Course report 2026

Higher Philosophy, 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 didn't 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: 550

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 484

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	145	30.0	30.0	77
B	77	15.9	45.9	66
C	92	19.0	64.9	55
D	65	13.4	78.3	44
No award	105	21.7	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

The question papers performed as expected. They were received well by centres and were fair papers in line with the specifications. The question papers worked as intended, and the spread of marks reflects a standard normal distribution graph. We have not made any adjustment to the grade boundaries for this assessment, unlike in previous years when the mean mark was lower.

Question paper 1

Question paper 1 performed as expected. The question on Hume was an open question that allowed for differentiation by outcome. The marking for essays in both sections of paper 1 is holistic and considers candidates' knowledge and understanding of the content as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation. The scaffolding in the questions helps weaker candidates to show their skills and knowledge.

The Hume question, as always, required precise knowledge and understanding of the course text, as well as the ability to analyse and evaluate Hume's theory.

For the utilitarianism questions, more candidates chose to answer question 3 than question 2. The mean mark for question 2 was slightly lower than the mean mark for question 3.

Question paper 2

Question paper 2 performed as intended. All candidates showed their knowledge and skills as fully as possible. Across all sections of the paper, a balanced spread of marks indicated that the differentiation for this paper worked as intended.

How candidates performed

Question paper 1

In the ‘Knowledge and doubt’ section, most candidates were good at describing parts of Hume’s theory. Some candidates showed precise knowledge of the text, with awareness of key aspects of Hume’s theory of impressions and ideas and the arguments he uses to support this. Many candidates showed a detailed understanding of Hume’s theories of knowledge, and cause and effect. However, many candidates found it challenging to evaluate how effective Hume’s theory of knowledge was in terms of his focus on experience.

Many candidates focused their essay on one aspect of Hume’s theory: the origin of ideas in section 2 of the enquiry, or his views on knowledge, causation and the problem of induction as described in section 4. Some candidates attempted to cover all aspects of the content offered as examples in the bullet points in the question. Many candidates described accurately the areas of the content they chose in great depth and detail. However, many did not show an understanding of how Hume used experience as a foundation for knowledge. Some candidates did not describe any of Hume’s arguments or reasoning to support his claims but simply described some key features of his theory, and this made it difficult to achieve the top marks, because it was hard to draw a line of argument in relation to the question without this.

Many candidates presented common criticisms of Hume. Some candidates showed good or very good knowledge of, for example, the missing shade of blue counterexample, but they were less good at articulating accurately why it was problematic for Hume. Similarly, many candidates wrote that Hume’s explanation of cause and effect as a result of habit and custom did not account for all cases, but did not successfully explain why this mattered for his theory. Many candidates could present criticisms or challenges to his theory in a superficial way, but they did not always provide sufficient explanation of the impact of those criticisms, or a personal judgement on them. In general, essays that achieved marks in the highest range did this most successfully. Those candidates usually showed a clear understanding of the fact that section 2 of Hume’s enquiry deals with concept acquisition, and they also tended to show an understanding of how this supported Hume’s empiricism.

Similarly, in relation to section 4, candidates who did best explained how Hume's fork ruled out some of the types of knowledge that rationalism might have included and explained the implications of this in relation to his theory of cause and effect.

In the 'Moral philosophy' section, for both essay questions (2 and 3), many candidates described aspects of utilitarian philosophy in detail. Some candidates only provided this very superficially. For example, they may have described the hedonic calculus as being a tool to aid utilitarians in finding which action would maximise pleasure and minimise pain, without explaining the different criteria or how it supported their moral decision making.

In question 2, the scenario, most candidates described in good depth how a utilitarian might go about assessing Dave's decision. Many candidates explained how this would determine what a utilitarian would think about Dave's choice. Candidates found it challenging to evaluate the utilitarian response to the scenario and to criticise the utilitarian theory based specifically on how it deals with this situation.

