Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2023

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level
In Geography (WGE03)
Unit 3: Contested Planet

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Introduction

This exam series for WGEO3 Contested Planet had an entry slightly larger than in the first few January exam series in 2018 and 2019. Candidates, as always wrote some interesting geography and well-informed, technical answers were produced by some candidates. Overall, the standard of answers was good, but perhaps a little more variable than of late. It is worth noting that WGE03 represents 60% of the Year 13 content so preparing for a January exam is a challenge.

The majority of answers were focussed on the questions as set, and as with the June 2022 exam series the major global 'news' issues of Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict were only mentioned when relevant to specific questions. This is very positive.

Most candidates wrote full answers to all questions and there was limited evidence of timing problems i.e. few 'blank' answer spaces or rushed answers.
In terms of the questions that are optional:

- Question 4 Energy Security was more popular than Q5 Water Conflicts (roughly a 60/40 split).
- Question 6 Superpower Geographies and Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap were equally popular.
- The difference in quality of answers between optional questions was small, although understanding of 'bottom-up' development in question 7b was a little disappointing.

Some overall observations:

- Data stimulus questions (those using a Figure in the Resource Booklet) are still sometimes answered with limited reference to the data provided. These questions test the skill of interpreting geographical data and answers which fail to show this will score low marks.
- Candidates often waste time describing data for which there are no marks: the questions always use the command words 'explain' or 'suggest reasons' i.e., *why* not *what*. This was especially true in Question 2 with often up to half a page of description of the map provided before any reasons were offered.
- Mark schemes refer to 'evidence': this can come in the form of examples, case studies, data, facts, detailed reference to places, concepts and geographical theory. This is important in terms of overall mark.
- 15- and 20-mark questions that use the command words 'assess', 'to what extent' or 'evaluate' benefit from a conclusion which is often missing from candidate answers.

Country classification
Centres should note that the country classifications used in the Specification (see page 75 of the Specification) are:

- **Developed**
- **Emerging**
- **Developing**

These divisions are based on the **Human Development Index**. Many candidates use the terms MEDC and LEDC, or HIC and LIC. These are acceptable terms to use in answers, but centres need to be aware that they will not be used in examination questions, or mark schemes.
Candidates should avoid use of the term '**Third World**' which did appear in some answers. This is a Cold War era term, largely referring to former colonies, and is anachronistic at best.

Question 1: Atmosphere and Weather Systems
In general, answers to this question ranged from reasonably good to very good. The geography shown on Figure 1 was understood by most in term of the ocean basin and development level of the countries affected by the three tropical cyclones. Most answers could like the deaths / numbers of people affected and economic losses to differences in wind speeds and some recognised the importance of very low air pressure on the scale of storm surges. Quite a number of answers realised that TC Idai's 'returning' path could have contributed to its severe impact. A number of answers considered the long track of TC Fani as an issue i.e. a long time to gain energy, but also quite predictable. The number of countries struck by the three cyclones was often mentioned as an explanation for the different impacts but this is a bit of a red herring – much more significant is the population density of areas impacted. Weaknesses included an entire paragraph of description at the start of answers (this was very common) that gained no marks plus unbalanced coverage as some answers on mentioned two of the TCs, not all three.

Question 2a: Biodiversity under Threat
The quality of answers was similar to Question 1 i.e., generally good. Most answers made good use of Figure 2 and referred to all 4 global regions and in many cases different time periods: such as arguing the changes in public opinion and political decision-making might account for the slightly lower deforestation in South America 2010-2019. Many answers had a range of explanations linked to development level, demand for new land, exploitation of resources (timber, minerals, palm oil) and attitudes to conservation. There were some weaker answers. These tended to focus on global warming as the cause of deforestation: this is not the main driver of deforestation as it is more likely to degrade forests than remove them. Some answers viewed the main cause of deforestation as demand for energy resources: this is one driver but again not the main one (some of these answers felt like answers to an Energy Security question). A common weakness was lack of reference to the numerical data on Figure 2.

Question 2b: Biodiversity under Threat

Answers to this question were quite variable in terms of quality, and were often either quite good or quite weak. The best started with a definition of ecosystem services and this was quite often seen. There is a need to differentiate between provisioning / cultural services (which many considered to have strong local value) and regulating/ supporting services which were often linked to global value.

However, a number of answers were clearly unfamiliar with the Specification and the concept of ecosystem services. These answers often focussed wholly on the value of economic goods, or else answered a very different question about Global and Local ways to protect and conserve ecosystems. Usefully, stronger answers did often include reference to real places and specific ecosystems i.e., were supported / used evidence. Many answers referred to the carbon cycle and the role of biomes in regulating climate (although some were fixated with oxygen production, rather than carbon sequestration). Good answers do need to make a judgment (s) as the command word used in this question is 'assess': candidates need to leave time to make a conclusion and many do not do this.

Question 3: Synoptic

The synoptic question is usually 'set up' in a similar way i.e. a contention that could be wholly agreed with, rejected, or debated. It is the debated option which is indicated by the command phrase 'evaluate the view' or 'to what extent'. Answers, in this case, that focus entirely on global warming as the 'most important factor' can score full marks. However, that approach is challenging and the task becomes less demanding if other factors are considered.

