2020 VCE Classical Studies examination report

General comments

In 2020 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority produced an examination based on the *VCE Classical Studies Adjusted Study Design for 2020 only*. In light of the conditions in which the students undertook their study of this subject, it was pleasing to see that most students understood the texts they studied and the demands of each section of the exam.

The 2020 VCE Classical Studies examination consisted of two sections.

* Section A – Individual Study: students were asked to answer three questions each on two texts they have studied from a selection of eight texts, covering both written and material culture of the classical world. The distribution of marks for the questions were 4, 6 and 10 for parts a., b. and c. respectively, for a total of 20 marks.
* Section B – Comparative Study: students were asked to meaningfully compare and contrast the ideas in a chosen pair of texts. Students were given one question for each of the eight pairs of texts and were assessed using the published adjusted expected qualities for 2020.

Most students completed at least one of the Section A questions. Answers were generally relevant to the questions and students showed solid knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts.

Some responses, however, showed a lack of understanding of the questions' requirements and presented large quantities of information without analysis or sharp focus on the question. Better responses were more targeted in the details they discussed and demonstrated the students' understanding of the text and the classical world.

Most students understood the adjustments to Section B for 2020 (only), which removed the need to analyse and compare techniques of the two selected texts in the essay. However, students who did refer to techniques in their essay were not penalised.

There was a noticeable difference in the length and depth of the analysis within different parts of the questions. Students often spent too much time on one part of the question in Section A or on one of the comparative texts in Section B, which left them with not enough time to adequately finish the remaining part of the question.

Legibility was a problem – students are encouraged to work on improving their handwriting as assessors can only mark what they can read. Clarity of handwriting and expression is an advantage for students as it ensures that assessors can clearly see and understand the points being made.

Specific information

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A – Individual study
First selection

Question	none	Homer	Thucydides	Aeschylus	Vases	Virgil	Cicero	Ovid	Portraits
%	0	76	0.5	12	3	9	0	0	0.5

Part a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	4	24	31	26	15	2.3

Part b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	0.5	1	11	24	34	21	9	3.9

Part c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	3	2	9	10	12	14	16	16	13	3	2	5.3

Second selection

Question	none	Homer	Thucydides	Aeschylus	Vases	Virgil	Cicero	Ovid	Portraits
%	2	6	11	33	33	4	0	2	8

Part a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	5	8	30	36	21	2.6

Part b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	4	4	12	27	26	19	9	3.6

Part c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	4	3	6	8	12	14	22	12	10	5	1	5.3

The Greek texts were the most popular. Nearly 80 per cent of students answered the *Iliad* question; the second-most popular work in Section A was Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The material culture texts, vases and Roman reliefs were also popular choices.

Students demonstrated a solid knowledge of the texts. Most were able to place the extract/item in its context and identify and describe the key ideas and techniques. Some students, however, struggled to go beyond description and did not analyse the ideas or evaluate how the techniques reflected these. The better responses addressed the classical ideas in the texts by explaining and discussing how the writers/artists had depicted them.

Questions about techniques tended to draw lists without exploration of how the techniques were used to express an idea or a character. Students need to be more aware of text genres and the techniques used with each: for example, an epic versus a tragedy, or how speeches in drama are different to those in historiography. Students who scored highly were able to explore how the techniques of each genre added to the impact of the extract/item.

Question 1 – Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6

Question 1a.

Students generally struggled with this question, which asked for the sociohistorical context of the extract. Students responded in two different ways. Some discussed the mythological background, referring to the events that led up to the extract such as the kidnapping of Helen and the gathering of the Greek troops. Others gave all the sociohistorical dates and events they had learnt from classical history. While accurate, some of these dates did not relate to the extract or Book 6.

The better responses were able to glean the salient sociohistorical facts needed from the extract itself. They explained how Homer was writing years after the events of the war he was describing and how the concepts of ransom and heroic ideals were important to the Greek culture. Some students even referred to the difference between the bronze weapons of the war and the reference to Agamemnon as the 'iron warrior' as reflecting the time period of the production of the work itself.