In question 3, the quotation, most candidates described key features of the philosophy on a superficial level. Some did it very effectively with depth and detail, for example clearly distinguishing act utilitarianism from rule utilitarianism. Many candidates referred to a least one common criticism of utilitarianism in their answers. Candidates found it more difficult to analyse and evaluate utilitarianism in depth in terms of the problems raised specifically by the quotation.

Question paper 2

Section 1: arguments in action

Question 1 was a very straightforward question focused on the knowledge of statements, premises and conclusions. All parts (a), (b) and (c) were done well and most candidates gained full marks.

Question 2(a) was done very well, with most candidates correctly identifying the main conclusion of the argument.

Question 2(b) required candidates to rewrite the premise in standard form. This was done well, with many correctly changing the pronoun 'it' to 'reading'.

For question 2(c), many candidates said what made the premise acceptable.

Question 3 was done very well, with most candidates providing an appropriate argument based on the diagrams.

In multiple choice questions 4, 5(a) and 6, most candidates used their knowledge of inference indicators, inductive and deductive arguments, and confirmation bias to identify the correct answers.

Question 5(b) was more difficult and only some candidates explained correctly why the argument was inductive sufficiently to gain 2 marks. Some candidates gave one reason why the argument was inductive, but did not add further reasons or develop them sufficiently to get the second mark.

Question 7 on validity was challenging. For question 7(a), most candidates did not explain why the statement about validity was untrue sufficiently to gain both marks. Some gave one reason based on their understanding of validity and some did not explain this at all. Question 7(b), which required candidates to use their understanding of validity and apply it to the argument provided, was done better. Many candidates explained what made the argument invalid. Only a few candidates gained 0 marks for this question.

Question 8 was about the sufficiency of premises, and many candidates did well with both parts of this question. Many explained what made the premises insufficient to establish the conclusion for part (a), and most gave an additional premise that would lend further support to the conclusion for part (b).

Question 9 was on ambiguity. Parts (a) and (b) were done well, with most candidates explaining the ambiguity in the argument and identifying which type of ambiguity it was. Many candidates gained at least 1 mark for explaining how the ambiguity affected the probability of the conclusion being true. However, only some explained this with sufficient detail to get 2 marks.

Question 10 on appeals to authority was challenging, with only a few candidates achieving all 3 marks. However, many candidates did get at least 2 out of 3 marks. To gain 3 marks, candidates needed to apply their understanding of legitimate and

illegitimate appeals to authority to this specific argument and not just use general explanations.

Question 11 was on the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. Many candidates defined this fallacy in terms of it wrongly assuming causation has occurred simply because two events have occurred one after another in time. This definition was worth 1 mark. To gain 2 marks, candidates had to explain that this was a fallacy because on its own this was not enough to give us a good reason to assume causation. Only some candidates achieved 2 marks for this question.

Question 12 was done quite well. Many candidates got 1 mark for explaining the ad hominem in the argument and many identified the correct form of ad hominem.

Section 2: knowledge and doubt

Questions 13 to 15 focused on Descartes' cogito from Meditation 2. Most candidates correctly identified the cogito and showed a clear understanding of what it was and its importance for Descartes, with many candidates writing more than was necessary for question 13.

Question 14 was about how Descartes reasoned to find his cogito. Most candidates gave some explanation of this and gained at least 1 mark. Many candidates gained at least 2 out of 3 marks for this question, but only some gave sufficient explanation of how Descartes came to the cogito, to gain all 3 marks.

Question 15 required candidates to evaluate the cogito. It was intended to be challenging and to differentiate by outcome. Many candidates gained at least 3 out of 6 marks, but only a few gave enough in-depth evaluation of the cogito to gain 6 marks.

