

SBL Retake guide

■ Plan ■ Prepare ■ Pass

Strategic Business Leader (SBL)

▪ Plan ▪ Prepare ▪ Pass

Welcome to your guide helping you to retake your Strategic Business Leader exam

Why use this guide?

- ✓ A structured approach to help you succeed in your retake
- ✓ Signposted resources and how to use them
- ✓ Tips for success to help you pass this time
- ✓ Interactive clickable checklists to keep you on track

This guide applies to exams for September and December 2019 and March and June 2020.

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Reflect

Understand where you went wrong

Students may fail this exam because they do not have the necessary knowledge OR they do not demonstrate the required professional skills OR they have poor exam technique OR a combination of all three – the first step to success in studying for your retake is to understand the reason you failed.

In this section we will help you to understand where you went wrong and then in the next two sections we will take you through what you should do to ensure you pass your retake exam.

Reflect – Resources to help you understand where you went wrong



The Strategic Business Leader exam

Before reflecting on your previous attempt at Strategic Business Leader it is worth reading, or re-reading, the [Examiner's Approach article](#). This will help you think about your performance in the context of how the exam has been designed.



Student quote

Conquer the fear of failure

“During my break at work I make sure I read a chapter or solve exercises in my book. All in all, you know yourself - you know your limits and capabilities, but you need to conquer the fear of failure and note something down somewhere that will give you that motivation and determination that will keep you going. For me, it was my family's sacrifice in helping to fund my studies.”

Audit and Assurance retake student, UAE

- Review the [examiner's reports](#) for Strategic Business Leader and the exam technique article [Read the mind of an SBL marker](#)



Remember that students often make the same mistakes exam sitting after exam sitting and you will see that the examining teams talk about the same key knowledge areas and the same issues around exam technique time and time again. Really think about whether you have made these mistakes as, once you know what caused you to fail, you can work on improving that area. We will show you how in the next three sections.

- Read the article [10 things to learn from the September 2018 sitting](#)



This article was written by the examining team after marking the first session of the SBL exam. It contains some clear observations on aspects where candidates struggled. Think about your own previous attempt at SBL in the light of this article and you should find useful tips to help you succeed in your retake.

- Read the exam technique article [How to approach Strategic Business Leader](#)



This one-page summary includes quick tips on time management, effective reading and planning and writing answers.

- Watch the video [How to plan answers in the SBL exam](#)



This short video shows you how to plan your time and answers when you open the exam question paper in the exam room.

Reflect – Resources to help you understand where you went wrong



Extract from the December 2018 examiner's report

To gain each technical mark, candidates need to make points that:

- ✓ Address the requirements of the question, considering the scope of answer required and what the question verb indicates should be provided
- ✓ Apply to the organisation featured in the case study
- ✓ Are specific to the decision or situation covered in the question requirement
- ✓ Show the reader why the point being made is significant in the circumstances

Demonstration of technical knowledge or explanation of theory without application will not score marks in this exam.



Tips for success

- ✓ Don't give up. Use this guide to help you achieve success in your retake. Start by thinking positively and believing you will pass this time.



Extract from examining team article 10 things to learn from the September 2018 sitting

Stating technical knowledge by itself scores no marks in SBL. However, there were many instances in September of candidates seeing a topic in the question requirements and writing down what they knew about the topic without applying their knowledge to the question or to the company. Thus in Question 3(b) candidates who wrote what a risk committee did scored no marks unless they showed it was an advantage of a separate risk committee, which was what the question required. In Question 4 candidates who just presented a detailed theoretical explanation of big data scored no marks for it, as their answers did not discuss the opportunities and costs for the company, which was what its board wanted.



Reflect – Other hints to help you understand where you went wrong



Tips for success

Take advantage of any new resources provided specifically for you, to help you with your retake

- ✓ ACCA is continually producing new resources developed specifically to help you pass your exam whether it be the first time or a retake, so keep an eye on the [study support resources](#), and the [technical articles](#) on the website (where you will find not only specific syllabus areas covered but also exam technique articles and study support videos).
- ✓ If you haven't done so already make sure you have personalised your edition of [Student Accountant](#) to ensure you receive advice specific to your exam.



Why did you fail?

Marginal fail?

- ✗ If you scored a marginal fail (between 45% and 49%) last time it is likely that you failed because of poor exam technique and possibly a lack of focus on demonstrating professional skills.

Very low mark?

