Course report 2023

Higher Geography

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: 7,176

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 7,426

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade.

A	Number of candidates	2,975	Percentage	40.1	Cumulative percentage	40.1	Minimum mark required	47
B	Number of candidates	1,572	Percentage	21.2	Cumulative percentage	61.2	Minimum mark required	38
C	Number of candidates	1,271	Percentage	17.1	Cumulative percentage	78.3	Minimum mark required	29
D	Number of candidates	905	Percentage	12.2	Cumulative percentage	90.5	Minimum mark required	20
No award	Number of candidates	703	Percentage	9.5	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

It was encouraging to see an increase in entries again this year for Higher Geography.

Question paper 1: physical and human environments

The question paper performed broadly as expected. Feedback from the marking team indicated that it was accessible and fair for candidates, and comprehensive in terms of course coverage. Due to marks allocated however, some questions were more demanding than expected, and grade boundaries were adjusted to take this into account.

Question paper 2: global issues and geographical skills

In this component, the most commonly-chosen questions were question 3; climate change, and question 2; development and health. It was noticeable that a few centres have again started to deliver the energy option (question 4).

This question paper performed largely as expected, although one question was found to be more demanding than expected and grade boundaries were adjusted to take this into account.

Assignment

The requirement to complete the assignment was removed for session 22–23.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1: physical and human environments

Question 1: Most candidates performed well in this question. Most candidates demonstrated a strong understanding of the processes of glacial erosion, and many were able to give a named example in this question.

Question 2: Most candidates performed well in this question and showed a secure understanding of the process of longshore drift, with some candidates making good use of a diagram to enhance their answer. Many candidates were able to give a named example in this question.

Question 3: Many candidates gave detailed explanations of the changing river level referring to a range of factors including land use, gradient and number of tributaries.

Question 4: Most candidates were well prepared for this question, with many making good use of annotated diagrams, which supported their answer. Many candidates demonstrated a detailed understanding of the processes of river erosion.

Question 5: Many candidates showed a good understanding of atmospheric circulation and were able to name and correctly locate both cells and their associated winds.

Question 6: Most candidates were well prepared for this question and drew detailed annotated soil profiles.

Question 7: Most candidates showed a detailed knowledge of the different methods used to collect population data. Many were able to describe methods beyond a census including sampling, civil registration and other government agencies.

Question 8: Most candidates were able to provide some consequences of the population structure, with some able to give more detailed answers.

Question 9: Many candidates were able to describe and explain a range of strategies used to improve housing, with most able to give named examples to enhance their answer.

Question 10: Many candidates were able to provide detailed answers with clear reference to their case study.

Question 11: Most candidates were able to describe some strategies to manage rural land degradation. Candidates who wrote about rainforest areas demonstrated an improved performance in relating their answers specifically to land degradation.

Question 12: Most candidates were well prepared for this question, with many discussing current and contemporary conflicts specific to their case study area. Most candidates were able to give named examples, which further developed their answer.

Question paper 2: global issues and geographical skills

Question 1(a): Candidates who made full and detailed use of the sources, and were able to interpret this information, scored well in this question.

Question 1(b): Some candidates were able to explain a range of negative impacts of a water control project, and give named examples, which helped contextualise their answers. Those candidates who answered on more recent projects, generally scored higher marks.

Question 2(a): Most candidates were able to discuss a range of impacts of the water related disease they had studied.

Question 2(b): Many candidates were able to describe a range of strategies, and comment appropriately on their effectiveness. It was pleasing to see many candidates referring to current primary health care strategies, and most candidates were able to provide named examples, which enhanced their answer.

Question 3(a): Many candidates were able to explain some of the physical causes of climate change, with a few explaining with a very high level of detail.

Question 3(b): Many candidates were able to describe a range of strategies, with most making good use of current examples.

Question 4(a): Some candidates were able to offer relevant reasons for the differences in energy production, linking to up-to-date factors such as specific government policy.

Question 5: Most candidates gave detailed explanations of the suitability of the site and were able to offer a range of impacts of this development on the local area.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1: physical and human environments

Question 1: A few candidates explained only the formation of a u-shaped valley and did not develop this into a ribbon lake. Some candidates also gave named examples of u-shaped valleys, rather than ribbon lakes. A few candidates misread the heading on diagram Q1 and the wording of the question, and instead wrote about the formation of an ox-bow lake.

