



Course report 2023

Advanced 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.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 1,176

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 1,109

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	347	Percentage	31.3	Cumulative percentage	31.3	Minimum mark required	98
B	Number of candidates	261	Percentage	23.5	Cumulative percentage	54.8	Minimum mark required	82
C	Number of candidates	235	Percentage	21.2	Cumulative percentage	76	Minimum mark required	67
D	Number of candidates	153	Percentage	13.8	Cumulative percentage	89.8	Minimum mark required	51
No award	Number of candidates	113	Percentage	10.2	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

The question paper performed broadly in line with expectations with feedback suggesting it was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. Most candidates completed the two required parts of the question paper in the allocated time. However, some extended-response questions in part A were perceived to be more demanding for a few candidates.

Section 1: Political issues and research methods was the second most popular area of study with a few candidates attempting questions from this section. In this section, topic A: power and influence (question 2), topic B: political ideology (question 3) and topic C: political structures (question 5) were the most popular questions.

Section 2: Law and order remains the most popular area of study with most candidates attempting questions from this section. In this section, topic B: understanding criminal behaviour (question 11) and topic C: responses by society to crime (questions 13 and 14) were the most popular questions.

Section 3: Social inequality was attempted by a very small number of candidates. In this section, topic A: understanding social inequality (question 17) and topic C: responses to social inequality (question 22) were the most popular questions.

Extended-responses (questions 1–6, 9–14 and 17–22)

Similar structure and framing of the extended-response questions allowed candidates to access the questions and apply their knowledge to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the statements within the questions, while also attempting to make international comparisons. Direction within questions to include ‘reference to the UK/Scotland and any other country or countries’ supported candidates in adopting a comparative approach. The quality of the comparative analysis and evaluation acted to differentiate candidates.

Research methods (questions 7, 15 and 23)

Questions 7, 15 and 23 across the three sections referred to the same research method — observation. Candidates appeared familiar with this research method and engaged well with the question by referring to alternative methods in addition to observation. The extent of engagement with the scenario in each question and the subsequent quality of analysis, evaluation, reference to social science research, and overall conclusion acted to differentiate candidates.

Source evaluation questions (questions 8, 16 and 24)

Source questions across the three sections were all drawn from market research produced by Ipsos. This ensured equity for candidates irrespective of their area of study. Source content allowed candidates to analyse, evaluate and comment on key aspects relating to validity, reliability and overall trustworthiness. The quality of analysis, evaluation, knowledge of social science research, and overall conclusion acted to differentiate candidates.

Overall, candidate performance in the question paper this year was slightly lower than the previous year.

Project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed as expected. Most candidates continue to perform better in the project–dissertation than the question paper.

Most candidates selected titles from the ‘Advanced Higher Modern Studies Approved List of Dissertations’ document. Where candidates developed their own dissertation titles, they often produced insightful dissertations on contemporary issues, which should be encouraged.

Most candidates were familiar with the project–dissertation’s assessment criteria and developed an approach and structure to fit this. The most common approach included:

- ◆ an introduction justifying the political or social issue for research
- ◆ a discrete chapter evaluating research methodologies
- ◆ two or three chapters that draw on a wide and varied range of sources of information to analyse and evaluate the issue, arguments and evidence
- ◆ an overall conclusion
- ◆ an appendix or appendices showing evidence of primary research and/or statistical information
- ◆ a bibliography

Overall, candidate performance in the project–dissertation this year was almost identical to the previous year.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Many candidates displayed good knowledge and understanding of the political and social issues raised in the extended-response questions. However, a few candidates were clearly unprepared for some of the questions sampled in this year's question paper.

Extended-responses (questions 1–6, 9–14 and 17–22)

Across the assessable criteria for the 30-mark extended-response, strong candidates produced high-quality answers containing the following features:

- ◆ **Analysis:** candidates identified and analysed key factors, which they developed and related to the question throughout the main body of the response. They presented contemporary supporting evidence to support their analysis and evaluation, and attributed the source or origin. In their analysis of key issues, candidates integrated evidence from an international comparator to compare, contrast, analyse and evaluate the issue in relation to the UK/Scotland and other countries. High-quality responses also contained reference to ideas and/or theories or the academic arguments of others.
- ◆ **Comparison:** candidates compared the UK/Scotland with a relevant comparator country or countries throughout the essay. In their evaluative and overall conclusions, candidates commented on the extent of difference or similarity between the UK/Scotland and the comparator country or countries cited.
- ◆ **Evaluation:** candidates provided implicit as well as explicit conclusions and considered and evaluated alternative views or theories in relation to the question. Their overall conclusions were justified and included a reason for rejecting or accepting alternative arguments.
- ◆ **Synthesising information to structure and sustain lines of argument:** candidates had a clear line of argument that flowed from an organised and logical sequence of ideas. They offered a developed conclusion, rather than a summary, which directly addressed the question and offered a judgement based on the evidence presented.

