



Course report 2023

Higher Photography

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: 2,704

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,671

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	365	Percentage	13.7	Cumulative percentage	13.7	Minimum mark required	91
B	Number of candidates	921	Percentage	34.5	Cumulative percentage	48.1	Minimum mark required	78
C	Number of candidates	955	Percentage	35.8	Cumulative percentage	83.9	Minimum mark required	65
D	Number of candidates	311	Percentage	11.6	Cumulative percentage	95.5	Minimum mark required	52
No award	Number of candidates	119	Percentage	4.5	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

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected. Feedback from markers suggests that the question paper sampled the course content fairly and provided a suitable level of challenge for candidates. Questions followed a variety of appropriate and familiar formats and featured a range of suitable imagery to engage and challenge candidates.

The question paper followed the structure of past papers and the specimen question paper closely, while ensuring the questions and sampled content did not follow a predictable pattern. Most candidates attempted all 12 questions.

Project

Candidate responses to the project assessment task were mostly as expected. Most candidates adhered to the session 2022–23 modifications and submitted eight final images. A few candidates submitted between eight and 12 final images, and a few submitted more than 12.

Most candidates produced more streamlined projects compared to previous years. This was likely a result of the reduced requirement for final images. Most candidates presented a selection of relevant research and development work. A few candidates included evidence that was irrelevant to their project topic and/or approach.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Most candidates attempted most or all questions and completed the question paper in the designated time. Many candidates answered extended-response questions well and demonstrated a sound understanding of the command words.

Many candidates' use of photographic language and terminology was better than in previous years, and in line with expectations at Higher level.

Section 1: multiple choice

Most candidates performed very well in this section of the question paper and applied their knowledge and understanding of photography in a variety of contexts. Most candidates attempted most questions in this section.

Section 2: analysis

Question 11(a)

Most candidates achieved both marks for this question and demonstrated an effective understanding of how to respond to the command words 'identify' and 'explain'.

Question 11(c)

Most candidates performed well in this question. They identified relevant compositional techniques and explained their creative effect on the image. Some candidates demonstrated an understanding of cause and effect and related their response to the image in the question.

Question 11(d)

Most candidates achieved both marks for this question. The quality of candidate responses was generally very strong. They demonstrated a good understanding of mood and atmosphere in the image.

Project

The overall performance in the project was significantly better than in 2022.

Most candidates selected an appropriate topic from a genre and style that suited their ability.

As in previous years, most candidates submitted a printed digital file, such as a PowerPoint or Word document. Fewer candidates presented their project in a traditional sketchbook format. Markers noted an improvement in presentation layouts, which helped many candidates highlight their skills, knowledge, and understanding. Projects were generally much more streamlined, succinct, and focused than in previous years.

Section 1: planning, research and investigation

Most candidates produced a body of research work that was focused and relevant to their selected theme and approach. Many candidates linked visual imagery well to the style of their photographic work. Many candidates provided additional shoot-specific research throughout their development work, which kept them on track and in line with their earlier research work.

This year, more candidates accessed marks for their research on the influences of relevant photographers' work and practice. These candidates demonstrated a clear link between the influence and the impact on an example of the photographer's work.

Section 2: development and production

Most candidates produced a body of photographic work that explored their theme in depth. Most candidates demonstrated a range of creative and technical photographic skills in their work that was relevant to their selected approach and within the scope of their skill set.

Many candidates structured this aspect of their project very well. Most candidates broke their theme down into sub-sections or photo shoots, which minimised repetition and gave them scope to be creative. Candidates presented their body of work in a variety of formats. Most candidates produced contact sheets, edits, and test images to develop their work.

Many candidates demonstrated strength in their critical reflection, refinement, and decision-making skills. Most showed an ability to reflect on their work effectively through shoot reviews and mid-point reviews. Many candidates demonstrated refinement in a variety of ways that illustrated their thought process in arriving at their chosen set of images.