Question 1b.

The analysis of the techniques used to describe Menelaus and Agamemnon was accurate and generally well explored. Students made good use of the contrast between how 'his pleas were moving the heart of Menelaus' and the derisive question from Agamemnon on 'why such concern for the enemy'. Students were able to demonstrate how the epithets of the brothers showed the prowess of Menelaus on the battlefield and the cold-heartedness of the 'iron warrior'. They also referred to the repetition of the negative 'no and none' in Agamemnon's wishes for Troy, especially in contrast to the pleas of Adrestus. Some students focused on one brother more than the other, resulting in an uneven treatment that didn't fully explain the depiction of both Menelaus and Agamemnon.

Question 1c.

Students who knew Book 6 well were able to explore the contrast between the extract and the rest of Book 6, especially the sequence inside the walls of Troy. The better responses used quotes from the extract to link them to the rest of Book 6, in particular to the 'no baby boy' and the poignant scene between Hector and his

son Astyanax. They also tended to introduce their discussion by explaining that they would be tackling the significance of ideas and character. Weaker responses tended to use this extract to retell what happens next rather than discuss the contrast between the ideal of the heroic code as depicted by Diomedes and Glaucus or the cost of war for the victims such as Adrestus and Troy itself. Some even included Hector's death at the hands of Achilles, which is far outside the scope of the set book. Other students gave a detailed discussion of the extract without referring to the rest of Book 6, and thus did not fully answer the question.

Question 2 – Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

Question 2a.

Students identified a variety of tones for this text, ranging from patriotic to naive and ignorant to foolish. As long as they were able to support their choice(s) with evidence from the extract, most of the interpretations were accepted. The better responses noticed that the tone changed depending on the point Nicias was making and to whom he was referring. Initially, Nicias strikes a tone of censuring his naval allies for gaining more than their fair share in 'freely sharing our empire' and threatening them to not repeat past mistakes and be downcast by them. When turning to the Athenians, he uses a more desperate tone to appeal to patriotism and security as 'Athens will be incapable of resisting' any future threats and 'be at the Mercy of the Spartans'. Finally, the speech employed an alarming or desperate tone, pleading for someone to 'save us all'.

Lower-scoring responses tended to repeat what Nicias said without commenting on the tone or focused more on how other people viewed him as weak and unsure rather than on how this speech would have sounded.

Question 2b.

Students seemed to have confused the word 'critique' for a negative reflection on Nicias instead of a critical evaluation of his speech. They wrote about the flaws of his leadership but not how the speech itself was used to reveal those flaws. Often students repeated points that they had made in response to the first question or talked generally about Nicias without confining themselves to the extract. The better responses discussed the idea of him being made a scapegoat for the eventual loss of the battle, citing how his speech was not so much about specific strategy but more about 'big picture' ideas of 'advantages of the Empire' and 'the great name of Athens'.

Question 2c.

This question called for a broader view of Thucydides' work and required students to consider how speeches were used throughout the set extracts. Not many students referred to Thucydides' own commentary in Book One on how he would use speeches in his work, but higher-scoring students used it to set up their response. They cited how he used speeches to characterise the key players in the war and their differing views, particularly Alcibiades and Nicias. This led to a discussion of leadership styles and the disastrous consequences of such leadership for the Sicilian expedition. Many students made the point about the inherent problems of Athenian democracy, as revealed in the speeches, wherein everyone had a say, leading to indecisive and often populous decisions. The better responses included references to specific speeches and examples to support their ideas.

Lower-scoring responses summarised the extract and/or talked very generally about speeches. They wrote that Thucydides used them in his work but did not refer to specific speeches or people to illustrate their ideas. Few students referred to how the speeches reflected Thucydides' own attitude to certain players in the events and their decisions.

Question 3 – Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon'

Question 3a.

Students showed a very good knowledge of the plot of the play, from the beacon speech and the fall of Troy to the arrival of Agamemnon, with references to the curse on the House of Atreus and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Some students went into such detail that their answers for this 4-mark question were longer than the one they wrote for the 10-mark question.

Question 3b.

