Course report 2025

Higher Philosophy

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: 562

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 550

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	119	21.6	21.6	75
B	100	18.2	39.8	63
C	105	19.1	58.9	52
D	88	16.0	74.9	40
No award	138	25.1	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

The question papers performed largely in line with expectations. The feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicated they were received well by centres and were fair papers in line with the specifications. The mean mark across the two papers was slightly higher than the 2024 paper and the distribution of candidates appeared normal. However, the Knowledge and doubt section in paper 2 was deemed to be more demanding than anticipated, and we adjusted the grade boundary to take this into account. It was considered to have slightly more of an impact on pupils at the C grade than at the A grade, and we also took this into account in the grade boundaries.

Question paper 1

Question paper 1 performed in line with expectations. The question on Hume was focused on section 2 of the Enquiry and, as always, required precise knowledge and understanding of the course text, as well as the ability to analyse and evaluate Hume’s theory. Candidates answered this question marginally less well than the Descartes question from last year, despite being a similar level of difficulty.

For the Kant questions, more candidates chose to answer question 2 than question 3, which is in line with previous years. Candidates tend to favour the scenario questions over the quotation questions. The average mark for question 2 was lower than the average mark for question 3, which is also in line with the trend from previous years.

The marking for essays in paper 1 is holistic and takes into consideration the candidates’ knowledge and understanding of the content, as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation. The scaffolding in the questions continued to help weaker candidates show their skills and knowledge in response to the questions asked.

Question paper 2

The Arguments in action section performed in line with expectations. However, the questions in the Knowledge and doubt section were considered to be more demanding than intended. This extra demand would have affected all candidates, especially candidates at the C grade level more than those at the A level, and we took this into account in the grade boundaries. The Moral philosophy section performed as intended.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper 1

As a whole, candidate performance in paper 1 was slightly below that of the previous exam diet. Most candidates were good at describing parts of Hume's theory of impressions and ideas. Some candidates showed precise knowledge of the text, with awareness of key aspects of Hume's theory and the arguments he uses to support this. However, many candidates found it more challenging to evaluate how effective Hume's theory of impressions and ideas was.

Most candidates were able to provide a clear description of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas. They often described the distinction between internal and external impressions and the four processes of the imagination, using good examples. Strong essays showed knowledge of Hume's arguments to support his distinction between impressions and ideas and the copy principle. Some candidates failed to describe any of Hume's arguments, but simply described some key features of his theory; this made it difficult to achieve the top marks because it is hard to give depth to the evaluation of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas without showing an understanding of why Hume made these distinctions, and what he believed the relationship was between impressions and ideas.

Many candidates were able to present common criticisms of Hume's thinking as described in section 2 of the Enquiry. Some candidates showed good knowledge of the missing shade of blue counterexample, although articulating accurately why it was problematic for Hume proved more of a challenge. Many candidates could present criticisms or challenges to his theory in a superficial way, but were not always able to explain clearly why they challenged his philosophy, or make a personal judgement about these criticisms and how they affected his theory. In general, essays that achieved marks in the highest mark range did this most successfully. Those candidates usually showed a clear understanding of the fact that section 2 of Hume's Enquiry deals with concept acquisition, and they also tended to show an understanding of how this supported Hume's empiricism.

In both Kant essays, for question 2 and 3, most candidates could describe the general principles of Kant's philosophy. Most candidates showed understanding of the absolute nature of Kantian ethics and could articulate some of the foundations of the theory, including the 'sovereignty of reason' and 'the good will'. Many candidates gave good explanations of Kant's focus on motives in terms of what made actions morally praiseworthy. Many candidates explained, in general, what the categorical imperative was and the two formulations. However, few candidates were able to give a clear description of the application of either of the two formulations or how Kant would work out our moral duties using these. With the universal law formulation, candidates were often unable to explain the nature of contradictions in conception, or in the will or what this meant in terms of the duties they would have to themselves or others when they arose.

Most candidates were able to provide some common criticisms of Kantian ethics in their essays, although this was often superficial and did not always show deep understanding of why this was a criticism of Kantian ethics. The best essays showed the ability to apply Kantian ethics to the specific scenario or quotation and evaluate on the basis of this application.

