

Research and Information Services

Monitoring Standards Report



Comparison of Gaelic Higher for 2005 and 2007

Information about Monitoring Standards

Since 1998 SQA has been monitoring a sample of qualifications annually to determine whether standards in the level of demand in the syllabus and question papers are being maintained year on year and whether any changes to marking instructions have had an impact on candidates' examination results.

NQ teams are asked to compare the Arrangements, Question papers and Marking Instructions for the years in question, and consider whether there have been any changes to these which have resulted in any change to the level of demand or difficulty. Teams decide whether the breadth and depth of the syllabus has remained the same and, if not, how these changes have altered the level of demand in the question papers in the years being compared. The clarity of instructions and allocation of marks in the marking instructions across the years is also considered. The candidate evidence is compared, and the teams decide whether or not the evidence is demonstrating the same standard of performance across the years.

NQ Monitoring teams comprise a subject specialist from Higher Education or a Professional Organisation, who is the chair of the group, the Principal Assessor for the subject, who is the SQA expert in the group and a practicing classroom teacher who can be an SQA marker.

Summary of findings

The panel, which comprised a University lecturer (chair and report writer), the Principal Assessor (Gaelic), and a practising teacher, concludes that the overall level of demand for Gaelic (Learners) Higher has not significantly changed for 2007 compared to 2005 for the majority of candidates, except in so far as it could be seen as somewhat higher for students who under the 2005 arrangements would have opted for the Speaking & Listening Focus. Although certain elements of the revised assessment structure (whereby all skills are assessed in exam conditions) could present a higher level of demand for some students, the panel feels strongly that the new arrangements offer a more robust, consistent and reliable assessment of student competencies.

Cohort of candidates

This is broadly similar in both years.

Level of demand of Arrangements / syllabus

The level of demand is broadly similar overall in that the skills being developed and assessed, and the content to which the skills are applied, have not changed. However the redistribution of assessment weightings, and the removal of the skills specialisation in the final exam, could be said to have increased demand level for some students (specifically the minority who might have chosen the 'writing-light' Speaking & Talking focus under the old arrangements).

Level of demand of Assessment instruments

The level of demand of the directly comparable assessment instruments (Listening and Reading) is broadly similar. However changes in course structure and hence the nature of the assessment (removal of focus options, and two course components previously assessed in-centre now examined under external exam conditions) could be seen as increasing the level of demand for some students, in particular those students who previously would have opted for the Listening & Talking focus. The 5% drop in A Grades between 2005 and 2007 may reflect this change, but this cannot be convincingly claimed without further data.

Level of demand of Marking Instructions

The Marking Instructions are broadly similar where comparable. 2007 exam marking schemes in Listening and Reading were more precise in formulation and allocation of marks, and likely to ensure more consistent marking.

Grading of scripts

Grading of scripts was broadly similar where comparable. Although in the Writing component, the 2007 sample was seen to perform on average less well in the exam question than the 2005 sample had in their folio work, the exam mark carried less percentage value than the folio, and 2007 performances in the new Literature exam section were on average high, so that overall results did not conclusively show that a Band 2 was harder to achieve in 2007.

1 Introduction

General changes

In absolute terms, the number of candidates was slightly lower in 2007 (119) than in 2005 (130). The number of centres presenting candidates was equal in both years, but S5 candidates represented a much larger percentage of the cohort in 2007 (76%) than in 2005 (58%). Pass rates were almost identical, averaging at 91.5%, with a slight decrease in A Grades from 55% in 2005 to 50% in 2007. The gender profile of entries was identical in both years (roughly 70% female, 30% male), and in 2007 roughly the same proportion (c. 50%) of both genders achieved an A grade (representing a rise among males and drop among females of c.10% compared to 2005).

Although no significant general changes were made to the Higher Gaelic syllabus between 2005 and 2007, the following significant changes were made in the assessment structure:

- ◆ Under the course arrangements operating in 2005, varied weightings had been given to the four language skills (Listening, Talking, Reading and Writing) in external Course assessment, allowing pupils to specialise in two language skills: either Listening and Talking, for 75% of their final course assessment; or Reading and Writing, for 58% of final course assessment. Writing was assessed entirely through a portfolio of work produced during the year, and evaluative skills in Literature were tested by pass/fail in-house assessment.

- ◆ In 2007, however, options were no longer available, the folio requirement had been removed, and all four language skills plus evaluative skills in literature were externally assessed in exam conditions. Speaking was given dominant weighting for all students, and the four other skills shared equal weighting. (See Appendix, Tables 1 and 2 for a summary of these arrangements.)

The changes involving the Writing component were to some extent occasioned by assessors' dissatisfaction with the writing folio as an instrument of summative assessment. It had been felt that due to the possibility of excessive re-drafting and of input from agents other than the pupil and the teacher, the folio was an insufficiently reliable mirror of students' competence in writing. The revised system emphasises the role of external assessment in encouraging and evaluating the retention and integration of all the skills developed through the year ('added value').

