Course report 2026

Higher Art and Design, SCQF level 6

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: 5,847

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 6,280

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	1,104	17.6	17.6	182
B	1,829	29.1	46.7	156
C	2,135	34.0	80.7	130
D	1,048	16.7	97.4	104
No award	164	2.6	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.

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

Marker feedback and the statistical data indicated that the questions in this year's question paper differentiated effectively between candidates of different abilities and levels of understanding.

The question paper was well-received by candidates, centres and markers. Feedback from markers indicated that the question paper was fair and accessible for candidates in terms of coverage and overall level of demand.

There was no significant difference in how the questions in 'Section 1: Expressive art studies' and 'Section 2: Design studies' performed.

Candidates selected a range of works by different artists and designers in response to the mandatory questions. Markers commented on the variety of artists and designers studied this year. Popular choices in the expressive arts section included Paul Cezanne, Audrey Flack, Vincent van Gogh, David Hockney, Frida Kahlo, and Jenny Saville. In the design section, A M Cassandre, Peter Chang, Coco Chanel, Alexander McQueen, Alphonse Mucha, and Louis Comfort Tiffany were popular.

The optional questions that most candidates chose to respond to were:

Expressive art studies:

- question 2 — 'Still not solitary' by Tania Rivilis
- question 4 — 'The Artist Looking for Inspiration' by Edivaldo Barbosa de Souza
- question 6 — 'To Pastures New' by James Guthrie

Design studies:

- question 8 — 'Monstea' by Yvonne Moser
- question 9 — 'Dimension Outfit' by Demobaza
- question 11 — 'Roman Perfume Bottle' by unknown designer

Expressive portfolio

The expressive portfolio performed as intended, with candidate evidence indicating that the level of demand was accessible and appropriate. Markers commented on the high level of personalisation and choice evident.

Still life featuring traditional subject matter such as fruit, food, household items, and significant objects relating to interests or hobbies were popular themes. Portraiture and self-portraiture were also popular.

2D work was the most popular form of expressive work submitted. Large-scale work, photographed for submission, was less popular.

Design portfolio

The design portfolio performed as intended, with candidate evidence indicating that the level of demand was accessible and appropriate. Markers commented on the high level of personalisation and choice evident.

2D graphic design along with 3D body adornment and jewellery design were the most common design areas for portfolios.

Both digitally and traditionally produced work featured prominently in graphic design and illustration portfolios.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper

Most candidates attempted all six questions in the time allocated, followed the instructions in the question paper and selected appropriate questions to answer.

Most candidates structured their responses using a streamlined approach, providing separate succinct points for question prompts. Candidates who used an exam technique such as ‘what, where, why’, or ‘point, evidence, explain’, conveyed their responses effectively. The highest-performing candidates explained, analysed and fully justified the impact for each prompt they discussed.

Many candidates who demonstrated in-depth knowledge and understanding of art and design practice and concepts responded effectively to the given prompts in the mandatory questions, particularly regarding the impact of social, cultural and/or other influences.

Many candidates who demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of art and design issues, responded effectively to the question prompts and applied art and design terminology correctly in the optional questions.

Expressive portfolio

Many candidates’ expressive portfolios showed their skill, personal input and high level of engagement.

Most candidates demonstrated a sound understanding of the expressive portfolio assessment task and accessed the full range of marks for highly relevant investigative work, in line with our *Guidance on National 5 and Higher portfolios* document. (You can find this document under the ‘Help and guidance’ heading in the ‘Coursework’ section of the Higher Art and Design subject page.) This created a strong base for them to focus on a single line of development. Markers commented that most portfolios showed clear progression and refinement as they developed towards their final piece.

Many candidates chose portraiture or still life themes and demonstrated highly effective technical skills, particularly in drawing and use of tone. Many candidates showed an effective use of media, including use of colour. This, along with the clear development of ideas and refinement, allowed many candidates to access the full range of marks.

