



2004 Contemporary Australian Society GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Contemporary Australian Society involves an examination of the way change is affecting key social institutions in Australia. The 2004 examination, like previous ones, sought to test students' ability to explore and explain these changes across a wide spectrum by using key concepts with authority and showing sufficient knowledge of particular institutions and situations to draw clear and balanced conclusions about the nature of their own society. While the quality of examination answers varied greatly, assessors were impressed by students' often passionate engagement with this study and their willingness to grapple with the variety of experience of living in contemporary Australia.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Note: Student responses reproduced herein have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

Section A

Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	1	2	1	1	9	18	19	15	18	12	4	6.5

Drawing closely on the Contemporary Australian Society Victorian Certificate of Education Study Design, this question asked students to describe the difference(s) between locality-based and cultural- or interest-based communities. Most students saw this as an opportunity to explore the dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' communities, or, as one student put it, between communities based on 'geographical presence' and 'emotional connection'. While noting that this dichotomy was a useful way of understanding how communities have changed, the best students nevertheless could see that characteristics associated with each concept were present in most communities, and that all communities were still characterised by 'human beings craving a sense of belonging':

Although this...[internet-based] community does not have economic welfare, it is still a way the concept of community can be understood as it has 'community spirit' through people coming together and participating in chats and social activities.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	10	2	2	3	12	16	17	14	13	9	2	5.4

Again, the examiners drew directly from the Study Design in framing this question. Students needed to describe how **practices of inclusion** – meeting membership criteria, accepting rules, participating in rituals, sharing language, customs, dress, experience and ways of doing and seeing – helped to constitute a particular community they had studied, and how **practices of exclusion** – the identification of people as 'other' or 'non-compliant' in relation to the above – were equally powerful in shaping that community. Assessors were impressed by answers which saw the integral connection between these two processes – that the more rigorous the tests for inclusion, the greater the possibility of exclusion; the sharper the sense of 'them', the clearer the sense of 'us'.

One student described the Jewish community in Melbourne:

The community is perhaps better known for its exclusion practices, yet it is these practices that have led to it becoming a thriving community that continues to grow, with a high level of intra-marriage and also a high level of members who continue to remain faithful to the religion. The Jewish community separates itself from other communities not just because of its religious beliefs and values, but also because of its social attitudes. [It]...has a terrible history of genocide and racial tension and this sadly continues today even in Australia.

Some students also made an interesting distinction between exclusion practiced by the chosen community (for example, barring non-believers from access to a religious school) and exclusion thrust on it by outside agencies (for example, the government declaring a particular political group a proscribed organisation).

Of course, students who were able to illustrate these insights through a detailed knowledge of their chosen community were more likely to score highly.



Section B

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	5	1	1	3	2	3	5	9	11	10	17	10	10	8	5	1	8.9

As in previous years, the assessors were struck by the number of students who appeared not to recognise that Section B questions, which were worth 15 marks rather than 10, required answers of greater depth. The best answers gave a clear sense of a known community, while weaker ones often referred vaguely to the 'Australian community' or to an undifferentiated community, for example 'Australian Aborigines'. Stronger students were aware of a complex interaction between government (at particular levels – federal, state and local) and their chosen community that had changed over time and had perhaps brought a range of impacts that benefited some within the community at the expense of others; weaker answers focused on one impact and assumed it was uniform, and that the community was homogenous.

This student, summarising a succession of federal and state policies, observed a mixed impact on a complex community:

The government providing welfare for ATSI communities had positive effects as it made members feel more a part of Australian society and more socially accepted, as they were able to contribute more and participate more in employment and social activities. This however is only a portion of the community. Noel Pearson believed, when referring to indigenous people of Cape York Peninsula, that the introduction of welfare has caused people to become more dependent and therefore less self-empowered.

