Introduction

As always, there was a very varied selection of work for moderators to look at. Some portfolios were particularly impressive, with Critical Investigations and Linked Productions of equal excellence. However, the great majority of portfolios tended to produce a pairing which was rather uneven and there were a small minority (getting smaller every year) which, for a variety of reasons, struggled to reach A-level standard.

Administration

Even though these administrative points have been made in previous reports, there are some issues still arising. By taking on board the following requests, it will mean that the moderation process is a smooth one. Where there are problems with administration, teachers are asked to contact AQA in the first instance.

- 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 often this was very much to the disadvantage of the student. As moderation involves a sampling of student work, addition errors may not be picked up by the moderator.

  This addition problem has become particularly difficult to correct now that schools/colleges are submitting marks electronically. Changing the marks (and the knock on effect this can have on selecting six students for the moderation sample) is less easy to do now that we are using e-submissions so please double check. Also check that the marks on e-submissions matches the marks on the Candidate Record Forms (CRFs).

- Please ensure that all CRFs and Centre Declaration Sheets are filled in appropriately and signed by teachers and students as necessary. A lot of time is wasted sending these forms back and forth, and they are important.

- Please annotate all work, which is a requirement of the specification. “The annotation will help the moderator to see as precisely as possible where the teacher considers that the candidates have met the criteria in the specification.” 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, which was a particular problem this year. 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 because moderators can see clearly why credit has been given.

- If schools/colleges have engaged in a dialogue with their Coursework Adviser, print off the correspondence and send it 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.

- Teachers are advised that a great deal of very helpful information is available about this unit
  on the AQA Media Studies webpages. It is advisable to check these webpages for useful
  information.

- Linked Productions should be fully realised artefacts. Magazine pages should be printed.
  There is a fundamental difference between an artefact printed out on paper and the way it
  might appear on a screen. Websites should be fully functional and broadcast material should
  be playable on most domestic machines.

- There was a real problem with the range of different formats that moving image production
  work was submitted on. As a rule of thumb, moving image work should be playable of a
  domestic DVD player or on VLC Media Player.

- Please note that QuickTime files do not play on domestic DVD players, and moderators have
  also encountered problems trying to view them on both PCs and Macs. QuickTime should be
  avoided where at all possible and is builds in problems into the moderation process.

- Please label all production work as clearly as possible.

- Please remember that DVDs scratch very easily and then become unplayable. Please send
  DVDs in a case or plastic cover. There were 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 individual broadcast or e-media work (ie each student) is stored on a separate
  disk rather than storing all of the work from a school/college on one disk. Where a
  school’s/college’s work is stored on one disk, please place the work in student number order
  and again label as carefully as possible.

- If a website has been published online, or if work has been submitted via YouTube, please
  print the url (preferably as a hyperlink). Handwritten links can be difficult to decipher and much
  time can be wasted trying different variations of the link.

- Some schools/colleges submit work on a memory stick and this is a particularly effective way
  of submitting work to the moderator.

- Please do not send in huge boxes of research materials and pre-production planning. This is a
  requirement of MEST2 but even then, only a representational sample is required. We do not
  need to see anything other than the linked production itself for MEST4.

- There is no call for an evaluation of the production.

- It is good practice to run your titles and linked productions by your Coursework Advisor. Some
  topic areas this summer were not particularly helpful for the students, an issue that could have
  been avoided.
**Critical Investigation**

Overall, many of the Critical Investigations seen this series were well researched, independent, critical investigations and schools/colleges are to be congratulated on the sterling work being done.

Schools/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 and individual research and critical autonomy are essential components of it. There may be isolated instances where two students in a cohort may want to look at similar areas, and if this is the case, please ensure that they adopt a different path through the problem and, in particular, look at completely different media products. It is not in the spirit of the unit that a cohort should all answer the same fundamental question and simply refer to different texts. There were some instances where all students had been given a basic essay title and then all had chosen different products to examine. In a small number of cases, a cohort all wrote an essay on Representation and the only difference between each essay was what exactly was being represented in a variety of media products. Each essay then referred to exactly the same general research, which suggests that the teacher had far too much influence over what students were studying and how they were studying it. Against advice given in previous reports, there was more than one instance where all students from a school/college answered exactly the same question and the topic area had clearly been taught. References to media products were identical throughout all the Investigations in some of these cases. 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 texts to be studied should be absolutely minimal. It is virtually impossible to reward marks in level 4 for work that has been overly prescribed to the students.

