Course report 2023

Higher Philosophy

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:   750

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   655

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	118	Percentage	18	Cumulative percentage	18	Minimum mark required	72
B	Number of candidates	121	Percentage	18.5	Cumulative percentage	36.5	Minimum mark required	59
C	Number of candidates	113	Percentage	17.3	Cumulative percentage	53.7	Minimum mark required	47
D	Number of candidates	135	Percentage	20.6	Cumulative percentage	74.4	Minimum mark required	34
No award	Number of candidates	168	Percentage	25.6	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.

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

The question papers performed largely in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicates that it was a fair paper, in line with the course specification. Modifications should have enabled candidates to be more supported and well-prepared for the assessment.

However, the spread of marks achieved by candidates showed a larger percentage of marks in the lower end of the mark range than we would normally find. This was seen particularly in the paper 1 essay questions. Many candidates' responses suggested difficulty with the complex skills needed to write philosophical essays and achieve success in the exam setting. Grade boundaries were lowered to take this into account. The lowering of the grade boundaries was tapered to reflect the fact that candidates at the lower end of the mark range had more difficulty than those at the top end.

Question paper 1

The essay questions in this paper proved more challenging than expected, and this was particularly true for the knowledge and doubt section. The essay questions in the knowledge and doubt section were expected to be difficult, as they were covering particularly challenging content in the course; however, essay questions are marked holistically and take this into account. In addition, the challenge in knowledge and doubt was balanced by the more straightforward questions in the moral philosophy section and the question paper 2 questions in these sections. The marking for essays in Higher Philosophy takes candidates' knowledge and understanding of the content into consideration, as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation. The scaffolding in the questions continued to help weaker candidates to show their knowledge and skills in response to the questions asked. In the knowledge and doubt section, question 1 was by far the most popular choice. In the moral philosophy section, more candidates answered question 3 than question 4.

Question paper 2

Question paper 2 largely performed as expected. However, questions 1, 7(b) and 9(b) in the arguments in action section were more difficult than intended, and the grade boundaries were lowered at all grades to take this into account.

In the knowledge and doubt section, questions 13, 14 and 15 on Descartes were more popular than questions 16, 17, and 18 on Hume.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper 1

Candidates performed best in essay questions 2 and 4, which were the Hume essay and utilitarianism quotation essay respectively. Average marks for these essays were slightly above that of the Descartes and utilitarianism scenario questions. However, the essays were of similar difficulty and, because holistic marking judges candidates on the skills they demonstrate, the difference in marks was small.

In question 1, the Descartes essay, many candidates were able to describe the position Descartes is in at the start of Meditation 3, after having discovered the certainty of the cogito. Many explained how the cogito gave him his clear and distinct rule and led him on to prove the existence of God. Some showed precise knowledge of the text, with awareness of how Descartes uses the causal adequacy principle and his innate idea of God to prove that God exists. However, many candidates found it challenging to explain with accuracy and precision how the various parts of this argument come together. Many candidates found evaluating Descartes' arguments very difficult, and often they gave superficial criticisms that they did not explain. A few candidates were able to effectively explain criticisms of Descartes' arguments and engage in deeper discussion of how successful these criticisms were in relation to Descartes' arguments. These candidates would have achieved marks in the top band range for essays.

In question 2, the Hume essay, most candidates were able to provide a clear description of Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. They often described how we come to have belief in a posteriori facts beyond our experience, through reasoning about matters of fact based on cause and effect. Good essays showed knowledge of the various examples that Hume uses and how they support the different parts of his arguments around cause and effect. Many candidates got confused about the role of the different examples Hume gives. For example, they confused Hume's examples of how we reason about matters of fact based on cause and effect with the examples he gave to support his belief that cause and effect is not known a priori. This led to some confused criticism of the arguments. Many candidates were able to present common criticisms of Hume's arguments in a superficial way, but they were not always able to explain clearly why they challenged his philosophy, or make a personal judgement about these criticisms and how they affected his theory. In general, essays that achieved marks in the highest mark range did this most successfully.

In both utilitarianism essays, question 3 and question 4, most candidates were good at describing the general principles of utilitarian philosophy. Most candidates focused their description on the greatest happiness principle and its component parts. Many candidates were able to provide some common criticisms of utilitarianism in their essays, although often this was superficial and did not show deep understanding of why this was a criticism of the theory. The best essays showed the ability to apply utilitarianism to the specific scenario or quotation and evaluate based on this application. In scenario essays, some candidates struggled to make use of utilitarian thinking in relation to the scenario. Candidates did less well if they got caught up in general consideration of what might have occurred in this scenario, without relating this discussion to how this impacted the application of utilitarianism to work out the right thing to do. In both questions 3 and 4, most candidates showed understanding of the consequentialist nature of utilitarian ethics and could articulate some of

the components of the greatest happiness principle. They often showed knowledge of the hedonic calculus, but did not as often show effective application of this to the scenario, sometimes making superficial or sweeping generalisations about how it might be applied. The best essays showed deep evaluation of the theory in relation to the quotation or scenario, which explained how criticisms applied to utilitarianism and made personal judgements on the effectiveness of their criticisms.

