

May 2018 extended essay reports

Social and Cultural Anthropology

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-6	7-13	14-20	21-26	27-34

The range and suitability of the work submitted

As in previous May sessions, a significant number of extended essays that were submitted for this subject were not relevant to social and cultural anthropology. Teachers sometimes even commented on the fact that the student had not previously studied anthropology or that the school did not offer this subject as part of the IB DP. Many extended essays did not have an anthropological focus, and many students did not appear to have received clear instructions on what an anthropological secondary source is, or where/how to find one. As it is clearly stated in the social and cultural anthropology chapter of the Extended Essay Guide “Social and cultural anthropology is not a “residual” category for essays that do not fit into any other subject. Students should not attempt to prepare an EE in social and cultural anthropology if they have not studied the subject formally”.

Many research questions were too broad and unfocused, and/or did not employ even basic anthropological theories and concepts. Those that did incorporate anthropological theories or concepts frequently either misunderstood or misused them or alternatively, used older theories. A frequent case was a general reference to E. Tylor or F. Boas to provide a definition or theory of culture, as a nod to the discipline, without real knowledge or understanding. Very few extended essays demonstrated any awareness of contemporary theory in anthropology. While many candidates were able to describe some of the materials that were related to their research question. Few were able to critically evaluate these materials in an appropriate and anthropologically informed manner.

The most successful essays revealed students who were well informed about their topic, with their understanding solidly grounded in anthropological concepts and theory. One case was based on the role of traditional ancestor worship in contemporary Hong Kong or another on the concept of bio-power and its use in different ethnographic writings. Another analysed virtual communities drawing from Bourdieu. Some good and very good extended essays compared two or more ethnographies and were able to justify and explain the rationale for the comparisons they made. For example, a study on the effects on women who earn wealth in patriarchal societies; or the analysis of the vernacular architecture of the Dogon and the

Tuareg from idealist and materialist approaches. Some students were able to demonstrate their ability to apply theory and concepts to selected data in order to analyse and re-evaluate already published material in the light of new or different theories and methods to those originally used by the published anthropologist. An example of this was an essay examining the transformations of tradition and national identity in the Netherlands, or a study of witchcraft and its influence on Bhil women in India. Such extended essays were often very good and also demonstrated clear anthropological insight and imagination.

It is interesting to see that candidates writing extended essays in this subject are usually engaged with very current contemporary issues. For example, an examination of the meanings of the hijab in the religiopolitical context of Quebec, or a study on how state censorship in China shapes the experience and use of social media. In this session, topics related to gender inequality seemed to capture many students' interests, producing a varied array of essays such as an examination of hair as a vessel for resistance against feminine beauty ideals in African American women or a comparative study on the effects of colonialism on gender among the Igbo of Nigeria and the Baule of Ivory Coast. Another interesting study of gender focused on the relation between male gender identity and vegetarianism from symbolic perspectives. Essays related to the topic of the body were also abundant, like one on cultural appropriation of Maori tattooing and African American hairstyles.

The weakest essays were short – some barely 2000 words long. Not all students were able to cite their sources or produce relevant bibliographies. However, many students were able to meet, to a reasonable extent, the formal levels of presentation regardless of the quality or content of the extended essay.

Some candidates continue to base their extended essays on their own fieldwork data and this needs to be addressed as the extended essay is intended to be based fundamentally on published academic and other sources, as stated in the EE Guide. Primary data may only be used to supplement this. Where students did use some of their own gathered data (through surveys etc.) this was rarely discussed in methodological terms and only few students considered the ethical or other limitations of their own data.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

Relatively few essays reached the top markband. In many cases, the topic/research question did not lend itself to a systematic investigation in the subject, or was too broad in scope or only partially appropriate. A research question that focuses on a broad category such as “North American culture” will tend to produce a vague research. The key variable here in terms of the variety in success was often linked to research methodology and/or sources.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

Only a minority of essays showed excellent knowledge and good use of terminology and concepts. The majority split fairly evenly between good or limited knowledge and adequate or limited use of terminology. A key variable here was often the extent to which there was any evidence of subject-specific terminology.

Criterion C: critical thinking

Many essays showed limited critical thinking, most often because the topic/research question was deemed inappropriate for Social and Cultural Anthropology. This was a pity as sometimes these essays otherwise demonstrated sound research that was quite well focused and analysis that was usually supported by the evidence. The key variable for essays to do well in this criterion was almost always the evidence of at least some critical evaluation. It is worth noting that some essays showed sound critical evaluation, analysis and research achieving excellent results.

Criterion D: presentation

Many essays were well presented, with clear organization laid out in a table of contents and sub-headings; consistently presented citations and a clearly formatted bibliography or works cited sections, attaining good presentation. It is unfortunate that a significant number of essays were less successful here: some did not use standard formatting for bibliographies/works cited, others were very inconsistent in terms of references and citations and a few were missing all of the required elements.

Criterion E: engagement

The separate comments on the Reflections on planning and progress form also varied widely in quality and development. Perhaps because this is a new element, some candidates did not seem to understand what was expected here and provided minimal comments, or a limited narrative of what the advisor had said at their meetings, with the candidate's own voice essentially missing. Others were able to convey at least some sense of new understanding of either the topic itself or of the research process in terms of choices and planning, and occasionally of some larger intellectual growth and active personal engagement which was good to read.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

- It is essential that both teachers and students understand that even when their

topics/research questions include some social and/or cultural component, this is not necessarily sufficient to meet the requirements for a research essay presented as Social and Cultural Anthropology.

- It is also essential that candidates have some training and/or guidance in terms of the kinds of standards and expectations required in any IB Extended Essay. This includes a table of contents that goes beyond 'Introduction, Body and Conclusion', word count, page numbers, references, citations and formatting of works cited/bibliography.
- While some candidates appeared to be aware that to be effective in the subject, research questions need to be closely focused - there is a helpful set of examples in the EE guide - this is not always the case. This would seem to be an area where supervisors' guidance can really make a difference to a candidate's success.
- Supervisors need to review sources more carefully with candidates earlier in the research process to ensure appropriate secondary anthropological sources are being consulted.
- Supervisors need to be made aware of the new assessment criteria as some candidates appeared to be using the now obsolete criteria when writing their EEs. Several had left their RPPFs blank.
- Students should choose a topic for study which can be researched via published academic and other texts, and not one primarily based on their own fieldwork data.