



Pearson

Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2020

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced
Level in Geography (WGE03_01)
Unit 3: Contested Planet

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Introduction

The January entry for WGE03 is smaller than the June entry, so making generalisations about performance is harder to make. However, a number of issues are worth raising about performance on this examination paper which can be used to inform preparation for future examinations:

- Question 4 Energy Security was more popular than Question 5 Water Conflicts.
- Question 6 Superpower Geographies was more popular than Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap.
- The difference in quality of answers between optional questions is very small.

Some overall observations:

- Use of place-based examples is a general weakness, with significant numbers managing to answer 10 and 15 mark questions without any reference to specific geographical locations.
- Many candidates need to pause and read questions more carefully. Question 1a used the phrase 'people and economy' and these must be both addressed, not conflated into a general 'impacts'.
- Most Figures were interpreted successfully by candidates: as a general rule if there is numerical data on a Figure (such as Figures 3 and 4) candidates should try to use this as part of their answer to increase precision.
- Figures should be fully used: for instance, Figure 2 showed decreasing, stable and increasing populations of African elephants so answer only focussed on possible reasons for decrease are only partial explanations.
- Extended writing skills are generally sound, however too few candidates grasp the importance of making a judgement or decision in the 15 mark and 20 mark essay questions that use high-level command words i.e. assess and especially evaluate.
- Performance on the synoptic question (Question 3) continues to improve, with most candidates moving beyond simply agreeing with the contention and suggesting alternative factors or explanations. Candidates must expect to use some knowledge and understanding from Paper 1 within this question.

Question 1a Atmosphere and Weather Systems

There was a tendency, in this and other questions, to use acronyms such as MEDC / LEDC / LIC within answers. It is important the candidates are familiar with the developing / emerging / developed terminology used in the Specification and within questions.

Generally, Figure 1 was understood very well, and candidates referred to it in their answers. There was a marked difference between answers that referred generally to 'drought' and those that recognised that impacts would be especially severe in some periods (2013-2016) but much less serious at other times (2009-2012). The question was not asking for an explanation of why drought occurs in California which some answers slipped into. A number of answers spent far too long describing Figure 1 rather than explaining the impacts of the information shown. A further weakness was referring to California as 'at risk from famine' or 'starvation' which is not the case in this developed country. Many answers did recognise that the USA could cope with these droughts but speculated that farming would be badly hit and impacts on water security, farm incomes, farm costs and possibly water consumers (industrial and domestic) could be significant. Many answers provided a clear definition of drought in the first few lines of their answer – good practice as well as a good way to focus the mind on the topic.

Some weaker answers were really extended lists of impacts or drifted into environmental impacts which are not part of the question. The human and economic impacts of wildfires were often explained successfully.

Question 1b Atmosphere and Weather Systems

On the face of it this question appears fairly straightforward, but a small number of candidates made it much more demanding by failing to focus on 'extreme weather events'. A number of answers were about earthquakes and especially tsunami. The latter are generated by tectonic processes not weather events.

There were some good answers, but many were generalised and lacking in examples and reference to place. This question was the ideal one to use named examples (case studies) of the management of extreme weather. A small number of answers were place based but many managed to write an entire answer in very general terms. Due to this, named organisations did not appear but rather very general reference to 'NGOs' and 'governments'. In some cases, no specific weather hazard was referred to. There was occasionally a drift into general 'development aid' rather than a specific focus on aid in the context of a disaster and a drift into things like response to disease outbreaks e.g. the Ebola crisis. As with some other questions a few candidates move as quickly as they can into 'global warming' and focussed on Kyoto / Paris and other management of global warming – which is not the management of extreme weather events.

The best answers were evaluative i.e. they considered which groups / organisations had the most impact on successful management and mentioned other factors such as development level, magnitude and degree

of predictability – all of which have an influence on how well communities cope. These answers were quite rare.

Question 2 Biodiversity under Threat

This question was usually answered quite successfully. Exceptions were answers that spent too long describing the pattern (often for a whole paragraph), which is not what the question demands. This tendency to describe also afflicted Question 1 and Question 4a.

A number of answers focussed almost entirely on areas with decreasing populations of elephants and reasons for this – providing only a partial response to the stimulus material provided.

Nevertheless, a number of answers were more structured and considered all three situations shown on the map. There were many good explanations of why populations might be declining including habitat destruction, illegal hunting, urbanisation and expansion of farmland due to rising populations. The Environmental Kuznet's curve idea was often used as part of an explanation, and climate change linked to habitat loss and even altered patterns of migration were also seen. There was a generally sound understanding of the role of conservation and national parks/ wildlife reserves in explaining stable / increasing populations – often linked to the economic benefits of tourism. Mention of specific strategies such as CITES or the work of specific NGOs such as WWF was much less common.

Question 3 Synoptic

This question is quite high demand, because it links together at least two topics and demands some thought and 'thinking like a Geographer'. The question was quite an open one, as in the past, and this means that a wide range of answers are possible (and encouraged). However, arguments must be convincing, evidence provided and an evaluative judgement made ("to what extent...").

The word 'hazardous' was left open to interpretation, but candidates should not need reminding that Unit 1 is largely about natural hazards / disasters and the climate change threat. Where 'hazardous' was interpreted in terms of online / internet hazards or disease threat answers tended to be less successful as much because of a tenuous link to urbanization as anything else. A number of answers lacked the urban focus needed and instead provided accounts of Australian bush-fires which are largely rural. Other less than wholly successful approaches included how urbanization leads to ecosystem destruction, and the general costs and benefits of urban living.

