Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2024

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced 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

Summer 2024
Publications Code WGE03_01_2406_ER

Introduction

The entry for WGE03 in summer 2024 was up on the equivalent 2023 entry and overall the quality of responses was good. As discussed below there was variability between responses, as there always is, but the overall standard of answers was pleasing. There were perhaps fewer very weak responses than in the past.

Some general observations worthy of further thought:

- Generally physical geography questions have weaker responses than human geography questions, so Questions 1 and 2(a) were the weakest overall. There were many level 1 responses to Question 1 on tropical cyclones.
- The above is an ongoing issue, not specific to this exam series.
- There were very few 'blank' or no-attempt responses: they were seen most often in Q1 and Q7b.
- Many answers to 15- and 20-mark questions began by defining key terms in the question: this is good practice and especially helpful in terms of focus when candidates are writing in a second language.
- The evidence (examples, data, facts, parts of case studies, concepts) used in in answers is very variable: some candidates write whole essays with very limited reference to actual evidence to back-up their arguments and assertions.
- The Figure questions in Section A still suffer from answers that describe the Figure: the command word 'describe' has never been used on this exam paper. Candidates need to explain, not describe.

In terms of the optional questions in Sections B and C:

- Approximately 40% of answers were to Q5 Water Conflicts and 60% to Q4 Energy Security.
- Approximately 65% of answer were to Q6 Superpowers and 35% to Q7 Development Gap.

The comments on specific questions below should be read in conjunction with the published mark scheme and are written with the aim of identifying strengths and weaknesses and passing this information on to candidates to help improve future performance.

Country classification

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

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

This classification is 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.

Question 1 Atmosphere and weather systems
This question was the most polarised on the examination paper in terms of performance.

There were some very good answers but there were more weak ones, with a significant number only scoring Level 1 marks. As noted above, physical geography and the processes that underpin it can be a weakness. Low performance was a result of:

- Describing the changes shown on figure 1: the skill of description is not being tested when the command word is 'explain'. Some answers filled the whole answer space with 'this happened, then that happened, then this happens' style answers with no reasons / explanations provided at all.
- Figure 1 shows a tropical depression evolving into a tropical cyclone it does not show a mid-latitude (frontal) depression. The latter form through different processes. Contrasting air masses are not involved in tropical depression / cyclone formation and these systems are non-frontal.
- Answers that explained the impacts of the tropical cyclone on people were not answering the question.
- Global warming is not an explanation for the intensity and track of tropical cyclone Ian.

There were some sound answers on why the intensity of Ian changes, but fewer that also explained the change of track over time i.e. unbalanced answers. Consequently, balanced Level 3 answers were not common. A very small minority of candidates seemed to think Figure 1 showed many individual storms and hurricanes, not the track of one named storm.

Question 2 Biodiversity under Threat

Question 2a
Answers were stronger than answers to Question 1, but still weak compared to the rest of the paper, for the following reasons:

- Long descriptions of what can be seen on Figure 1- again, the skill being tested is the interpretation of geographical data and explanation of this (not description skills).
- Confusion over 'biomes' versus 'biodiversity': these are not the same / synonyms.
- Human factors (global warming, deforestation, urbanisation, pollution, desertification) do not explain the pattern of biomes in Africa or elsewhere because biomes are large biological communities that have formed over millennia in response to climate and other physical systems. Some answers only considered human factors and these scored very low, or no, marks.
- Drought and aridity are not the same thing: deserts are permanently arid environments; drought is a temporary phenomenon.
- A small number of candidates believed the poles (and by extension polar cells and Pm / Pc airmasses) were shown on Figure 2.

Having outlined the weaknesses, it needs to be said there were many L2 and some L3 answers. These commonly made some reference to the heat equator / ITCZ, atmospheric cells and high/low pressure areas. In other words, they had a good grasp of the basic features of the climate system that influences biome type. Seasonal ITCZ movements – a key influence on savanna biomes – was seen only very rarely. Orographic or coastal rainfall

and altitudinal zonation (montane) was fairly frequently offered as an explanation although usually rather briefly. Some answers referred to the relevant parts of the tricellular model. It is worth noting that in January the ITCZ is usually over northern Madagascar.

Question 2b

Answers to this question were good on the whole. They were certainly stronger than Q1 and Q2a. The majority of answers showed understanding of biodiversity and could differentiate between global and local scale management. There was sometimes a lack of clarity about global versus local but usually an attempt was made to identify strategies at different scales.

Most answers had a least some evidential support in the form of named local places/strategies and in some cases impressive detail on costs and timescales, as well as players. Some answers argued that local strategies – while sometimes highly successful – tend to be undermined by internal tensions between different players with incompatible needs.

