A-LEVEL
MEDIA STUDIES
Research and Production/Unit 4 MEST4
Report on the Examination

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**Introduction**

There was once again a very varied selection of work for moderators to look at. As in previous years, there were some portfolios of a very high standard indeed and which were awarded full marks for both components of the unit. However, the great majority of portfolios tended to produce a pairing which was rather uneven (and where, it must be said again, more time and effort had most frequently been exercised on the research essay) and there were a small minority (but fewer and fewer every year) which, for a variety of reasons, struggled to reach A-level standard.

However, whilst there was much to be pleased with, it must be said that most schools and colleges seem to have settled on a way of dealing with the unit which involves tackling topic areas which are being repeated year in year out and which also seems to involve creating linked productions which are very much of an AS quality, and frequently little more than that. Schools and colleges are reminded below that the linked production is not simply an add-on that can be worked on in the last few weeks before deadline day but is meant to be a much more substantial part of the student’s final portfolio.

**Critical Investigation**

Schools and colleges are again reminded that the topic areas and the problematics should be chosen by each student on an *individual* basis. MEST4 is a synoptic unit - individual research and critical autonomy are essential components of this unit. There may well be isolated instances where two students in a cohort may want to look at similar areas. If this is the case it is not too difficult to ensure that they adopt a different path through the problem and in particular look at completely different media products - but the spirit of the unit mitigates against the idea that a cohort should all answer the same fundamental question and simply refer to different products. This cropped up frequently this year. Some schools and colleges created a title, frequently concerning Representation and/or genre, and each student in the cohort then answered the question referring to different Representations or different genres. This meant that in a sample being moderated there were exactly the same references to theory and the only thing that differentiated the students was the products that they were focusing upon. In fact it could be argued that the cohort had been given a template for the essays which was then followed by every student - critical autonomy hardly existed.

This then suggests that the teacher had too much influence over what students were studying and how they were studying it. Taught coursework is totally against the spirit of the specification and is self-defeating given the requirement for student autonomy. Schools and colleges should ensure that students are working on topic areas of their own choosing. Teacher input into topic areas and the products to be studied should be absolutely minimal. It is virtually impossible to reward marks in Level 4 for work where the hand of the teacher is so visible. It is difficult as a teacher to adopt a hands-off approach but our job should be to advise and monitor, not plan and direct.

To achieve synopticity, students work should really utilise all the five Key Concepts where appropriate, refer to the wider contexts of production and consumption and broadly ask the question ‘why’. The question ‘how’ is considered more of an AS signifier. Many students benefitted from taking a problematic and then attempting to answer ‘how and why’ it was so. Questions that ask ‘to what extent’ or ‘what effect’ tended to hinder students because they are essentially unanswerable. It was pleasing to note that there were far fewer essay titles with these phrases in this year but that there were still a number of students who attempted titles with these phrases in the title.
Unfortunately again here are some topic areas that seemed to be particularly common this summer. The effect of video games remains a favourite but it is rarely answered successfully. Other frequently researched areas this year were the size zero debate and the popularity of reality TV and celebrities. The removal of Representation as a MEST3 topic area has led to a very large number of students researching aspects of Representation in MEST4, most particularly the concept of the Disney Princess. There were also a large number of students who investigated the role of women in music videos and virtually every one of these essays focused on Miley Cyrus, Rihanna and Beyoncé (Lady Gaga was notable by her absence this year!). It is as if there are no other music videos out there involving women. As ever, interestingly, hardly any essays looked at male representations.

The fact that so many students seem to be tackling the same topic areas year in and year out, especially the ones mentioned above, is disappointing to say the least. There are so many things going on in the media landscape at present, so many important debates being had everywhere we look - more so in 2016 than most years - that it seems a great shame that students are not, seemingly, being encouraged to look beyond the tried and predictable.