To achieve the synoptic requirement of the unit, students’ work should really utilise all the 5 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 both ‘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 see that there were far fewer essay titles with these phrases in this year. However, there were still a noticeable number of students who still attempted titles which included these phrases.

Furthermore, please remember that the central media products being explored should be contemporary; roughly speaking produced and exhibited within the past 5 years.

There were some topic areas that seemed to be particularly common this summer. The effect of video games still remains a favourite but rarely is answered to any great success. Body image and rom-coms were also popular again. There was a puzzling surge in essays about reality TV/celebrity and a new interest in the representation of women in Disney films. There was a burgeoning interest in the upsurge of violence in all media products, which some students managed to contextualise quite successfully. There was also a surge in essays on Netflix and the new distribution methods of moving image products. Despite that this is really a MEST3 topic area, there was also a disturbingly frequent suggestion that Netflix is a benevolent institution, which exists purely to allow us to binge-watch.

There were far too many Critical Investigations this year, which were really just MEST3 Case Studies. The impact of digitalisation on the music industry or the influence of social media are both areas that are MEST3 topic areas. Particular advice has been given through Coursework Advisers, in standardisation meetings and also on the website about the necessity of avoiding a MEST4 topic area that is simply a repeat of the MEST 3 case study. This does not mean that Identity or 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. It also needs to focus on a media issue or debate. Unfortunately, this point has to be stressed because there were a couple of schools/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.

Schools and colleges should look at the MEST4 Checklist, which is available in the Teacher Resource Bank on the AQA website.

Some titles are still quite vague. The word limit is 2000 words, which means that a focused essay is vital. Some students are straying way beyond the word limit. These can lack focus and can rarely be considered fluent or cogent. It is advisable for students to pick no more that two or at most three central products for their investigation. This is an area where a conversation with the Coursework Advisor can be particularly valuable.

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. The central core of the investigation has to be a media issue/debate or problematic.

Students should also be prepared to challenge where they feel appropriate. There was a sense in many investigations that 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, and investigations should recognise this. The effects debate has moved on from the hypodermic syringe model.

There were several 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/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. 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 omitted to do this and those that did hardly did themselves justice. Students are reminded to consult texts that 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, in particular the list of references at the bottom of the page, but does not qualify as “wide-ranging” when it is the only reference listed.
Linked Productions

There were many excellent pieces of production work this summer. As with previous series, this was particularly true of moving image work but there were also some truly excellent print products submitted this year, moving well beyond the AS level.

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. It’s designed to enable students to 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. The two strands could be worked on simultaneously, or a student may wish to start with the production piece, which may then in turn stimulate the critical investigation.

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 that much easier but there was evidence that it also helped to focus the candidates on the important link between their Investigation and the Production.

Many schools and colleges have recognised that the advice in the specification about expectations referred to minimum expectations. 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.

Conversely however, there is also increasing evidence that many students see the Linked Production as a bit of an ‘add-on’, something to be done once the Critical Investigation is completed and something that does not require much ambition or effort. There were far too many 3 page print pieces this year, many of which were not even really up to AS standard. There is also compelling evidence that some schools/colleges are simply recycling/reworking the work that students had created for MEST2. There are examples of production work in ‘e-aqa’ and more will be added in the autumn. It is definitely worth having a look and discussing what is there with future students. Several schools/colleges also post MEST4 productions on YouTube and there is some excellent work available there.

Even though the Linked Production is worth fewer marks than the Critical Investigation, it is still an important part of the unit and demonstrates synoptic requirements and understanding very effectively. Some students are seriously underachieving because they appear to think that the Production exercise deserves 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

Summary

Please ensure that you look regularly at the website for information about all units.

http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/media-studies/a-level/media-studies-2570
Please also use your Coursework Advisers to ensure that your students are researching appropriate topic areas. If you do not know who your Coursework Adviser, email mediastudies@aqa.org.uk

Overall, there is some outstanding work being produced by some students. However, many moderators felt that, after looking at their allocation this summer, some schools/colleges had worked out a list of titles that seemed to fit the bill, suggested a number of possible linked productions and then guided their students through the process. This was never the rationale behind this unit. The students who scored highly this summer tended to be those that had clearly picked research topic areas that were genuinely individual and independent, demonstrated critical autonomy and in several cases produced Linked Productions that were as good as, and sometimes even better than, professionally produced products.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

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