Course report 2026

Advanced Higher Geography, 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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Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 867

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 876

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	310	35.4	35.4	104
B	291	33.2	68.6	88
C	209	23.9	92.5	73
D	52	5.9	98.4	57
No award	14	1.6	100	Not applicable

We have 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.

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

Question paper

The question paper performed largely as expected. Two questions were more demanding than intended and we took this into account when setting the grade boundaries.

Project–folio

The project–folio performed as intended. We made no changes to the project–folio for session 2025–26. Candidates researched a wide range of interesting and relevant topics.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper

Most candidates performed very well in the question paper. Most candidates performed well in question 1.

Question 1(a)(ii): many candidates demonstrated good map skills and could detail reasons for their choice of site.

Question 1(a)(iii): many candidates identified employment and the multiplier effect as positive impacts of the warehouse development.

Question 1(b): many candidates correctly discussed options to help build the warehouse more sustainably.

Question 2(b): most candidates described some soil analysis methodologies.

Question 3(a)(i): most candidates did well by describing changes in plastic waste between 2014 and 2024.

Question 3(c): many candidates explained very detailed negative consequences of plastic pollution in Kerala. Some candidates demonstrated evidence of wider reading.

Project–folio

Most candidates performed very well in both the geographical study and geographical issue, demonstrating confidence in their approach to both parts of the project–folio.

Candidates researched a wide range of interesting topics for the geographical issue essays.

Section A: most candidates achieved 3 or 4 out of the 4 available marks for their justifications across both parts of the project–folio.

Section D: many candidates did well by using wider reading in the geographical study to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Question 1(a)(i): some candidates had difficulty identifying a suitable site for a warehouse.

Question 2(a): many candidates were unable to link their sampling methods to the OS map.

Geographical study

Section B: a few candidates did not collect data from enough sites and therefore missed out on marks.

Section E: a few candidates did not use a wide variety of techniques in their geographical study. As this section is worth 10 marks, they missed out on valuable marks.

Geographical issue

Section B: some candidates did not include explicit wider reading in their essays. A few candidates did not use adequate references in their bibliographies.

Sections C and D: a few candidates were unable to determine the difference between a summary and an evaluation when they combined them, leading to fewer marks overall across both sections.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

You should remind candidates to:

- refer to the course assessment information in the course specification
- focus on the ‘Gathering and processing techniques’ and ‘Geographical data handling’ sections in the course specification to understand the assessed skills and knowledge
- read all information included in supplementary items and text boxes carefully

Map interpretation

You should encourage candidates to:

- regularly practise interpreting maps using past paper questions
- highlight key words and command phrases to identify the exact requirements of each question
- use tracing paper to help when planning responses to question 1
- practise using string to help determine the length of potential routes. Tying two knots in the string to indicate the length of the route helps try out routes on the OS map before making a final choice

You should remind candidates that:

- sites drawn to scale must be accurate. They will not achieve marks where the dimensions differ from those in the question. We recommend regular practice using scale and rulers to measure distances
- they should avoid simplistic justifications when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of sites or routes. Generic statements like ‘it is flat, so it is easy to build on’ are not enough at Advanced Higher level

- they should fully support their answers with evidence from the map. Using grid references and named places on the map are helpful to identify and locate specific evidence. Proposed sites and routes should be realistic and consistent with the map evidence provided

Gathering and processing techniques

You should encourage candidates to:

- practise explaining how they would collect geographical data
- explain why particular gathering techniques are appropriate for their investigation
- read each question carefully, checking if it asks about gathering methods, processing techniques or evaluation
- focus on the question asked and avoid irrelevant details. For example, in question 2(b), responses were good because they focused on the collection of soil analysis data only. Unnecessary detail relating to equipment was not required
- practise gathering techniques through local fieldwork or investigations in the school grounds, where possible
- become familiar with the range of processing techniques in the coursework assessment task. We recommend regular practice through classroom and homework activities
- evaluate if processing techniques are suitable rather than simply describing them

Data handling

You should encourage candidates to:

- practise describing and interpreting data using a range of graphical techniques
- practise hypothesis testing, ensuring they understand how to create a null hypothesis, by providing appropriate opportunities
- explain the advantages and disadvantages of statistical techniques in relation to both the data and the context of the question
- interpret statistical results accurately, including significance, critical values, the direction and strength of relationships, and whether the null hypothesis should be accepted or rejected

- practise selecting the most appropriate statistical technique for different types of geographical data
- select appropriate graphical techniques for processing and presenting data
- stay focused on the purpose of the question when responding to questions based on supplementary items

Project–folio

You should ensure that you and your candidates are familiar with the information and guidance in the coursework assessment task.

Word count

- You must instruct candidates to adhere to the word count.
- Word counts promote fairness, reduce repetition and encourage concise, effective writing.
- We apply a 10% penalty where submissions exceed the word count.
- Candidates must complete and sign the flyleaf and include an accurate declaration of the word count.
- Accurate word count declarations reflect good academic practice and prepare candidates for the expectations of further study.
- Providing a false or inaccurate word count declaration may be considered candidate malpractice.
- Contents pages and bibliographies are not included in the word count.
- Evaluative content presented in tables, together with text boxes containing more than descriptive material, is included in the word count.
- Encourage candidates who are concerned about exceeding the word count to reduce some sections, for example by limiting the justification to one page or removing unnecessary methodological description.

Section A: Geographical study

Candidates researched a wide variety of topics and most candidates demonstrated effective data-gathering skills.

A few candidates chose to investigate deprivation in urban environments. In these studies, candidates should take care to avoid making broad generalisations or unsupported judgements, particularly where they show limited evidence of wider reading. A few candidates focused their analysis on perceived characteristics of residents rather than the wider social, economic and environmental factors contributing to deprivation, resulting in confirmation bias rather than a balanced evaluation of the evidence. You should encourage candidates to critically examine the social and economic factors associated with deprivation and remind them that their conclusions should be supported by appropriate evidence rather than stereotypes.

Justification and planning

- The justification should be one page. Too much detail in this section uses up words, reducing the opportunity for analysis elsewhere in the study.
- Reference to wider reading should be explicit. Candidates should use phrases such as ‘According to*...’* or ‘XYZ states...’ or show wider reading with footnotes.
- Encourage candidates to develop independent fieldwork skills rather than basing their study on group fieldwork.
- Candidates need to gather enough data for meaningful analysis. We recommend a minimum of 10 sample sites. Candidates who collect data that can be compared, for example between two locations, often produce better analysis.
- Candidates should have some choice in selecting their geographical study.
- Candidates who complete a prescribed study based only on fieldtrip data, often perform less well.
- Candidates must have their own research questions or hypotheses. These should not be centre led.
- Some river studies were not effective. Encourage candidates to consider themes such as climate change, river ecology, geomorphology and water quality to improve their investigations.
- Candidates should not feel the need to compare minor river streams with the Bradshaw Model if the comparison does not support their aims.
- Marking is holistic and separate pages are easier to mark. Binding folios makes cross-referencing difficult.
- Candidates should include page numbers.

- Secondary sources are as valid as primary sources. Many candidates who did well used both primary and secondary data. Using several websites is mostly considered one gathering technique rather than several separate techniques.

Evaluation of gathering techniques and knowledge and understanding

- Where data is gathered as part of a group, candidates must acknowledge this and show that all subsequent work is their own.
- Detailed descriptions of methodologies are not needed and reduce the words available for evaluative content. Candidates will not gain marks for these.
- Encourage candidates to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of their gathering techniques.
- Encourage candidates to reflect on the reliability of the data they collected. Candidates who did this well discussed the limitations they experienced when collecting data and considered their impact on their findings.
- Candidates cannot achieve full marks in section C without well-developed next steps. Next steps should be specific and clearly explained. Candidates should identify how future data collection could improve reliability.
- Candidates must manage their time effectively. The geographical study is an assessment that is carried out over time and so giving ‘a lack of time’ as a limitation of the investigation is not acceptable.
- Encourage candidates to integrate wider reading throughout the study to support or challenge findings rather than including it in a separate ‘theory’ section. They should avoid separate knowledge and understanding or background reading sections and, instead, apply knowledge and understanding throughout the analysis. Candidates who performed well integrated explicit references to wider reading throughout their studies, strengthening both analysis and knowledge and understanding.
- Candidates should clearly reference knowledge and understanding. Footnotes are effective, as are statements such as ‘According to the UN...’ or ‘(UN, 2026)’.

