



# **Course report 2025**

## **Higher Psychology**

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: 2,494

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 2,657

## 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	670	25.2	25.2	88
B	667	25.1	50.3	74
C	561	21.1	71.4	61
D	426	16.0	87.5	47
No award	333	12.5	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**

Overall, the question paper performed largely as expected. Feedback from the marking team, teachers and lecturers indicated that there was similar differentiation in this paper in comparison to previous papers. This provided a balanced paper which enabled candidates to achieve marks and showcase their knowledge and skills.

The question paper sampled content from three topics: the two mandatory topics of sleep and dreams and conformity and obedience, and one optional topic. Candidates selected and responded to one question from the following options: depression, memory, stress, prejudice, social relationships, and aggression.

The question paper included a similar question to the application question with no scenario from 2024, but within the topic of sleep and dreams (question 1a). This enabled candidates to apply their knowledge of the impact of light on sleep in a real-life situation.

Considering the limited success of high-mark application questions, this type of application question was reduced to two smaller mark sections relating to the one scenario. Combined with question 2b, the conformity and obedience section was less demanding than expected and the grade boundary was adjusted.

The topic of memory was the most popular optional topic, and the topics of social relationships and aggression were the least popular. Across the different optional topics, the number of marks gained by candidates was consistent, with only minor variations.

## Assignment

The assignment task remained the same as 2024 and pre-covid years. The assignment performed as expected, with a very similar mean mark to 2024 and 2023. Feedback from the marking team, lecturers and teachers suggested it was appropriately demanding.

In previous years, during marking, the discussion section of the assignment was divided into sections for analysis and evaluation. This year there was a slight change to how marking was carried out. The allocation of 8 marks for analysis of results and 4 marks for evaluation of methodology remained the same, however markers entered one mark out of 12 for this section. This had no impact on candidate performance but did contribute towards a more straightforward standardisation and quality assurance process.

The marking of unethical research continued in line with the change made in 2023. Marks were deducted from the design and procedure of the method section for candidates who conducted unethical research rather than in the ethics section of the method. Candidates were therefore able to be credited for theoretical knowledge of ethics despite issues with the practical set-up of their assignment.

There were still some candidates undertaking unethical research. The number of ethical breaches remained consistent with 2024, representing just under 8% of the cohort. Centres are required to ensure that candidates follow the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines when conducting their assignments.

## **Section 2: comments on candidate performance**

### **Question paper**

#### **Section 1: Individual behaviour — sleep and dreams**

##### **Question 1(a)**

Candidates were asked to explain why using a smartphone before going to bed is not a good idea. Most candidates were able to show their knowledge of the impact of light on sleep in real life and so achieved 3 or more marks for this question. A few candidates did not relate the impact of light to the use of a smartphone and as a result were not able to access higher marks for this question.

##### **Question 1(b)**

Candidates were asked to analyse Oswald's restoration theory of sleep. This question worked very well as a discriminating question with a relatively normal distribution of marks across the cohort. Many candidates were able to provide three descriptive points for this theory. Some candidates were able to provide developed evaluative points and some candidates provided analytical points in relation to the theory.

It was noted that although a few candidates made comparative points between restoration theory and reorganisational theory, these points were not made analytically. In addition, a few candidates gave supporting evidence for restoration theory but did not explicitly link it to restoration theory and why it supported or refuted the theory.

## **Section 2: Social behaviour — conformity and obedience**

### **Question 2(a)**

Candidates were asked to explain situational factors affecting obedience. Most candidates were able to provide explanatory points about these factors, achieving three or more marks. Candidates were able to explain at least two situational factors, such as location, uniform and proximity and the effect these had on obedience, link with the Milgram study and its variations and/or alternative research evidence. A few candidates wrote about other factors affecting obedience and marks were awarded where these linked with situational factors, for example, where candidates linked perceived legitimate authority to uniform.

### **Question 2(b)**

Candidates were asked to evaluate the Mori and Arai study of conformity. Most candidates were able to provide developed evaluative points for this study and achieved the full 4 marks for this question.

### **Question 2(c)(i)**

Candidates were asked to apply their understanding of normative social influence to behaviour in an unseen scenario. Most candidates were able to explain at least one point of information about normative social influence and relate this to the scenario, achieving 2 or more marks for this question.

### **Question 2(c)(ii)**

Candidates were asked to apply their understanding of individual factors in conformity to the behaviour in an unseen scenario. Some candidates were able to explain factors and link these to the scenario sufficiently well to gain full marks for this question and most candidates achieved at least three marks for this question. Many candidates provided explanatory points on factors such as gender, self-esteem and age, with a few candidates answering on factors other than individual, such as size of the group and group unanimity.

