A-level
MEDIA STUDIES
MEST4 Research and Production
Report on the Examination

2570/MEST4
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General

There was a very varied selection of work for moderators to look at this year, including some portfolios of a very high standard indeed which were awarded full marks for both components of the unit. However, the majority of portfolios tended to produce a pairing which was rather uneven (and where more time and effort had been exercised on the Research Essay). There was also a small minority (fewer and fewer every year) that, 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 seem to have settled on a way of dealing with this Unit which involves tackling topic areas which are being repeated. More of a concern, there are a large number of students who are simply creating Linked Productions which are very much of AS quality, and frequently little more than that. Disappointingly, it would appear that in some cases, students are revising their MEST 2 work and then submitting it for MEST 4. This runs counter to the ethos and rules of the specification. Schools are reminded below that the Linked Production is not simply an add-on that can be worked on in the last few weeks before submission but is meant to be a much more substantial part of the student’s final portfolio.

Schools are 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. 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. Again, this cropped up on more than a few occasions this year. Some schools 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 identical 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 such a cohort had been given a template for the essays which was then followed by every student, thus limiting critical autonomy and the possibility of achieving placement in the highest levels of the mark scheme.

To achieve synopticity students work should 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’ has always been 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 is very gratifying to note that there were few instances of this happening this summer.

There are still some topic areas that seemed to be particularly common throughout the life of the Unit and have cropped up again this year. 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. There were also many students who investigated the role of women in music videos, however (disappointingly) every one of these essays focused on Miley Cyrus, Rihanna and Beyonce. As ever, interestingly, hardly any essays looked at male representations. Lastly the #metoo debate and the treatment/representation of transgender and sexual fluidity seemed to be a popular area as well.
The fact that so many students seem to be tackling the same topic areas is disappointing when there are so many things going on in the contemporary media landscape at present, so many important debates being had everywhere we look and 2018 has been an amazing source of media debates and controversies. It seems a great shame that students are not, seemingly, being encouraged to look beyond the tried and predictable.

More importantly there were still far too many Critical Investigations which were MEST3 case studies. This is particularly true of Critical Investigations which focused on the Impact of New and Digital Media. It must 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. 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 needs to focus on a media issue or debate. The best advice must be to put a block on topic areas that are closely linked to MEST 3. This then avoids problems in the moderation process.

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. Therefore the best advice has to be when there is any doubt schools should 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 might be with the topic areas and titles selected it really is worth contacting the Coursework Adviser. If you do not know who your Coursework Adviser is, then you should contact the subject department at Guildford (mediastudies@aqa.org.uk or 01483 556301). Schools 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 student’s own interests and/or hobbies. This can have the effect of making the essay seem more like a piece of feature journalism than a Critical Investigation.

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.

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, which gain marks.

It is important that students supply a bibliography and 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. Too many students still believe that if they read it on the internet it must be true.
It was the case again this year that many students analysed examples of representation with reference to magazine covers, adverts etc. It would be helpful if copies of such products were added to the essay as appendices.

The above comments 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, moving well beyond the AS level. (It is interesting to note that websites are becoming less and less popular.)

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 should not necessarily be created after the Critical Investigation has been finished. It does increasingly seem to be the case, as has been stated above and in previous reports, that there are many cases where 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 or just something that can be produced quickly at the end of Year 13. There were several students this summer who could and should have done much better in terms of marks and grades at MEST4 if only they had spent more time and effort on their Linked Production.

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 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 are examples of production work in e-AQA and more will be added in the autumn. It is 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 have been consulting their Coursework Advisors and one piece of advice given is that students should possibly offer multi-media inked 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. However, it is worth noting that 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. In short, 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. 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 Moderators Reports, there are still schools who are not complying with these requests. Where there are problems with administration, teachers are asked to contact AQA in the first instance.

• Schools 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 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 CRF and CDS forms 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 cover sheet) 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 not only annotate the work fully but also submit what amounts to a dossier of comments on the work of each student. This certainly helps the moderator to uphold the decisions made by schools.

• 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 are advised that a great deal of very helpful information is available about this, 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 individual’s broadcast or e-Media work is stored on a separate disk rather than storing all a school’s work on one disk. Where a school’s work is stored on one disk, please place the work in student number order and again label as carefully as possible.

• Some schools and 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 not of MEST4. 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 it is hoped that more schools 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