



Course report 2025

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 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 2,753

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 2,922

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	531	18.2	18.2	91
B	1,168	40.0	58.1	78
C	907	31.0	89.2	65
D	225	7.7	96.9	52
No award	91	3.1	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

Question paper

Feedback from markers showed that the question paper was balanced, fair and in line with the course specification. It sampled a broad range of course content, while minimising predictability and providing a suitable level of challenge for candidates. Question formats were familiar, and the supplementary image sheet was generally used appropriately for section 2. Most candidates attempted the full paper and appeared to manage their time well.

The revised wording of question 12 continues to make it more accessible for candidates

Project

The project performance was stronger than in previous years. Project submissions were generally more consistent and streamlined than in previous years. Most candidates adhered to the requirement of producing eight final images, and many demonstrated improved editing of their work to ensure relevance. There was a noticeable improvement in the quality of planning, research and technical execution across many centres. Candidates demonstrated a clearer understanding of their photographic approach, stronger critical reflection in their development work and more creative decision-making when selecting final images.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Most responses to the question paper were confident and well-structured, with clear signs that centres had supported the development of exam technique. Section 1 (multiple choice) was particularly strong, and most candidates successfully applied their knowledge of image-making processes. Question 11, parts (a) and (d) were also handled well, with many candidates able to explain the photographer's use of symbolism on the image shown.

Photographic terminology was used more consistently across responses than in previous years, suggesting a growing confidence in the subject-specific language.

Project

Most candidates selected a topic that was achievable and appropriate to their skill level. A wide variety of themes and genres were explored, and there was greater evidence of visual research influencing the development of work. The inclusion of 'shoot-specific' research helped candidates stay on track, with stronger links between research, development and final images.

Photographic development was generally well-structured, with most candidates breaking down their theme into manageable shoots. Most work was presented clearly, with candidates using contact sheets, edits and annotations to demonstrate creative decision-making. Markers noted a significant improvement in the way candidates reflected on their shoots, using reviews to justify choices and refine outcomes. In most cases, the technical and creative quality of final prints was strong. While many candidates chose to print externally, others achieved good results using high-quality in-house printing. Simple borders on final prints helped enhance

presentation, and markers reported that most sets of images were cohesive and clearly linked to the candidate's stated approach.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Questions 11(b) and (c) provided challenge for many candidates. While most candidates understood the purpose of the equipment identified in 11(b), they did not link their explanation to the image provided. Many candidates confused a polarising filter with a neutral density filter. In 11(c), many candidates either wrote about composition rather than visual elements, or provided generic explanations of three different visual elements and did not link them to the image provided.

While most candidates attempted question 12, many responses lacked depth and did not demonstrate a clear understanding of the command word 'discuss', as they did not provide a valid justification for the impact of their decision on the image provided. Weaker responses tended to list techniques as a 'hit list' rather than exploring relevant creative or technical factors specific to the image provided. Some candidates did not show an understanding of the command words, which meant they were unable to access the upper mark ranges.

Project

In the project, some candidates chose topics or approaches that were either too limiting or inappropriate for the level. This restricted their ability to access the upper mark ranges. A small number of projects raised concerns around safeguarding and age-appropriateness, with some themes deemed unsuitable for a Higher level qualification.

The planning element of the project varied in quality. While many candidates clearly articulated the practical and creative elements of their approach, some candidates submitted generic plans that lacked relevance.

The final prints varied in technical quality. While most candidates presented a competent set of eight images, some included images that were repetitive, or did not demonstrate enough skill to access the upper mark ranges. Candidates are required to demonstrate an understanding of technical factors such as focus, exposure and white balance, and apply this knowledge when selecting their final prints. Repetition across the final set reduced the creative impact and limited opportunities to demonstrate a broader skill set. Some candidates chose to print at the maximum A4 size, which in some cases exceeded the optimal file resolution and resulted in a loss of image quality. A smaller A5 print would have been more suitable and cost-effective.

The evaluation continues to be a challenging area of the product for many candidates. While most candidates provided effective commentary on their photographic practice, only a few offered critical reflection into the strengths and weaknesses of their final prints. Evaluations should move beyond description to consider how technical choices (for example, lighting, focus and exposure) affect the impact and effectiveness of the final image. To access the full range of marks, candidates must refer specifically to the final images, identifying both strengths and areas for improvement.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

To prepare candidates for the question paper, centres should continue to build their knowledge of photographic terminology and confidence to apply styles and techniques. Candidates should be supported to write clearly, apply their knowledge to unfamiliar images and understand the expectations behind different command words. Using marking instructions from past papers, especially for questions 11 and 12, is an effective way to model analytical responses. Centres should give candidates regular opportunities to practise past papers and specimen questions under timed conditions, and provide feedback to develop their confidence and understanding.

Centres should remind candidates that they must apply their photographic knowledge to the specific images provided for questions 11 and 12 when responding to these questions.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates to read each question carefully.

Project

Centres must ensure that projects are candidate-led and completed under appropriate conditions. Candidates must not use writing frames or model plans.

It is good practice to teach key skills through prior learning tasks or mini projects before candidates begin their formal assessment. Candidates should be given time to explore different genres, styles and techniques before selecting their topic.

Project themes should be realistic and appropriate. Candidates should choose a topic that offers creative scope but is achievable considering the timeframe, equipment and support available. The chosen theme must be suitable for the candidate age group and should not contain content that could raise safeguarding

concerns. Centre staff must provide clear guidance in the early stages to help candidates avoid inappropriate or limiting choices.

Centres are reminded that candidates should tick the relevant boxes on the flyleaf to highlight which evidence they have included.

Candidates should be taught how to plan effectively and focus on decisions that relate directly to their chosen theme. Planning should reflect practical and creative intent rather than act as a narrative of the project topic.

When researching photographers, candidates should select relevant practitioners, explain an influence on a specific image, and make clear how this influence connects to the photographers' work. Candidates do not need to connect the influence to their own work. Including irrelevant analysis or long biographies, or linking to the candidate's own work will not gain marks.

Candidates can be encouraged to develop ideas through thoughtful photoshoots, editing and reflection. They should avoid submitting large sets of identical images or including unnecessary material. The emphasis should be on quality over quantity, with clear evidence of progression and critical thinking. Final images must be selected carefully and reflect both technical competence and creative intent. Repetition, poor print quality or size issues can limit the marks that candidates can access.

Candidates should be taught how to evaluate their work critically. This includes reviewing their own photographic practice (planning, time management and decision-making) and the strengths and weaknesses of their final prints. Evaluations should be concise and clearly linked to the work produced. Keeping these two aspects of evaluation separate helps candidates address both effectively. Thumbnail references can also support clarity and reduce the word count.

Candidates should ensure their planning addresses key logistical considerations such as location, equipment and approach, and avoid including pre-prepared or scaffolded content that may not be relevant to their own intentions. Research into two photographers must go beyond biographical information. To access the full range of marks, candidates should clearly identify at least one influence on each

photographer, select an appropriate image, and explain how that influence is visually demonstrated in the selected image. Centres can refer to pages 29 and 30 of the course specification, available on the [subject page](#) of our website, for further guidance to support candidate understanding.

Rather than directly replicating a found image, candidates could draw holistic inspiration from a variety and range of images to inform each shoot.

Centres must take greater care when approving themes and ensure these align with the candidate's resources, skill level and the ethical standards expected.

Projects not presented in a sketchbook format should be securely bound, using deep staples, comb binding or a ring binder, to ensure pages remain in order and can be reviewed efficiently. There is no need to individually sleeve each page or final image. Candidate projects do not need to be individually wrapped or packaged.

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](#).