

# **The Scottish Standard: a guide to pass mark meetings for National Courses**

August 2005  
Publication code: FA2882

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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## Summary

These are the main points of the guide:

- ◆ SQA has a responsibility to make sure that:
  - the grade a candidate achieves in a Course represents the same standard as in the previous year or in the following year
  - it is not easier or harder to achieve the same grade across different Courses
- ◆ One of the most important ways in which we maintain standards is the pass mark and grade setting meeting which takes place after each National Course examination.
- ◆ Every year, within a six-week period between June and July, we run approximately 245 pass mark meetings at which the results for around 100,000 candidates from approximately 450 centres are scrutinised.
- ◆ Each pass mark meeting is rigorously conducted by a range of people with subject knowledge and people with experience of applying national standards across different subjects and levels of qualifications. The members of each pass mark meeting are responsible for setting:
  - the pass mark or minimum mark which candidates have to achieve to gain a Grade C in that Course
  - the grade boundaries or the minimum marks needed to gain a Grade A
  - the grade boundaries or the minimum marks needed to gain a Grade B and Grade D are calculated according to formulae.
- ◆ The system is criterion referenced. We do not have a fixed number of passes which we expect to see achieved each year, but if the examination presented a similar challenge and was of identical difficulty to the previous year, then the same pass mark and grade boundaries should apply.
- ◆ If the examination is found to be easier or harder than usual, adjustments will have to be made to ensure that standards are maintained and that candidates are not rewarded or penalised for the fact that they happened to sit in a particular year. These adjustments will be reflected in changes in the pass mark.
- ◆ If it is found that the ability of candidates has risen or fallen, there will be an increase or decrease in the pass rate or percentage of candidates achieving a pass. To do otherwise would be unfair either to the present year's candidates or to those of previous years.
- ◆ The meticulousness and thoroughness of pass mark meetings demonstrates the importance which SQA places on the maintenance of standards in National Courses.

## Introduction

SQA has a responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained from year to year and across Courses.

This means that we have to make sure that the grade a candidate achieves in a Course represents the same standard as in the previous year or in the following year. It also means that we have to make sure that it is not easier or harder to achieve the same grade across different Courses. For example, a Grade B in Higher Chemistry should represent the same standard of attainment as a Grade B in Higher French.

One of the most important ways in which we aim to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained is through pass mark meetings. These meetings are held after every National Course examination. Every year, within a six-week period between June and July, we run approximately 245 pass mark meetings at which the results for around 100,000 candidates from approximately 450 centres are scrutinised. The members of each pass mark meeting are responsible for setting the pass mark or minimum mark which candidates have to achieve to gain a Grade C in that subject and also the grade boundaries or the minimum marks needed to gain a Grade A. The grade boundaries or the minimum marks needed to gain a Grade B and a Grade D are calculated according to formulae.

The rigour of pass mark meetings demonstrates to candidates and the wider community the importance which SQA places on the maintenance of standards in National Qualifications.

## **Pass mark meetings — who is involved?**

Each pass mark meeting brings together a range of people with subject expertise and people with experience of applying the standards across different subjects and levels of qualifications.

### **Principal Assessor**

Each Course has a Principal Assessor who leads an examining team of subject specialists. The Principal Assessor is appointed by SQA to bring professional expertise to all aspects of the examination process for the Course. The Principal Assessor has a sound knowledge of the syllabus, assessment specification, marking schemes and criteria, and will know about any changes to the assessment instrument(s). The Principal Assessor will also be aware of the views of the markers, any shift in candidate attainment, and any issues which have arisen with the assessment or marking.

Setting grade boundaries and pass marks is not a precise science, and the professional judgement of the Principal Assessor is central to the process, particularly in the early years of a qualification.

### **Qualifications Manager**

SQA Qualifications Managers typically have responsibility for a number of Courses. The Qualifications Manager's role is to advise the Principal Assessor. The Qualifications Manager (QM), uniquely, has considerable knowledge of the other levels of the subject. The QM will also know about the views of stakeholders, and will be familiar with related subjects and patterns of awards and will feed this information to the meeting.

The Qualifications Manager also has a responsibility to record the decisions made and issues identified during the meeting, both for use in the following year, and for further investigation or action.

### **Statistician**

The SQA Statistician provides statistical support to the panel members. The Statistician is responsible for the technical accuracy of the process, checking the logic of the proposals and justifications, and recording grade boundary decisions.