- ✗ If you scored a very low mark (perhaps under 25%) last time then it is more likely that your mark is due to lack of knowledge or failing to apply your knowledge in a practical way to the tasks.

Did you struggle to come up with answers?

- ✗ It's more likely to be a lack of knowledge if you felt that you were either guessing answers or had struggled to come up with ideas on how to apply what you had learned to the tasks in the exam.

Did you run out of time?

- ✗ It's more likely to be poor exam technique if you ran out of time, perhaps missing out whole tasks or parts of tasks or not finishing the exam.

Reflect – Before you leave this section...

Have you identified where you went wrong last time?

- ☐ Lack of knowledge
- ☐ Poor professional skills
- ☐ Poor exam technique
- ☐ A combination of the three

If you really are not sure, then assume it was a combination of the three, and move on to the next section where we will help you to plan the time between now and your retake.



Tips for success

- ✓ Discuss your thoughts with colleagues, tutors or your peers to see if they agree with your conclusions.
- ✓ Don't feel alone or fed up because you failed last time... join the [ACCA Learning Community](#) and find other students in a similar position to you. Share ideas and thoughts, or perhaps find a study buddy to help keep you motivated.
- ✓ Don't dwell on this stage too long. The more time you spend dwelling on your last attempt, the less time you will have to improve ready for your retake!



Plan

Your checklist

Now that you have a better idea of where you went wrong last time, it's time to draw up a plan to help you manage your time between now and your retake exam

- ☐ Consider taking retake tuition with an Approved Learning Partner
- ☐ Draw up your retake study plan
- ☐ Obtain an Approved Content Provider question and answer bank
- ☐ Review the syllabus and study guide for your retake sitting

Plan – Draw up your study plan

Study plan checklist

- ☐ Enter for your retake as soon as possible using the [exam planner](#)
- ☐ Calculate the number of weeks from now until your exam date and draw up a plan – see the example to the left and a possible proforma for you to use on the next page
- ☐ You may need to add or take away weeks depending on which sitting you have chosen for your retake
- ☐ Block out days/half days/evenings already committed to family/social events
- ☐ Plan study periods – evenings/half days/full days

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 2	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 3	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 4	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 5	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 6	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Evening study period
 Daytime study period
 Other commitments

Plan – Your study plan

Print out and fill in when you will study for your retake

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							

☐ Evening study period
 ☐ Daytime study period
 ☐ Other commitments

Colour boxes in your preferred highlighter colours.

Plan – Populate your plan with questions to practise

Now that you have worked out when you will study for your retake, you need to think about which questions you are going to practise. Although you won't be able to plan every question in advance it is a good idea to decide on some key questions as well as scheduling in some time to attempt several full mock case study exams.

- Ensure you have a Strategic Business Leader [Approved Content Provider](#) question and answer bank as this contains some shorter questions to allow you to target specific areas of the syllabus as well as full mock case study exams to ensure you are fully prepared for your retake.



Tips for success

If you failed because of a lack of knowledge

- ✓ Look through your notes, study text and the [syllabus and study guide](#), and try to identify which areas you feel weakest in.
- ✓ The [Approved Content Provider](#) question and answer banks provide a list of questions by topic area. Use these to help you plan the questions you need to attempt and add them to your plan. Make sure that you choose questions that cover a wide range of syllabus areas, professional skills and answer formats.
- ✓ Look for any [technical articles](#) which relate to the area of knowledge you need to focus on and add these to your plan.

If you failed because of poor professional skills

- ✓ Watch the [SBL professional skills videos](#). This series of short videos provide tips on how to demonstrate each of the professional skills in the SBL exam.
- ✓ Read the article [Professional Skills Marking Guide](#). This shows how the skills are assessed and should help you to assess how well you are demonstrating professional skills during your question practice.

If you failed because of poor exam technique

- ✓ Schedule in time to watch the [study support videos](#) and review the [exam technique articles](#). These will give you some pointers on how you can improve your technique.
- ✓ Make sure you work some full length SBL case studies to build confidence in your exam technique.

