



P3 Questions & Answers – Teachers' conference 2009

Based on notes taken by Jim Stone

Question/Issue raised:

Under the online marking system being piloted in June 2009, markers will have scripts allocated to them on a completely random basis rather than being allocated most or all the scripts from individual exam centres. Could this make it more difficult for markers to achieve consistency, particularly where candidates from a centre may take similar approaches to questions or have a similar perspective on issues as a consequence of being more likely to have been taught together?

Response/Comments

It is felt that randomising the allocation of scripts will make it much easier to achieve marker consistency and it will make it much easier for examiners to monitor and ensure that markers are marking consistently and comparably with each other.

Question/Issue raised

Where scenario questions are set and the requirements are quite broad, are markers encouraged to be flexible in their marking to reflect the diversity of approaches taken by candidates?

Response/comments

The first thing to mention is that every effort is made to avoid scenarios being culture specific or to prejudice some cultural groups in the choice of scenario topic – but with hindsight it has been recognised that in reality there are few truly global scenarios which have the same relevance or applicability to all audiences.

However, despite this fact flexibility is adopted in interpreting the understanding candidates have of particular contexts and to take into account various cultural perceptions. All markers are encouraged to use discretion where examples used to justify an answer depart from those anticipated. It was pointed out that for many of the questions there was no 'right' answer. There could be a number of acceptable approaches – the quality of argument and justification plus a logical presentation were all important.

Question/Issue raised:

F1 questions clearly link to F1 theoretical knowledge – but this does not always appear to be the case with P3. On the December 2008 paper, one model answer did not clearly link to the underlying theory and concentrated on the practical aspects of implementation?

Response/Comments

Most students do link their answers to attributable underpinning theory and credit is always given for this in some cases there are a number of theories which could be used to justify or explain the approach and these are not always fully expanded in the model answer, which is intended to be indicative rather than exhaustive.

Question/Issue raised:

Can you expand on how students should bring in real world examples to their answers?

Response/Comments

They need to clearly explain the assumption(s) which they are making about the scenario and then explain why the example they have chosen to include is a good analogy and helps to support the answer which they provide.

Question/Issue raised:

Although the pass rate for his students was consistent and appeared fair overall, some good students (who had English as a second or third language) had repeatedly failed the paper. Is P3 entirely fair to candidates for whom English is not their first language?

Response/Comments

P3 as a paper is recognised to pose challenges for some students, but not necessarily because English is or is not their first language. An extra 15 minutes is allowed in an attempt to help all students with a better understanding of the information given. It is also important for them to recognise that where English is not the first language there are particular exam techniques which could help them – e.g. to produce tables or use bullet points where appropriate. This could help candidates better structure some answers and reduce the need for the inclusion of too much text. In fact to help candidates in this scenario word counts are getting smaller – and the examiner is making more use of tables of figures to replace the need to include so much text. It was disappointing that better use was not made of the tables of figures supplied within the scenarios. A good clue is that all figures are supplied for a purpose; candidates should be focussing on using them.

Question/Issue raised:

There appears to be quite a lot of focus on syllabus areas which are perhaps less interesting to teach and learn (examples given were project management and quality control). Why is this?

Response/Comments

A proper understanding of strategic theory and concepts are very important in P3 – but understanding implementation issues is also important. Every attempt is made to raise relevant and interesting questions in these areas where they are assessed. There is a lot of interesting material available to support teaching these areas – the study text providers have made good use of examples in their materials. Because the examiner can now assess any area of the syllabus in the first question, there is now the possibility that a scenario question may be a predominantly implementation question and may have less strategic focus than previous Section A questions, i.e. that it may come from the second layer of the syllabus structure diagram. The main reason for this is while some senior accountants may well be involved in strategy formulation, most accountants will have responsibility for implementing strategy which requires a proper understanding of business process, IT, project management and quality management issues.

Question/Issue raised:

Some of the syllabus areas covered in the study texts refer to many underlying theories – do students have to know them all in detail?

Response/Comments

Many of the references in the study texts are useful to provide breadth, to maintain interest and aid understanding. However, candidates will not have to know or use them all. The advice is to concentrate on the theories quoted in the Study Guide – there will be no exam questions which specifically require knowledge of theories not specified in the Study Guide.

Question/Issue raised:

Some candidates will be sitting P3, not having covered strategy, IT and HR in any earlier papers because of exemptions.

What will be the balance between these topics in future papers?

Response/Comments

There are a number of issues arising around exemptions. It also means that for some students this is the first three hour, fully discursive style paper that they will have ever written in English. The position is that if exemptions have been earned, candidates are expected to be able to demonstrate the claimed skills and knowledge which have earned them the exemption(s).

Question/Issue raised:

In previous sittings Part A: Compulsory Question 1 has always concentrated on strategy (Study Guide areas A,B,C). Part B: Optional questions focused on implementation issues, a mixture of Study Guide areas D,E,FG,H,I.

As the examiner has stated that all questions will now potentially come from anywhere within the syllabus, will this require more thinking and a careful approach?

Response/Comments

Yes, there will be the expectation that on relevant questions candidates will be expected to look at the question more broadly and judge the requirements taking a 'top down' analysis and/or a 'bottom' up implementation approach. Emphasis therefore should be placed on the need to read the question carefully, understand the requirement and to specify any assumptions made.

Question/Issue raised:

In line with this, can candidates completely ignore a strategic approach in any answer to a compulsory question in Part A?

Response/Comments

No – there will never be a Part A Compulsory Question which does not require aspects of strategy in the answer. In addition it may require discussion on relevant aspects of implementation.

Question/Issue raised:

Observation from students is that they mainly use their 15 minutes reading time for concentrating on Part A (Question 1). Is this true?

Response/Comments

In the majority of cases Question 1 was the first question answered. There is indeed some evidence that candidates do use most if not all their reading and planning time on Question 1 and where this is not the case, students do less well on Question 1 – possibly because of time pressures.

It is therefore advisable to start with Question 1, particularly where 15 minutes reading time has been devoted mainly to preparing for this question.

Question/Issue raised:

There is a very exhaustive reading list provided – are students expected to read all of the books referred to?

Response/Comments

The wide reading list is provided for guidance to study text producers, tuition providers – and students!

References in the reading list are intended to be helpful by identifying the relevant sections and page numbers of the books quoted. The primary focus for students should be the study guide – if something is not explicitly stated in the study guide it won't be explicitly called for in an examination question.

Question/Issue raised:

Can you explain the basis of the award of Professional Marks in P3?

Response/Comments

On this paper the main focus is to reward good clear layout and presentation and the coherence of the answer. In some cases candidates will be expected to provide a cogent answer to an argument that they may well not agree with. There will usually be marks available for an appropriate format, memo, letter, report or other document and for the appropriateness of the tone used for the relevant audience and for drawing relevant conclusions and making valid recommendations.