
FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH LEVEL 1

8720/S/W/R

Report on the Examination

8720

March 2022

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Please note that this report covers Functional Skills English for Level 1 (8720)**8720/S - Speaking****Introduction**

A large number of centres took the opportunity to enter this round of submissions. For some centres it was straightforward to verify their work. They had assimilated the standard by looking at the AQA standardising materials and they had completed the necessary record forms accurately.

The best submissions came from centres where students had chosen their own topic to present, and where their teachers asked them searching questions to allow them to show their skills. It is important to note here that teachers need to ask questions because they know the criteria and what the student needs to do to attain them. On this higher level qualification, as seen in the standardising videos, students must talk at length, both in their presentation and when answering questions.

No single topic for Presentations dominated this time round, with students completing their presentations before world events took a turn for the worst and when the covid epidemic seemed to be in decline. Instead students seemed more likely to talk about their own specific interests and activities.

Problems remain in two key areas, as was noted in both the November 2021 report and January 2022 reports. The first is that too many students read their presentation, without any attempt to engage with their audience. If this is the case then teachers should take the opportunity to teach aspects of presenting, showing students how they can use a script but at the same time engage with their audience. Too often it seemed that students were being put in front of a camera without preparation and then given their one and only chance to perform.

The second problem area is the completion of paperwork for the submission. A centre declaration sheet (CDS) must be sent with the submission. Each student in the sample must have a centre record form (CRF), and for each student all criteria must be indicated to have been fulfilled.

Please note that video submissions on DVD can no longer be accepted. A USB must be used.

If a password is required then it must be the AQA supplied password for the sitting. The password for June is WGu_3059.

The nature of the component

The spoken component is an integral part of the Functional Skills package called English. Along with Reading and Writing it is a required element, and the subject as a whole cannot be passed without it. As part of the component there are two activities that must be completed. These involve giving a presentation and taking part in a discussion. If both tasks are not completed and if no evidence is provided, a pass cannot be awarded to the student.

For a presentation there must be a video recording, plus a completion of the presentation part of the record form. For a discussion there must be a completion of the discussion part of the record form.

Each of the activities has a sub set of skills that must be delivered for a pass. These are listed on the record form, and all of them must be achieved. This is called a mastery model of assessment, so even one cross in the 'no' column means that the student has not passed and should be

entered at a later date. For example, if a student is not asked any questions after their presentation, or does not answer them, then they cannot be awarded a pass.

In advance of submission of entry and grades

1. During the Functional English course students should regularly take part in presentations with questions and in discussions. The questions should, at least in part, be from teachers/adults and should be designed to ensure that students can reach the required criteria. There is guidance in section 5 of the specification.

2. When preparing for/practising presentations, students must be discouraged from reading verbatim notes or PowerPoints. Students should be speaking on a suitable topic of their own choice.

3. Teachers should collect evidence which will be a video recording of a presentation for each student in the sample to be submitted and notes on the discussions to be entered on the AQA Candidate Record Form (CRF).

If there are reasons that make it impossible to conduct visual recordings then exemptions must be sought from AQA in advance of the submission deadline.

4. When students are entered the centre must already have collected the evidence that will allow them to give the student a Pass. This means they must have fulfilled **all** the criteria for both presenting and discussing. To ensure that you are familiar with the required standards (which for 8725 are obviously higher than for 8720) please watch the AQA standardisation videos, which are available via the AQA website. Please **do not** enter students if you do not have the required evidence to do so.

5. To summarise: *The procedure is: collect the evidence, complete the paperwork, check that all standards have been met by looking at criteria and watching standardisation videos, enter the student, wait to forward the evidence to the verifier.*

A check list of what is required once you are asked to submit your evidence for verification.

- Check that you are submitting the required sample size, that each student's presentation is on a separate clearly labelled file on a USB and that 8720 are separated from 8725.
- Check that the files play on Windows Media Player, on a computer. Check that visuals can be seen and that sound can be heard.
- Do not compress files and crucially do not encrypt with passwords known only to you. AQA does not require encryption. If you do, then please use the official password supplied by AQA, which for summer 2022 is WGu_3059.
- Check that you have completed and forwarded a Centre Declaration Sheet and a CRF form for each student in the sample. Double check that every student you have entered as Pass is shown to have fulfilled all the criteria on the CRFs.
- Have all materials ready for verification by the deadline.