Unfortunately many of the areas outlined above are also the areas which need to be treated most carefully because they can be rather difficult to handle in an analytical and evaluative way and the focus of the title becomes all important. Thus, to really be successful as a critical investigation the most helpful essay title about video games and their effects is “Why are video games considered to be responsible for violent behaviour amongst teenagers?” and then a focus on a particular game or critic. The most common title seen this year was “How do video games affect their players?” which is unanswerable.

More importantly there were far too many critical investigations which were really just MEST3 case studies writ large. This is particularly true of critical investigations which focused on the impact of new and digital media. It has to be said that particular advice has been given through coursework advisers, in standardisation meetings and on the website about the necessity of avoiding either of the MEST3 topic areas which is in danger of becoming simply in essence a repeat of the MEST3 case study. This does not mean that identities and the media or the impact of new and digital media should not have a presence in MEST4, but it does mean that the question ‘why’ needs to be asked and that the focus of the essay needs to be synoptic, and also needs to focus on a media issue or debate. Unfortunately this point has to be stressed because there were a couple of schools and colleges where it was apparent that students had simply repeated their MEST3 case study and then simply added a linked production. The general advice would be that when discussing possible topic areas at the start of the A2 course, students should be steered well away from the MEST3 set topics before they even start thinking about their independent research essays.

A well-focused title for the critical research essay is all important. In fact it could be argued that creating a suitably focused topic area is the hardest thing for a student to do in Year 13. This is where the role of the teacher is all important in terms of guiding the students to reach an essay title which is answerable in 2000 words.

Another point to be noted is that some students are still straying way beyond the word limit. This summer there were several 4000 word essays submitted. These clearly lack focus and can rarely be considered fluent or cogent. It is advisable for students to pick no more than two or at most three central products for their investigation. Again, this is an area where a conversation with the coursework adviser can be particularly valuable.
Therefore the best advice has to be that schools and colleges consult their coursework advisers. They are available to check the putative titles and topic areas of your students and make constructive and helpful suggestions. No matter how confident a school and college might be with the topic areas and titles selected it really is worth contacting the coursework adviser. Schools and colleges should look at the MEST4 Checklist which is available under Coursework on the AQA website.

Some students still fall into the trap of writing potted histories of their topic areas. Contextual issues need to be integrated into the investigation rather than explored in separate sections. There were a few essays that had very tenuous links to media studies and tended to read more like an investigation into the students own interests and/or hobbies. This can have the effect of making the 2000 word essay seem more like a piece of feature journalism than a critical investigation. As a general piece of advice, students are advised not to investigate a topic area of which they are particular fans. This is a trap that skateboarding fans fall into quite frequently. The same can be said of gamers. The central core of the investigation should be a media issue/debate or problematic.

Students should also be prepared to challenge where they feel appropriate. There was still a sense this summer that some students were trying to please their stereotypical notion of what an AQA moderator wanted them to say.

Many of the critical investigations seem heavily reliant on media theory which is rather old and outdated. Students should attempt to engage with more contemporary theorists where possible. For example Mulvey’s ‘Male Gaze’ has been modified, challenged and reinterpreted over the past decade and more investigations should recognise this. One of the most interesting essays this year was an investigation into the ‘Female Gaze’. The effects debate has moved on from the hypodermic syringe model long, long ago.

There are still instances where it appeared that reference to a media theorist had been rather shoe-horned into the essay. This becomes evident when moderating a school or college where students have each looked at different topic areas but half way through the essay all start referring to exactly the same media theory which is not always particularly relevant. Whilst some media theory is important and could well be relevant to the point being made by the student, it must also be noted that what is much more important is that students demonstrate an understanding of the key concepts, contexts and debates that are fundamental to a synoptic study of the media. It is possible to obtain Level 4 marks with few references to theory – and in fact theory should only be mentioned when and where it is appropriate. Students should be reminded that it is the argument and debate, with focused reference to specific media texts that gain marks.

