

# SQA Research Bulletin

## Higher Grade Standards over time

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### Introduction

‘Are standards being maintained?’ is an important, if familiar, question for those who are interested in education. This Bulletin focuses on the issue by asking whether, over time, candidates for Higher have been required to demonstrate the same coverage of subject content and skills. It goes on to show that subject content, exam questions, and the levels at which marks were awarded, were as demanding in 1998 as they were before.

The research summarised here follows in the footsteps of research undertaken by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) into standards in four subjects across the period from 1987 to 1994. SCRE found no evidence of changes in standards.

In 1998, SQA decided to monitor its standards over time, independently of its other quality assurance processes, by carrying out a programme of archiving and analysis. It decided that the areas of Services and Social Subjects, and Business and Languages, would be scrutinised in 1999 and again in 2001, and Science and Technology in 2000 and 2002. Once these initial scrutinies were completed, each area would be analysed every four years. This report summarises the findings of the first scrutiny.

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### Background

Higher syllabuses were revised in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after Ordinary Grades had been replaced by Standard Grades.

The total candidature changed over time. The most important change was that in 1985 candidates who took one or more Highers comprised only 28% of all 17 or 18 year-olds; by 1998, Higher candidature had increased to 42% of this age group, evidence of the improved staying-on rate. In absolute numbers of entries for specific subjects, however, the increase was hardly noticeable, because the size of the 17–18-year age group decreased by roughly a quarter from 1985 to 1998, and because their choice of subjects became increasingly varied.

Changes in the nature of the candidature influenced examination results in the five subjects studied. For example, candidates taking the examination in S6 performed better, so an increasing proportion of S6 candidates will have contributed to higher pass rates, without implying any change in standards. Similarly, a growing difference in performance between boys and girls in the five subjects studied meant that, in subjects taken by a larger proportion of girls, pass rates generally increased faster than in other subjects, again without implying any change in standards.

Other factors, such as an increasing amount of support, more focused teaching, and effective guidance, might also have contributed to the slight general rise in pass rates.

Because of these factors, pass rates were not considered a useful focus for monitoring standards over time. We decided to concentrate on scrutinising the demand set by the content of arrangements and question papers (with marking instructions and pass marks), and on comparing examples of candidates' work.

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## **Method**

Our monitoring concentrated on three years: 1985, 1992, and 1998. This allowed us to compare the revised Higher syllabuses which were introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s against the previous ones. Comparisons could be made between standards shortly after the revised syllabuses were introduced, and then again after some years had elapsed.

Five Higher subjects were selected for this scrutiny: Accounting & Finance, English, French, Geography, and Modern Studies.

Scrutiny groups were formed for each subject. Each group consisted of two teachers (SQA Principal Assessors, Senior Examiners, or Setters) and an external subject expert (mostly SQA Subject Panel members) with a background in Higher Education. A former HMI participated in the group for English, and a researcher from SCRE took part as an observer to confirm the rigour of the research.

The scrutiny groups first described changes in syllabuses (which define subject content and the skills required of candidates) over the period studied, and the effect these had on the level of demand set for candidates. They then compared assessment instruments and marking instructions across the three years. Finally, the groups compared work produced in 1992 and 1985 with work produced in 1998.

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## Summary of findings

The monitoring was organised to answer the following two questions:

- 1 Were the 1985 and 1992 syllabuses and their assessments as demanding as the 1998 examination, judged from a 1998 perspective?
- 2 Did candidates at a certain grade in 1998 perform as well as candidates who achieved that level in the past?

Overall, the level of demand as defined by syllabuses and assessment instruments was broadly comparable with previous years. Candidates from previous years who, according to the scrutiny group, had performed as well as candidates from 1998 had generally been awarded the same range of marks as the 1998 candidates.

In all five subjects, the revised syllabus differed from the 1985 syllabus. In general, the changes brought a clearer focus, and left less room for surprises.

The question papers changed as well. All subjects saw structural changes, such as the replacement or introduction of a complete paper. This meant that it was often quite difficult to compare the level of demand of the question papers. Questions tended to be more clearly phrased and shorter, which made the assessment more accessible. In some subjects, higher (and more demanding) skills such as analysis, evaluation, and application received increasing emphasis. Marking instructions generally stayed the same, but the number of marks needed for a pass generally rose after 1985, further compensating for the increased accessibility.