- When notified of your verifier the sample should be posted to the verifier using first class post (fully paid) and without the need for a signature. Do not use Special/Signed for Delivery.

Conclusion

The very best talks are those where students talk about often unusual and very challenging experiences, which are then teased out for their implications by subtle and sensitive questioning.

Many teachers had again worked very hard to work within at times complex constraints and their efforts are much appreciated.

[AQA | Notes and guidance: non exam assessment \(NEA\)](#)

Centre Declaration Sheet 2022 - [Centre declaration sheet 2022 \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)

[Functional Skills English Specification for first teaching in 2019 \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)

8720/W - Writing

Overview

This is the ninth series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 1 Writing (8720W). Although there is still some disruption to education due to the Coronavirus pandemic and numbers are below the norm for this series, it would appear that the trend is now more positive in terms of entries.

The 2011 standards have now been superseded by 'scope of study' descriptors which apply to Writing Composition and Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPG). These can now be found on page 9 of the AQA Specification <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8720-8725-SP-2019.PDF>

At Level 1 learners are required to produce straightforward texts such as narratives, instructions, explanations and reports of varying lengths. Each writing task will require learners to address one of the above categories although it is important to note that narratives and explanations can be embedded within different formats such as emails, blogs, letters, reviews etc

The reformed qualification is intended to maintain very high standards and a pass at this level will be a strong indicator of ability in writing Standard English. It is consistent in its standard as a test of basic English writing skills and will be the foundation for secure progression. With the current demands of GCSE English, many schools and colleges are considering alternative routes for students. This qualification would also serve as a suitable alternative and an excellent progression route from The Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English). It is important that schools and colleges enable students to have a realistic chance of acquiring valuable qualifications by mapping abilities against available qualifications. In this way, the reformed Functional English will provide important opportunities for both centres and students.

To ensure continuity under the reformed specification the writing papers have retained two questions. Each contains stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, enabling students to use some of the information in the question. There is an element of problem solving and functional thinking in completing each task. A significant innovation is that there are word limits established for Question 1, which will have an impact on the achievement of students and this is looked at in more detail below. The time allocated for the paper is now 1 hour with an advisory 20 minutes for the 1st question. The total mark available for the paper has been increased to 27, with 9 marks for Question 1 (6 for composition, 3 for SPaG) and 18 marks for Question 2 (9 for composition, 9 for SPaG). An important point to note is that SPaG comprises 44% of total marks, an increase of 4% over the previous specification, reflecting its importance at this level. Mark schemes for both questions are now skill based and will remain unchanged for the lifetime of the specification and can be found at: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/AQA-87202-SMS.PDF>

At this level, centres now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside the middle level of Mark Scheme descriptors. In this series, though the entry was modest, students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with approximately 90% of students gaining a mark of 10 or more while over 35% gained a mark of 18 or more. These figures are very encouraging, particularly at the top end where performance matched the stronger figures for January 22. In the circumstances, students achieving a mark of 18 are well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 18 need a little more in the way of skill development before they progress on to Level 2. Close examination of the centre's mark profile would be very useful in establishing appropriate progression routes for students.

Question 1

This question asked students to contact a gardening company with instructions for work to be undertaken on behalf of a relative. The question was phrased to allow inclusivity of answers even if the students did not themselves have gardening needs. The stimulus material provided headlines for the work that the gardening company, Jumila's GardenCo, would be able to take on. Nevertheless, students were able to provide their own schedule of works should they wish to do so. At standardising, it became apparent that some students had presented requests for work not for a relative, but for themselves. This was not penalised as it was accepted as a valid response as long as the student provided clear instructions.

Students were asked to write between 80 and 120 words. It is important to understand that the length of answers is clearly addressed in the mark scheme and that marginal infringements of this aspect of the question would not deny a student access to the highest band provided the standard of writing composition justified it. As the time advised for this question is only 20 minutes, students who spent too long and wrote too much may have been doubly disadvantaged. Overall, although it is not possible to provide definitive figures, most students met the requirements of word length for this question. This series provided a number of answers that were close to, or just above, the upper word limit. Such answers were often at the top end of the marks range. Excessively long answers were self-penalising as they lost focus and clarity while very short answers, below 50 words or so, were unlikely to achieve marks above the bottom level (1-2 marks).