It is important that students supply a bibliography. Many failed to do this. Many that did supply a bibliography hardly did themselves justice. It is good practice to list the primary research as well as the secondary research. Students should also be reminded to consult products which are not simply internet based. The Level 4 descriptor refers to “making use of extensive and wide-ranging research”. Wikipedia can be a useful starting point especially the list of references at the bottom of the page but does not qualify as “wide-ranging” when it is the only reference listed. Unfortunately too many students still believe that if they read it on the internet it must be true.

It was particularly noticeable this year that many students analysed examples of female representation with reference to magazine covers and adverts and the like. It would be helpful if copies of such products were added to the essay as appendices.
All of the above comments have been repeated many times over the life of the specification. They are intended, not as criticism, but as helpful pointers to facilitate our students cope with what is actually a very challenging task.

**Linked Production**

Again, there were some spectacularly successful pieces of production work this summer. This is particularly true, again, of moving image work but there were also some very impressive print products submitted this year, moving well beyond the AS level. It is interesting to note that websites were far less popular this summer; could it be because the changing face of websites is now so difficult to create as a working artefact?

The A2 linked production is designed to encourage the ambitious student who has learnt about the various platforms and processes in the previous year, and now wishes to build upon that experience over the space of Year 13 and produce something that can stand in its own right but also enhances, explains or challenges the research that has been outlined in the investigation.

The production does not necessarily come after the critical investigation. It does increasingly seem to be the case, as has been stated above and in previous reports, that the linked productions are very much an afterthought, something to be done hurriedly at the end of the spring term. It cannot be stressed enough that the linked production should not be seen as simply an add-on, of little importance - just something that can be produced quickly at the end of Year 13. There were a number of students this summer who could and should have done so much better in terms of marks and grades at MEST4 if only they had spent more time and effort on their linked production.

With this in mind, it is suggested that the two strands should be worked at simultaneously, or indeed some students may wish to start with the production piece which may then in turn stimulate the critical investigation.

Many schools and colleges have recognised that the advice in the specification about expectations referred to minimum expectations. The specification states that moving image and audio work is not expected to be more than five minutes long. It then states that print or e-Media work should be at least three pages long. It is pleasing to note that there were students who clearly spent a great deal of time and effort on the linked production and moved far beyond the minimum requirements. Some of the best work seen also utilised more than one platform.

But again we saw far too many three page print pieces this year and in fact an increasing number of linked productions were print based this summer, many of which were not even really up to AS standard. There is also compelling evidence that some schools and colleges are simply recycling/reworking the work that students had created for MEST2. It is very difficult to moderate positively when work is submitted that could almost have been completed in a morning yet has been placed in Level 4. There are examples of production work in e-AQA. It is definitely worth having a look and discussing what is there with future students. Several schools and colleges also post MEST4 productions on YouTube and there is some excellent work available there.

Adding a short explanation of the link between the production and the critical investigation seems to have been a very helpful addition this summer. Certainly it made the moderators’ work much easier but there was evidence that it also helped to focus the students on the important link between their investigation and the production.
Some schools and colleges have been consulting their coursework advisers and one piece of advice given is that students should offer multi-media linked productions and many of these have been very successful. Thus film trailers have been submitted along with some advertising posters for the film in question. One word of warning - there were instances where one medium was covered in a sophisticated and technically impressive way only to be accompanied by a less impressive accompanying production, which has on some occasions resulted in the mark being dropped. Quantity will not replace quality.

Even though the linked production is worth fewer marks than the critical investigation it is still an important part of the unit and demonstrates synopticity and understanding very effectively. Some students are seriously underachieving because they do seem to think that the production exercise does not deserve their time and effort. This is a real shame because the work offered in MEST2 is constantly improving. Sadly the overall impression in MEST4 is that this is not necessarily the case. It cannot be stressed enough that the 32 marks available for the linked production can make an enormous difference to the total marks achieved by a student and the final grade. It is still our hope that students in future will be more ambitious and enterprising with their linked productions.

