



How the Case Study is assessed

A guide for students by the Case Study senior examiners

The Case Study exam is a competency-based assessment which uses a substantial case study to assess the professional skills of ACA students and is the final exam many students will sit before completing their ACA training. It comprises the Advance Information (AI) of around 15,000 words, which provides the case scenario; and the exam paper (EP) which is around 3,500 words. On the day of the exam, students will receive updates to the case scenario and will need to answer the exam requirements. The Case Study exam is based on a real-life business situation and essentially tests practical rather than pure academic or technical skills.

THE FOUR PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND HOW THEY ARE ASSESSED

In the Case Study, the examiners are assessing students' ability to demonstrate their competence in four professional skills, as shown below (together with a brief explanation of what the examiners assess):

- **Assimilating and using information (A&UI)** the identification and use of relevant data from the case material - integrating AI and EP and any own research.
- **Structuring problems and solutions (SP&S)** the appropriate analysis and explanatory commentary on figures and other case information, providing evidence of comprehension of the core issues.
- **Applying judgement (AJ)** the evaluation of the

analysis conducted, consideration of implications by assessing all assumptions, identification of limitations, omissions and links between issues, applying appropriate professional scepticism.

- **Conclusions and recommendations (C&R)** highlighting key points, providing clear conclusions derived from analysis and judgement and offering a range of relevant action points.

All students are advised to read the examiners' detailed report on any recent Case Study exam to obtain further understanding of each of these skills in a specific exam context.

The ICAEW learning materials also provide detailed examples of different qualities of answer for each of the cases included.

Students' exam scripts are assessed using a marking key in five sections:

- executive summary;
- the three main exam requirements; and
- appendices and overall exam.

The marking key has 40 equal 'skills assessment boxes' in total: six for the executive summary, 10 for each main requirement and four for appendices and overall exam. Thus, the three main requirements are given equal weighting and so should be given equal attention by students. The professional skills are closely integrated and there is synergy between them.

Competency is assessed by reference to four levels in each skills assessment box:

1. clearly competent (CC);
2. sufficiently competent (SC);
3. insufficiently competent (IC); and
4. insufficiently demonstrated (ID).

Clearly competent and sufficiently competent collectively are referred to as 'passing grades'. If there is no evidence of the competency, the box will be marked 'not attempted' (NA).

The result is expressed as a final mark out of 100; the pass mark is 50.

MARKING AND RESULTS DETERMINATION: THE PROCESS

The marking key for each exam session is developed by a process of intensive discussion over a period of several days by the senior examiners in conjunction with a group of highly experienced markers, with reference to a sample of actual exam scripts.

Marking is carried out by a 50-strong group of independent, professionally qualified, trained markers, arranged into teams headed by team leaders. Markers are required to be fully versed in the content of the confirmed marking key before they can begin 'live' marking. Their work is monitored throughout by the team leaders reviewing marked scripts and completed marking keys, and by overall statistics that monitor standards and variations.

Marking keys must show a clear, objective audit trail indicating how each mark was awarded (or not awarded).

This process provides a ranking of all scripts according to total grades achieved. The senior examiners and senior moderator then review a

range of scripts around a predicted pass mark to determine those to be selected for second marking.

Around 12% of all scripts receive a second marking, chosen mainly from just below and just above the predicted pass mark. This is undertaken 'blind' (that is, by a different marker with no reference to the first mark but using exactly the same marking key template). Differences between first and second marking are arbitrated independently by a third marker.

After second marking, a final ranking is produced. The senior examiners and senior moderator then read marginal scripts to decide a final pass/fail position. This is a reflective process which relies on the audit trail recorded by markers on the marking keys. Using that yardstick, the senior examiners and senior moderator can determine whether the scripts provide evidence of the necessary quality to pass a competency-based, professional skills assessment. The following criteria are relevant:

- position in the ranking;
- number of achievable passing grades obtained in each requirement;
- balance and completeness in coverage of the requirements;
- balance and completeness in coverage of professional skills;
- quality and integration of the answer to each requirement;
- number of not attempted boxes on the script overall.

An accumulation of not attempted boxes is seriously detrimental to success (no self-respecting professional accountant would present a report to a client with gaps in it!).

Legibility is also a critical key issue. There is no point in students writing 40 pages that markers struggle to read - they will try their best but points are bound to be missed. It is better for students to spend more time and reduce the number of pages, or to use simple techniques such as clear spacing. Until computer-based exams remove this issue, students should ensure that their report is completely legible - an unreadable report means that no credit can be given.

Students with marginal fails will have had their script marked twice, arbitrated where necessary, and been subject to a final review. The examining team are therefore confident that a fail is a fail. Unsuccessful students are advised to read the detailed examiners' report on the Case Study exam they sat to understand the general strengths and weaknesses which the whole cohort presented.

IN CONCLUSION

Success at the Case Study lies in knowing the AI scenario thoroughly; integrating the exam paper information into AI knowledge (A&UI); analysing the problems posed and performing relevant calculations (SP&S); making judgements from that analysis (AJ); and presenting conclusions and recommendations (C&R) that follow from the work conducted - all presented in a coherent and legible report for the client. ●

Explore the latest Case Study exam resources at icaew.com/examresources. Please note that the Case Study exam is fully open book. You can attempt the Case Study once you have attempted (or received credit for) all the other ACA exams, and you need to be in the final year of your training agreement.