

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

Information Systems

Qualification area:

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

Information Systems Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	2865
Pre appeal	

Number of entries in 2003	2821
Pre appeal	

General comments re entry numbers

The number of entries was down very slightly this year but still a healthy number of entries.

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

Upper A — 84
A — 73
B — 63
C — 53

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

Question papers and their associated marking schemes are designed to be of the required standard and to meet the assessment specification for the subject/level concerned.

The grade boundaries at 'C', 'B' and 'A' reflect the level of difficulty and accessibility of the external assessment: that is, course work and examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The average mark for coursework was 23.4 out of 30 (78%) which is within one per cent of what it has been since 2000 when the subject was introduced. Generally, the overall response from candidates was wide ranging. In the exam, candidates performed reasonably well in the core questions and some markers noted a marked improvement in this area compared to last year. Again, candidates tended to respond to questions in a general manner, rather than describing a solution to the particular scenario in the question — thus candidates showed limited ability to apply knowledge in a problem-solving context. In these type of questions, candidates tended to give a response based on their recall of knowledge without paying any attention to the problem requiring to be solved based on the scenario given.

This year there was a marked improvement in the candidates' understanding of the normalisation process and consequently the marks for this question were significantly better than in previous years.

An average mark of 34.4 out of 70 for the written paper compared to 29.1 in 2002 reflects the improved performance of candidates.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

In the core section, the two database questions (1 and 3) were done very well by the majority of candidates with a significant percentage scoring full marks for question 3. In the optional topics, expert systems was by far answered the best with candidates scoring particularly well in question 10.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

In the core section, questions 2 and 4 were answered poorly, with a large number of candidates demonstrating knowledge of the terminology but failing to link it to the scenario. In question 2 (b), many candidates did not give clear examples of planning and decision making from the information supplied. In a lot of cases, the candidates gave an example of decision making when it should have been planning. In question 4 (a) candidates did not take fully into account that the characteristics of information had to be considered at the design stage. The majority of responses referred to the new system after it had been implemented. Candidates did not answer the parts on hardware and searching in question 4 (b) well at all. Little consideration was given to the scenario which should have directed candidates to answering the question in terms of a networked information system. The vast majority of candidates were unable to correctly name three pieces of current legislation concerning information systems in question 4 (c).

In the optional topics, candidates did not perform well in Computer Application Software, particularly question 7 and in Hypermedia, particularly question 12.

All markers highlighted question 7 as the one that was least well attempted by candidates. Some centres have expressed concern over the depth of knowledge required in this question. In Part (b) candidates did not need to design a specific formula but describe one. In part (d) candidates were asked to describe how the results could be achieved by using a spreadsheet and a database package. This required the candidates to use and integrate their knowledge of advanced features of spreadsheets and databases to describe a solution in this unfamiliar context.

Question 12 in Hypermedia was also identified by markers as being very poorly answered. Most candidates struggled with parts (a), (b) but managed part (c) better although few candidates answered part (iii) correctly.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Presenting centres should stress to candidates that their examination responses should be detailed, accurate and complete. A level of depth and breadth appropriate to Higher level is required. An examination question which asks for a description or an explanation will not be given full marks if the answer simply states the name of an information system or the feature of an application package.

Centres also need to stress to candidates that problem solving questions often require candidates to relate their answers to the context of the question. They have to use the information supplied in the scenario. Many candidates simply write down all that they know without relating it to the context.

Since the examination question paper is only worth 70 marks, and has a 2.5 hours duration, asking candidates for 2 responses for 1 mark is unavoidable if Higher standards are to be met. Centres should ensure that candidates are aware of the need to give as full answers as possible to make sure of maximum attainment.