Administration

Even though these administrative points have been made repeatedly in previous reports on the examination, there are still schools and colleges who are not complying with these requests. This does make moderation an extremely lengthy process at times and so schools and colleges’ cooperation is asked for. Where there are problems with administration, teachers are asked to contact AQA in the first instance.

- Schools and colleges are asked to ensure that the work that they send to moderators has been internally standardised. Where there is more than one teacher, please ensure that the work is looked at and assessed by all the teachers and that a final mark is arrived at through discussion and agreed by all.
- Please ensure that all 2000 word essays have been properly labelled, student by student, and stapled or tied together so that moderators have easy and secure access. It is most helpful if the cover sheet has been attached to the coursework rather than delivered in a separate folder.
- Please check the addition of marks. There were several instances this summer where the addition was incorrect and strangely this was almost always to the disadvantage of the student - the sampling process often means that we do not see all students so some of your students might suffer unnecessarily.
- Please ensure that all Candidate Record Forms (CRF) and Centre Declaration Sheets (CDS) are filled in appropriately and signed by teachers and students as necessary. A lot of time is wasted sending these forms back and forth.
- Please annotate all work (this is an Ofqual requirement) remembering that the more comments that are made (both on the work and on the CRF) the easier it is for the moderator to understand why the marks you have given have been awarded. This is particularly true when awarding the marks for the linked production. Too often the linked production is barely mentioned on the CRF and this lack of detail can make life rather difficult for moderators. This was a particular problem this year - while it is a given that teachers workload is getting heavier every year, just a short paragraph explaining the marks awarded can make a real difference to the moderating experience. It is pleasing to note that some schools and colleges not only annotate the work fully but also submit what amounts to a dossier of comments on the work of each student. This certainly makes the process of moderating the work far easier and is again of great benefit to students.
• If schools and colleges have engaged in a dialogue with their coursework adviser then please print off the correspondence and send that along with the work. This is particularly helpful if the moderator comes across work that on the face of it might not seem to fit the parameters of the unit. The dialogue with the adviser can explain everything.

• Schools and colleges are advised that a great deal of very helpful information is available about MEST4, and all other units, on the AQA Media Studies website.

• Linked productions should be fully realised artefacts. Magazine pages should be printed, websites should be fully functional and broadcast material should be playable on most domestic machines and/or computers.

• Please note that QuickTime files do not play on domestic DVD players and frequently behave very strangely on PCs. Strangely enough, they also behave in a very erratic manner on Macs. QuickTime is to be avoided. This point cannot be stressed enough.

• Please label all production work as thoroughly as possible.

• Please remember that DVDs scratch very easily. They then become unplayable. Please send DVDs in a case or plastic cover. There were again several examples of DVDs being unplayable this summer so please take this comment on board. Please also note that broadcast or e-Media work can far more easily be stored on a memory stick and is far less likely to be damaged.

• Please check that the disk has been formatted properly before submission to the moderator.

• It is best if each individuals broadcast or e-Media work is stored on a separate disk rather than storing all a schools/colleges work on one disk. Where a schools or colleges work is stored on one disk, please place the work in student number order and again label as carefully as possible.

• Please do not send in large amounts of research materials and pre-production planning. This is a requirement of MEST2 but even there only a representational sample of five to six pages are required. We do not need to see anything other than the linked production itself.

• There is no call for an evaluation of the linked production.

• It is still an extremely wise idea to run your titles and linked productions by the coursework adviser - some topic areas this summer were not particularly helpful for the students.

MEST 4 remains, a potentially very exciting and valuable exercise for students, one where they are encouraged to take their own route through the contemporary media landscape and explore an issue or debate that actually interests them. Many students are encouraged to take this route by their schools and colleges and it is again hoped that more schools and colleges will let go of the reins just a little more and allow their students the individual space to research areas of their own choosing and thereby develop genuine critical autonomy - which is exactly what the unit was designed to achieve.
Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator