



Course report 2022

Subject	Psychology
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 appeals.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022	3160
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

A	Percentage	25.9	Cumulative percentage	25.9	Number of candidates	820	Minimum mark required	84
B	Percentage	22.6	Cumulative percentage	48.5	Number of candidates	710	Minimum mark required	71
C	Percentage	20.1	Cumulative percentage	68.6	Number of candidates	640	Minimum mark required	59
D	Percentage	15.0	Cumulative percentage	83.6	Number of candidates	475	Minimum mark required	46
No award	Percentage	16.4	Cumulative percentage	N/A	Number of candidates	520	Minimum mark required	N/A

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in appendix 1 of this report.

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 page of [SQA's website](#).

Section 1: comments on the assessment

The modified question paper sampled content across the two mandatory topics of individual behaviour — sleep and dreams (section 1) and social behaviour — conformity and obedience (section 2). Each section had a total of 30 marks, giving a revised total of 60 marks. Candidates were given the opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills, including description, explanation, evaluation, application, and analysis.

Modifications were also put in place for the assignment. Teachers and lecturers were able to suggest research topics and research methods to candidates. Candidates were able to make use of online research tools to generate data and a minimum number of research participants was introduced, which was three.

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected, with feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicating it was fair and accessible to candidates.

Question 1(d) required candidates to answer the question ‘What can be concluded from Dement and Kleitman’s (1957) study?’. This is a relatively new way of eliciting analytical information from candidates and a question of this type was used in the 2020–21 question paper. Weaker candidates appeared less familiar with answering a question of this nature and the grade boundary was adjusted to account for this.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected, with the modifications leading to a small increase in average marks awarded. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested it was appropriately demanding.

There was, however, an increase in the number of ethical breaches, where candidates had undertaken unethical research. Centres are required to ensure candidates apply the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines in relation to their assignment.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Overall candidates gained more marks for Section 2: Social behaviour — conformity and obedience than for Section 1: Individual behaviour — sleep and dreams. This is likely due to the higher order skill of analysis being required in question 1, and an increased number of marks being available for lower order skills of description and explanation in question 2.

There was an adjustment to the marking of question 1(c) where candidates were asked to analyse factors affecting sleep. In analysis questions, half the available marks are normally awarded for description and evaluation. In this analysis question the marks available for description were increased, due to the difficulty of evaluating factors affecting sleep. This enabled candidates to access marginally more marks for the skill of description instead of the slightly higher order skill of evaluation.

Many candidates achieved full marks for question 2(a)(i) in which they were asked to 'Describe Mori and Arai's (2010) study into conformity'. These candidates were able to provide four descriptive points about this study and most candidates were able to provide at least two descriptive points about the study.

Question 2(a)(ii), which required candidates to evaluate the Mori and Arai (2010) study of conformity, was also answered well, with many candidates providing developed evaluative points.

An increase in the number of marks being awarded for the higher order skills of analysis and application suggest that some candidates were well-prepared for these questions. Many candidates were able to relate factors of obedience to the scenario effectively in question 2(c). In addition, many candidates were able to provide some analytical points for factors affecting sleep in question 1(c).

Assignment

Most candidates performed well in section A (the introduction) of the assignment. This section requires candidates to describe background theory and research relating to their topic and it attracted the highest average mark of the assignment.

Candidate marks increased for sections F and G of the assignment, showing that some candidates are developing their analytical skill in relation to their results and many candidates are providing specific evaluative points about their procedure, sample or method.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Many candidates performed poorly on question 1(b), which required candidates to evaluate Crick and Mitchison's (1986) Reorganisational theory of dreaming. Some candidates provided evaluative points for research studies instead of the theory. Many of the evaluative points provided were not fully developed and so could not gain the full 2 marks for each point made.

Question 1(d), which required candidates to provide conclusions of the Dement and Kleitman (1957) study, attracted the lowest marks for this section of the paper. Few candidates were able to provide four conclusions for this study, with many candidates providing findings of the study instead of conclusions.

In question 2(c) candidates were asked to explain the behaviour in the given scenario, with reference to factors affecting obedience and research evidence. A few candidates linked factors with the scenario and gave explanations of their chosen factors but did not refer to research evidence. This had an impact on the number of marks available for these candidates.

Assignment

Many candidates did not provide a sufficiently operationalised hypothesis to be awarded the hypothesis mark in section B of the assignment. Candidates completing a correlational study sometimes provided a causal hypothesis. This was inappropriate as correlational hypotheses should be written in terms of relationships or links between co-variables. Correlational studies do not measure cause and effect.

In section C of the assignment, most candidates could identify the method chosen for their research, however, some could not justify their use of this research. This was also evident in section E, where candidates are required to justify their use of descriptive statistics, as some candidates were unable to do so.

Candidates who completed research using a correlational design sometimes became confused when writing their method and results sections of the assignment (sections C and E). They showed a lack of understanding in their hypotheses, co-variables and in the statistical procedures chosen. This was also evident with a few candidates who completed research using a natural or quasi experiment.

