemporary world. With fewer set texts in the new course, teachers should find more time to embed these observations into everyday classroom practice, rather than treating Outcome 3 as an ‘add-on’ unit that necessarily requires study of an entire, additional, complex ethical tradition.

Oral presentations, dialogues, essays and written exercises were popular modes of assessment for this outcome. Many tasks encouraged students to conduct their own research and to explore topics of their own interest. It was common for classes to all study the one current debate (for example, Do Australians care too much about making money?) and then have a choice of philosophers to explore it through. Using newspaper articles as a source for analysis and comparison was quite a popular approach.

### **Assessment**

Again, the assessment guide rubric was popular, while many other teachers constructed their own criteria based on the study design.

There seemed to be a general emphasis on ‘viewpoints’ found in texts and other sources, with some tasks overlooking the inclusion of argument analysis among the key skills.

The most common problem teachers appeared to have with assessing this outcome was including all the various required elements of analysis, evaluation and comparison, and establishing reasonable weightings for these.

## **UNIT 4**

This report is provided for the first year of implementation of this study and is based on the coursework audit and VCAA statistical data.

### **GENERAL COMMENTS**

Fewer outcomes and fewer changes to the study design in Unit 4 seemed to make Unit 4 relatively straightforward for teachers to assess. As required, all schools audited had included at least one essay among the assessment tasks. It was also popular to split the 50 marks allocated to each outcome between an essay and a short-answer test. However, a small minority of schools had taken the path of oral or multimedia presentations for some component of the outcomes.

In cases where assessment tasks failed to match the study design, this was typically due to schools recycling old tasks which merged mind-body and knowledge problems and attempting to assess both outcomes in a single task. Problems arose when tests or essays were set which failed to clearly separate each of Outcomes 1 and 2 and it was sometimes unclear as to how a teacher might have calculated a student’s final mark out of 50 for each distinctive area of study.

The rubrics offered in the *VCE Philosophy Assessment Handbook* proved popular for assessment of the essay. Often teachers had reworked these to produce their own criteria sheets or rubric matrices, in language which would be more helpful to students. Of most interest was the extent to which teachers picked up on the study design's emphasis on contemporary applications and implications of both the mind–body problem and epistemological debates. Most schools audited had included these elements of the key knowledge and skills among their assessment tasks, whether embedded in essay questions, oral presentations or even short questions. Sometimes it was clear that a whole class had examined a particular contemporary application, while other schools encouraged students to research an issue of their own choosing. It was clear that reducing the number of set texts has broadened the scope of classroom discussion in these areas of study.

### **Outcome 1**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to discuss the concepts relating to the nature of the mind, and analyse and evaluate viewpoints and arguments concerning the relationship between body and mind occurring within and between the set texts, and in the context of relevant contemporary debates.

#### **Task type options**

The student's performance on each outcome should be assessed using at least one or more of the following formats:

- essay (at least one for Unit 4)
- and
- short-answer responses
  - test
  - written analysis
  - written exercises
  - written reflection
  - presentation (oral, multimedia)
  - dialogue (oral, written).

#### **Assessment**

The most common approach to assessment of this outcome was either by essay alone, or by a combination of essay and short-answer questions.

Examination of relevant contemporary debates was a feature of nearly all tasks audited, and this was occasionally included as part of an oral presentation, forum posting, multimedia presentation or research project. The most commonly examined contemporary applications of the mind–body problem were artificial intelligence, life after death or religious belief, and the status of animals.

Teachers seem generally very assured in their assessment of this outcome, and had no trouble covering the key knowledge and skills in their assessment tasks. Almost without exception, both the Descartes and Armstrong texts were included in assessment questions, and even when the short-answer format was favoured, teachers still managed to include tasks of evaluation and critical comparison as well as straight comprehension and analysis questions. There was evidence that many schools modelled their assessment tasks on the sample examination.

The main caution that schools should note here is against trying to explicitly assess epistemological issues (including the set texts for Area of Study 2) as part of this outcome.

### **Outcome 2**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to discuss concepts relating to the nature of knowledge, and analyse and evaluate viewpoints and arguments concerning the nature of knowledge occurring within and between the set texts, and in the context of relevant contemporary debates.

### **Task type options**

The student's performance on each outcome should be assessed using at least one or more of the following formats:

- essay (at least one for Unit 4)
- and
- short-answer responses
  - test
  - written analysis
  - written exercises
  - written reflection
  - presentation (oral, multimedia)
  - dialogue (oral, written).

### **Assessment**

Again, teachers mostly favoured an essay or short-answer questions, or a combination of both, to assess this outcome. Clearly, not every text needs to be assessed, so it was perfectly acceptable to just include two rather than three philosophers in assessment tasks. However, if only one philosopher was examined, it was difficult to get a strong enough sense of students' performance across all key knowledge and skills.

Consideration of relevant contemporary debates was not as universal in this outcome, perhaps due to timelines. However, it was still clear that teachers are taking up the stronger emphasis on applied philosophy in this study design. Debates commonly considered included climate change and intelligent design.

While it is perhaps implicit in any essay question, the key knowledge point which was probably most neglected was the third one – distinguishing the merits and weaknesses of deductive and inductive reasoning.

While there is fewer assessment tasks required in Unit 4, each outcome needs to yield 50 marks for students' coursework scores. Therefore it is important that the tasks are substantial and give students fair scope to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, as well as discriminating among students. The tendency with Unit 4 Area of Study 2 can sometimes be to rush the assessments as Term 3 draws to a close. In light of this, teachers are cautioned against assessment of Outcome 2 becoming too thin.