From some pupils' perspective, the new system might be seen as more challenging in several ways:

- ◆ the added pressure of external assessment in exam conditions for all course components, including writing and literature, with the written exam component rising from 50% to 73%
- ◆ the increased importance given to Gaelic writing skills for all students, even implicitly, by the move from folio to exam assessment
- ◆ the requirement of an oral presentation of research (NAB) from all students (previously required only of L&T-focus students, with R&W students submitting a written summary of research)
- ◆ the introduction of a three-component 110 minute exam, demanding higher retention and greater time-management than previous 45-minute exams

2 Level of demand of arrangements/syllabus

2.1 Breadth of syllabus

Level of demand in 2007 compared to 2005

It was felt that the breadth of the syllabus was probably more demanding overall because of the more equal stress put on each of the five skills (Listening, Talking, Reading, Writing and evaluation of literature) in final assessment for all students.

Additions in 2007 and level of demand

- ◆ The requirement of a research-based oral presentation (NAB) from all students (previously required only of L&T-focus students): whether this was seen as more demanding than the previous option of a textual presentation would depend on individual students' preference, confidence and linguistic (Gaelic) background; but presumably, for some students, this requirement would be seen as more demanding.
- ◆ The increased importance given to writing skills for all students, even implicitly, by the move from folio to exam assessment: for some students (those who would previously have opted for the Listening & Talking Focus,

whose written folio counted only for 8% of the final mark), this requirement would probably be seen as more demanding.

- ◆ The requirement to cover a minimum of two genres in Literature, where previously one genre sufficed: while this would expand students' knowledge of Gaelic literature and their evaluative skills, it was felt that it did not make the syllabus more demanding.

Reductions in 2007 and level of demand

Decrease in the menu of Themes from four to three between 2005 and 2007 (with the removal of 'Media'): it was felt that this did not constitute a reduction in breadth affecting the overall demand of the syllabus in terms of pupil learning, since time constraints had rarely allowed teachers the possibility of covering four themes in any case.

Changes in arrangements

The course arrangements were restructured from the double Language Study Unit plus Focus Unit option to three mandatory units for all students, and changes were made in assessment tools and weightings (Appendix, Table 1). See previous answers for the effect of this on level of demand.

The Arrangements document reflects all the changes mentioned above, as well as putting a new emphasis on Assessment is for Learning approaches and including clear outlines of Estimates, Appeals and QA procedures.

2.2 Depth of syllabus

Amount of detail covered

It was felt that this had changed under the new arrangements, since more detail could be covered because of time freed up by dropping the folio requirement.

Emphasis on integration of skills and content

In so far as equal emphasis was now placed on each of the five skills for all pupils (though slightly greater weighting was given to Speaking in course assessment), the panel judged that the integration of skills and content had been improved.

3 Level of demand of the examination questions

3.1 General approach in the assessment instruments

The approach in NAB assessment was unchanged, but as outlined earlier, final assessment of writing and of literature evaluation in 2007 was under exam conditions, and the four linguistic skills were given more equal weighting.

3.2 Coverage of the syllabus

It was not felt that significant change had occurred in this respect as a result of the changes in course arrangements. Under the previous system (2005 cohort) the

same skills were being developed and assessed (albeit in varying proportions), and the same content covered.

3.3 Structure of the total assessment task

As outlined above (1.1 and 2.1), there have been significant changes here in terms of what is assessed under exam conditions, which might be viewed as more demanding of the students. The total assessment was deemed by the panel to offer a more robust and more reliable evaluation of pupils' competences.

3.4 Demand of assessment tasks

Directly comparable tasks (Listening and Reading) had not changed in nature or in level of demand. However, the passage used in Listening Paper 1A (sat by all students) in 2005 was longer and seemed more difficult than the second (focus-only) Listening Paper 1B in 2005 or the Section A (Listening) paper in 2007, but this seemed an anomalous rather than systematic difference.

The introduction under the new arrangements, however, of a writing question and a literature question under exam conditions, represents a potential increase in demand, and the coverage of three components in one 110 minute paper (Section B) could also be seen as more demanding of students, in the need for performance stamina and time management. This possible increase in demand is, however, offset by:

- ◆ The change in weightings, with the Writing question in 2007 representing only 18% of total marks in 2007, compared to the 25% value of folio work for most students in 2005.
- ◆ The overall success with which students treated the literature question. Panel members remarked that in their experience this was an element students enjoyed and in which they performed well (the question can be prepared for and is answered in English, although some choose to answer in Gaelic), and this was borne out by the 2007 sample results (see Appendix, Table 7).

It was felt in addition that the Writing question struck a very effective balance between providing clear guidance to the students on content and structure and allowing for individual initiative and preference.

4 Level of demand of examination marking

It was not felt that there were significant differences in Marking Instructions that would affect the grades achieved by students. In the Listening and Reading questions, however, the 2007 marking schemes were judged by the panel to be clearer and more effective, in that there was more obvious correspondence between the data selection from the text and the mark allocation, ie the assignment of marks shown on the paper more clearly reflected the focus of the questions and the expectations of the assessors.