## **Section 3: optional topic**

### **Questions 3 to 8 part (a)**

Candidates were asked to describe one aspect of their optional topic. For example, for memory, candidates were asked to describe the features of long-term memory. Many candidates were able to demonstrate their knowledge of this part of their optional topic and provide at least two points of description in their response. For the topics of depression, memory, stress and social relationships most candidates achieved half marks and more. For the topics of prejudice and aggression, many candidates achieved half marks and more.

### **Questions 3 to 8 part (b)**

Candidates were asked to explain one aspect of their optional topic. For example, for the topic of depression, candidates were asked to explain Beck's cognitive triad. Most candidates who answered on the topics of social relationships and aggression were able to provide at least three points of explanation for the aspect of their topic. For the topics of depression, stress and prejudice, many candidates were able to provide at least three points of explanation and for the topic of memory, some candidates were able to provide at least three points of explanation.

### **Questions 3 to 8 part (c)**

Candidates were asked to analyse one study into an aspect of their optional topic. For example, for the topic of social relationships, candidates were asked to analyse one study into virtual relationships in social media. This question enabled candidates to show depth of knowledge of their optional topic. Within any analyse question, candidates can access half marks for description and evaluation with full marks available to candidates for analytical points.

Candidates found this question challenging, with a few candidates responding with descriptive content of their chosen study only. This mainly applied within the topics of memory and social relationships. For the topics of depression, stress, prejudice and aggression most candidates provided relevant points of evaluation and/or analysis as well as descriptive points of information about their study. For the topics of memory and social relationships some candidates provided relevant points of



evaluation and/or analysis as well as descriptive points of information about their study. Overall, some candidates were able to provide relevant analytical points and these candidates achieved higher marks.

## **Assignment**

### **Introduction**

Candidates must describe background theory and research relevant to their research. Most candidates were able to provide a relatively detailed theoretical background and describe two research studies relevant to their primary research, achieving 6 marks or more for this section.

### **Introduction — aim and hypotheses**

Candidates must provide an aim that relates to their background research and an operationalised hypothesis. Many candidates were able to provide a relevant aim, and some candidates were able to write a fully operationalised research hypothesis. Many candidates did not provide a sufficiently operationalised hypothesis to be awarded the hypothesis mark in this section of the assignment.

Candidates completing a correlational study sometimes provided a causal hypothesis. As correlational hypotheses should be written in terms of relationships or links between co-variables, causal hypotheses are not awarded the mark.

### **Method**

Candidates need to identify their method and justify why they have chosen this method, identify the design (where appropriate), research variables, extraneous and/or confounding variables, sampling method and participants. Candidates must describe their procedure and identify their materials.

Most candidates could identify the method chosen for their research and identify the research design; however, some candidates could not justify their use of research method. Many candidates identified their research variables, although a few candidates did not give the conditions of their Independent Variable (IV) (where

appropriate) or specifically operationalise their Dependent Variable (DV) (where appropriate) or co-variables. Many candidates described their sample and correctly identified their chosen sampling method. A few candidates described their procedure in sufficient detail to permit replication.

### **Method — ethics**

Candidates need to explain how they implemented BPS ethical guidelines and avoided ethical breaches. Many candidates were able to apply the ethical guidelines specifically to their own research and explain how they had avoided ethical breaches.

Some candidates provided some generic points on ethical guidelines and procedures showing an overall knowledge of ethics in psychological research.

Marks for the method section were impacted if candidates completed unethical research. Those that did so were not awarded the mark for their procedure or the mark for the justification for their research.

The ethical breaches identified in 2025 included the following:

- Jenness/Asch style replications involving group discussions
- manipulating participant's pre-sleep routine, for example, exposing participants to blue light before sleep or changing their caffeine consumption (including asking participants to consume caffeine before going to sleep)
- depriving participants of sleep in some way
- exposing participants to difficult words to memorise or spell or difficult cognitive tasks to complete
- recreating exam anxiety
- using incentives to reward candidates for participation
- physical fitness tests
- approaching strangers to act as participants. (Ethical guidelines protect researchers as well as participants and obtaining participants in this way puts candidates at risk.)
- using participants who are under 16 years of age. (It is clearly stated in the course assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used.)

A few candidates used questionnaires with invasive and inappropriate questions. These included questions on the following: anxiety levels, medical conditions or medical history, medications in general and medications that affect sleep, drug and alcohol consumption, learning difficulties, academic attainment, and sleep disorders.

### **Confidentiality or data breaches**

Many participants were asked for their date of birth on their consent form. While it is recognised that candidates believe this ensures participants are the appropriate age for participation in research, this information, potentially combined with a printed name and signature constitutes a breach of data protection guidelines and therefore is considered unethical. This breach of ethics also applies if candidates asked their participants for ID or proof of age.

A few candidates included details about their centre or class group that allowed their participants to be identified which is a breach of confidentiality. This occurred both in section C of the report and in the appendices to the report.

