6th November, 2023

Dear OCR,

We write as representatives of the Classical Association Teaching Board (CATB) to raise our concerns and those of the teachers who have contacted us regarding the GCSE and A Level Classical Civilisation examinations undertaken in the summer 2023 series.

Question setting

Last year, we wrote to you on behalf of teachers who were dismayed by the ambiguous wording of questions in a number of the GCSE components. We recognise the difficulty the exam setters face in appropriate phrasing, but are disappointed to see questions again this year at both GCSE and A Level that limit the accessibility of the papers for some students.

Regarding the GCSE exams, we have had teachers contact us about question 5a from the Myth & Religion paper:

‘Source B is an extract from an ancient Greek traveller called Pausanias and it reads:

“The gods sit on a throne, and he is made of gold and ivory. On his head lies a garland which is a copy of olive shoots. In his right hand he carries a Victory…she wears a ribbon and - on her head - a garland. In the left hand of the god is a sceptre, ornamented with every kind of metal, and the bird sitting on the sceptre is the eagle. The sandals also of the god are of gold, as is likewise the robe. On the robe are embroidered figures of animals and the flowers of the lily.”

Pausanias is describing the chryselephantine cult statue of Zeus in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.’

The question reads: ‘Which type of statue is being described by Pausanias in Source B? [1]’

The mark scheme states that the answer to this question is cult statue (1) and gives no other possible responses.
The examiner’s report states that ‘chryselephantine statue’ will not be accepted as an answer, and students will only be credited the mark if they have written ‘chryselephantine cult statue.’

Teachers feel that ‘chryselephantine statue’ is a legitimate response to the question when the question asks ‘Which type of statue is being described?’ It is easy to see how students would view ‘chryselephantine statue’ as a type of statue, and thus feels as though students are being penalised for the question not being worded clearly enough.

This issue has also arisen at A Level, with a number of teachers contacting us regarding the following question in the Politics of the Late Republic paper:

"The period of the Late Republic was like a stage play with two sets of actors: the optimates and the populares. Evaluate how far you agree with this statement." [30]

In the report the chief examiner writes: "Some candidates engaged in detailed exegesis of the ‘stage play’ simile, drawing parallels between the Roman factions and the Greek chorus, and imagining the individuals as tragic heroes. This was not required.

Teachers feel that the wording of this question is misleading, and for some, would be very difficult to interpret.

Similarly, we received concerns regarding the 30 mark essay questions in the World of the Hero paper, with one teacher commenting:

“I have been, for many years, a lead examiner with a different exam board, and I am astounded by the level of difficulty on OCR papers. Often the language and layout of the questions makes decoding the questions a big hurdle for candidates, which seems unfair. For example, on this year's World of the Hero Paper students had a choice between a nice 30 mark single focus essay on Menis in the Iliad OR a double focus question on Odysseus being as complex as the poem or a double focus essay on gods and fate in the Aeneid. Looking through past paper questions there are lots of double focus essays creeping in, which seems very unfair, especially given the tight timings in the exam.”
There is a strong feeling within the teaching community that the unrealistic expectations of students, and the obscure, and at times, ambiguous questioning, both at GCSE and A Level, do not allow students to demonstrate their knowledge adequately. It was pleasing to see that consideration had been given to the concerns we raised with you last year regarding question setting, and we hope that the examples provided above can further support you as you continue to make improvements to future question papers.

Marking

We have had a number of centres contact us to raise their concerns over the marking of the A Level papers from this summer’s exam series.

One teacher, who is an experienced examiner for another exam board, was shocked to find a lack of comments, either positive or negative, on the scripts they recalled. This makes it very difficult for teachers to ascertain where students may have made errors, or how they could improve their performance. Additionally, without a summary comment to explain why a mark has been given, the usefulness of recalled papers as resources that centres can use to improve the teaching & learning of this specification is limited. If centres have the right to recall papers for this purpose, it would be helpful if examiners could provide commentary that would enable both teachers, especially those new to teaching or from a non-specialist background, and students to feel confident that their performance in the exam has been fairly assessed.

One centre has contacted us to raise their concerns that papers are being marked inconsistently unfairly. This centre submitted four papers for review, three of which, at the time of this letter, they have received back, and all three papers have been moved up a grade boundary as a result of the remark. These papers received 9, 10 and 14 additional marks during the remark process, which indicates that the marking process in the first instance was too harsh. This is a repeat problem for this centre, who are now rightly concerned that their whole cohort may have been unfairly marked. Unfortunately, this pattern with marking leads to a lack of confidence in their exam board, which feeds into the perception of teachers and students alike that it is very difficult to achieve the top grades in Classical Civilisation. However, it can be very difficult to convince students to submit their papers for review, as many pupils cannot afford the review fee.
Examiner Recruitment

We wish to ask how OCR goes about ensuring both quality and diversity when recruiting examiners and question-setters for this qualification. We would be grateful if you would answer the following questions:

**Gender Balance.** Please could you let us know for this 2023 series, and for the years since this specification was first examined in 2019 (inclusive):

- What was the proportion of men and women on your examining teams?
- What was the proportion of men and women on your question-setting teams?

As the partnership between the Classical Association’s Teaching Board and OCR continues to strengthen, we would welcome the opportunity to support you in reviewing and improving the areas where concerns have been raised, and will continue to support the dialogue between you and the Classics teaching community.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sharon Marshall (CATB Chair)
Gráinne Cassidy (CA Education Co-ordinator)
Rob Hancock-Jones (CATB subject representative for Classical Civilisation)