Pearson Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2024

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Subsidiary Level In Geography (WGE03)
Paper 01: Contested Planet

Edexcel and BTEC Qualifications

Edexcel and BTEC qualifications are awarded by Pearson, the UK's largest awarding body. We provide a wide range of qualifications including academic, vocational, occupational and specific programmes for employers. For further information visit our qualifications websites at www.edexcel.com or www.btec.co.uk. Alternatively, you can get in touch with us using the details on our contact us page at www.edexcel.com/contactus.

Pearson: helping people progress, everywhere

Pearson aspires to be the world's leading learning company. Our aim is to help everyone progress in their lives through education. We believe in every kind of learning, for all kinds of people, wherever they are in the world. We've been involved in education for over 150 years, and by working across 70 countries, in 100 languages, we have built an international reputation for our commitment to high standards and raising achievement through innovation in education. Find out more about how we can help you and your students at: www.pearson.com/uk

January 2024
Publications Code WGE03_01_2401_ER

Introduction

This January examination series for WGE03 Contested Planet continued a long-term trend of increasing entries. Candidates wrote some good answers using competent geographical terminology.

Paper 3 Contested Planet has a significant amount of content and it was clear, as has been the case in the past, that some candidates were not perhaps as well-prepared as they might have been. It is a challenge to cover all the WGE03 content and be fully prepared in terms of exam skills for a January exam. There were noticeable 'gaps' in knowledge and understanding from some candidates.

The majority of answers were focussed on the questions set. It was noticeable that the ongoing (as of Feb 24) Israel-Palestine conflict featured in answers to question 6 and even question 4. Generally, it is advisable to avoid 'live' global issues which in most cases are not mentioned in the specification.

Most candidates wrote full answers to all questions and there was limited evidence of timing problems. There were a small number of 'blank' answers, most often in response to question 2 (a).

In terms of the questions that are optional:

- Question 4 Energy Security was more popular (62% of answers) than Q5 Water Conflicts (38% of answers).
- Question 6 Superpower Geographies was more popular (73% of answers) than Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap (27% of answers).
- Difference in quality of answers between optional questions was not generally noticeable, although answers to Q7 were sometimes more focussed on the question and more logically argued.

Some overall observations:

- Data stimulus questions (those using a figure in the resource booklet) are often 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 lose time describing data for which there is no marks: the questions always use the command words 'explain' or 'suggest reasons' i.e., *why* not *what*. This was especially obvious in question 1 where many answers described Figure 1 for about 25% of their answer.
- 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. Factual accuracy was noticeably worse than in previous exam series.
- 15 and 20-mark questions that use the command words 'assess', 'to what extent' or 'evaluate' benefit from a conclusion which is often missing (or simplistic) from candidate answers.

- Some important specification terminology used in question was poorly understood by some candidates. This included 'ecosystem services' and 'weather hazards' – the latter is often taken to include tectonic hazards by some candidates.

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 still appears in some answers. This is a Cold War era term, largely referring to former colonies, and is anachronistic at best.

Q1 Atmosphere and weather systems

Question 1

This question often suffered from much description of the three maps in figure 1. There are no marks awarded, directly, for describing a figure. Candidates need to refer to places/data from figure 1 as part of their explanation. Please advise candidates against beginning their answer with a paragraph of description.

Some answers focussed heavily on economic impacts rather than impacts on 'people' and the 'environment'. Clearly some economic impacts are linked to 'people' but answers often omitted impacts on health. Some answers made no direct reference to places or data on figure 1.

A number of answers explained, in great detail, the causes of the heat wave conditions shown. This is not the focus of the question. It is focussed on *consequences* (impacts) not *causes*. In some answers there was a lack of realism related to Europe: even with a very serious heatwave (which this was) European countries do not suffer from famine and starvation. The other main issue was timescales. This heatwave was a short-term weather phenomenon (it is not Europe's 'climate') and as such impacts such as desertification and extinction are not realistic. That said, there where good answers which focussed on both people and environment in a balanced way and explained impacts such as heat-stroke, dehydration, pressure on health services, forest fires and many others in a detailed way. The best answer often commented that southern Europe might cope better than northern Europe so the impacts would not be the same in all places.

Q2 Biodiversity under Threat

Question 2a

As with question 1, although to a slightly lesser extent, answers often lost time describing what figure 2 shows. Answers need to focus on the management cycle's advantages and disadvantages from the start.

A more significant issue was how far some candidates focussed their answers on the economic advantages and disadvantages of the cycle i.e. profits from selling timber, the economic benefits of biofuels versus fossil fuels, the jobs provided. This is not the focus of the question. 'Biodiversity' and the 'environment' are the focus. Only a small number of answers referred to the impacts on biodiversity in detail. These answers considered issues such as degraded nutrient cycle and disrupted food webs. Some referred to the idea of fragmentation to argue that that 'small areas' protected might not be large enough to support species at the top of the food web. It's worth noting that figure 1 is from Canada so this is not an area of tropical rainforest. Equally, this is forest management in a *developed* country, not a developing one.