Another student, looking at the impact on the indigenous community of the Federal Government's abolition of ATSIC in June 2004 wrote:

Some indigenous groups – such as the Victorian Bennelong Society – voiced approval of the move, saying many indigenous Australians felt out of touch and unhelped by ATSIC. A larger number responded critically, pointing out that while reforms were necessary, abolition was a step backwards: after all, in 'traditional' spheres of government, the indigenous community is represented by a sole parliamentarian, Senator Aidan Ridgeway.

These students gave a clear sense of engaging critically with their material and related it clearly to the demands of the question.

Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Average
%	5	0	2	3	2	7	8	10	14	16	11	7	7	4	3	0	7.9

Students found it relatively easy to develop a response to this question, but many became polemical without carefully defining 'a single national culture' or 'ethnically too diverse', focusing instead on the stereotypical extremes of Anglo-Celtic monoculture and an open market of competing cultures, none with any pre-eminence. Better answers, such as the following, noted the gap between stated government policy (popular imagination) and the complex allegiances of Australians over time, and also recognised that ethnic diversity and a 'single national culture' were not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts.

...looking at a monoculture as one in which the people share values and belief systems as well as sharing a national flag, system of government and other symbols...our ethnic diversity can still be recognised as a monoculture.

...although large numbers of Australians are of ethnic descent and speak their native tongue at home and at church, the language for legal issues, citizenship and at school is English. Language demonstrates that there is a main national culture.

There is a need for all students to ground their arguments about community and culture in real practices, beliefs and institutions rather than the clichés of meat pies and pizza, and to notice continuities in values and allegiances as well as radical shifts.

Section C

Question 5

Students were much more adept at analysing the representation and using it to support their answers this year. Assessors were generally pleased with the quality of responses to Questions 5a, b and c, though once again they felt that students too readily became accustomed to this pattern and ignored the greater demands and rewards of Question 5d.

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5a

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	21	46	21	6	2.0

Students noticed many different ways in which the representation portrayed the future, though most agreed that the message was generally optimistic, presenting refugees as a valued group in Australian society and Mina's story as inspirational.

The story on the front of the card enables the reader to see Mina as a person as she tells of her past and her future and not just as a refugee. The photo of her smiling also encourages support for refugees with a different tack, rather than showing the horror she has been through.

However, some students felt that the very existence of the postcard and its purpose – a call to action – implied that refugees might be unwelcome in Australia in the future and that the Australian environment was under threat. Better answers noticed this novel linking of human rights and environmental action, as well as the development of political action through new forms of communication (the internet) combined with older ones (the postcard).

5b

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	19	47	24	3	2.0

Most students saw Mina's journey from war torn Bosnia to a life of opportunity in Australia as the most obvious example of change in the representation, although for some the postcard's call to action to defend refugees and the environment was a sign that attitudes to both were hardening in contemporary Australia. Again, better answers were alert to the new ways or forms that political action might take, as well as the emergence of new alliances like those represented by the collaboration between The Body Shop and fasstt to produce this card.

5c

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	9	15	35	34	7	2.1

Most students interpreted the question to mean 'in what ways can individuals and communities respond positively to the messages presented in the post card?' These included filling in the postcard and sending it to a friend or politician, donating funds to support refugees, being friendly towards and accepting of refugees on a personal level, using environmentally safe products (The Body Shop products, recycled biodegradable paper) and expressing solidarity with victims of human rights abuses around the world. However, a few students were alert to the possibility that some people may take the opportunity offered by the postcard to voice their disapproval of refugees coming to Australia.

5d

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Average
%	8	3	8	14	18	22	15	11	2	4.2

This question encouraged students to develop their own opinion about the future suggested in the postcard. Better answers restated what this future was before expressing a point of view. Most importantly, they also referred both to the representation and to the material students had studied in class. There was a danger here of answers becoming diatribes, and evidence being no more than the rehashing of stereotypes. Better answers, such as the following, contained a reasoned argument supported by a range of evidence, whether they saw a positive or bleak future.

