



## Case Study Questions in Formation 2 Information Systems

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This article aims to provide guidance on a key aspect of the F2 Information Systems paper – the unseen case study and associated questions. These questions, as part of Section A, are compulsory. As examiner, in recent years I have seen considerable variation in the quality of answers presented by students. Better preparation and technique in responding to case studies could help many students improve their marks in this paper.

### Why case studies?

Case studies are particularly important in the context of the F2 Information Systems paper. From the learning outcomes identified in the (2017/18) Syllabus (online):

On successful completion of this subject students should be able to: ... critically analyse Information Technology-based case studies, thus incorporating their strategic and practical **knowledge of Information Systems to real-life business situations**.

In other words, the case study is an important way to examine not only your knowledge but whether you can apply this to a given situation. This should mirror real-life experiences: in real life you're unlikely to be asked to list the advantages of a given technology, but instead what it might mean for your organisation/client. This is an important aspect of your professional competence.

### What **knowledge of Information Systems** is expected?

Your syllabus acts as a checklist, but also, uniquely to F2 Information Systems, the Education Focus section of the Educators' Briefing (online) identifies a range of topics as 'core' and 'important'. Additionally, the Educators' Briefing (2017/18) clarifies that the case study question:

Will primarily assess students' ability to apply their knowledge of the **core** areas identified in the Education Focus. However, it will also expect students to draw on knowledge of the **important** areas also identified in the Education Focus.

### What is expected in relation to **real-life business situations**?

Crucially, prior knowledge of the specific situation detailed in the case is NOT expected, and mark schemes reflect this. What is expected is a sensible consideration of how the facts presented might influence your response. Some points to consider as you read a case include (and this list is not exhaustive...):

- Is this is a new/well-established business?
- Is it in growth or decline? What is its financial position?
- What is the business's strategic focus/is the strategy unclear?

- Who are the suppliers/customers, what issues arise?
- Are there indications of previous investment/expertise/attitude to IS matters?
- What Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats are indicated (SWOT)?
- What Political, Economic, Social or Technological issues/changes are indicated (PEST)?

Clearly illustrate how the factors you identify impact on your response. For example, do these factors suggest one course of action over others? Might these factors impact on the likely advantages/disadvantages, or the implementation?

#### Common issues in case study responses

1. Lack of detail/understanding in **knowledge of** the specific aspect of **Information Systems**
2. Getting carried away with the **real-life business situation** and not showing **knowledge of** the specific aspect of **information systems**
3. Writing down all your **knowledge of** the specific aspect of **information systems** but not applying it to the **real-life business situation**

#### Before the exam – how to prepare

Firstly, you'll need to know the content that is expected. Case study responses often highlight where students don't fully understand the content, or don't know it in good enough detail. This has important implications in terms of how you study for this subject.

Make sure that you're comfortable both with the content about specific technologies (e.g. cloud computing, ERP, CRM, SCM, business intelligence and analytics) and also about information systems and how these relate to operation and strategy (e.g. the role of IS in the competitive environment, strategic objectives of IS). In terms of the technologies, you'll need to understand these at a good level of detail: especially – what these are, advantages/disadvantages, risks, and possible implications for operations or strategy. The interplay between information systems and strategy is an area of weakness for many students but it's a significant aspect of the syllabus. The sometimes vague terminology here is well explained in the Laudon & Laudon textbook (see also the November 2017 workshop recording – online).

Secondly, practice is crucial. Past paper questions and solutions are available online and will be useful for your preparation, not least in terms of how questions are asked. You might find it helpful to practice and discuss past papers with others where possible.

#### In the exam – good technique

Exam technique is very much a matter of personal preference, but consider these as you practice.

- Read the case study questions, then the case study information. Read both again! As you read, highlight, underline, scribble in the margins, sketch out points or bullets – whatever works for you.
- Brainstorm 2 key questions:
  1. What issues are raised by the real-life situation presented?
  2. What is the specific knowledge being assessed here?

- Plan out each part of your answer using a few key words – making sure that your answers for a/b/c/d don't overlap, and that you're answering every part of each question.
- Work out how many minutes you want to spend per mark – this is good time management and a useful guide to answer length.
- You might find it useful to attempt relevant past questions as you revise each topic – if you do this keep a full paper to attempt under exam conditions closer to the time. This lets you test your knowledge and your timing.
- Do you expect to be under time pressure in this exam? Would it work better for you to complete the case study at the start or end of the exam?

### An example – August 2017 paper

Read the August 2017 case study question, following the suggestions above. If you haven't covered all of the content yet, focus on interpreting the real-life situation using the questions above. Otherwise, draft an outline answer, without looking at the solutions (for now).

Some comments on the situation of Valtex and how this might affect your answer:

- Is this is a new/well-established business? Well established - 30 years - should know its market and have relatively well-established processes (but see below).
- Is it in growth or decline? Financial position? Turnover growth of 150%, but declining margins – may indicate lack of retained funds for investment/under-investment in recent years (this is also a specific point made in this case study). Growth can indicate changing business processes (also a specific point here).
- What is the business's strategic focus/is the strategy unclear? Clear strategy of low cost leadership – IS important for operational efficiency, effective decision making.
- Who are the suppliers/customers, what issues arise? Global suppliers indicates need for clear processes, efficiency in process, information for forecasting and decision making. Customers are 'fast fashion' retailers (note – not the end consumer): indicates low margins, high stock turnover, and rapid stock obsolescence.
- Are there indications of previous investment/expertise/attitude to IS matters? Clear statement of underinvestment and reluctance to investment, changes in procurement process indicates system no longer fit for purpose/efficient/providing useful information.

Some comments on student responses (read with the solutions):

The average mark was 12.6/25 (51%) – a little lower than the April 2017 average of 53%, but much better than August 2016's 42% average. Given that the case study will always focus on core areas, and provides information provided that should prompt recall of knowledge, students should see the case study as an opportunity to pick up higher marks.

Part a: Responses were very mixed, with some students apparently under-prepared for a detailed question on Supply Chain Management (SCM), despite this being a core area of the syllabus, and relatively regularly examined. The major determinant of low marks was a lack of detail – it was surprising to see some students writing less than two pages. Those that lacked detail often did not engage with specific aspects (e.g. on SCM or competitive advantage) or failed to explain in good detail the potential benefits for Valtex, relevant to the information provided (especially issues such as global supply chains, low cost focus, risk of obsolescence).

Part b: Responses to this question were generally good with many students receiving 4/4 marks – those that did not usually gave generic advantages of SCM not specific to cloud-based SCM.

Part c: Responses here were poor, with many students showing a lack of technical knowledge and confidence in what they understood as business intelligence. Acknowledging that this is a ‘fuzzy’ term subject to a range of definitions, students need to have a good working definition of this that they can apply when needed. See Laudon & Laudon Chapter 12 – also the subject of a November 2017 webinar (online).

Finally, mark your outline answer using the suggested solution. An important point to note is that the marking scheme has flexibility to give credit for relevant points not included in the suggested solutions and in how marks are applied. Reflecting on this exercise, what do you now need to do before the exam, and in the exam to drive your case study question mark higher?