Section 3: moral philosophy

Questions 16 and 17 focused on Kant's categorical imperative and how it was used to establish our moral duties. The mark spread showed that these questions differentiated by outcome, as intended. Candidates did well in question 16 when they explained in depth and with accuracy how Kant used the categorical imperative to establish duties. Some candidates focused on the first formulation, some focused on the second, and some explained both. They showed varying levels of skill. Approximately 50% of candidates gained 3 out of 6 marks for this question, with some giving enough detail to gain 6 marks. In question 17, most candidates gained at least 1 mark out of 4, but only some evaluated the use of the categorical imperative in relation to establishing moral duties with the required depth and detail to gain 4 marks.

Preparing candidates for assessment

You should always use the most current guidance and documentation. The Higher Philosophy Course Specification, available on our website, is the main source of information on the requirements of the course. You know your own candidates best and should use your professional judgement to select the most suitable resources for preparation. Additional support is available in the 'Course support' section of the Higher Philosophy web page, and you can find examples of candidate evidence on the Understanding Standards web page.

Question paper 1

As this paper is essay-based, regular essay writing practice will help candidates strengthen their understanding of the course content. Emphasise developing a clear line of argument in response to essay questions. Candidates should understand that the essay is an opportunity to show their knowledge and understanding of key areas of philosophy. They should practise accurately describing content from both the 'Knowledge and doubt' and 'Moral philosophy' sections and learn how to build a relevant argument based on the question. Focused practice in these areas will support stronger performance in the exam.

The scaffolding provided in suggested essay content can guide candidates in what they might include. However, they should feel confident in approaching essays in various ways. They do not have to include all suggested content, and they can use content not specifically mentioned. There are multiple valid approaches to answering each question.

In the 'Knowledge and doubt' section, candidates who perform well show familiarity with the course texts they have studied and a clear understanding of the philosophical narratives. This often enables them to engage more critically with the material in their essays. Candidates should explain the key theories and arguments, paying close attention to areas where fine distinctions are important. The open nature of this year's exam question meant candidates could select aspects of the course text that they wanted to write about. We did not expect candidates to cover all areas of the enquiry studied at Higher level in such an essay. Some candidates did attempt

to do this and if time allowed them to go into depth, they did sometimes achieve high marks in their essays. However, this approach was likely to lead to the candidates' essays being overly heavy in their description of the text, with little analysis or evaluation in relation to the question. We recommend that you encourage candidates to curate what they choose to write about, to achieve the depth required. It is acceptable for a candidate to focus on a small aspect of the course text or to draw from more than one part to answer the question. A few candidates very successfully explained Hume's copy principle without the reasoning in section 2 to support it. They analysed what this meant in terms of Hume's fork and his theory of causation, from part 4, which they evaluated in relation to him using experience as a basis for knowledge.

For the 'Moral philosophy' section, candidates should demonstrate sound knowledge and understanding of the moral theories covered in the course. It may be helpful for you to provide regular opportunities for candidates to practise applying these theories to a range of moral issues and scenarios, as well as evaluating their effectiveness.

Candidates who did well in the scenario questions identified specific issues for utilitarianism that applied to this scenario. For example, the issue of evil pleasures was not obviously relevant to this scenario, but the issue of special obligations and supererogatory acts was. In quotation questions where no scenario is given, candidates who did well often used their own relevant examples to show how a moral theory could be applied in real-life situations, and the issues this might raise.

Question paper 2

This paper includes both short and extended-response questions. These questions require candidates to describe and explain philosophical ideas and arguments accurately and clearly. You should ensure that candidates are familiar with all the content outlined in the course specification. Providing a glossary of key terms may be helpful (there is one in the appendix of the course specification), and regular testing of definitions can support candidates in developing the precision needed for many of the questions.

In the 'Arguments in action' section, candidates should learn the definitions of fallacies accurately, and understand what specifically makes an argument fallacious

as opposed to legitimate. For questions that ask candidates to judge if an argument contains a fallacy, it is useful for them to consider what features would make the reasoning flawed, and what would make it acceptable.

It is also beneficial for candidates to practise answering questions across all areas of the course and skill sets to ensure they are fully prepared for this paper.