



P1 Questions & Answers – Teachers' conference 2009

Based on notes taken by Jim Stone

Question/Issue raised:

What is the difference between 'ethical knowledge' and 'ethical theory'?

Response

Candidates are expected to know and to be able to reference the theory and then be able to discuss and build a case as to how it may be applied in practice recognising that the Ethics module is first exposure candidates have to challenge assumptions and to recognise more fully that issues do not always have clear cut solutions or answers.

Question/Issue raised:

It is difficult for some students to gain the professional marks on offer in P1 because they are not used to presenting their answers in such a way. Can you advise on this?

Response

Professional marks are awarded for presentation and logical construction of an answer. It is important for students to gain access to formats and approaches (e.g. Annual Report, Memo, Letter) which they may need to utilise in the exam – because these are also important in professional life for a qualified accountant. Where this is a problem – should not tuition providers provide examples ?

From the point of view of examination skills candidates should be aware of the question requirements when the higher level verbs: assess, analyse, evaluate, criticise are used.

Question/Issue raised:

Sometimes candidates are asked to 'critically evaluate' an approach – what does this mean?

Response

To evaluate the approach of someone or something, but at the same time criticising or finding fault with it. This form of requirement is intended to test a candidate's ability to produce a cogent and coherent argument with which they may or may not agree.

Question/Issue raised:

It is not always possible to see how the marks may be allocated within a question. For example if a question asks for something AND something else how can the candidate establish how much to devote to one part rather than the other?

Response/Comments

Judgement is required and it will be context specific – there will always be some flexibility to give credit for good, relevant (if unexpected) points made.

Question/Issue raised:

Is there any advice on layout/ format requirements on the examination answer booklet?

Response/Comments

It is important to clearly state the question number at the top of the page and the indicate the question part near the margin – this will be increasingly important with computerised marking coming in to make sure any additional answers added later in the exam are clearly linked to (and preferably co-located with) the original answer.

Question/Issue raised:

Will the Combined Code be assessed and shouldn't there be a list of examinable documents for P1 as with the accounting and audit papers for example?

Response/Comments

An international perspective requires recognition that different jurisdictions require different (local) variants on documents. Examiners will look for local assumptions stated but not for the detail in any specific code or in country specific legislation.

Question/Issue raised:

To gain good marks does it normally require content which includes examples or real situations of ethical interest or dilemmas to help explain a point or points?

Response/Comments

To get students to learn how to apply aspects of the P1 syllabus to real situations from the media is quite a challenge for tuition providers and study text authors. Many P1 questions require the candidate to deconstruct a situation and examine the issues contained within them in relation to some specific requirements. It is therefore very good practice to examine current news stories which contain issues related to the P1 syllabus.

There are always lots of good materials widely available via the news media, and internet, particularly at this time when there is a focus on rapidly changing economic conditions. The challenge for tuition providers is to help make this relevant by

focussing candidates toward relevant, local examples which may capture their interest and which will stimulate them to discuss and think about the P1 issues within certain areas of the syllabus which may be contained within these examples.

Question/Issue raised:

What does the examiner perceive as the key topics in this exam?

Response/Comments

The key topics are, in no particular order, corporate governance, risk, internal control and ethics. This is made clear in the study guide and in my initial 'examiner's approach' item in the newsletter.

Question/Issue raised:

The emphasis in the exam in December 2008 was very much on risk while the pilot and the first two papers emphasised corporate governance more. What is the likelihood of a paper where the main emphasis is ethics?

Response/Comments

Actually I don't think I agree on the emphasis suggested by the question. Each paper has sampled the syllabus broadly but there may be a 'shading' one part more than others but if so, it is only a marginal effect. Each paper has contained tasks on each of the four main syllabus areas with Q1 sampling more broadly than the Part B questions.

Question/Issue raised:

Is it the case that if a topic is in the approved study texts then it is potentially examinable? If a topic is not covered in the texts is it potentially examinable? Eg Q4 in December 2008 about strategic positioning.

Response/Comments

In general, if an item is in the study guide then it is potentially examinable. Although the examiner reviews the study texts he is not directly responsible for their content or emphasis. Q4b was not actually about strategic positioning – it was about the use of codes of ethics as a part of strategic positioning and in case candidates didn't know what it was it was defined in the requirement itself.

Question/Issue raised:

Roughly how many marks will be available in each exam for 'general' question parts that do not require the students to apply the information given in the question scenario?

Response/Comments

Because there is no direct predecessor to P1 in ACCA's exam scheme. P1 papers may contain some 'knowledge' questions in addition to application questions. It will be safe to assume that application to the case will be a part of all questions although some parts of questions are general and non-applied in case content There is no precise figure on this as that would place a constraint upon the examiner for future papers that would be unhelpful.

Question/Issue raised:

Will the examiner always make clear whether students need to use the information in the question scenario in their answer to each question part?