The print quality of most final images was very good. Most centres used commercial printing companies to print the final images. Some candidates used high-quality laser jet printers in their centre, some of which produced prints of a very good standard.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Question 11 (b)

Many candidate responses to this question were generic descriptions of pieces of equipment. Many candidates listed equipment but did not relate it effectively to the specific image. For example, some candidates responded that a tripod would have been used to eliminate motion blur. This showed a lack of understanding that a fast shutter speed was used to create the image, so motion blur was not a particular issue. However, some candidates answered effectively by explaining how a photographer could have used a tripod to help frame the shot or allow them to stand further back from the flying shards of the broken cup.

Question 12

This question was designed to give candidates an opportunity to demonstrate a broader understanding of photography by discussing relevant technical and creative factors that the photographer would have considered when setting up the shot.

Most candidates clearly identified relevant factors but, at times, did not discuss them in detail. Many candidates listed their points but did not fully explore them or link them to the given image. Many candidates gave generic responses that were irrelevant or incorrect for the given image.

Candidates who did not perform well in this part of the question paper did not show an understanding of how to respond to the prompt 'discuss'.

Project

While most candidates selected project topics that were appropriate and suitable for their abilities and available equipment, some candidates selected project topics and/or approaches that were very limited in terms of creative scope and/or accessibility. In these instances, candidates were not able to access the full range of marks.

A few candidates selected inappropriate topics. Candidates should select a topic along with their teacher or lecturer. Teachers and lecturers should advise if the topic is suitable and if it will give candidates the opportunity to access all available marks.

Section 1: planning, research and investigation

Project plan

Candidates presented their plans in a variety of formats, such as a body of text, text broken up into headed sections, or a mind map.

Most candidate planning was effective. However, some candidates did not highlight key planning aspects that were relevant to their project. In some instances, project planning was generic or irrelevant.

Section 2: development and production

Technical quality

Some candidates presented images that demonstrated issues with focus, exposure, white balance, composition, and lighting. Candidates should apply their technical knowledge and understanding to their photographic practice, and this should be evident in their final images.

Some candidates made poor selections for their final images. They did not choose the strongest images from their photo shoots.

Creative response

Markers noted that some candidates did not demonstrate a suitable level of creativity in their images. In these instances, the images did not visually link to the creative and dynamic research that they had included in their investigation.

Markers also noted that many candidates were repetitive in their choice of final images, with many images being the same or very similar. Final images should work well together as a set and link to candidates' planning and research. They should not be repetitive as this impacts on the creativity of the final set.

Section 3: evaluation

Most candidates adhered to the 500-word limit. Some candidates did not produce evaluations of the required standard.

The evaluation has two parts:

- ◆ critically evaluate the effectiveness of their photographic practice (5 marks)
- ◆ critically evaluate the strengths and areas for improvement in their final prints (5 marks)

Most candidate evaluations were not critical in nature and did not highlight the issues that were evident in their body of work. Candidates can only achieve marks if what they say is relevant, accurate, and critically reflective.

Many candidates did not critically evaluate their final images. Instead, they discussed decisions they made during their shoots and in post-production. Candidates can only gain these 5 marks for critically evaluating the strengths and areas for improvement in their final prints. They must refer to the prints. Many candidates did not identify areas for improvement despite their work demonstrating clear evidence of issues.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Teachers and lecturers should continue to broaden candidates' knowledge and understanding of photographic terms, techniques, styles, and genres. This will ensure that they are fully prepared for any images or scenarios that could feature in the question paper. This will also help to develop their understanding of photography for their project.

Teachers and lecturers should continue to support candidates by developing exam technique through timed responses and opportunities to complete practice questions and papers. Past papers and specimen question papers with marking instructions are available on the Higher Photography subject page of SQA's website.

Examples of candidate evidence, along with commentaries, are available on SQA's Understanding Standards website.

Teachers and lecturers must ensure that candidates know that they will receive a supplementary sheet in the final exam. Candidates should refer to this print when responding to the question, as clearly directed in the question paper instructions.

Teachers and lecturers must ensure that candidates are prepared for a variety of genres and subject matter to appear in the question paper.

Some candidates provide generic responses to the analysis questions, for example giving a dictionary definition of a tripod or lens. These definitions alone do not gain marks.

Candidates must demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect (question 11) and cause and effect with valid justification (question 12) in relation to the given image. They must produce a bespoke answer and not one that they have pre-prepared.