Generally, most students contributed something specific that needed to be undertaken. Activities ranged from the credible, such as simple weeding, clearing and mowing to the less credible, such as the building of large swimming pools that would not really be in the remit of a local gardening company.

Stronger answers provided a clear rationale for the request for the work to be undertaken and this is where some students were able to shine. For example, one very good student wrote about the fact that their grandmother was increasingly feeble and unable to take on work, while another wrote about the time pressures of busy family life for their aunt. A clear schedule of work would then follow with an accompanying request for prices or estimates. The key discriminator, though, was not the activity itself but the way in which students met the requirement to provide instructions. Purpose and audience would require clarity and guidance as to specific details. Instructions are one of the four types of questions that can be set for Functional Skills English Writing and students who saw the need to produce effective writing of this type were rewarded.

It is often the case that the language found in the better answers was able to reflect the content more effectively than that in weaker answers. The use of specific vocabulary such as 'to enquire if you can do some essential work' or 'clean up any surrounding weeds' were found in excellent answers. Sentences were varied and sometimes complex, again adding to the impact of the response. The use of the imperative mood such as 'clear and weed them' is also part of the armoury of language available in the writing of instructions and the use of modal verbs such as 'could' or 'would' enables an appropriate tone to be established.

Many weaker answers tended to ask for very general work such as, 'Can you do some gardening work for a relative' (sic) Although the word limits are modest, some planning is called for to enable sufficient information to be provided. It is important that students understand that a key feature of the new type of Question 1 is how closely focused the answer is on the task.

The very weakest answers, at the bottom level were almost invariably too short, with students unable to provide much beyond reference to a relative or a garden with few details or instructional

sentences. Answers in the bottom band were often incoherent with vocabulary alone providing the only basis for the reader to grasp meaning. Some students were clearly trying to assemble an answer by borrowing heavily from the stimulus material in a 'cut and paste' approach. However, achievement at this level is limited to a minority, and in this series approximately 15% of students did not gain more than 2 marks for composition. This, however, was a decline from the January performance and indicates that some students may be better suited to the Entry Level Certificate (Step Up To English).

Before leaving Question 1, it is important to remember that it carries a maximum of only 9 marks (including SPG) and it is recommended that students spend no more than 20 minutes answering it. Students who spend too long on this question are putting themselves at a serious disadvantage because they are losing time on Question 2 which is worth twice as many marks. Also, it is extremely unlikely that the maximum mark for Question 1 would deliver a pass for the student, but this is not true for Question 2.

Question 2

This question was a narrative task linked to leisure activity. Students were asked to upload an account of an enjoyable visit to a local park to the Brambyworld.com website. The task was felt to be something that students would have little difficulty in understanding and the stimulus material provided some visual information that might feed into the answer.

Nearly all students were able to produce narrative writing of some sort ranging from the detailed and complex to the more factually mundane.

The best answers were those which provided detailed information within a clear structure, using effective language to present an interesting and engaging narrative. Many at this level took an oblique approach to the task, establishing a highly credible context initially and then developing it in the body of the answer. For example, one student wrote about an abiding interest in photography that would take him to the local park in the early morning to seek out wildlife, particularly birds. The response presented in clear detail the way in which the final, perfect photograph emerged. Another student wrote about a group enterprise, where a number of friends collaborated to provide food and drink, entertainment and transport for a full day's activities. Details of the picnic were provided as well as an entertaining description of the persistent ducks that followed the group around, looking for food.

One of the key descriptors for the top level is: 'Sentence structures, including complex sentences, convey meaning clearly'. This is often a determinant of a good mark as detailed, developed content can be delivered only through such a range of sentences. Simple, single clause sentences simply do not carry the information and ideas in a way that enables full understanding. In this series, for those students who were able to reach this standard, the quality of the language identified their answers and reflected their content very effectively. Sentences such as 'I could see the geese peacefully along the water, perfect for an equally as calm man like myself' and 'I looked forward with great expectation to the day ahead,' were not uncommon in the top band. Such students have been well-prepared.

