Course report 2026

Higher Modern Studies, SCQF level 6

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question paper and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

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Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 8,923

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 8,772

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	2,818	32.1	32.1	77
B	1,903	21.7	53.8	65
C	1,718	19.6	73.4	53
D	1,232	14.0	87.4	41
No award	1,101	12.6	100	Not applicable

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- ‘Most’ means greater than or equal to 70%.
- ‘Many’ means 50% to 69%.
- ‘Some’ means 25% to 49%.
- ‘Few’ or ‘a few’ means less than 25%.

You can find statistical reports on our website.

General commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, we aim 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's very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, we hold a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. We 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.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do

this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy.

How the course assessment performed

Question paper 1

Question paper 1 performed largely as expected, presenting an appropriate level of challenge.

The most popular questions in each section were:

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

Question paper 2

Question 1 was more challenging than expected.

Question 2 performed as intended.

Question 3, while still challenging, proved accessible for many candidates.

Assignment

We made no changes to the assignment assessment task or the marking instructions. The assignment performed as intended.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper 1

Question 1(a)

Most candidates demonstrated knowledge and analysis of the ways in which the UK and Scottish Parliaments can monitor the activities of their respective governments. Candidates commonly referred to question time and committees.

Question 2(b)

Many candidates performed well in this question, considering a wide range of policies from all sections of government. Candidates could include any area of policy including health and social welfare. Many candidates effectively discussed UK-wide examples and specific Scottish examples. They referenced policies including National Minimum Wage, National Living Wage, Universal Credit, free school meals, Minimum Unit Pricing, free prescriptions, PIPs, sugar tax, winter fuel payments and The Baby Box.

Question 2(d)

Many candidates provided detailed knowledge of custodial and non-custodial sentences. They made valid comparisons and supported evaluative comments with statistical evidence.

Question 3(b)

Most candidates provided responses on the USA, with some candidates focusing on China and a few candidates concentrating on South Africa or Brazil. They presented detailed knowledge of the factors that create international influence including membership of various international organisations, such as the UN.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — source conclusions

Conclusion 3: most candidates identified the link between campaign spending and voter turnout and supported it with relevant source evidence.

Overall conclusion: most candidates successfully identified that age had the biggest impact on the 2024 UK General Election. A few candidates identified that class had the biggest impact on the 2024 UK General Election and provided appropriate evidence from the sources.

Question 2 — source objectivity

Many candidates provided appropriate evidence from within and between the sources to support and oppose the view. Most candidates made it clear which way they were arguing and effectively linked evidence, gun laws and gun deaths in different states.

A few candidates managed to provide an effective overall conclusion on the extent to which weak gun laws were the main cause of gun-related deaths.

Question 3 — source reliability

Source A: some candidates correctly identified that YouGov are a very well-respected polling company with a good reputation for accuracy. Many candidates also identified the sample size used by YouGov as a positive when considering reliability.

Source B: many candidates correctly argued that the political bias of newspapers had a negative impact on reliability. Some candidates correctly identified the date as a negative of this source and importantly explained that ‘many things’ will have changed in two years. A few candidates highlighted the positive aspect that the credentials of the named journalist could be checked.

Source C: most candidates recognised that a charity such as Age UK may be biased towards their own cause and that the date of the source would have a negative impact on reliability as ‘things may have changed’.

Overall judgement: most candidates chose source A as the most reliable and many candidates provided comparative evidence concerning all three sources to justify their choice.

Assignment

Most candidates demonstrated a good level of background knowledge concerning their issue and managed to effectively frame the issue and their options. Candidates gained most, if not all, knowledge marks for the background and framing of their issue by opening with an introductory section sometimes titled ‘background and framing’ or ‘background to the issue’. Although no specific structure for the assignment is specified, most candidates started this way.

Many candidates gained high marks for analysis and synthesis through effective source use. Sources were referenced and the information developed and used as argument or judgement, rather than simply repeated.

Most candidates successfully took the approach of identifying a social problem and then discussing potential solutions.

Many candidates gained high marks for structure and decisions.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper 1

Question 1(b)

Many candidates managed to provide only a simple description and discussion of ‘first past the post’ and the ‘additional member system’ in their response. Some candidates introduced a second or third system as part of their simple analysis. Few candidates could provide an accurate or detailed description or analysis of ‘single transferable vote’. Many candidates confused different voting systems.

A few candidates managed to provide accurate, in-depth explanations of how each system resulted in fair or unfair representation. Although exemplification tended to be up to date, many examples lacked accuracy. Many candidates argued incorrectly that

the simplicity of ‘first past the post’ led to higher turnouts. This did not gain any marks.

Question 2(a)

Many candidates discussed factors such as race, gender, education, housing and low pay. Many candidates provided vague and largely inaccurate discussion. Some candidates did not explain causes well and therefore could not access the full range of marks. Some candidates tried to answer the question as an impact question.

