



Course report 2025

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive)

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design)

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 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 1,313

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,330

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	479	36.0	36.0	70
B	419	31.5	67.5	60
C	333	25.0	92.6	50
D	84	6.3	98.9	40
No award	15	1.1	100%	Not applicable

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 741

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 891

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	269	30.2	30.2	70
B	254	28.5	58.7	60
C	302	33.9	92.6	50
D	57	6.4	99.0	40
No award	9	1.0	100%	Not applicable

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 or equal to 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

Portfolio

Progression

The submissions of Advanced Higher Art and Design for 2024/25 continued to show the many ways in which many candidates have successfully made the step from Higher to Advanced Higher. This progression can be challenging and uncertain for some, however, most candidates have developed the skills from Higher and embraced this progression with confidence and creative freedom.

Creative process

Many portfolios showed a strong understanding of the process of responding to the chosen theme, stimulus or design brief. The task of researching, developing and resolving creative ideas is central to both design and expressive courses. It involves investigating relevant sources, exploring the work of artists or designers, trying out possible directions, experimenting with materials, and refining potential resolutions. Markers commented on the achievements of many candidates in bringing these varied tasks together into a coherent portfolio.

Themes and design briefs

As in previous years, the subjects, themes and design briefs that headlined each portfolio reflected candidates' diverse interests and concerns. Family life and friends featured prominently in expressive portfolios that explored home life, childhood, ageing, relationships, pets and cultural roots. In design portfolios, briefs for fashion and even architecture had family-related topics of security, heredity and ethnicity.

Nature, biology and the environment allowed starting points for candidates to develop shape and colour from such things as flowers, sea life, woodland, insects, birds, human arteries, skeletons and viscera. In some design portfolios, nature was also a means of exploiting types of biomimicry. The influence of a general cultural landscape was also evident in expressive portfolios, and graphic design that looked

at music, film, literature, pop imagery, ordinary objects and cultural stereotypes. Some candidates chose to explore the world of fantasy, from nostalgic images of children's illustration to folklore and mythology. Supernatural themes were also explored by some candidates, in a range of forms including animation, gaming character design and fashion.

Some themes that have made important contributions to portfolios in the past were not as common this year. Anxiety about body image, and general teenage angst, depression and loneliness were rare. In the past, portfolios have engaged with contemporary issues such as historical injustice, climate change, feminism, disinformation, income inequality, the meat industry, pacifism and political propaganda. This year, with some notable exceptions, these themes were few.

Materials and techniques

The technical challenge of making art or design work, such as the exploration of tonal contrast, colour variation, print making on fabric, or constructing in card, was the central inspiration for many portfolios. The breadth and variety of materials used in both design and expressive courses has increased in recent years. While traditional painting skills were the basis of many expressive portfolios, collage, print making and mixed media were used experimentally and in resolved work.

Drawing

For many candidates, drawing was the most fluent and flexible means of trying out and investigating ideas. The observation skills that many candidates demonstrated in their portfolios were often used with confidence in extending their range of techniques and subject matter. From sketchbooks or sheets of preliminary studies to resolved works, drawing skills underpinned standards in both design and expressive courses.

Digital media

Markers commented on the continued increasing proportion of digital technology in portfolios. Some candidates demonstrated that computer software, such as Photoshop or Procreate, could add an extra dimension to their work. Most of these

portfolios showed a hybrid approach where aspects of digital research and development were created through image manipulation, merging or layering, combined with drawing and a variety of traditional art materials. Markers fed back positively on portfolios that included this mixture of physical and digital work.

Using basic materials

Some candidates produced exciting results from basic, inexpensive materials. This included sensitive drawings made from pencil or pastels, or a whole portfolio of expressive portraits in charcoal, corrugated card and found objects.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Creative independence

Markers noted that there were many portfolios where the 'voice of the candidate' was evident. These portfolios demonstrated a personal choice of theme, and the individual development of ideas, materials and techniques. This creative independence was seen in the deliberate and energetic sense of direction, and a familiarity with materials and relevant visual elements.

Starting points

Markers noted the diverse and contrasting use of initial stimulus or source material for developing ideas in most portfolios. One example, inspired by cubism, contained a collection of found objects, investigation through sketchbook drawings and photography with references to personal experience, as well as research into popular culture and local architecture. The starting point for that portfolio is an example of the diverse stimulus that helps create a creative process.

Presenting a sustained creative process

The process of researching and developing ideas is a crucial part of the Advanced Higher courses. Most candidates successfully edited and arranged their work, numbering and annotating sheets and linking their development work to research, to identify each step in the creative process. Markers were impressed by the many candidates who presented work in a clear, coherent way. This was seen in all parts of the portfolio. The practical work, contextual analysis and evaluation came together to make a complete enquiry.

Skilfully and creatively using materials

Demonstrated skills in drawing remain of a high standard, with some outstanding examples of drawing and painting techniques. However, candidates displayed many different skills, including printmaking, card model construction, sewing, jewellery making, digital drawing, film making, and Photoshop editing and manipulation.

