



Course report 2023

Higher Sociology

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: 936

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 846

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	299	Percentage	35.3	Cumulative percentage	35.3	Minimum mark required	77
B	Number of candidates	178	Percentage	21	Cumulative percentage	56.4	Minimum mark required	66
C	Number of candidates	144	Percentage	17	Cumulative percentage	73.4	Minimum mark required	55
D	Number of candidates	100	Percentage	11.8	Cumulative percentage	85.2	Minimum mark required	44
No award	Number of candidates	125	Percentage	14.8	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

The question paper performed as expected. Questions allowed for differentiation, but all proved to be accessible. Candidates accessed the full range of marks.

The continued modifications to assessment for session 2022–23 appear to have worked well. Candidates had to complete two sections in the question paper — Section 1: Human society and Section 2: Culture and identity.

Most candidates demonstrated their understanding of what was required and completed the two sections of the question paper in the allocated time.

The paper provided opportunities for discrimination between A-grade and C-grade candidates. Many candidates produced good-quality answers with A-grade candidates producing quality responses across both sections of the paper while section 1 provided opportunities for C-grade candidates to perform well.

Most candidates attempted all questions. Candidates achieved generally higher marks in the shorter response questions in section 1 but there was an increase in the average mark achieved in the essay questions in section 2.

Assignment

Candidates were assessed on social issues through the assignment. The assignment requires candidates to complete a 1,500–2,000-word report on a social issue of their choice, using at least one sociological study. The marks are divided into sections, for example 4 marks for evaluation of sources.

Overall, the assignment performed as expected, with candidates gaining slightly higher marks than in previous years. Candidates continue to achieve high marks in the sections requiring knowledge, for example findings from sociological studies.

Candidates continue to choose a wide range of topics on social issues, from the influence of social media to the effectiveness of home schooling. Candidates used a wide range of sociological studies and other sources of sociological significance for their assignment.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Section 1: Human society

Candidates generally performed well in this section, attaining the full range of marks across all questions. A-grade candidates tended to perform consistently well in all questions (theories and methods).

Most candidates understood question 1 and were able to access the full range of marks. In their responses to question 1(a) most candidates appeared to understand what a hypothesis is and tried to formulate one in relation to the scenario. Similarly, many candidates coped well with question 1(b) and question 1(c).

Most candidates coped well with question 2, a very straightforward question on the features of feminism. Candidates who gained the highest marks used sociological language such as referring to conflict theories or patriarchy. Many candidates who performed well also used examples in their responses, for example statistics on inequalities.

Most candidates understood the requirements of question 3 and question 4 and many answered both successfully. Those who answered very well used sociological language and terminology relevant to each theory. For example, in question 3, candidates who gave strong responses focused their answers on the strengths of Weberian concepts such as verstehen or class, party and status. Moreover, in question 3 candidates who gained high marks explained why their point was a strength of Weberism and in question 4 described why their point, for example lack of historical perspective, could be described as a weakness.

Many candidates answered question 5 well and explained the presentation stage of the research process well.

Section 2: Culture and identity

Most candidates attempted the question.

The average mark for the essay question increased this year. This may be because of the modifications made for session 2022–23. Modifications made it easier to predict that the essay (if there was one) would be in section 2.

The question was straightforward and most candidates who tackled the essay answered the question.

Candidates who achieved high marks produced responses that were well structured and were focused on the way culture is formed, used the requisite theories, studies, and sociological language.

Candidates who achieved high marks used the essay introduction to define terms such as culture and/or to introduce the question, for example the role of socialisation in the formation of culture.

Candidates were awarded marks for introductory points wherever they appeared in the essay and not just at the beginning.

A-grade candidates used one structural and one action theory to analyse the ways culture is formed. Strong answers used each theory to analyse the way culture is formed, for example candidates who used feminist theory analysed the role of patriarchal institutions in the formation of culture, for example the role of media.

Similarly, strong answers used an action theory to analyse the ways culture is formed, for example using symbolic interactionism to explain the significance of symbols in the formation of culture.

Candidates who produced A-grade essays also linked the study they used to one of the theories used, and to the issue of the formation of culture. For example, by citing findings of the study that backed up their chosen theory's analysis of the way culture is formed.

The most successful candidates consistently used sociological language and terminology relevant to specific theories and studies.

Assignment

There was a slight increase in the average mark of assignments this year.

Candidates who completed assignments that met all requirements, for example findings, evaluation of sources, analysis and so on, tended to achieve high marks.

Social issues are often complex and multi-faceted, and therefore the best results were achieved by candidates who chose a topic they understood, and who chose sources that were relevant to their topic.

Most candidates coped well with describing research findings. Candidates who chose sociological studies and/or studies of sociological significance tended to find it easier to describe findings and to analyse the findings.

Most candidates who gained high marks in analysis and/or conclusion sections tended to use two sociological studies and/or a sociological study and a study of sociological significance.

Many candidates who provided good analysis and conclusions tended to apply sociological theories to their topic (although this is not the only way to gain such marks).

Strong assignments consistently featured sociological language, for example the terms 'valid' and 'reliable' in relation to evaluating sources. Candidates who produced an academic-type report, written in the third person and using references, tended to achieve high marks.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Section 1: Human society

Although many candidates performed well in question 1 some candidates struggled to formulate a hypothesis and a significant number produced over lengthy versions.

Although many candidates achieved high marks in question 1(b) and question 1(c) some missed marks by answering in generic terms rather than referring to the scenario.

Some candidates still gave common-sense views of feminism as their response to question 2 and so were unable to access the marks available. A few candidates added their opinion to the answer and seemed unable to differentiate evidence from opinion.

