

May 2018 extended essay reports

Business Management

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

A small number of candidates wrote excellent EEs with university-level secondary sources, such as academic articles from peer-reviewed journals; these A-grade candidates and their supervisors have fully understood the fact that the EE is a scholarly piece of work.

For the highest marks, examiners were not looking for perfection: the candidate may have missed out on some points on some of the criteria, for example with a RPPF more descriptive (of the meetings with the supervisor) than evaluative (of the candidate's own research process), but the highest marks were typically rewarded the candidates who:

- had carried out substantial academic research, as showed by their bibliography (see criteria A, B, C)
- displayed a high level of both data analysis and discussion of their findings (see criterion C).

Those who performed satisfactorily usually conducted did some interesting research, but not always with the methodology appropriate for an EE. The work often read like an IA task (with primary research and recommendations for the business owner/manager) and/or the bibliography was short (typically: just the class textbook and some websites), possibly more journalistic than academic. In many cases, examiners felt that the candidates had not been properly counselled, especially when the supervisor seemed to encourage the use of primary research and recommendations at the end of the work, as in the IA task. As in previous sessions, the confusion between IA and EE was the main reason why many candidates underperformed.

Students who could have improved their performance often submitted essays that were much shorter than the 4000-word limit. The essays often lacked planning, were too superficial, or failed to engage with subject tools and terminology (beyond a SWOT analysis, for example). Evidence of research was present but limited.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

Criterion A is about (a) communication of topic, (b) formulation of research question and (c) methodology.

Dimensions (a) and (b) were rarely a problem, as long as candidates had a balance of “theory” and “practice” (i.e. both “contents” and “contexts”). Very few EEs had a research question leading to research that would be solely theoretical or solely empirical. Dimension (c) however was a key differentiator. Marks 5 and 6 rewarded candidates who had done sufficient academic research, as shown in their bibliography.

EEs which had the form of an internal assessment task usually did not score higher than 2, as neither the methodology (focusing on primary research) nor the research question (leading to recommendations to a business) were suitable for an EE in Business Management.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

B is about ‘knowledge and understanding’, which includes (a) knowledge and understanding of the subject (Business Management) and (b) knowledge and understanding of the topic under investigation (i.e. what the candidate is researching: franchising, viral marketing, motivation theories, business modelling....); it is not about knowledge of a company, or of a case study.

It is through the correct use of subject terminology that candidates showed their knowledge and understanding.

Because of the demand of the EE in Business Management regarding secondary research, the best candidates were able to refer to other models they had read about, beyond the syllabus (such as Porter’s Five Porters or Stakeholder Mapping), to other theories (such as Herzberg’s two-factor theory or ‘Blue Ocean Strategy’), or to other concepts, such as sustainability. This was rewarded with top marks, as candidates then showed excellent subject knowledge. Candidates who used a good range of terms, tools, theories and technologies from the syllabus usually scored 3 or 4, and candidates whose work had a limited theoretical underpinning (e.g. only PEST and SWOT) usually scored 1-2.

Criterion C: critical thinking

This criterion encompasses: (i) research, (ii) analysis and (iii) discussion/evaluation. In Business Management it is easy to distinguish between:

- i. the research carried out by the candidate (secondary research, possibly with some complementary primary research, if relevant and appropriate, which often is not the case, because of the scope of the topic and research question)
- ii. the analysis that results from the application of models, when the candidate starts interpreting their research findings (“why?” and “so what?”)
- iii. the discussion and evaluation, which proved more difficult for many candidates who did (i) and (ii) very well (the research and the analysis), but without any discussion, and solely a conclusion at the end of their analysis.

Criterion D: presentation

Criterion D is about structure and layout; which in Business Management may be interpreted in two ways: an EE in Business may look like an essay or like a professional business document (with numbered sections and sub-sections, footnotes etc). Both approaches are fine, as well as a hybrid combination of the two.

Typical flaws resulting in lower marks for D included:

- Pages of “block of text” without any paragraph nor indentation
- No page number and/or no table of contents
- Bibliography missing at the end, as one of the structural requirements
- Poor labelling of tables, graphs and other illustrations

Criterion E: engagement

The following three points are important:

- Respecting the maximum word length (500 words in total) is essential. If the RPPF is longer, examiners will only mark the first 500 words, which means that part of the later reflections may not be considered.
- The text of the RPPF should be specific to the candidate’s own work, about what they have learnt about their topic, with specific examples, as opposed to generic: a “one-size-fits-all” text that could be written by any candidate about any EE will not result in high marks for this criterion.
- Although candidates must write the three reflections after the three reflection sessions, their reflections should not just be about what was discussed in the reflection sessions with the supervisor, but about the EE process more holistically.

Lower marks were awarded to candidates who did not seem engaged, did not plan their EE research well, or wrote such a descriptive/superficial RPPF.

Higher marks were awarded to candidates who evaluated their work/process and their engagement: their reflections were personal, so the student’s voice came through clearly.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

- Make sure that the differences between IA and EE are understood, especially in terms of requirements. As their timing may overlap, students often get confused, mix the two and end up producing, instead of an EE, an extended IA task, which is a self-penalising approach. This is the most common problem with EEs in Business Management, it is the reason why many students may underperform.
- Explain to the students that their EE is an academic investigation. It is not about recommendations and practical value to management e.g. to help business managers make a decision (IA requirements).
- For their EE, students must carry out substantial secondary academic research, for example in specialised literature or academic journals. It is not enough to work from the generic Business Management textbook used in class. The EE is a form of

specialisation in a domain, so advanced research is necessary. For example, a student writing an EE about online marketing would need to read specifically on this topic, engaging with appropriate academic sources. You may want to work with your librarian on this in order to best support students.

- If the student's methodology includes interviews or questionnaires, they may be on the wrong track. Of course, primary research is possible for an EE, as long as it is not the main source of information. The EE is a scholarly piece of work; quotes from interviews could be integrated in the analysis, but the focus must be secondary research.
- The EE needs theoretical underpinning, i.e. a coherent academic framework which must be presented in introduction. Just listing a series of business models (PEST followed by SWOT followed by Ansoff matrix followed by 4Ps followed by BCG matrix etc) is not a good approach, as it may lead to a fragmented, disjointed analysis, rather than to a coherent one, with a clear focus.
- Make sure that students understand the criteria - especially criterion E and the RPPF. Even weaker students (whose research and analysis may be limited) can score high marks for criterion E, if they reflect well on their work and process.

Further comments

- Supervisor comments at the end of the RPPF are useful to help understand or contextualise candidate's work; although they are not taken into account to determine the marks, examiners still highly welcome them.
- The EE website includes samples of EEs with marks and commentaries. These will also be refreshed with authentic examples after the close of the May 2018 session.