Course report 2023

Advanced Higher Geography

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.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 1,024

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 978

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	276	Percentage	28.2	Cumulative percentage	28.2	Minimum mark required	98
B	Number of candidates	330	Percentage	33.7	Cumulative percentage	62	Minimum mark required	80
C	Number of candidates	239	Percentage	24.4	Cumulative percentage	86.4	Minimum mark required	62
D	Number of candidates	94	Percentage	9.6	Cumulative percentage	96	Minimum mark required	44
No award	Number of candidates	39	Percentage	4	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.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

There was an increase in uptake between the 2019 and 2023 cohorts, and an increase in the number of centres presenting Advanced Higher Geography.

Generally, the question paper performed as expected, however, there were issues with a couple of questions and as a result the grade boundaries were lowered.

The feedback received from centres and markers indicates that, despite these issues, the assessment was deemed fair in terms of its level of demand and coverage. The balanced level of demand enabled differentiation of candidates through the allocation of marks within each question.

The selection and use of command words, along with the organisation of question components, are crucial factors in creating a balanced and fair assessment.

Project–folio

The project–folio is made up of two components:

- Section A: geographical study
- Section B: geographical issue

There were no changes made to the project–folio for session 2022–23. However, candidates did not perform as well as in previous diets. Feedback from markers suggests that many candidates struggled to access marks that were previously accessible. The pandemic, and subsequent lack of fieldwork and research opportunities may have had an impact on opportunities for candidates and centres to gather fieldwork data.

In addition, the removal of the National 5 and Higher assignments may have had a negative impact on Advanced Higher candidate performance because candidates this year may not have had experience in researching and evaluating gathering techniques, preparing processing techniques, analysing data, and creating conclusions based on data gathered. This was taken into consideration when setting the grade boundaries.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Question 1: map interpretation

Question 1(a)(i)

Most candidates answered this question well. The inclusion of outlines on the tracing overlay ensured that almost all candidates were able to use the tracing overlay appropriately. Many candidates were able to identify appropriate sites in terms of relief, and correctly draw their sites to scale.

Question 1(a)(ii)

Most candidates were able to achieve 4 or more marks for this question. Many clearly identified relief, access, drainage and conflict with some going into greater detail and accessing the full range of marks available.

Question 1(a)(iii)

Many candidates clearly understood the requirements of this question to focus solely on social and economic impacts, therefore accessing the full range of marks. A few candidates skilfully linked environmental concerns to social impacts.

Question 1(b)

Most candidates achieved 3 or more marks for this question. The wording in the question encouraged candidates to use both their atlas and Ordnance Survey (OS) map to highlight the region's suitability for tourism. Many candidates showed skill in including a variety of map evidence alongside information from their atlas.

Question 2: gathering and processing techniques and data handling

Question 2(b)(i)

Most candidates were able to correctly, and clearly state a null hypothesis.

Question 2(b)(ii) and (iii)

Some candidates were able to access the full range of marks across both part (ii) and part (iii) of this question. They were able to correctly use the scatter graph and result of the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMCC) calculation to explain the significance. Furthermore, some candidates were able to correctly evaluate the suitability of using PPMCC.

Question 2(d)

Many candidates were able to achieve 2 or more marks for discussing the effectiveness of using kite diagrams to present information. Some candidates explained this very clearly and were able to access the full range of marks.

Project–folio

Most candidates continue to perform very well in section A in both the geographical study and the geographical issue. Candidates developed their justifications through the use of wider reading and purpose with clarity. Candidates appeared to have a greater

understanding of the relevance of their study in a wider geographical context this year. Many achieved the full range of marks for section A in the geographical issue.

Markers noted the variety of topics presented in the geographical study this year. These included many physical topics like beach profile and river studies, and an increased variety in human topics. Many candidates showed skill and ingenuity in their gathering techniques. Most markers noted a great variety in original topics for the geographical issue, with most being current and many supported with extensive bibliographies.

Markers commented that some candidates demonstrated a wide range of new technology and innovative techniques to generate data. There continues to be an increase in the number of candidates using online surveys as part of their data collection.
Some markers noted candidate skill in using the voices of people living and working within their geographical issue areas. In addition, candidates listened to a wider cohort of voices than previously.

Some of the skills for the geographical issue are developed and assessed for the first time at Advanced Higher level and therefore, this component appears to have been less affected by the course modifications at Higher and National 5 over the last two years. Most candidates achieved 5 or more marks in both sections D and E of the geographical issue, and some markers noted improved performance from candidates in their geographical issue conclusions.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Question 2(a)(i)

Most candidates struggled to access the full range of marks in this question. Many candidates mentioned the steps needed to gather slope profile data, but most also described the collection of other data like vegetation, and soil pH, which was not relevant. Some candidates provided correct points but lacked detail, and a few candidates described drawing a slope profile.

Question 2(a)(ii)

Most candidates struggled to explain the strengths and weaknesses of systematic sampling or offer alternative sampling techniques that might have been better. Some answers did not go into very much detail, and a few candidates mixed up systematic and stratified sampling.