Plan – Tips for success



Student quote

Read the technical articles

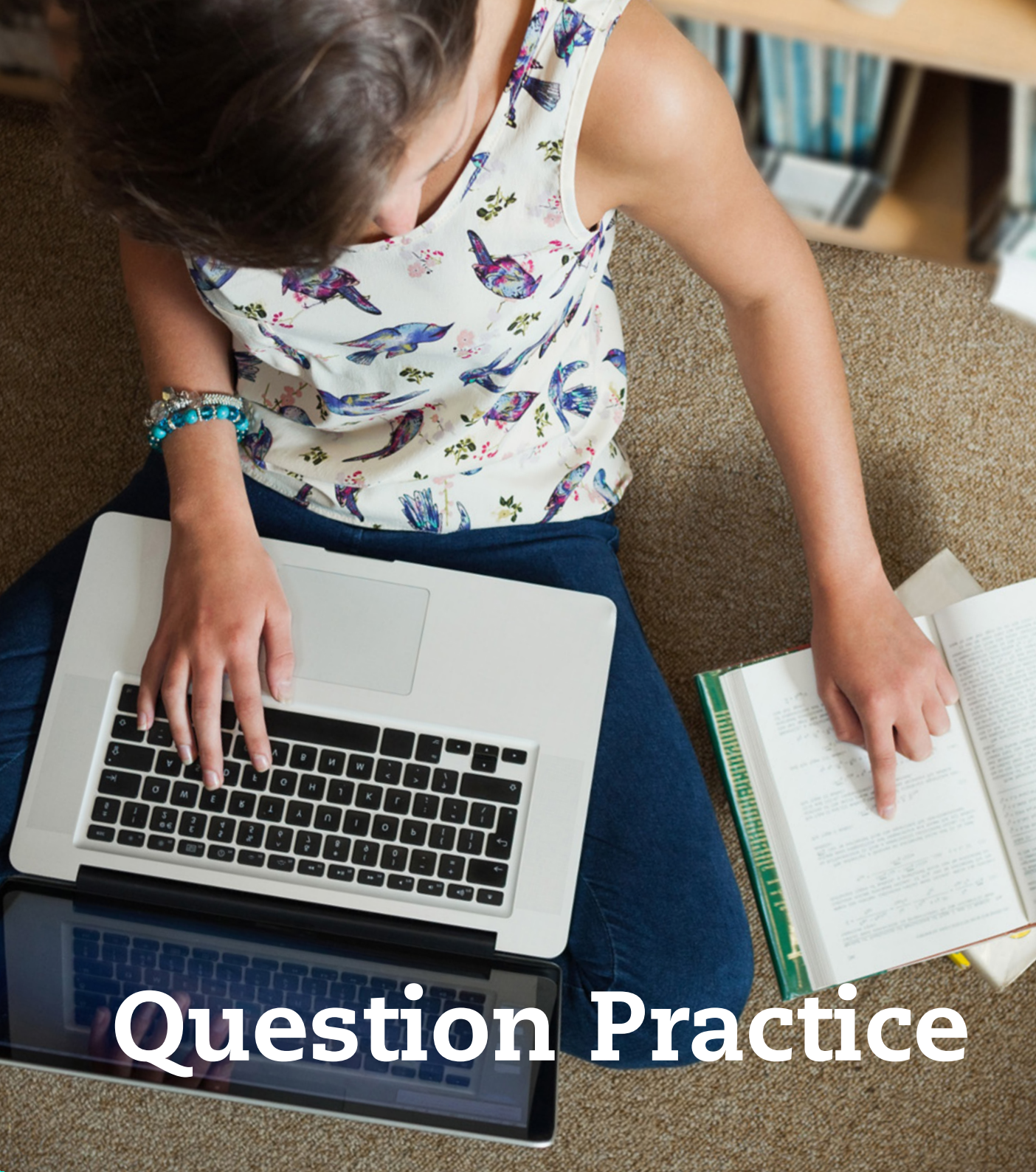
“After failing with 40% the first time, for my retake I made sure I read the technical articles carefully. I can’t stress more about the importance of these technical papers. Examples illustrated in these articles are so clear that it’s very hard to not understand them.”

Advanced Financial Management retake student, China



Tips for success

- ✓ If you are able to, consider including time to attend a retake or revision course with an [Approved Learning Partner](#). These will give you the chance to really understand what you need to know for your retake.
- ✓ Again, if you are able to, schedule in time to attend a mock exam day offered by one of our [Approved Learning Partners](#) or do a mock exam online. These will provide you with feedback and help you to focus your last few days of revision time.
- ✓ SBL is a practical exam, and there is no single right answer to any question. If you don't have access to tutor feedback, you could discuss your answers with a study buddy in the [Learning Community](#).
- ✓ Don't forget to include time to practise several mock exams in full to time. These could be mocks from the [Approved Content Provider](#) question bank, the Strategic Business Leader [specimen exams](#) or [past exams](#). If you attempt Specimen 3 you should view the exam debrief webinar in the [study support resources](#) to learn more about what is expected in the SBL exam.
- ✓ ACCA has some great resources to help you around exam technique. Make sure you build some time in to review all the [exam technique](#) and [technical articles](#) as well as the [webinars](#).



