May 2018 extended essay reports

Economics EE

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-6	7-13	14-20	21-26	27-34

The range and suitability of the work submitted

As always, there was a wide range in terms of the quality of the essays. Students who wrote about an appropriate topic, with a clearly-focused research question were more likely to be able to build an argument and earn higher marks.

There were fewer market structure essays, which was a good thing. With few exceptions, those students that pursued market structure investigations were unable to carry out appropriate analysis, but tended to rely on replicating very basic textbook material with extra padding from superficial consumer surveys.

As demonetisation in India was a very topical issue, there were a lot of essays on this topic. However, the majority were far too broad to be effective.

The ‘sharing economy’, particularly ride-sharing, was also a popular topic, but as this is a rather recent economic phenomenon, it is difficult for students to carry out meaningful analysis, and the essays were largely descriptive, or ineffective attempts at applying market structure theory.

It would appear that most schools are aware of the five-year rule, as relatively few students breached the rule. Nonetheless, it is valuable to clarify the meaning of this ‘rule’. The five-year rule was designed to prevent students from writing an economic history essay about a policy/issue/event that occurred more than five years ago. Students should choose a policy/issue/event that has taken place within the last five years, but in order to build a good argument, it may be necessary to research and use information from before as well as after the event.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

In this first application of the new criteria, it is clear that many students/supervisors are unaware that there are multiple strands to the criterion.

Although the marks for this criterion are awarded on a holistic basis, covering the whole essay, the early pages of the essay are critical is setting out the focus and method.

In the first strand of this criterion, students must outline the purpose of the research. Very often, the economic theory central to the topic and the research question was not indicated in the early part of the essay.

Many students were unable to effectively communicate the academic purpose of the research. It was not unusual for students to give a personal anecdote about why the topic was interesting to them. However, personal motivation does not serve as the purpose for an academic investigation. The place for personal reflection is in the RPPF form.

Another problem occurred when students did not adequately contextualise the research question - either in terms of the time frame or the geographical context. The context should be included in the actual research question.

There was a tendency to frame far too many research questions in the format of a “To what extent. . ..” question, where the students actually made no attempt to develop an argument in response to the actual question they had asked. If asking a question framed in this format, it would be necessary to examine **alternative** points and give relative importance to the different points.

Too often, the discussion in the essays strayed away from the actual RQ where students tried to include as much economic theory as possible, limiting their success in the second strand.

It is expected that students carry out relevant and meaningful secondary research. This includes both research into the economic theory, and also research into the specific topic. Many students relied on very basic Internet revision sites or broad sites such as Investopedia. While these can be useful starting points, if students want to achieve higher marks, the depth and breadth of the research needs to be wider. Primary research can be valuable, but is not compulsory. Many students gathered masses of irrelevant primary data through surveys/questionnaires. Where surveys were carried out, it was remarkable how many students did not explain the methodology of the sampling.

Many students were aware that methodology is an important element, and so specifically explained their methodology in a separate paragraph or section. This is valuable. However, when explaining the methodology, there was very often a lack of detail. Students would say that there was a survey, or an interview, or a certain book was used, without saying how the source was going to help to answer the research question. With this approach, it was difficult for many students to show that their selection of sources was informed.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

Too often, the students set out the theory in a discrete section followed by research and analysis as a separate section. When this occurred, students were able to achieve some credit for the use of terminology, but without applying the theory to their own topic, it was difficult for them to show understanding and effective use of the research.

Too many students used theory that was not relevant to their actual question, perhaps to be seen to be including more economic analysis. Economic theory should not be included unless there is evidence to justify its inclusion.

In many cases, students carried out a lot of primary research, but the data generated did not sufficiently address the RQ. There might have been pages of tables or graphs that indicated primary research, but this research did not generate meaningful evidence to answer the question. In such cases, the poor primary research limited the ability of students to perform well in this criterion for several reasons. It meant that the selection of the source material was only partly appropriate/effective and often showed an anecdotal knowledge of the topic.

Inaccurate and incomplete labelling in diagrams indicated a lack of understanding. Generic (downloaded) diagrams are not ideal as they prevent the student from effectively applying the theory to their own case study.

Criterion C: critical thinking

In the first strand of this criterion, a very significant problem was a notable lack of critical awareness, with very few students being aware of any bias or lack of reliability in their sources. Students were also rarely cognizant of the implicit assumptions and limitations of economic theory.

Very few students achieved top marks in the second strand. Most students found it hard to break out of a descriptive treatment of a topic, and where there was analysis, it was often superficial.