Question 2(b)(ii)

Many candidates were unable to access the full range of marks. Many did not notice the negative correlation in the scatter graph and did not see the relationship lying between the 95% and 99% significance levels.

Question 2(b)(iii)

This is a familiar question, but some candidates struggled to access it and explain fully the usefulness of using PPMCC. Most markers stated that many candidates simply did not know how to answer the question.

Question 2(c)

Many candidates struggled to access the full range of marks in this question. One of the difficulties was asking candidates to look at diagram 1 and 4 in supplementary item D. The diagrams being on separate pages may not have served candidates well. Furthermore, the question asked candidates to use the data in diagrams 1 and 4 to analyse the changes on the slope. While most candidates wrote lengthy descriptions, only a few wrote enough analytical points to help them access the full range of marks.

Project–folio

Candidate performance in the geographical study was not as strong as in previous years, particularly in sections B, E, F and G. Of particular concern was the slight fall in planning marks compared to 2022. Some candidates conducted little fieldwork or research meaning the impact on their processing and analysis marks was more profound.

The geographical issue saw near identical candidate performance when compared with 2022. There was a small increase in candidates being unable to access marks in the geographical issue, and this may be connected to candidates submitting incomplete folios.

It is possible that reduced performance across the geographical study and geographical issue is as a result of fewer fieldwork opportunities this year, and the removal of the Higher assignment.

Markers have suggested that the lack of skills development was evidenced by candidates using fewer techniques in the geographical study.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

The general comments outlined in previous reports should be referred to and used in conjunction with the following additional comments to advise and prepare future candidates.

- Centres should ensure that candidates continue to practice using the tracing overlay for question 1.
- The accuracy of drawing a site to scale needs to be absolutely precise. Marks are not awarded where there is a deviation from the size of site required; in this case, 1.2cm x 0.6cm in question 1(a). Continued practice using scale and rulers is essential.
- Candidates should also practice using string to help determine the length of potential routes.
- Most candidates achieved 2 marks out of 3 in question 1(a)(i). However, many struggled with their final access mark. It is important to note that sites that require access, like a retail park for example, should always be within touching distance of a road.
- Use of the atlas is crucial but in question 1, that information must be paired with prior learning and the OS map. It was good to see candidates gain marks in question 1(c) by including detailed evidence from the map and specific information, like average rainfall and temperature, from the atlas.
- It was good to see candidates use and apply different information from the atlas, and they should continue to practice this.
- Candidates must take care to avoid simplistic answers when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a site. Candidates had opportunities to discuss the lack of rail transport, the cost of construction in greenfield sites, and the difficulties of site access for those without cars in question 1(a)(ii).
- Centres should note that there is significant overlap between the factors in helping determine the best location of a site, and the impact that site may have. Marks were awarded holistically across questions 1(a)(ii) and (iii). Candidates should take care to ensure answers are not repeated.
- It is important that candidates are taught to think realistically about their choice of sites or routes in question 1(a). For example, a small retail park in Amble will not be an international tourist attraction because according to the atlas, Newcastle airport is 30 miles away.
- It would be beneficial for candidates to have more practice in exam technique to help them appreciate and recognise the differences in the wording of the questions. For example, questions requiring analysis should be practiced. Careful reading of questions is important. For example, question 2(a)(i) asked candidates how they would gather slope profile data. Many candidates instead focused on vegetation and pH gathering, therefore losing out on marks.
- Candidates should be encouraged to read their answers carefully to avoid repetition of information.
- Candidates and centres should be encouraged to read the course specification for Advanced Higher Geography. They should be aware of the skills and required knowledge and understanding that are being assessed in the 'Gathering and processing

techniques' and 'Data handling' sections of the question paper. Awareness and practice of these skills and knowledge can then benefit and enhance the project–folio.

- Centres should continue to help candidates to understand the relevance and significance of information contained within text boxes and supplementary items. This was evident in candidate responses this year, resulting in answers that correctly related to the context of the question.
- Candidates should be encouraged to annotate sketches and diagrams to assist with explanation of data techniques. For example, a few candidates cleverly used annotated or labelled sketches to assist with explaining how they might collect slope profile data in question 2(a)(i).

Project–folio

- It was good to see candidates continue to develop the use of technology and innovative techniques to generate data, for example, the use of online surveys.
- Marking is holistic and therefore separate pages are much preferred. Binding folios is unhelpful as it makes it difficult for markers to cross-reference.
- Most candidates included page numbers which, due to holistic marking, is very helpful.
- There were clear improvements in the quality of bibliographies this year, though there were a few that still caused some concern. A bibliography should be a work-in-progress throughout the entire project–folio process and should be reflected within the issue and study through citations and footnotes or endnotes.
- In the bibliography, it would be helpful if candidates include the source's date of publication as well as the date of access.
- An issue or study without a bibliography is self-penalising. Bibliographies should be correctly formatted (not just a list of websites). There are online reference generators that centres should encourage candidates to use.
- A few candidates included vast bibliographies without any real evidence that wider reading was used. In terms of prioritisation of sources for the geographical issue, candidates should clearly identify their main sources of information. This is not meant to be a list of best to worst sources of information.
- Candidates should keep their main sources separate in the bibliography to make them more easily identified. Some candidates cleverly put their three main sources under a separate title in their bibliographies this year.
- Section C of the geographical study is an evaluation of gathering techniques, and comments on the reliability of the data gathered. Candidates should also discuss next steps, for example the way in which their data collection may be improved.
- This year, many candidates cleverly incorporated evaluations into tables alongside their list of methods and sampling techniques. Focus however, should remain on evaluation and not on an overly detailed step-by-step methodology.
- A few candidates include a detailed evaluation following their conclusion. Care, however, should be taken to ensure that the conclusion is not diminished.
- Group fieldwork continues to be a concern this year. The sharing of data is acceptable, but it can reduce the opportunity for candidates to develop and demonstrate their own ideas and skills. Candidates should state in their planning and evaluation sections if data was gathered collectively.

