

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

Geography

Qualification area

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

Geography: Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	7,786
Pre appeal	

Number of entries in 2003	7,801
Pre appeal	

General comments re entry numbers

Entry numbers have remained stable at this level, apart from a slight rise in 2001, since the introduction of Higher Still.

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

Grade Boundaries:

C	51
B	62
A	73

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

All grade boundaries have increased by one mark from 2002. This reflects some slightly more accessible questions than in previous years.

In spite of the increase, the percentage of candidates achieving each grade has also increased.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The candidate performance showed a slight improvement on that of 2002.

The mean score in Paper 1 increased from 30.1 to 30.5, while that in Paper 2 increased from 27.9 to 29.4.

Many markers commented that there were fewer very weak candidates than usual.

The appendices show the mean scores for the questions in Papers 1 and 2, and the pattern of question choice in Paper 2.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Appendix 1 shows that the best answered questions in Paper 1 were questions 1, 2, 5 and 7. Abundant resource material was provided in question 1, and candidates who examined it carefully, and used their knowledge of the ITC Z to explain the variations, scored very highly indeed. Similarly in question 2(a) and in question 7, there was sufficient information on the Ordnance Survey map for the careful and systematic candidate to score well. Candidates showed detailed knowledge of waterfall formation, though a great many answers began with some kind of 'fall' in place, and went on to describe the process of retreat. These were not penalised. Question 5 tested content which is traditionally handled well.

The mean scores disguise strengths in other questions. Those candidates who opted for sand dune succession in question 4 generally answered fully. Some candidates scored heavily by extracting lots of information from the graphs in question 8.

Appendix 2 shows that in paper 2 question 1 was well answered. To a large extent the high mean scores resulted from high quality answers in part (a), limestone. This more than compensated for some difficulties elsewhere. Question 5 was, as usual, attempted by very few, but there is evidence that, in the centres which do teach it, the candidates have a sound grasp of the content. The mean score in question 6 was higher than usual, partly because candidates made full use of the statistics in part (a) (i), partly because there was a 'full' question on disease (factors, control strategies, effectiveness) — a topic with which many candidates are comfortable.

Elsewhere there were many good answers on soil conservation measures in question 2 (b), and on the impact of water control projects in question 3 (b) (iii).

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

In Paper 1, mean scores were disappointing in questions 6 and 3. Many candidates simply described the farming system in question 6, and those who did discuss change tended to write about changes which could hardly be described as ‘new’ or ‘continuing’. More candidates answered question 3A than 3B, and the former was better answered. The processes of scarp and vale formation were particularly weakly explained.

There were areas of weakness in questions with better mean scores. Few candidates showed detailed knowledge of plants or processes in the derelict urban site in question 4. In question 7, some candidates wrote at great length about transport as a factor, but ignored other factors. In question 8 there was a disappointing lack of detail on the city supposedly studied. Many candidates mentioned a city in the first line and made no obvious reference to it thereafter, showing, as one marker commented, “a naïve belief that just naming a city is sufficient to confer authenticity”.

In Paper 2, there were weaknesses in some parts of almost all questions, many of them resulting from candidates’ failure to read the question. In question 1 (b), some failed to write about two land uses. In question 1 (c), some wrote about conflicts which are not tourist-related. As usual, there was a lack of specific examples/place names from the area supposedly studied. This was true even if a very broad definition of ‘honeypot’ was chosen. Some candidates lost marks in question 2 (b) by ignoring the ‘and either’. Answers to question 2 (a) were often repetitive and vague.

Questions like 3 (a) have appeared several times over the years, and this year’s answers were as weak as in the past. Candidates show remarkably little knowledge of the distribution of mountains and rainfall in their chosen continent. In question 4 (a) (i), some candidates failed to notice ‘urban’ in the question or graph title; some were careless in their reading of the graph. Question 4 (c) produced some answers which were very generalised, eg the whole of Edinburgh, and failed to focus on a specific redevelopment area.

In question 6 (a) (iii), some candidates attempted to explain the variations within Brazil, rather than ‘a country you have studied’, when they obviously knew little about it. Others answered by referring to differences between countries (which was probably the question they were expecting!) While there were many good answers to question 6 (b), there is evidence that candidates who have studied more than one disease sometimes become confused about the causes. The ‘remoteness’ of the topic for candidates in Scotland is shown by the unusual nature of some of the suggestions — draining all the puddles in Africa to combat malaria!

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

*Candidates must be encouraged to read the questions fully. The inability or unwillingness to read the question thoroughly continues to cause concern. Sometimes this leads to parts of questions being omitted, eg.

P2 Q1(b) two opportunities ...
P2 Q2(b) North America and either ...

At other times this can lead to irrelevant or unbalanced answers, eg

P1 Q8 overemphasis on the graph and not enough information on the city studied.
P2 Q1(c) irrelevant, ie non tourist-related, conflicts discussed.

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to make full use of the ‘other places you have studied’ option, especially in Paper 2, Question 6.
- ◆ More detailed examples, including place names, would add authenticity to answers. This would have been particularly welcomed in Paper 1, Question 8 and in Paper 2, Questions 1 and 4.
- ◆ Centres should discourage their candidates from answering in the form of lists consisting of short phrases, which inevitably mean that points are not fully developed.
- ◆ Centres might consider whether their candidates might find the content of European Regional Inequalities (much of it visible round about them) more accessible and comprehensible than the rather remote content of Development and Health.

Mean Marks for Questions in Paper 1

Question	Mean Mark	Out of	Percentage
1	4.71	7	67.3
2	4.16	6	69.3
3	3.38	6	56.3
4	3.77	6	62.9
5	3.99	6	66.5
6	2.60	6	43.3
7	4.20	6	70.0
8	4.41	7	63.0

Sample of 300 scripts

Mean Marks for Questions in Paper 2

Question	Mark out of 25
1	16.1
2	13.2
3	13.9
4	13.9
5	15
6	14.1

Sample off 300 scripts

Question Choice in Paper 2	
Question	Percentage
1	32.9
2	9.6
3	7.7
4	11.2
5	1.0
6	37.6

Sample of 2,000 scripts