

Spotlight on Setting Grade Boundaries

When marking has finished, the awarding process begins, which is where grade boundaries for exams, coursework and controlled assessment are set. The aim of the awarding process is to ensure standards are maintained year on year. Exam boards use an awarding committee, made up of a group of senior examiners who are experts in that subject, to carry out the awarding process.

Why do grade boundaries change?

Exam boards always aim to develop question papers with the same level of difficulty year-on-year. Clearly it would be unfair for students to get a lower grade just because they sat a more difficult paper. However, it is very hard (almost impossible) to produce exam papers that are exactly as difficult

as each other. For this reason, in each exam series, new grade boundaries are set for each exam paper, coursework or controlled assessment. This is why grade boundaries can be different each year and for each exam.

Setting grade boundaries

Grade boundaries are the minimum mark required for a particular grade. For example, a C boundary of 50 means that you need 50 marks to get grade C. Grade boundaries are set after the exams have been taken and although each exam series may have similar grade boundaries, they are unlikely to be exactly the same each time.

Once all the marking has been completed, the awarding committee meets to recommend where to set this year's grade boundaries. The awarding committee needs to balance a range of evidence when deciding where to recommend the grade boundaries. It must consider statistical evidence alongside its review of student work.

The committee is aiming to find the mark for this year's work which best reflects the standard at which last year's grade boundary was set. To do this it looks at student work from this year that is close to the proposed grade boundary and compares it with student work from last year that was at the grade boundary. To make a fair comparison, the committee needs to know whether, overall, the group of students who took the exam this year is similar to the group who took it last year. It uses statistics about the characteristics of the two groups of students to do this, such as age and performance in the exams. The awarding committee is also presented with statistical information about the exams themselves. This includes an analysis of marks students achieve

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on each individual question and an indication of where grade boundaries could be set to achieve similar overall outcomes to last year's exams. The committee uses this type of evidence to help guide its decisions, especially when there are changes to qualifications.

When new qualifications are introduced, students in the first few years are likely get lower marks in the exams than students in previous years, who were more familiar with the exams. The awarding committee uses all the evidence available to it to identify what adjustment is needed to allow for this effect. Where there is an effect, grade boundaries are likely to be lowered to compensate for the dip in performance of those students sitting new qualifications.

After carefully considering all of the evidence, the awarding committee recommends the lowest mark

needed for each grade to ensure the standards required for this year are the same as for previous years. The exam board then makes quality checks to ensure that the committee has considered all of the available evidence and that the grade boundary decisions are justified. The final grade boundaries are then reviewed and signed-off by the exam board's responsible officer. The exam board then processes these grade boundaries and calculates the grade each student has achieved.

This process means that a student who performed to the same level should get the same grade, whether they sat the exam this year or last year. Where the exams are taken in Wales, the process is monitored and overseen by us, Qualifications Wales. Where the exams are taken across Wales, England and Northern Ireland, this process is jointly monitored and overseen by the qualifications regulator in each country.

For more information.....

All exam boards have useful information and animations on their websites giving further details of this process.

More information:
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