Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy

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Why do we need the policy?

This policy, which applies to SQA's graded National Courses, provides information on how standards are set and maintained during the awarding process. The policy outlines SQA's approach to setting grade boundaries for graded National Courses. It also defines SQA's grading structure and details the purpose and format of awarding meetings, and the roles and responsibilities of SQA staff and appointees involved.

What does it apply to?

This policy applies to graded National Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.

Who is it for?

Any team or individual involved in grade boundary setting for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

What support is available?

The Standards Team within the Policy, Analysis and Standards Directorate can provide support on implementing this policy. Further support is provided to staff and appointees through SQA Academy modules and other resources.

This policy should be read in conjunction with A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries.

Policy version control

Version number	Revision date	Summary of changes	Author
1.0	21 March 2025	N/A	Head of Standards, Malpractice & Complaints

1. Policy statement

The Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy outlines SQA's overall position and approach in respect to awarding and standard setting. It also defines SQA's grading structure and approach to awarding meetings for graded National Courses.

The policy is underpinned by the principles of assessment (validity, reliability, practicability, equity and fairness).

SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained. Monitoring and maintaining standards ensure the credibility and currency of qualifications for all who hold these qualifications and end users of the qualifications.

National Qualification standards are maintained annually through the grade boundary decisions made at awarding meetings. Every year, during June and early July, SQA runs awarding meetings, at which the results for over 120,000 candidates from approximately 500 centres are scrutinised.

The policy sets out our well-established processes underpinning awarding and our long standing and rigorous approaches to grade boundary setting, which are grounded in quantitative and qualitative evidence. Further details on these awarding processes can be found in A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries.

SQA's well-established approach has in-built protections for learners that takes any variations in the assessment performance into consideration when setting grade boundaries. This position is informed by the approaches taken by the rest of the UK. However, we recognise that other awarding bodies operating in the UK take a more statistical approach to awarding.

The review cycle for this policy has been set at three years. However, if we identify a cause for substantive formal review, we will undertake a full policy review before the three-year period ends. The awarding processes which support delivery of the policy will be reviewed annually.

2. Policy relationship to SQA's Governing Principles

As outlined in the Awarding Body Code of Practice, SQA's Governing Principles govern how the organisation meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities.

The Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy supports the following principles:

Governing Principle 1

Openness to the needs of individuals, educational and vocational institutions and the needs of society is an essential aim of SQA, and therefore SQA will endeavour to ensure that processes for the development of qualifications, assessment and the maintenance of national standards are as open and transparent as possible; and informed through a research and evidence-based approach to self-regulation.

Governing Principle 6

SQA will work in partnership with its appointees and centres to ensure that all assessments used in its qualifications are valid and reliable.

Governing Principle 7

SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of candidates are met in the management of its assessments.

Governing PrincDipe 10

SQA will ensure that candidates receive accurate results in the stated timeframe.

Governing Principle 11

SQA will work in partnership with centres to ensure that the standards of its qualifications are consistently monitored and maintained.

3. Policy context

As outlined in the policy statement, standards are vital in ensuring the credibility and long-term integrity of qualifications — for those who take them and for end users of qualifications. SQA has a statutory duty and responsibility to individual learners and to the wider community to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained. Monitoring and maintaining standards ensure the credibility and currency of qualifications for all who hold those qualifications.

In jurisdictions across the globe, and in the UK, slightly different concepts of standards are adopted or prioritised, and different approaches and methods are used for alignment. In Scotland, the tradition of standards maintenance falls under the banner of 'attainment-referenced'. This means the intention is to maintain performance standards by using expert judgement of assessment performance measured against defined assessment criteria, supported by statistics as a means of sense checking the plausibility of outcomes. This is different from 'norm-referenced' approaches (which seek simply to maintain the same outcomes regardless of performance) or 'criterion-referenced' approaches (which seek to prioritise performance standards through consideration of performances against a series of criteria).

The awarding process is just one of a number of quality assurance measures in place to ensure the standards of SQA qualifications are maintained. Maintaining qualification standards is a complex and technical area. To achieve this, assessments must be set at the same, or a similar, level of demand year on year.

In some curricular areas, each assessment is made up of individual questions, with each question (or item) having a different level of demand. This will prompt different responses from each cohort of candidates. In other curricular areas, candidates need to show certain characteristics to achieve a specific grade. Each combination of items that forms an

assessment must also be unique to each cohort to ensure the assessment instrument remains valid and secure.

SQA works with subject and assessment specialists, who are practising teachers and lecturers, to design assessments that aim to achieve the same level of demand each year. However, it is challenging to know how the assessment and candidates will perform in practice. When a script is marked, there are several reasons why a mark may not be equivalent to the same grade as the year before. It would be unfair if a candidate was awarded the same grade for their responses to a less (or more) demanding assessment sat by a candidate the year before, even if they achieved the same number of marks.