Across all the essays, candidates tended to do best when they used the bullet point scaffolding provided to help guide the content they included.

Question paper 2

Section 1: arguments in action

Question 1 was intended to be a very straightforward question about the fact that statements can be true or false, however it proved more difficult than anticipated. For this question, the fact that there is an exclamation mark does not impact the answer being 'You cannot be serious!'. This is the only sentence of the three provided in which it would make sense to say that it was true or false.

Question 2 was done well, and many candidates were able to correctly identify a premise indicator. Some candidates incorrectly identified the word 'if' as an example of a premise indicator, which it is not.

Question 3 was a straightforward question on the definition of a counterexample. Only some candidates achieved this mark. Candidates who did not recognise that the example showed a universal claim to be false were not awarded the mark.

Most candidates achieved at least one mark for question 4, being able to give reasons as to why this was not an argument, and some were able to give sufficient reasons to gain both marks.

Many candidates could not give an accurate definition of a conductive argument for question 5(a). However, many were able to give an example of their own conductive argument for question 5(b).

Question 6 was done well, and most candidates achieved 2 or 3 marks for this question on argument diagrams.

Question 7(a) and (b) proved challenging. Many candidates could not give an accurate definition of a deductive argument in 7(a) and few were able to explain why this argument was not deductive.

Question 8 proved difficult for candidates. Many candidates did not effectively use their knowledge of argument analysis to assess the argument provided. Most candidates did not gain more than 1 mark out of 3.

Question 9(a) was intended to be a straightforward recall of information, but only some candidates were able to accurately define validity. Additionally, many candidates did not provide a valid argument for the conclusion given in question 9(b). However, many could say why the argument provided was not valid for question 9(c).

Many candidates did well in question 10, however a larger than normal number of candidates did not attempt this question. Of those who did answer, most got 2 or 3 marks for their answer. To get the mark for the definition of the post hoc ego propter hoc fallacy, candidates needed to recognise that the error is in assuming a first event caused a second because it precedes the second event. Many candidates gave reasonable examples of a post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy, but couldn't explain why the reasoning was flawed.

Question 11 was intended to be challenging, as it required candidates to apply their knowledge of appeals to authority and confirmation bias to unseen arguments. In question 11(a), candidates did well when they considered what was specifically claimed by the arguments provided and what this could tell us about the authorities cited. For example, some noted that there were several scientists supporting Koyama's view, as opposed to one researcher who had been found to support the opposing position. Some candidates made assumptions about the authorities that were not founded in the question. For example, they assumed that the scientists cited by Koyama were unbiased, but this is not stated in the question and so it cannot be assumed. Candidates did well when they discussed what additional information we might need to know whether the appeal to authority was legitimate. Question 11(b) was done well, and many candidates were able to say why Ruti could have been guilty of confirmation bias. Most candidates gained at least 1 mark out of the 2 available.

In Question 12, many candidates did not manage to identify the fallacy as affirming the consequent, however many were able to explain the difficulty with the argument and why it was problematic, even if they had not correctly identified the fallacy.

Section 2: knowledge and doubt

In questions 13 to 15 on Descartes, many candidates were able to state the aims of the method of doubt for question 13. However, some confused these with the wider aims of the meditations. They found it more challenging to explain the extent of Descartes' doubts at the end of the unreliability of the senses and the dream arguments as required in question 14(a) and (b) respectively. They also found it more difficult to evaluate what was said about the malicious demon in question 15. This was intended to be a more difficult question, and it required precise knowledge of the role of the demon in the meditations. Few candidates were able to achieve full marks for this question.

In questions 16 to 18 on Hume, many candidates were able to correctly state what Hume means by 'impressions' and 'ideas'. It proved more difficult for them to explain how the idea of God supported the copy principle in question 17. Candidates found it particularly difficult to evaluate what was said about Hume's missing shade of blue. This was intended to be a more difficult question, and it required candidates to show precise knowledge of the role of the missing shade of blue to achieve full marks. Few candidates were able to achieve full marks for this question.

Section 3: moral philosophy

In question 19, many candidates were able to give one reason why the sovereignty of reason was important to Kant, but few candidates were able to give sufficient detail or explanation to gain both marks.

