Course report 2024

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 with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   2,671

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   2,753

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	331	Percentage	12.0	Cumulative percentage	12.0	Minimum mark required	91
B	Number of candidates	957	Percentage	34.8	Cumulative percentage	46.8	Minimum mark required	78
C	Number of candidates	984	Percentage	35.7	Cumulative percentage	82.5	Minimum mark required	65
D	Number of candidates	369	Percentage	13.4	Cumulative percentage	95.9	Minimum mark required	52
No award	Number of candidates	112	Percentage	4.1	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding 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 statistical reports on the statistics and information page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected. Feedback from markers showed that the question paper sampled the course content fairly and provided a suitable level of challenge for candidates at this level. Questions followed familiar formats, and a range of imagery was selected to engage and challenge candidates.

The question paper was written in line with the structure of past papers and specimen question papers, whilst ensuring the questions and sampled content did not follow a predictable pattern. Most candidates attempted all twelve questions.

The wording used for question 12 was modified for session 2023–24, to make it more accessible for candidates, and enable them to consider the wider scope of the photography process, including post-production.

Project

The project performed as expected. Most candidates produced a set of eight images in response to their project plan. A few candidates submitted between eight and 12 final images, and a few candidates submitted more than 12.

Many candidates edited the evidence they submitted to ensure it was relevant. Some candidates produced too much evidence, which was irrelevant to their project topic and/or approach.

Some candidates submitted projects with evidence missing, without it being noted by the centre on the flyleaf.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Markers commented that overall, candidates were well-prepared for this assessment, had attempted most, or all, questions, and were able to complete the paper in the designated time. There was evidence that centres had practised exam techniques with candidates, particularly for Section 1: multiple choice and question 11. It was clear that candidates were familiar with the structure of the question paper.

Candidates' use of photographic language and terminology continues to improve.

Section 1: multiple choice

Overall, most candidates performed very well in this section of the question paper and were able to effectively apply their knowledge and understanding of image making techniques. Most candidates were able to attempt all questions in this section of the assessment.

Question 11(c)

Most candidates performed well in this question and were able to identify relevant compositional techniques and explain their effect on the image. Responses generally demonstrated an understanding of cause and effect and related to the given image.

Project

Most candidates selected a topic that was appropriate for this assessment. Most candidates selected a range of genres and styles that suited their understanding, ability and level.

The overall standard of candidate responses to the project was consistent. Markers identified that candidate responses to the following aspects of the project demonstrated considerable improvement compared to the previous years:

♦ producing a plan, explaining the selected approach, and demonstrating their planning skills
♦ explaining the impact of social, cultural, historical and/or scientific influences on relevant photographers' work and practice from their investigative research
♦ technical and creative quality of final prints

The presentation of candidate projects was similar to that of previous years, with most choosing to submit a printed digital file such as a PowerPoint or Word document. Markers noted an improvement in presentation layouts, which helped many candidates highlight their skill, knowledge and understanding. Most projects were more streamlined, succinct and focused.

Section 1: planning, research and investigation

Most candidates compiled research that was focused and relevant to their selected theme and approach. Visual imagery linked well to the style of most candidates' own photographic

work. Many candidates adopted the approach of providing additional 'shoot-specific' research throughout their development work, which kept them on track and in line with their earlier research work.

More candidates this year were able to access marks for their research into the influences of relevant photographers' work and practice. Candidates that accessed these marks were able to demonstrate 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.

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

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

The print quality of most final images was very good. Most candidates had made the decision to print externally however, many chose to print their images internally on high quality laser jet printers, some of which were of a very good standard. Many candidates chose to include a simple border on their prints, which helped to frame them.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Question 11(a)

Whilst most candidates were able to access 1 mark for identifying a piece of equipment, many were not able to access 2 marks, because their explanation was either not related to the image, or their explanation focused on the effect on the photographer, not the image, as the question asks.

Question 11(b)

Many candidates found it challenging to explain the effect of exposure compensation on the image. Many candidates gave a definition of exposure compensation, and some applied their understanding incorrectly to the image.

