



## A closer look at setting grade boundaries

When marking has finished, the awarding process begins, which is where grade boundaries for exams and non-examination 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 process.

### What are 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 examinations have been taken and although each examination series may have similar grade boundaries, they are unlikely to be exactly the same each time.

### Why do grade boundaries change?

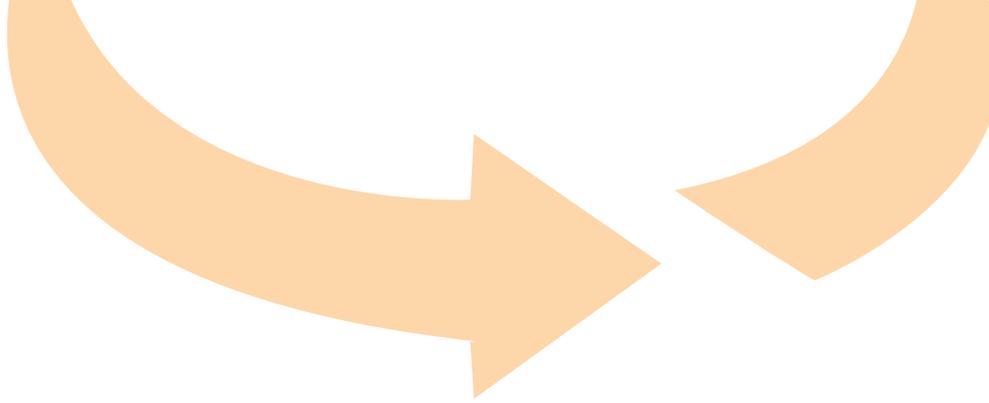
Exam boards always aim to develop question papers with the same level of difficulty year-on-year. Clearly it would be unfair for students to get a lower grade just because they sat a more difficult paper.

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. This is why grade boundaries can be different each year and for each exam.

### How do exam boards set grade boundaries?

Once all the marking has been completed, the awarding committee meets to recommend where to set this year's grade boundaries. They need to balance a range of evidence when deciding where to recommend the grade boundaries. In particular, the recommendations have to consider the balance of both statistical evidence and examiner judgement of student work.

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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 at 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 previous exams.

The awarding committee is also presented with statistical information about the exams themselves. This includes an analysis of marks students achieve 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 to get lower marks in the exams than those 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.

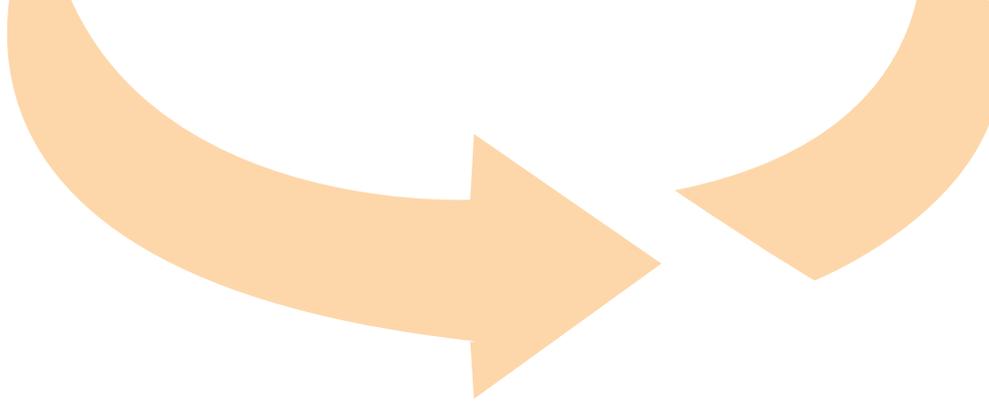
Where there is evidence to support a change, grade boundaries may be lowered to compensate for the dip in performance of students sitting new qualifications.

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 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.



## How is Qualifications Wales involved?

Qualifications Wales monitors and oversees the awarding process. Before the award of a qualification is confirmed, the exam boards must report their outcomes to us. If the overall outcomes are different to what we would expect them to be, we ask the exam board to explain why. If we are not satisfied, we can ask the exam board to look again at the award or to conduct additional analysis to confirm its proposed award.

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

## For more information

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



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