Grade Boundaries for the new Higher Classical Studies

I am writing as Convener of the SCIS West of Scotland Classics Group. This body also incorporates three Edinburgh schools.

We would like to express our deep concern over the grade boundaries determined and imposed by the SQA on the 'new' Higher Classical Studies examination. To gain an A pass, candidates had to gain a minimum of 83%; for a B 73%; for a C 63%; for a D 58%. This is a significant deviation from the national norm, which is 70%, 60%, 50%, 45% or a few % either way.

We are well aware that analysts have to set grade boundaries, post exam diet, according to the demands of the assessment. However,

- this was the first year of a new examination;
- only 97 candidates from ten schools sat the new examination;
- both the Question Paper and Assignment were of the standard exemplified in all the SQA guidelines for Course Assessment and for Assignment, including marking guidelines, Support Notes, Specimen Questions and Marking Instructions.

We are not convinced that from this relatively small cohort you can confidently adjust grade boundaries by 13% over the norm. The SQA says it used statistics based on 'prior attainment' to work out the grade boundaries. It is very difficult to know how reliable these statistics are without being privy to the exact calculations and being expert enough in statistics. However, while statistics may be reliable generally for a big cohort like Maths, it seems questionable whether they are reliable for only 97 candidates. Moreover, many candidates do Higher Classical Studies as a 'crash' i.e. they have not done Nat 5; also, classes tend to be a mix of S5 and S6. If prior attainment is based on all Nat 5 subjects, not just subject-specific, is this fair? If someone is not so good at Maths or science, but better at social subjects, will this be a fair projection of their Classical Studies grade, where Classical Studies is a social subject?

Moreover, how reliable is it to compare Classical Studies with other subjects and conclude that it was over 10% 'easier' than the other social subjects, for example, which were set up on a similar basis and design to Classical Studies in course structure and marking guidelines?

The SQA set the standards for the new examination and we, as teachers, went through all the demands and steps, along with our pupils, preparing for the assignment and question paper in the way directed. To be told, after the examination, that 'the course assessment did not function as intended for either the Question Paper component or the Assignment' (Dr Gill Stewart, Director of Qualifications Development) is, in our view, a betrayal of the candidates doing the subject. They are, in fact, being penalised for doing well by having questionable and unfair grade boundaries imposed on their efforts.
Dr Stewart goes on to say (in her letter to the Rector of St Columba’s School, Kilmacolm) that within the Question Paper the choice of question offered resulted in candidates being able to avoid the more discriminating questions, such as those on political propaganda and Augustus’ control of religion. This seems a very odd comment. First, political propaganda and Augustus’ control of religion are basic parts of the course; these are no more difficult or discriminating than the questions on analysing the status and role of women in the Roman world or analysing how tolerant the Romans were of the religions of the people they conquered. Second, even if it were possible to say that one option was more difficult than another, why would candidates under examination conditions be expected to second-guess the SQA by doing the option thought to be more challenging? Again, it seems candidates are being penalised for just answering the questions set by the SQA.

Dr Stewart then says in the assignment due to the existing marking criteria it was found that candidates were achieving very similar marks for tackling straightforward subjects like jobs of slaves in a basic manner as those who tackled more challenging topics on Greek tragedy or philosophy in a more developed manner. This seems to demean slavery as a trifling topic, yet it is part of the Power and Freedom course and fundamental to an understanding of ancient societies. It also has many resonances with the modern world. Greek tragedy does not seem a topic that many candidates would view as a social issue, while few candidates, unless they have studied as complex a subject as philosophy, are likely to want to choose it as a topic. Moreover, there was nothing in the guidelines to suggest a hierarchy of topics.

The SQA say they are going to review the marking instructions in September. However, we would ask: What good is that to this year’s candidates who have been disadvantaged by the setting of an examination that did not function as intended? Highers are still the gold standard for entrance to university and some pupils may well now be affected in that regard because of the SQA’s lack of quality assurance before the assignment and examination paper. To impose arbitrary grade boundaries of 13% above the norm, based on a small number of candidates, discriminates unfairly against these candidates.

Curriculum for Excellence is meant to be about rewarding young people for what they can achieve, not some arbitrary ‘quota system’ based on just 97 candidates from ten schools in the first year of a new qualification system. These deeply concerning grade boundaries diminish their achievements.

Candidates and their teachers need to have confidence that an examination system is fair and that everyone knows what is expected to gain a good result. We in the SCIS West of Scotland Classics Group are very concerned, as are lots of others throughout Scotland who are now aware of these bizarre grade boundaries, that pupils have been unfairly penalised.

You cannot help feeling that, if it were some big-uptake subject like Maths or English, there would have been a huge outcry, especially in the media, if 13% had been added to the normal grade boundaries.

We request that some action be taken to remedy the unfairness imposed on those candidates who sat this year’s new, but sadly tarnished, Higher Classical Studies.
Alan Milligan

Convener, SCIS West of Scotland Classics Group
The High School of Glasgow
637 Crow Road
Glasgow, G13 1PL
email: am@hsog.co.uk