

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Geography

Qualification area

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

**Geography
Advanced Higher**

Statistical information: update

Resulted entries in 2003 (final)	757
(pass mark stage)	730

Resulted entries in 2004 (pre appeal)	906
(pass mark stage)	874

General comments re entry numbers

The continuing increase in numbers is strongly welcomed. Two main factors can be identified as contributing to this increase.

- Teachers are building a growing cohort of engaged and able students interested in studying geography to the highest school level. This relates to the quality of teaching and enthusiasm of staff in centres.
- Advanced Higher Geography, which has a demanding syllabus focussing on core skills in Higher Education as a whole, attracts able candidates who use the qualification as a preparation for University entry. The qualification is perceived as being a good general entry preparation by Scottish Universities.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards (pre appeal)

Grade	No. of candidates	% of candidates	Cumulative percentage
A	115	* 12.7	12.7
B	340	37.5	50.2
C	332	36.7	86.9
A – C	787	86.9	-
D	69	7.6	94.5
No Award	50	5.5	100.0

* 1.5% of candidates at pass mark stage awarded “Upper A”.

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

There has been a decrease in the proportion and number of A grade awards compared with 2003 (17.8%). The overall pass rate is down from 89.8% (final) to 86.9% at pre appeal stage. This is attributed to a minor variation in the quality of candidates’ work seen this year. Performance in both the written examination and the Geographical Study was slightly weaker than in previous years. The difficulty of the examination and the standard expected in the Study were identical to those in previous years. Matters relating to these distributions are considered more fully in the sections dealing with Comments on candidates’ performance and Feedback to Centres.

Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	12.7	12.7	120	146
B	37.5	50.2	323	123
C	36.7	86.9	326	100
D	7.6	94.5	85	88
No award	5.5	100	20	n.a.

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 were identical to those used in 2002 and 2003. In the case of the new award of grade D, the mark of lowest 88 was considered to be the minimum score obtained by a candidate whose submitted work was close to the Advanced Higher Standard. Marks below this were not considered to be work of the standard required for any award in Advanced Higher Geography.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Generally the performance was satisfactory. Some of the following issues relating to standard of performance will be addressed by the new arrangement for externally assessed work, which will apply from the 2005 diet of examinations.

- As in previous years the best work seen was of an exceptionally high standard reflecting very well both on candidates and centres.
- A significant number of candidates submitted work that appeared to be rushed or poorly done, particularly in the Geographical Study. Time management skills, which are a core element in AH Geography need to be reinforced. The examiners are well aware of the priority given by centres to this issue. This comment, therefore, is primarily addressed to candidates.
- With respect to assessment of Geographical Techniques some centres had candidates who had a grasp of a rather limited range of techniques. This significance of this comment applies to both the written examination and the Geographical Study.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

It is most gratifying to note that performance in the Geographical Issues critical evaluation essays improved, especially in the area of critical evaluation of sources. Whilst there remains room for development of skills, it is clear that most centres are preparing candidates more effectively in this respect. Critical thinking is a challenging skill at the AH level, but as it is a core skill in all Higher Education. Its importance cannot be overestimated. This is one of the most externally valued elements in the AH Geography programme.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

The general standard of Geographical Studies was a little disappointing. Quite a number appeared to be rushed, or not finished to the required standards. It is to be hoped that the earlier date of submission next year, as part of the AH Portfolio will allow candidates to concentrate on this part of the programme. The folio submission date will mean that all work must be completed before the start of the examination diet and the end of year activities in which 6th Year students often play an important part.

Performance in the examination was also a little weaker than in 2003. Both sections were done less well. The question choice in both sections meant that there should have been no properly prepared candidate who would have difficulty in attempting a question. The degree of difficulty, content and marking standards of the examination paper was exactly the same as in previous years, though the style of question was a little different. Candidates must avoid a formulaic approach to questions at the AH level.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Briefly centres should place emphasis on the following in their teaching programmes for the 2005 diet of examinations:

- Students must be familiar with, and understand the applicability of, a good range of techniques in the Geographical Techniques part of the syllabus.
- Attention should be paid to map reading skills. Candidates need better technical skills in areas such as grid referencing, use of symbolic data and interpretation of relief and drainage patterns.
- Weaker candidates often produce work in the Geographical Studies and Issues essays that is poorly presented.
- Good Geographical Studies almost invariably take on challenging topics.
- In Geographical Studies the source of all data must be explained, either through a clear discussion of data collection, or in the case of secondary data through proper acknowledgement of sources. Group collected data (such as might be part of a field class) is perfectly suitable for Geographical Studies. However the group source should be clearly acknowledged. It is highly desirable that candidates from the same centre using such group data have hypotheses which are somewhat different from other candidates; i.e. are using the data set in a manner particular to their study.