Candidates must demonstrate an awareness of how to respond to the command words:

- ◆ 'Identify' requires candidates to give the correct name.
- ◆ 'Explain' requires them to demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect.
- ◆ 'Discuss' needs an understanding of cause and effect with a valid justification.

The course specification contains a list of terms used in the question paper, along with details on the associated knowledge and understanding that candidates are expected to demonstrate. Candidates should not provide generic justifications such as 'this makes X stand out'. This does not demonstrate the breadth of knowledge and understanding required at this level.

Project

Candidates must complete their project independently. Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are prepared and have developed the necessary skills before beginning.

Teachers and lecturers should give candidates the 'Instructions for candidates' section from the project assessment task. This information will support them through each stage of the process.

Candidates should select a theme and approach that is achievable in terms of their abilities and the equipment and resources available to them. At times, candidates select unsuitable themes, which means that they can struggle to access the available marks. Themes should be broad enough to give candidates scope for creative exploration and minimal repetition, but not too broad that they are unable to draw a credible link across their work.

Planning

Project plans should focus less on story-telling and more on critical and logistical planning. They do not need to be excessive in length, however, they must address the key issues that the candidate expects to encounter in their project. Planning must be focused and relevant. If candidates include generic information (such as basic camera techniques) that is not specific to their project, it can limit the marks they can achieve for planning.

Candidates must ensure that the information they include is relevant and personal to their project, for example locations and equipment. Teachers and lecturers should not provide candidates with model plans. The 'Instructions for candidates' section of the project assessment task provides clear guidance on planning.

To achieve the 5 marks available for identifying social, cultural, historical, or scientific influences on two photographers' work, candidates need to:

- ◆ select two photographers (relevant to their topic or theme or approach)
- ◆ identify at least one correct and relevant influence on each photographer
- ◆ select an image for each photographer that demonstrates this influence
- ◆ explain how the influence impacts the image

Candidates do not gain marks for including a generic biography for each photographer.

Section 2: development and production

Candidates should only include relevant evidence in their submission. Candidates should submit evidence that is in line with the requirements of their selected topic and approach.

When exploring a topic in a photo shoot, candidates should give themselves scope to explore different ideas and techniques. Candidates can document their exploration of techniques during their critical reflection, refinement, and creative decision-making. They can do this in shoot reviews, a mid-point review, points for action, and shortlisted images. Candidates should understand the difference between an effective photo shoot and a photo shoot where the photographer takes a series of identical images of the same subject from the same viewpoint and focal length.

Candidates should always aim to demonstrate a variety of creative skills in the following areas (where appropriate):

- ◆ composition
- ◆ lighting
- ◆ viewpoint or camera angle
- ◆ focal distance
- ◆ subject matter
- ◆ approach

Candidates should focus on producing quality photographic outcomes. Their final images should be technically competent, creative in nature, and relevant to their planning, research, and body of work. Candidates should not produce repetitive images.

Candidates must produce eight final images. These should be no smaller than A5 and no larger than A4, or equivalent. A bigger image is not necessarily worth more marks than a smaller image. Candidates should understand file optimisation and spot issues with print quality and use this knowledge to ensure their final images are as high in quality as possible. Candidates should present their final images loose, rather than mounted or in individual sleeves or pockets, because this allows markers to view and judge the images together as a set.

Section 3: evaluation

Candidates should be able to identify valid strengths and weaknesses in their photographic practice and final images. Candidates can structure their responses using the bullet points in the 'Instructions for candidates' section of the project assessment task.

To access the first set of 5 marks, candidates should focus on their photographic practice. For example, they could reflect on their time management, creativity, planning, logistics, and technical ability.

To access the second set of 5 marks, candidates must refer to their final images. For example, they could reflect on the quality of the prints, printing issues, how the images work as a set, repetition, or their range of ideas and how they link to their plan.

Candidates should approach the evaluation in a holistic manner, looking for strengths and areas for improvement in their practice and final prints. They could include thumbnails of final prints and refer to these as a way of reducing their word count. Candidates do not need to refer to every final print in their evaluation. They could evaluate prints with specific strengths and areas for improvement or refer to groups of prints with similar issues.

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](#).