Question 2: A few candidates gave a named example of a sand spit rather than a sand bar. A few candidates explained coastal erosion processes.

Question 3: Some candidates described the rainfall graph rather than the discharge. A few candidates did not recognise the longer lag time on this hydrograph, failing to take account of the scale on the x-axis.

Question 5: A few candidates did not attempt this question at all. Some found this question challenging and were unable to give more than a limited explanation or did not link circulation cells to the correct latitude. A few candidates did not respond to the question, instead explaining the heat budget or oceanic circulation.

Question 6: A few candidates drew only a basic, unannotated 'ladder' style diagram, and wrote a paragraph-style answer underneath.

Question 7: A few candidates wrote about the problems encountered collecting population data rather than the methods used.

Question 8: A few candidates misinterpreted this pyramid as having an ageing and falling population and gave answers more suited to a high-income country. A few candidates focused on only one age sector, such as economically active, and did not refer to the other age groups. Many candidates were unable to provide a full range of consequences.

Question 9: Some candidate answers were very historic in nature, rather than recent as outlined in the course specification.

Question 10: Many candidates did not respond to the 'explain' command in this question, instead offering comments on the effectiveness of strategies.

Question 11: A few candidates did not attempt this question. Candidates should take care when commenting on the effectiveness of strategies not to repeat the same point.

Question 12: A few candidates went beyond the command to discuss conflicts and went on to comment on strategies to manage conflict.

Question paper 2: global issues and geographical skills

Question 1(a): Some candidates did not develop the information in the sources to respond to the 'explain' command in the question.

Question 1(b): A few candidates discussed the suitability of the site for a water management project, rather than the consequences. A few candidates were unable to relate their answer to the project they had studied.

Question 2(b): A few candidates did not read this question correctly and instead, only described strategies to manage malaria. While some of these strategies may overlap, many are not primary health strategies.

Question 3(a): A few candidates explained human factors leading to climate change.

Question 3(b): A few candidates offered little beyond stating a reversal of human causes of climate change, rather than focusing on specific strategies to manage it. Candidates should also ensure that their answers link back to the question. For example, many candidates made points on transport policy such as Glasgow's low emission zone or the Scottish Government's charge for plastic bags but did not link these to the management of climate change, instead referring to air quality or plastic waste in general. While these strategies can be related to climate change, few candidates made this link.

Question 4(b): Candidates should ensure their answer links back to the question, for example '…in meeting the energy demand of a country'.

Question 5: A few candidates found it difficult to locate the development site using the sketch map. Some candidates did not read the scenario carefully and discussed the impacts of a nearby airfield to the new development. Some candidates, while referring to the graphs showing traffic flow, did not use figures from the graphs to develop their answer. Fewer candidates gave map evidence in their answers than in previous years.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper 1: physical and human environments

It is essential that candidates read each question, and all sources, carefully and that they understand and respond to both the command word and any other key words in the question. Answers that are generic and vague will not gain full marks.

Centres should ensure that all case studies used are up-to-date and relevant. It should again be noted that historic issues, such as installing toilets in homes, is not considered a recent strategy for urban management in a developed world city. Those candidates who scored most highly in all the case study-type questions, were those who referenced contemporary issues in today's world.

Centres should ensure that when candidates are presented with resources such as graphs, for example hydrographs, that they can make full use of these resources by reading accurately from them.

Question paper 2: global issues and geographical skills

In those questions where candidates are presented with resources such as graphs, for example in the 'application of geographical skills' question, they should make full use of these resources by reading accurately from them, and give detail from them in their answer. Centres should ensure that candidates are experienced in using both 1:25000 and 1:50000 map scales.

Candidates should ensure that they link all points in their answer back to the key point in the question. While this was most noticeable in the 'climate change' question, it applies to all questions.

As in question paper 1, centres should ensure that all case studies used are up-to-date and relevant. Some primary health care strategies relating back to the 1960s for example, are less relevant to today's learners and the world they live in. Like paper 1, candidates who scored higher marks were those who referenced current issues.

For both components, centres should use the range of materials available including past papers, Understanding Standards materials and specimen question papers to help prepare candidates for the range of questions, command words and mark allocations used.

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.