The relationship between assessments and marking instructions is complex, which can result in slight variations in difficulty from year to year. Expert judgement is needed to ensure those variations are controlled. Equally, there could be other mitigating factors impacting on the performance of the candidates or an individual assessment. These factors are considered at awarding meetings where we use qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate how a course assessment has performed in practice and to set grade boundaries accordingly. Combined, these ensure that the level of demand and standard is maintained and is comparable from year to year.

For further details please see [A Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#).

4.   Details of SQA's approach to awarding

The key aim of awarding is to ensure that it is no easier or harder to obtain a particular grade compared to the previous year and that standards are maintained over time. The outcomes from previous years are available as key benchmark indicators.

Awarding operates using our well-established procedures to evaluate the course assessment performance. Awarding meetings take account of how the course assessments have functioned and any factors that may have impacted on learner performance. Awarding decisions are informed by the full range of qualitative and quantitative data used during awarding, with additional relevant historical data included as comparators.

After learners have sat an assessment, an issue that could impact on awarding can become apparent (whether it has to do with the assessment instrument or the cohort, affecting the interpretation of candidate performance in the assessment). In such cases, the qualifications manager should alert their head of service (who acts as the advisor in awarding meetings). If appropriate, the head of service will flag that subject as 'early warning' to the data and analytics team, and a range of data will be monitored for that subject. This may involve holding a pre-awarding meeting to discuss the issue and any impact it may have on the grade boundary decision. This will be supported by process documentation.

As was the case in previous years, dynamic feedback from markers is used to inform senior appointees as they evaluate the assessment performance. Markers are asked to compare performance standards to the previous year.

As noted above, historical data is used as a benchmark to judge learner performance in relation to standards. Awarding meetings can therefore evaluate the course assessment

performance and performance standards in comparison to previous years as a key reference point for decision making.

When completing their Statement of Intent, principal assessors will indicate whether they think intended grade boundaries will be at notional, previous year or moving towards notional. The focus of awarding meetings is therefore on maintaining standards. Three key questions will guide discussions and decision making:

a) Has the course assessment functioned as intended?
b) How does candidate performance that year compare to previous years?
c) Has candidate performance changed in comparison with the previous academic year?

All decisions are underpinned by a thorough evaluation of the qualitative and quantitative evidence.

5. Awarding meetings

5.1 Purpose of awarding meetings

Awarding meetings are held after each diet of SQA external assessments. They are an integral part of the quality assurance process of National Qualifications.

The purpose of awarding meetings is to establish any differences in candidate performance, the extent to which a course assessment has performed as intended, and to finalise grade boundaries for that course assessment in line with SQA's grading criteria.

5.2 Responsibilities

Awarding meetings involve a range of people with subject expertise and 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 examining officer or a senior member of SQA's staff. This role chairs the awarding meeting, ensures 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: The position of advisor to chair is held by one of SQA's Qualifications Development heads of service. The head of service has considerable knowledge of qualifications across a range of subject areas. They also have 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 help decide appropriate grade boundaries.

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 instructions and marking criteria. They also know about

the intended demand of the assessment instruments. They are aware of the views of the markers, the quality of candidates' response, and any issues in the assessment or marking process. The professional judgement of the principal assessor is central to the process. Their role 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 assessments within their remit. The principal verifier supports the principal assessor in preparing for the awarding meeting by providing information on internally assessed components of course assessments, where applicable.

Qualifications manager: The qualifications manager's role is to lead, advise and support the principal assessor in preparing for the awarding meeting. The qualifications manager, uniquely, has knowledge of all qualification levels of the subject. They know about the views of stakeholders, are 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 what conclusions can be drawn from it.

5.3   Frequency of awarding meetings

SQA holds awarding meetings following every exam diet for all graded National Courses.

5.4   Decision-making process

Awarding meetings are held after the course assessment has been delivered to establish the extent to which the course assessment performed as intended. The purpose of each awarding meeting is to set the grade boundaries for the assessment accordingly.

The members of each awarding meeting are responsible for setting the minimum mark that candidates have to achieve to gain a grade C in the course 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 computed automatically following these decisions.

The principal assessor and qualifications manager will provide information on the intended grade boundaries for the course assessment. The purpose of the meeting is to establish the extent to which the course assessment has functioned as expected with respect to this intended boundary.

Decisions at awarding meetings are made collectively by the awarding panel, with the principal assessor's professional judgement and direct experience being a key input. Decisions are supported by the qualitative and quantitative information generated by SQA. Each meeting is organised to ensure that all available information is taken into account to consider issues that may affect the setting of the grade boundaries. There is a standard agenda to ensure consistency across meetings and a checklist to record that all factors that may impact on the grade boundary decision have been covered through the panel discussion. The agenda and checklist are in the Appendix.

There are several factors that might influence a decision to change a grade boundary. For example, if a question (including the marking instructions) is more difficult than intended, adjustments may be made to ensure that the standard of the course assessment is correctly set and maintained.

If the panel determines that the course assessment has functioned as intended, then the intended grade boundaries will be used. Otherwise the grade boundaries will be adjusted to take account of the identified issues.

