

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

Geography

Qualification area

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

Advanced Higher Geography

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	727

Number of entries in 2003	
Pre appeal	730

General comments re entry numbers

The very small increase indicates that numbers will probably remain at about this level in future. It is approximately double the number of candidates in the latter years of SYS and given the constraints on resources in schools is a reasonable number of entrants. Nevertheless in view of the high reputation of the qualification more entrants would be welcome, and should be encouraged by SQA.

Grade boundaries at C, B and A for each subject area included in the report

Upper A (band 1)	167
Lower A (band 2)	146
Upper B (band 3)	134
Lower B (band 4)	123
Upper C (band 5)	111
Lower C (band 6)	100

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 syllabuses evolve and change

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

The grade boundaries are identical to those for 2002. After a very full review of candidates' performance and the degree of difficulty of the examination by the assessment team, it was agreed that the boundaries remain unchanged for 2003.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The further improvement in candidates' work, following that in 2002, has been noted. This is most commendable. In general most presentations reached a standard of work which was satisfactory or better. There remain differences between centres, across a spectrum of ability of candidates, indicating that some centres are still not fully appreciating the requirements of all of the elements of presentation in the AH geography programme. The externally assessed work is especially demanding in terms of effort and intellectual application. However the improvement in results in the band 2 band 3 grades represents the outcome of more focussed efforts by candidates and more refined teaching and support by staff.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

1. Basic statistical techniques were handled well and accurately.
2. There was a small but significant improvement in the critical evaluation of *sources* in the Geographical Issues essays "paper 2".
3. Geographical studies which received high marks were of a commendably high standard. There were more good or very good geographical studies.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

1. Interpretation of statistical tests was in many cases rather weak. Candidates need to be able to apply the results to geographical evaluation.
2. Map interpretation skills are poor in a significant number of candidates. Candidates should be familiar with the Explorer 1/25,000 O.S. map series, and be able to interpret landscapes with fluency. Accurate understanding of linear and areal scales, and of grid referencing is essential.
3. Many candidates still critically evaluate issues and not (as is explicitly required) *sources*. To get a good mark in the critical evaluation element of the assessment of these essays it is essential that there is an explicit critical evaluation of sources. This element constitutes a quarter of the marks available for the essays, and 10% of the total of marks for the whole AH programme.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

1. Strengthen interpretation in work using statistical techniques.
2. Improve map interpretation skills, and confidence in the use of the O.S. Explorer 1/25,000 series maps.
3. More class work on critical evaluation of sources will help in the Geographical issues essays. Tutorial type sessions, and candidates assessing each others practise work may help understanding of the requirements of this part of the AH programme. School staff are encouraged to collect a range of suitable sources which can be used in class work. The Principal Assessor may be consulted on this. The GI essays are the most demanding and challenging part of the whole programme, but also that which is most valued in higher education.