Course report 2023

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design)

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive)

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: Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design)

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   666

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   689

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	222	Percentage	32.2	Cumulative percentage	32.2	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	200	Percentage	29	Cumulative percentage	61.2	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	216	Percentage	31.3	Cumulative percentage	92.6	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	42	Percentage	6.1	Cumulative percentage	98.7	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	9	Percentage	1.3	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.

Grade boundary and statistical information: Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive)

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   1,278

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   1,250

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	436	Percentage	34.9	Cumulative percentage	34.9	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	400	Percentage	32	Cumulative percentage	66.9	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	358	Percentage	28.6	Cumulative percentage	95.5	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	49	Percentage	3.9	Cumulative percentage	99.4	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	7	Percentage	0.6	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.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Portfolio

Creative freedom

Both Advanced Higher Art and Design courses give candidates a high degree of creative freedom. Candidates can choose any theme and submit work in a vast range of media. This openness has encouraged evolving and diverse approaches. Markers noted that many candidates showed a deliberate sense of direction and a familiarity with materials and relevant visual elements, which suggests that they had created their portfolios on a foundation of preparatory work.

Diversity of themes and design briefs

This year's range of thematic ideas in both the design and expressive portfolios was wider than in previous years. Some candidates' portfolios reflected their personal experiences, interests, and concerns, such as family life, pets, teen life, nostalgia, personal memorabilia, cultural roots, and family ties.

Concerns about health continues to be a prominent theme in some portfolios. These included dementia, old age, mental health, anxiety about body image, and mortality.

Ideals and social commentary were also present in some design and expressive portfolios. These portfolios explored issues connected to climate change, feminism, income inequality, religious beliefs, LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, the meat industry, pacificism, political propaganda, and satire. The built environment has always provided a ready vehicle for observation and expression. This year, some portfolios were inspired by the built environment and architectural design. Some candidates used these as an atmospheric backdrop for figurative ideas or animations.

Many candidates used forms in nature as a starting point for their expressive or design portfolios. Nature provides the mixture of colour, pattern, and shape that has traditionally inspired ideas.

Modifications

Modifications to the portfolio continued in session 2022–23, with candidates being required to submit between six and 12 A1 sheets (or equivalent). This modification helped candidates to produce more focused portfolios. Markers noted that most six-sheet portfolios demonstrated enough evidence to satisfy the course requirements and enabled candidates to access the full range of marks.

We are keeping this modification in place for session 2023–24 and onwards.

Materials and techniques

Drawing

Drawing appeared in many forms this year, such as 3D drawing or incising a line on acetate for etching. Candidates used more techniques and materials than in previous years, but standard refinement and observation still underpinned the work in most portfolios.

Painting

Many candidates who developed their painting skills during the Higher course extended their range of techniques and subject matter at Advanced Higher. For some, the technical challenge of painting faces or reflective surfaces became a theme, and this led to an exploration of tonal contrast, colour variation, textural layering, or lighting effects.

Digital media

The use of digital media is becoming more popular in Advanced Higher submissions. Some portfolios featured digitally created research, development, and resolution of ideas. Markers were impressed by candidates' skills in using editing apps such as Procreate; 3D modelling, drawing, and painting apps such as SketchUp; and their use of software to create animated films in a stop-motion style. Digital media provided a rich mixture of new and traditional art materials to many portfolios.

Using basic materials

Some candidates produced exciting results from the most basic materials, such as sensitive drawings made from pencil or pastels; a whole portfolio of expressive portraits in charcoal; fashion design from folded newspaper, corrugated card, and recycled plastic bottles; and pinhole photography using household materials.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Practical expressive and design work

As with last year, a high proportion of portfolios achieved top marks. These portfolios combined:

- the voice of the candidate
- clear presentation
- diverse lines of creative process
- technical skill
- creative work for candidates with limited drawing skills

The voice of the candidate

Many of this year's portfolios clearly demonstrated evidence of a personal choice of theme and the independent development of ideas, materials, and techniques.

Clear presentation

Markers were impressed that many candidates defined the theme or design brief and presented work in a logical sequence of research, development, and resolution that was coherent. These candidates numbered and annotated their sheets, linked their development work to research, and identified resolutions.

Diverse lines of creative process

Markers noted the part played by the initial source material in many of this year's portfolios. The source material was diverse and contrasting such as fine art; popular culture; personal experience; first-hand drawings; and references to science, politics, and geography. This rich mix of starting points can contain the promise of an interesting and ambitious creative process that leads to an interesting resolution.

Technical skill

There were outstanding examples of drawing and painting in many portfolios. Markers also noted many other skills this year, such as card model making, sewing, jewellery, digital drawing, and Photoshop editing and manipulation.

Creative work for candidates with limited drawing skills

In many expressive portfolios, markers were impressed by candidates who were creative or personally expressive. Some candidates found ways to create practical work that expressed their ideas brilliantly using mixed media such as printmaking, collage, photography, and digital drawing. In many design portfolios, candidates explored ways of creating fashion, illustration, jewellery, and architecture without using traditional drawing skills.