Applied understanding of art/design practice

The influence of artists and designers was seen throughout the work of most portfolios. In some submissions, the technique or style of an artist or designer was adopted; in others, the outlook of a designer or artist, such as their attitude to the subject, was taken up and applied to aspects of the work. Markers commented on the improvement in the way this influence has informed and enhanced many portfolios.

Unity of contextual analysis and practical work

Markers noted many portfolios in which the contextual analysis and practical work were closely linked, so that the contextual analysis was an essential part of the whole portfolio. Many candidates selected a written topic that had an impact on their creative process, and the influence of this topic was seen throughout the portfolio. Markers commented on a 'visual connection' between written work and practical work, and in many portfolios, the choice of topic and the subsequent discussion of work clearly complemented and informed the creative process.

Points of differentiation

Produce sustained lines of development

Some candidates started out with a response to a chosen theme or design brief, but found it difficult to sustain or develop the work further. Some candidates struggled to present more than one single idea in response to their theme, stimulus or design brief. From the initial research to the resolution of the enquiry, the composition or design had hardly changed. The capacity to rethink possible solutions or rearrange ideas, or to reimagine the initial stimulus in different forms is an essential, yet demanding, element of the creative process.

Introducing new topics

A few candidates included extra topics within their practical work. For example, a graphic design brief for a CD cover may have a poster, a 'flier', a band logo and even a t-shirt added to fill up the space where a creative process for the original idea

might have gone. Trying out possible directions, 'exploring and experimenting with visual elements' is a vital part of the Advanced Higher courses. Markers noted that some candidates introduced new themes or extended the design brief, which at times was to the detriment of researching and developing the core idea.

Limited design brief

A few candidates started with a very restricted brief that described in detail the design they were going to make. These briefs can limit the process of development to small decisions about how to make a design that is predetermined. For example, a design brief for a t-shirt with a pattern of large sunflowers leaves few questions that might elicit a creative response. Writing out precisely what is to be designed before it is made is a self-fulfilling straight line from the brief to the solution, where candidates hardly consider any creative problems or alternative ideas. Such portfolios produce few sustained lines of development.

House styles

A few centres restricted candidates to similar topics that allowed only circumscribed opportunities for individual creativity and expression. These portfolios often showed skill and coherence, but each candidate tended to follow a similar pattern of research and development. While this might be a supportive and structured way of introducing the course, candidates are responding to stages of a set project, rather than an individually chosen theme or design brief. Markers recognise the need for teaching at this level, but this must be in the service of individual creativity.

Digital media

Digital techniques are an effective approach in the Advanced Higher course. Digital media was seen to be used with discerning visual awareness and imagination within a creative process in some portfolios. In a few submissions, it allowed candidates with potentially limited drawing skills to realise ideas in areas such as graphics, architecture, animation, film or illustration that might have otherwise been unattainable. However, there were a few portfolios where digital techniques appeared repetitive and simplistic, and included multiple versions of a pattern or design without much creative discrimination.

Research and development of fantasy or gaming characters

Some candidates successfully adopted themes or design briefs based on fantasy or gaming characters that were skilfully presented, showing a thorough understanding of the genre. Although the investigation and development were relatively straightforward through digital media, a few candidates were not able to resolve this in an original or creative way. While the Advanced Higher courses encourage candidates to investigate art or design practice and show that their own work is informed by this research, candidates should ensure they are demonstrating an individual, personal creative process rather than a variant of an existing, familiar form.

Contextual analysis

Markers noted that, while many candidates found the discursive aspect of the contextual analysis demanding in the past, a growing number created a discussion by addressing a question such as, 'to what extent?' or asking, 'what does this mean?' or even just by making comparisons, and some contextual analysis submissions performed stronger this year than in previous years.

Evaluation

In the evaluation, many candidates made an informative account of their progress through the creative process, explaining points of departure, changes of direction and moments of inspiration. However, the self-critical task of 'evaluating the impact of creative decisions and the effectiveness of their art/design work' seemed for some candidates to be an admission of difficulty or failure. Markers sometimes found the annotations that explain and illuminate work in sketchbooks and practical sheets contained more critical insights into the work than were written in the evaluation.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Before starting

Encourage autonomy

While giving support and advice to a group of candidates together is beneficial, teachers must encourage each candidate to individually adopt a theme or area of design, select source material, develop ideas, and make creative decisions of their own choosing. Candidates should take time to consider a range of options before starting the course. Candidates who choose their theme or design brief early may be more likely to change their mind later and may not be fully prepared for the uncertain process of developing ideas.

Sketchbooks

Sketchbooks are a way of encouraging candidates to take an individual approach. Candidates can begin to form ideas from a series of quick sketches and collections of material around a theme. At this stage, it is important for candidates to be coherent and create more than one idea so that they have other options.