Some answers explained other management strategies rather than the one shown on figure 1: this is not a successful approach when understanding of figure 1 is being tested ("this management cycle"). Recognition that secondary/replanted forests are not as biodiverse as primary forests was rarely referred to. A small number of answers did recognise that the replanted forest was likely to be a monoculture and that the 'fast growing species' would provide only a basic food web and in fact could be an alien species, further limiting any recovery in biodiversity following replanting.

Question 2b

This question was perhaps the most problematic on the whole examination paper. Understanding of the phrase 'ecosystem services' was far from universal.

The specification states this: *"Ecosystem services is an important concept - ecosystems have value and importance in terms of biodiversity and ecological resources (supporting, provisioning, cultural and regulating services)."* Centres will note that the wording of Q2b is very close to the wording in the specification in section 3.4.1. The question is not asking candidates about why global and local ecosystems are valued more by some people than others.

Many answers did have a detailed understanding of ecosystem services, but many did not. Most of the latter answers focussed on explaining local and global management strategies, not ecosystem services. The overall message is that understanding of this part of the specification was patchy.

Sitting in between strong and weak answers were some that did focus on the idea of 'value' and referred to different groups and players, but without any specific reference to types of ecosystem services – rather a very generalised concept of value. These answers tended not

to refer to examples and places. There were some good answers, but these were rare. Some argued that cultural and provisioning services are more valued by indigenous groups, (and perhaps by those involved in tourism) whereas regulating services tend to be valued more widely because of their role in planetary health.

Q3 Synoptic question

The quality of these challenging synoptic questions has improved over the years such that the majority or answers are now focussed on the themes stated in the question. More able candidates often introduce other factors/explanations into their answers in order to generate a debate/argument and consider other explanations. This approach is important in terms of the AO2 marks available (10 out of 15 marks).

Most answers focussed on population to a greater of lesser extent. There was a belief from a small minority that world population is declining, which is not the case and not projected to be the case for decades. 'Global population trends' is primarily focussed on numbers, although migration is a legitimate part of an answer. A few candidates focussed wholly on migration and omitted to consider global trends in terms of numbers.

It is worth noting that a surprising number of candidates consider tsunami to be a weather hazard, and some even claim earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are weather hazard. This type of basic misunderstanding undermines answers.

Equally, global warming and weather hazards are not the same thing. While global population increases may well increase emissions and therefore global warming, answers needed to focus on population whereas some jumped straight to rising emissions. The best answers used data to illustrate growing global population numbers, sometimes regionally, and then argued how this might affect risk i.e. higher density urban and coastal populations, greater numbers in drought prone regions such the Sahel. Good answers recognised that other factors such as climate change, poor governance, development level and poverty might be equally, or more important.

Q4 Energy Security

Question 4a

This data stimulus question was generally answered fairly successfully with many candidates able to relate the changing oil price to rapid economic growth in emerging markets (high demand), the Global Financial Crisis, changes in type of energy source (renewables) and periods of conflict/tension.

However, the basic relationship between oil supply and oil demand is often misunderstood. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. It was often argued that the 2007-08 GFC drove up the oil price. The role of OPEC is often misunderstood: OPEC sets production targets for its members which can influence the oil price. OPEC does not set oil prices.

Question 4b

This question was reasonably well answered although there were few very good answers. This was in large part because understanding of the carbon cycle was quite weak. The carbon cycle is in the specification. While a detailed understanding is not required it is necessary to know that fossil fuel burning releases carbon from long-term geological stores, and that this carbon ends up in the atmosphere and oceans – and this creates environmental issues.

Of course, fossil fuel use is not the only human activity altering the carbon cycle as deforestation also does this (for energy resource extraction and more widely for land use change). It was generally well understood that some energy sources such as renewables, nuclear power and biofuels have much lower carbon emissions and that switching to these would have a smaller impact on then carbon cycle.

This understanding was only rarely linked correctly, to how levels of atmospheric GHG might change. It was sometimes stated that carbon emissions/GHG emissions are now falling due to renewable energy switching. This is not the case, at least globally. A few answers focussed on urban air pollution and these were generally not very successful. Some 'technical issues' need further work, for instance CO^2 does not destroy the ozone layer. Stronger answers often considered some especially carbon intensive types of energy, such as tar sands to argue that some fossil fuels had a much greater impact than others.

Q5 Water Conflicts

Question 5a

This question was answered a little better that the parallel question 4a. Overall, there was more clarity on the factors that might explain the change in reservoir level. Most candidates suggested that increased demand could explain the fall and often combined this with a suggestion that long-term drought and/or changes in precipitation due to climate change could have reduced supply. Some strong answers suggested, not unreasonably, that the 2011-2013 increase in level could be due to a 'climate event' such as El Nino changing rainfall patterns, greater snowmelt or even efforts at water conservation/demand management. This showed careful use of figure 4 and good thought processes.

