Course report 2026

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design), SCQF level 7

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive), SCQF level 7

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question paper and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

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Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design) statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 891

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 934

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	263	28.2	28.2	70
B	261	27.9	56.1	60
C	329	35.2	91.3	50
D	77	8.2	99.6	40
No award	4	0.4	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- 'Most' means greater than or equal to 70%.
- 'Many' means 50% to 69%.
- 'Some' means 25% to 49%.
- 'Few' or 'a few' means less than 25%.

You can find statistical reports on our website.

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive) statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,330

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 1,595

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	517	32.4	32.4	70
B	481	30.2	62.6	60
C	495	31.0	93.6	50
D	88	5.5	99.1	40
No award	14	0.9	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

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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's 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 make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use 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.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

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.

How the course assessment performed

Portfolio

The portfolio for both courses performed as intended. Feedback from markers indicated that it was accessible for candidates in terms of level of demand.

Markers observed an extensive range of themes and ideas across design and expressive portfolios. The most common design areas were fashion, costume and textile design, architecture, and graphic design. There was very little jewellery design. Popular expressive themes included family relationships, pets, social and school life, cultural identity, nostalgia, and personal memorabilia.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Portfolio — design and expressive

Many candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of the assessment requirements and communicated their design or expressive ideas in their portfolio effectively. Markers commented on candidates' personal considerations and the high levels of engagement evident in many portfolios.

Many candidates produced portfolios that achieved marks from the highly effective mark range. These portfolios combined:

- personal responses to their theme or brief
- individuality and problem-solving skills
- clear arrangement and presentation of the creative process
- process and skills inspired by a range of artists' or designers' work
- demonstration of an appropriate level of skill throughout

Personalisation

Many candidates drew on their personal experiences and interests and used these to provide authentic starting points for their creative enquiry and to inform the development of individual responses.

Many candidates demonstrated a very clear creative direction through the personalisation of themes and design briefs, using and applying materials, techniques, and visual elements. Informed by the practices and approaches of relevant artists and designers, they engaged, explored and experimented with ideas, materials, techniques, and visual elements.

Candidates who chose game and character design produced strong portfolios and often used traditional drawing skills. Many portfolios clearly demonstrated evidence of independent development of ideas and use of materials and techniques.

Presentation

Many candidates demonstrated a clear sense of creative direction in their submission. Many candidates' portfolios were well organised. These candidates clearly defined their themes or design briefs, numbered and annotated their sheets, and presented the work coherently in a logical sequence of research, development, and resolved work or works.

Many candidates who achieved the higher mark ranges produced a body of work that was visually coherent and demonstrated a strong and sustained creative process. Some candidates created unified projects, where each section linked together and created a clear visual story of how their project evolved.

Creative process

The breadth of influence on candidates' portfolios, such as ancient mythology, popular culture, personal experience, science, politics, and geography, allowed them to explore interesting and ambitious creative approaches and working methods that led to diverse development and resolved work. Portfolios and contextual analyses featured a wide variety of artists' and designers' contexts. Many candidates chose relatively unknown artists and designers, which contributed to portfolios that explored fresh ideas and techniques. Many candidates applied their understanding of artist or designer practice by skilfully and creatively using materials, techniques and/or technology to explore and experiment with visual elements.

Practical skills

Many candidates successfully demonstrated a range of practical and creative skills, including embroidery, sewing, jewellery construction, sculpture, model making, traditional and digital drawing and painting, and digital image editing and manipulation. Many candidates demonstrated high levels of creativity that effectively addressed their theme or stimulus or design brief.

For the expressive portfolios, many candidates explored creative approaches and solutions that demonstrated strong conceptual thinking without relying solely on traditional drawing skills. Some candidates produced innovative and expressive practical outcomes through the skilful use of mixed media, including printmaking,

collage, photography, and digital drawing. Many candidates combined strong observational skills with highly creative approaches to drawing and painting. Many candidates demonstrated high levels of skill through traditional painting focusing on one visual element and exploring it through small-scale close-up studies. Some candidates used printmaking effectively in the development process and some candidates combined collage with printmaking to introduce texture and pattern into the development process.