Some candidates provided generic descriptions of camera controls, with no relation to the image in question.

Question 12

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

Most candidates approached this question enthusiastically and were able to clearly identify relevant aspects. However, most were unable to 'discuss' these factors in detail. Many candidates listed their points, but did not fully explain them, or link them to the given image. Many candidates gave generic responses which were irrelevant or incorrect for the given image.

Most candidates who did not perform well in this question failed to show an understanding of the question prompt: discuss.

Project

While most candidates selected project topics that were appropriate and suitable for their skill level and available equipment, some candidates selected project topics and/or approaches that were very limiting. In these instances, candidates were not able to access the upper mark ranges.

A few candidates selected project topics that were inappropriate for their age group. Candidates should select a topic along with their teacher or lecturer, who 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 chose to present their plans in a variety of formats, such as a body of text, mind maps, and using sub-sections.

Many candidates did not highlight key planning aspects that were relevant to their project. In many instances, project planning was generic or irrelevant. Candidates must ensure that the issues they choose to include are relevant and personal to their project, for instance the locations, or equipment.

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, which should be reflected in their final images.

Some candidates made poor selections for their final images, not choosing their strongest ones. The final eight images should be the candidate's most technically competent images, and this should be reflected in their refinement and decision-making throughout their project.

Some candidates submitted more than the required eight images for their final selection. Some candidates also produced their final images outside of the designated sizes (A5 to

A4). Where candidates printed up to the maximum A4, their images were often of poorer quality than they would have been if printed smaller.

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

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

Section 3: evaluation
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 be awarded marks if what they are saying is relevant, accurate and critically reflective.

Many candidates did not critically evaluate their final images. Instead, they stated decisions they made during their shoots and in post-production. These 5 marks are awarded for critically evaluating the strengths and areas for improvement in their final prints only, therefore reference must be made to the prints themselves. Many candidates did not identify any areas for improvement despite there being clear evidence of issues.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Centres should continue to broaden candidates' knowledge and understanding of photographic terms, techniques, styles and genres. This will ensure that they are prepared for any images or scenarios that may be included in the question paper. It will also help to develop their understanding of photography for their project.

Centres should continue to support candidates by developing exam technique through timed responses, and opportunities to complete practice questions and papers. Question prompts that are used within the Higher Photography question paper are included in the course specification document, with a description of how candidates should respond to them. Example responses are also available in the marking instructions for past papers, and the specimen question paper. Past papers and the specimen question paper, with associated marking instructions, are available on the Higher Photography subject page of SQA's website. Example candidate responses are also available on the Understanding Standards section of SQA's secure website.

Centres should ensure that candidates are aware that a supplementary sheet is issued together with the question paper during the exam. Candidates should refer to the supplementary sheet when responding to the questions.

Section 2: analysis

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

Some candidates are providing generic responses to the analysis questions, for example by giving general definitions of a tripod or a lens without linking it to the image in question. These definitions alone do not enable candidates to access the available marks.

Candidates must demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect (question 11) and cause and effect with valid justification (question 12), referring to the particular images in the questions. Therefore, the candidate must produce a bespoke answer and not one that has been pre-learned.

Candidates must demonstrate an awareness of the different command words used within the analysis section of the question paper:

- ◆ 'identify' requires candidates to give the correct name
- ◆ 'explain' requires them to demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect
- ◆ 'discuss' requires a demonstrated understanding of cause and effect with a valid justification.

A list of example justifications can be found in the 'Effect of applied techniques' field on page 9 in the course specification on the Photography subject page.

Project

A few candidates submitted projects that contained evidence of writing frames and/or pro formas that had been used to assist the candidates in the completion of their projects. As is stated in the course specification, candidates should only receive reasonable assistance in completing their project.

To enable candidates to complete their project independently, centres should teach candidates how to produce an effective project. This could take the form of a mini-project, test project or similar before undertaking the coursework assessment.

Centres are advised to give candidates 'Appendix 1: instructions for candidates' from the coursework assessment task document. This information will support the candidates at each stage of the process. Centres should ensure that candidates show engagement with all aspects of the assessment criteria and do so independently or with reasonable assistance.

