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Business Studies BUSS4

(Specification 2130)

Unit 4: The Business Environment and Change

Report on the Examination

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General Comments

This is the only unit in AS or A2 Business Studies where students have a choice of questions. It is important, therefore, that students give careful thought about the precise requirements of each title and the extent to which they can address the issues raised in the question effectively in their response. A good response must answer the question set. Unfortunately, some students seem to answer a question they may have been set before as homework or a question they would like to have been asked, rather than the one that is in front of them. Good responses, by comparison, stay clearly focused on the question asked and directly address the issues raised. An essay on social reporting, for example, is not a general essay on corporate social responsibility and good answers recognise this. Similarly, an essay on the effects of the increasingly global nature of business on strategy is not the same as a general essay on strategy.

Students are strongly advised to take some time reading through the options they have and analysing each question in detail before deciding which one to answer. This process of selecting a particular question needs to involve a detailed deconstruction of the title to ensure that a student has fully understood the precise focus of the question. Better responses usually refer back to the title throughout the answer showing how a particular paragraph supports the argument for or against. This usually then leads to a conclusion that pulls together the earlier arguments.

Section A

Question 1

This title clearly focused on the value of social reporting to businesses. Better responses stuck closely to this and argued whether or not it was essential for businesses, and then produced a supported judgement. For example, some argued that social reporting was essential nowadays as stakeholders demanded evidence of responsible behaviour and without effective social reporting it would be difficult to raise finance or generate sales. Other students claimed it was not essential because there were many successful businesses that did not produce social reports. Weaker responses focused on whether reports were essential for stakeholders rather than for the businesses themselves; this is clearly not the same question. Some responses were rather general essays and seemed to be answering whether corporate social responsibility, rather than social reporting, was essential. The use of the word “essential” in the title was significant; some responses gave general answers about the benefits and costs of social reporting but did not directly address this part of the title.

Question 2

This was the more popular choice of titles in Section A, but again, some students suffered by wandering away from the title and not answering what had been asked. The question required students to consider the extent to which the ability of a business to act successfully in a socially responsible manner depends on the product. Strong responses considered the impact of the product (eg alcohol, tobacco or oil) and compared it with other factors such as the management attitude, the culture of the organisation and the financial position of the business. Good judgements often centred on the behaviour of different organisations within the same industry, to prove that it is not just the product that determines the behaviour of a business. Weaker responses focused more on the factors determining why businesses choose to behave in a socially responsible manner (rather than the factors determining their ability to behave in such a way).

In general, students followed the instructions in Section A and used the stimulus as a starting point and then brought in evidence from their research. The best use of research often used examples, data and case studies to compare and contrast issues raised in different industries or raised by different organisations. Good application used data and examples to support arguments, rather than simply describing events. It is important that students avoid simply telling a story about what has happened at a business. The example should be illustrating and substantiating an argument and lead perhaps to a discussion of why this occurred in this particular business, or at this specific moment, compared to what has happened elsewhere. The significance of the example needs to be made clear.

When researching the set theme, students should aim to study some well selected, in-depth examples that can be used to argue a point. In the case of social reporting, for example, good responses might have analysed the impact of Marks and Spencer's Plan A in some detail, or the need for Nike to produce social reports following criticism in the media, and then compared this with an analysis of an organisation that places less emphasis (if any) on social reporting. A good grasp of a selected number of case studies is more effective than descriptive lists of examples.

It was also interesting to note that when using data, better students tended to strengthen their argument by putting it in context. For example, rather than quoting a figure in isolation on the extent to which employees or consumers look at social reports, the student considered the source of the data and how this figure compared to other findings.

Section B

Question 3

This was a relatively popular title and many students were able to analyse strategy change in the context of increasing profits. However, good responses also needed the context of globalisation that lay behind the question. Do all organisations need to change their strategies as a result of globalisation? Better answers considered why they might (eg to reduce costs to remain competitive or to seek new markets if your domestic markets are threatened by overseas competitors) and then debated whether this was 'needed' and whether it was needed by 'all' organisations. Weaker responses tended to write generally about the issues involved in a strategy change and did not place this in the context of the "increasingly global nature of business".

Question 4

This essay was the most popular of Section B. It clearly focused on the ability of a leader to make a significant difference to the long term success of a business. Weaker responses tended to describe leadership styles and seemed to be repeating notes or repeating a general essay that had been written before. Some responses also seemed to be describing a long list of factors that could affect business success without relating this back to the difference that a leader can make; again some of the focus was lost. Better responses focused clearly on the factors that made it easier or more difficult for a leader to influence the long term success of a business and reached a justified conclusion based on this.

This essay was interesting in terms of the use of examples and cases to support the arguments made. Whilst it was pleasing to see a good general awareness of leaders such as Branson, Jobs and Schultz, the quality of application and analysis was rather limited in many cases. It is clearly not enough to say that 'Apple did well with Jobs there, then not so well when he left and now is doing well because he is back' without some insight into the role he has had as a leader, the decisions he has made and an analysis of what he has done, or not done, to influence the long term success of the organisation. Too often, students seem to have 'stories' but these simply describe events without analysing and evaluating the cause and effect in any detail. Again a few detailed case studies are recommended to provide some substance to the application and to substantiate the analysis. There is a danger that application is seen merely as repeating 'stories' – this leads to a descriptive response. The aim of case studies should be to support and substantiate the analysis, not to replace it.

Question 5

This was the least popular of the Section B titles, perhaps because the context of reinvention was not as familiar to students as some of the areas covered by the other titles. Better responses focused on the problems that might be caused by employees resisting a change of this scale compared to other factors (such as customers' reaction and finance); good conclusions tended to weigh up the relevant significance of these factors. Again, the context (in this case a situation of major change) was important for a good response as opposed to a general response on the problems of change. Weaker responses wandered from the question; for example, they examined the reasons why employees resist change rather than how this causes problems.

Summary

It is something of a cliché, but 'the answer is in the question', and students would be well advised to think carefully about this. Rushing in to start writing without thinking carefully about the right titles to choose and the elements that make up the question is a very risky strategy. Each question has a particular context or scenario that needs to be addressed directly to get good marks. There is also no doubt that essay practice is essential. Good responses showed a careful crafting of an answer. The introduction gave an overview of the whole response, the paragraphs developed a particular argument well with good examples or data to support it and ended with a judgement on the relative strength of this particular argument. The examples were used to support the arguments and often compared and contrasted different situations to provide real insight in the response. Having debated the issues, stronger responses usually led to a well supported conclusion. This is unlikely to happen by accident but as the result of regularly writing essays and learning how to structure answers and how to develop arguments in depth.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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