Research methods (questions 7, 15 and 23)

Most candidates correctly interpreted that the question required comparison between observation and an alternative method(s). High-quality responses contained features of the following:

- ◆ **Analysis:** candidates who produced quality analysis linked developed points to the scenario stated in the question. They distinguished between covert and overt observation as well as referring to other alternative methods. Quality responses also showed knowledge of the benefits and limitations of using observation and alternative method(s) for researching the scenario. High-quality analysis included supporting evidence from the candidates' own knowledge, research experience or use of the method(s) in academic or contemporary research.

- ◆ Evaluation: candidates who produced quality responses evaluated the effectiveness of observation and alternative method(s) in relation to the scenario outlined in the question. In high-quality responses they also commented on ethical issues related to at least one research method. Candidates commented on common ethical issues including informed consent, harm, confidentiality and anonymity.
- ◆ Conclusion: candidates who presented quality conclusions offered a clear judgement outlining their preferred method in relation to the issue. They clearly stated their justification for preferring one method and reasons for rejecting the other method(s).

Source evaluation questions (questions 8, 16 and 24)

Most candidates analysed and evaluated aspects of the source that enhanced as well as diminished its validity, reliability and trustworthiness. High-quality responses also contained features of the following:

- ◆ Analysis of a source: candidates demonstrated detailed knowledge of aspects of the source, which affected its trustworthiness including provenance, source evidence, methodology, recording approach or date of publication.
- ◆ Evaluation of trustworthiness: candidates used supporting evidence drawn from the source and their own knowledge of social science research. They made reference to alternative approaches that would increase the trustworthiness of the source.
- ◆ Conclusion: candidates presented a clear conclusion quantifying and justifying the extent to which the source was trustworthy.

Project–dissertation

In the project–dissertation, high-quality responses contained the following features:

- ◆ Justifying an appropriate, complex, contemporary political or social issue for research: candidates had titles, hypotheses and aims that were logical, linked and supported analysis and evaluation of a contemporary modern studies issue. They included an introduction that explained the contemporary political or social relevance of the issue and its local, national and/or global significance, with reference to up-to-date issues or events related to the issue. They justified the aims and outlined the line of argument and coverage to come.
- ◆ Evaluating research methodology: in quality responses candidates offered a balanced evaluation of a select range of methods that they used. In their high-quality analysis and evaluation, candidates commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, commented on ethical issues and considerations surrounding the selected methodologies, and also commented on specific, detailed ways in which the use of one of their methods could be improved upon.
- ◆ Using a wide range of sources of information: in high-quality dissertations, candidates used a wide and varied range of primary and secondary sources of information. They accurately referenced primary sources of information, academically evidenced in the appendices and integrated into the main body of the dissertation.
- ◆ Analysing the issue: candidates analysed key issues leading to evaluative comments, which they supported with contemporary evidence, case studies, statistics, theories or examples.

- ◆ Evaluating arguments and evidence: in quality dissertations candidates included implicit and explicit evaluations and conclusions. They presented and evaluated arguments that supported the stated hypothesis as well as alternative views, making it clear which arguments they accepted and which they discounted.
- ◆ Synthesising information to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument, leading to a conclusion, supported by evidence: candidates who produced high-quality dissertations made evaluations or conclusions consistently within chapters, at the end of each chapter, and in their overall conclusion. They raised points within aims and built chapters towards, and linked to, their overall conclusion.
- ◆ Organising, presenting and referencing findings using appropriate conventions: candidates who achieved high or full marks in this area presented a well-organised bibliography, which presented source types in a clear and logical manner. Their references were consistent and in line with an acceptable academic form. Their appendices included detail on the origin and provenance of the primary or secondary information. They integrated and referenced the evidence from appendices in the main body of the dissertation.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Extended-responses (questions 1–6, 9–14 and 17–22)

Some candidates failed to refer to an international comparator(s) or made only cursory reference to another country. In weaker responses, candidates also described rather than analysed, lacked supporting evidence, and presented one-sided responses to the issue. In weaker responses candidates often attempted to turn questions to fit pre-prepared answers rather than answering the questions set.

A few candidates found the following extended-response questions demanding:

- ◆ Question 6 — Political structures: ‘Different levels of government are in a constant state of conflict with each other.’ Discuss...
Candidates who found this question challenging appeared to have pre-prepared a response on the relationship between branches of government, and analysed and evaluated the relationship between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Such responses did not engage with the question and could not gain high marks. This question required candidates to analyse and evaluate relations between differing levels of government such as those between local and national governments, devolved and central governments, states and federal governments, and state and supranational governments.
- ◆ Question 10 — Understanding the criminal justice system: ‘Some issues facing the criminal justice system are of more concern than others.’ Discuss...
Candidates who found this question challenging appeared to apply a narrow, one-sided approach that focused on the problems and limitations of the prison and penal system. Such approaches did not consider alternative perspectives or criminal justice issues and could not gain high marks. This question was best answered by responses that analysed

and evaluated criminal justice issues such as national security, human rights, civil liberties, equality within the criminal justice system, policing or surveillance.

