



Advanced Certificate in Market & Social Research Practice

Guide to the Examination – MRS Accredited Centres

A comprehensive guide to the Examination element of assessment for MRS Accredited Centres

Effective from June 2020 Assessment

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the UK professional body for research, insight and analytics. We recognise 5,000 individual members and over 500 accredited Company Partners in over 50 countries who are committed to delivering outstanding insight. As the regulator, we promote the highest professional standards throughout the sector via the MRS Code of Conduct.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of the MRS Advanced Certificate in Market and Social Research Practice

The role of market and social research is vital in informing and driving effective decision making within both the business and public sectors.

The MRS Advanced Certificate in Market & Social Research Practice (Advanced Certificate) is designed for those who have just entered or are seeking to enter the research profession, working in the areas of commercial market and/or social research. The overall aim of the qualification is to enable candidates to develop a clear practical understanding of the principles underpinning all stages in the research process, and to develop the skills required to enable them to design and carry out key research tasks. As such, it enables candidates to select appropriate approaches and tools based on a clear understanding of the research problem and the objectives of any associated programme of research.

The Advanced Certificate is a single-unit qualification which follows the research process from problem definition through to interpreting and reporting on results. The qualification comprises 2 elements, each divided into a number of topic areas:

Element 1 (The Research Context) contains two topic areas, focusing on the setting in which research takes place and the preparation needed to underpin the research process. The learning outcomes in this section inform and guide each stage of the development of a research project.

Element 2 (The Research Project) contains three topic areas, focusing on the stages involved in planning and carrying out the research project based on the understanding of the context. Understanding of the research setting, and the ethical principles underpinning research, are woven into each of the topic areas in Element 2.

In order to reflect the inter-dependence of the various stages in the research process, the assessment of the qualification follows an integrated approach. All candidates must successfully complete 2 components of assessment:

A project component (the Integrated Assignment, or IA): This requires candidates to prepare a brief & proposal for a research project. To successfully pass the IA candidates are required to integrate knowledge from across the syllabus, from problem definition to reporting.

A written examination: All questions in the examination require candidates to demonstrate how they might apply their learning in practical situations. In order to be successful, candidates must demonstrate that they can integrate and apply knowledge from different areas of the syllabus in order to address the given problems. In each examination round, all elements of the syllabus will be assessed through the range of questions.

This document provides:

- guidance for Accredited Centres on the structure of the examination and the marking process;
- tips for Accredited Centres on how to prepare candidates for the MRS Advanced Certificate examination.

AIM & FORMAT

Aim of the Examination

The examination requires candidates to demonstrate the extent to which they can apply the knowledge and skills developed while studying for the qualification to a range of market and/or social research scenarios and tasks.

The Advanced Certificate syllabus covers all stages of the research process, from problem identification to reporting research results. The examination requires candidates to demonstrate their ability to meet learning outcomes relating to different stages in the research process.

Format of the Examination

The 2^{1/2} hour (150 minutes) examination is held twice per year in **January & June**. The dates of examinations are published on the MRS website, usually one year in advance.

The examination comprises two sections:

- Section 1: Compulsory Section (one question in three parts based on a case study)
- Section 2: Option Section (candidates must complete two out of six questions)

The requirement is for candidates to complete all of the questions in Section 1 and two questions from six in Section 2. If candidates answer more than two questions in Section 2, only the first two answers are marked. Candidates who answer fewer questions than the requirement will be marked as non-compliant.

Section 1: Compulsory Question (Recommended time: 50 minutes)

This section contains a short case study with 3 associated questions, all of which the candidate must answer. The aim of this type of question is to assess the candidate's ability to apply their knowledge of market research to a concrete situation and to offer clear and convincing solutions.

Section 1 questions normally follow the following format:

- A short case study, usually containing the following types of information:
 - Background information & secondary data;
 - Specification of the client's needs or problem;
 - Definition of the task for the researcher.
- There are three questions associated with the case study. Candidates must answer all three. The normal format for the questions is as follows:
 - One question requiring candidates to demonstrate their understanding of research methodology, make informed methodological choices and justify those choices.
 - One question requiring candidates to demonstrate their understanding of sampling issues, make informed sampling choices and justify those choices.
 - One question requiring candidates to apply their knowledge to a different aspect of a research problem and to suggest and justify an appropriate response to the problem.

Section 2: Option Questions (Recommended time: 100 minutes)

Section 2 contains six questions. Candidates must answer **two** questions from this Section.