### **Chair**

The position of Chair is held by the Chief Executive or a member of SQA's Executive Team. The role of the Chair is to ensure that all evidence is taken into account, and all necessary decisions made. The Chair should also ensure that the decision-making process is consistent across all subject areas and from year to year.

## **Adviser to Chair**

The position of Adviser to Chair is held by one of the SQA's National Qualifications Business Managers. NQ Business Managers are responsible for Qualifications Managers and their teams. The Adviser will be familiar with all the data and should also ensure that the standards in the subject are broadly consistent at that level across years. The Adviser will also ensure that there is an appropriate difference between the levels of the subject, for example that there is a clear distinction between Intermediate 1 and 2; and that standards are broadly comparable with other subjects.

## **Preparation for the meeting**

Before the pass mark meeting, the Principal Assessor and the Qualifications Manager will gather evidence and consider issues that may affect the setting of the pass mark and the grade boundaries.

The first stage of gathering evidence takes place at the marking procedures following the examination. The Principal Assessor is responsible for collating the Marker Reports on the candidates' performance. The Principal Assessor will also have personal experience of marking and scrutiny of scripts.

The Principal Assessor and the Qualifications Manager also consider each of the following areas.

### **1 Setting of the examination paper**

- ◆ Was there any change in the team involved in setting the paper compared to the previous year?
- ◆ Was there any change in Course structure, components, the length of the examination, the maximum marks in the examination?
- ◆ Was there any attempt to make any changes to the structure of the paper from previous years? This could include the accessibility of language, the order of questions or different types of questions.
- ◆ What was the predicted outcome of any changes?

### **2 Marking**

- ◆ Was there any difference in the standard of marking compared to the previous year?
- ◆ Was there a change to how marking was carried out compared to the previous year (for instance, a move to central marking)?
- ◆ Was there any change in relation to partial credit for incomplete answers?
- ◆ Were there any changes in approach due to previous feedback?

### **3 Examination performance**

- ◆ What was the feedback from markers/examiners?
- ◆ Did questions perform as planned?
- ◆ Was there any feedback from centres on particular questions?
- ◆ Were there any mistakes in the paper or any correction notices that might have affected performance?

### **4 Candidates**

- ◆ Were there changes in the stages at which candidates were presented, for example S3 candidates taking Intermediate 1?
- ◆ Was there anything noticeable about candidates' performance in previous years at the level below (for example, a good Standard Grade candidature going on to Higher)?
- ◆ Was there an increase in uptake due to new centres presenting candidates?
- ◆ Was the type of candidates presented the same as in previous years?
- ◆ How did the candidates perform overall — similar to previous years, better at C or A grade boundaries?

### **5 Quantitative information**

This would include:

- ◆ Candidate population — information on candidate entries, trends in uptake, presentation patterns in centres, age, and stage.
- ◆ Centres — information on the number, type, and any new centres presenting for the first time.
- ◆ Estimates — centres/teachers provide estimates each year of how well they expect their candidates to perform in the examination. The Principal Assessor and Qualifications Manager look at previous estimates to see how reliable these typically are.

### **6 Statistical evidence**

On the day of the meeting, but before it begins, the Principal Assessor and Qualifications Manager consider the statistical evidence. This consists of:

- ◆ The frequency distribution and summary statistics of candidates' scores in the current and previous year.
- ◆ The pass marks and resulting grade distributions for the past three years, and the pass marks which would replicate the previous year's distribution of awards if (a) the candidate group is consistent with the previous year, and (b) the standard of examination is unchanged from the previous year.
- ◆ The National Ratings for the past three years, which indicate how difficult or easy the examination has been relative to other examinations at that level.
- ◆ Centres'/teachers' estimates for the current year.

In the light of this information and scrutiny the Principal Assessor will, in discussion with the Qualifications Manager, prepare a justification for a proposed passmark at C and grade boundary at A. In principle, the intention of examining teams is to set examinations which have a pass mark of 50% for Grade C and a grade boundary of 70% for Grade A. However, in practice, examinations may prove to be more or less demanding and the passmark at C and grade boundary at A may be set to reflect this.

The grade boundary for Grade B is set mid-way between the passmark for Grade C and the grade boundary for Grade A.

The grade boundary for Grade D is set at the passmark for Grade C minus 25% of the difference between the passmark for Grade C and the grade boundary for Grade A.