The removal of half-marks had helped in this respect: questions had been set so as not to elicit responses for which half marks would be awarded. There was less ambiguity for the student in understanding what was being asked, and for the

assessor in knowing how marks should be assigned. Assessment grids for the marking of writing (previously the marking of folio work) had not substantially changed. The presentation of A Grade and C Grade descriptors for all skills supplied in the Arrangements documentation were felt to be clearer in 2007 (*Arrangements*, pp. 9-11) than in 2005 (*Arrangements*, pp. 10-11).

5 Grading of candidates performance

5.1 Grade A (Band 2) and Grade C (Band 6) scripts

Due to the changes in assessment already described, direct comparisons in scripts are only possible between performances in the Listening and Reading papers sat by all candidates in both 2005 and 2007 (see Appendix, Table 4). There was a noticeable difference in the higher average performance in Listening in 2007 compared to 2005. If this was representative of the entire cohorts, it might be attributable to the slightly more demanding nature of the 2005 text, which was longer and deployed more specialised lexis than either the 2007 text or the second (L&T-only) text in 2005.

The panel also compared grading of the 2007 Writing exam performances (40 marks) with grading of 2005 R&W candidates' folio work (major piece only, also 40 marks). Predictably, the 2005 folio submissions (subject to redrafting, polishing and potentially open to outside input) earned students significantly higher marks than the 2007 exam question, with average drops between 2005 and 2007 of 6 marks (15%) in Band 2, and of about 9 marks (21.5%) in Band 6 (Appendix, Table 5). The drop across the entire sample was of 9.3 marks (23%). However as the percentage value of the Writing exam assessment was lower than that of the R&W folios (18% to 25%), the drop in marks in Writing did not necessarily impact on overall student performance in 2007.

The panel was satisfied that the 2007 assessment gave a truer picture of candidates' competence in writing, and felt that the figures confirmed the suspected unreliability of the folio as an accurate indicator of actual writing competence, rather than showing either a drop in writing competence between cohorts or inconsistent marking practice.

5.2 Specific weaknesses or strengths in scripts

In both samples, oral marks were significantly higher than the mark achieved for the written exam questions, with the average Band 2 mark on the cusp of band 1, and the average Band 6 mark in bands 2-3 (Appendix, Table 6). In 2007, Literature marks were high, and tended to be the highest achieved in the exam paper (Appendix, Table 7).

In neither sample was there evidence of students performing consistently across the board, except in the case of D Grade students (and possibly Band 1 students, but none were included in the sample): generally, students raised their final band in 2005 by their performance in their oral and their folio work, and in 2007 by their oral and literature marks.

Appendix

Table 1: Unit structure of Course.

2005	2007
Double unit: Language Study (Four language skills & literature)	Listening & Speaking
	Reading and Writing
Listening & Talking Focus OR Reading & Writing Focus	Literature & Individual Study

Table 2: Percentage weightings in external Course assessment

	2005 (240 marks)		2007 (220 marks)
	L & T focus:	R & W focus:	All:
Listening	33%	17%	18%
Reading	17%	33%	18%
Writing	8% (folio)	25% (folio)	18%
Talking	42%	25%	27%
Literature	0% (NAB)	0% (NAB)	18%

Table 3: Written exam components 2005 and 2007

	2005 (120/240 marks = 50%)		2007 (160/220 marks = 73%)
	L & T focus:	R & W focus:	All:
Listening	Paper 1(A) Paper 1(B)	Paper 1(A)	Section A
Reading	Paper 2(A)	Paper 2(A) Paper 2(b)	Section B(i)
Writing	--	--	Section B(ii)
Literature	--	--	Section B(iii)

Table 4: Performance in Listening and Reading exam tasks

	Listening		Reading	
	2005 Paper 1(A)	2007 Section A	2005 Paper 2(A)	2007 Section B(i)
Band 2	24	23	30	36
	24	37	27	24
	27	32	33	24
	36*		35*	
Average	25 (27.8)	30.7	30 (31.3)	28
Band 6	13	17	17	17
	16	20	15	15
	10	17	20	17
Average	13	18	17.3	16.3

* : L&T candidate added to sample of R&W candidates (2005)

() : average taking into account L&T candidate (2005)

Table 5: Performance in externally assessed 40-mark writing tasks

	2005	2007
	(R&W students)	
	Folio	Exam B(ii)
	(longer piece)	

Band 2	28	22
	28	20
	28	24
Average	28	22
Band 6	20	19
	25	13
	31	16
Average	25.3	16

Table 6: Performance in oral exam (60 marks)

	2005 (R&W students)	2007
Band 2	49	46
	50	48
	54	53
Average	51	49
Band 6	43	45
	48	41
	40	35
Average	43.7	40.3

Table 7: Performance in new exam tasks 2007 (40 marks each)

	B(ii): Writing	B(iii): Literature
Band 2	22	28
	20	25
	24	24
Band 3	25	26
	19	26
	20	28
	19	20

Band 6	13	25
	16	26
Band 7	13	22
	13	21
	19	23
Average	18.6	24.5
Range	13 → 25	20 → 28

Averages Band 2: 22 25.7

Averages Band 6: 16 23.7

B(iii) marks in bold indicate that this result was the student's highest (or highest equal) score in Section B.