



Course report 2023

Higher Psychology

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: 3,161

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,932

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	977	Percentage	33.3	Cumulative percentage	33.3	Minimum mark required	84
B	Number of candidates	603	Percentage	20.6	Cumulative percentage	53.9	Minimum mark required	72
C	Number of candidates	480	Percentage	16.4	Cumulative percentage	70.3	Minimum mark required	60
D	Number of candidates	368	Percentage	12.6	Cumulative percentage	82.8	Minimum mark required	48
No award	Number of candidates	504	Percentage	17.2	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

As a result of the modifications put in place by SQA for session 2022–23, the question paper sampled content across the two mandatory topics of individual behaviour — sleep and dreams and social behaviour — conformity and obedience. There were two sections, one on each topic. Each section had a total of 30 marks, giving a revised total of 60 marks.

Candidates were given the opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills, including explanation, evaluation, application, and analysis. Question paper marks were then scaled to a total of 80, to preserve component weightings from the unmodified course assessment.

Modifications were also put in place for the assignment. For session 2022–23, teachers and lecturers were able to suggest research topics and research methods to candidates.

Candidates were able to make use of online research tools to generate data and a minimum number of participants was introduced, which was three.

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected, with feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicating it was fair and accessible to candidates. Candidates appeared to be very well prepared for the question paper due to the modifications put in place, as intended.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected, with the modifications leading to a small increase in average marks awarded. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested it was appropriately demanding. Given the reduced content assessed in the question paper, centres and candidates would have had more time to focus on the assignment, which the increase in marks may reflect.

A change was made to the marking of unethical research. Marks for candidates who conducted research that did not comply with ethical guidelines were deducted from the design and procedure area of the method section, rather than the ethics area. This enabled candidates to be credited for theoretical knowledge of ethics despite any issues with the practical set-up of their assignment.

There were, however, still some instances of ethical breaches, where candidates had undertaken unethical research. Centres must ensure candidates apply the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines in relation to their assignment.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Candidates performed equally well in Section 1: Individual behaviour, which assessed the sleep and dreams topic and Section 2: Social behaviour, which assessed the conformity and obedience topic. This was likely due to the equal spread of differentiating questions in each section, with the analysis question in section 2 and the application question in section 1.

Most candidates achieved half marks or more for question 1(a) in which they were asked to 'Explain manifest and latent content of dreams'. These candidates were able to provide an explanation of each type of content and an example as well as additional explanatory points.

Candidates demonstrated their understanding of circadian rhythms in question 1(b) with some candidates achieving full marks for this question.

Overall, candidates performed well in question 1(c) 'Evaluate Dement and Kleitman's (1957) study of sleep and dreams' with some achieving all 8 marks available for the question. Many candidates were able to demonstrate their evaluative skills by writing developed evaluative points for this study.

Candidates were well prepared for question 2(c), leading to an increase in the number of marks being awarded for the higher order skill of analysis. Most candidates were able to describe and evaluate the Milgram study effectively and many candidates were able to provide some analytical points on this study.

Assignment

Most candidates performed well in section A (the introduction) of the assignment. This section requires candidates to describe background theory and research relating to their topic and it attracted the highest average mark of the assignment.

Candidate marks improved in section D (ethics), with most candidates demonstrating thorough knowledge and understanding of ethical guidelines and ways to apply these to their own research. Most candidates achieved half marks or more for this section.

Candidate marks increased for sections F and G of the assignment, showing that many candidates are developing their analytical skill in relation to their results. In addition, many candidates are providing specific evaluative points about their procedure, sample or research method.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

In question 1(d) candidates were asked to 'Explain cognitive processes relating to sleep and dreams with reference to the scenario'. Many candidates found this question challenging and any application to the scenario was often vague and repetitive.

Assignment

Some candidates did not provide a sufficiently operationalised hypothesis to be awarded the hypothesis mark in section B of the assignment. Candidates completing a correlational study sometimes provided a causal hypothesis. This was inappropriate as correlational hypotheses should be written in terms of relationships or links between co-variables. Correlational studies do not measure cause and effect.

In section C of the assignment, most candidates could identify the method chosen for their research, however, some could not justify their use of this research. This was also evident in section E where candidates are required to justify their use of descriptive statistics as some were unable to do so.

Candidates who completed research using a correlational design sometimes became confused when writing their method and results sections of the assignment (sections C and E). These candidates showed a lack of understanding in their hypotheses, co-variables and statistical procedures chosen. This was also evident in a few candidates who completed research using a natural or quasi experiment.

