

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

Environment

Qualification area

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

MER Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	17
Pre appeal	

Number of entries in 2003	20

General comments re entry numbers

There was a slight increase in presentation numbers compared to last year.

Entries were from four centres representing the FE sector.

Feedback from the course teachers from these centres indicated that they were happy with the paper and felt that the questions were appropriate and accessible to candidates.

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

Upper A	93
Lower A	77
B	66
C	55

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

The grade boundaries show no change from previous years.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

All questions in the paper were accessible to the candidates. The quality of answers from candidates was generally good and in some cases exceptionally good. Judging from some of the answers, candidates seem to have enjoyed the course and in cases gave precise and detailed knowledge of environmental issues at both local and national level.

It was clear from responses that some candidates had been involved in practical investigations and field work appropriate to the coursework.

The average gained for the six questions in Section A of the paper was 68% and the range was between 76% for question 4 and 65% for question 6.

All but one of the candidates attempted both essays. The average gained in this section was 60%.

Only three candidates selected essay option 7A, the rest 7B, while eleven candidates opted for essay option 8A compared to eight for option 8B. The average mark for the structured essay 7A / 7B was ten out of fifteen marks and that for 8A / 8B was 5.5 out of fifteen.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

The majority of candidates performed well in question 5 which introduced a new style of question based on a detailed case study on Barytes mining in Perthshire.

The structured essay relating to energy production from named sources was very well done by some candidates.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Problem solving skills such as calculating % decrease and graphs were challenging for some candidates.

Comprehension of certain terms such as 'set aside' and 'non renewable' proved problematic to others.

For essay 8A, achieving a balanced response for the negative effects of both fertilisers and pesticides was difficult for some candidates.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Centres should be congratulated on the support they appear to have given to candidates particularly in relation to fieldwork and investigations and the promotion of national environmental issues such as conflicts surrounding National Parks.

Centres should ensure candidates practice basic problem solving skills such as completion of graphs and percentage calculations.

Practise of essays, particularly of an unstructured type, should be encouraged and candidates should be advised to use bullet points in essays only where appropriate, not as a substitute for an essay.