

Introduction to the Graded Unit for Social Sciences

Contents

Understanding the Graded Unit (GU)	1
Purpose of the Unit.....	2
Themes in HNC Social Science	3
Structure and agency	3
Competing perspectives	4
Continuity and change	4
Nature and nurture	4
The local and the global	4
Assessment	5
What to do next	6
Exam Stress	7
References	7

Understanding the Graded Unit (GU)

The Graded Unit (GU) is something of myth and legend among HNC Social Science students. When you begin the course you start a learning journey that is often quite frustrating in terms of measuring your performance against standards that you are used to i.e. grades or percentages. For many of you, this will be a return to a more traditional form of assessment as the GU is an exam within which you will produce three essays that you are marked and then graded for.

The GU is the opportunity for you to demonstrate the critical thinking ability that you have developed as you have studied the A and B units across the disciplines and throughout the duration of the course.

The key to success in this unit is to be as prepared as you can for any question that is presented to you. You need to bear in mind that trying to create ‘model’ answers will not prepare you for the exam. This is about critical thinking and

Graded Unit: Research in the Social Sciences

applying the knowledge that you have acquired to create an effective response to a specific question. These materials have been developed to provide you with an opportunity to organise what you have learned and practice responding to example questions. If you can create an effective essay plan for the examples in this unit, you will be prepared.

Think of the knowledge you have about the social sciences as a tree (bear with me). You have a core or trunk that could be viewed as research and methodology. This trunk is the fundamental centre of the social sciences as it provides a way for evidence to be generated. Without this evidence we cannot support our theories. Now think of the branches of the tree. The thick branches that grow out of the trunk are the various disciplines i. e. sociology, politics and psychology. That thick branch then supports many smaller branches; these can be viewed as the various approaches, theories and concepts that each discipline is concerned with. What you are trying to do in this unit is to create a strong mental image of the tree of knowledge that you now have access to. This is not meant to sound as biblical as it does!?! Rather it is a way for you to begin to understand and organise what you know.

Purpose of the Unit

The Graded Unit (GU) is designed to provide evidence that you have achieved the following principal aims of the HNC in Social Sciences:

- develop an understanding of different social science disciplines;
- develop an understanding of the contribution of social sciences to the modern world and human behaviour;

Graded Unit: Research in the Social Sciences

- demonstrate that by combining perspectives from more than one subject, particular themes or aspects of human behaviour can be examined, explained and thereby understood;
- develop an open-minded, critical and evaluative approach to study;
- develop examination techniques;
- gain knowledge and understanding of different research methods;
- gain knowledge of competing views, perspectives, theories and evidence from a variety of subjects to enable the candidate to adopt a social scientific approach;
- develop skills in managing and prioritising information.

SQA Unit Descriptor for FM67 34

Themes in HNC Social Science

Throughout the social sciences, there are multiple debates and concepts that cross over the disciplines. Often, an issue can only be understood by adopting a tool-box approach by borrowing from several disciplines. An example of this could be voting behaviour. We may look to political science, social psychology, psychology of individual differences, structural sociology and action sociology to enable us to understand what motivates an individual in their voting choices. Each approach views an issue from a difference perspective.

It is useful for you to consider some of the popular debates that persist in the social sciences and these are briefly outline for you next.

Structure and agency

This debate highlights the tension between the forces of structure and agency. The contest here is to decide whether or not human behaviour and society are

driven by individuals and the choices they make, or the result of actions that are out with our control. Do we shape society, or does it shape us?

Competing perspectives

All social science disciplines are underpinned by theory. Often we will encounter theories that contradict each other and we have to consider alternative explanations for things. This is seen as an on-going process and social scientists understand that this particular debate is ultimately what drives research in the social sciences. We do not expect to find a definitive answer. As yet, there is no 'one size fits all' theory (despite what Stephen Hawking movie titles may suggest).

Continuity and change

Particularly relevant to History, it is important to understand how and why things change and remain in society. Sociology, as well as other disciplines, considers what drives change or what leads to a status quo. What do we now know that we did not know a century ago? How has Psychology changed in light of technological advances?

Nature and nurture

This debate probably needs the least introduction. In common sense terms the argument about whether we are born with innate behaviours or we learn them is not news. Nature and nurture spans across the disciplines like no other. It is a fundamental question within the social sciences and beyond.

The local and the global

Here we examine the impact that global events have on local activities, labour, service provision and so on. We might consider the impact of war in the East on

Graded Unit: Research in the Social Sciences

oil production and the infrastructures that supports it in Scotland. The focus is on geography and the influence of a location.

Assessment

The assessment is based on a closed-book examination lasting 3 hours in controlled and invigilated conditions. The use of notes, textbooks, handouts and other materials will not be permitted.

The question paper contains 4 unseen questions and you will answer 3 of them. The Research and Methodology (40 marks) question is mandatory – you must answer this.

You may then choose 2 from a selection of 3 – 1 Politics (20 marks), 1 Psychology (20 marks) and 1 Sociology (20 marks).

There is one reassessment opportunity for the Graded Unit. Reassessment allows students who have failed, or wish to upgrade their award, another opportunity. The second exam paper will be significantly different from the first paper. In all cases of reassessment, students should be awarded the higher grade achieved. This does not mean that students can approach the initial Graded Unit exam as a practice run – your academic record will keep a note of whether or not your grade is from a first or second attempt and this can have implications on your future studies.

The exam will be marked out of 100 and students will be graded as follows:

A - 70%-100%

B - 60%-69%

C - 50%-59%

Fail - 49% or lower

What to do next

First you need to realise that exams are a good way of ensuring that you have understood the main themes and concepts from the course.

Second this should reassure you that you do not need to run off and learn the entire course notes for each of the topics you have studied. For those of you who have not kept pace throughout the course this is a good time to look back over the unit descriptors for each unit and discuss the key points with your lecturer. This means that you need to consider 5 of the units that you have studied: Research and Methodology (Outcomes 1 and 2 especially); the A and B units for the 2 disciplines you choose from Psychology, Sociology and Politics.

Third is to access the core texts for each discipline and read the introduction. You may already have done this during the course of the units, but if you did not quite manage it, now is the time. The introductions will give you a general overview of the discipline and allow you to begin to visualise the discipline and where it stands on the knowledge continuum.

The final point is to make sure you give yourself thinking time. I have a key ring that a student made for me that says "Some thoughts can't be taught". Thinking is a process and is something that you cannot learn by rote. You will be sick of hearing from your lecturers that you need to read, converse and allow yourself time to digest information. Part of the learning process is creating downtime for you to mull over ideas. The good news is that sleep is part of this process!!

Exam Stress

Exams can be stressful. This is not news to you. However, you need to bear in mind that there are no trick questions and that if you have prepared well for the exam you have no rational reason to allow stress to limit you.

Planning is key here and we will consider exam stress further in the 'Preparing for the Exam' session. In the meantime, positive thoughts can override the negative feelings and memories that you have of exams. Breathing exercises can also help before the exam and during.

A useful resource that has been developed for students is from [Student Minds](#). An additional source to help you prepare for your exam is the UHI '[Essential Student Skills](#)'.

References

Student Minds Exam Stress [online]. Available from:
<<http://www.studentminds.org.uk/exam-stress.html>> [22 Jan 2018]

Contributing authors: Julia Moreland and Brian Boag

Corresponding author: Julia Moreland