Candidates made some errors in identifying the sampling technique used in section C of the report, with a few candidates identifying their sampling technique as being opportunity when it should have been quota, for example, when their independent variable was gender or age.

Few candidates gained the full 4 marks available for section D of the report as responses were generic with little consideration of the specific impact their research would have on their participants. There was also an increase in ethical breaches, which affected section D of the assignment.

Ethical breaches

Ethical breaches identified in 2022 included the following:

Deception

A number of candidates completed unethical conformity experiments involving replications of Jenness or Asch style experiments. Candidates created experiments that deceived participants by using confederates or group discussion in a situation of overt social pressure.

Protection of participants

A number of candidates conducted research that potentially put their participants at risk of physical and/or psychological harm, discomfort or stress. Candidates across a range of centres conducted research involving the following:

- ◆ Jenness or Asch style replications
- ◆ manipulating participants' pre-sleep routine, for example, exposing participants to blue light before sleep or changing their caffeine consumption
- ◆ no debrief given to participants
- ◆ post-experimental interviews asking participants about their mental state after participating in the research
- ◆ use of different stimuli to alter participant mood
- ◆ memory recall experiments involving complex English words with participants whose first language is not English
- ◆ using incentives to encourage participation
- ◆ approaching strangers to act as participants. Ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants and obtaining participants in this way puts candidates at potential risk
- ◆ using participants who are under 16 years of age. It is clearly stated in the coursework assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used
- ◆ posting questionnaires on open social media sites, which means there is no screening mechanism for age of participants or effective mechanisms for gaining informed consent
- ◆ questionnaires involving questions on low mood, anxiety levels, dream content (the questions were considered invasive), medical conditions and/or history, exam subjects passed and at what grades, and questions on self-esteem levels in groups where there are already potentially low levels of self-esteem

Confidentiality

A few candidates included certain details about their centre or class group allowing their participants to be identified, which is a breach of confidentiality. This occurred both in section C of the report and in the appendices. There were also a few candidates who included personal details on information given to participants, for example a mobile phone number or personal email address on the debrief. This is a safeguarding issue for candidates as ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants.

Centre office staff were occasionally involved in confirming the personal details of participants and this is considered a data protection breach.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

The modifications put in place for the 2021–22 examination diet supported most candidates towards success in the question paper and modifications remain in place for session 2022–23. Centres are reminded that although the optional topics will not be assessed in the 2023 question paper, they still form part of the Higher Psychology course, and candidates should have the opportunity to study them throughout the course.

Candidate knowledge and understanding of the two mandatory topics is well-developed and centres are encouraged to continue to use the course specification to support their candidates.

Candidates will benefit from continued development of the skills required by the course, particularly the higher order skills of application and analysis. Guidance for centres on how to do this are given in the appendix of the course specification, and in an SQA Academy course. There are now a number of past papers that will also be of use to centres when supporting their candidates to develop these skills.

Centres are directed towards SQA's [Understanding Standards website](#), which has examples of candidate evidence and detailed commentaries about mark allocations.

The majority of candidates studying Higher Psychology are new to the subject. As the course contains highly abstract content level, centres are encouraged to carefully consider the ability of potential candidates when putting them forward for this level.

Assignment

Candidates may benefit from completing assignments from the optional topics in the Higher Psychology course. This would give candidates a deeper understanding of topics not assessed in the question paper.

Candidates would benefit from support and guidance to enable them to provide hypotheses that are fully operationalised. As research is designed around the hypothesis, an improved understanding as evidenced by appropriate hypotheses, would also support candidates towards making decisions about the method they use.

Centre guidance on the development of the skills of 'justifying' and 'applying' their choice of method and descriptive statistics would also benefit candidates.

Candidates should be encouraged to use appropriate terminology and avoid terms such as 'prove', 'statistical significance' (unless inferential statistics have been calculated) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used). Candidates should also be supported towards writing in the third person as the report is an objective account of their research process.

Centres are reminded that assignments must be submitted using an approved SQA template, with candidates only identified via the flyleaf and their Scottish Candidate Number

at the bottom of each page. Information on use of the template is available on the [Higher Psychology subject page](#).

Ethical research procedures are essential, and candidates must be encouraged to think carefully about the impact of their research on participants. Centres should support candidates to ensure that the [British Psychological Society \(BPS\) ethical guidelines](#) are adhered to when candidates are planning and conducting their research.

The BPS has published a guide that may be useful to candidates who conduct research online: <https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/conducting-research-human-participants-during-covid-19>

Further guidance on ethical procedures is available in the [Higher Psychology course support notes](#) on SQA's website and in the [Association for the Teaching of Psychology \(ATP\) Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-Degree Level](#).

SQA's [Understanding Standards](#) website has examples of candidate assignments with detailed commentaries on marks awarded which can be used by teachers and lecturers to support candidates towards success in their research assignment.

Appendix 1: 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 including assessment modifications and revision support, was introduced to support candidates as they returned to formal national exams and other forms of external assessment. This was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, SQA adopted a more generous approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses than it would do in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams have done so in very different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019.

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 2022. 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 revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2022 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 2022 Awarding—Methodology Report](#).