Comparing work from different years did present difficulties, not only because each year set different assessment tasks and sampled different aspects of the range of content, but also because parts of the examination had been changed or discontinued. Also, information about the original marking and grading of the scripts was incomplete. Within these constraints, though, the groups concluded that the level of 1985 and 1992 candidates was broadly comparable to 1998 candidates.

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## Findings on Accounting & Finance

The Higher Accounting syllabus was revised in 1993 and renamed Accounting & Finance. The revised syllabus contained more specific guidelines on the depth of teaching required, and a more detailed description of what would be included in a question paper. The introduction of computer applications balanced the slight reduction in breadth. The increased complexity of one topic which drastically changed as a result of legal requirements was matched by a reduction in depth in some other topics. On the other hand, change of mostly optional theory sections into compulsory sections required a broader preparation. On the whole, the changes were considered to have balanced out in relation to demand.

The 1998 question paper had a radically different structure to the papers for 1992 and 1985. It included computer applications (20% of marks) and compulsory theory sections (15% of marks). This meant a slightly stronger weight on application, knowledge, and understanding compared to previously, where computational skills predominated. The structure of assessment tasks, using types of short-answer questions, was generally more supportive, and this was balanced by the broader preparation required by compulsory theory questions.

The group agreed that, although similar topics could be examined across all years, the knowledge required could vary. The 1985 assessment was more demanding than 1998, but 1992 was possibly slightly less demanding than 1998. These differences, however, were fully compensated for by the pass marks.

Marking instructions and marks actually awarded for similar calculations were remarkably consistent for 1985, 1992, and 1998.

A comparison of work selected from the same range of marks in all three years showed no clear changes in the accounting knowledge required over the years to obtain a good A and B pass. The group believed that a few more borderline candidates might have been able to scrape a C pass in 1998 compared to the two previous years by being able to show some knowledge in one of a series of small questions, especially on theory. In 1985 and 1992 these candidates would not have been able to gain any marks for a question which required a long answer, such as the optional theory questions.

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## Findings on English

The comparison between 1985 and the two later years was not straightforward, because parts of the examination had been added, renamed, or made part of other combinations of options. Also, the syllabus for 1985 was an outline only, while the 1998 syllabus was very detailed.

The scrutiny group could not find any indications that there were consistent differences in terms of accessibility of texts and tasks across the three years, although in some respects 1998 seemed to be more exacting than previous years.

In 1992 and 1998, *Interpretation* had been given less weight than in 1985, while the addition of the *Review of Personal Reading* had increased the weight of literature (and writing).

The *Report* questions in 1992 and 1998 were probably easier than in 1985, but the pass marks were higher, the pass mark in 1992 being the highest.

There was a discernible trend over the years away from assessing *Understanding* and towards assessing *Understanding and Analysis* and on to *Understanding, Analysis, and Evaluation*. In 1998, the number of *Understanding* questions was lower than in the two previous years. As candidates usually find *Understanding*

questions easier than *Analysis* questions, this meant that the *Interpretation* task in 1998 was more difficult than in 1992.

Marking of the *Interpretation* and of the *Report* was stricter after 1985 and it became impossible to reproduce rehearsed pieces of writing. On the other hand, course-work, which could be revised before submission, was added in the *Review of Personal Reading*, and replaced work produced under examination conditions (*Imaginative/Discursive Writing* replaced *Composition A*). Again, those changes balanced out, some making the assessment more demanding, some making it less so.

The comparison of work from across the three years did not lead to any detailed findings. One reason for this was that *Interpretation* and *Practical Criticism* could not be compared (the questions on the different texts set for *Interpretation* were too different to be compared, and *Practical Criticism* was an infrequently chosen option). Another reason was that the marks indicated on the archived scripts could have been corrected in the standardisation procedure which took place between the first marking and finalisation of results. Finally, the scrutineers did not agree to a sufficiently high degree.

Because of these constraints the comparison allows only the global conclusion that no evidence of a change in standards could be found for the parts of the assessment instruments which could be compared.

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## Findings on French

In addition to the Arrangements there was a document called *Recommended Basic Requirements for Examinations in French in and after 1980*. This document, which provides lists of situations and grammatical structures for examination purposes and comes close to a syllabus, has never been superseded or withdrawn. According to the scrutiny group for French, in 1999 many points in it were considered to be suitable for teaching at university level.

In each of the three years, the same skills were tested, but with a different emphasis. The weightings of *Reading Comprehension*, *Writing a French Essay*, and *Speaking* increased, while those of *Reading (Translation into English)* and *Writing/Grammar* decreased. In other words, the emphasis moved from testing memorised and detailed lists of vocabulary and grammatical structures, to competence in writing and oral skills and understanding modern written French.