Where students collected primary data with minimal relevance, their achievement level in this criterion was negatively affected, as the ‘analysis’ was usually simply a description of the results rather than an application of the analysis to the RQ. Furthermore, in cases where students carried out surveys, there would often be a rather contrived sentence stating that the sample size might have been too small or narrowly-based, but this was usually an add-on, a superficial claim, rather than an awareness of the true limitations of the research.

Very often, students made contentions or assertions that were perfectly plausible, but were unsupported by their research. For example, it is quite plausible that consumption of a certain good would cause negative externalities, but, without evidence from the research, it is an unsupported assertion. It is quite remarkable how many essays on market structure included a kinked demand curve diagram with no evidence to support its inclusion.

Given that Criterion C specifically includes a reference to “conclusions to individual points of analysis”, it is disappointing that so many students failed to provide any interim conclusions. This was a sign that they had lost sight of their focus and were not establishing an argument in response to the RQ.

Very importantly, critical awareness of primary and secondary information needed to be shown **throughout the essay**. A significant majority of students inappropriately compartmentalised their evaluation/critical thinking into a separate section at the end.

Criterion D: presentation

Generally, essays were presented well and the vast majority performed in the top mark band 3-4. Clearly candidates and supervisors are familiar with this aspect of the EE.

Where full marks were not awarded, common problems included:

- Missing elements (cover page, table of contents, page numbers, bibliography)
- A Table of Contents page with no page numbers
- Page numbers not matching the table of contents
- Illegible diagrams
- Excessive use of irrelevant photos that broke up the flow of the essay
- Poorly-organised bibliographies.
- Mixed-up fonts

Research conducted in languages other than English can be very valuable. However, when this research is noted in citations and the bibliography, a translation of the name of the text should be included.

Criterion E: engagement

The vast majority of reflections were largely descriptive with a nod to skills development or decision-making by the third reflection. Many candidates did not seem to understand that they should be reflecting upon, and evaluating their decision making and planning, and not just describing it.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Above all, students need to be familiar with the criteria, and the significance of the different strands within each of the criteria.

If students choose Economics as the subject of their Extended Essay, it is hoped that they have a decent understanding of basic economic theory, but are prepared to do some research to extend their knowledge of the theory and gather good, reliable data which they can analyse in the context of the theory. Reliance on Investopedia or simple revision websites is unlikely to deliver a high quality of analysis. Students may use any economic theory; this includes any of the models in the IB course, but may also include theory that is not on the course.

In order to score highly on Criterion A, it is necessary to outline the purpose of the research. The question that students implicitly need to answer is: “Why would it be valuable to have an answer to this research question?”

In Criterion B, students must be sure to apply any theory that they use to their case study, and not include any theory for which they have no relevant research/evidence.

Students should **not** have a separate section for the economic theory. Any theory used should be in the context of the RQ – that is, the theory needs to be applied to the research.

No diagram, chart, table or picture should ever be included unless information in the graphic is relevant to the RQ and is **used** in the discussion. When a graphic is used, it should be contextualised before it is included (so that the student can write something like: “As shown in the following diagram). To indicate analysis, the information in the diagram must be used in the discussion. If there are numbers in the data, the numbers should be used to make the argument – the analysis must **not** be left up to reader. Wherever possible actual values should be incorporated into the diagrams.

Diagrams should rarely be included if there is no evidence to support their relevance to the RQ. For example, an essay looking at a non-collusive oligopoly should not indiscriminately include a kinked demand curve if there is no evidence of the behaviour associated with such a curve.

If theories or diagrams are included that are not supported by evidence, the student should note that the situation might be explained by the theory, but that there is no evidence to prove firmly that the theory is valid. For example, where it appears that a firm is operating in monopolistic competition and is not making abnormal profits, but the student does not have proof of this, then the explanation should make clear that it is an assumption and has not been empirically proven.

Students should be urged to provide conclusions to individual points of analysis and ensure that these conclusions are clearly related to the RQ. A standard way to encourage this would be to recommend that when drafting the essay, the student should use the RQ as a header. They can then regularly look up to the header and try to provide a conclusion after each point of analysis to respond to the RQ. This helps to build an argument to the RQ.

The students should **not** have a separate section entitled “Evaluation’ or ‘Limitations’ at the end. Critical awareness should be demonstrated throughout the essay through the students being aware of the validity of their information and the possible limitations of their argument. Very importantly, the essay should clearly note any assumptions that have been made in setting out the argument and reaching the conclusions.