

Business management extended essay

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Extended essay

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For grade boundary information, please refer to **the Grade boundaries for Diploma programme coordinators** document available on the PRC.

Extended essay

The range and suitability of the work submitted

Numerous candidates wrote excellent EEs that used scholarly sources, such as academic books and articles from peer-reviewed journals.

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

- demonstrated effective research skills, especially with academic sources
- displayed analytical skills and evaluative, critical thinking skills
- applied subject-specific terminology and concepts, showing very good knowledge of their chosen topic, in the wider context of business management as a DP subject.

Candidates who performed satisfactorily often conducted interesting research, but not always with the most suitable methodology. Their work sometimes read like an IA, for example with recommendations for the business, or with primary research. Some candidates wrote a case study of an organization, applying as many tools from the syllabus as possible; that showed some misunderstanding of the nature and scope of the EE: it is not a written framework to show everything candidates have studied in class, but the opportunity to carry out further research on a specific topic, usually anchored in the syllabus, yet going further.

Candidates who did not perform well had often selected analytical tools that were inappropriate and/or superficially applied to the context; in such cases, sources often were too general and of limited value to answer the research question, for example just the class textbook and a handful of websites. Some weak EEs were descriptive rather than analytical, telling the story of an organization rather than investigating a particular aspect from a business management viewpoint.

Examiners also noted:

- an unfortunate tendency to use sources from 'essay mills'. Those sources are of very limited value, as they do not show candidates' ability to apply tools (for example: how to carry out the SWOT analysis of an organization); they only show their ability to copy and paste from online sources.
- a tendency to formulate very 'routine' research questions without much originality, largely reusing the approach of previous EEs (such as the ones available on the IB EE website, or the ones used in teachers' training workshops) – for example, so many EEs have the following research question: "To what extent is XXX's success due to its corporate culture and organizational structure?". Depending on the chosen organization, this may be a good research question, or not. Likewise, starting with the words "to what extent..." may be very suitable in some cases, but not always.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

Criterion A has three strands: (a) communication of topic, (b) formulation of research question and (c) methodology.

Strands (a) and (b) were rarely a problem, as long as candidates had a balance of “theory” and “practice” (i.e. addressing both “contents” and “context”). Very few EEs had a research question leading to research that was only theoretical or only empirical; very few were not applied to a business, organization or industry, although there were some. Strand (c) however was a key differentiator: the [5-6] markband rewarded candidates who had carried out academic research, as shown in their bibliography.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

Criterion 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: corporate social responsibility, franchising, supply chains, viral marketing, motivation theories, business modelling etc.); it goes beyond knowledge of a case study, or an organization or of an industry.

It is through the correct and consistent use of subject terminology throughout the EE that candidates show their knowledge and understanding. Because of the demand of the EE in business management regarding secondary research, the best candidates were usually able to refer to other tools, techniques and theories they had researched, beyond the DP syllabus, such as Porter’s Five Forces, Carroll’s pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility, or Mintzberg’s 5 Ps of strategy. Their meaningful application was rewarded with higher marks for criterion B, as candidates then showed excellent subject knowledge. By the same token, candidates whose work had a limited theoretical underpinning (e.g. only SWOT or only Marketing Mix) could only score in the [1-2] mark band, as they did not show sufficient knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Criterion C: critical thinking

Criterion C assesses the extent to which critical-thinking skills have been used to analyze and evaluate research findings. It has three strands: (i) research, (ii) analysis and (iii) evaluation. In business management, there is a clear distinction between:

- the research carried out (secondary research, and, if essential: some complementary primary research, although primary research is rarely appropriate for EE in business management, because of the scope of the research question)
- the analysis that results from the application of models, when the candidate applies models (such as the Ansoff Matrix, SWOT analysis, Porter’s Generic Strategies etc.) to their chosen organization (or, if they decided to study an industry, models such as Porter’s 5 Forces)
- the evaluation, which proved more difficult for some candidates, who often did not include any discussion in their EE. In some cases, analytical tools were successively and successfully applied, but there was no discussion afterwards, and no consideration of different viewpoints, just an abrupt conclusion. Analytical tools are not an end in themselves: their aim is to frame knowledge and to lead to a discussion.

Criterion D: presentation

The vast majority of candidates reached high marks for this criterion; typical flaws resulting in lower marks included a number of the following:

- pages consisting of “big blocks of text” without any paragraph nor indentation
- no table of contents and/or no page number
- poor labelling of tables, graphs and other illustrations.

Criterion E: engagement

Regarding criterion E, the following two points are important:

- The text of the RPPF should be specific to the candidate’s own experience, about what they did and learnt, with contextualized examples. A generic “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 three meetings with the supervisor, in a rudimentary, technical way, but about the EE process more holistically.

Higher marks were awarded to candidates who evaluated their work/process and their engagement; their reflections were personal, and their own voice came through clearly. Candidates’ choice of a particular topic was often explained in terms of links to a CAS project, to an enterprise club at school or to a summer internship done in an organization, or plans to study business management at university, or a particular interest in a company or a brand, from a customer’s perspective.

Lower marks were awarded to candidates who did not seem engaged, did not plan their research well, or wrote a descriptive, superficial RPPF. Many candidates seemingly did not understand the difference between 'reflection' and 'description': they described rather than reflected.

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, candidates often get confused, mix the two and end up producing, instead of an EE, an extended IA.
- For their EE, candidates must carry out secondary academic research, for example in specialized literature or academic journals. It is not enough to work from the generic business management textbook used in class. For example, a candidate writing an EE about viral marketing would need to read specifically on this topic, engaging with some academic sources, for example a textbook about viral marketing. Librarians may play an invaluable role in terms of research skills, especially about how to select and access suitable sources.
- The EE needs a coherent, overall framework that should be presented in the introduction. Just listing a series of business models (PEST followed by SWOT followed by Ansoff matrix followed by 4Ps followed by BCG matrix followed by ratio calculations etc) is not a good approach, as it leads to fragmented, disjointed analysis.
- Make sure that candidates are aware of the criteria and expectations, especially criterion E and the RPPF. Even weaker candidates (whose research and analysis may be limited) can score high marks for criterion E, if they reflect well on their work and process. Examiners noted that some candidates, who wrote an

otherwise good EE, missed valuable marks for their RPPF, as they seemingly did not understand the requirements and expectations of criterion E.

Further comments

- Supervisor comments at the end of the RPPF are useful to contextualize the work submitted. Although they are not taken into account to determine the marks for criterion E, examiners always highly welcome them.
- Candidates should be reminded that the EE requirements are the ones in the IB EE Guide and official IB documents such as the subject reports.