Many candidates seemed to find question 3 challenging although they appeared to understand the questions. Some candidates included some information on Weberian theory in their response and did not expand their answer to explain why their point was a strength, for example stating that Weber provides a bridge between structure and action theories but not explaining why this is a strength. Weber's theory of social change recognises that we need to take account of individual motivations for action in order to understand massive social structural changes. Centres should prepare candidates for questions on all theories listed in the course specification.

Many candidates found question 4 challenging, and some answers lacked the appropriate terminology, for example about the 'I' and the 'Me'. Many candidates also focused on labelling and only managed to answer on one weakness of symbolic interactionism.

A significant number of candidates missed marks in question 5 by not explaining their point, for example where in the research process presentation comes.

Section 2: Culture and identity

In question 6, essays that were not planned or organised tended to be awarded marks at the lower end of the range.

Some candidates wasted time on introductions that merely described what they were going to write and did not gain marks.

A few candidates used two structural or two action theories and could only gain marks for one theory.

Some candidates found it difficult to analyse the formation of culture using two contrasting theories and merely described or explained generic theoretical points; generic points are not awarded any marks.

A few candidates were unable to make a response on culture and framed their response about identity alone. Such answers were unable to achieve any marks. Where responses were mostly about identity but made attempts to analyse culture, candidates tended to achieve marks at the lower end of the range.

Some candidates were unable to link their study to the issue of the formation of culture, demonstrating in some cases a lack of understanding of the findings of their chosen study.

Some candidates found it challenging to use their sociological knowledge to analyse the way culture is formed. This was demonstrated through apparent lack of knowledge about theoretical explanations as to the way culture is formed.

Assignment

Candidates chose a very wide range of sociological topics. However, a few candidates found it difficult to differentiate between their personal views and those of sociological studies and perspectives. Strong assignments demonstrated the conventions of academic report writing, for example writing in the third person and using academic references.

Candidates who understood their chosen topic tended to achieve high marks. Some candidates chose topics that were not matched to their sociological knowledge and skills.

Most social issues are multi-faceted but some candidates could not cope with the complexities of certain social issues. For example, assignments on the topic of women in prison need to gather a knowledge of current penal reform or demands for reform, the workings of the criminal justice system, patterns of female offending, male dominated institutions and so on.

Some candidates struggled to identify suitable sources. For example, some candidates found it difficult to understand and use academic research papers or sociological studies and therefore found it difficult to achieve marks in the sections on findings, analysis, and conclusions. Similarly, some candidates used only one source.

A significant number of candidates missed out evaluation of sources or found this section challenging to answer. Some candidates found it difficult to evaluate the source as a source as opposed to its content. For example, evaluating a source in terms of validity and reliability.

Some candidates found writing conclusions challenging and merely repeated points they had already made. Effective conclusions provide a clear statement on whether the hypothesis has been proven and give additional points or insights that back up the point being made. This could include additional research, a critique of theoretical approaches used in the analysis, or express implications for government policy.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Centres should ensure that candidates are familiar with the course specification, particularly the content required.

Centres should prepare candidates to respond to questions on all theories noted in the course specification. Candidates are required to understand the main features, strengths, weaknesses, and differences between theories listed in the 'Human society' section and to apply these theories to 'Culture and identity' and 'Social issues'. Similarly, candidates must be prepared to answer questions on all research methods and the research process as detailed in the course specification.

Centres should prepare candidates to answer questions on action theories as well as structural theories. This should include preparing candidates to answer questions across each of the sections, as well as using an action theory in an essay question. For example, candidates should be able to answer questions on symbolic interactionism beyond just responses on labelling.

Centres should remind candidates that responses on feminist theory should be sociological.

Candidates who are successful demonstrate good answering technique. Centres should try to prepare candidates to develop good practice. For example, in shorter response questions candidates should understand how many marks each question is worth and the corresponding length their response should be. For example, a 2-mark question should elicit a shorter response than a question worth 6 marks. Similarly, when preparing essays, centres and candidates can use the published marking instructions and past papers as part of their preparations.

Understanding Standards materials will also help candidates to prepare.

In essay questions the most successful candidates have full knowledge and understanding of the course content specified in the Higher Sociology Course Specification on SQA's website.

Centres should ensure candidates' understanding of the content required on Culture and identity, and Social issues, which will again be assessed this year with the removal of modifications to course assessment.

Centres should remind candidates to use sociological language and terminology throughout the paper. Candidates should understand that they must not use stereotypical language.

Assignment

The assignment is an individual task however teachers and lecturers are allowed to provide some guidance to candidates, for example on choice of topic. Please see the Higher

Sociology Coursework Assessment Task and the Guidance on Conditions of Assessment documents for details as to what is and what is not reasonable assistance.

Centres should support candidates to choose an assignment topic of their choice. However, centres should also support candidates to make an appropriate choice in terms of the level of their sociological understanding and the accessibility of sources.

Centres should support candidates to identify what is and what is not a suitable source for their assignment, for example reminding candidates that, 'At least one of these named sources must be published research that is relevant to understanding your topic. This may be either a sociological study or research that has sociological significance'.

Topics should be sociological, based on a social issue. Although choosing a topic that candidates have an interest in and/or have knowledge of can motivate candidates, some have difficulty in separating their views and opinions from the sociological approach. Centres should remind candidates that the assignment must follow academic conventions, such as writing in the third person and using references.

Centres should ensure that candidates have a sound grasp of the research process, including methods. This will help candidates to evaluate sources — an area many find challenging.

Centres should ensure that candidates have the sociological skills to complete the assignment in terms of sociological knowledge and understanding, for example of theoretical approaches as outlined in the course specification. Furthermore, centres should continue to emphasise the ethical considerations sociologists (and candidates) must have when studying certain topics, research methods and so on.

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](#).