New linear qualifications (AS, A-level and GCSE)

A guide to notional component grade boundaries

In modular qualifications, components can be taken at different times during the course, and grade boundaries are set for each component separately. In linear qualifications, students are given a single overall grade for the subject. However, we are able to provide 'notional grade boundaries' for individual components in linear qualifications, for illustrative purposes only.

Although there are no official grades for individual components in linear qualifications, it can be useful for students and teachers to see how the overall subject grade was achieved. The grade boundaries given for each component are known as 'notional grade boundaries', as they are for illustrative purposes only.

The notional component boundaries do not always add up to the subject grade boundaries. The example below explains why this might happen.

Sample subject and notional component grade boundaries in a linear AS qualification

Subject	Max mark	A	B	C	D	E
	100	80	70	60	50	40
Paper 1	50	45	38	32	26	20
Paper 2	50	35	31	27	23	20

In this example, the subject boundary mark for a grade B is 70 (out of 100). The notional component boundary marks for a grade B are 38 out of 50 on Paper 1, and 31 out of 50 on Paper 2. These add up to 69, not 70. Why is this?

The reason is that there are rules that all awarding bodies must follow for setting the subject boundary marks for B, C and D, based on the A and E subject boundaries. Grades A and E are known as 'judgemental' grades, and the awarding committee for each subject sets these by looking at students' work. The B, C and D boundaries are then set arithmetically so that they fall as evenly as possible between A and E.

In this example, there are 40 marks between the subject boundary for grade A (80), and the subject boundary for grade E (40). The B, C and D boundaries are set at 10 mark intervals, because $40 \div 4 = 10$.

If the difference between the A and the E boundaries is not exactly divisible by four, the remainder of the marks are allocated to each of the intervals between A and B, B and C, and C and D – in that order.

So, let's apply this to Paper 1 in the example above.

1. The difference between the A boundary and the E boundary is 45 - 20 = 25.
2. 25 ÷ 4 = 6, with a remainder of 1.
3. This remainder is allocated to the interval between A and B, so the B boundary is set 7 marks (6 + 1) below the A boundary, i.e. at 45 - 7 = 38 marks.
4. There are no more remainder marks to use up, so the C boundary is set 6 marks below grade B, i.e. at 38 - 6 = 32 marks.
5. The D boundary is set 6 marks below grade C, i.e. at 32 - 6 = 26 marks.

As shown here, applying the rules that are used to calculate subject grades B, C and D to each separate paper can lead to a situation where it is possible to get, for example, a notional 'B' on both papers (38/50 and 31/50), but a subject grade of C (69/100).

The reason this happens is that the mark intervals between A and E on the separate papers may divide more or less evenly than the mark intervals between A and E on the subject overall.

Although this example is for AS, the principle is the same for A-level and GCSE. The 'judgemental' grades for A-level are A and E; for GCSE they are 7, 4 and 1.

For **A-level,** grade A* is also available and this subject boundary mark is determined statistically by carrying forward the standard from the previous specification. This means there are no simple arithmetic rules for setting this subject boundary mark - and so no rules that can similarly be used to derive notional component boundary marks. For the components, the grade A* notional boundaries are therefore set so that they are in the same relative position as the subject grade A* boundary. For example, if the subject boundary for grade A* is halfway between the grade A boundary and the maximum subject mark, the notional component grade A* boundaries are also set to be halfway between the grade A boundary and the maximum component mark (rounding to the nearest whole number if necessary).

For **GCSE,** the grade 9 notional component boundaries are set in a similar way. For example, if the subject grade 9 boundary is halfway between the grade 7 boundary and the maximum subject mark, the notional component grade 9 boundaries are also set halfway between the component grade 7 boundary and the maximum component mark (again, rounding to the nearest whole number if necessary).

GCSE grade 8 notional component grade boundaries are then set halfway between the component grade 7 and 9 boundaries, rounding *down* to the next whole number if necessary.

It is therefore important not to put too much emphasis on the notional component grades. The sole determinant of a candidate's grade on a linear exam is his/her total subject mark. It is not calculated by combining grades on the individual components.