This postcard shows Mina's future as being one of opportunity and happiness. It implies that for refugees that are able to obtain visas, life can move on and they can contribute to society. However...Australian policy is so strict on refugees as to whether they can obtain refugee status, many remain in detention centers for years. So for refugees fleeing conflict the future they face may be one of imprisonment for a long time to come. As for Mina's wish that 'there is no war' the future does not look promising. The 'war on terror' continues as more troops invade foreign countries creating more refugees.

Section D

Question 6

Question Chosen	0	a	b	c
%	3	23	7	67

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Criteria 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	4	11	14	31	33	8	3.0

Criteria 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	9	9	17	39	23	4	2.7

Criteria 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	10	10	15	36	24	6	2.7

Criteria 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	9	9	24	33	21	3	2.6

Criteria 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	12	11	18	27	27	6	2.6

This question gave students the opportunity to demonstrate a detailed knowledge and understanding of the study as well as their particular interests and specialisation during the year. Unfortunately, some students had run out of steam by the time they reached this point and were unable to muster the stamina to give their answers the depth and attention to all the criteria that they required.

6a

Students who chose this question were required to define **Australian citizenship** and **globalisation**; however, too many rushed into an answer and took the meaning of both these terms to be self-evident. Most students argued that globalisation presented mixed blessings for Australian citizenship; it was interesting though that very few saw Australian citizens as **agents** of globalisation.

Globalisation, whether seen as threatening:

...our culture begins to take on features of others, in particular America, causing us to lose our own national identity. We begin to get caught up in non-Australian merchandise, trends and behaviours.

or benign:

Globalisation has also led to the increased flow of migration. Australia has seen large intakes of people following WWI and WWII and more recently a surge of refugees from the Middle East. This introduction of new cultures, new religions and broadening ethnic groups has in the eyes of many threatened Australia and its concept of citizenship. But to many others this can only educate and culturally enrich Australian citizenship and national identity...the external influences are creating a new kind of citizen, a global citizen.

was usually characterised as a force **acting on** the Australian culture, economy or polity. Nevertheless, students who explored the impact of this perceived force on all of these areas, using specific examples like the recent Free Trade Agreement with the US, migration and refugee policies, global campaigns for human rights and environmental protection, the rise of the One Nation Party and participation in the 'war against terror', scored highly in this question.

6b

This was the least popular of the three questions, perhaps because it was thought to present fewer opportunities to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding about contemporary Australian society that the student had developed during the year. If this was indeed the calculation that students made, then it is to be encouraged; students need to think carefully about their choice of questions in Section D in order to maximise their marks.

This question called upon students to identify 'new forms of communication'; for most this meant the Internet, but stronger answers considered the impact of mobile phones (and for some, TV and cars) as well. They also had to identify 'two groups previously excluded from many democratic practices'. Indigenous Australians and women were the two groups most frequently identified, though there were some interesting arguments mounted about the empowerment of school children. The quality of responses hinged on the clear definition of key terms. What, for example, did students mean by 'democratic practices? Voting? Expressing opinion in the print and electronic media, or in the workplace or the family home? Organising and/or attending public meetings? Striking? Picketing? Boycotting? The best answers

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included at least some of these activities in arguing for the existence of greater inclusion, though not necessarily of greater empowerment.

6c

This was easily the most popular question of the three in Section D. Students were asked to develop a response to the claim that there is a clear gap between the theory of equality for all Australian citizens and the reality of that equality. Once again, students who spent time clarifying what was meant by Australian citizenship – and who were able to move beyond a legalistic definition – found it easier to develop an informed and focused argument. While most students were able to identify at least two groups to discuss (indigenous Australians and women being the most popular), many relied on a few general statements about the comparative disadvantage of these ‘groups’, supported by, at best, anecdotal evidence, which did not allow them to score highly across the five assessment criteria. Students who chose to look at asylum seekers did not always make it clear that they were **not** Australian citizens.