The most successful design portfolios demonstrated the candidate's process and skill development through:

- exploring fabric manipulation techniques
- using inventive recycling and repurposing construction approaches
- using software effectively

Many candidates explored creative approaches and solutions in their design portfolios and demonstrated strong conceptual thinking without relying solely on traditional drawing skills.

Contextual analysis — design and expressive

Many candidates selected appropriate artists or designers to study and formulated specific and manageable accompanying practical work.

Individuality was evident in the written contextual analysis. Some candidates chose to discuss more accessible examples, such as video-game characters, magazine photos, or stills from films. By expressing their personal critical reaction to the chosen work, they showed that images, designs, and artefacts can convey ideas, feelings, and meanings.

Most candidates demonstrated a strong and meaningful connection between their contextual analysis and the practical work developed in their portfolios. These candidates communicated clearly how contextual research informed their creative decision making, establishing explicit links between their research, their development of ideas, and the refinement of their resolved works. Candidates who made a strong visual connection between their written and practical work achieved marks from the highly effective mark range. Many candidates chose artists' and designers' work that

inspired, complemented, and informed their creative processes, which resulted in coherent and well-developed responses.

Themes and topics

Many of the candidates that produced a highly effective contextual analysis included titles that addressed a specific aspect of their theme or topic. The most successful contextual analyses did not include a biography or general information. Instead, they provided an analytical and contextual discussion relating to their chosen theme or design brief.

Evaluation — design and expressive

Candidates who performed well in this area identified clear and specific turning points in their portfolio, supported their comments by referring to relevant work, and cited the appropriate sheet numbers. They explained their intentions and the reasons behind any turning points, including alterations and changes they made throughout the production process. Some candidates reflected on their changes in direction and gave clear explanations about how and why their ideas evolved.

A few candidates produced effective evaluations that clarified the aims of conceptual work and gave a critical appraisal and insight into how the turning points affected its development.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Portfolio — design and expressive

Skills and development

Some six-sheet portfolios included enough evidence to meet the course requirements, but only a few of these portfolios accessed the full range of marks.

Some candidates did not demonstrate enough skill in the portfolio, for example in traditional drawing skills.

Some portfolios did not feature evidence of the candidate’s process or document how they developed their ideas. These portfolios did not demonstrate the candidate’s

flexibility or capacity to rethink possible solutions or reimagine their initial idea in different forms. Portfolios that lacked visual coherence and did not demonstrate a sustained creative process did not access the full range of marks.

Some candidates did not provide clear evidence of the influences of artists or designers in their practical work. A few candidates did not achieve the full range of marks because their portfolio, contextual analysis and evaluation comprised unrelated work that lacked clear connections.

In some portfolios, candidates used research images only as a mood board and did not show how the images informed the development of their practical work.

Experimentation

Some candidates demonstrated limited understanding of visual language and design principles. In some portfolios, experimentation consisted of repeating the same image through printing, tracing, or producing multiple digital versions. These repetitive approaches did not provide enough evidence of meaningful exploration or creative development. More successful portfolios showed purposeful refinement, where each iteration informed and advanced the next stage of the design process.

Film making and animation

In portfolios featuring video, animation, or film, some candidates focused primarily on presenting the final film, and included limited evidence of planning, research, or creative development.

In some portfolios, candidates relied on screenshots from completed films and provided limited evidence of the development of their ideas. Candidates who included development work, such as storyboards, shot plans, scripts, mood boards, production notes, test footage, and outtakes were better able to demonstrate how they generated and refined ideas and made decisions.

Photography portfolios

Some candidates did not demonstrate enough experimentation or exploration. They did not manipulate creative images or apply a broad range of photographic techniques. Stronger portfolios investigated composition, lighting, exposure, camera

controls, editing processes, and post-production techniques, and used experimentation to inform and refine initial ideas.

