Course report 2023

Higher Modern Studies

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

1

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   9,772

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   9,973

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	4,009	Percentage	40.2	Cumulative percentage	40.2	Minimum mark required	54
B	Number of candidates	2,051	Percentage	20.6	Cumulative percentage	60.8	Minimum mark required	45
C	Number of candidates	1,711	Percentage	17.2	Cumulative percentage	77.9	Minimum mark required	36
D	Number of candidates	1,129	Percentage	11.3	Cumulative percentage	89.2	Minimum mark required	27
No award	Number of candidates	1,073	Percentage	10.8	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

♦ 'most' means greater than 70%
♦ 'many' means 50% to 69%
♦ 'some' means 25% to 49%
♦ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the statistics and information page of SQA's website.

2

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper 1

Overall, question paper 1 performed as expected, presenting an appropriate level of challenge.

The most popular questions in each section were as follows:

- Section 1, Democracy in Scotland, questions 1(b) and 1(d)
- Section 2A, Social inequality, questions 2(a) and 2(c)
- Section 2B, Crime and the law, question 2(f)
- Section 3C, World powers, question 3(a)
- Section 3D, World issues, question 3(d)

Question 1(d) was more demanding than intended, while 1(b) proved less demanding than intended.

Although some questions were deliberately broad, some were narrower in their focus such as 1(d). There was evidence that some candidates may have provided pre-prepared answers, which did not always fit the specific question asked.

Question paper 2

Questions 1 and 2 performed as intended and candidate responses were in line with previous exam diets.

Question 3 proved more challenging for candidates, however, markers noted an improvement in responses from 2022. Many candidates continue to provide generic, undeveloped answers, which do not demonstrate the required justifications or understanding of the sources.

Assignment

The requirement to complete the assignment was removed for session 2022–23.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1

Question 1(a)
Many candidates answered this question by comparing the relative merits of the current devolution settlement and independence. This was a valid response, but some candidates also considered possible reforms such as a move to a more federal system or the scrapping of devolution altogether.

Question 1(b)
Most candidates showed a good grasp of the ways in which either the UK Parliament and/or the Scottish Parliament can hold their respective governments to account. Answers often considered Prime Minister's Questions and/or First Minister's Questions, committee structures and procedures, debates, private members' bills, and the House of Lords. Candidates usually successfully considered the limitations of such factors.

Question 2(c)
Candidates considered a wide range of policies from all sections of government. Candidates could include any area of policy including health and social welfare. They effectively discussed UK-wide examples and specific Scottish examples. Policies included National Minimum Wage, National Living Wage, Universal Credit, free school meals, Minimum Unit Pricing, free prescriptions, PIPs and The Baby box. Overall, candidates were well prepared for this question and gained high marks.

Question 2(d)
Few candidates completed this question. Those who did complete this question were well prepared and responses contained up-to-date information with a strong level of analysis and evaluation. Candidates showed good knowledge of rights legislation and the international conventions to which the UK is affiliated.

Question 2(f)
This was the most popular option in the crime and the law section. Candidates managed to show appropriate knowledge of various non-custodial sentencing options such as Community Payback Orders or Drug Treatment and Testing Orders. Candidates were well prepared for this question and often successfully compared these with custodial options focusing on costs and reconviction rates as well as impacts on families and relationships.

Question 3(a)
Candidates answered mainly on the USA, with a few focusing on China and South Africa. Candidates answering on the USA were relatively well prepared and displayed some good knowledge of the separation of powers within the US Federal Government. They successfully compared and analysed the powers and limitations of each branch of

4

government. Candidates provided recent exemplification regarding the actions of Presidents Biden and Trump, although some very old examples were still evident.

Question 3(d)

This question was the most popular of the world issues options. Many candidates discussed and analysed the causes of their world issue in a comprehensive manner. They identified social, economic, political and military causal factors, and drew valid conclusions around their importance.

Underdevelopment in Africa remains by far the most popular choice in the world issues section. Other topics covered by a few candidates were the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, Syria, LGBTQ+, terrorism and world conflict.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — Source conclusions

Most candidates gave clear conclusions on Scotland's drug issues.

Conclusion 1: most candidates identified the link between deprivation and drug deaths and provided evidence from three sources to support their accurate conclusion.

Conclusion 2: most candidates identified that the age of drug death victims is rising. Evidence to support this was sparse, but many candidates still achieved 2 of the 3 marks available.

Conclusion 3: many candidates identified that Drug Consumption Rooms seemed to reduce drug deaths but often could not provide accurately interpreted evidence to support their conclusion.

Overall conclusion: many candidates concluded that Scotland's drug death problem had deteriorated in recent years, providing sufficient evidence for 1 of the 2 available marks.

Question 2 — Source objectivity

Most candidates provided appropriate evidence from within and between the sources to both support and oppose the view. Most candidates made it clear which way they were arguing and successfully linked evidence, displaying effective synthesis. Many candidates scored highly from the 8 marks available for this.

A few candidates managed to successfully provide an overall conclusion on the extent to which 'traditional media platforms are the main providers of news for people in the UK', using phrases such as 'to a small extent'.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1

Question 1(d)

Most candidates who answered this question covered three or four influential factors such as age, gender and media in isolated sections or paragraphs that did not address the central focus of the question. Only content directly linked to age could gain marks. In this instance, pre-prepared answers with separate, unlinked paragraphs on each of the main factors that influence voting behaviour did not fit the question, disadvantaging many candidates.