Candidates who produced streamlined portfolios in line with the guidance accessed the full range of marks. Many candidates combined this approach with a well-considered choice of media, which gave them more time to develop fully resolved final pieces. Working on a smaller scale enabled many candidates to fully resolve their portfolios, while also demonstrating their creative process and skills.

Some candidates used digital technology and photography effectively in their development process. This was particularly effective when used as a means of compositional development and to develop sense of mood and atmosphere. Most candidates who used digital technology combined this with traditional working methods. A few candidates worked entirely digitally and accessed the full range of marks. A few candidates who used digital technology did not outline their working methods, which made it difficult for markers to award marks accurately for the process involved.

The overall quality of candidates' evaluative comments was strong. Candidates who focused on concise evaluative comments that documented and justified their decision-making processes accessed higher marks for the evaluation. Successful candidates used relevant art terminology effectively throughout their evaluative processes.

Design portfolio

Most candidates chose well-considered and appropriate design briefs that gave them a strong foundation to develop their portfolios. Most candidates carried out highly relevant and focused research, which led them to a highly effective single line of development. This allowed candidates to access the full range of marks. Many candidates focused on a manageable task, which led to coherent and well-resolved portfolios.

Many candidates explored specific design issues, visual elements, or techniques, and demonstrated a strong overall focus and visual continuity. This approach gave them the opportunity to experiment and develop their skills, and, in many cases, led to highly creative design solutions.

Candidates who considered function and aesthetics together tended to access the higher mark ranges. For example, a candidate who explored the function of a book jacket design, while considering how it would communicate information to the target audience and address aesthetic qualities, such as colour and shape, demonstrated a more in-depth design approach.

Many candidates initially explored traditional methods and techniques but went on to successfully use digital technology to develop their process. For many candidates, this combined approach created additional development opportunities and gave them scope for further refinement and resolution in their design portfolios.

Many candidates who explored a digital or combined approach to 2D design used techniques such as digital layering, editing, and digital drawing creatively and effectively. A few candidates who used digital technology did not outline their working methods, which made it difficult for markers to award marks accurately for the process involved.

Many candidates who worked with 3D design took a highly creative approach, using basic or inexpensive materials, such as paper or recycled materials. This gave them opportunities to experiment and address aesthetics and functional issues, particularly in areas such as body adornment and product design.

The overall quality of candidates' evaluative comments was strong. Candidates who focused on concise evaluative comments that documented and justified their decision-making processes accessed higher marks for the evaluation. Successful candidates used relevant design terminology effectively throughout their evaluative processes.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Many candidates did not provide developed responses for each question.

Many candidates did not respond fully to all three prompts in a question and did not demonstrate the analytical skills necessary at Higher level. Some candidates did not demonstrate a clear understanding of art and design terminology or the expectations of prompts. Some candidates discussed prompts in general terms without referencing the artwork or design work, limiting the marks that they could achieve.

In the mandatory questions, most candidates provided social, cultural and/or other influences, however many candidates did not explain the impact on the artwork or design work.

A few candidates appeared to rely on a generic response and did not relate their knowledge and understanding of the artwork or design work to the prompts in the question.

In question 1, some candidates responded to the prompt ‘techniques’ by discussing materials or working methods. In question 7, some candidates did not demonstrate knowledge and understanding for the prompt ‘materials and/or technology’, providing limited justification.

Section 1: Expressive art studies

For question 2, some candidates demonstrated limited understanding for the prompt ‘line’ with comments that lacked description or the effect on visual impact. For questions 4 and 6, many candidates responded to the prompt ‘colour’ with comments about tone or demonstrated limited understanding of colour theory. For question 6, some candidates referred to the use of ‘texture’ generally, without describing the type of textures or considering how the textures may have been created.

