



Spotlight on... **how grades are decided**

Grade boundaries

What grade each learner gets in a subject depends on how many marks they get in their exams and non-examination assessments.

After exam marking is complete the awarding process begins, and an 'awarding committee' meets to set the grade boundaries for each exam paper and assessment. An awarding committee is a group of senior examiners who are experts in the subject, who have helped to set and mark the exam papers. The awarding committee is brought together by the awarding body.

A grade boundary is the minimum mark needed to achieve a particular grade. For example, if the grade boundary for a C is 50 marks, then learners have to get 50 marks or more to achieve a grade C.

Grade boundaries can change every year. One year a learner may need 60 marks to achieve a B grade, and the next year it could be 58.

Why do grade boundaries change?

Exam papers change each year, and it is impossible to produce exam papers that have exactly the same level of difficulty as those in previous years. It would be unfair for learners who have sat a slightly more difficult exam to have to get the same number of marks to achieve a certain grade as those who sat a less difficult exam. This means that the number of marks needed to demonstrate the standard required for a grade may be different in one year to what it was in a previous year. For this reason, the grade boundaries may stay the same or they may need to change. This promotes fairness for learners, whichever year they take the exam in, and maintains standards for learners past, present and future.

How does the awarding committee set grade boundaries?

Awarding committees do not make recommendations about all grade boundaries, they focus on key grade boundaries where the performance standard is known. These are also called the judgemental grade boundaries. The grade boundaries for other grades are produced by a calculation linked to the number of marks between the judgemental grade boundaries, so that they are spaced equally across the mark range. These are called arithmetic grade boundaries. For more information on this, look at our [video guide to marking and awarding](#).

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At AS and A level, the judgemental grade boundaries are grades A and E. The arithmetic grade boundaries are calculated so that the number of marks between them is even. (For example, if the grade boundary recommended by the committee for A is 62 marks out of 80, and the grade boundary recommended for E is 30 marks out of 80, there are 32 marks between them. C would be calculated at 46 marks, B at 54 marks and D at 38 marks). There is also a rule about where the A* boundary is set.

At GCSE the judgemental grade boundaries are at grades A, C and F. The arithmetic grade boundaries at B, D, E and G. There is also a rule about where the A* boundary is set.

There are some exceptions, for example in tiered subjects where more boundaries need to be considered by the committee, so that there is alignment between overlapping grades on the different tiers.

The committee uses a range of information and evidence to help them make their recommendations for each grade boundary, including:

- information about this year's learners and last year's learners
- statistical information about how learners did in each question
- examiners' judgements on the learner work they see and how it compares to last year's work.

How does the awarding committee use statistical information?

It is important for the committee to know whether this year's group of learners is like the group who took the exam last year. To do this, they use statistical information, such as age and previous performances, from both groups. (If the learners are very similar and nothing else has changed, it is reasonable to think that the national results, or outcomes, should be similar).

The committee also considers whether there are any changes to the qualification. When new qualifications are introduced, learners in the first few years are likely to get lower marks in the exams than those in previous years, who were more familiar with the exams and their formats. In this case, grade boundaries may be lowered to compensate for this. This is called the comparable outcomes approach. For more information on this, look at Spotlight on... Comparable outcomes - keeping grades fair .

The committee also looks at statistical information about the exams themselves. They look at how many marks learners achieved on each individual question, and this gives an indication of whether the exam was more or less difficult than last year's exam. Grade boundaries may be lowered or raised to compensate for differences.

Together, this information provides an indication of where a grade boundary could be set. It is a starting point for the committee.

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Does the awarding committee look at learner work?

After considering the statistical information the awarding committee looks at some completed exam papers (we call them scripts) from learners. Committee members look at papers over a range of marks that is guided by the starting point. They also consider how performance compares with last year's exam papers. Looking at how learners performed on the exam papers is one of the most important sources of evidence that the committee considers.

How does the awarding committee decide grade boundaries?

Finally, once all evidence has been considered, the committee recommends the number of marks needed for each key grade for that qualification.

Though the analysis completed ahead of the awarding process provides a starting point, the actual proportion of learners at each grade depends on where the boundaries are set by the committee.

The awarding body then carries out checks to ensure all available evidence has been considered and the recommendations are justified. The final grade boundaries are reviewed and signed off by the awarding body's responsible officer. The awarding body then uses the grade boundaries to calculate the grade each learner has achieved.

This process ensures that a learner who is performing at the same standard would get the same grade whether they sat the exam this year or last year.

How is Qualifications Wales involved?

Qualifications Wales sets out the requirements for the awarding process in Wales and monitors it to check it is being undertaken appropriately. Before any grades are announced or qualifications confirmed, awarding bodies must report their results to us.

If the overall results are different to what we would expect them to be, we ask the awarding body to explain why. If we are not satisfied, we can ask the awarding body to look again at their processes, or to conduct additional analysis.

In cases where exams are taken across Wales, England and Northern Ireland, this process is jointly overseen by the qualification regulator in each country.

More information

Please contact us at comms@qualificationswales.org if you have any queries about exams and we will be happy to answer your questions.

