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7HRC- Human Resource Management in Context

EXAMINER'S REPORT

September 2020

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Advanced Level Qualification

Human Resource Management in Context

September 2020

Date: 22 September 2020

Instructions

- Answer **all** of Section A.
- Answer **five** questions in Section B (**one** per subsection).
- Read each question carefully before answering.
- Write clearly and legibly.

Information

- Questions may be answered in any order.
- Equal marks are allocated to each section of the paper.
- Within Section B equal marks are allocated to each question.
- If a question includes reference to 'your organisation', this may be interpreted as covering any organisation with which you are familiar.
- The case study is not based on an actual organisation. Any similarities to known organisations are coincidental.

You will fail the examination if:

- You fail to answer five questions in Section B (one per subsection) **and/or**
- You achieve less than 40% in either Section A or Section B **and/or**
- You achieve less than 50% overall.

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SECTION A – Case Study

Note: In your responses, you are allowed to improvise or add to the case study details provided below. However, the case study should not be changed or compromised in any way.

Global Science in Action (GSA) is an American multi-national corporation which manufactures and provides support services for a range of scientific instruments. It has a global workforce of approximately 65,000 employees and operates in 28 countries. Its customer base covers around 90 countries. GSA has its headquarters in Boston, USA, where there is an Executive Management Team comprising a President, a Senior Vice President and ten Vice Presidents, including a Vice President People. The values of GSA are based on entrepreneurship, integrity, commitment and trust. Its mission is to 'Advance the boundaries of science and technology'.

The operation of GSA is truly global and is divided according to geographic regions. These include Europe, North America, Far East, Middle East, Africa and India, with an Assistant Vice President (People) for each global region. At country-level there is a People Manager and team of Advisors, who work on the development and integration of HR strategy as it is cascaded down the organisation, and Assistants who provide a more transactional role. The European Office is based in the UK city of Norchester, famous for its science and engineering innovations dating right back to the industrial revolution. A unique and highly specialized scientific instrument industry still thrives there and attracts inward investment. GSA is one of only five major organisations in this niche area of scientific instruments, and one of three with a strong presence in the Norchester area.

Norchester was home to a number of eminent scientists who developed innovative and sophisticated scientific and engineering products and processes. GSA recognises the importance of this inheritance and the prestige that it brings to the city and views it as the natural location for the 'high-tech' end of its business. GSA (UK) has built upon this inheritance of pioneering research and development. Today, the company's reputation for product development and after-sales care of 'high-tech' scientific instrumentation has global recognition. It is a product leader, with a brand that attracts both customers and employees from across the world. The Norchester site is home to all of GSA's 'high-tech' scientific instrumentation, involving Research and Development (R&D) and Installation and Service (I&S).

Competition to recruit specialist scientists and engineers is strong as there is a global shortage of qualified scientists of high calibre who have specialized in scientific instrumentation. This applies equally to the UK as elsewhere. As well as looking for highly qualified and trained staff the recruitment strategy at GSA (UK) is based on attracting those scientists and engineers who can bring entrepreneurship and some element of risk to their work. This is particularly needed for those in R&D, whose role requires them to keep the organisation ahead in developing new methods of scientific analysis. Those who work on I&S usually work autonomously and need to be good decision-takers, self-motivated and have good customer-facing skills. I&S staff travel globally and may spend anything from three days to three weeks on each assignment.

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GSA (UK) employs staff from a wide range of countries and prides itself on this diversity. It also acknowledges that it has to recruit internationally to attract high calibre applicants in a market where there is a global shortage of suitably qualified people. There is collaboration between countries on recruitment. Science and engineering staff (particularly those in installation and service) tend to regard themselves as part of a boundary-less global workforce. Currently GSA (UK) employs around 130 specialists in R&D. It also employs 45 I&S staff and manages a further 60 located across the other 27 countries from which GSA operates. R&D staff regularly work on projects alongside their contemporaries in other countries, with some travel required.

Despite the success of GSA (UK) and its pivotal place in 'high-tech' scientific instruments, there has been speculation that both it, and the European Headquarters will be moved to the European mainland as it is looking increasingly likely that the UK Government Draft Regulations 2020 on immigration will come into law. The draft Regulations contain proposals that were initially put forward in the government White Paper, 2019, three of which are:

Everyone will be required to obtain a permission if they want to come to the UK and to work or study here.

