Course report 2019

Subject	Spanish
Level	Higher

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. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

The content of the course assessment covered all four contexts of society, learning, employability and culture across all four components. Markers noted that the question papers and marking instructions were very fair and that the papers offered an appropriate level of challenge at Higher.

Question paper 1: Reading

Candidates continue to perform very well in the reading question paper. The questions were balanced in terms of high, low and average demand. The overall purpose question and translation were well done, showing the range of candidate language ability.

Candidates read one text in Spanish in the context of learning about the promotion of global citizenship amongst pupils in Spanish schools. In general there was a good response to the comprehension questions and many candidates understood all of the main points.

The reading text also had a section for candidates to translate into English, which requires a high degree of accuracy in the language. Full marks are only available in the translation with a very good rendering of the text into English. It is positive to see that candidates seem to be dedicating more time to the translation.

Question paper 1: Directed writing

In the directed writing question paper, candidates were given a choice of two stimuli, scenario 1: society, and scenario 2: culture, each with six unseen bullet points to address.

Candidates continue to embrace the element of personalisation and choice in this paper. In the best performances, candidates wrote six distinctive paragraphs addressing all six bullet points to the same extent and length. Two thirds of candidates chose scenario 1: society.

Overall, candidates did well in the directed writing question paper. The slightly increased word count and six bullet points worked well for the majority of candidates. However, some candidates found it more challenging to sustain writing for all six bullet points at the level required at Higher.

Question paper 2: Listening

The listening question paper covered the context of employability. Overall, candidates performed very well in this component of course assessment. The paper offered elements of challenge and candidates coped well with questions with more familiar language. However some candidates did not always provide the expected level of detail in answers for Higher.

Assignment–writing

Overall, the level of writing was good and there were some excellent essays which went beyond the level required at Higher. Candidates embraced the formative aspect of the assignment. There was a wide range of topics covering all contexts, and candidates showed a degree of personalisation and choice.

Centres provided very strong rubrics to the majority of candidates, with some very good suggestions of topic development to embrace the discursive writing element of the assignment. However, it seemed that some candidates were not given rubrics or topics with ideas for development which were appropriate for the task. For example, where candidates write about past holidays, it is not enough to tackle the assignment in a way more appropriate for the previous directed writing task. Instead, candidates should offer different viewpoints, for example pros and cons of going on holidays with parents. Although candidates were not over-penalised for this, it is important that assignment titles lend to discursive writing.

On the whole, content, accuracy and language resource were appropriate to Higher.

Performance–talking

The performance–talking performed as expected.

Revised marking instructions for the performance–talking (valid from session 2018–19) were published in the *Higher Modern Languages Course Specification* (June 2018).

At Higher, candidates now have a discussion (in Spanish) with the teacher or lecturer, rather than the previous format of a spoken presentation, directly followed by a conversation with the teacher or lecturer.

The revised general and detailed marking instructions allow teachers and lecturers to mark candidates' performances with confidence. The majority of centres sampled this session marked candidates' performances in line with national standards.

Teachers and lecturers play an important role in guiding candidates prior to the assessment in their choice of contexts and topics. In the sample of centres verified this year, teachers and lecturers had encouraged candidates to identify topics that gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities against the four aspects.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Overall, the performance of candidates this year in the Higher Spanish course has been very good, and the question papers have worked well. Markers noted that a small number of candidates were possibly not quite prepared for Higher and could not write with the level of accuracy and language resource required for the writing elements at this level.

Question paper 1: Reading

Candidates performed particularly well in the comprehension questions in the reading question paper. Markers felt that the questions were accessible and that the marking instructions were fair. This year candidates found the overall purpose question more challenging, with many candidates gaining only 1 out of the 2 available marks. Some candidates found the translation challenging.

The structure of the question paper enabled candidates with a lesser command of the language to access the paper through more straightforward questions. Most candidates used their literacy skills to look for the 'signposts' offered in the Spanish text, linking them to the questions in English.

Question paper 1: Directed writing

In the directed writing question paper, candidates performed equally well in both scenarios, although most candidates chose scenario 1: society.

Question paper 2: Listening

In the listening question paper, the topics were accessible and candidates could easily relate to the content. However, on the whole, candidates did not give all the detail required in their answers.