Understanding was usually sound but there were answers which were very generalised so interesting arguments were not backed up. Equally most answers named at least one, sometimes several, global strategies such as CITES, REDD+ and others. A small number of answers only focussed on COP climate change agreements: these could work if they were linked to biodiversity and in a small number of answers they were not.

Most answers had some balance between global and local approaches (some were unbalanced) and most had a conclusion of some sort. Conclusions tended to be a little vague and 'sitting on the fence' in comparisons to those seen in later questions.
There were a small minority of answers that were mostly about farming, and these seemed to not understand what is meant by 'biodiversity'.

Question 3 Synoptic

Performance on the Synoptic question has generally improved over the years. In this series the majority of answers were sound and focussed on global warming and biodiversity as the question indicated. At the weaker end some answers were essentially unsupported lists of problems that global warming could cause: there were often quite well focused on biodiversity but sometimes drifted into a whole range of global warming impacts that were off-topic.

Weaker answers sometimes drifted into solutions or made far too much of 'natural hazards' (including tectonics) devastating biodiversity. Hazards such as drought, wildfire, floods and cyclones have existed for millennia and have a temporary, localised impact on ecosystems. To argue that these genuinely impact biodiversity requires a careful argument about how planetary warming might increase aridity or alter the hydrological cycle and climate system and thus change the frequency/intensity of hazards such as wildfire permanently.

Many stronger answers recognised that biodiversity loss is being caused by a range of human actions that are not linked closely, or at all, to global warming and thus provided something of a counterargument (poaching, tourism, urbanisation etc). There was often some helpful factual detail and exemplification on biodiversity loss which quantified the scale of the problem.

The strongest answers tended to have some linkage to the carbon cycle and the idea that biodiversity's regulating services in relation to the atmosphere would be disrupted by global warming. The best answers argued that global warming causes biodiversity loss by altering global climate, shifting climate belts, enabling alien invasive species, and warming and acidifying oceans but also that as biodiversity is lost carbon sequestration by plants is reduced – and so further warming is caused. This feedback loop concept was rarely seen but sometimes well argued.

Question 4 Energy Security

There was usually a good understanding of renewable energy so that most answers focussed on wind power, solar power and HEP with other renewables sometimes used in answers. Many answers defined 'energy security' which helped focus the subsequent answer. Most candidates understood that renewable energy expansion could involve large capital costs and that this might be unaffordable to countries at lower levels on development. However, stronger answers argued that costs are falling rapidly in relation to fossil fuels and that most renewables generated electricity at a 'fixed' cost whereas oil/gas prices were highly volatile – so perhaps renewable energy reduces risk.

Stronger answers often had a wider range of arguments and some of these were interesting, such as arguing that many countries rely on imported renewable energy technology from China/Germany which is perhaps not different from relying on imported oil/gas. Many argued that renewable energy is produced domestically and that these de-risks compared to imported fossil fuels. Many answers were good on intermittency/geographical constraints i.e. some countries/regions simply do not have the conditions needed to use some renewables.

Stronger answers expanded on this by arguing that real energy security comes from having a mix of energy sources – not necessarily all renewable. The concept of baseload electricity power was not often mentioned. There were some arguments suggesting that major fossil fuel exporters (Canada, Saudi Arabia) would be 'devastated' by a switch to renewables because of the loss of markets. This is unlikely as the transition to renewables will be gradual as most transport relies on oil even today.

Stronger answers often mentioned risky energy pathways and linked this to the energy shock caused by the Russia-Ukraine war (and other events, chokepoints etc) and went on to argue that domestically produced renewables could free some countries from these risks. Overall, this question yielded a large number of good answers. Please stress that long essays such as this need place-based example support i.e. evidence.

Question 5 Water Conflicts

This question was a little less popular than Question 4 as an option. Generally, answers were good and focussed on water security. Most answers did pick on the 'all people' aspect of the question and referred to the idea that water engineering schemes often benefit some people more than others. A minority of answers had quite a limited focus on 'water security' and tended to be more generalised. In addition, a few candidates were really answering a different question – one about how transboundary water supplies lead to conflicts and these were often quite weak for obvious reasons.

Answer to this topic often fall into the 'case study overload' category i.e. candidates try to use all the case studies they think are relevant and also use all parts of these case studies. This lack of selectivity can lead to descriptive answers that tell the 'story' of various case studies rather than applying relevant parts of case studies to the question. Case studies such as GERD and Lesotho Highlands were used well by many, but all of the costs/benefits of these schemes were not relevant to this specific question. Candidates need to think about whether adding another case study into their answer adds to it: the GERD, Nile, Mekong, GAP and South-North Transfer can all be argued to increase water security for some but reduce it for others so including all of these case studies in an answer makes the same point repeatedly.