Most students wrote about the techniques in terms of the imagery of the 'sea witch and Scylla', the metaphor of the 'lion who lacks the lion's heart', and the dramatic cry at the start of the extract. But they struggled to connect the techniques to the depiction of Cassandra and how the audience view her. Her frenzy at the start reflects her tragic situation, as she can see her fate, but the chorus can't. The implicit comparison between her and Clytaemnestra, in the way Cassandra describes the queen as a monster and an 'outrage', emphasises her depiction as the victim of not only Clytaemnestra but also of fate, a yoke she accepts. There is a stoic, almost heroic, aspect to Cassandra in her acceptance of this fate and her calm words to the chorus at the end.

Some students responded to this question by focusing on Clytaemnestra and her personality, making only token references to Cassandra.

Question 3c.

Students generally handled this question well, discussing the ideas that this extract covered and linking them to the rest of the play. The concept of fate and freewill, in the way that Cassandra has had no choice in her slavery and the death that awaits her in the palace, led students to consider this idea in relation to the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the walking on the tapestries. Many students then linked this to the role of Apollo in cursing Cassandra to not be understood, despite the fact that what she says is 'all too true'. Students also discussed how the characters referred to in the extract were depicted and the accuracy of these depictions, in particular Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra. Agamemnon's arrogance, which prevents him from 'seeing', and Clytaemnestra's role as the destructive other were well explored.

Lower-scoring responses tended to discuss the extract only in terms of the plot of the play and describe what occurs afterwards. While its role in the plot is important, its main significance is as a dramatic pause before the revelation of the corpses and Clytaemnestra's glory. Students who perceived the significance of this extract to the drama of the play demonstrated a real understanding of the work.

Question 4 – Greek Vases

Question 4a.

Students responded to this question by describing the processes of creating the vases and/or decorating them. The better responses referred to both and focused on the techniques used to create the images and the way the incisions of the red-figure style befitted the images. Techniques referred to included the composition of the image in relation to the shape of the vase, drapery, musculature, iconography and references to the decoration on the handles and neck.

Some students made comparative references to the black-figure style, which was not necessary for this question.

Question 4b.

Students gave detailed recounts of the Oedipus myth, referring to the prophecy at his birth, to Polybus and Merope and the situation that led to this scene. Some went on to recount the events that followed the scene, which was not necessary. Many students incorrectly identified the figures in the Amazonomachy, especially that of Telamon. The better responses connected the scene to the 9th labour of Heracles.

Some students spent too much time describing the events, leaving them little time to finish answering the question. As a result, many answers only had one sentence covering the ideas the scenes depicted. The better responses explored the idea of civilisation versus barbarism/the other in the battle between the hero and the Sphinx/Amazon. Other ideas were the hero of intellect versus the hero of battle and the depiction of the hero clothed versus naked.

Question 4c.

Most students responded to the term 'frightening figures' as referring to 'the other', the monster or female who goes outside the bounds of convention. Some students, however, related it to Telamon and the frightening figure he projects on the battlefield, as depicted in the Amazonomachy. Answers that were supported with evidence were credited.

Better responses provided a clear definition of 'frightening figures' and used it to discuss two other vases that reinforced their definition. The Herakles vases, Odysseus and the Sphinx, and Achilles and Penthesilea were the most commonly used comparative vases. The choice of at least one black-figure vase allowed students more scope to refer to the differing techniques in their discussion.

Some students ran out of time and compared the two exam vases with only one other vase or wrote just a few lines. This was often due to the answers to the first two questions being too long for the marks allocated to them.

Question 5 – Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 10

Question 5a.

Most students were able to give details of the events that led to this extract. They explained the carnage that was occurring on the battlefield while the gods argued in council over who was to blame. They clearly showed how Venus argued for the Trojans while Juno presented the case for the Italians. The better responses gave the reasons for these conflicting views.

Question 5b.