There were also a few candidates who included personal details on information given to participants, for example a mobile phone number or personal email address on the debrief. This is a safeguarding issue for candidates, and as stated before ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants.

### **Results**

In this section, candidates are required to choose appropriate statistical procedures to describe their data and justify that choice, present data in appropriate formats and label these appropriately. They are also required to carry out accurate calculations, include these in the appendices and relate their findings to their hypothesis accurately.

Most candidates chose appropriate statistical procedures to describe their data, however, many could not justify their use. Many candidates presented their data in an appropriate format(s). Some candidates did not label the data in sufficient detail to enable interpretation (titles were vague, missing axes labels). A few candidates did not include calculations in their appendices.

Many candidates provided an accurate statement of whether their results supported or refuted their hypothesis. Candidates who completed research using a correlational design sometimes became confused when writing this section of their assignment and did not choose appropriate measures to describe or present their data, focusing on mean scores and using bar charts rather than utilising a scattergram and raw data.

### **Discussion – analysis and evaluation**

In this section of the assignment, candidates must analyse their results and evaluate their methodology. The marks for this section were relatively normally distributed indicating that many candidates were able to provide at least some analytical points relating to their results and some fully developed evaluative points.

Analytical points made by candidates tended to be related to the way the candidate's results confirmed or refuted their hypotheses, the way in which their results related to the psychological theory or theories and research in their introductions and real-life applications of the research. A few candidates wrote a conclusion at the end of their discussion, which did not include the main research statistics or a concluding statement and so could not be awarded a mark. A few candidates explained the influence of variables on their results but did not give details on the specific way their results were impacted. On some occasions, where a comparison was made between a candidate's own research and the research studies they provided in their introduction section of the assignment, these comparisons focused on the method, sample or procedure rather than results, and so did not attract marks.

Candidates need to evaluate their primary research in this section of the assignment. There was a range of evaluative points made by candidates, where some candidates provided at least two developed evaluative points, and some gave four fully developed evaluative points relating to their procedure, sample or research method.

### **Style and presentation**

Candidates need to provide references in a format that enables the information to be located by a third party and must present their research in the style and format of a formal psychology report. Some candidates fulfilled these requirements and so were

awarded the full two marks. A few candidates included their references at the very end of their assignment which is not in the style and format of a psychology report.

## Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

### Question paper

Candidates are expected to have full knowledge from the course content for each topic listed in the course specification. The course specification is available on the [Psychology subject page](#) on our website.

Centres should continue to help candidates develop the skills required by the course, with particular focus on the higher-order skills of application and analysis.

Candidates may be expected to analyse processes, theories, and explanations, and research studies, and so should be well prepared for this. Detailed guidance is available in the appendix of the course specification and in the SQA Academy course. Past papers are also available to support centres to help candidates develop these key skills. These are available from the [Past Papers section](#) of our website.

Centres can find examples of candidate evidence and detailed commentaries about mark allocations on our [Understanding Standards website](#).

Most candidates taking Higher Psychology are new to the subject. Given the abstract nature of the content at this level, centres are advised to carefully assess the suitability of candidates before enrolling them in the course.

## Assignment

Centres should ensure that candidates are aware of the requirements of the assignment. The coursework assessment task is available on the [Higher Psychology subject page](#).

Candidates would benefit from support and guidance to enable them to provide hypotheses that are fully operationalised. As research is designed around the hypothesis, an improved understanding as evidenced by appropriate hypotheses, would also support candidates to make decisions about the method and statistical procedures they use.

In the introduction, emphasis is placed on the relevance of research studies to the candidate's aim. At least one study must be directly relevant to the aim to be awarded full marks.

Centre guidance on the development of the skills of 'justifying' and 'applying' their choice of method and descriptive statistics would also be beneficial for candidates.

Candidates should be encouraged to use appropriate terminology and avoid terms such as 'prove', 'statistical significance' (unless inferential statistics have been calculated) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used). Candidates should also be supported towards writing in the third person as the report is an objective account of their research process.

Ethical research procedures are essential, and candidates must be encouraged to think carefully about the impact of their research on participants. Centres should support candidates to ensure that the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines are adhered to when candidates are planning and conducting their research. The guidelines can be accessed on the BPS website: [Code of Ethics and Conduct | BPS](#). The BPS website also has additional guidance on [BPS Code of Human Research Ethics](#).

Further guidance on ethical procedures is available in the appendix of the course specification on the Higher Psychology subject page on our website and in the

Association for the Teaching of Psychology (ATP) Guide to Ethics for Teachers and Students of Psychology at Pre-Degree Level ([www.theatp.uk](http://www.theatp.uk)).

Our [Understanding Standards website](#) has examples of candidate assignments with detailed marking commentaries which can be used by teachers and lecturers to support candidates towards success in their research assignment..



# 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](#).