Question 2(c)

While only a few candidates completed this question, many who did provided quite vague, generic answers that lacked specific Modern Studies exemplification and provided only simplistic analysis and evaluation.

Question 3(a)

Although this type of question has appeared in previous question papers, some candidates were not well prepared, and answers often did not contain the standard of knowledge or analysis required at Higher level. Few candidates discussed more than one group. Some candidates provided examples that were often vague, with answers often focusing on broad generalisations and stereotypes.

Question 3(c)

Many candidates who had studied development in Africa as a world issue could only provide a very vague, generic answer with very few specific African examples. Candidates who studied LGBTQ+ issues provided very basic answers with little reference to individual countries or to any international examples.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — source conclusions

Conclusion 1: many candidates did not make any comparison in their conclusion to previous elections and could not gain marks.

Conclusion 2: some candidates did not make any comparison in their conclusion to previous elections and could not gain marks.

Some candidates provided two pieces of source evidence to support their conclusions, gaining 2 marks. They then tried to provide an evaluative comment to gain a third mark. This was often unsuccessful as their attempted evaluation was no more than a rewording of their initial conclusion, or a basic explanation of the evidence already presented.

Question 2 — source objectivity

Many candidates argued that the statement was completely accurate and did not include any quantitative judgement, so did not gain any marks for this. Some candidates did not provide an overall judgement.

Question 3 — source reliability

Many candidates incorrectly argued that there is a cut-off point at which sources stop being reliable, for example, ‘Source A is within the five-year limit that is acceptable in Modern Studies’. Many candidates argued that sources A, B and C were ‘up to date and still accurate’.

Some candidates identified bias as an issue in sources B and C. However, they did not explain the meaning of bias or how this impacts a source’s reliability.

Many candidates mistakenly believed that YouGov is a government source and that this therefore adds to its reliability.

Assignment

A few candidates chose a research topic that would have been more suited to Geography, History, RMPS, Biology or Chemistry. Topics such as ‘global warming’ and ‘assisted dying’ contain some elements of Modern Studies, but some candidates were unable to restrict their discussion to social, economic or political considerations.

Some candidates only included web addresses on their research sheets. A lack of direct referencing of the research sheet then made it impossible for candidates to achieve analysis and synthesis marks.

Some candidates, who only included web addresses, simply provided details of the website's content from memory without comment or analysis. This gained no marks.

Some candidates ordered their sources on their research sheet in the order they intended to use them in their report. This often led to very simplistic reports that did little more than link the quotes with generic and inaccurate analysis. Some candidates regularly used standard phrases like 'this demonstrates' or 'this shows' but then provided no accurate or relevant analysis.

Many candidates gained their 5 background and framing knowledge marks in an introductory section but did not include any knowledge worthy content thereafter. The bulk of their report consisted of source use. A few candidates used their sources effectively in this introduction, gaining analysis and synthesis marks rather than knowledge.

A few candidates provided bullet point lists of statistics to gain background and framing knowledge marks. This was often unsuccessful as the information was either irrelevant or did not provide an adequate explanation of the issue or alternative courses of action. This approach was not suited to the conventions of a report.

A few candidates did not evaluate the usefulness and reliability of their sources. Some candidates, who attempted to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of their sources, answered in very generic terms without making specific reference to the sources they used in their research.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper 1

You should continue to provide candidates with the best up-to-date examples with which to illustrate their points. Some candidates provided very old examples in section 1 of the paper when they could have used more recent examples to illustrate the same points.

You should encourage candidates to avoid generic story-type answers using only broad generalisations and stereotypes. For example, candidates should use real statistics about African countries and their development issues rather than broad ‘In Africa …’ comments.

You should encourage candidates to learn the topics they have studied and not just memorise a series of essays on them. Resource sharing through online groups or portals can have a positive impact on candidate performance but may be limiting for some candidates especially if they do not exactly match the wording of exam questions.

You should remind candidates that evaluations or conclusions should be judgements that refer back to the question and provide an overall answer to the question. They should be more than a simple summary of previously made points.

Question paper 2

You should remind candidates 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 gain partial marks. Absolute statements will gain no marks.

You 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. You should discourage candidates from simply copying from the sources without development.

You 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 can also gain marks. For example, knowing that the Daily Mail has a Conservative or right-wing bias.

In the ‘reliability’ question, you should remind candidates 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 Daily Mail’s article is two years old and some details may now have changed, it was written when the controversy over winter fuel payments was at its height so provides reliable contemporary information’.

You should ensure candidates are aware 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.

You should stress 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 a maximum of 1 mark.

Assignment

You should remind candidates that if they include only web addresses on their research sheets, they must explicitly reference these sources, or they will not gain analysis or synthesis marks. Simply repeating what the source said, even if it is from memory, will not gain marks.

You should stress that knowledge in the assignment should explain the background and significance of the issue and alternative course of action or it should support or oppose the candidate’s overall arguments. A bullet point list of facts does neither of these things.

You should emphasise to candidates that only sources that appear on the research sheet can gain marks in the evaluation of their sources.