There will no longer be one immigration system for non-Europeans, and another for EU citizens. The future system will apply in the same way to all nationalities – EU and non-EU citizens alike – except where there are objective grounds to differentiate.

Following the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), we will prioritise skilled migrants. A skilled-based migration policy will ensure the UK remains a hub for international talent from the EU and the rest of the world, which attracts people to work in our vibrant and diverse communities in jobs that drive up productivity and wages, and deliver essential services.

GSA (Europe) has established a 'Brexit Task Force' bringing together its different business functions to prepare the company for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. The Human Resource Manager (UK) is a member of the task force.

You are one of two HR Advisors at GSA (UK) reporting to the HR Manager (UK).

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1. **In the light of the 2020 Draft Regulations, provide a detailed discussion of the current situation for GSA (UK) in terms of its internal strengths and weaknesses.**

2. **Analyse the external political, labour market, and legal factors and their potential to influence any decisions about changes to GSA (UK).**

3. **CIPD advice on preparing for change following the UK decision to withdraw from the European Union offers 11 options for addressing an organisation's workforce requirements:**

- **Build rather than buy.**
- **Improve retention.**
- **Find new labour source.**
- **Redeploy resources.**
- **Improve attraction.**
- **Outsource.**
- **Automate.**
- **Restructure work.**
- **Use contingent workers.**
- **Collaborate with others.**
- **Relocate work.**

Select THREE of the above and evaluate the potential contribution they separately AND jointly can make in preparing GSA (UK) for changes to immigration law. There must be a strong justification for your answer.

It is recommended that you spend an equal amount of your time on each question.

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SECTION B

Answer FIVE questions in this section, ONE per subsection A to E. You may include diagrams, flowcharts or bullet points to clarify and support your answers, so long as you provide an explanation of each.

A

1. Following a CIPD course talk about Contemporary Organisations, (such as John Lewis, Starbucks) a fellow student emails you the following, 'there seem to be lots of positive things said about organisations where all the employees are partners, yet few examples of them. If the model is so good, why aren't there more?'. To prepare your reply:

Critically evaluate partnership organisations in terms of their advantages and disadvantages both within the organisation and externally.

Justify your answer.

OR

2. In an internal HR discussion-group-email about the future direction of your organisation, a colleague comments that 'Managers need to assert more control over performance, profit and efficiency and they can only do this by concentrating their attention on what goes on within the organisation, in particular with employees.'

You do not agree with such an 'inward-looking' approach. You write a response based on a critical evaluation of the role and contribution that any **TWO** types of external stakeholders make to your organisation.

What will you say?

Justify your answer.

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B

3. Governments use the following three steps to change consumer behaviour and influence the market: Price (often in the form of taxation); legislation; promotional/information campaign.

Evaluate the impact and effectiveness of up to **TWO** examples of government intervention from the following:

- Tobacco smoking.
- Car usage.
- Education and training.
- Alcohol consumption.
- Healthy eating.

Justify your answer.

OR

4. Achieving competitive advantage is at the heart of private sector organisations in a capitalist economy. HR has a role to play in achieving this. Porter (2004) argues that there are three generic strategies that support the drive for competitive advantage: low-cost leadership (being one of the lowest-cost producers); differentiation (underpinned by market-segmentation); focus (developing a niche strategy and targetting).

Discuss how these generic strategies are used in any **TWO** organisations that compete against each other; and evaluate which organisation is the more succesful in achieving competitive advantage.

C

5. A criticism sometimes levelled at new graduates is that they lack business acumen.

'One way to tackle this could be to provide a module on business acumen, that would include subjects such as Financial Management and Operations Management'. So says the vice president of a leading employers association.

Provide a persuasive case in favour of including **EITHER** Financial Management **OR** Operations Management into a 'business acumen' undergraduate module. Draw upon the work of HR practitioners, and/or your own experience, to support your case.

AND

What **ONE** aspect of Financial Management would you want to include in the syllabus to develop 'business acumen' in HR graduates.

Justify your answer.

