



Bulletin number: 14

Derived Grades — FAQs

June 2005

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
Hanover House, 24 Douglas Street, Glasgow G2 7NQ, and Ironmills Road, Dalkeith,
Midlothian EH22 1LE

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SQA is committed to the use of robust evidence in the development and evaluation of policy and its implementation, and carries out or commissions research across a range of topics to support this.

The publication of Bulletins allows us to disseminate the results of our research activity to practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics and anyone else who has an interest in the key role that qualifications play in economic growth and social inclusion in Scotland.

What is the Derived Grades procedure?

In the Derived Grades procedure SQA compares the estimate of a candidate's performance with their actual performance in the summer diet. The estimate is a teacher's professional judgement of what that candidate is capable of achieving, and is based on how they have performed over the school year. Provided the teacher has estimated accurately for the majority of candidates, then the (comparatively few) candidates who narrowly fail to show what they are capable of during the examination will be awarded their estimated grade. Statistical safeguards ensure that even small numbers of candidates¹ undertaking a subject in any centre can be reliably considered in this way.

What is it doing?

The Derived Grades procedure — and the Appeals procedure (of which it is in integral part) — allow candidates, who have done less well in the examination than expected, to have their attainment recognised. Conducting an examination is the principal (and simplest) way of determining whether a candidate has achieved the necessary learning, but it should not be the only way.

SQA recognises that some candidates — for very good reasons — may not be able to sit the exam or may not perform as well as they are able to. Perhaps because of personal stress or illness. An inclusive system must ensure that candidates are provided with other means of demonstrating their ability and it is for this reason that SQA is unique in offering an appeals system, of which Derived Grades is one component.

The major difference between an award made on the basis of a Derived Grade and an award made after a successful appeal is:

- ◆ for a Derived Grade, it is the professional judgement of teachers and their accuracy of estimating attainment which determines the award
- ◆ in an appeal, it is the candidate's own work that is directly considered

Finally, we should not expect the awards made on the basis of a Derived Grade to be a reflection of overall attainment in Scotland. They are likely to be skewed towards schools with larger populations and those where the abilities of the student population are less diverse. In schools where the range of abilities is much more variable, estimating attainment is much more of a challenge. In the words of one teacher 'estimating excellence is always easier'!

¹ Candidates receive a Derived Grade provided there are at least six candidates with an estimate at the same grade in the centre AND at least 60% of the candidates have achieved that estimated grade. Where there are less than six candidates with an estimate at the same grade, 75% agreement between estimates and actual attainment is required. For example, if a centre estimated that six candidates will achieve an A in a particular subject and four candidates do so (but one achieves a B and one achieves a C) then the candidate who got the B grade will be upgraded to an A via the Derived Grades procedure. The candidate achieving the C will not be upgraded but the centre can appeal and submit alternative evidence to support that.

When was it introduced and has it changed?

Concordance and Derived Grade concepts and procedures were developed and introduced in the 1970s for Standard Grade examinations. They were intended to remove the need for an appeal where there was an obvious case of underperformance, and also to standardise the first stage of the appeals procedure.

In 1992 the procedure, with a few changes, was extended to Highers. Following a further review, changes were introduced in 2001 for the new National Qualifications. The review concluded that, overall, the Derived Grades procedure was well accepted by assessors and centres for Standard Grade and that no changes were necessary. The primary purposes of the changes for National Qualifications were to provide greater transparency and fairness.

More changes were made in 2003, when an integrated procedure for National Courses and Standard Grades was created. The main objective of these changes was to pre-empt appeals which were likely to be successful. This would save time for centres and appeals staff, speed up the awarding process for the candidate whilst also being efficient, fair, and transparent. They were also intended to respect the essential differences between Standard Grades and National Courses.

Following a thorough evaluation, further changes have been made for 2005 to ensure that candidates are not discriminated against in less popular subjects or in centres where there are few candidates at a particular level.

Who has been consulted about changes?

In making these changes SQA has taken account of the view of teachers, examining teams and Principal Assessors. We have also had extensive dialogue with the EIS. And, as with previous revisions and developments, the process was informed by rigorous modelling of the proposed changes in order to evaluate the effects on grade distributions and candidates.

What arrangements are there for monitoring the procedure?

SQA has — and will continue — to review the process and outcomes from Derived Grades on an annual basis. We have introduced a random check of evidence, for the candidates who are awarded on the basis of a Derived Grade, to discourage the overestimating of candidates. We have also carried out and published research on how centres arrive at estimates. These results are being used to inform and improve the advice and guidance we give to centres.

What are our expectations for this year?

The percentage of awards made on the basis of a Derived Grade is very small — around 10% of all Standard Grades and just under 2% for National Courses. We do not expect these proportions to change radically.