- Centres should also ensure that enough data is collected to allow for a variety of different ideas to be investigated. Some centres may have given their candidates the same or a very narrow range of topics for geographical studies. This resulted in candidates within some centres producing studies that were very similar.
- Candidates should be encouraged to develop their own skills and should not feel pressured into writing a study based on a particular group fieldwork experience. There should be options for the geographical study.
- Where candidates are sharing data, centres must make sure that they are always working independently. Candidates must not be sharing processing techniques and analytical points.
- Centres should continue to encourage candidates to adhere to the word limit. Word limits ensure fairness, help avoid repetition of ideas in essays, test candidates' communication skills, and help focus candidates' evaluative and analytical skills.
- Candidates are required to read and sign the flyleaf; this includes their stated word counts.
- The project–folio is an assessment and therefore centres must ensure that assessment evidence submitted by candidates is their own work.
- Candidates should be encouraged to use wider reading to support their own findings in the geographical study. A theory section can demonstrate knowledge and understanding, but it rarely helps analysis.
- The Bradshaw Model may not be the most appropriate method to compare most candidate-researched streams to and should not form the basis of an entire study. Wider reading often benefits candidates who conduct river studies. Centres should encourage candidates to explore the impacts of climate change, changing river ecology and geomorphology, water quality, and other factors when considering river studies in addition to comparing their streams to various models.
- Candidates should ensure that they have enough research sites to enable them to gather sufficient data. In a river study, for example, a minimum of 8 to 12 sites would allow sufficient data to be gathered.
- Candidates should be encouraged to include a map of their study sites.
- Candidates should be encouraged to avoid simplistic research questions.
- Candidates should be encouraged to use a wide range of data gathering techniques. Secondary sources are just as valid as primary sources. However, some candidates continue to treat different websites as different secondary sources. Centres should encourage the use of online questionnaires, textbooks, books, and journals. Centres should also encourage the use of online technology to help candidates conduct interviews remotely.
- It was great to see some candidates using a wider variety of processing techniques this year. Candidates should be encouraged to ensure scales are consistent and that techniques are not 'dumped' together. Integration is important.
- The course specification outlines techniques that candidates could use to process their data. Candidates should be encouraged to develop and enhance their skills and avoid simplistic processing techniques.
- In the geographical issue, candidates should prioritise three main sources to summarise from a wider range of sources. Some markers noted candidates had excellent and

relevant academic sources in their wider reading yet chose to summarise less rigorous articles.

- Candidates should be encouraged to identify topics that are geographical and avoid essays that are more 'modern studies'.
- Candidates' evaluations of sources for the geographical issue should focus on both the author and/or publication and most importantly, the content of the source. There should be less focus on the word choice within those sources.
- Some candidates divided their critical evaluations into sections allowing markers to see clear evidence of wider reading. For example, some had a paragraph that stated, 'research that supports this viewpoint includes…' and 'research that opposes this viewpoint includes…' This is a helpful method for many candidates to access the full range of marks.
- Candidates should be encouraged to compare their three main sources in all their critical evaluations.
- Many candidates had very good titles for their geographical study and geographical issue that provided clear purpose this year. This was enhanced in the justification with clear relevance and explicit use of wider reading.
- Candidates should be encouraged to answer title questions and refer to their justifications when completing their conclusions. Re-reading introductory points can be helpful in creating a conclusion.
- Candidates can demonstrate insight by showing a clear and developed awareness of their research or issue. This is often helped by a wide range of reading; candidates' knowledge of the issue will be stronger if there is clear evidence of background reading.
- There should be clear concluding points, or an answer to the overall question, within the conclusion. In the geographical issue, candidates can state which of the sources they thought was the best, but they should also go beyond this by giving a clear answer to their issue. In the geographical study, concluding each research question, aim or hypothesis can be helpful before bringing it all together in a final overall conclusion.
- There was an improvement in the number of candidates presenting fewer pages of appendices. Centres should encourage candidates to avoid the use of contents pages and appendices. Marks are not awarded for anything in an appendix, and if graphical evidence is in the appendices, marks for 'integration of techniques' will be lost.
- Candidates and centres should read the coursework assessment task on SQA's website for specific information regarding marking instructions and to help understand the requirements.

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 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.