Design briefs

Some candidates submitted highly detailed design briefs that limited their opportunities for meaningful creative exploration. In these portfolios, the design process only involved making minor decisions, such as selecting colours, patterns, or finishes, rather than investigating a range of possible solutions. This approach resulted in a linear progression from the brief to the resolved work, with little evidence of alternative ideas, experimentation, or critical decision making.

Contextual analysis — design and expressive

Some candidates chose an artist or designer who was not relevant to their work.

Some candidates discussed lesser-known artists or designers without including visual examples in their contextual analysis. In these cases, markers found it difficult to see the links and connections candidates were making.

Some candidates included brief biographical information with their analysis of the selected artwork or design without establishing meaningful connections to the work itself. Although this information provided context, it did not always link to the features, themes, intentions, or development of the chosen work. As a result, markers could not always identify the candidate's ideas about the selected work.

Some candidates broadened the focus of their contextual analysis to cover an artist's or designer's entire body of work, resulting in responses that were too generalised to meet the assessment requirements. For example, a few candidates who selected a single building by an architect shifted their analysis to the architect's career and architectural style as a whole, rather than maintaining a detailed analysis of the chosen work. Stronger responses focused on one specific artwork or design and used it as the basis for a critical discussion of visual elements, contextual influences, and its relevance to the candidate's own practical work.

Evaluation — design and expressive

Some candidates submitted evaluations that described everything they did, with little or no reference to the key turning points and decisions that shaped the development of their practical work. Some candidates produced a chronological account of creating their portfolio, rather than a critical evaluation of their creative process. While outlining the sequence of activities provided context, it did not demonstrate candidates' evaluative thinking. Stronger evaluations focused on the decisions candidates made throughout the project, such as identifying turning points, explaining why they made changes, how they addressed challenges, and how experimentation, feedback, and reflection influenced the resolved work. These evaluations critically assessed the effectiveness of candidates' approaches, rather than simply recounting the stages of portfolio production.

Some candidates did not include enough self-critical reflection in their evaluations, instead they focused on defending or justifying their work against possible criticism. These evaluations recognised the strengths of the portfolios without identifying limitations, reflecting on challenges encountered, and considering how aspects of the work could have been developed further. Candidates who demonstrated balanced and honest critical reflection by acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of their practical work were more likely to demonstrate evaluative thinking and, therefore, access the full range of marks.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Portfolio

Markers consider the contextual analysis and evaluation alongside the practical work. This allows them to judge the relevance of the chosen artwork or design in relation to the practical work. Candidates should explain how their selected artwork or design relates to their portfolio in their statement of intent and evaluation template. This approach supports meaningful connections between practice and research and helps markers understand the candidate's intentions and influences.

Portfolios that are clearly organised and state the theme or have inspirational images and market research along with examples of artists' or designers' work on the first sheet help to provide context for markers.

You should make sure that candidates have included their completed and signed flyleaf with their portfolios. Markers find it easier to access and read a contextual analysis and evaluation if it is not attached to the first sheet. You should advise candidates to check they have added a Qualifications Scotland label to each sheet of their portfolio.

Exploration and experimentation

You should encourage candidates to take time to explore before committing to a final theme or design brief. Design candidates should ensure their design briefs provide enough scope for ideas to evolve through research, testing, evaluation and refinement. Selecting a starting point too early can limit opportunities for experimentation and can result in candidates changing direction later in the portfolio. Allowing time for investigation, visual research, and creative play can help candidates establish a more considered creative direction.

Candidates who access the full range of marks explore alternatives, take creative risks and refine ideas through experimentation before they establish a clear direction for their resolved works.

Experimenting with a range of visual responses is an important, though often challenging, aspect of the creative process. Candidates should demonstrate their

understanding of the visual elements and design principles by developing ideas through purposeful experimentation, exploring aspects such as composition, shape, colour, texture, scale, and media.

Sketchbooks

Candidates can use sketchbooks to develop an individual approach and explore ideas in a personal and experimental way. Candidates can begin to generate concepts by producing quick sketches, recording visual notes, experimenting with ideas and collecting imagery linked to a theme. At this early stage, candidates should work fluently and avoid committing too quickly to a single solution. Developing a range of possible ideas allows candidates to compare, refine, and make informed decisions as their work progresses, leading to more considered and resolved work.