Students were able to clearly identify the techniques and, in most cases, explain what they revealed about Jupiter. They discussed the extended simile creating a sense of debate that was quickly quelled by Jupiter's direct and short sharp commands of 'so be it'. The tone of command in his 'orders' and the impact of his words on the world emphasised his power. The better responses showed how the gravitas of his words was increased by the oath on the river Styx and the effect it had on the gods. Students who did not score well only identified the techniques.

Question 5c.

Many students saw this as a plot question and went into great detail about how Jupiter's decision led to the unprecedented violence on the battlefield, the deception of Turnus and the death of Pallas. The better responses explained the impact of the decision in terms of consequences and cause and effect. They explored the role of the gods, citing Juno's delaying of Turnus's death by having him chase the phantom Aeneas but not being able to change the inevitable fate of Pallas. The death of Mezantuis and his son and

the visceral descriptions of other deaths also showed the impact of war, while Jupiter's decision led to more suffering as he ignored pleas to intervene.

Question 6 – Cicero, 'On Duties', Book 3

No students attempted this question.

Question 7 – Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Question 7a.

The few students who attempted this extract handled this question very well. They explained in detail the story that Galatea was recounting to Scylla. They described how she fell in love with Acis and the jealousy of Polyphemus that led to his death. They connected these events to her grief with references to her 'tears that choked her voice'.

Question 7b.

This question was also answered well, as students explained not only the techniques but how they were used and their effect. They contrasted the language of loss, such as 'sigh deeply', 'ruthless', 'grief and pain', and 'choked', with the anger of the language directed at Polyphemus, such as 'lust for killing, insatiable thirst for blood'. Likewise, the description of Acis's beauty and youth was contrasted to the humour and ridicule of Polyphemus's attempts to improve his appearance. Weaker responses referred to examples while the better ones explored their effect.

Question 7c.

This question was not so well answered, with students generally focusing on love rather than on Venus, who has no active role in the extract. Successful responses started with the depiction of the influence and power of Venus in the extract, as love is shown to be intensely passionate but also violent. They then discussed other examples of Venus and her role in other stories such as Venus and Adonis and Atlanta and Hippomenes. Students contrasted her more active role in narrating the story of Adonis as compared to the extract. They also referred to her pride and the way she did not deal with any kind of rejection. Students made the point about the powerful and transformative nature of the love she inspires.

Question 8 – Roman Portraits

Question 8a.

Most students handled this question well, going beyond a description of the reliefs to discuss composition, iconography, layering of figures, drapery and architectural features. Weaker responses tended to describe the scene rather than identify the techniques. Many students did not identify the reliefs they were talking about, referring to them as images A and B. While this was not a requirement of the question, accurate identification of the reliefs would have assisted in the discussion.

Question 8b.

Students handled the first part of this question well, describing the reliefs and the events they depicted. They clearly identified emperor Marcus Aurelius carrying out a public sacrifice in the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill in image B and the creation of public works in the Haterii/image A. However, many students did not discuss the ideas the scenes reflected. The better responses explored the glorification of Rome through its public works and the propaganda it gave to the Flavian emperors. Likewise, the role of religion

and public displays of pietas by the emperor reflected the importance of these ideas in Rome at the time of the creation of these reliefs.

Question 8c.

Many students did not go beyond a description of the scenes in the two reliefs. The better answers connected the scenes to the ideas they reflected. The Haterii/image A depicted the construction of vast buildings through slave labour and technology such as the wheel and pulley. This reflected the role of the wealthy and how expansion was part of life in Rome. Image B was used to discuss the public nature of religion and the importance of sacrifice and worship in Rome.

Students had to compare these reliefs to two others. Many students used the marriage ceremony and the chariot race to explore the ideas of family and entertainment in Rome. Other reliefs depicting military service such as the Ludovici sarcophagus were used to discuss the importance of the military at that time.

Some students ran out of time and compared the two exam reliefs with only one other relief or wrote just a few lines. This was often due to the answers to the first two questions being too long for the marks allocated to them.