The final decision on grade boundaries is signed off by the chair and the principal assessor. If a decision cannot be reached during the meeting, then the escalation process described below will be followed.

5.5   Escalation process

If consensus cannot be reached in a scheduled awarding meeting, the panel will agree what further information is required to make a decision. The chair will adjourn the meeting and arrange to reconvene it at an agreed time. This will allow the principal assessor and qualifications manager to provide and consider additional information such as supplementary statistics or additional qualitative information.

In the exceptional situation where consensus still cannot be reached at the reconvened awarding meeting, and no further evidence is available to aid decision making, the chief examining officer, in consultation with a range of key SQA staff and appointees, will make a decision on the final grade boundaries.

5.6   Communication of results and outcome reporting

Grade boundary decisions and individual results are embargoed until Results Day. Official statistics covering the attainment outcomes are released at 9:30 on the morning of Results Day on SQA's website. These publications cover subject level attainment outcomes, grade boundaries and assessment mark (component) statistics.

A summary of information from these reports is shared five working days ahead of Results Day both with key SQA and Scottish Government staff. Distribution of the reporting is managed through a formal pre-release process in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

In addition to the general high-level summary, focused subject level outcome reports showing the attainment trend and noting relevant triggers are provided where they meet specific criteria. This includes all levels of English and Mathematics and for high uptake Higher subjects where there has been a notable change in either the grade A–C rate or in the marks required to attain a grade C. Final parameters for reporting of Higher subjects are detailed below.

Number of entries for subject	Change in A–C rate (percentage points)	Change in grade C boundary (percentage points)
10,000 +	>3	≥4
4,001 to 10,000	>5	≥4
1 to 4,000	No outcome reporting	No outcome reporting

A record of National 5 and Advanced Higher subjects that meet the final parameters will also be shared as part of the reporting.

5.7 Review of grade boundary decision

In rare and exceptional circumstances, an issue may be identified (after investigation) which means a grade boundary decision needs to be revisited. Agreement to reconvene an awarding meeting must be obtained from the chief examining officer. The reconvened awarding meeting must be held promptly to mitigate disruption to post grade boundary procedures.

A decision to review the grade boundary will be reported without delay to the head of standards and the Procedural Change Group to monitor and follow the established contingency process. A clear record will be kept of the reasons for revisiting the grade boundary decision and any changes made at the reconvened meeting together with the reasons for these changes.

6. Grading criteria

Graded National Courses use grades A to D.

Grading is based on the score achieved in the course assessment and applied based on grade boundary decisions. Grade boundaries are set for the whole course assessment and based on the total score for all components of course assessment.

Grade boundaries are set to recognise attainment across the grade descriptions for the course.

Course assessments are designed with the intention of setting notional grade boundaries as follows:

- Grade A – 70% of maximum marks available
- Grade B – 60% of maximum marks available
- Grade C – 50% of maximum marks available
- Grade D – 40% of maximum marks available

Candidates who have attained a graded result in the course assessment will be certificated with a course award at the corresponding grade.

Appendix

Agenda for Awarding Meeting

1	**Welcome and Introductions** Overview of meeting Overall approach to grading	Chair
2	**Confirm subject/level and maximum marks**	Statistician
3	**Review of previous year** • Decision-making record • Course assessment structure and grade distribution for relevant previous diets	Advisor
4	**Provide an overview of the standard of this year's assessment**	Principal Assessor/QM
5	**Discuss the standard of this year's assessment** (using both qualitative and quantitative information) • Report from PA on each component (using SoI and APF) (Principal Assessor) • Overview of statistics headlines (Statistician) • Discussion • Summary (Advisor)	Advisor
6	**Evaluate performances standards** and **Agree Grade Boundaries** In line with the 'Awarding and Grading' policy and Guide to Awarding	Chair/All
7	**Confirm Grade Boundary decisions**	All
8	**Clarify and agree reasons for Grade Boundary decisions** • Complete decision-making record • Finalise any action points	Advisor/All
9	**Thank you and Close**	Chair

Checklist for Awarding Meeting

	Item of Evidence	Confirm reviewed
1	**Statement of Intent**	
1.1	Review of previous year	
1.2	Approach to sampling	
1.3	Differentiation across components	
1.4	Issues addressed from previous year	
1.5	Intended grade boundaries	
2	**Assessment Performance Form**	
2.1	Candidate performance for each component	
2.2	Assessment task or brief for each component	
2.3	Marking issues for each component	
2.4	Overall judgement for each component	
2.5	Understanding of assessment standards for each component	
3	**Markers Reports**	
3.1	Candidate performance compared to previous years	
3.2	Details of candidate performance this year	
3.3	Comments on the assessment	
3.4	Any other comments	
4	**Statistical Pack**	
4.1	Course Information	
4.2	Cohort	
4.3	Mark distribution	
4.4	Grades	
4.5	Component information	
4.6	Estimates	
5	**Other Feedback**	
5.1	Feedback from centres	
5.2	Feedback from individual learners	
5.3	Feedback from professional bodies	
5.4	Feedback from subject networks	