OR

6. The Marketing function focuses on four elements of activity: product; price; promotion; place (the 4 Ps), which, when combined together, are referred to as 'the marketing mix'. It is often argued that pricing is the only activity performed by the Marketing department that produces revenue. The others represent costs.

In the retail sector where price-discounting has become common-place, evaluate the role of marketing in ensuring a balance between price and the other three 'Ps' (product, promotion and place) that can match customer needs.

AND

In what ways might different pricing policies of retail organisations influence HR functions?

Justify your answer.

Draw upon published material from reputable sources to support your answer.

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D.

7. According to CIPD 'Viewpoint' 'Automation, artificial intelligence (AI) and other workplace technologies are bringing major changes to work and employment. But research shows that HR has very little influence over strategic decision-making processes relating to automation and AI and is not involved in the operational delivery of technology change'.

Identify up to **THREE** risks that may be consequences of the lack of HR involvement in the strategy and delivery of automation and AI, and up to **THREE** recommendations to put HR at the centre of implementing technology.

Draw upon published material from reputable sources to support your answer.

OR

8. An organisation is planning display material to use at a Graduate Careers Fair. You have been asked to focus on the attractiveness of working at this organisation in terms of its diversity and work-life balance policy.

Produce an information leaflet in the form of a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) with brief answers.

Draw upon published material from reputable sources to support your answer.

E.

9. The Harvard 'best practice' approach to strategic HR is made up of six elements: flexibility; selection process; appraisal; learning and development of key employees; reward systems; participation and employee involvement.

Explain what is involved in **THREE** of these elements and the contribution of each to best practice.

AND

Critically evaluate HR in your organisation to determine whether it could be described as delivering 'best practice'.

Justify your answer.

OR

10. According to Barney (1991), the Resource Based View of the firm (RBV) is based on four criteria which indicate whether a resource is adding value. The resource must: add positive value to the organisation; be unique or rare among competitors; be difficult or impossible to imitate; not be easily substituted with another resource by a competitor. Assume your own organisation is interested to know whether the RBV model could be applied to it as part of an overall drive to make it more competitive.

Write a short paper for your HR manager analysing your own organisation against each of the four RBV criteria.

AND

Use your analysis above to draw conclusions on the suitability of the RBV model to your organisation.

Justify your answers.

END OF EXAMINATION

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Following Government announcements in relation to coronavirus (COVID-19), CIPD made the decision to adapt the September examination series to be taken online instead of at exam venues.

At the start and throughout the examination there were severe technical issues which negatively impacted candidates. The CIPD has taken this very seriously and, after extensive analysis and subsequent compensation, the results below reflect the final agreed grades.

The following report has been written by the Chief Examiner (HRC) Sue Speakman based solely on the content of answers given in relation to the questions set.

Introduction

This report is based on a large cohort of candidates, following the cancellation of the May 2020 examination. As is evident from the table below, there was more than three times the number of candidates taking the exam this autumn. This comprised those who would normally sit at this time, and those who were unable to sit the summer exam. For both tutors and candidates there was the stress and uncertainty when the summer exam was cancelled, and no-one could forecast the future with COVID-19 in our midst.

A total of 615 candidates sat the 7HRC examination in September. Of the 615 candidates, 519 passed this examination making the overall pass rate 84%.

September 2020		
Grade	**Number**	**Percentage of total**
Distinction	48	8
Merit	209	34
Pass	262	42
Marginal fail	35	6
Fail	61	10
Total	**615**	**100**

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SECTION A

Learning outcomes:

LO5: Globalisation and international forces and how they shape and impact on organisational and HR strategies and HR.

practices

LO7: Government policy and legal regulation and how these shape and impact on organisational and HR strategies and HR practices.

As in the past, the more successful candidates had researched the sector and the particular industry which, in this case, was Scientific Instruments. The application of the industry to the three tasks was crucial to successful answers. In a number of cases application was under-stated and appeared to be under-researched. On the positive side there were answers that demonstrated a significant ability to apply the case study, with a strong knowledge and understanding of the subjects. Candidates would benefit from taking account of General Assessment Criteria (GAC) as well as the LOs as they prepare for the examination.

Overall, for Section A, we saw a high number of candidates achieving a Merit or Distinction indicating that there were some very strong candidates this session. It is to be expected that the majority of candidates achieved a Pass, creating a normal distribution curve.