Project–dissertation

A few candidates found the following areas demanding in the project–dissertation:

- ◆ Using a wide range of sources of information: most candidates consulted an adequate number of sources and used a range and variety of appropriate methods of gathering information. However, weaker dissertations continue to be based on research gathered from a limited number of websites.
- ◆ Analysing the issue: a few candidates continue to adopt a weak, one-sided approach to their hypothesis, rather than objectively assessing evidence and arguments in a balanced manner. One-dimensional approaches that fail to consider alternative viewpoints, perspectives or theories, severely reduce the scope for gaining marks and should be discouraged.
- ◆ Organising, presenting and referencing findings using appropriate conventions: a few candidates did not use consistent academic referencing conventions. Weak bibliographies that simply list website URLs were also common in weaker dissertations.
- ◆ Exceeding the maximum word count (5,000 words with 10% toleration): a very small number of candidates received a penalty for exceeding the maximum word count.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Centres should ensure all candidates have access to, and are familiar with, the relevant supporting documentation for Advanced Higher Modern Studies. Centres should also ensure that all candidates are fully informed and familiar with the assessable criteria used for the range of question types across the question paper and the project–dissertation. It is important that candidates know how to structure their responses and manage their time. This will help them respond effectively to the question paper.

Question paper

Extended-responses

Centres should ensure that course coverage complies with the course specification to adequately support candidates. Session 2023–24 will revert to the original course specification assessment structure. Part A will therefore consist of one question from each topic (A–C). Candidates will have to attempt two 30-mark extended-response questions from a choice of these three. Centres should continue to direct candidates to focus on answering the questions set in the question paper and avoid attempting to turn the questions or provide pre-prepared responses.

Research methods questions

Centres should aim to prepare candidates adequately by ensuring that the key research methods are covered. These can be found in the course specification.

Source-based questions

Centres should encourage candidates to critically analyse and evaluate sources and discourage them from simply describing source content or research methodology. Candidates should be directed to make an overall conclusion to research method questions in their responses.

Project–dissertation

Centres can assist candidates in the planning stage of the project–dissertation by ensuring they adopt an appropriate hypothesis and aims. To support this process, centres may wish to make use of the ‘Advanced Higher Approved List of Dissertations’ document available on the Advanced Higher Modern Studies subject page on SQA’s website. However, it is acceptable for candidates to adapt or modify these. Where centres are unsure about the hypothesis, title or aims candidates develop themselves, they may wish to submit a ‘Project–dissertation title feedback form’, also available on the Advanced Higher Modern Studies subject page.

Centres should direct candidates to use stems such as ‘To what extent ...?’, ‘To analyse ...’, ‘To examine ...’, ‘To examine the extent to which ...’, when formulating their aims and chapter titles. A two- or three-chapter approach is advised.

Candidates should be directed to provide an evaluation of a selected range of methods (two to three at most) that they used in the production of their project–dissertation. Analysis and evaluation should comment on benefits and limitations of selected methods, ethical issues related to at least one method, and ways in which the use of at least one method could have been improved on.

Candidates should aim to use a wide and varied range of sources of information. Secondary resources can involve a wide range of sources and may include academic texts, journals, newspapers, websites, documentaries and other audio or visual sources. Primary research is not mandatory for the project–dissertation but often enhances research and offers further insight or perspectives on issues. Where appropriate candidates should be encouraged to carry out primary research.

Candidates should be strongly encouraged to discuss and critically evaluate alternative views and theories as part of their dissertation.

Candidates should avoid summary conclusions and instead offer a conclusion to their dissertation that makes and supports a balanced and considered judgement of the issue.

Centres should adopt a consistent, academic style of referencing and ensure candidates follow this.

Appendices are crucial evidence of the candidate’s research process and should include interview transcripts, letters or emails sent and received, survey results and other resources. Candidates who only conduct secondary research should also include appendices, for example, statistical or graphical information that they analyse, evaluate and integrate into the main body of their dissertation.

Centres should ensure candidates’ dissertations are within the maximum word count and proofread before final submission.

Centres should encourage candidates to ensure final dissertations are produced using the following conventions:

- ◆ size 12 font
- ◆ 1.5 line spacing
- ◆ one-side printing
- ◆ a word count per chapter included
- ◆ an overall word count included

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](#).