In scenario essays, to fully answer the question, candidates must apply Kantian ethics to the situation. Many candidates struggled to do this successfully. In question 2, most candidates answered that Kant would say we have a perfect duty to never lie; however, fewer candidates knew that our duty to help the innocents we were sheltering would be an imperfect duty. Few candidates actually explained how Kant would work out what his duties were, using either of the two formulations, in relation to the scenario. This may explain why the average marks for question 2 essays were lower than for question 3. In question 3, candidates could draw on pre-learned examples of maxims and the duties arising from them to show their understanding of the formulations, rather than having to apply the theory to an unfamiliar scenario.

Question paper 2

Section 1: Arguments in action

Question 1 was a straightforward question, focused on the knowledge of statements and arguments and the distinctions between them. Candidates completed all parts, (a), (b) and (c), well, and most candidates were able to gain each of these marks.

Question 2(a) focused on the acceptability of the premises in this argument, and was meant be a straightforward application of this concept to the argument. Many candidates gained both marks for this question, with only a few candidates not gaining any marks.

Candidates answered question 2(b) well, with many candidates able to explain why the premises would have been sufficient.

Candidates answered question 2(c) well, with many candidates able to correctly identify the argument as requiring a linked diagram.

Many candidates answered question 3(a) well, with most candidates getting at least 2 out of 3 marks. Where candidates gained 2 out of 3 marks, most failed to get the mark for the second premise because they had not presented it as a standalone, meaningful sentence by changing the ‘there’ to ‘at school’.

Question 3(b) was a straightforward question of definition. However, many candidates did not gain this mark. Some candidates confused validity with having a true conclusion, or were simply not precise enough in their definition to gain this mark.

Candidates answered question 3(c) well, with half of candidates achieving this mark. While many candidates were unable to give an accurate definition of validity in question 3(b), more candidates were able to explain why the specific argument was not valid, which suggests they understood the concept but were unable to precisely define it.

Candidates answered question 4(a) well, and many candidates could say why the argument was inductive. However, question 4(b) proved more challenging. Around half of candidates achieved at least 1 mark out of 2. Most candidates who got 1 mark out of 2 showed an understanding that inductive strength depends on the amount of evidence supporting a conclusion. However, they did not develop this point in relation to the specific argument, failing to note that we are not told how many times the cat has been fed before. The more often this has occurred, the stronger the inductive strength of the argument would be.

Most candidates achieved at least 1 mark out of 2 for question 5. To gain both marks, candidates needed to identify two aspects of confirmation bias, such as seeking evidence that supports one’s own beliefs and ignoring evidence that contradicts them.

Question 6 proved somewhat challenging for candidates. In particular, many candidates were unable to give an accurate definition of an appeal to authority in question 6(c). Candidates who did not gain this mark often did not express that the appeal to authority concludes that a claim is true because some authority, who is inappropriate in some way, said it. Many candidates answered that it was simply an argument put forward by someone who is not authoritative on the issue.

Candidates answered questions 6(b) and 6(c) more successfully, with many candidates able to state a criteria for an appropriate authority in question 6(b), and most candidates being able to get at least 1 mark for questions 6(c) regarding whether the appeal to authority was fallacious or not.

Candidates found question 7 difficult. Many candidates were unable to describe the appeal to emotion fallacy accurately. Often, they did not explain that the emotion was irrelevant to why we should accept the conclusion. Although more candidates were able to discuss the fallaciousness of the argument itself in question 7(b) and gain 1 mark, many did not get any marks for this question. In order to answer whether the argument was fallacious, it was necessary to show an awareness of whether the emotions evoked would be relevant to whether an extension should be given.

Candidates completed question 8 well. Most candidates were able to correctly identify the fallacy as the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy in question 8(a). Many candidates were also able to describe the fallacy in question 8(b), with only a few gaining this mark. Many candidates also gained at least 1 mark out of 2 for question 8(c). Some candidates who did not get the marks in question 8(c) seemed confused about the definition of ‘correlation’, and used it as if interchangeable with ‘causation’. Encourage candidates to explain its meaning in their answers when using this term, as it would make clear when they genuinely understand the fallacy, even if they use the term incorrectly.

Candidates had difficulty with question 9, with just over half of candidates gaining no marks for question 9(a) and similar numbers gaining no marks for question 9(b). For question 9(a), some candidates knew that a formal fallacy was fallacious due to the structure of the argument but did not know that an informal fallacy was fallacious due to the content of the argument.

