

A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries

Introduction

SQA has a responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standard of our qualifications is maintained over time and across Courses. This means that we have to make sure that the grade a student receives recognises achievement against the established grade descriptions of the Course. It also means that we have to make sure that it is not easier or harder to achieve the same result across different Courses. For example, a Grade B in Higher Chemistry should broadly represent the same standard of attainment as a Grade B in Higher French.

One of the ways in which we aim to ensure that the standard of our qualifications are maintained is through Awarding Meetings, where grade boundary decisions are made. These meetings are held after each diet of SQA examinations. Every year, within a four-week period between June and July, we run over 200 Awarding Meetings at which the results for over 100,000 candidates from approximately 550 centres are scrutinised.

Awarding Meetings — who is involved?

Each Awarding Meeting brings together a range of people with subject expertise and people with experience of standard setting across different subjects and qualification levels.

Principal Assessor

Each Course has a Principal Assessor who leads an examining team of subject specialists. The Principal Assessor is appointed by SQA to bring professional expertise to all aspects of the assessment process for the Course. The Principal Assessor has a sound knowledge of the syllabus, assessment specification, marking schemes and marking criteria, and will know about the intended demand of the assessment instrument(s). The Principal Assessor will also be aware of the views of the markers, the quality of candidates response, and any issues which have arisen with the assessment or marking.

The professional judgement of the Principal Assessor is central to the process.

Qualifications Manager

SQA Qualification Managers typically have responsibility for a number of Courses. The Qualification Manager's role is to advise the Principal Assessor. The Qualifications Manager (QM), uniquely, has considerable knowledge of all qualification levels of the subject, will know about the views of stakeholders, will be familiar with related subjects and will feed this information into the meeting.

Statistician

The SQA Statistician provides statistical support at the Awarding Meeting, ensures logical decision making, and records Grade Boundary decisions. The Statistician is responsible for the provision of reliable statistical information, and explaining which conclusions can be drawn from it.

Chair

The position of Chair is held by the Chief Executive or a senior member of SQA's staff. The role of the Chair is to ensure that all information is taken into account, and all necessary decisions made. The Chair should also ensure that the decision-making process is consistent across all subject areas and over time.

Advisor to Chair

The position of Advisor to Chair is held by one of the SQA's National Qualifications (NQ) Heads of Service. NQ Heads of Service are responsible for Qualification Managers and their teams.

Preparing for the Awarding Meeting

Before the Awarding Meeting, the Principal Assessor and the Qualifications Manager will gather qualitative information and consider issues that may affect the setting of the grade boundaries.

The range of qualitative information that the Principal Assessor and Qualifications Manager take into consideration relate to:

- ◆ The setting of the examination paper - was there any change in the team involved in setting the paper, has there been a change in Course structure, components, the length of the examination, the maximum marks, the grade descriptors or intended demand of the assessment?
- ◆ The marking of the examination - was there any change to how marking was carried out (for instance, a move to Central Marking) or was there any change in relation to partial credit for incomplete answers?
- ◆ Examination performance - did questions perform as planned and what was the feedback from Markers/Examiners?

Statistical information is also provided giving information solely on student performance and cohort information such as the breakdown of the candidate group by stage.

It is the job of the Principal Assessor to combine the qualitative information collected with the statistical data to offer a sound explanation of student's assessment performance.

Basic Principle

In the simplest terms, if the assessment functioned as intended and there were no other mitigating circumstances, there is no requirement to make any grade boundary adjustments.

Conversely, if the assessment is found to be easier or harder than intended, adjustments will have to be made to ensure that standard of the Course is maintained.

Supporting Information

In order for changes in grade boundaries to occur, decisions must be backed up with valid evidence from the Principal Assessor and agreement reached by all members of the Awarding meeting. In many cases information is extracted from analysis of individual questions within the examination paper that did not function as expected. Identification of particular questions allows impact to be clearly discerned, both in regards to how many marks more difficult or easy the examination was but also, which students and therefore which grade boundaries would be affected.

In addition, given the decisions on grade boundaries based on the standard of assessment, the resulting grade distribution should be able to be explained. There is no fixed proportion of grades which we expect to see attained, so the ability of the candidates must be reflected in the grade distribution since to do otherwise would be unfair.

Which Grade Boundaries are Decided

National Courses

The members of each Awarding meeting are responsible for setting the minimum mark which students have to achieve to gain a Grade C in that subject and also the minimum marks needed to gain a Grade A, and upper A. The grade boundaries needed to gain a Grade B and a Grade D are automatically calculated following these decisions.

Standard Grades

The externally assessed Elements of a Standard Grade Course are graded either using separate exams (for example, Standard Grade English comprises a Reading paper as well as a Writing paper) or within the same exam (for example, Standard Grade Mathematics includes both Knowledge & Understanding and Reasoning & Enquiry questions within the same paper).

Grade boundary decisions for Standard Grade Courses are made at each Element, rather than each subject. In the majority of cases, within each Element grade boundaries need to be set across all grades, i.e. Grades 1 –6. Grades 1 and 2 equate to Credit Level, 3 and 4 to General and 5 and 6 to Foundation. Once grade boundaries

have been set for each Element they are then combined with directly graded Elements to produce an overall grade.

The Awarding Meeting

At the Awarding Meeting it is necessary to determine the grade boundaries for the assessment.

The meeting is organised to ensure that all the information is taken into account before grade boundary setting. Decisions are based primarily on the Principal Assessor's professional judgement and direct experience, and supported by the statistical and quantitative information generated by SQA.

Each meeting follows a set structure:

- The Qualifications Manager will be asked to comment on any feedback from centres, and any public or press comments on the assessment as well as any wider issues relating to the subject and/or level.
- The Chair will then ask the Principal Assessor for overall comments regarding the assessment and marking together with their personal views and those of their colleagues. At this stage, the meeting should consider the comments that were submitted by the markers, Principal Assessor and Qualifications Manager before the statistics were available.
- Statistical information will then be considered. Given the analysis of the student performance, discussions around correspondence between the data and the qualitative information will follow.
- An additional feature when setting Standard Grade boundaries is ensuring that the demands on students are appropriately staggered across grades 1–6. This can be complex as grades are linked to different assessment papers. Consideration across these papers must be made to ensure that the level of demand on students is properly differentiated.
- Given the discussions within the meeting, the Principal Assessor will then be asked to propose the grade boundaries, clarifying the evidence for these decisions.
- Once all boundaries have been set, members must check the overall pattern of awards. Is this pattern justifiable given the information available?
- Once members have agreed unanimously, the grade boundaries will be formally confirmed by the Chair and the Principal Assessor.