

Course report 2026

Higher ESOL, 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

For information about the Performance: Speaking and Listening component you should read the verification summary 2025-26 on the [ESOL](#) page of our website.

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

Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,017

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 852

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	291	34.2	34.2	72
B	243	28.5	62.7	62
C	187	21.9	84.6	52
D	104	12.2	96.8	42
No award	27	3.2	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 1: Listening

Feedback suggests the question paper was slightly less demanding than the standard expected at Higher level. Recording 1 was felt to be the most demanding and recording 2 the least demanding of the three listening sections. The topics covered by the recordings were appropriate and accessible as well as current and relevant to candidates.

Overall, as the question paper was slightly less demanding than expected, we made a minor change to grade boundaries.

Question paper 2: Reading

Feedback suggests this question paper was of the standard expected at this level. Text 2 appeared to be the most challenging for candidates. The topics covered by the texts were felt to be appropriate, accessible and current.

Most question types were attempted well except for the vocabulary questions in text 2. Overall, the question paper performed as expected.

Question paper 3: Writing

The question paper performed as expected. All topics in the writing tasks allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. Markers felt that topics were accessible to all candidates. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates.

Some candidates understood the work task in part 2 to require an evaluation of 'managers' plural as opposed to one 'manager'. As this was one possible interpretation of the question, we did not deduct any marks for this interpretation.

For the optional work and study tasks in part 2, most candidates attempted the essay question with few candidates attempting the report. Those candidates who attempted the report gained lower marks compared to those who attempted the essay.

How candidates performed

Overall, candidates performed better in reading and listening than in writing.

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper 1: Listening

Most candidates performed well in:

- Q6 (multiple choice)
- Q8 (multiple choice)
- Q9 (multiple choice)
- Q10 (multiple choice)
- Q15 (multiple choice)
- Q16 (Candidates generally completed their gap-fill responses within the three-word requirement.)

Question paper 2: Reading

Most candidates successfully completed these questions:

- Questions 1, 3, 4, 12 (gap-fill)
- Q16 (multiple choice)
- Q19 (i) and Q19 (ii) (both matching)
- Q21 (multiple choice)
- Q24 and Q25 (both gap-fill)

Question paper 3: Writing

Many candidates added support for the bullet points provided and added their own ideas in some cases. Most candidates were familiar with the conventions and layout of both discursive essays and evaluative reports although candidates were generally better at writing essays than reports.

Most candidates completed reports this year without using formulaic language and bullet points excessively.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper 1: Listening

Candidates found Recording 1 to be the most challenging. Across the three recordings, candidates found multiple choice questions to be easier than gap-fill questions. The questions that candidates found most demanding were 1, 2, 4, 13 and 14 (all gap-fill). The spelling of some candidates was poor this year.

Question paper 2: Reading

Candidates found Text 2 to be the most challenging. The most demanding questions were questions 6 (multiple choice), 17, 18 and 31 (all vocabulary) and 23 and 28 (gap-fill).

In terms of question type, the matching questions were found to be the easiest, followed by multiple choice, then gap-fill and short answer. Candidates found the vocabulary questions to be the most demanding.

Some candidates struggled with following the instructions in the question paper and used more than the maximum number of words requested or used their own words rather than using words from the text.

Question paper 3: Writing

Many candidates struggled with the genre and formality by using language that was too informal in the formal email as well as the work and study-related context tasks. Candidates did not use paragraphs well and some scripts showed no evidence of paragraphing, which is important at this level. Punctuation was weak this year, with some candidates not using capitalisation or full stops. Handwriting was an issue with some candidates and their responses were difficult to read.

Preparing candidates for assessment

You should refer to the Understanding Standards materials on our Understanding Standards and Qualifications Scotland secure websites.

Question paper 1: Listening

You should ensure candidates:

- use the allocated time at the end of the listening paper to check their spelling to ensure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions
- know that minor spelling errors are acceptable in the listening paper as long as the word is recognisable, and it is clear that they understand the meaning
- use clear, legible handwriting in the exam
- adhere to the word limit when a question asks for 'no more than x words'. They will not gain marks if they use more than the requested number of words. Even if they include the correct answer within this, they will not gain the mark as it is not clear that they have fully understood the question
- work on recognising and identifying paraphrasing and synonyms when listening, which helps them to complete all question types
- work on identifying key words in the questions, brainstorming synonyms and listening to check, which will support them in the exam.

You should use practice exams and past papers to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter in the paper.

Question paper 2: Reading

You should ensure candidates:

- get regular practice at short-answer questions alongside the other question types of gap-fill, multiple choice and multiple matching
- check their spelling carefully, particularly if they finish before the end of the exam time. Words copied directly from the texts are expected to be spelled correctly
- understand that when the question asks for 'words or phrases from the text' they should choose words found in the text and not try to paraphrase

- are careful not to copy long chunks from the text when answering questions that ask for short answers, as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and therefore they will not gain the marks. Give *one word only* when asked 'Which **word** means x?' and, conversely, give *more than one word* when asked 'Which **phrase** means y?'
- work on identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the classroom, as this will benefit them in the exam
- underline key words in the questions and then identify relevant parts of the text
- adhere to the prescribed word limit in a question
- focus more on identifying opinion and overall purpose of the text when developing reading skills in class
- develop a depth of vocabulary across a wide range of topics that will help them cope with the lexical demands of the text in the exam
- clearly score through incorrect answers to highlight which answer they would like to submit
- use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the question paper and to practise at the speed or within a timed limit

Question paper 3: Writing

You should focus on candidates' writing skills and provide guidance on writing tasks.

You should ensure candidates:

- have opportunities to practise writing tasks such as blog, email and article, as these are the potential genres for Task 1 in future question papers
- can use punctuation correctly. Lack of capitalisation or inconsistent use of full stops will significantly reduce the available marks for a piece of writing at this level.
- spend time working on the structure of a paragraph and how and when a new paragraph should be used. You could provide texts without paragraphing and ask them to identify topic sentences and paragraph breaks or identify the structure within a paragraph.

- practise the use of discourse markers, linking, and signposting in longer writing tasks, especially the essay task in part 2. Clear and correct use of these features can improve a writing task considerably.
- focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks, as style is important in the writing tasks at this level
- have opportunities to use online writing tasks such as authentic blog and social media posts, as this genre may be part of future question papers, and work on comparing different writing styles. Rewriting a formal written task in an informal style or vice versa helps them develop the ability to use both types of registers and highlight the importance and impact of different styles.
- spend more time practising different essay structures, for example discursive essays and for or against essays, as well as focusing on the academic language style expected in an essay. You should ensure their work is legible and ask candidates to practise writing by hand under test conditions.
- try to produce answers within the recommended word count and be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words
- can proofread and edit their work, and are advised to factor in time for this during the exam
- practise reading (and re-reading) the questions carefully, fully understanding what is expected and fulfilling the task required, rather than trying to recycle previously completed writing tasks to fit the exam

You could give candidates texts without punctuation and ask them to add punctuation. This will focus their attention on the difficulty of following the message when punctuation is missing, and the importance of accurate punctuation. (Candidates who are weak on punctuation will be able to improve their marks significantly if they learn to punctuate better.)