The stronger answers often focused on rising urban populations in terms of population density, slums, housing in unsuitable locations and governments which lacked the resources to manage risk. Flooding, earthquake risk and cyclones were often used, and better answers referred to specific events and urban locations. A very common form of evaluation was to argue that urbanization was linked to better educated, wealthier, better prepared people and so hazard risk was not necessarily higher. Many answers mentioned global warming although in some cases this was focused on at the expense of other themes and some stated links between urbanization

and global warming were at best weakly expressed. Overall answers were slightly stronger than on previous papers.

Question 4 Energy Security

This question was significantly more popular than Question 5. In part 4a the issue remains many candidates' inability to write extended explanations and instead a tendency to list factors rather than explain them. Answers tended to state that future population is uncertain, future affluence levels are uncertain, future oil use is uncertain – without explaining how this might be linked to the data on Figure 3. The term 'primary energy' was often not fully understood and the term 'secondary energy' was often used to refer to renewable energy (rather than electricity). Reasons such as uncertainty over future energy demand in emerging countries (linked to wealth levels, and attitudes to pollution / renewable) were quite rare.

In part 4b all answers focussed on nuclear power, although understanding of the nature of this energy source varied. A number of answers were very negative and focused on nuclear plant disasters and nuclear waste almost to the exclusion of anything else. These 'Chernobyl style' answers lacked any kind of balanced assessment of nuclear energy and focussed on the impacts when things go wrong, not nuclear power's impact on energy security. The relationship between civilian nuclear power and military nuclear weapons is not understood by all.

Better answers often began with a definition of energy security and considered their answer from that standpoint. There were many good outlines of the advantages and disadvantages of nuclear power, which often then moved on to argue that other sources of energy were actually better in terms of overall energy security. Because these answers were comparative they tended to naturally lead to an overall assessment in the form of a conclusion. Somewhat lacking was an appreciation of the huge up-front cost of nuclear which is a key reason preventing its wider adoption.

Question 5 Water Conflicts

There were very few answers to this question, making generalisations difficult.

Part 5a was parallel, broadly, to part 4a and the style of answers was similar. The key is to make an extended point (2 marks) which has a link to the data shown – such as recognising the very wide range of about 3000km³ between the high and low projections which could be explained by very large differences in future levels of population and the development level of this population. The majority of points made are not extended ones linked to data.

Part 5b answers usually showed good understanding of intermediate technology and a number of answers used a range of named examples of technologies in a place context. This support helps greatly. The focus was almost always on low-income areas with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa often referred to. The advantages and disadvantages of intermediate technology were usually explained successfully. Some good answers argued such technology might be vulnerable to climate change, so might not be a long-term solution and strong answers often argued that in terms of scale

and extent of water scarcity that some hi-tech options were inevitable e.g. desalination and large dams (especially as development led to demand growth). These answers provided a genuine assessment using a comparative approach.

Question 6 Superpower Geographies

The more popular option, many answers began with a definition of 'superpower' – certainly not a requirement but a good way to focus on the question. A number of answers conflated 'physical resources' and 'geographical spheres of influence' and did not deal with them separately. The overall impression was that spheres of influence were not well understood by quite a few candidates.

Weak answers were occasionally afflicted by too much of a focus on 'news' specifically President Trump – and not on the Specification content. Recent news items can be very useful and up to date knowledge is encouraged, but it needs to have more depth than partially understood 'headlines'.

Nevertheless there were good answers that focussed on the Arctic and its resources, as well as China's resource focus in Africa. Less often seen, but very relevant to the question was consideration of China's actions in the South and East China seas. For Level 3 and higher answers really needed to tackle the issues of 'inevitable' and few did this. However a small number did take this on and argued that in many cases global IGOs might be able to manage tensions – the work of the UN over EEZs was mentioned and bi-lateral or multi-lateral talks to resolve issues. An evaluation is needed, not just knowledge and understanding of existing tensions.

Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap

This option was less popular than Question 6. Most answers did have a good grasp of the question and covered both women as a group and ethnic minority groups. There was often less focus on 'economic' and 'social' specifically, but nevertheless a sound link to development more generally. As with Question 6, answers that referred to specific place-based examples tended to be more convincing and more evaluative. Examples in the Middle East, parts of Africa and in some cases wealthier regions were referred to illustrate inequality. Other groups were rarely considered, and in many cases no difference was seen between the level of disadvantage between women versus ethnic minorities. A small number of answers did attempt to tackle this aspect by arguing that in more developed regions women had overcome many barriers whereas ethnic minority groups may not have done. The command phrase 'to what extent' was often not really addressed in answers.

Exam format reminder

It is important to understand that the examination question types and mark tariffs for WGE03 do not vary from one examination series to the next. However, within Sections A, B and C the questions will vary from one series to another. This variation is random and does not conform to a pattern. Some important points to note are:

- In Section A, Question 3 is a synoptic question and it will always be a 15 mark essay question.

- In Section A, there will always be a 10-mark data stimulus question on both A1 Atmosphere and A2 Biodiversity. The 15-mark essay question could be on either A1 or A2.
- In any exam series, Section B will either consist of a 5 mark stimulus question plus a 15 mark essay question, or a 20 mark essay question.
- Section C will be the opposite structure to Section B in any given examination series.

Please see the WGE03 Contested Planet Assessment Guide for further details:

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/International%20Advanced%20Level/Geography/2016/Teaching%20and%20learning%20materials/Contested-Planet-Unit-3-WGE03-Assessment-Guide.pdf>