Section 2: Design studies

For questions 8 and 11, some candidates did not fully analyse the prompt ‘fitness for purpose’ and did not provide the necessary justification in their responses. In question 9, some candidates did not fully consider the prompt ‘target market’ and did not convey how the design work appeals to the target market. For question 11, a few candidates did not demonstrate knowledge and understanding, resulting in descriptive responses and limited justification for the prompt ‘form’.

Expressive portfolio

A few candidates submitted expressive portfolios that did not meet the required standard for Higher.

A few candidates submitted more work than recommended in the portfolio guidance. In some cases, this work was repetitive and appeared to reduce the time available for the candidate to refine and improve the quality of their portfolio. A few candidates who worked on a large scale, did not resolve their final piece to the same level they demonstrated earlier in the portfolio, suggesting that working at a more manageable scale could have improved their opportunities to access the full range of marks.

A few candidates worked on top of digitally generated images with traditional drawing and painting materials. Some of these candidates did not clearly demonstrate their working method and skills.

For the evaluation, some candidates described the steps of their working process, rather than critically evaluating their creative process. While many candidates tackled this aspect effectively, some candidates missed opportunities to access additional marks by not including more evaluative statements.

Design portfolio

Although most candidates explored appropriate design briefs, a few candidates did not include a brief. At times, this made it challenging for markers to understand the candidate’s decision making throughout the portfolio. Most briefs were achievable, while still offering a suitable level of challenge. A few briefs were complex, vague, or difficult to resolve within the requirements of the assessment task. This

disadvantaged these candidates and limited their ability to successfully develop and resolve their ideas into a final solution that fully addressed their brief.

Some candidates submitted investigative research work that significantly exceeded the volume of work recommended in the portfolio guidance. This was particularly evident at the investigation stage, which should remain focused and relevant to the design brief and line of development.

Some candidates did not appear to select their most relevant work to streamline their portfolio submission. Some candidates submitted minimal work that did not demonstrate the skills, knowledge and understanding required at Higher level. Candidates who edited and refined their work to create a single line of focused development produced more cohesive portfolios.

For the evaluation, some candidates described the steps of their working process rather than critically evaluating their creative process. While many candidates tackled this aspect effectively, some candidates missed opportunities to access additional marks by not including more evaluative statements. A few candidates included evaluative commentary throughout their portfolio, rather than using the evaluation template, as instructed in the assessment task.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

You should give candidates time and opportunity throughout the year to familiarise themselves with art and design terminology. The Higher Art and Design Course Specification contains a list of prompts that can feature in the question paper. Appendix 2 of the course specification gives details about how candidates can interpret and develop these subject-specific terms in their responses.

You should make sure the selected artwork and design work that candidates study for the mandatory questions give them enough opportunity to demonstrate specialist knowledge and understanding in their responses. Selecting artworks or design works with limited accessible information can make it more difficult for candidates to respond to the prompts.

Throughout the course, you should give candidates the opportunity to study a diverse range of art and design imagery, the full range of question prompts, and exam techniques. Practising selecting appropriate questions, structuring streamlined responses and time management should help candidates respond effectively to the question paper. You can find the specimen question paper, past papers and marking instructions on the subject page of our website.

To access the full range of marks, candidates must answer all prompts in the selected questions. Up to 4 marks are available for each prompt. Candidates do not need to make four points for each prompt. There is some flexibility about how candidates can structure their responses to access the 10 marks available for each question. For example, they can gain:

- 4 marks for one prompt, and 3 marks each for the other two prompts
- 4 marks each for two prompts and 2 marks for the third prompt

You should encourage candidates to make it clear where in the work they can see the specific aspect of the prompt and explain and analyse what effect the prompt has on the work. Candidates should fully justify each point they make, demonstrating their understanding and knowledge of art and design terminology at this level. The

course support notes in the course specification provide an example of how to make effective analytical points by considering ‘what, where, why’ to help structure responses.

Understanding Standards resources, an audio presentation, and a webinar are available on our Understanding Standards website. This material illustrates the level of response required and commentary about how the question paper is marked.