Answers in middle level (marks 4-6) offered some relevant material, but there was evidence of a lack of depth and confidence in the answer. Many of the middle band answers were able to fulfil the requirements of the task at a simple level, listing a sequence of events. There was detail but little use of interesting language or variety of sentence use to engage the reader. In addition, events were presented in a rather formulaic way with a catalogue of facts rather than a flowing narrative. However, these answers were genuine attempts to respond to the task and there was, in the vast majority in this band (4-6) a clear awareness of purpose and audience.

The weakest answers, in the 1-3 level were often rather short and the student did not provide significant detail or logical sequence to sustain a narrative that met the needs of the task. Where there was coherent narrative, the task of interpreting the challenging language was a key indicator of the quality of the response. In this series, just over 10% of students were at this level which was roughly equivalent to performance in both November and January. Only 3% of students did not attempt the question, which was an improvement on the two previous series.

Students should be advised that this question carries 18 marks and should therefore be given enough time to gain as many of these marks as possible. There was clear evidence, in a large number of answers, that the students had not spent sufficient time on this answer in either planning or writing.

SPG

Spelling: at the top level students used specialist language effectively. Words and phrases such as 'photographer', 'natural and urban environment', 'peacefully', 'fully recommend', 'the dog we recently adopted', 'obsessed' were spelt correctly. When ascribing a level to spelling it is not simply the correctness of the spelling that matters but the range and ambition of the vocabulary. At the bottom level, 'few examples of conventional spelling' is a key descriptor in the mark scheme.

Punctuation: sentence demarcation is the most significant issue in punctuation and answers in the top level displayed accuracy throughout. Comma splicing and the omission of punctuation are the two key weaknesses in the production of good sentences that can be read comfortably. Occasionally, more complex punctuation is used but not always accurately. In the middle level, sentence punctuation is accurate when sentences are straightforward. At the bottom level, sentence punctuation is either inaccurate, barely present or not present at all. A growing issue is the omission of apostrophes with personal pronouns, as in 'Im' or 'im' (sic). Another feature is the arbitrary use of upper case that may be linked to social media practices.

Grammar: At the bottom level a range of grammatical errors are found which makes reading very difficult. The main problems were:

- issues around tense especially shifting between past and present
- subject/verb agreement;
- the use of definite and indefinite articles;
- the use of conjunctions or coherence markers;
- lengthy sentences which lost the thread of meaning;

In middle and top levels the scale of grammatical inaccuracy varied considerably but the crucial indicator was the ability to follow what was written.

The final mark for spelling, punctuation and grammar takes into account achievement across the three elements.

In relation to performance, on Question 1, over 18% of answers were in the top level for SPaG, which was not as high as January, while only 20% were in the bottom level, this latter figure being a significant drop on the November series.

On Question 2, less than 20% were in the top level, a drop since January, and 20% were in the bottom level, an increase since January.

8720/R - Reading

The March series explored the very important topic of sleep. Source A attempted to replicate an online consultation between an insomniac patient and a doctor. Source B was a review article about the mindfulness app, Calm, and source C an advice leaflet for teenagers aimed at promoting better sleep hygiene. There was a very good level of engagement with all three sources.

Questions 1, 4 and 15, tick box style, ask students to identify which statements are true and which false, thereby testing close reading and comprehension. Q1 had the highest success rate ever seen in terms of full marks, at 72% and fewer than 10% achieving no marks. Less successful students did not recognise that the “Action” section of the consultation meant the patient would be seen by a doctor. Q4 appeared considerably more challenging with 35% of students scoring no marks and 1/3 achieving full marks. The most common error was misreading the statistic “*One in three people suffers from poor sleep*” leading to selecting “*Three people suffer from poor sleep*” as True. In Q15, only 15% gained full marks with 31% on zero. The most frequent mistake lay in identifying “*You should switch off screens at bedtime*” when the source clearly stipulates “*one hour before bedtime*” – a lack of precision which also had the potential to cost marks in Q17.