Assignment–writing

The assignment–writing worked very well and candidates produced a wide range of very interesting assignments. Most candidates tackled the discursive writing element well, and the level of content, accuracy and language resource often went beyond what is expected at Higher. It is anticipated that for many, this component of course assessment will offer a strong preparation for Advanced Higher.

Performance–talking

The majority of candidates coped well with the revised format of the task and were able to sustain the discussion for the recommended duration.

Based on the centres verified, the vast majority of candidates gained pegged marks 15 or higher, and the majority of those gained pegged marks 27 or 30. Very few candidates gained pegged marks 12 or lower.

Where teachers or lecturers used open-ended questions this was more effective in eliciting detailed and complex language from candidates. Candidates covered a range of topics and a wide variety of structures, vocabulary and tenses appropriate to Higher.

Some performances sampled evidenced confident delivery with little undue hesitation, very good grammatical accuracy and use of interjections and questions by the candidate.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1: Reading

In some cases, candidates showed that they had an understanding of the Spanish text but their expression in English let them down.

Candidates found question 2(b) very difficult. Very few managed to get the idea of 'doing laps' around the school, and this expression in Spanish has been poorly understood.

The overall purpose question appears to have been more challenging than in previous years, and not all candidates provided a justification in their answers.

In the translation, some candidates struggled to cope with *seguir colaborando* and *a lo largo de*. Few candidates recognised the future tense *será,* and *tanto... como* proved challenging. However, the translation provided the appropriate level of challenge expected at Higher.

Question paper 1: Directed writing

Some candidates found it difficult to sustain accuracy and language resource throughout the six bullet points, although most candidates covered all bullet points. There were some excellent responses which went beyond the scope of the task. There were, however, many responses where candidates only gave cursory coverage to the bullet point. Centres should encourage candidates to be clearer that they are addressing the bullet points asked for, rather than using unrelated material from a pre-learned essay.

There were difficulties for some candidates in the use of the past tenses. Some candidates were not writing at the level required for Higher, and centres should consider the level of presentation.

Question paper 2: Listening

The listening question paper was of a similar level of challenge to previous years. Very few candidates gained the second mark in question 2(a). Question 2(c)(i) proved particularly challenging.

Assignment–writing

Overall, the assignment–writing was done very well.

Most candidates were given rubrics and further ideas in the assignment which allowed them to develop writing of a discursive nature. However, there was a minority of candidates whose writing, in terms of language content, was not discursive and centres should take this into account for next session.

Performance–talking

Among the samples verified, weaker performances often highlighted errors which detracted from the overall impression. Some candidates could not always be understood as there were some serious errors heard at this level, for example the wrong gender of nouns, incorrect agreement of adjectives, and key words missing from responses.

In some performances, the types of questions tended to elicit language that would be more typical of responses at National 5. Where this arose, performances were quite uneven and candidates could not sustain the use of detailed and complex language expected at Higher. The use of closed questions in a few instances did not help candidates to expand on their answers.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

In both reading and listening, candidates should read questions carefully, and respond giving the correct amount of information, ensuring to give enough detail. Detailed marking instructions for reading, directed writing and listening question papers are available in the Higher Spanish past papers section of SQA's website, and show the level of detail required for answers.

Candidates should re-read their answers to be sure that they make sense in English, especially in the translation.

Question paper 1: Reading

In the reading question paper, in the overall purpose question, most candidates understood that one assertion and one piece of evidence from the text is enough to gain 2 marks. Candidates should provide an explanation in English when citing Spanish from the text; merely adding a word-for-word translation in English adds nothing to their justification. Many candidates wrote considerably more than they needed to, in a way that is more similar to the Advanced Higher overall purpose question, and this could have had a detrimental effect on the translation as candidates did not allow themselves enough time.

Candidates should read the questions carefully and re-read their responses to check English expression. The reading questions offer candidates 'signposts' to answers in the text. Candidates overall had a good grasp of how to tackle the reading text. However, there were some who were not guided by the 'signposts' and as a result, provided information which, although not wrong, was irrelevant.

In the translation, candidates performed well overall, but it is important to keep in mind that full marks in the translation are only available if there is a very good rendering of the text into English. Candidates should allow enough time to complete the translation where accuracy plays a very important role.