TASK A1

There were some good answers. These candidates understood the case study organisation and the Government White Paper and were able to demonstrate both application and implications for GSA. The majority of candidates appeared to have made some preparation for the case study. They identified a range of strengths and weaknesses in relation to GSA. Some, however, did seem to be including a number of factors from what appeared to be a pre prepared SWOT analysis. As a consequence, these candidates did not respond to the actual question, i.e. discuss in 'light of the 2020 Draft Regulations'. Some candidates presented full a SWOT whereas the question asked only for the strengths and weakness. Here, I suspect a question requiring a full SWOT was anticipated and prepared for. Candidates need to be cautioned that they must not present something simply because it was what they prepared and answer the question that is being asked.

TASK A2

Most candidates attempted to discuss all three external forces, with better answers providing a good analysis and potential influence on change decisions. Weaker answers often neglected to consider wider global issues, such as competition, and tended to provide a very brief discussion on legal issues. The task took three factors of the PEESTLE model - 'political, labour market and legal', and asked about their potential to influence decisions on changes to GSA (UK). A number of candidates chose, instead, to apply all aspects of the PEESTLE model. The consequences are as noted above for use of the SWOT model: providing extraneous material uses up time and attracts no marks. Better answers focused on the key issues relevant to the case study and the question at hand with a sound and informed response.

TASK A3

This task gave candidates the opportunity to explore the way organisations might prepare themselves for the future. The task provided them with nine factors for addressing work-force requirements. The most popular amongst these were retention, recruitment, build rather than buy, collaboration, and automation. Better answers selected three areas that allowed for the evaluation of how approaches might work together to strengthen the impact. Weaker candidates appeared to struggle to compose a meaningful conclusion as to how their three chosen areas would jointly contribute to GSA. Some candidates had a poor grasp of the nature of the product and the product market, and how that impacted upon the some of the nine factors. Recognition of fierce competition in a specialized market requiring a particular type of highly skilled workers was not always borne in mind. This lack of context led to ideas for implementation of change that were unrealistic, undesirable or unattainable.

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SECTION B

Section B tested the remainder of the LOs – 1, 4, 2, 6, 3, which are set out before the feedback on the paired questions. As ever there were questions that attracted more candidates than others; there were three questions in particular that attracted fewer candidate. These are identified later in the report, and you may want to reflect whether the ones that aren't popular have less attention paid to them whilst studying and revising. Alternatively, some questions may be more popular with candidates because either the context and/or the content was more attractive to them.

Question A1

Learning outcome: LO1 contemporary organisations and their principal environments.

Overall, there was a reasonable pass rate for this question. The most crucial thing was to understand the term 'Partnership Organisations'. The stem gave a clear indication of what was meant; it provided example organisations such as John Lewis and Starbucks. There were four aspects to the question: Advantages; disadvantages; internal; external. Better answers made an evaluation of all four aspects required from the question, often linked. For example, it may generate greater employee commitment that leads to better customer service and thus to an enhanced company image amongst the buying public. Weaker answers struggled to say much, if anything, about external advantages and disadvantages. Some candidates interpreted the question as being about 'partnership' organisations found, typically, in those offering professional services, for example, solicitors and accountancy. This was judged as acceptable as the question itself referred to 'partnership organisations'. It will help some candidates if they are reminded of the importance of the stem. This provides a 'steer' to the question, designed to set the candidates 'on-track'.

Question A2

Learning outcome: LO1 contemporary organisations and their principal environments.

Overall, this was the more popular of the two questions. Whilst some Centres had a balance of responses between the two questions, other Centres were heavily biased toward A2. It may be that candidates felt more confident or more interested in question A2, though it is always worth looking at the delivery of topics to see whether there is anything that might explain a preference for particular topics. Predictably, this question was tackled well by those who had prepared for the exam and had an understanding of their own organisation and its stakeholders. Familiarity with 'own organisation' is an important aspect of exam preparation. Some candidates will need to use 'an organisation with which they are familiar'. These candidates should be encouraged to identify and research an organisation, as part of their preparation for the exam.