Processing techniques and analysis

- Processing techniques are worth 10 marks. Candidates should allocate enough time to this section.

- Candidates should demonstrate a wide range of Advanced Higher level processing techniques. Candidates who achieved high marks typically used a broad range of appropriate processing techniques, including many of the graphical techniques identified in the course specification.
- Candidates should avoid relying on simple processing techniques. Although techniques such as bar graphs have value and may be appropriate, this section should demonstrate techniques that are of Advanced Higher standard.
- Simple techniques can be enhanced through effective annotation, integration with maps or transects, and links to subsequent analysis.
- Candidates should integrate processing techniques and analysis wherever appropriate through annotation, labelling and accompanying explanation.
- Candidates should consider the size of maps, graphs and diagrams to allow as much integration as possible.
- Candidates should ensure that all processed data is clear and readable. The analysis should build directly on this evidence, and poor-quality presentation can make it difficult to follow and assess the analysis.
- You should remind candidates that processing techniques and analytical commentary must be candidates' own work and must not be shared.
- Encourage candidates to structure analysis by:
    - describing the data
    - explaining the patterns using phrases such as 'This is because...'
    - supporting explanations with wider reading
- Description alone is not enough to access the higher marks available for analysis. Candidates should move beyond describing patterns to explaining them.
- Unexpected findings often provide opportunities for strong analysis. Rather than attributing them solely to limitations in data collection, candidates should explore possible explanations using wider reading.
- Candidates who performed well compared findings with published literature, strengthening both analysis and evaluation.
- Candidates should use appropriate linking phrases, such as 'Firstly', 'Additionally' and 'Similarly', to improve the coherence of their analysis.

Conclusion

- Many candidates found the conclusion challenging. While most candidates summarised their findings, candidates who did well gave more than a summary of the analysis and explained what the evidence showed overall.
- Candidates should support their conclusions with evidence drawn from across the investigation. A conclusion based on a single finding or data source is likely to provide only limited support.
- Well-written conclusions synthesise evidence from a range of fieldwork methods, allowing candidates to draw balanced and well-supported conclusions. Candidates who achieved high marks provided conclusions that demonstrated insight by interpreting the findings rather than simply restating them. This included identifying relationships or patterns within the data, explaining the significance of the findings, recognising anomalies or limitations, or making a balanced overall judgement that is clearly supported by the evidence.
- The following examples show the difference:
    - Summary of analysis: Traffic counts showed that vehicle numbers were highest between 8.00am and 9.00am. Most questionnaire respondents felt congestion was a problem.
    - Conclusion showing insight: Evidence from the traffic counts, questionnaires and observations suggests that congestion is primarily a peak-time issue rather than a problem throughout the day. Although respondents perceived congestion to be severe, observations showed that traffic flow improved considerably after the morning peak, suggesting that targeted traffic management measures may be more appropriate than permanent road widening.

Similarly:

- Summary of analysis: The environmental quality survey showed that Site A had the highest score, and Site C had the lowest score.

- Conclusion showing insight: Evidence from the environmental quality survey, field sketches and land-use mapping indicates that environmental quality declined with increasing commercial activity towards the town centre.

However, the presence of recently regenerated public spaces demonstrates that land use alone did not determine environmental quality.

These examples demonstrate that candidates who achieved high marks for conclusions did more than report findings. They drew together evidence from across the investigation and explained what that evidence indicated about the geographical issue being investigated.

Ensure candidates are aware of the following key points.