Related to this, some answers had far too much detail on the HEP generated by dams – whereas the question is about water security not energy security. It's worth noting that dam collapses are rare and not a widespread risk of constructing dams.

Stronger answers often contained some arguments relating to the funding of dams and linked to idea of debt/dependency caused by WB or Chinese funding of major engineering. Some contrasted the water security brought by low-tech or water conservation schemes with the situation resulting from major engineering schemes. A few answers had no place-specific support at all.

Question 6 Superpower Geographies

Question 6a
This short question was usually done reasonably well but please note:

- Describing the data in Figure 3 is not an answer to the question.
- Explaining the differences in the data is not the question: the question is about whether the data in Figure 3 is useful.
- There was some confusion over what the data could/could not show: for instance, the data on total population does not indicate anything about age structure or population growth rates.

Many answers did explain that the data set was narrow and 'missed out' some key metrics of power.

Question 6b
Although this question was answered quite successfully by many there was a common tendency to quickly move away from the 'change in power over time' part of the question. It was essential to try and focus on this temporal idea and construct an argument about the importance of the two types of power over time – many answers did not do this.
Most were clear on the meaning of hard versus soft power, but a few were not and changed their position during their answer. The question of whether economic power is hard or soft seemed to vex many candidates.

The answer that tended to drift away from the 'change over time' part of the question often ended up answering a question about whether hard or soft power was 'the best way to maintain power' – this is not the question that was set.

Some answers began in the colonial era arguing that hard power was more important in the past. There was often some confusion about the timeline and power mechanisms during the Cold War. Having said that there were many good answers that focussed on the nature of Chinese power today i.e. the role of the BRI and the situation in the South China Sea. Many candidates seemed to have a reasonable understanding of the situation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its relationship to hard power. Better answers often broadened their answer out to consider Smart Power and/or Sharp Power and argued these as important to the world today. These answers often argued that hard power could be 'high risk' but that it was still important to gain power, whereas soft power was used to maintain power. There were some good links to globalisation as an 'enabler' of soft/sharp power in the 21st Century.

Question 7 Bridging the Development Gap

Question 7a

This short question was usually done quite well but please note:

- Describing the data in Figure 4 is not an answer to the question.
- Explaining the differences in the data is not the question: the question is about whether the data in Figure 4 is useful.

Many candidates did make some good points about how the data could indicate healthcare in the two countries, or whether basic needs were being met. Some recognised that data from one time period was quite weak in terms of indicating development 'progress.'

Question 7b

Answers to this question were a little polarised. They were either good or quite weak. The key issue was whether candidates were familiar with the two theories or not. A small number of answers showed that they had not encountered Modernisation or Dependency Theories as part of their studies. Occasionally other theories were mentioned e.g. World Systems/Wallerstein and this was more than acceptable. However other things were stated as theories (HDI/ GDI/ MDGs/ SDGs) which are not theories of development but rather ways to measure it or reduced the scale of the development gap.

Broadly, coverage of Dependency Theory was stronger than Modernisation Theory. Dependency arguments were often linked to specific countries (Ghana), colonial and neo-colonial trade patterns, terms of trade and Chinese investment in Africa/BRI. There were also sensible links to debt and even 'brain drain' migration.

Some answers provided a very successful critique i.e. 'western'/Eurocentric models that cannot be applied to the eastern world, or that other factors such as governance or conflict renders the models very simplistic. Some argued that experience of China/ UAE/ SK or Saudi Arabia was very different i.e. skipping modernisation stages – and this undermined the applicability of the models. It was common to see arguments based around the idea that the theories ignore development differences within countries, which are often very large.

Overall, and setting aside the weaker answers, many answers showed good understanding and made some interesting political and cultural points.

Summary and examination format reminder
Going forward please try to focus on the following points as you prepare candidates for future examinations:

1. There are no marks for describing Figures; reasons and explanations for what is shown on a Figure are required to gain marks.
2. When using case studies in 15- and 20-mark answers be selective: the examiner does not want to know everything there is to know about the Three Gorges Dam and everything will not be relevant to a good answer.
3. Try to avoid over-writing on the 5-mark questions: the marks can be achieved using the 10 lines provided.
4. Keep looking back at the question as you write your answer: check you are still answering it. Have you drifted off towards another question?
5. Defining key terms is a good way to start an essay; it might seem a bit boring but it helps you focus on the content/concepts you must discuss.
6. Evidence in the from of examples, parts of case studies, data, facts etc is important especially in the 15- and 20-mark questions.

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