Question Practice

Your checklist

- ☐ Before you start
- ☐ Reading and planning
- ☐ Key skills

Question practice – Before you start

- Review again the [examiner's reports](#) and read the [Examining Team Guidance](#) and [10 things to learn from the September 2018 sitting](#) articles so that you have all of the examining team's comments and advice in mind when you start working through questions
- Make sure you understand what knowledge is assumed from the Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills exams. This is set out in the article [How Applied Knowledge and Applied Skills Map to SBL](#).



Tips for success

- ✓ Remember to think positively and don't give up on a question before you start. Every question you practise properly will bring you closer to a pass in your retake.

Question practice – Reading and planning

The Strategic Business Leader exam has a duration of four hours to give you time to read all of the information in the case and exhibits and to write answers that demonstrate professional skills.

The [Examining Team Guidance](#) article suggests a step by step approach to planning your time and reading the case study. Try this out when you attempt a mock exam.

You may decide to stick to that approach, or you may want to adapt it a little. Either way, having a clear plan for how you will use the four hours will boost your confidence for your retake.



Tips for success

Practice how long you will need to spend reading and planning

- ✓ The examining team recommends that you should expect to spend at least 40 minutes and up to an hour in reading and planning before you start writing out any of your final answers.

Decide an order for reading the exam

1. First read through the background information to understand the context of the case
2. Then read the list of exhibits
3. Start to annotate the requirements (see key skills on pages 16 and 17)
4. Having understood the requirements and what you need to do in each task, finally read the exhibits themselves so that you can identify and highlight the information that is relevant to each task.

Plan your time

- ✓ If you spend 40 minutes for your initial reading and planning, you have 200 minutes left to spend on the detailed planning and writing of your answers to the tasks. Allocating this over the 80 technical marks (as the professional skills don't require any extra writing) gives you 2.5 minutes per technical mark. Note down how long you will spend on each task. Adapt these calculations if you want to spend longer on the reading and planning stage.

Question practice – Key skills you need to master



Key Skills

Reading the requirements

This will help to ensure you are answering the question that has been set and not wasting time including irrelevant information.

- ✓ Identify how many parts there are to the requirement and allocate your time across all of the parts according to the marks being awarded.
- ✓ Identify what your role is in the task. Read carefully, as this can change between tasks.
- ✓ Check what format of answer is required. The article [The importance of effective communication](#) discusses the main formats likely to be required.
- ✓ Think about who your audience is. this will help you identify the most relevant points, and the tone you should use in your answer.
- ✓ Identify the verb and understand what is required of you. Carefully analysing the answers provided in the question and answer banks once you have attempted a question will help you to understand what the different verbs mean. You can also take a look at the article [What is the examiner asking?](#) for further guidance.
- ✓ Think about the mark allocation and how many points you need to make in your answer to pass. Generally one mark will be awarded for each point made, provided that it is related to the scenario in the question. A well-developed point may earn up to two marks.
- ✓ Check which professional skill is being assessed in the task. Think through the definition of that skill to ensure that you put the correct focus in your answer.



Student quote

Importance of exam technique

“My advice to future sitters of SBL is to do lots of exam technique practice – understand the different answer formats and the professional skills being tested so that you can structure your answers in the right way. I wish I had done [this] sooner, I was too focused on learning the content when the exam is a lot about application.”

Strategic Business Leader candidate, September 2018

Question practice – Key skills you need to master



Key Skills

Application of knowledge

Strategic Business Leader is a practical exam. The tasks set are designed to reflect the workplace, so your knowledge must be applied to the specific situation of the case study.

- ✓ Make sure you use the information in the case background and the exhibits, refer to the organisation, the industry or the people mentioned in your answer.
- ✓ Do not regurgitate everything you know about a particular topic area; your answer needs to be a practical response to the task. Technical knowledge only scores marks in this exam if it is clearly applied to the case.

Professional skills marks

There are 20 marks available for demonstration of professional skills, so this can make the difference between passing and failing.