Contextual analysis

The visual connection

Many portfolios displayed a clear link between the written and practical work, which supported the contextual analysis as an essential part of the portfolio. Many candidates selected a topic that had an impact on their creative process and the influence of the topic is evident throughout the practical work. Markers noted a visual connection between written work and art or design work. In many portfolios the choice of topic and the subsequent discussion of work clearly complemented and informed the creative process.

Topics not biographies

Many of the best examples of contextual analysis had titles that addressed a specific aspect of the topic. One example focused on a self-portrait by Rembrandt and explored 'Representing the Elderly' by looking at the artist's painting of the elderly. The analysis of a design by Iris van Herpen was titled 'Digital technology in fashion'. In a design portfolio on animation the contextual analysis referred to stills from the film 'Spirited Away' to discuss 'Satirical characters in Studio Ghibli'. In these examples, the candidates avoided providing a biography or general information, and instead provided a discussion relating to a particular topic.

Illustrating analysis

Most candidates were very experienced in the analytical part of the contextual analysis, which was likely due to responding to visual elements of artworks or designs in the National 5 and Higher question papers. Some candidates found that illustrating specific aspects of the work through captioned details was beneficial to their overall analysis.

Individual comment

Individuality was evident in this year's written contextual analysis. Some candidates chose to discuss more accessible examples such as video-game characters, magazine photos, or stills from films. By expressing their personal critical reaction to the chosen work, they showed that images, designs, and artefacts can convey ideas, feelings, and meanings.

Evaluation

Turning points

Many candidates commented on changes of direction they took while making their portfolio. This aspect of the evaluation encourages candidates to explain their intentions and why they reached a turning point or felt the need to alter or rearrange their work. Many candidates performed well in this aspect.

Evaluating conceptual portfolios

Many candidates produced effective evaluations that explained the aims of conceptual work that may not have been obvious, while also providing a critical appraisal and important insights.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Practical expressive and design work

Flexibility

Some candidates did not perform well in the creative process of the Advanced Higher courses. These candidates did not demonstrate flexibility or the capacity to rethink possible solutions or rearrange ideas to reimagine the initial stimulus in different forms.

Applied understanding of art or design practice

Markers noted that in some portfolios, candidates used images only as a 'mood board' and did not show how the images informed the development of their practical work. Showing that work has been informed by artists or designers can be a beneficial step in the creative process.

Repetitive experiments

Trying out different solutions can be an exciting but challenging part of the creative process of developing ideas. Candidates can show their understanding of the visual elements by putting their ideas through iterations, such as composition, shape, colour, or texture. Some candidates did not demonstrate their understanding of art grammar. Some candidates repeated the same image, sometimes as a print, or a traced copy, or in different digital versions. These repetitive experiments do not always genuinely represent a creative process.

Screenshots are no substitute for genuine development of ideas. Some candidates who presented videos, animations, or films spent their time on the finished product without planning and researching their work. Developmental work in the form of storyboards or outtakes or shot planning may be rough in nature, but it is more valuable to the process than screenshots of the finished work.

Photography portfolios

Advanced Higher offers a broad range of opportunity for candidates who have enjoyed Higher Photography and want to expand their creative ideas. However, a few candidates who submitted photography portfolios did not demonstrate effective experimentation with materials or photographic techniques.

Design briefs

A few candidates included a detailed brief that described the design they were going to make, limiting the creative process to small decisions, for example about colour or pattern. This approach to the design brief often creates a straight line from the brief to the solution, where candidates hardly consider alternative ideas.

Contextual analysis

Making the subject too big

In the contextual analysis, candidates are asked to provide evidence of their ability to select a single artwork with relevance to their practical expressive art or design work and discuss the impact of related contexts through analysing the features of the art or design work. Some candidates enlarged the scope of the subject to the point that it became too broad and generalised to gain marks. For example, a candidate might begin with one design by Mackintosh and enlarge the subject to all Mackintosh's work.

Biographies

Many candidates demonstrated a link between the lives of artists and designers and the artist's or designer's work. In many examples of contextual analysis, candidates placed a short biography beside the analysis of the chosen work without making any connection between the two. It can be useful to link aspects of a biography to the features of a chosen work, but dropping biographical details into the text does not always create a context.

Analysis

At Advanced Higher, candidates are asked to look at a single work of art or design in detail. However, after picking out the features of one work, some candidates move on to another. By choosing too many examples, candidates can risk diluting the effect of the analysis and are sometimes unable to look in detail at the effects of technique, content, or (in the case of design) function, style, or impact.

Evaluation

Not a story

Many candidates wrote an account of their Advanced Higher year rather than evaluative comments on their work. It is difficult to write a 'story of the portfolio' while also giving an evaluation of the work.

Self-criticism

Many candidates did not include self-critical points in their evaluations. It was evident that they wanted to defend and justify the work against possible criticism. Candidates who can see shortcomings as well as strengths in their practical work are more likely to access the full range of marks.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Practical expressive and design work

Before starting

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates not to start their portfolio too early. Candidates who choose their theme or design brief early may be more likely to change their mind later and may not be fully prepared for the uncertain process of developing ideas.