In question 20, many candidates achieved at least one mark for why Kant argued that nothing but the good will is good in itself. Where candidates explained both why the good will was good itself and why other possible intrinsic goods were ruled out by Kant, they were able to achieve full marks.

Many candidates answered question 21 well. Most candidates were able to achieve at least 1 mark out of 3 for question 21(a), explaining why Kant would not see Sinead's actions as morally praiseworthy. Good answers that considered the distinction between acting out of duty and inclination in Kant and the importance of autonomy in making decisions out of duty were able to achieve full marks. Some candidates also gained full marks for question 21(b), giving reasons why they agreed or disagreed with Kant's position on this.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

It is important to ensure familiarity with the most up-to-date advice and documentation. The Higher Philosophy Course Specification, which can be found on the Higher Philosophy subject page on SQA's website, remains the main source of information for teachers and lecturers about the requirements of the course. The course support section provides additional support. Teachers and lecturers know their candidates and can use their discretion to judge what resources will be most useful to prepare them. Examples of candidate evidence can be located through the SQA Understanding Standards webpage.

Question paper 1

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are fully prepared on all areas of the course, in line with the course specification. For the 2023–24 exam diet, the course will return to full assessment requirements. Therefore, candidates must be prepared to answer essays on both Descartes and Hume, as there will be no choice between answering an essay on Descartes or Hume and only one of these philosophers will be asked about.

As this paper is essay based, candidates will benefit from essay writing practice as they develop their knowledge and understanding of the course. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to answer the specific question that is being asked, and avoid pre-prepared responses.

There is a range of types of questions that can be asked in the Higher Philosophy assessment and candidates who rely on pre-prepared answers may find it more difficult to access the higher marks available for essay questions. For example, while essays in the knowledge and doubt section have often focused specifically on one area of content, such as the method of doubt in Meditation 1 of Descartes, or cause and effect in section IV of Hume, it is possible that essay questions may be more thematic. Essays may, for example, ask candidates to consider the rationalist or empiricist approaches of these philosophers, and thus would allow more scope for candidates to select their arguments and points for discussion. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to learn the content of these texts and consider the questions asked in an essay and how best to respond to them. Candidates must be able to plan an essay in response to different types of questions.

Candidates should find the scaffolding of suggested content for the essay questions provides a useful guide as to the kind of content they might include in their essay. It is not, however, intended to provide an essay plan. Candidates who gain high essay marks tend to be clear about what they intend to write in their essays from the start and can argue their case throughout their essay. This effectively demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the course content, as well as the skills of analysis and evaluation.

Candidates who achieved the highest marks in essays were able to explain the philosophies studied fully and in depth. Evaluative comments in essays should be more than a list of strengths or weaknesses. An essay in the highest band range will likely engage in a form of conversational critique, considering possible rebuttals to points of criticism and providing personal judgements on the quality of critical points made.

In the knowledge and doubt section, candidates who did well showed that they were familiar with the course text that they had studied, and they understood the narrative provided by the philosophers. This usually allowed them to engage more critically with philosophies studied in their essays. Candidates should be able to explain the various theories and arguments, paying particular attention to where fine distinctions are required.

For the moral philosophy section, candidates should show knowledge and understanding of the moral philosophies studied. Teachers and lecturers may find it helpful to provide opportunities for candidates to practise applying the moral theories to different moral issues and scenarios and evaluating them. In quotation questions where a scenario is not provided, candidates did well when they used their own examples to demonstrate how the moral theory is applied and used in real-life situations.

Question paper 2

For the 2023–24 exam diet, this course will return to full assessment requirements. There will be no choice of questions to answer and, in particular, there will be no choice for the knowledge and doubt section. Candidates must be prepared to answer questions on both Descartes and Hume, as there will only be one set of questions to answer, and it will focus on only one of these philosopher's texts.

Question paper 2 is made up of short and sometimes extended-answer questions. These types of questions require candidates to demonstrate precision and accuracy in describing and explaining philosophical ideas and arguments. In the arguments in action section, there is a range of terms used when discussing and evaluating arguments that are quite similar in description. It is therefore particularly important that candidates are precise in these definitions. Vague descriptions that could refer to more than one idea in the course are not likely to gain marks in assessment answers. Regular testing of definitions across the course can help candidates to develop the precision and accuracy required for answering many questions in this paper.

Responses in the 2022–23 exam diet suggest that candidates found it particularly difficult to apply their knowledge of the course to unseen content. Teachers and lecturers should prepare candidates by providing them with many opportunities to apply their skills to a range of unfamiliar arguments and questions. In addition, encouraging candidates to create their own examples that successfully exemplify the course content will further enhance their skills.

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.