



meeting	EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING SELECT COMMITTEE		
date	6 December 2005	agenda item number	4

## REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

### **Grade Boundaries for GCSE examinations**

#### **Purpose of Report**

1. This report responds to a request made at the meeting of the Education and Lifelong Learning Select Committee in September, for information about grade boundaries at GCSE and how the performance of Nottinghamshire pupils relates to the boundaries between grades.

#### **Information and Advice**

##### **Background**

2. In discussing the performance of Nottinghamshire pupils in the 2005 GCSE examinations, some members of the committee were concerned about information presented in national newspapers suggesting that because grade boundaries were set very low, some pupils were achieving higher grades too easily.

##### **Grade boundary information**

3. It is very difficult to determine the exact raw mark or percentage of the available raw marks that a candidate needs to obtain in order to secure a particular grade in a particular subject. The reasons for this are quite complex but the key points are:
  - a Universal Mark Scale (UMS) is currently used in order to ensure that all modules make an appropriate weighted contribution to the final grade. Each entire exam has a fixed maximum mark (generally 300 for GCSE and 600 for an A level). Each individual unit e.g. coursework or test paper, contributes some fraction towards the total and in many cases there could be three papers and a course work mark

- for A levels, the grade boundaries on the UMS in percentage terms are Grade E 40%, D 50%, C 60%, B 70% and grade A 80%. For GCSE examinations, the UMS percentages vary between subjects but the principle is the same. The range of marks for a given grade on the UMS is the same each year unlike the range of raw marks which is determined subject by subject on the basis of the examiner's professional judgement
- full data on boundaries is not available. Some examination boards will not release this information on the grounds of confidentiality
- information on the weighting of the individual units is not available.
- in many cases students will have a choice of modules which may have different raw marks for a given grade boundary and in order to fully answer members' queries, we would need to know the distribution of module combinations taken by different students. Pupil level raw mark information is not available for individual modules and units
- some subjects have what is known as tiered papers, so that candidates are entered for the paper that is the most appropriate to their ability e.g. an average student would be entered for the intermediate tier rather than the higher tier. This complicates the situation further because the equivalent paper in two tiers often has a different set of grade boundaries. This means that two candidates taking a paper that covers the same parts of the syllabus but in a different tier could have significantly different raw marks but the same grade. The evidence shows that the cases highlighted in the national press relate to tiered papers.

### **Linking marks to grades**

4. Analysis of the available information shows that for GCSE, most units require a raw mark in the 35 - 55% range to obtain a C grade. It is usually necessary to obtain at least 70% in a unit to be awarded an A mark on the UMS scale. The analysis of the available information shows that it is not true that candidates are scoring a low average mark in an exam and being awarded a top grade.

### **Data about Nottinghamshire pupils**

5. The data requested by members in relation to raw marks for Nottinghamshire pupils is not available. As explained above, some examination boards will not release information, whilst others release general information about grade boundaries but do not release information about the modules and units taken by pupils.
6. The local authority holds data showing the proportion of students achieving each grade for the three main exam boards. This data shows that there is variation between the distributions of grades awarded by different boards in different subjects but does not allow

analysis by individual pupils or schools. The analysis suggests there is no correlation between the popularity of a board in a given subject and the number of higher grades awarded.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

7. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, personnel, Crime and Disorder and those using the service. Where such implications are material, they have been described in the text of the report. Members' attention is however drawn to the following:-

### **Equal Opportunities Implications**

8. The local authority is committed to raising the attainment of all pupils in Nottinghamshire. The examination process should support this aim and ensure the grading system accurately reflects the achievements of all.

### **Implications for Service Users**

9. Schools and pupils need to feel secure with the national examination system and its marking procedures. Schools on occasions have submitted appeals against grades awarded and this has involved a long and trying process for pupils and staff until the appeal is resolved.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

10. That the Education and Lifelong Learning Select Committee note the information provided in this report.

**PAM TULLEY**

Director of Education

## **Background Papers Available for Inspection**

Nil.

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