## **Preparing a justification for proposed grade boundaries**

In the simplest terms, if the examination presented a similar challenge and was of identical difficulty to the previous year, the same grade boundaries should apply. Likewise, if the ability of candidates entered for the examination was the same as in the previous year, the same distribution of awards at each grade should apply.

Conversely, if the examination is found to be easier or harder than in the previous year adjustments will have to be made to ensure that standards are maintained and that candidates are not rewarded or penalised for the fact that they happened to sit in a particular year. These adjustments will be reflected in changes in the pass mark. For example, if it is agreed that an examination was more difficult than the previous year when the pass mark was 50%, then an adjustment to a pass mark of 48% might be necessary to ensure that all candidates who would have passed the previous year will still achieve a Grade C.

If it is found that the ability of candidates has risen or fallen, there will be an increase or decrease in the pass rate (or percentage of candidates achieving a pass). There is no fixed proportion of passes which we expect to see achieved each year, so the ability of the candidates must be reflected in the pass rate, since to do otherwise would be unfair either to the present year's candidates or to those of previous years. For example, if the previous year's candidates in one subject had been exceptionally able, with many candidates achieving A grades and a correspondingly high pass rate of 94% when the pass mark had been agreed as 50%, it would be unfair to drop the pass mark to 45% this year to ensure that the same percentage of less able candidates passed.

This means that it is necessary to know the reasons underlying any changes in the distribution of marks. There are crucial points for consideration:

- ◆ Where a Course has a large and stable entry, and there have been no changes to the syllabus, assessment arrangements, or curricular support, it is likely that the characteristics of the entry group will have remained fairly constant and the pass rate would not be expected to vary significantly from year to year.
- ◆ Where there is an experienced examining team with a record of setting papers of a consistent standard, it is unlikely that the difficulty of the examination has changed significantly and hence the pass mark would not be expected to change significantly.
- ◆ Setting a standard for a new qualification is more challenging than maintaining the standard in an established one. Once a subject is established, much of the pass mark setting process consists of comparing the examinations and the performance of candidates with recent years, and adjusting the pass marks accordingly. In the first year of a qualification, no such historical information is available; therefore, the judgement of the Principal Assessor is critical.
- ◆ All proposals must be backed by evidence.

## **The pass mark meeting**

The meeting is organised to ensure that all the evidence is taken into account before grade boundaries are set. It is vital that members bear in mind that decisions are based both on the Principal Assessor's professional judgement and direct experience, and on the statistical and quantitative information generated by SQA.

Each meeting follows a set structure:

- ◆ The Qualifications Manager will be asked to comment on any feedback from centres, and any public or press comments on the examination as well as any wider issues relating to the subject and/or level.
- ◆ The Chair will then ask the Principal Assessor for overall comments on how the examination and marking has gone — for their personal views and those of their colleagues. At this stage, the meeting should consider the comments that were submitted by the markers, Principal Assessor and Qualifications Manager before the statistics were available.
- ◆ Statistical information will then be considered. This would include a review of the entries for the Course. The meeting will consider whether there are any specific changes in entry numbers from previous years. If this is the case, the reasons for these changes and the implications for performance will be explored.

- ◆ In terms of overall performance, the meeting will look at data for any internally assessed components such as a project or coursework, and compare the data with that for previous years to see what it reveals about the current year's candidature. This is helpful because an assessment which is unchanging from year to year will show any changes in the overall ability of the candidates.
- ◆ The meeting will also look at the data on candidate marks, including graphs showing the distribution of scores. If there is a variation from what is expected, is there anything to explain this? Is it caused by variations in the difficulty of the examination or in the ability of the candidature, or a mixture of both? The panel should also be aware of any comments recorded in the previous year's meeting that may have to be taken into account.
- ◆ The Principal Assessor will then be asked to propose the pass mark boundary. If this is significantly different from 50%, or outwith the range expected from previous years, there should be an explanation, as there should if the proposed grade boundary conflicts with any of the earlier evidence. Once the meeting has agreed the Grade C boundary, the pass rate for this year's candidates is calculated. If there is a significant change from previous years, the meeting must decide whether this can be justified.
- ◆ This process is repeated for the A boundary and for the Upper A–Lower A interface, (ie the mark need to gain an A Grade and the mark needed to gain a Band 1 Grade A). All other boundaries are then set by applying formulae.
- ◆ After all the boundaries have been set, members must check the overall pattern of awards. Is this pattern reasonable compared with the established pattern and with the examiners' overall impression of performance?

Once members have agreed unanimously, the awards will be formally confirmed by the Chair and the Principal Assessor.