Research skills

You should encourage candidates to research and explore examples of work by artists and designers that relate to their chosen theme or subject matter. This contextual research helps candidates to develop a deeper understanding of visual approaches, methods, materials, and ideas that can inform their own creative practice.

You should encourage candidates to respond to and adapt ideas from artists or designers whose work they find inspiring. Even at an early stage, candidates can benefit from recording observations, making notes, and collecting relevant quotations or information about the approaches, intentions, and processes that interest them. This evidence can support the development of their own practical work and provide valuable material for their contextual analysis.

Materials and techniques

Candidates should explore a range of materials, techniques, and formats to develop ideas further and investigate different ways to present them. You should encourage candidates to use experimentation to discover new approaches, test possibilities, and make informed decisions about the direction of their work.

Candidates can use a variety of accessible and inexpensive materials to investigate mark-making, texture, shape, and composition. Techniques such as collage, mono-printing, working with thread and paint rollers can provide valuable opportunities to generate ideas and develop a more individual visual language.

Visual coherence

The Advanced Higher portfolio is a body of work that should be consistent throughout. This means that the portfolio, contextual analysis and evaluation should demonstrate an enquiry that connects initial ideas to resolved work. Strong links to the contextual analysis and evaluation must be evident. Candidates who present a visually coherent and sustained creative process can access the full range of marks available.

Candidates should develop a visual language personal to themselves, and this should underpin their body of work. Candidates' research, experiments, development and resolved works should relate to each other through theme, style, artist and designer influence, materials, techniques and composition. Candidates can use a colourway or colour palette to unify their portfolio, and this can also underpin the contextual analysis, although it is not a requirement. The Advanced Higher portfolio should feel unified rather than a collection of unrelated works.

Sustained creative process

The portfolio should demonstrate ongoing investigation and development. This includes thorough research from relevant artists, designers, and primary sources, exploration of a range of materials, media, and techniques, and experimentation and risk-taking. Candidates should critically evaluate their work at different stages and refine their ideas based on what they have learned throughout the process.

Research methodology

You should encourage candidates to gather and generate a wide range of visual source material. This can include drawing from observation, photography, observational studies, and investigating related subjects. Engaging with diverse visual references lets candidates broaden their understanding, make meaningful

connections, and generate original ideas. By collecting, analysing, and responding to new source material, candidates can refine and develop their concepts.

Contextual analysis — design and expressive

Candidates must complete their contextual analysis independently. Candidates can use artists' and designers' websites, online galleries, museum and exhibition information, art critics' reviews, and other sources to support and inform their ideas.

Candidates can use visual references to support their text and direct markers to the main points in the contextual analysis.

Candidates must select one relevant artwork or design work to ensure depth. They should select an artist or designer who has clearly influenced their own practice or approach and avoid broad biographies or discussions of an artist's or designer's entire body of work. They should analyse the artwork or design in depth, using correct terminology and vocabulary to justify their opinions or observations. Candidates should not discuss the link to their own portfolios in the contextual analysis, as they will do this in the evaluation.

Statement of intent

Candidates should discuss their choice of theme, subject matter and inspiration. Design candidates should also discuss their design brief.

Candidates can refer to how they intend to develop their ideas towards resolved work or works.

Evaluation — design and expressive

Candidates should complete their evaluations independently. They must complete them without assistance or writing frames or model answers.

Candidates can use bullet points in their evaluation if they find this layout helpful.

Candidates should not modify the evaluation template or reduce the font size.

Effective evaluations

Candidates should look back at their initial creative intentions and:

- Explain their initial ideas, stimulus, theme, or design brief. This could be a short statement to clarify how they developed their initial research.
- Explain how the contextual analysis influenced and supported their practical work.
- Show how far their initial ideas developed or changed. They could:
    - identify turning points in the development of their ideas
    - consider how effective their ideas were and what they might have done differently
- Evaluate:
    - things they did well
    - things they did less well
    - if they achieved what they set out to do