Question 5b

Most candidates had some understanding of transboundary water issues and agreements/frameworks that have been (or are being) used to reduce conflict and share water out fairly. There was, however, a tendency to 'throw' a large number of case studies into the answer in the hope that some might 'stick'. This was not always successful. For instance, China's South-North water transfer project is not 'international' and neither is Australia's 'Big Dry'. These case studies are a poor fit for the question as asked.
Other case studies work better. These include the Nile, Mekong, Ganges and Colorado. However although the overall concepts being discussed in answers were generally accurate i.e. the idea of framework agreements, disputes etc, the geographical accuracy of many case studies was often poor in terms of places, dates, countries involved (for instance the

Colorado River is not a dispute between the USA and Canada). There is no substitute for detailed revision. The Helsinki and Berlin rules are very relevant and often were referred to in answers (but these rules are not an agreement between Finland and Germany).

In terms of 'assessing the success', which is crucial for the AO2 marks, only infrequently were the nature of 'tensions' between countries explored. Water sharing is especially difficult when countries have *other* problems and conflicts between them i.e. water is not the only disagreement. Where demand is growing (or supply falling) tensions might increase as the resource effectively shrinks. In some instances one party to a potential agreement is simply much more powerful than others involved e.g. China.

Q6 Superpower Geographies

This option continues to be the more popular choice in section C. Overall, answers were sound with most understanding what the 'tensions' referred to in the question referred to. As a general point candidates need to be *confident themselves* in deciding which countries are 'superpowers' and 'emerging powers'. Examiners are happy to be convinced that China is an emerging power or a superpower as this depends on the evidence used and the perspective of the candidate. Some are more obvious of course such as the USA or Brazil.

Many answers made reference to examples such as the South China Sea, Eastern Europe/Ukraine and the Arctic is terms of disputed territories and disputed spheres of influence (this term of often used accurately). These examples were generally quite well understood and factually sound. Less convincing was reference the Middle East. In some ways this is understandable as the geopolitics of this region has a long history of complexity – it might be better to avoid it, for some candidates.

Another area that does perhaps need a little reinforcement is the operation of UNCLOS and EEZs. This is very relevant to both the Arctic and South/East China seas but is not that well understood. Most answers made some attempt to differentiate between 'territory' and 'natural resources' and only weaker answers grouped the two together into a 'source of tension'. There were a decent number of answers that make reference to attempt to reduce tensions in forums like the UN or WTO and this often led to answers that were evaluative i.e., arguing that tension and conflict are not inevitable. It's very important not to approach these 20-mark questions from the standpoint of "I agree 100%" because that leads to a lack of debate, and low AO2 marks.

Q7 Bridging the Development Gap

This option is the less popular of those in section C and although there is little difference in overall performance between C1 and C2, very good answers are seen a little more often in C2.

Understanding of aid was generally good with most candidates showing they were aware of different types of aid i.e. multilateral (WB/IMF), bilateral, NGO and emergency aid. A small number of answers focussed quite heavily on emergency aid which is very narrow in the context of the question (and the 'Bridging the Gap' topic as a whole).

The concept of dependency, and dependency theory, was frequently used to make a case for some countries continuing to rely on the 'west' or China for help: a neo-colonial relationship model which can be supported by real-world evidence in some places. It was also quite common to read arguments that some countries can, and have, broken free of dependency and aid and developed into emerging/middle income economies so the inevitability in the question can be countered.

The alternative view (not inevitable) was more often seen in this question than the other 15+ question on this paper. That said, a number of answers were one-sided and simply agreed with the contention in the question. Stronger answers sometimes focussed on a small number of countries (Haiti, DRC, Somalia) where corruption, conflict, poor governance and very low HDI are endemic and long-term. It was argued these countries faced more-or-less permanent barriers to development and were likely to rely on external help for the foreseeable future. Differentiating the experience of countries, or global regions, was key to generating a debate.

Summary and examination format reminder
Performance in this series was varied. Going forward please note the following points when preparing candidates for exams:

- Wording in exam questions closely follows the wording in the specification such as phrases like 'ecosystem services' and 'carbon cycle' point to particular key ideas and bullets points and therefore specific content.
- Questions that use a figure require the figure to be used in detail as a basis for identifying reasons and explanations, all or most of the figure should be referred to in answers. There are no marks for straight description of the 'say what you see' type.
- Evidence (data, facts, dates, named examples, named locations, concepts) are important but these need to be factually accurate.
- 15 and 20 mark answers must focus on the content indicated in the question for at least a significant part of the answer, after that other factors, explanations and views can be introduced and assessed or evaluated.
- 20-mark questions represent a large percentage of the exam paper total marks, and these should be planned to create a logical structure before candidates begin writing.

Examination 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

Pearson Education Limited. Registered company number 872828
with its registered office at 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, United Kingdom