

Principal Assessor Report 2005

Assessment Panel:

Geology

Qualification area

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

Higher Geology

Statistical information: update

Number of resulted entries in 2004	63
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	45
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General comments re resulted entry numbers

A fall in presentation numbers caused by one centre losing their geology teacher. This centre has a history of being one of our largest presenting centres. Although this has caused a decline in numbers, two new centres presenting Higher Geology for the first time has offset the impact.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark - 110		-	-	-
A	17.8	17.8	8	77
B	22.2	40.0	10	66
C	24.4	64.4	11	55
D	13.3	77.8	6	49
No award	22.2	100.0	10	-

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 any significant changes in distribution of awards/grade boundaries

Slight decline in the number of 'A' candidates, and slight increase in the number of no awards compared to 2004. As presentations are low, a variation in the standards of a handful of candidates can have a significant impact.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

It is anticipated that this paper will experience very gradual changes over the next few years. Two changes were implemented this year.

1. Non subject specific language was simplified.
This appears to have had the desired effect of making the paper more accessible. No candidates appeared to be disadvantaged by overcomplicated instructions. Difficulties were confined to the geological content, not the comprehension of English.
2. The introduction of a more simplified ‘three point problem’ (Question 14) to allow less able candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their ability at a ‘C’ level, has proved to be a major success. Many candidates picked up full marks for this question and most performed beyond the level anticipated in Question 15. In fact, Questions 14 and 15 were two of the best answered questions in the paper.

Overall, the question paper performed as anticipated.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

- Three point problem questions (Questions 14 and 15)
 - Geological cross section (Question 13e)
 - Stratigraphy Question 7 (a) ‘way up criteria’.
- Good responses also to Questions 1, 2(b), 3(a), 3(c), 4, 6(a) and 6(b).

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

- Section B essay questions. ‘A/B’ candidates did well here, but ‘C’ level candidates underperformed (most failed this section)
- Question 13 (f) geological history. Weaker candidates struggled, and many did not attempt it, although stronger candidates performed as expected.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Many teachers have to deliver this course with inadequate time or in bi level teaching circumstances, and it is a testimony to their level of enthusiasm and professionalism that so many candidates have performed well.

Points to note

1. The examining team will be attempting to make the exam more accessible to candidates over the next few years, so do anticipate very slight changes to question style or wording.
2. Every attempt will be made to present 'Section A' questions in a predictable order. (Rocks and Minerals, Earth Physics, Fossils and Stratigraphy, then Economic Geology.)
3. Sections B (essay questions) are giving weaker candidates some difficulty as they are unable/unaware of the level of detail expected. Students should be encouraged to draw diagrams to enhance their answers, although a written explanation should accompany them. It is to be expected that the more able candidates will be more widely read and should demonstrate a deeper level of understanding than others, but the gap between 'C' level candidates and more able ones is greater than it should be. Candidates should be reminded that they will not have marks deducted for 'poor' English. Marks will be awarded on the basis of accurate and detailed geological knowledge.
4. (a) Time is a major factor in this exam. Problem solving, logical deduction, drawing cross sections and the drawing of accurate structure contours will take up a considerable amount of a candidate's time. Under exam conditions, candidates should be reassured that examiners are not expecting coloured or even tidy cross sections or structure contours. Accuracy and clarity is all that matters. Candidates do not need to waste precious time embellishing such parts of their exam paper.
(b) For the geological history part of the main map question in Section C, candidates should be encouraged to list or bullet point the order of events. There is no need to write in full sentences here.
(c) If at all possible, give candidates plenty of time practicing the predicable parts of the exam (geological cross section, three point problem and map question). Centres which consistently perform well in the three point problem question will spend up to two weeks allowing candidates to practice this. This question carries a significant amount of marks and it has a predictable format so it is advisable to allow as many candidates as possible time to gain confidence handling them.
5. Finally, centres are to be congratulated on the quality of fieldwork reports once again. Many candidates have boosted their mark with quality reports which reflect not only a major effort on their part but on their teachers or tutors. Most candidates have clearly spent much time in the field.