Response/Comments

The wording of the question signifies this although the way in which this wording is given will vary. That said, candidates can also use content from the cases in 'general' questions as evidence of understanding,

Question/Issue raised:

How does the examiner weigh up the relative difficulty of the optional questions? For example December 2007 looking at requirement verbs in optional questions, Q2 5 marks were given for requirements with Level 3 verbs, Q3 18 marks, Q4 4 marks. Judged by the requirement verbs, which the examiner has stressed are very important, Q3 was much more difficult than the other two questions.

Response/Comments

All P1 papers are carefully scrutinised for the internal 'balance' of each question. Although it might sometimes appear that the levels of verbs in a section B question are imbalanced, we have always weighed this against our overall assessment of the overall difficulty of the other parts of the question. Plus as part of the drafting process, the paper is answered by the assessor and sat by a 'sitter' both of whose feedback on internal balance feeds in to subsequent redrafting. So the number of marks per intellectual level is only one factor in our consideration of the overall difficulty of a given section B question.

Question/Issue raised:

Linked to 6, it would be useful to have more guidance on the examiner's use of requirement verbs. For example, despite the stress on Level 3 verbs, June 2008 Q2 contained no Level 3 verbs. Also the number of marks per point cannot always be inferred from the verb (for example June 2008 Q4 describe (Level 1 verb) in part (b) 2 marks per point were awarded, whereas in part (c) construct (Level 3 verb) 1 mark per point was awarded

Response/Comments

The meaning of the verbs is quite well dealt with in the BPP study text but you can also get a feel for what each ones means by studying the published answers. Re J08Q2 I would refer you to my answer to Q6 above. Again, it is difficult to be prescriptive on mark allocations per verb because of other variables in each question such as the overall level of difficulty that a given part is believed to be and the amount of content that can realistically be expected of a candidate in answering it.

Question/Issue raised:

If students are asked to evaluate (determine the value of in the light of arguments for and against) will they get any marks for drawing a conclusion? Published mark schemes appear to suggest they won't.

Response/Comments

This point also applies to the verb 'assess'. Markers are asked to always use discretion and academic judgment in allocating marks and so the marks awarded will always be a fair reflection of the overall worth of a given answer. Some evaluations and assessments lend themselves to a conclusion whilst others do not. D08Q1(a), for example, included some reward for conclusion because it was possible to draw a conclusion from the other parts of a well-prepared answer. In some cases, such a conclusion is less relevant because it is a recognition of the complexity of an argument that is important.

Question/Issue raised:

Can the examiner indicate what other forms of written communication may be tested in Q1 in future?

Response/Comments

This has been flagged a couple of times in marker's reports and elsewhere. The forms mentioned in the Dec 08 report were letters, presentations, briefing notes, management reporting narratives (such as was asked for in the D08 diet), press statements, memos and the like. These are professional marks and so examiners can ask for evidence of professionalism in any form of written communication.

Question/Issue raised:

Are there any other specific models (like TARA) which the examiner would assume students should know about?

Response/Comments

The requirements are clearly laid out in the study guide and where any interpretation issues were raised (such as TARA/SARA), these were flagged with the study text authors. Again, however, I would say that whilst the examiner comments on the study texts he is not responsible for their content.

Question/Issue raised:

Can the examiner indicate what sort of non-governmental organisations may be tested in future exams? How will he deal with the problem that some kinds of NGOs don't exist in certain countries?

Response/Comments

Each exam paper is scrutinised for the ways in which it will be received in other parts of the world. It will very rarely be the case that candidates will need a detailed knowledge of the legal form of an organisation to answer a question except where clearly flagged by the study guide (such as public companies) and in practice, if an unusual form of organisation does appear, there may be an explanatory sentence or two somewhere in the case narrative for those unfamiliar with it.

Question/Issue raised:

Students require a knowledge of Sarbanes-Oxley per the syllabus – in how much depth might they be expected to answer (June 2008 Q4 required knowledge of s404)?

Response/Comments

Actually J08/4 didn't require a knowledge of s404. It used s404 as a part of the story leading up to the questions and in the questions, but there weren't marks for knowing about s404 per se. In terms of knowledge and depth, it is useful to refer to the study guide which has an entry (A6e) at level 2.

Question/Issue raised:

What exactly does the examiner mean by “a framework for the board level consideration of risk” – does he have a specific model like COSO's ERM in mind or something else?

Response/Comments

This question refers to section C3c and is dealt with in Chapters 7 and 8 (BPP) and Chapter 10 (Kaplan). Section C3 is headed 'Identification, assessment and measurement of risk' so the frameworks that should be considered here are those that address these points. It is important that boards should be aware of the overall risk process and how to assess risks. This involved some frameworks such as those mentioned in the question and also a general awareness and understanding of risk. Consideration of risk cannot be reduced to a single framework – to consider risk a holistic understanding and technical skills are required.

Question/Issue raised:

For the exam does deontological = absolutism and teleological = relativism?

Response/Comments

No. These are two separate parts of the study guide because they are not the same thing.

Question/Issue raised:

What is the level of knowledge required of the views of Kant?

Response/Comments

Just enough to understand the Kantian deontological ethical assumptions. So nothing except that, but deontology as a wider perspective is on the P1 study guide and should be taught fully.