Learn research skills

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore and look for examples of art and design that relate to their theme to build up some background material. Research should be an ongoing process that is done together with developing and resolving ideas.

Influences from artists and designers

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to learn from artists or designers they admire. It is useful, even at an early stage, for candidates to make notes or find quotes about the methods, ideas or practice that they like. This also may be useful when writing the contextual analysis.

Introduce basic design ideas

Candidates can develop ideas by exploring visual elements such as negative space, tonal contrast, scale, colour variation, cropping, proportion, viewpoint and perspective. Rough models or mock-ups, storyboards, and photographic contact sheets can also be used to investigate ways in which abstract shape or form can suggest alternative ways of expanding a creative idea.

Experiment with materials and techniques

Candidates could explore ideas, new techniques and formats, with a view to extending the ways they can represent a visual idea. Candidates can use a range of cheap materials to explore mark-making or shape-making, such as collage, mono-printing, thread, paint rollers, palette knives, craft knives, scissors and stencils. More sophisticated equipment could include sewing machines, printing presses, scanners and CAD software (such as Photoshop, Procreate or SketchUp). Candidates could experiment with mixing digital images with sketching, for example, drawing on top of digital images to look at the theme in a new light.

Research themes widely

In addition to researching their chosen theme, candidates should draw, take photos and explore related themes to find a wide range of sources to develop. For example, in fantasy-based portfolios, as well as looking at a range of fantasy art, candidates could explore nature and the urban environment to further develop their ideas.

Digital images

When presenting digital images, it is important for candidates to:

- make a clear connection to the whole scheme of work
- document the stages in the process of creating the images
- annotate the image by explaining the type of software
- show how the same image might be recomposed
- show how they have experimented with different styles, compositions or techniques

Contextual analysis

Make visual connections

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to choose a topic that has influenced their practical work and discuss aspects of the chosen topic that have helped to inform the ideas and the overall look of the portfolio. Some candidates begin the contextual analysis before they have established a clear direction and influence in their practical portfolio. They may find that the early interest in a topic is no longer relevant. This visual link between the theme or design brief of the practical work and the topic of the contextual analysis should be clear, so that the written work is a natural extension of the practical.

Consider the breadth of topic

Before candidates choose a topic, they should do some wider research into the background of their whole field of interest. If they find that their chosen example offers too little information, they can enlarge the subject while still focusing on one work. For example, a single drawing of a ballet dancer by Degas might become all Degas' studies for a particular painting such as 'The Rehearsal'. Equally, a single fashion design by Iris van Herpen might become part of a collection by van Herpen such as the 'Micro' collection.

Answer questions

Candidates could begin by explaining what they are writing about in the form of questions. Asking questions can provide a structure. For example:

- How did Degas break away from the academic style of posed figures to make drawings of people that look natural and unposed? Why did he choose young dancers as his subject? What was the position of these young people in society at the time?
- How do Iris van Herpen's designs relate to natural form? Where does she get the ideas? How does she collaborate with scientists to research and make the forms for her 'Micro' collection? Are they wearable? If so, for what occasions?

Analyse the topic with illustrations

The presentations on SQA's [Understanding Standards](#) website show how candidates can use images along with text to explain visual elements. Candidates should include relevant images and ensure they clearly link them to the text.

Explain quotes

When discussing an artist's or designer's work, candidates can use quotes. They can be from almost any source that makes an interesting comment on the subject. For example:

- What did Degas mean when he said, 'People call me the painter of dancing girls. It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement'?
- What did Degas mean when he said, 'The artist does not draw what he sees, but what he has to make others see'?
- In writing about Iris van Herpen, what does the critic mean by: 'A fascination for architecture has been with Van Herpen from the very beginning'?
- What does the critic mean by: 'Her creative process brings together architecture and nature'?

Useful discursive words

Writing about art is often a balance of statements. Words that make links between statements help to form a discussion. For example, by starting a sentence with 'Although' or 'Despite', candidates can make a complex statement:

- Although Degas' ballet pictures are thought to be pleasing scenes of beauty, they, in fact, depict the lives of young people who were exploited.
- Despite van Herpen's interest in nature, her work is made in the most unnatural way.

Writing about context and influence is often subjective. As part of their analysis, candidates should discuss why artists or designers might have been influenced by, commented on or created something.

Evaluations

The evaluation offers candidates an opportunity to look back at their initial creative intentions and determine if they achieved what they set out to do. They could:

- Explain their initial ideas, stimulus, theme or design brief. This could be a short statement to explain how they developed their initial research.
- Show to what extent their initial ideas developed or changed. They could identify turning points in the development of their ideas. They could consider how effective their ideas were and what they might have done differently.
- Evaluate things they did well and less well and if they achieved what they set out to do. They should be self-critical and imagine how someone objective would judge them. They should explain any changes they would make.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

Our main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and to maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, we aim 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, we hold 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 our 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. We 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.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).