In the case of this question, it is relatively straightforward to link global warming to increased risk of weather hazard such as cyclones, drought, flooding and wildfires. But the risk of disaster also depends on the vulnerability of human population, population density, level of preparedness – i.e., other factors.

Some answers to this question were little more than long lists of hazards which can be linked to global warming. This type of very descriptive answer cannot score the AO2 marks in the mark scheme. More worryingly, a few answers considered the risk from earthquakes and tsunami, which are not weather hazards or disasters. There was, not uncommonly, some confusion over the use of the terms global warming, the greenhouse effect and enhanced greenhouse effect: these terms of not synonyms and need to be used correctly. Lastly a few answers drifted into climate change causes such as Milankovitch cycles which are not linked to either the timescale, or cause of, global warming. The number of answers that explained how global warming might be linked to a greater risk of flood / drought / cyclone disasters and then moved into an 'on the other hand' discussion of other factors that might increase weather disaster risk was quite small.

Question 4: Energy Security

Question 4 was answered quite successfully by many candidates. In general, knowledge and understanding of energy issues is good. Most candidates had a good grasp of the concept of economic cost and most understood the idea if public perception: this was most often linked to views on nuclear power and renewable energy. A number of answers began by defining energy security as affordable, reliable and available energy sources. This provided a structured focus for their essay and is good practice. In many cases answers were supported by reference to real places i.e., country specific energy security situations, decisions made about national energy mix and perceptions in different countries. Again, good practice in terms of providing evidence to support an argument. Almost all answers seen made some reference to both economic cost and public perception. Answers that moved beyond these two factors were rarer: some answers did consider physical availability e.g., the widespread use of shale gas and oil in the USA making it likely that these fossil fuels continue to be used regardless of other factors. Equally, other answers pointed out that in some authoritarian countries (China) there is little role of public perception as decision-making is totally centralised. There was less reference to specific players (TNCs, governments, energy supply companies, NGOs) than might have been expected.

Question 5: Water conflicts

Less popular than Question 4, but of very similar demand, this question was answered slightly less well overall. For some candidates the issue was conflating the word 'climate' in the question with 'climate change'. Those that did this tended to write an answer that was focussed on how global warming is affecting water supply and this is not the direction of the question. A number of answers focussed on other factors that can affect water security (conflict, transboundary issues, economic development and population growth) but provided very little information on climate or geology as a factor. Some answers did provide an overview of how climate zones influence precipitation and thus water supply: there was some mention of high / low pressure areas and the ITCZ, and occasional mention of atmospheric cells but this was usually partial / in passing. This climate / global circulation 'big picture' is important in understanding why some areas of the world are invariably water poor whereas others enjoy good supply at least from the atmosphere. In contrast to Question 4, fewer definitions of water insecurity were seen – this was a useful way to begin (and was occasionally seen). Geology was perhaps better understood as a factor than climate, with permeable / impermeable rocks and aquifers often explained. Some stronger answers did move into other factors such as rising population and resource demand (India), water pollution reducing water quality and the concept of economic water scarcity. These latter answers were much more likely to include a convincing conclusion.

Questions 6a and 6b: Superpower Geographies
Most answers to Question 6a were successful, although some provided a general overview of Figure 3 without referring to the three specific regions. A number of responses explained the change in the middle class numbers – which is not what the question is asking for. Most answers did focus on environmental issues.

The main issue within answers to Question 6b was confusion over what an 'emerging superpower' might be. Many answers focussed in the BRICs, but some considered the USA an emerging power and focussed, unsuccessfully, only on that country. It is, of course, relevant to compare emerging superpowers to the USA in order to judge strengths and weaknesses. Quite a few answers narrowly focussed on only one country, usually China (the question used the plural 'superpowers') and this does make an assessment harder to achieve. A few answers were more focussed on the costs and benefits of globalisation than superpower strengths and weaknesses and these answers were really WGE01 in focus, not WGEO3. Although a little more challenging to write and plan, answers that were structured by strengths and weaknesses, rather than country by country, tended to be more successful as these were more comparative and covered more ground: often this style of response used some of the 'pillars of power' (economic, military, cultural, demographic) as a way of organising paragraphs, discussing and moving towards a conclusion.

Questions 7a and 7b: Bridging the Development Gap
A weakness of answers to Question 7a (more so than question 6a) was describing Figure 4 rather than identifying how the changes shown might affect people. Phrases such as 'postively impacted on people' were often used in answers but without explaining what these impacts might be. Again, the question is not asking for an explanation of why the numbers in poverty have changed but rather the impacts of the changes. Cause and effect were confused in some answers.

Some answers to Question 7b were very good. However, there was a slightly surprising lack of understanding, from some, about what bottom-up development might be. A few explained it in terms of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by TNCs or very large projects run by governments or funded by the World Bank. These examples are more usually considered top-down development approaches. Reference to top-down is of course relevant in an answer, if it is being used as a way of identifying what is 'good' about bottom-up development by identifying what is 'bad' about top-down. Some answers only discussed top-down whereas others used a range of examples which were hit-and-miss in terms of their relevance. That said, stronger answers focussed on NGO and community led projects with clear social and cultural benefits but also argued that the scale and funding o bottom-up approaches was often limited so their overall impact, especially on incomes, could be small.

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

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