Question 16, the test of fact and opinion, also in tick-box style, was well-answered with full-mark rates just below 45%. The most visible and amusing error lay in identifying “*Teenagers are just idle*” as Fact!

For all the tick box questions, the instruction is “*put a tick (✓)*”. A significant number of students choose to ignore this and utilise a variety of symbols, such as circles, dots, dashes, the letter V; diagonal lines which fill the entire box or a mixture of ticks and crosses according to whether they are selecting T or F. Some even write the full words in the chosen box, which is simply wasting time. Whilst examiners are directed to award the mark if the symbol is in the correct box, this is a functional test, which includes the ability to follow instructions. It would also be worth making it absolutely clear that all four statements must be attempted. Some students tick only one or two boxes and immediately deny themselves any marks.

Questions 2, 5 and 13 are the dictionary questions. There were wide variations in the success rates this series with over 80% gaining the mark for “*insufficient*” and 78% for “*withstand*” but 30% of students gaining no marks for “*fractious*” where it appeared that too many students had guessed and selected “*tired*” as the answer. This can only have arisen because a significant proportion of students did not use a dictionary or did not have access to one. As noted in previous reports, whilst the success rates are pleasing overall, if the advice to use a dictionary is being followed, higher levels of accuracy may be expected. The “not-attempted” rates sat around 1% on these questions this series.

Practice in developing dictionary skill could usefully form part of future lessons. It would also be worthwhile teaching students that alternative definitions sometimes appear and to look for the numerals which would indicate this. When students try to change an answer by overwriting, it can be difficult to discern which letter they wish to submit as their final answer. Please advise students not to overwrite, but clearly cross out and write the alternative next to the crossed out response. It is perfectly acceptable to write a second-attempt answer outside the box, in the cause of clarity, however, two letters presented in the form of “*A or C*” will result in loss of the mark. There was also evidence of some good practice in students clearly eliminating some of the possibilities and working through the options systematically, which was very pleasing to see.

Question 3 this series was the picture question. The Scope of Study descriptor for this question is “*Infer from images meanings not explicit in the accompanying text*”. The question is worded to reflect this by advising students “*Source A contains text and a photograph. What extra*

information...does the photograph suggest?" Answering this question should be a matter of eliminating options on the basis of their inclusion in the written text – if it is stated in the text, it cannot be the right answer. It was clear this series that students were not using this approach as over half of them chose the wrong option, the most common one being *"Both male and female doctors are available"* despite this being very clear in the last line of the source.

Questions 7.1 and 7.2 asked for a positive and negative thing about the Calm app told to us by the writer of the review – Anita Jones. Students were much more successful in identifying the negative comments with 75% gaining the mark as opposed to 55% on Q7.1. The main reason for incorrect responses in both questions lay in selecting aspects from outside the review ie, the wrong section of the source. A slight issue is emerging on this question relating to students offering multiple attempts, sometimes as many as three. What is being assessed here is the ability to *"identify and understand the main points, ideas and details in texts"*. *"Identify"* means *"select"* and students cannot be rewarded for copying several points into the space meant for one and sometimes arriving at a right answer on the second or third attempt. Students should be advised to choose **one positive** and **one negative** only and put each of these into the relevant space.

Question 9 – it is gratifying to note that almost 80% of entrants are aware of the functions of the colon as demonstrated in this test of punctuation.

Question 10 asks for two similarities between Source A and B. The new question wording is still bedding in, reflected in some differences in performance between January and March. Just over 1/3 gained two marks this series, compared with almost 50% in January. A further 47% achieved one mark and 17% scored zero as against 10% in January. Students who rely on what appear to be pre-learned responses which are inevitably generic cannot achieve full marks as they are offering no evidence that their answer is based on the two texts in front of them. There is always a further risk that both sources will not contain a picture, title, subheading etc so the texts need to be studied to ensure that the response is accurate. It may seem obvious, but answers also need to be accurate, particularly when deciding what the sources are about. In this series, *"both are about mental health"* and *"both tell/advise you how to sleep better"* were popular attempts which could not be rewarded.