Justification

- limit to one page, including diagrams
- clearly state the purpose of the study, directly or in the title
- clearly state why the topic is relevant and worthy of investigation
- use relevant wider reading with proper citations
- discuss the area under investigation, providing relevant context by identifying current issues
- avoid any historical detail

Planning

- gather enough data for processing and analysis
- plan as early as possible to maximise the time available for data collection
- include information about sampling techniques
- avoid relying on Higher assignment data as this is not enough data to produce a good study
- create their own research questions, aims or hypotheses
- avoid simplistic research questions — research questions must allow for analysis
- include a labelled map of their research sites — candidates who did this were able to contextualise their research with greater ease
- state in the planning and evaluation sections if data was gathered collectively
- use a wide range of data gathering techniques
- consider using online questionnaires, textbooks, books, journals, and online technology to help conduct interviews, as well as ‘standard’ research on websites

Evaluation and reliability of research techniques

- avoid describing how data was collected as there are no marks available for this
- focus on strengths, limitations and improvements
- discuss next steps, for example the way in which their data collection may be improved and how this would then impact reliability

Knowledge and understanding

- integrate wider reading throughout the study to support or challenge their findings
- be aware that a stand-alone theory section can demonstrate knowledge and understanding, but it rarely helps analysis

Processing techniques

- be aware that processing techniques are not limited to those stated in the course specification
- develop and enhance their skills and avoid relying only on simplistic processing techniques, for example bar and line graphs
- ensure scales are consistent — this is especially important in cross-sectional diagrams
- integrate techniques — all processing techniques should be embedded within the study, not grouped together in separate pages
- avoid placing processing techniques in appendices as these are not marked

Analysis

- include explanations, not just descriptions
- use the structure ‘describe — explain — support’
- link findings back to the hypotheses and research questions using specific evidence
- explore and explain unexpected results

Conclusion

- draw together the main findings of the investigation rather than simply repeating the analysis
- support conclusions using evidence from across the investigation
- explain what the evidence shows overall by identifying patterns, relationships or trends
- explain the significance or implications of the findings
- where appropriate, make a balanced overall judgement supported by the evidence

Section B: Geographical issue

You should ensure that you and your candidates are familiar with the assessment requirements for the geographical issue and the marking instructions. Candidates who performed well demonstrated a clear purpose, well-developed wider reading, balanced summaries and evaluations, and a conclusion firmly supported by evidence.

Justification

- Encourage candidates to clearly state the purpose of their geographical issue. A straightforward statement such as ‘The purpose of this essay is to...’ provides a clear focus for the investigation.
- Encourage candidates to make the geographical relevance of the issue clear from the start. Candidates should explain not only why the issue is geographical, but also why it is worth investigating.
- Candidates who did well often contextualised their issue before introducing the specific focus of the essay. For example, an essay on plastic pollution might begin by considering local impacts on marine ecosystems before exploring wider environmental implications.
- Wider reading included within the justification should consider relevant geographical literature and demonstrate clear geographical substance.

Wider reading

- Wider reading should be explicit throughout the essay.
- Candidates should use appropriate referencing techniques, including citations or footnotes where appropriate, to demonstrate engagement with wider reading.
- Candidates should prioritise three substantial sources for detailed analysis.
- The prioritised sources should have enough quality and depth to support both summary and critical evaluation.
- Candidates should avoid selecting weaker sources simply because they appear easier to evaluate.
- While the geographical issue should be as current as possible, there is no need for all sources to be recent. Older sources may be appropriate if they continue to provide authoritative evidence. However, where more recent evidence exists,

candidates should ensure that their prioritised sources remain appropriate and current.

- Bibliographies should follow an accepted referencing style rather than only website addresses.
- Bibliographic entries should include the publication date and the date the source was accessed. For example:
  SEPA (2025) *National Flood Risk Assessment.* Available at: https://beta.sepa.scot/media/2kliy0j5/national-flood-risk-assessment-2025.pdf [Accessed 01/01/2026].

- Candidates should ensure the three prioritised sources are easy to identify in the bibliography. Some candidates used separate sub-headings at the beginning of the bibliography.