A free online Higher Art and Design question paper course is available on our Academy. The course provides information and guidance about the question paper and includes interactive marking exercises. You can find the course in the ‘Course support’ section of the Higher Art and Design subject page.

You should consider special arrangements for candidates whose handwriting is so difficult to read that it could disadvantage them in a written exam.

General portfolio guidance

Volume of work

You should advise candidates to follow the portfolio guidance on the subject page of our website. This will help them produce focused and concise portfolios, make the best use of the time available, and access the full range of marks.

You should encourage candidates to carefully select and edit their portfolios. A streamlined and concise portfolio can meet the requirements of the assessment task and allow candidates to focus on developing their skills. Including irrelevant work can lead to an unclear line of development and affect the final mark.

Candidates should present their work to show their line of development with a clear structure and format. They do not need to use complex or expensive mounting materials; however, they must make sure all work is securely attached without overlapping or layering. Each portfolio must not exceed three A2 sheets or equivalent.

Evaluation

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.

You should make sure the correct evaluation is attached to the first sheet and that it does not overlap any work.

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

Candidates should make sure each sheet of the portfolio has a Qualifications Scotland sticker label and that their completed flysheet is attached to the back of the portfolio.

Expressive portfolio

You should make sure candidates choose age-appropriate themes. Candidates should clearly note the title of their theme in the top left corner of the first sheet, alongside their investigation studies.

You should avoid adopting prescriptive approaches with your candidates. While focusing on a single genre, such as still life or portraiture, can make delivering the course more efficient, candidates should have opportunities for personalisation and choice in their portfolio. This can help them engage more fully with their work.

When choosing the theme for their portfolio, candidates should consider their individual strengths, media handling, scale of work and the time available. When candidates consider these factors at the outset, they tend to produce more successful portfolios because they create a focused approach and give themselves more scope to develop skills.

You should make sure candidates understand that all portfolio work must be their own, including the development of compositional ideas. Candidates should avoid working on top of existing images as this can limit their ability to demonstrate their skills. For digital portfolios, candidates should document key stages of development, for example using screenshots.

Design portfolio

When developing design briefs, you should encourage candidates to consider their individual strengths, prior experience, and the time available. A realistic and manageable design brief will support a focused and concise portfolio and maximise the candidate's success. For example, candidates designing a dress for a fashion event should focus on one piece, rather than attempting to design an entire collection.

Candidates should carefully consider functionality alongside aesthetics, reflecting on practical aspects such as ergonomics and material selection. In fashion, body adornment, or jewellery design, this could include fastening methods. In graphic design, it could include how effectively the intended theme or message is communicated and the use of text.

You should encourage candidates to remain focused during the investigation stage and meet the requirements of the portfolio assessment task. The design portfolio guidance explains that candidates should include three examples of relevant market research and one other piece of relevant research, such as an image of a source of inspiration. This focused approach allows them to access the full range of marks available for investigation and research.

You should advise candidates to carefully edit their work and present it in a clear and sequential order. Candidates should show a focused line of development leading to a fully resolved design solution. Candidates should develop and refine their work at each stage of this process.

For digital portfolios, candidates should document the key stages of their development, for example taking screenshots. To ensure that they gain all available marks for both process and skills, candidates should demonstrate how their work progressed rather than simply showcasing the capabilities of the software they used.

You should encourage candidates to consider the most appropriate use of materials to demonstrate their skills. You can help candidates make informed decisions when editing and presenting their work so that they only show their strongest and most relevant pieces.

Candidates do not need to use expensive materials when producing work for their portfolio. Low-cost or recycled materials, such as paper, can produce highly creative and effective results. Candidates can include 3D samples in the portfolio, if appropriate. However, there is no requirement for candidates to include large 3D outcomes. Clear, well-presented photographs from various angles, with some detailed shots, sufficiently represents candidates' work. Candidates should make sure all their work is securely mounted, without overlapping or layering. The design portfolio must not exceed three A2 sheets or equivalent.