The questions in Section 2 are drawn from across the syllabus.

The questions usually provide a short description of a research context or problem and between 1 and 3 associated tasks. These tasks normally ask candidates to demonstrate:

- their knowledge of a given topic (e.g. through a descriptive element in the question);
- their understanding of a given topic (e.g. through analysis or evaluation);
- their ability to relate their knowledge and understanding to the practical application of market and social research principles.

Assessment weighting

Candidates must answer 3 questions: the compulsory question in Section 1, and two questions from Section 2. All three questions are equally weighted in their contribution towards the final result.

Where questions are subdivided into 2 or 3 tasks, the weighting for each task within the question will be clearly indicated. The weighting of the task and the grades awarded for each task determines the grade awarded to the exam question.

Exam questions are allocated one of the following grades:

- Distinction
- Merit
- Pass
- Fail

ASSESSMENT

Preparing candidates for the exam

When preparing candidates for the exam encourage them to do the following:

- **Review the learning outcomes of the qualification.** Look at the MRS Advanced Certificate syllabus to remind themselves of the scope of the type of questions which might come up. A copy of the Syllabus is available from the MRS Website.
- **Apply their knowledge to a problem.** Remind candidates, when revising, to consider how they might apply what they are reading about to a practical situation. They should try to think of practical situations which are relevant to the area they are looking at.
- **Analyse some research.** The business or social affairs sections of newspapers and websites are good places to start. Encourage candidates to keep an eye open for reports of recent research surveys and to evaluate the processes which are described.
- **Read.** Broaden their knowledge by reading the core text along with recommended supplementary reading – See Recommended texts and Codes & Guidelines.
- **Get to know the exam.** Reading past papers on the MRS Website.
- **Practise writing to time.** Candidates will need to handwrite answers in the examination. Encourage them to practise questions within past papers. They should allow themselves 50 minutes to write an answer, then compare their ideas with the relevant Answer Guide.

What is the examiner looking for in exam answers?

As with many subjects, there are few 'black and white' solutions in market research practice. The examiners are seeking evidence that candidates:

- have a range of ideas which are relevant to the question being asked
- can justify the suggestions they make, thereby demonstrating an *understanding* of the research process
- can identify the limitations of the suggestions they make – i.e. can identify any potential problems which may not be solved by their suggestions.

In short, the examiner is looking for a *range* of suggestions which demonstrate the *depth* of understanding.

What are the most common problems in the exam?

Completing an exam can be stressful. Candidates can overcome the most common exam problems by following these guidelines:

Take time to read the paper

When the exam begins, they should take a few minutes to plan how they are going to tackle the paper. For example, they may want to do one of the Section 2 questions first if they feel they can answer the question effectively and quickly. That is fine – they should not feel constrained to answer the sections in the order in which they appear in the paper.

Work to time

Avoid spending too much time on one question. Instead, try to follow the suggested timings.

- Reading and choosing questions: 5 minutes
- 45 minutes per question
- 10 minutes checking work

Focus on the question:

- Remember that they need to identify exactly what the question requires. Writing all they know about a subject will mean that only a few of the points they make may be relevant. Focus should be on the key elements of the question.

Plan answers:

- When writing in continuous prose, it is easy to go off at a tangent. Candidates need to stay focused on the question and to plan their answers, making sure they can link each point they make with the question being asked. This can be done via rough work in the answer booklet – with a line put through any notes which they don't want the examiner to take into consideration.

Use the question to support the answer:

- The question usually gives a lot of context on which to base an answer. This is certainly true of the Mini Case Study section, where candidates are given a research 'problem' and asked to provide suggestions and/or solutions. They should remember to link their answers to the context given.

Demonstrate the depth of understanding:

- The examination is a time for candidates to demonstrate clearly the breadth and depth of their knowledge and understanding of key issues. When writing an answer there needs to be a rationale for the points made. The examiner does not know the candidate personally and therefore can't assume *why* they have made a particular suggestion. Candidates should not be afraid to 'state the obvious' – it demonstrates that they know what they are talking about!

Remember, as with most exams, exam technique is important. The sample questions and the relevant answer guides on the MRS Website are a useful learning/revision resource.

Pass Requirements

Candidates are given an overall grade (Distinction, Merit, Pass or Fail). The overall grade is an aggregate of grades allocated over the three questions attempted in the exam.

