

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Biology

Qualification area

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
Included in this report**

MER Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2003	20
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Number of entries in 2004	89
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General comments re entry numbers

There has been a significant increase in presentation numbers compared to 2003.

There were presentations from 8 centres. Four of these were FE centres who had previously presented and four were schools who had not previously presented. One school presented 33 candidates.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	22.5	22.5	20	77
B	40.4	62.9	36	66
C	20.2	83.1	18	55
D	4.5	87.6	4	49
No award	12.4	100.0	11	0

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

Fewer candidates were awarded Grade A compared to 2003 but a larger percentage gained a B and fewer candidates were given no award.

Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Grade Boundaries	Lowest mark	Percentage of maximum marks
A	77	70
B	66	60
C	55	50
D	49	45
No award	0	0

General commentary on passmarks and grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create mark schemes which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum 50% of the available marks (notional passmark) and a very well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70%, it is almost impossible to get the standard absolutely on target every year, in every subject and level
- Each year we therefore hold a passmark meeting for each subject at each level where we bring together all the information available (statistical and judgmental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the senior management team at SQA
- We adjust the passmark downwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly more demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- We adjust the passmark upwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly less demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- Where the standard appears to be very similar to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries
- An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. And just because SQA has altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related as they do not contain identical questions
- Our main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

The examination was the same standard as previous years and all questions performed as planned. The grade boundaries are therefore the same as previous years.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

In Section A all questions were accessible to the majority of candidates. The quality of answers was generally good showing a sound grasp of many aspects of the course. Discriminating questions challenged even the most able.

Detailed knowledge and first hand experience of certain environmental issues were displayed in answers given by a number of candidates from one centre in particular. This was demonstrated clearly in responses relating to experiences gained through practical investigations or field excursions.

In Section B the majority of candidates performed better in question 8, the structured essay, compared to the unstructured one. Ten candidates did not attempt either of the options in question 9.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Questions 5 and 6 were well done by most candidates. Parts of other questions such as the graph in question 3 and the food web in question 4 were also well done.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Candidates performed poorly where precise knowledge or exemplification was required e.g. biotic factors (question 3c(ii)), environmental regulation (question 4b(ii)), national initiative (question 5b(iii)), and environmental legislation (question 6(g)).

Candidates attempting essay option 9B overlooked the requirement in the essay to describe sampling methods as well as measurement of abiotic factors.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Centres should be congratulated on the support given to candidates in preparation for the exam and, in some cases, for providing the appropriate practical experience and field work to support the course.

Experience of field excursions, particularly involving practical work or focussed on local environmental issues, benefited candidates and produced varied and in depth responses in certain questions. Such experiences should be actively encouraged in centres.

Essays writing should be encouraged and practised. Bullet points should not be used as an alternative to an essay as the responses tend to be too brief presented in this way, lacking the detail and context required to be awarded marks.