Question 11 performance has fallen this series. Only 6% scored the full two marks compared with 14% in January, and 37% scored one mark compared to 50% last series. Most students gaining one mark did so as a result of identifying one valid difference but presenting it as two separate comments – one in each space. The upcoming paper in June will present the answer space as a number of lines with no division into separate spaces. It is hoped that, with careful teaching and guidance, this will remind students that two differences are required, which, in essence, requires four separate points.

Students need to comment on specific aspects of the texts, rather than making generic comments. **Differences** must be ways in which the texts are different, which may need to include recognition of a similarity rather than simply restating that they are different – see the penultimate point in the guidance which follows. Students should be advised to avoid unrelated pronouns. Responses need to be specific and accurate otherwise it can be difficult to see where marks can be awarded, for example: *"One is about a doctor and the other is about mental health"* – Source A is not *"about a doctor"*. Responses can also suffer when the basis of the difference is not clear, such as *"Source A talks about a man who can't sleep and Source B is about an app"*.

The following guidance, reproduced from previous reports, remains valid.

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- The sources will always be linked thematically so students can say “*Both sources are about.....sleep*”. They can then identify a specific point relating to the content of the sources eg “*Both sources are trying to help people improve their sleep*”.
 - Advise students to look at the front of the insert, which clearly identifies the text type and this is a completely acceptable way to secure a valid difference.
 - Students need to be specific in the points they make so steering them away from the type of generic comments which plagued Q8 responses in the legacy specification would be advisable. Responses such as “*Both texts use paragraphs*” or “*Source A is a webpage and Source B / the other one isn’t*” will not be rewarded. The latter comment simply points out that the sources are different, which the question already indicates. Students need to say what the difference is.
 - Some students appear to enter the examination with a pre-prepared response such as “*Both texts use sub-headings*”, which, if wrong, simply indicates that the student has not even looked at the sources in an attempt to identify a similarity or difference. It is very disappointing to see this. When identifying aspects of presentation, these must be linked to the source text, eg, “*Both sources use blue font in the title*”.
 - Comments which are not comparing like with like are sometimes offered: “*Source A uses sub-headings and Source B is a letter*”, for example.
 - Finally, pictures. One of the sources will always contain a picture, in order to deliver the scope of study descriptor assessment for **Q3**. There is no guarantee that both sources will contain an image so the pre-planned response referred to above must be avoided. If both sources do contain an image, students will be able to gain a mark for identifying this in **Q10**. If only one source contains a picture, this will not form a valid route for a mark in **Q11**. However, if both sources contain an image, a mark can be gained in **Q11** by identifying a difference in the content of the pictures: “*Source A has a picture of two doctors and Source B contains a picture of the Calm app*”.

Question 17 – Here, students were asked to assist a friend experiencing difficulty in sleeping with a list of things they could do to help them sleep better. The information was all contained in Source C and almost 20% of entrants completed this successfully by attaining full marks, which was lower than the 45% who did so in January. In order to achieve the “*range*” required for the top band of the mark scheme, a minimum of four correct, accurately transcribed points were required. Students lost marks where their answers were not presented as actions – *things the friend could do* – as stipulated by the question, or where the responses were inaccurate or incomplete. For example, “*Don’t drink caffeine after midday*” would gain a mark; “*Don’t drink caffeine before bed*” would not. Similar to January, 17% of students secured no marks on this question, almost 4% of those did not make any attempt at the question.

It would be helpful to remind students that this is a functional test: reading the question and complying with its precise requirements are important elements of the assessment. This is the highest tariff question on the paper and it is clear that a number of students arrive here depleted in terms of time and/or energy. There is no reason why Source C and its 10 marks of questions could not be attempted first, thus completing Q17 while still relatively fresh.

Despite the shortcomings noted in this report, overall performance has been largely maintained since January with a comparable mean mark of 15 reached by almost 60% of entrants.

This report necessarily focuses on areas which have been more problematic and require improvement; however, it has not gone unnoticed that this examination was once again taken in circumstances of difficulty and loss of learning. Given these ongoing tribulations it is important to pay tribute to the students sitting this examination whose effort was highly commendable and responses largely very satisfying. It is hoped that the students who persevered with their lessons and examination in these unrelentingly stressful and challenging circumstances, together with their indefatigable teachers, will be able to sleep soundly in their beds as the clocks go forward.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.