When awarding the overall grade for the exam script, a points system is used. Points are allocated to each question grade: **Distinction = 3** **Merit = 2** **Pass = 1** **Fail = 0**.

In order to achieve an overall Pass grade, candidates are expected to achieve a minimum of a Pass grade in each of the three questions. Candidates who pass only 2 questions are expected to achieve a grade of merit or distinction in one of the pass questions in order to pass overall. A candidate who achieves 1 distinction and 2 fails will not pass.

Answers to (parts of) questions will automatically be graded as a Fail if they:

- fail to identify the key ethical and/or legal issues relevant to the context
- Include information or suggestions which conflict with current legislation, regulation and/or ethics advice for research and data practice.

If there is a connection with other part questions, then this will be taken into account in the marking of the other part(s).

The Overall Grade is based on points allocation:

- **FAIL** = 0 – 2 points
- **PASS** = 3 – 4 points
- **MERIT** = 5 – 6 points
- **DISTINCTION** = 7 - 9 points

When deciding grades, the examiners, moderators and Chief Examiner use the Examination Grade Descriptors for guidance.

Assessment and results processes

All examiners who mark MRS Advanced Certificate papers are very experienced market and/or social researchers who are, or have been involved in, training researchers. Before they begin to work as examiners, they undergo thorough training in assessing examination work.

When marking papers, the examiner has an *Exam Answer Guide* to support them. Examples of these answer guides are on the MRS website to help candidates assess their own answers to the sample questions. These answer guides are not 'model answers', nor definitive lists of all the points which could be made in relation to the question. They are summaries of key points which might be made in answer to the question. However, if candidates do not cover all of the points in the answer guide or if they make different points, the examiner who reads their paper is an expert who will give credit for all relevant and convincing points which the answer make.

In addition to this first round of marking, a range of exam scripts are double marked by a Senior Examiner. These include:

- all exam scripts which fail to meet the pass standard
- all exam scripts which fall on a borderline
- a sample of exam scripts across all examiners

After second marking a further selection of scripts is then subject to moderation by an industry expert and by the Joint Chief Examiner. Only then is a decision made on a candidate result.

When are results released?

The results are released approximately 12 weeks following the date of the exam, after exam scripts and integrated assignments have been marked and moderated.

What happens if a candidate does not pass the exam?

Candidates can retake the examination twice after the initial sitting, as long as the retakes are taken within the candidates' 3-year registration period.

Examination: Grade Descriptors

The following should be read alongside the **Examiner Answer Guide** for each examination question. The answer guide provides guidance on the minimum information required by each question.

	Pass	Merit	Distinction	Fail
Structure & language	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is written in language that is generally accurate, easy to read and appropriate to the topic. is generally clearly structured. Language puts little or no strain on the reader. 			<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is written in language which is inaccurate or inappropriate to the topic. language puts inappropriate strain on the reader.
Task achievement	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognises and addresses the key issues raised by the question demonstrates a satisfactory level of awareness and understanding of the key issues 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognises and addresses the key issues raised by the question demonstrates a good level of awareness and understanding of the key issues 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognises and addresses the key issues raised by the question demonstrates an excellent level of awareness and understanding of the key issues 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> fails to recognise and/or address the key issues raised by the question demonstrates a significant lack of awareness or understanding of key issues
Content	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> meets the minimum requirements specified in the answer guide, and: provides adequate rationale, where appropriate, for the points made provides some appropriate examples to illustrate points made identifies all or most key ethical and/or legal issues and outlines how these can be addressed 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> covers more than the minimum information requirements specified in the answer guide and: provides convincing rationale, where appropriate, for the points made provides a range of appropriate examples, where appropriate, to illustrate points made demonstrates a good level of knowledge and/or understanding in either the range or depth of the points made demonstrates a clear awareness of relevant potential ethical and/or legal issues and identifies how these can be addressed 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> covers more than the minimum information requirements identified in the answer guide and: provides fully convincing rationale, where appropriate, for the points made where appropriate, makes good use of examples to illustrate points made demonstrates a high level of knowledge and/or understanding in the range and depth of the points made demonstrates a high level of awareness of all potentially relevant ethical and/or legal issues and plans how to best to manage these issues. 	<p>The answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> fails to meet the minimum information requirements specified in the answer guide fails to provide adequate rationale, where appropriate, for the points made fails to identify relevant key ethical and/or legal issues is in conflict with current legislation, regulation and/or ethics advice for research and data practice



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