A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries

Introduction

SQA has a responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standard of our qualifications is set appropriately and maintained over time and across courses. This means that we have to make sure that the grade a candidate receives recognises achievement against the established grade descriptions of the course. It also means that we have to make sure that it is not easier or harder to achieve the same result across different courses. For example, a grade B in Higher Chemistry should broadly represent the same standard of attainment as a grade B in Higher French.

One of the ways in which we aim to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained is through awarding meetings, where grade boundary decisions are made. These meetings are held after each diet of SQA examinations. Every year, within a four-week period between June and July, we run over 140 awarding meetings at which the results for over 100,000 candidates from approximately 550 centres are scrutinised.

Awarding meetings — who is involved?

Each awarding meeting brings together a range of people with subject expertise and people with experience of standard setting across different subjects and qualification levels.

The awarding meeting draws on the following expertise:

Chair: The position of chair is held by the chief executive or a senior member of SQA's staff. The role of the chair is to ensure that the correct procedure is followed, all evidence is taken into account, and all necessary decisions are signed off. The chair should also ensure that the decision-making process is consistent across all subject areas and over time.

Advisor to chair: This position is held by one of SQA's heads of service from Qualifications Development. A qualifications head of service has considerable knowledge of qualifications across a range of subject areas and a good understanding of assessment and awarding policies and procedures. The advisor's role is to examine all available evidence and scrutinise the arguments put forward by the principal assessor and qualifications manager, to enable a decision on appropriate grade boundaries to be made.

Principal assessor: The principal assessor is appointed by SQA to bring subject expertise to all aspects of the assessment process for the course. The principal assessor has a sound knowledge of the course requirements (skills, knowledge and understanding), the assessment specification, marking scheme and marking criteria, and will know about the intended demand of the assessment instrument(s). The principal assessor will also be aware of the views of the markers, the quality of candidates' response, and any issues which have arisen with the assessment or marking. The professional judgement of the principal assessor is central to the process. The role of the principal assessor is to propose and justify grade boundaries for the course assessment based on qualitative and quantitative information.

Principal verifier: The principal verifier is appointed by SQA to lead, direct and support the quality assurance of internally assessed units and components of course assessment (ie coursework) within their remit. Some course assessments have coursework components that are internally assessed and subject to quality assurance by SQA to ensure national standards have been applied. The role of the principal verifier at the awarding meeting is to support the principal assessor by providing intelligence on how internally assessed coursework has performed, where applicable.

Qualifications manager: The qualification manager's role is to lead, advise and support the principal assessor in preparing for the awarding meeting. The qualifications manager, uniquely, has considerable knowledge of all qualification levels of the subject, will know about the views of stakeholders, will be familiar with related subjects, and will feed this information into the meeting.

Statistician: The SQA statistician provides statistical support at the awarding meeting, ensures logical decision making, and records grade boundary decisions. The statistician is responsible for the provision of reliable statistical information, and explaining which conclusions can be drawn from it.

Preparing for the awarding meeting

Before the awarding meeting, the principal assessor and the qualifications manager will review qualitative information and consider issues that may affect the setting of the grade boundaries. The range of qualitative information that the principal assessor and qualifications manager takes into consideration relates to:

♦ The setting of the assessment — was there any change in the team(s) involved in setting the question paper and/or coursework, has there been a change in course structure, components, the length of the examination, the maximum marks, the grade descriptors or intended demand of the assessment?

♦ The marking of the assessment (question paper and/or coursework) — was there any change to how marking was carried out (for instance, a move to central marking) or was there any change in relation to partial credit for incomplete answers?

♦ Assessment performance — did questions and/or coursework tasks perform as planned and what was the feedback from markers and examiners?

Statistical information is also provided on candidate performance and cohort information such as the breakdown of the candidate group by stage.

It is the job of the principal assessor to combine the qualitative information collected with the statistical data to offer a sound explanation of candidates' assessment performance.

Principle

Grade boundaries are set in line with the intended demand of the assessment. If the assessment did not function as intended, the grade boundaries are adjusted appropriately.

The decision-making process involves the following steps:

♦ understanding the intended demand of the assessment
♦ analysing how the assessment functioned
♦ judging if any identified issues would have affected the intended demand of the assessment
♦ quantifying any change in demand

All decisions must be justified and be supported by information collected throughout the awarding procedure.

Supporting information

In order for changes in grade boundaries to occur, decisions must be supported by valid evidence from the principal assessor and agreement reached by all members of the awarding meeting. In many cases, information is extracted from analysis of individual questions within the assessment instrument(s) that did not function as expected. Identification of particular questions allows impact to be clearly discerned (how many marks more difficult or easy the examination was) and also which candidates, and therefore which grade boundaries, would be affected.

In addition, given the decisions on grade boundaries based on the standard of assessment, the resulting grade distribution should be explainable. There is no fixed proportion of grades; the ability of the candidates must be reflected in the grade distribution since to do otherwise would be unfair.

Which grade boundaries are decided?

The members of each awarding meeting are responsible for setting the minimum mark which candidates have to achieve to gain a grade C in that subject and also the minimum marks needed to gain a grade A, and upper A. The grade boundaries needed to gain a grade B and a grade D are automatically calculated following these decisions.

The awarding meeting

The awarding meeting is used to determine the grade boundaries for the assessment.

The meeting is organised to ensure that all the information is taken into account before grade boundary setting. Decisions are based primarily on the principal assessor's professional judgement and direct experience, and supported by the statistical and quantitative information generated by SQA.

Each meeting follows a set structure:

Welcome and introductions — The chair begins the meeting by introducing all panel members.

Check subject/level and maximum marks — Before the meeting commences in earnest, the statistician will formally confirm the subject and level being discussed within the meeting and also check the maximum marks and component structure of the course assessment.

Understanding the intended demand of the assessment — At this stage in the meeting, the advisor leads the discussion. The principal assessor describes how this year's assessment instrument was set to the intended demand, and any changes to marking or assessment content that would be relevant for decision making. Where applicable, discussion will begin with a review of the previous

year's assessment and in particular any actions that were recorded on that year's Decision Making Record. It is crucial to understand how any previous assessment issues have been dealt with, and how these may or may not affect the assessment undertaken this year.

Analysing how the assessment functioned — The standard of the assessment is then discussed by the panel. This will involve the advisor summarising the qualitative and quantitative information presented. In doing so, the principal assessor may be asked for further details or explanations on the assessment, and panel members will be given the opportunity to challenge any inconsistencies or anomalies within the qualitative and quantitative information sources.

Agree grade boundaries — Once all the information has been tabled and scrutinised, the principal assessor will be asked by the advisor for their proposed grade boundaries. The reasons for these boundaries should reflect this earlier review of information. If further discussion, clarification or grade boundary adjustment is required, the advisor will lead this discussion.

Confirm decisions and complete paperwork — Once the chair has confirmed that all panel members are content that the grade boundaries reflect the demand of the assessment and are justifiable given the information presented, the grade boundary decisions are set by the statistician.

The advisor confirms the final decisions as detailed on the formal meeting documentation, and the chair and the principal assessor sign-off the boundaries.

If you would like any further information on SQA's awarding procedures please contact our Customer Contact Centre:

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