- Candidates should clearly reference every source included in the bibliography in the essay. An essay submitted without a bibliography is self-penalising.
- Direct candidates towards referencing guidance or reference-generation tools to support accurate citation.

Summaries

- As the summary section is worth 10 marks, candidates should focus on it as much as the critical evaluation section.
- Effective summaries enable the reader to develop a clear understanding of each source without referring to the original text.
- Candidates should summarise the key arguments rather than simply describing the content.
- Candidates should support general statements such as ‘the author says...’ with sufficient detail to demonstrate understanding of the source.
- Candidates should avoid summarising sources on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis as this often limits demonstration of overall understanding.
- Candidates should include diagrams where they enhance understanding of a source and are appropriately labelled.
- Candidates should include relevant wider reading where it helps clarify or develop points made within the source.

- Do not instruct candidates to use a particular structure for the essay. However, separate summary and evaluation sections often allow candidates to demonstrate evidence for both assessment areas more effectively.
- Candidates who integrated summaries and evaluations produced less balanced responses, with one section becoming underdeveloped.

Evaluation

- Candidates should give as much attention to the critical evaluation section as they did to the summary section.
- Candidates should evaluate the credibility of each author and the reliability of each source.
- Evaluation should consider factors such as expertise, qualifications, publication context and previous work, where appropriate.
- Candidates should identify the strengths and weaknesses of each source, supporting their judgements with evidence from wider reading.
- Candidates should identify and explore areas of bias, exaggeration or omission where relevant, using wider reading to support this.
- Candidates should use wider reading to support and challenge the viewpoints presented by each source.
- Candidates should compare their three prioritised sources throughout the evaluation rather than considering each source separately.
- Some candidates structured evaluations around themes, for example:
    - author credibility
    - source reliability
    - evidence of bias or exaggeration
    - supporting evidence from wider reading
    - opposing evidence from wider reading
    - comparison between sources

  This structured approach often helped candidates demonstrate the full range of evaluation skills.
- Candidates who performed well often used wider reading to reinforce the strengths of one source while identifying limitations in another.

- Candidates should identify the most convincing viewpoints and explain why particular evidence is more persuasive or reliable, recognising relationships, patterns and tensions between the different sources.

Conclusion

- Conclusions should answer the question or title directly.
- Judgements should be supported by evidence drawn from the three prioritised sources and wider reading.
- Candidates should refer to the purpose established in the justification and demonstrate how it has been addressed.
- Strong conclusions synthesise evidence rather than simply repeating earlier points.
- Candidates who did well often used wider reading to suggest realistic courses of action or identify future implications.
- Candidates who integrated wider reading throughout the essay were generally able to produce more insightful and well-supported conclusions.
- Effective conclusions can end with a clear overall judgement that reflects the breadth of evidence considered.

Ensure candidates are aware of the following key points.

Justification

- limit their justification to one page and clearly state the purpose and geographical relevance of the issue
- contextualise with current issues before expanding to broader impacts

Wider reading

- ensure that their wider reading is relevant, clearly referenced, and properly cited using formal techniques
- focus on three high-quality main sources, clearly identified in the bibliography
- ensure sources are current and identified in a bibliography that is correctly formatted
- use all sources listed explicitly in their essay

Summaries

- explain the content clearly in the summary with specific detail rather than vague statements
- use diagrams where helpful (not essential)
- include reference to their wider reading

Critical evaluations

- avoid repeating the summary
- evaluate author credibility, reliability, bias, exaggeration, and compare facts and figures
- use wider reading to support their evaluations
- compare all three main sources
- structure evaluations clearly, for example, ‘research that supports or contradicts this…’
- avoid focusing on the language used in sources as this can detract from the content and message of the sources

Conclusion

- refer to the purpose and justifications, answering the main question with evidence
- review the main points from sources and wider reading, and interpret the significance of the evidence
- identify the most convincing arguments
- explain that disagreements may exist between the sources
- show an awareness of geographic implications or consequences
- reflect on implications and future action
- provide a strong conclusion that shows insight and a clear final judgement