Question 3(b)

Although this type of question has appeared in previous question papers, some candidates seemed less well prepared than in the past and answers tended not to contain the standard of knowledge or analysis required at Higher level. Few candidates discussed more than one group. Exemplification was often vague, with answers often focusing on broad generalisations and stereotypes.

Question 3(e)

Many candidates who attempted this option tried to flip the question to become a 'causes' of the issue question. This was done with varying levels of success.

Many candidates who answered on African underdevelopment and the Russia–Ukraine war, provided only broad generalisations and stereotypes rather than specific, up-to-date knowledge and examples.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — Source conclusions

Throughout some responses, candidates misinterpreted the statistics from sources B, C and D. In the sources, drug deaths were actually presented as per million people and not as absolute numbers.

Question 2 — Source objectivity

A few candidates misunderstood the difference between new media and traditional media.

Many candidates did not gain the 2 marks available for their overall judgement on the extent of the statement's accuracy. Some argued that the statement was completely accurate and did not include any quantitative judgement. Such absolute answers are not awarded marks. Some candidates did not provide an overall assessment at all.

Question 3 — Source reliability

Overall, many answers to this question were overly generic. Many candidates did not provide the degree of explanation required at Higher level. When date is used as an indicator of reliability, some qualification may be required. For example, 'the source is from the actual dates of the COP 26 event, so even though it is now two years old it can be considered a reliable account from that time'.

6

Source A: some candidates argued that Source A was from a 'government' website and was therefore trustworthy. Many argued, wrongly, that the source was still 'in date' as it was only two years old and information will 'not have changed'. Many candidates claimed that any source less than five years old was reliable. Only a few qualified their answer by saying that 'despite being from two years ago, it is a reliable snapshot of opinion at the time' as the sample size was big and therefore representative of the population.

Source B: many candidates argued incorrectly that the source was 'still in date'. Many claimed that 'newspapers are biased' but gave no specific explanation of the Guardian's bias. Although a few candidates mentioned the inclusion of the journalist's social media details as a positive, the 'news website of the year' accolade was largely ignored as a positive.

Source C: many candidates claimed that the source was 'in date' and therefore reliable. Most managed to suggest that pressure groups are biased but did not expand this further. A few commented on the emotive nature of the photo and exaggerated nature of the headline and gained some marks.

Overall judgement: most candidates chose Source A as the most reliable but did not provide a valid, active comparison with the other two sources.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper 1

Centres should continue to provide candidates with up-to-date examples with which to illustrate their points. Although some very old examples were given in all sections of this paper, the standard of exemplification has shown obvious improvement in recent years. This was especially evident in questions 1(b), 2(c) and 3(a).

Centres should encourage candidates to avoid generic story type answers using only broad generalisations and stereotypes, for example, real statistics about actual African countries and their development issues rather than broad 'In Africa …' comments.

Centres should try to discourage candidates from an over reliance on pre-memorised, model answer type learning. This can prove successful for some candidates in some types of question but often disadvantages candidates. Candidates should be encouraged to learn the topic and not just to memorise a series of essays. While a certain amount of resource sharing via online groups or portals can have a positive impact on candidate performance, centres are advised to check the accuracy of the knowledge, analysis and evaluation contained within.

Candidates should be reminded that evaluation and/or conclusion comments are more than just repeats or a summary of previously made points. Evaluations should be judgements which refer back to the question and provide an overall answer to the question.

Candidates should be encouraged to avoid unconnected responses. It is valid to introduce other factors into an answer, but they must in some way relate to, and contribute to, the analyses of the question's primary focus. This had an impact on marks, especially in question 1(d).

Question paper 2

Centres should continue to encourage their candidates in their use of the sources in question paper 2.

Candidates should be reminded that their overall judgement in the 'objectivity' question should contain a quantitative statement to show the extent of the statement's accuracy. Vague phrases such as 'partly' or 'to an extent' will only be awarded partial marks. Absolute statements will not be awarded marks.

Centres should encourage candidates to expand their points and explanations in the 'reliability' question. Candidates should provide an explanation of why an aspect of a source deems it to be reliable or unreliable. Simply copying from the sources without development should also be discouraged.

Centres should remind candidates that their responses in the 'reliability' question should be specific to the three sources in the paper but that background knowledge about the source

8

can also be awarded marks. For example, knowing that YouGov is a private company and not a government agency.

In the 'reliability' question, centres should stress that answers concerning the age of the sources are not always as straightforward as 'old' is always unreliable and 'recent' is always reliable. Such answers can be qualified by the trustworthiness of the source's creator, for example, 'Although the Guardian article is two years old, which detracts from its reliability, it is a well-respected, award-winning quality paper with high standards. It is a contemporary source from the time of COP26 and is therefore a reliable account of events'. It should also be noted that there is no absolute cut-off age for reliability. For example, it is not the case that any source less than two years old is reliable.

It should be stressed to candidates that the overall conclusion on the most reliable source of information should contain points of comparison between all three sources. A simple statement on the strength of the chosen source will receive only partial marks.

9

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

♦ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
♦ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
♦ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

10

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report.

11