Question paper 1: Directed writing

As the directed writing question paper now has six bullet points, it is important that candidates dedicate an equal amount of words (150–180 in total) to all six bullet points. It was felt that some candidates did not manage to sustain accuracy and language resource appropriate to Higher throughout their piece of writing.

The best performances structured the directed writing into six distinctive paragraphs, of equal length. It is important that candidates show use of preterite and imperfect tenses, as well as the conditional in the last bullet point.

Some candidates struggled to go beyond the first person, and some bullet points required candidates to write about what they did with their friends.

Some recurring inaccuracies in Spanish were present in using gender, adjectival agreement and verb tenses. Some candidates did not know when to use indefinite or definite articles.

Ser and *estar* usage is another recurring issue, as is the lack of precision when using the preterite and the imperfect.

Many candidates found difficulty using the subjunctive after *cuando*. Candidates should be comfortable using phrases such as *cuando sea*, *cuando vaya*, *cuando tenga* if they are writing about their future intentions to work abroad or do a language exchange, or when recommending the experience of spending a summer in Spain or taking part in a festival in a Spanish speaking country.

An important classroom exercise is to ask candidates to mark directed writing created by their peers, teacher or lecturer, or the exemplars published on the understanding standards website. This helps candidates to become familiar with the marking instructions so that they understand what they have to do to improve their writing.

Question paper 2: Listening

In the listening question paper, it is important that candidates provide enough information expected at Higher. A helpful exercise to do with candidates, especially if they did not do National 5 Spanish, is to look at the level of detail needed in answers in past listening question papers at Higher.

Assignment–writing

For detailed information about the assignment–writing, please refer to the understanding standards website. This gives examples of a wide range of topics and marks for the assignment–writing.

An important classroom exercise is to share these exemplars and the marking instructions with candidates so that they understand the importance of content, accuracy and language resource. It is also useful for candidates to mark some of the exemplars in pairs and then justify their mark.

Performance–talking

Teachers and lecturers should continue to include grammar practice and coverage of the rules of the language as an integral part of learning and teaching. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to use a variety of persons and tenses, as appropriate to the topics chosen. The assignment–writing could contribute towards aiding candidates' understanding of how language works.

Many confident performances demonstrated very good language resource. In some instances, candidates did not use detailed and complex language and this detracted from the overall quality. In relation to the level of language, teachers and lecturers can refer to the productive grammar grid in Appendix 2 of the *Higher Modern Languages Course Specification*, and Understanding Standards exemplars of Higher performances on SQA's secure website.

Teachers and lecturers are encouraged to ensure candidates have strategies for asking questions to be repeated, or language structures and phrases to use when they have not understood any part of the discussion. Candidates who were able to use interjections and ask relevant questions could sustain the discussion more confidently.

Where candidates struggle to answer certain questions, teachers and lecturers should continue to support the candidate by rephrasing, asking another question or changing the topic. Teachers and lecturers should give candidates the appropriate thinking time before doing this, and should avoid interrupting.

The length of the performances sampled varied, and teachers and lecturers should refer to *the Higher Modern Languages Course Specification* in the assessment conditions for the performance–talking, and the recommended duration of the discussion. This is to ensure that candidates are able to demonstrate their ability to meet the demands of the task. Where performances sampled went beyond or were significantly shorter than the recommended duration, neither approach was necessarily to the candidate's benefit.

Teachers and lecturers should put a variety of questions to the candidates, even where the candidates have selected the same or similar topics from within the same centre. In turn, this provides for personalisation and choice and provides scope for candidates to produce a more varied discussion.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates have the opportunity to practise talking skills in preparation for the performance–talking. The 'Approaches to learning and teaching: talking' section in the appendix of the *Higher Modern Languages Course Specification* provides examples of how to develop candidates' talking skills, and suggests talking activities as part of learning and teaching.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	2795

Number of resulted entries in 2019	3054

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	47.1%	47.1%	1439	84
B	19.3%	66.4%	590	72
C	16.8%	83.3%	514	60
D	10.5%	93.8%	321	48
No award	6.2%	-	190	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

♦ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
♦ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional 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 every year for each subject at each level to bring together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The principal assessor and SQA qualifications manager meet with the relevant SQA head of service and statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
♦ Where standards 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 to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.