

### **Core Script:**

During the global pandemic, SQA, in common with education systems around the world, had to use different approaches to assessment and certification. This year, for National Qualifications, Scotland has returned to formal national exams, supported by a package of measures (including course modifications and revision support, as well as wider support from across the education system at a national, regional, local and school/college level). These measures were designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people experienced, while maintaining standards.

SQA worked with partners across the education sector, including teachers, lecturers, learners, parents and carers, throughout the year to agree the wide-ranging package of support that was put in place to enable learners to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do, despite the disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, as announced in February, SQA has adopted a more generous approach to grading National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses than it would do in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for learners while maintaining standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams have done so in very different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019, having experienced disruption to their learning over two academic years. Along with the other measures taken to address ongoing disruption, the more generous approach to setting grade boundaries has also been informed and agreed by partners.

SQA's role is to assess performance in this year's assessments in an equitable and fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that qualifications remain credible. Learners' demonstrated attainment – the proof or evidence of a learner's knowledge and skills in a course measured against the required national standard – is at the core of our approach.

Grading takes place only once the marking for a course has been completed (by markers who are experienced course teachers and lecturers). Marks achieved by each candidate on the exam and any other assessments (for example coursework such as a performance in Drama or PE) are added together to give a total mark. At that point grade boundary meetings take place to determine grade boundaries which allow us to set the grades – A, B, C, D and No Award - which we award each year. These grades are not pre-determined or fixed – they are set each year based on how assessments (exams and coursework) have functioned.

In 2020 and 2021 when exams were cancelled and grades were determined by schools and colleges, results overall were higher than in years when candidates sat exams. As such, it was recognised across the education system that the reintroduction of exams could result in lower outcomes for learners overall than in 2020 and 2021. In recognition of this, and noting that circumstances for learners this year are very different from the pre-pandemic years, SQA has, where necessary and appropriate, and on a subject-by-subject basis, applied grade boundaries in a way that is fair to learners. The expectation is that, as a consequence of this more generous approach, outcomes in 2022 are likely to be somewhere between those in 2021 and those in 2019.

Grade boundaries have always been used – in Scotland and elsewhere - when exams have taken place using rigorous and well-established procedures. The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2022. This includes taking into account how the assessments (exams and coursework) have functioned and the impact of course modifications and revision support.

SQA continues to consult with other UK regulators to ensure that our approach is broadly consistent and fair for Scottish learners to support their progression to the next stage of their learning or employment.

A fundamental principle is that final grades are only based on learners' demonstrated attainment as reflected in their performance in exams and other assessments, as measured against the national standard set in SQA's assessments.

Historic performance at school/college or local authority level is **not** used to determine grades. Grade boundary meetings are not provided with any information that allows them to identify individual learners, centres or local authorities. Grade boundaries are determined using the expertise and judgement of senior examiners such as Principal Assessors and their deutes (all experienced course teachers and lecturers), and senior SQA staff.

We set the A, B, and C grade boundaries in such a way that i) makes sure standards are maintained and ii) takes into account how the assessments (exams and coursework) have performed.

If the exam and other assessments for a course performed exactly as expected with the intended level of challenge, no changes to the grade boundaries were made.

If the exam and other assessments did not perform exactly as expected, we explored a wide range of issues that may have impacted on the performance of the assessments and of learners, before agreeing grade boundaries that deliver the objectives of fair outcomes for learners and protected standards. Grade boundaries were set on a subject-by-subject basis and drew on the expertise of the Principal Assessors and their deutes (experienced course teachers and lecturers).

Given the unique circumstances facing learners in 2022, and our approach to awarding, comparisons with other years should be treated with significant caution and do not allow for any conclusions to be drawn on changes in education performance. However, colleges, universities and employers, can be confident that standards and integrity have been maintained in 2022.

Learners can also be confident that the qualifications they receive are credible and fair, and that they reflect the knowledge, understanding and skills they have acquired through their hard work in very challenging circumstances.

### **1. What are grade boundaries and why do we need them?**

Grade boundaries are the marks needed to get an A, a B, or a C grade. They tell us the minimum marks needed to achieve a particular grade for a course.

Every SQA assessment, both exams and coursework, include questions and tasks that provide the opportunity for learners to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. They are also designed to differentiate between different levels of performance - A, B and C.

Grade boundaries help ensure exams and other assessments have worked as they were planned, and, under normal circumstances, the grades awarded are consistent from one year to the next – so a B grade in Higher Mathematics in one year, is comparable to a B in Higher Mathematics awarded in another year.

Grade boundaries are never fixed year-on-year – every year SQA reviews how each course assessment (exam and any coursework) has performed in order to set appropriate boundaries and make sure the process and outcomes are fair for everyone.

### **2. Who decides on the grade boundaries?**

Once exam scripts, and other externally assessed coursework, have been marked by trained SQA Markers – experienced course teachers and lecturers – senior SQA staff meet with senior examiners, such as the Principal Assessor and their depute, who are experienced subject specialists and course teachers or lecturers, in a grade boundary meeting to talk about whether the course assessment performed as expected.

### **3. How were grade boundaries decided this year?**

Once all exam scripts were marked, grade boundary meetings were held for every course (subject and level).

For each course, senior examiners, such as Principal Assessors and their deputies, discuss with the grade boundary panel whether the assessments had performed as intended and appropriate grade boundaries are set.

Normal grade boundary checks took place to consider, using a range of evidence including qualitative feedback from marking teams and estimates received from schools and colleges, whether assessments had functioned as intended. If so, no adjustments were made to grade boundaries.

If assessments had not functioned as intended, consideration was given to the impact of course modifications (for example, the removal or reduction of coursework) and revision support. The impact of disruption on this year's learners was also considered. Taking all of this into account, grade boundaries were adjusted. In some cases, where necessary and appropriate, these adjustments were more generous than in a normal exam year but only so far as the credibility of grades was not impacted. This process ensured fairness for this year's learners while maintaining national standards.

#### **4. Are grade boundaries the same for every course and every level?**

No. Grade boundaries will vary from subject to subject, and by level, as all the information about how the assessment of each course has performed is reviewed separately.

Each course has its own content that allows learners to develop a specific set of knowledge, understanding and skills at distinct levels of difficulty. How learners are assessed to achieve a National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher in each course is different, based on its unique content and skills.

#### **5. Do we set grade boundaries based on the marks scored by individual learners?**

No. Grade boundary meetings are not provided with any information that allows them to identify individual learners, centres or local authorities.

Grade boundary meetings are checking to see if the exam and course assessment has performed as was intended and this can include looking at how all the learners who took the course, as a group, performed by looking at the marks gained for some individual questions.

Grade boundaries are determined using the expertise and judgement of senior examiners, such as Principal Assessors and their deputies (experienced course teachers and lecturers) and senior SQA staff.

#### **6. How will we ensure consistent grade boundaries when there were no formal examinations in 2020 and 2021?**

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#### **7. Does SQA report on grade boundary decisions?**

Yes, on Results Day, Tuesday 9 August 2022, information on the minimum marks needed to achieve each grade in each subject will be published.

Further information about the grade boundary process for each subject will be included in the National Qualifications 2022 Course Reports that will be published from September onwards.

For further information, visit [www.sqa.org.uk/statistics](http://www.sqa.org.uk/statistics)

**ENDS**