Introduction to Advanced Higher

The reduced volume of evidence required for the practical work should give teachers and lecturers more time to prepare candidates. Below are some suggested ideas.

Sketchbooks

Sketchbooks are a way of encouraging candidates to take an individual approach. Candidates can begin to form ideas from a series of quick sketches and collections of material around a theme. At this stage, it is important for candidates to be fluent and to create more than one idea so that they have other options.

Learn research skills

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore and look for examples of art and design that relate to their theme to build up some background material.

Influences from artists and designers

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to adapt ideas from artists or designers they admire. It is useful, even at an early stage, for candidates to make notes or find quotes about the methods, ideas, or practice that they like. This may be useful when writing the contextual analysis.

Introduce basic design ideas

Candidates could explore the abstract language of art and design by looking at format; negative space; scale; enlargement; cropping; proportion; viewpoint; perspective; photographs of conceptual models or mock-ups; storyboards; and photographic contact sheets.

Experiment with materials and techniques

Candidates could explore ideas, new techniques, and formats, with a view to extending the ways they can represent a visual idea. Candidates can use a range of cheap materials to explore mark-making or shape-making such as collage, mono-printing, thread, paint rollers, palette knives, craft knives, scissors, and stencils. More sophisticated equipment could include sewing machines, digital cameras, darkroom equipment, printing presses, photocopiers, scanners, and CAD software (such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe InDesign, or SketchUp). Candidates could experiment with mixing digital images with sketching, for example drawing on top of digital images to look at the theme in a new light.

Research themes widely

In addition to researching their chosen theme, candidates should draw, take photos, and explore related themes to find a wide range of sources to develop. For example, in fantasy-based portfolios, as well as looking at a range of fantasy art, candidates could explore nature and the urban environment to further develop their ideas.

Contextual analysis

Before candidates choose a topic, they should do some wider research into the background of their whole field of interest. If they find that their chosen example offers too little information, they can enlarge the subject while still focusing on one work. For example, a single drawing of a ballet dancer by Degas might become all Degas' studies for a particular painting such as 'The Rehearsal'. Equally, a single fashion design by Iris van Herpen might become part of a collection by van Herpen such as the 'Micro' collection.

Do not discuss your own work

Candidates should not discuss their creative process or the development of their own portfolios in the contextual analysis. They can discuss the link between their work and the subject of the contextual analysis in the evaluation template.

Make visual connections

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to choose a topic that has influenced their practical work and discuss aspects of the work that they can see in their portfolio.

Answer questions

Candidates could begin by explaining what they are writing about in the form of questions. Asking questions can provide a structure. For example:

♦ How did Degas break away from the academic style of posed figures to make drawings of people that look natural and unposed? Why did he choose young dancers as his subject? What was the position of these young people in society at the time?

♦ How do Iris van Herpen's designs relate to natural form? Where does she get the ideas? How does she collaborate with scientists to research and make the forms for her 'Micro' collection? Are they wearable? If so, for what occasions?

Analyse the topic with illustrations

The presentations in the Understanding Standards section of SQA's secure website show how candidates can use images along with text to explain visual elements. Candidates should include relevant images and ensure they clearly link them to the text.

Explain quotes

When discussing an artist's or designer's work, candidates can use quotes. They can be from almost any source that makes an interesting comment on the subject. For example:

♦ What did Degas mean when he said, 'People call me the painter of dancing girls. It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement'?
♦ What did Degas mean when he said, 'The artist does not draw what he sees, but what he has to make others see'?
♦ In writing about Iris van Herpen, what does the critic mean by: 'A fascination for architecture has been with Van Herpen from the very beginning'?
♦ What does the critic mean by: 'Her creative process brings together architecture and nature'?

Useful discursive words

Writing about art is often a balance of statements. Words that make links between statements help to form a discussion. For example, by starting a sentence with 'Although' or 'Despite', candidates can make a complex statement:

♦ Although Degas' ballet pictures are thought to be pleasing scenes of beauty, they, in fact, depict the lives of young people who were exploited.
♦ Despite van Herpen's interest in nature, her work is made in the most unnatural way.

Speculate or give your opinion

Writing about context and influence is often subjective. As part of their analysis, candidates should discuss why artists or designers might have been influenced by, commented on, or created something. For example, 'Degas does not seem to have any liking for the dancers. It is as if they are just a decorative subject.'

Evaluations

The evaluation offers candidates an opportunity to look back at their initial creative intentions and determine if they achieved what they set out to do. They could:

♦ Explain their initial ideas, stimulus, theme, or design brief. This could be a short statement to explain how they developed their initial research.
♦ Show to what extent their initial ideas developed or changed. They could identify turning points in the development of their ideas. They could consider how effective their ideas were and what they might have done differently.
♦ Evaluate things they did well and less well and if they achieved what they set out to do. They should be self-critical and imagine how someone objective would judge them. They should explain any changes they would make.

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](#).