Course report 2025

National 5 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: 263

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 253

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	65	25.7	25.7	69
B	38	15.0	40.7	58
C	42	16.6	57.3	47
D	36	14.2	71.5	36
No award	72	28.5	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

The question paper performed largely as expected. Feedback from markers indicated that it was fair and gave candidates the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding they had gained through the course.

However, upon analysing candidate performance, it was evident that the level of demand presented by the phrasing of questions 2(c)(i–iv) and 3(e) may have disadvantaged candidates. Question 3(c) was less demanding than intended. We made grade boundary adjustments to account for these issues.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected.

A few candidates were not clear about what constituted appropriate use of their resource sheet.

We did not make any adjustments to the grade boundary for this part of the assessment.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper

Candidates performed slightly less well than expected in the question paper, with more gaining very low marks and fewer achieving high marks compared to last year.

Assignment

Fewer candidates gained high marks than last year in the assignment.

Approaches to the assignment varied enormously, as did candidate performance. Most candidates chose a philosophical question or claim in the area of moral philosophy. In many centres, all candidates chose to write their assignment on the same area of the course, and in some centres they chose very similar questions. In a few centres, candidates chose topics that were entirely outwith the content of the course.

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Arguments in action

On the whole, candidates performed best in this section, particularly in questions 1(a) and 1(b), which required simple recall of knowledge.

Knowledge and doubt

Many candidates were awarded full marks for describing Descartes' senses argument in question 2(c)(i).

Many candidates gained at least 2 out of 3 marks for explaining how Descartes uses his dreaming argument to undermine our confidence in knowledge gained through experience in question 2(c)(iii).

Moral philosophy

Many candidates were able to answer questions 3(a) and 3(b) correctly, with most also gaining a mark for 3(c) and 3(d).

Candidates were generally well-prepared to describe the key features of their other moral theory, with most gaining 3 or more marks out of 6 for question 3(f).

Assignment

Most candidates performed best in describing their chosen philosophical problem or claim, with many candidates achieving full marks in this section, and most at least 4 marks out of 6.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Arguments in action

Question 1(c) was the most challenging question in this section. Most candidates were not able to give a detailed explanation of the slippery slope fallacy in question 1(c)(iii). Only a few candidates gained more than 2 marks out of 4 for this question.

Knowledge and doubt

Many candidates were awarded no marks for question 2(c)(ii) because they gave general objections to the senses argument, rather than explaining why it does not fully undermine Descartes' confidence in knowledge gained through experience.

Many candidates were awarded no marks for question 2(c)(iv) because they explained criticisms of Descartes' sceptical arguments rather than his approach in the method of doubt.

Some candidates were awarded no marks for question 2(f), which asked them to explain how Hume uses the idea of God to support his claim that all ideas can be traced back to earlier impressions. In question 2(g), some candidates were awarded no marks because they used Hume's example of the virtuous horse and the golden mountain instead of those he uses to support his claim that if someone doesn't have the impression then they can't have the corresponding idea.

Question 2(h), which asked candidates to describe criticisms of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas, was challenging for many candidates, with only a few candidates gaining more than 3 marks out of 6.

Moral philosophy

On the whole, candidates did not perform as well as expected on question 3(e), which asked them to consider how effective utilitarianism is as a moral theory. Although the question stated that marks would not be awarded for repeating points that were in questions 3(a) to 3(d), many candidates repeated those points. Only a few candidates got more than 8 marks out of 10 for this question.

A few candidates were awarded no marks for question 3(g) because they gave general descriptions of their other moral theory rather than applying the theory to the scenario.

A few candidates were awarded no marks for question 3(h), which asked them to explain two criticisms of their other moral theory. They were not able to name one criticism of their other moral theory.

Assignment

A few candidates were awarded more than 4 marks for analysing responses to their philosophical question or claim. Many candidates were awarded fewer than 3 marks for explaining criticisms of responses to it. A few candidates were able to score full

marks for presenting their ideas in a logical sequence, but some did not gain any marks for this.

Some candidates chose to apply at least one moral theory to a moral issue. This made it difficult for them to access all of the marks, and often resulted in them either giving detailed descriptions of the moral issue itself — rather than philosophical responses to it — or descriptions of more than one moral theory. In both cases, candidates often made more descriptive points than there were marks available.

A few candidates made inappropriate use of their resource sheets, copying material directly without adding any significant content in their write-up. Candidates cannot be credited for anything that is copied from their resource sheet.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are fully prepared to answer questions on all aspects of the mandatory course content, which is listed in the course specification on the National 5 Philosophy subject page of our website.

Candidates should be able to explain the error that is made in each of the fallacies. They must also be able to identify the precise mistake that is made when they are presented with particular instances of fallacious arguments. They should be directed to the glossary in the course specification to familiarise themselves with the level of detail that is expected, and refer to marking instructions from past papers so that they understand how marks are awarded.

Candidates should be able to explain criticisms of the philosophical theories they study. In the Knowledge and doubt section, candidates must be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' and Hume's arguments and be able to explain these. Candidates may also gain marks for responding to criticisms. Candidates should be aware that the term 'criticisms' can be understood to refer to either strengths, weaknesses or both. Teachers and lecturers should discuss criticisms with their candidates to prepare them for this aspect of the question paper.

The 'National 5 Philosophy model questions' resource demonstrates different approaches to answering questions on criticisms. This resource can be found under the 'Course support' heading on the National 5 Philosophy subject page.

Candidates must learn another moral theory besides utilitarianism. They should be able to describe its key features, apply it to scenarios and describe criticisms of it. Candidates should be clear that rule utilitarianism does not count as their other moral theory.

Assignment

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates choose a philosophical question or claim that will allow them to access the full range of marks. Candidates must include description, analysis and criticisms within a coherent piece of writing. Omitting any of these areas will result in fewer marks. At the beginning of the research process, it is worth cross-checking the assignment marking instructions against the proposed title to ensure that candidates' chosen topic allows to access all the available marks. Centres should give candidates a copy of the marking instructions.

In this year's assessment, it was noted that some candidates reached the cap on description marks long before they had finished their description. This tended to happen when candidates chose topics that involved a comparison of two theories or/and consideration of how one or more moral theories might respond to an issue such as abortion, euthanasia or the death penalty. As the write-up is time-limited, candidates should avoid spending time spent on excess description that gains no marks.

Teachers and lecturers should steer candidates towards analysing the responses to their question or claim by making relevant connections between concepts; explaining possible implications or consequences of a theory or position; and considering different interpretations of concepts. This will help candidates to understand how to gain analysis marks in their marks in their assignment, and avoid wasting time in the write-up on description that gains no marks.

Teachers and lecturers should also encourage candidates to consider and explain problems with the philosophical theories they encounter in the course. This will help them to understand what they must do to get marks for explaining criticisms of the responses relating to their claim or question.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are aware of what constitutes an appropriate use of their resource sheet. Candidates whose resource sheets contain a mini version of their assignment, or a coded version of it, put themselves at a disadvantage. No marks can be awarded for any material that is copied from the

resource sheet. Although no marks are awarded for the resource sheet itself, markers scrutinise them carefully, and potential malpractice is investigated. A penalty of 20% of the maximum mark for the assignment component will be applied in the case of non-submission. Further information can be found in the Coursework for external assessment document, and the coursework assessment task on the National 5 Philosophy subject page.

While it is acceptable for teachers and lecturers to give generic advice to the whole class, teaching the assignment as a whole-class exercise with all candidates doing the same topic is unacceptable. The individual nature of the task will be reflected in the content of the resource sheet. We will carry out an investigation if all of the candidates from the same centre submit resource sheets with similar content.

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.