Candidates should not start their project before they have been taught the relevant skills to do so. Centres are encouraged to give candidates the opportunity to explore image making techniques, styles, genres and creative effects before beginning to work on their projects. This will support providing candidates with the skills to select an appropriate theme and produce a project with minimal assistance.

Candidates should be encouraged to select a theme and approach that is achievable for their level of skill, as well as resources and equipment available to them. Themes should be broad enough to give scope for creative exploration and minimise repetition, but not so broad that the candidate is unable to create cohesiveness throughout their work. Teachers and lecturers should discuss the themes with the candidates to ensure appropriate themes are chosen.

Centres must also be mindful that some themes are inappropriate for this assessment due to the sensitive nature of the images the theme will produce, the approaches employed by the candidate, or the associated themes explored. These concerns must be taken into account by teachers and lecturers when discussing themes with candidates.

Planning
Project plans should focus less on storytelling 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, therefore not generic. Where generic information is included (such as basic camera techniques etc) and it is not specific to the candidate's project, it can limit achievement in this aspect of the project.

To achieve the full marks available for identifying social, cultural, historical or scientific influences on two photographer's work, there are a few key elements candidates need to present:

♦ selecting two photographers (relevant to their topic or theme, or approach)
♦ identifying at least one true and relevant influence on each photographer
♦ selecting an image by each photographer that demonstrates this influence

♦ explaining how the identified influence affects the selected image

This does not need to be an extensive piece of writing and can be quite short in length. No marks are awarded for including a biography for each photographer, or creative analysis of their work.

Section 2: development and production
Candidates should edit the evidence that they choose to submit to ensure that it is in line with the requirements of their selected topic and approach.

When exploring an idea in a photoshoot, candidates should give themselves scope to explore different ideas and techniques. Candidates could be encouraged to document their learning and exploration of techniques, detailing how they arrived at their conclusion. Prior learning should give them confidence to understand what constitutes an effective photoshoot compared to taking a whole series of identical images of the same subject from the same viewpoint, focal length etc.

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

♦ composition
♦ lighting
♦ viewpoint and camera angle
♦ focal distance
♦ subject matter
♦ approach

Candidates should focus on producing good quality final images. These should be technically competent and creative in nature (as well as relevant to their planning, research and body of work). Candidates should be taught this skill in their prior learning before beginning this assessment task. Candidates should also avoid producing repetitive images.

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

Evaluation
Candidates should be encouraged to identify valid strengths and weaknesses in their photographic practice and final images. For clarity, it is recommended to keep these two sections separate. Candidates can use the headings in their instructions to structure their response.

To access the first set of five marks, candidates should focus on their photographic practice. This could include time-management, creativity, planning, logistics, technical ability for example. To access the second set of five marks, candidates must only refer to their final

images, and not the steps they took to create the image in the shoot. They could refer to aspects such as the quality of the prints, printing issues, or how the images work as a set with reference to their selected theme and approach.

The evaluation is only 500 words, so candidates should not evaluate every image at length. They should be encouraged to approach the evaluation in a holistic way, looking for patterns or abnormalities in their practice and final prints. Thumbnails of final images could be included and referred to as a method of reducing their word count.

Presentation and packaging
All candidates must complete a flyleaf for their project. It is best to place this at the very front of the project to allow the marker easy access to it. The flyleaf must not be laminated. Teachers and lecturers must also tick the box to indicate that any issues that arose from the project have been discussed.

Project packaging should be kept simple. Sketchbooks do not need to be individually wrapped and sealed. All evidence should be secured within the folder or sketchbook.

Candidate labels should be placed on the front of their project book or folder. Labels can also be placed on the back, if there are spares available. One label should be attached to each of the candidate's final images.

Most candidates that perform well have structured their project in accordance with the 'instructions for candidates', which in turn mirror the marking instructions. Complicated presentation such as pull outs, fold downs and button ups do not add to the candidate's mark and can sometimes make it difficult for the marker to decipher.

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.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in March 2024 and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).