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Question B3

Learning outcome: LO4 the market and competitive environments of organisations and how organisational leaders and the HR function respond to them.

Overall this question was well-answered. There were some candidates who simply described things. However, better answers examined each step-in relation to each of the chosen topics. These provided an evaluation of the effectiveness of government action, either directly, for example a reduction in the number of people smoking, or suggested ways in which this evaluation might be achieved. Those failing to achieve a pass displayed limited knowledge of what the government was doing in these areas or simply described government action and/or considered only one aspect. As you would expect a number were able to cite a number of examples, but it was the clarity of thought and how the impact and effectiveness of these interventions were expressed or not, which distinguished between what were stronger and weaker answers.

Question B4

Learning outcome: LO4 the market and competitive environments of organisations and how organisational leaders and the HR function respond to them.

This question relied on candidates understanding the three generic strategies and then choosing two organisations that are clearly in competition with one another. A number chose supermarkets as examples, and for some this worked well. There was some confusion between a niche market and differentiation, and this led to muddled argument, and less opportunity to evaluate. Weaker answers were rather descriptive and provided outlines of the ways government had intervened; the better answers justified the actions by outlining reasons such as social pressures, consequences of the habits and the cost to society and NHS. Overall, most candidates made a reasonable attempt and were clear in identifying the one that had competitive advantage. What is worth reiterating to candidates is the importance of developing a systematic way of answering questions. Candidates may need regularly reminding about the importance of creating a plan before launching into an answer. Those that take your advice clearly benefit from doing so.

Question C5

Learning outcome: LO2 the managerial and business environment within which HR professionals work.

This question was the more popular of the two. There were some very clear statements about the need for business acumen. Candidates understood the need for showing credibility in their organisation, and many discussed Finance as the more important subject. Fewer candidates chose Operations Management but, for the most part, those who did tended to have a good grasp of what was involved and why it mattered. In the second part of the question the aspect most commonly chosen was budgets; a few chose understanding the profit and loss account. Weaker answers needed to more clearly demonstrate how an understanding of budgets would contribute to HR functions. Better answers described how the carefully considered allocation of a budget can contribute to their efficiency. They also concluded that even if other departments considered HR being merely a cost, this would have demonstrated that the money was controlled and used in ways that were appropriate and effective in contributing to profitability and performance.

Question C6

Learning outcome: LO2 the managerial and business environment within which HR professionals work.

This was one of the two questions that were significantly amongst the least popular (the other being question 10). This may have been due to it being a specific marketing question, and one that required more knowledge than just the role of the marketing function, which historically has been asked, so maybe learnt. Of those that did attempt it, there was almost an equal split between those that achieved a pass and those that failed. Of those that did pass this question, very few achieved a Merit or Distinction level answer. Weaker answers often failed to set the answer within the retail context and offered a simple description of each element and/or said little or nothing about the influence of pricing policies on HR's policy and practice. Overall, this suggests that the knowledge and understanding of the basics of marketing are not that well understood.

Question D7

Learning outcome: LO6 demographic, social and technological trends and how they shape and impact on organisational and HR strategies and HR practices.

The choice of question in this subsection was evenly spread. Performance was good with few failed candidates. Risks were clearly identified in good answers with appropriate recommendations supported by suitable published material. Better candidates also identified risks and produced plausible recommendations as to how they should be averted. The best answers contained issues such as employee voice, developing the business partner role, HR representation on the board and involvement in longer term planning. Amongst the weaker answers, perhaps the most significant thing was writing about how AI and technology could improve the efficiency of HR, rather than answering the question asked – a point we refer to regularly. It is difficult to know why it is a regular feature of answers, perhaps due to the stress of the exam, or that old favourite – writing about what they wanted to be asked. It is also important to note that, once again it was those answers that were based on a clear and systematic plan that performed well. You will be pleased to note that more candidates are citing readings and research to support their answer and this should be further encouraged.

Question D8

Learning outcome: LO6 demographic, social and technological trends and how they shape and impact on organisational and HR strategies and HR practices.