Marks for the method section were affected if candidates completed unethical research. Those who did so were unable to be awarded the mark for their procedure and the mark for the justification for their research.

Ethical breaches

Ethical breaches identified in 2023 included the following:

Deception

A number of candidates completed unethical conformity experiments involving replications of Jenness or Asch style experiments. Candidates created experiments that deceived participants by using confederates or group discussion in a situation of overt social pressure.

Protection of participants

A number of candidates conducted research that potentially put their participants at risk of physical and/or psychological harm, discomfort or stress. Candidates across a range of centres conducted research involving the following:

- ◆ Jenness or Asch style replications
- ◆ manipulating participants' pre-sleep routine, for example, exposing participants to blue light before sleep or changing their caffeine consumption (including asking participants to consume caffeine before going to sleep)
- ◆ depriving participants of sleep in some way

- ◆ no debrief given to participants
- ◆ using impossible or difficult maths problems during testing
- ◆ approaching strangers to act as participants — ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants and obtaining participants in this way puts candidates at potential risk
- ◆ using participants who are under 16 years of age — it is clearly stated in the course assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used
- ◆ obtaining consent verbally or after the research took place
- ◆ blindfolding participants during the procedure
- ◆ posting questionnaires on open social media sites, which means there is no screening mechanism for age of participants or effective mechanisms for gaining informed consent

Of particular concern was the number of questionnaires asking invasive and inappropriate questions. These included questions on the following: low mood or depression, anxiety levels, medical conditions or history, medications, drug and alcohol consumption, learning difficulties, whether participants have sleep disorders and/or if they are on medication that affects their sleep, and questions on self-esteem levels in groups where there are already potentially low levels of self-esteem.

Confidentiality

A few candidates included certain details about their centre or class group allowing their participants to be identified, which is a breach of confidentiality. This occurred both in section C of the report and in the appendices to the report. There were also a few candidates who included personal details on information given to participants, for example a mobile phone number or personal email address on the debrief. This is a safeguarding issue for candidates as ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

It appears that the modifications put in place by SQA for the 2023 examination diet supported most candidates towards success in the question paper. These modifications continued the upward trend from session 2021–22 with a slight increase in the number of candidates achieving grades A–C.

Careful preparation for the question paper will be even more important in session 2023–24 due the change in the number of topics included and number of marks awarded for each. Candidates will be asked to demonstrate their skills of description, explanation, evaluation, application and analysis on three topics: sleep and dreams, conformity and obedience and one additional topic. The additional topic will be chosen from depression, memory, stress, prejudice, social relationships and aggression. Centres are referred to the course specification for session 2023–24 onwards for details.

Candidates will benefit from continued development of the skills required by the course, particularly the higher order skills of application and analysis. Guidance for centres on how to do this are given in the appendix of the course specification, and in an SQA Academy course. There are now a number of past papers that will also be of use to centres when supporting their candidates to develop these skills. These are available from the past papers section of SQA's website.

Centres are directed towards SQA's Understanding Standards website, which has examples of candidate evidence and detailed commentaries about mark allocations.

The majority of candidates studying Higher Psychology are new to the subject. As the subject contains highly abstract content at this level, centres are encouraged to carefully consider the ability of potential candidates when putting them forward for this course.

Assignment

Candidates would benefit from support and guidance to enable them to provide hypotheses that are fully operationalised. As research is designed around the hypothesis, an improved understanding as evidenced by appropriate hypotheses, would also support candidates towards making decisions about the method they use.

Centre guidance on the development of the skills of justifying and applying their choice of method and descriptive statistics would also be beneficial for candidates.

Candidates should be encouraged to use appropriate terminology and avoid terms such as 'prove', 'statistical significance' (unless inferential statistics have been calculated) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used). Candidates should also be supported towards writing in the third person as the report is an objective account of their research process.

Ethical research procedures are essential, and candidates must be encouraged to think carefully about the impact of their research on participants. Centres should support candidates to ensure that the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines are adhered to when candidates are planning and conducting their research.

The BPS has published ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research, which may be useful to candidates who conduct research online.

Further guidance on ethical procedures is available in the [Higher Psychology course support notes](#) on SQA's website and in the [Association for the Teaching of Psychology \(ATP\) Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-Degree Level](#).

SQA's Understanding Standards website has examples of candidate assignments with detailed commentaries on marks awarded, which can be used by teachers and lecturers to support candidates towards success in their research assignment.

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](#).