- ✓ Make sure you watch the professional skills webinars in the [study support resources](#) to make sure that you fully understand each of the skills and how you can demonstrate these in the exam.
- ✓ If you have not completed the [Ethics and Professional Skills module](#) you should do so before attempting your retake as it provides some effective practical support in building these skills.



Tips for success

- ✓ Make sure you are answering the question set and not the question you wish you had been set!



Student quote

Learn from your mistakes

“The only way to pass an exam is to learn from your mistakes. On my fourth attempt at AA I realised that I was failing because of my lack of knowledge around audit procedures. Finally I was able to succeed in passing.”

Audit and Assurance retake student, Pakistan

Question practice – Tips for success



Tips for success

Learn from every question you do

Maximise your time by reviewing what you have learnt from each question you practise. Spend time working through the answer for every question you attempt and ask yourself the following questions. Did you:

- ✓ Finish your answer in the allocated time?
- ✓ Include sufficient points in your answer given the marks available?
- ✓ Use the details in the exhibits to make your answers relevant to the case?
- ✓ Make points that responded to the verb(s) in the requirement(s)?
- ✓ Present your answer in the right format?
- ✓ Write full sentences and short paragraphs?
- ✓ Demonstrate the professional skill as described in the skills marking grid?

Additional tips:

- ✓ It is better to attempt fewer questions really well rather than lots of questions badly.
- ✓ Read the technical article [Read the mind of an SBL marker](#) to help you critique and assess your answers when reviewing your attempts.
- ✓ If you find you are still struggling with the technical knowledge you need to answer the question, refer back to your notes or study text and remind yourself of the key points.



Extract from the December 2018 examiner's report

Candidates should remember that they are carrying out a professional task that has a particular purpose for a defined user or stakeholder. It is vital that candidates read the **technical and professional requirements together**, as this will assist candidates to formulate their answers in the correct, style, tone and level of **professionalism**. An example of where candidates failed to do this was in Question 3(a). Candidates were required to discuss the potential challenges and applications of disruptive technologies with 4 professional skills marks "available for demonstrating scepticism skills in probing and challenging the opinions of the board", made in Exhibit 6. Most candidates completely ignored this and failed to demonstrate any scepticism skills.





Final Tips

Your checklist

- ☐ Make sure you are ready to walk into your retake exam

Final Tips – Tips for success



Tips for success

Very few students enjoy taking exams but there are things you can do to make the experience less stressful!

- ✓ Identify where the exam hall is.
- ✓ Plan your route to the exam hall, considering the time of day you will be travelling and any potential issues.
- ✓ Have in place a back-up plan in case of traffic problems or public transport delays.
- ✓ Ensure you have all the equipment you need for

the exam (black pens, calculator etc).

- ✓ Don't forget to take your exam docket with you as well as your student identification.
- ✓ Eat properly before you leave for the exam.
- ✓ Sleep properly! Don't spend the last night before your exam doing last minute revision, as you will perform so much better if you are alert and well rested (and in any case, last minute revision will only cause you to panic!).

- ✓ Try not to get into discussions with fellow students just before the exam about what might come up. Again this will only cause you stress.

Once the exam is over:

- ✓ Relax.
- ✓ Don't over analyse – you cannot change anything now!

Good
Luck!

Appendix – Links

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04, 14	Examiner's reports	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/examiners-reports.html
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04	How to plan answers in the SBL exam	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/preparing-for-strategic-business-leader.html
06, 12, 17	Study support resources	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader.html
06, 11, 12	Technical articles	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/technical-articles.html
06	Student Accountant	http://www.accaglobal.com/gb/en/student/sa.html
07	ACCA Learning Community	https://learningcommunity.accaglobal.com
09	Exam planner	http://www.accaglobal.com/gb/en/student/exam-entry-and-administration/enter-an-exam/exam-planner.html
11, 12	Approved Content Provider	http://www.accaglobal.com/gb/en/student/your-study-options/alp-content.html
11	Syllabus and study guide	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/syllabus-study-guide.html
11	SBL professional skills videos	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/preparing-for-strategic-business-leader.html
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12	Approved Learning Partner	https://learningcommunity.accaglobal.com/#discover/1
12	Learning Community	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/sa/features/learning-community.html
12	Specimen exams	https://www.accaglobal.com/uk/en/student/exam-support-resources/professional-exams-study-resources/strategic-business-leader/specimen-exams.html
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