Section 2: Knowledge and doubt

Questions 10 to 13 were focused on Descartes’ clear and distinct rule, and candidates found them challenging. Questions 10 and 11 were focused on the definitions of ‘clear’ and ‘distinct’ for Descartes. Some candidates managed to gain the mark for question 10 on defining clear perceptions, but only a few candidates accurately defined distinct perceptions. Many candidates failed to show that distinct perceptions were ones that had nothing about them that was not clear or confused with anything else.

Half of candidates could state the clear and distinct rule for Descartes, while only some candidates were able to say why Descartes thought that he needs the idea of God to support the clear and distinct rule.

Question 14 was intended to differentiate between A and C candidates. However, it was more challenging than intended and many candidates did not gain more than half the marks. Even though this question was intended to be more difficult than the previous Descartes questions, some candidates did better in this question than in the previous knowledge-based questions (questions 10 to 13). This suggests that the issue was more about how precisely and accurately students expressed their knowledge, rather than about their overall understanding of the text. This highlights the importance of preparing candidates to answer both essays for question paper 1 and short answer questions for question paper 2.

Section 3: Moral philosophy

Question 15 was intended to differentiate between A and C candidates, and it did this well. Candidates performed well in this question, with most candidates able to achieve at least half of the marks and close to half the candidates gaining 3 or 4 out of 4 marks. This question was focused on using the hedonic calculus in moral decision making, and many candidates were able to explain some aspects of the hedonic calculus successfully. One area of confusion was in how the extent criterion is meant to be applied. Many candidates suggested that we should simply multiply the sums of the other criteria by the number of people affected, rather than that we must consider the pleasures and pains of each individual affected for each possible action.

Question 16 was an evaluation question, so it was expected to be more challenging than Question 15, and it was. It was also intended to differentiate between A and C candidates. Candidates completed this question well, with many gaining at least half marks and just under half of candidates gaining 4 or more marks.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

It is important to stay up to date with the latest guidance and documentation. The Higher Philosophy course specification, available on our website, is the main source of information about the requirements of the course. Teachers and lecturers, who know their candidates best, should use their professional judgement to choose the most appropriate resources for preparation. Additional support is available in the course support section of the Higher Philosophy webpage, and you can find examples of candidate evidence on our Understanding Standards webpage.

Question paper 1

As this paper is essay-based, regular essay-writing practice will help candidates strengthen their understanding of the course content. Teachers and lecturers should place an emphasis on developing a clear line of argument in response to essay questions. Candidates should understand that the essay is an opportunity to show their knowledge and understanding of key areas of philosophy.

Candidates should practise accurately describing content from both the Knowledge and doubt section and the Moral philosophy section, and learn how to build a relevant argument based on the question. Focused practice in these areas will help candidates perform more strongly in the exam.

The suggested essay content is intended as guidance on what candidates might include. However, candidates should feel confident in approaching essays in various ways. They are not required to include all suggested content, nor are they limited to it. There are multiple valid ways to answering each question.

In the Knowledge and doubt section, candidates who perform well show familiarity with the course texts they have studied and a clear understanding of the philosophical narratives. This often enables them to engage more critically with the material in their essays. Candidates should be able to explain the key theories and arguments, paying close attention to areas where fine distinctions are important.

For the Moral philosophy section, candidates are expected to demonstrate sound knowledge and understanding of the moral theories covered in the course. It may be helpful for teachers and lecturers to provide regular opportunities for candidates to practise applying these theories to a range of moral issues and scenarios, as well as evaluating their effectiveness.

In quotation questions where no scenario is given, candidates who do well often use their own relevant examples to show how a moral theory could be applied in real-life situations.

Question paper 2

This paper includes both short and extended-response questions. These questions require candidates to accurately and clearly describe and explain philosophical ideas and arguments. Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are familiar with all of the content outlined in the Higher Philosophy course specification. Providing a glossary of key terms may be helpful, and regular testing of definitions can support candidates in developing the precision needed for many of the questions.

For the Arguments in action section, candidates should learn the definitions of fallacies accurately and understand what specifically makes an argument fallacious. For questions that ask candidates to judge whether an argument contains a fallacy, it is useful for them to consider what features would make the reasoning flawed, and what would make it acceptable.

It is also beneficial for candidates to practise answering questions from all areas of the course and across different skill sets to ensure they are fully prepared for the paper.

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.