This question used a different context, which created a range of responses. Some understood that persuasiveness and visual appeal were almost as important as demonstrating knowledge, coupled with an understanding of what undergraduates are likely to look for in an organisation. A number of candidates did not take account of being asked to produce 'brief answers'. They tended to provide lengthy answers that included extraneous material. A good way to answer this question was to imagine oneself in the position of a graduate, walking round a busy fair, and stopping from time to time to see whether particular organisations have a certain appeal; hence the need for brief answers. Some questions had obvious answers, which the undergraduates would already know and expect from any organisation. Conversely there were candidates who seemed to relish the opportunity to address this alternative format. There was evidence of a good deal of creativity in tackling it. Better answers were able to draw from evidence and posed questions that enabled them to answer in a way that allowed them to evidence their knowledge and understanding. Encouraging candidates to put themselves in particular contexts and take the role of the person in the question may help them to better understand what a question is looking for.

Question E9

Learning outcome: LO3 how organisational and HR strategies are shaped by and developed in response to internal and external environmental factors.

This was distinctly the more favoured question in this subsection. Very few candidates opted for the alternative. Candidates seemed familiar with the elements from the model and they were able to provide comprehensive and convincing examples. Nearly all the answers successfully explored their own organisation. Better answers also demonstrated a sound knowledge of the best practice approach and provided a sound explanation and of what is involved, and the contribution of their chosen three elements. To return to the issue of planning and a systematic structure this question provides a clear way to do this with an outline of a best practice model which would then provide a framework for analysis; in particular it would have been easier to show how the integration of the elements further promoted best practice.

Question E10

Learning outcome: LO3 how organisational and HR strategies are shaped by and developed in response to internal and external environmental factors.

I recall the late Professor David Farnworth saying that candidates regularly show a lack of understanding of the Resourced Based View (RBV). On this occasion it was interesting to see how few chose to this question. There was, generally, a clear distinction between two types of answers to the question: Those that had a firm understanding of what was meant by RBV (including that the model applies to all the organisation's resources) and the criteria used; and those that struggled to demonstrate much at all by way of relevant knowledge. Once again it is interesting that the answers that used the model to lead them into a structured approach to their answer provided better answers. These candidates tended to put forward convincing discussion and analysis, and included examples to support the rationale for their assessment.

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CONCLUSION

In the body of the report I have identified some key development points that have emerged. I am discussing them here so that you can reflect on candidates' experiences and what more they need to do to fully grasp human resources in context. I have written the title in lower case because there are candidates who need reminding that this isn't just about the taught programme; it's about the 'lived experience'.

I have deliberately said little about some of the 'old chestnuts', such as answering the question set, having good time management, and answering all parts of the question. They still apply, and whilst you continue to discuss them with candidates, there can be so many individual reasons for them that there will always be some occurring. Nonetheless, they need to be reinforced for each cohort of candidates.

The importance of creating a plan before launching into an answer is essential. Those that did, clearly benefited from doing so. Theoretical models provide useful structures around which to focus an answer. They also help the candidate to identify all aspects of the model that need answering.

More candidates are citing readings and research to support their answers and this should be further encouraged. It is evident that it varies by Centre. Under examination conditions the expectation isn't that they provide a full citation. A name will suffice, preferably with the date.

Candidates need to understand the importance of the stem. It provides a 'steer' to the question and often gives a background and/or context to the question. Again, it is easily over-looked by those candidates who are just anxious or eager, to answer the question.

Encouraging candidates to put themselves in particular contexts and take the role of the person in a question may help them to better understand what a question is looking for.

Extraneous material does not attract marks, and the candidate loses precious time. This may be because they have prepared for a particular requirement of a question, e.g. SWOT, and so produce the whole model as though showing this knowledge is worthwhile, irrespective of what the question asks for.

It is always worth looking to see whether there is anything that might explain a preference for particular topics. You might also want to reflect whether there is any reason why a particular topic is less favourable to candidates. For example, regularly candidates have performed poorly on questions about RBV.

I will finish this report with the general statement I made in a previous report. It is important to ensure that candidates understand that answers are expected to demonstrate M-level performance and the ability of candidates to develop logically structured and clearly focused responses to the questions put. They are also expected to show familiarity with recent research and examples of current practice. Evidence of research and critical evaluation will demonstrate different performance levels between stronger and weaker scripts.

Dr Sue Speakman, Chief Examiner, and on behalf of the team of HRC Examiners.