Assessment moved away from examiner-imposed hurdles (eg *Prose* and the *Long Translation* in 1985) and towards active production and self-imposed obstacles on the part of the candidate in 1992 and 1998 (eg *Essay-writing* and *Speaking*). The group was undecided as to whether these changes made the assessment more or less demanding.

The scrutiny group felt that the level of language candidates had to deal with did not change much over the years (ie in *Reading* and *Listening*). However, a

subjective opinion would be that what they were asked to do in 1998 was more straightforward than what they were asked to do in 1992.

The exercise of comparing the 1985, 1992 and 1998 Higher French scripts was well-nigh impossible, because part of the evidence of oral performance was not available and tasks in the available evidence varied too much. On the basis of the scripts selected, the only confident conclusion was that the grades achieved by candidates across the three years were broadly consistent.

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## Findings on Geography

The revised syllabus, which was introduced in 1991, differed little from the previous syllabus:

- ◆ The themes changed little. In the revised syllabus, there was some strengthening of physical geography and a significant reduction in economic geography (which was studied in few centres).
- ◆ The skills required were broadly similar, but the revised syllabus contained fewer requirements for statistical techniques.
- ◆ The abilities required in the questions were similar, but the revised syllabus had slightly more emphasis on evaluating.

Assessment tasks were broadly similar, but there was a higher proportion of short response questions in the revised papers. Resource-based questions continued to dominate the papers. The practical exercise in the Alternative Arrangements was replaced by the *Investigation*, but this was discontinued after 1996. The marking instructions were broadly similar, but the pass mark had gone up since 1992.

It could be argued that the 1985 candidates benefited from a shorter examination time and a wider choice of questions (though this was not necessarily an advantage for all candidates). On the other hand, 1998 candidates had greater advantages:

- ◆ the range of locations to be studied was narrower and more clearly defined
- ◆ the questions were more predictable
- ◆ a narrower choice in the examination reduced the likelihood of inappropriate choices
- ◆ there was a higher proportion of short answer questions which support weaker candidates
- ◆ the questions were more precisely worded
- ◆ the questions were, in general, more likely to be accessible to all candidates

This analysis of the assessment instruments might suggest that standards had gone down. However, analysis of the scripts rated by the scrutiny group revealed that

1998 scripts were generally rated better than scripts from the other two years. In particular, some 1998 scripts were judged to be of equal or higher value than 1985 scripts which had been awarded a higher range of marks. This suggested that 1998 candidates showed real improvements over those from previous years, as well as possibly benefiting from greater accessibility of papers.

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## Findings on Modern Studies

The contemporary nature of Modern Studies, and the regular changes in syllabuses during the period studied, made it difficult to reach conclusions. However, the group considered that candidates in 1998 performed equally well as those from previous years on those parts of the question papers which were judged to be equally demanding. In general, scripts awarded a particular grade in any of the three years studied were judged to be of equal value.

In 1993 and later, several changes were made to the syllabus, though the conceptual framework remained the same. The contemporary nature of Modern Studies meant that syllabuses and question papers have been regularly updated to make them more relevant to contemporary events, eg in the light of events in Russia, Central America, and the Middle East.

Other examples of changing emphasis in and after 1991 include the decreasing emphasis in the UK sections on overtly economic contexts, and the increasing emphasis on *Income and Wealth in a Democratic Society* and on *Health Care in a Democratic Society*. Breadth and depth of knowledge, and application of knowledge, were key requirements. In the international context, the rubric of the new paper possibly led to a narrower, albeit more focused, study.

A major change took place when the *Depth Study* was replaced by the *Decision-Making Exercise* in 1991. This carried less weight than the two *Depth Studies* did before the revision. Instead of a combination of short-answer and essay-answer questions, it contained short evaluative questions and a decision-making report.

The scrutiny group judged that the level of demand remained broadly similar. Although the question paper had been modified, and tested skills over a broader range of content, the paper was more accessible. It was also felt that there were fewer cases where responses related poorly to the question asked.

The balance between lower and higher-order skills questions in the 1985 and 1992 paper 1 tipped towards predominantly lower-order skills questions in the 1998 paper 1. Three issues in paper 1 that carried 37% of the total marks available in 1985 carried 50% of the total marks in both later years. One of these issues was also linked to an additional exercise in paper 2.

Scripts from 1985 and 1998 with the same range were rated equally by the group. Scripts from 1992 were rated somewhat lower, on average.

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