Section B – Comparative study

Question selection

Question	Aeschylus Herodotus	Aristophanes Plato	Sophocles Euripides	Cicero Sallust	Livy Tacitus	Suetonius Seneca	Altar Column	Aristophanes Plautus
%	16	13	57	0	4	0	10	0

Essay

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	1	0	1	2	1	3	4	5	7	10	8	11	9	8	9	11	8	4	2	1	0	11.4

Most students wrote essays that tried to engage with the question and create a clear comparison between the set works. The essays were generally clearly structured, with references to the works and their sociohistorical context. The essay structure varied, with some students comparing both texts in each paragraph, some writing a paragraph on each text and a comparison in the second paragraph, and many providing a separate sociohistorical paragraph. All forms were accepted as long as the comparison was clear and detailed.

However, there was a discrepancy in the knowledge and understanding between the texts in the pairing. This led to an imbalance in the discussion, which affected the overall result for some students. As the task was to compare the ideas in two texts, there had to be salient points about both texts to achieve a clear and insightful comparison. It is important for students to remember that comparison means discussing both similarities and differences. Too often students ignored the obvious similarities in say the role of women in a society or the Greek idea of barbarism even in an empire as great as the Persian.

Students need to make sure that they engage with the key words of the question. It is important that they clearly indicate in their introduction what points they are going to argue and follow through in the essay. Some students failed to fully address the question or tried to adapt pre-prepared answers to the exam.

While students have often shown excellent sociohistorical knowledge of their texts, they could benefit from a more judicious understanding of the element of 'relevance'. For example, in the works of Sophocles and

Euripides, an understanding of the different Athens in which the plays were presented – one at relative peace and prosperity and one at war – as well as the role of women in the community was needed to contextualise the different tones and purposes of the plays. Conversely, information such as the formation of the Delian league and the discovery of silver at Larium were not relevant to the question.

Question 1 – Aeschylus and Herodotus

Most students understood that this question was about the bias and prejudices of the authors in how they viewed the Persian wars. The obvious points of Aeschylus's personal experience versus Herodotus's hindsight were well explored. More could have been made of Herodotus's experience under Persian rule and democracy. Few students explored the limitations of experience for the genres they wrote in. The better responses perceived that the authors' personal experiences at times illuminated their views on war.

Question 2 – Aristophanes and Plato

This question allowed students to show their clear understanding of the different genres and purposes of the two texts. The sociohistorical context of this pairing was well used, with most students making the point about the real Socrates versus the parody in 'The Clouds'. However, while students showed very good understanding of how argument was used in both texts, they didn't always deal with the 'morality' aspect of the question.

Question 3 – Sophocles and Euripides

Most students chose this question and responded in three ways. Some fully agreed with the statement that 'Women pay for the mistakes of men', arguing that Antigone and Electra were victims of men, whereas some students wrote that it was the fault of the women in both texts. The better responses explored the role of both men and women in the outcome of the plays. Interestingly, some students took the discussion back to the curse on both houses and how it was the men's fault that all the subsequent events happened. Many students only focused on Antigone and Creon, Electra and Aegisthus. Those who also looked at the roles of Ismene, Polynices and Eteocles, and Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Orestes had more scope to explore the question.

In some essays, students brought in the gods, blaming them for the events. While this idea has merit, students failed to connect it to the question and the idea of 'paying for mistakes'. It read like a pre-prepared paragraph and didn't actually add to the coherence of the essay.

Question 4 – Cicero and Sallust

No students attempted this question.

Question 5 – Livy and Tacitus

This question was generally well handled, though many students saw power and arrogance as synonyms and used the terms interchangeably rather than exploring how both could be dangerous. Few students considered whether these qualities could have positive attributes. There was also a tendency to attempt to make all ideas studied fit the question, with strong women being discussed without connection to the question itself.

Question 6 – Suetonius and Seneca

No students attempted this question.

Question 7 – Pergamon's altar and Trajan's column

Many students responded with a description of the two works rather than using the works to support a discussion of 'order over chaos'. The better responses defined this phrase in their introduction as either the concept of civilisation over barbarism, or Rome versus the world, or empire versus republic, or elements of each. This then enabled them to link the sections of the works to the ideas for discussion.

Question 8 – Aristophanes and Plautus

No students attempted this question.