

Course report 2026

Higher Psychology, 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.

Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 2,657

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 2,707

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	536	19.8	19.8	80
B	654	24.2	44.0	67
C	588	21.7	65.7	55
D	497	18.4	84.0	42
No award	432	16.0	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

The question paper sampled content from three topics: the two mandatory topics of sleep and dreams and conformity and obedience, and one optional topic. Candidates answered one question from the following options: depression, memory, stress, prejudice, social relationships, or aggression.

Overall, the question paper performed largely as expected. Feedback from the marking team, teachers and lecturers indicated that there was appropriate differentiation between candidates. This provided a balanced paper which enabled candidates to achieve marks and showcase their knowledge and skills.

Question 1(b) worked well as a differentiation question with a relatively normal distribution of marks across the cohort; however, it had an overall lower mark than expected across the cohort. Additionally, the mean mark for questions 3-8 part(b) was, for most topics, less than half. The level of demand was therefore higher than expected, and we adjusted grade boundaries.

This year there was a return to a higher mark application with a scenario question. This was in the mandatory topic of conformity and obedience. There was some feedback from teachers and lecturers which referred to the last sentence of the scenario question relating to obedience. Some teachers felt it confused the meaning of the scenario. However, this sentence had no negative impact on candidate responses. Most candidates ignored it and responded with knowledge appropriate to the rest of the scenario and the few candidates who tried to address the point, did so effectively.

The topic of memory was the most answered optional topic, closely followed by the topic of depression. The topics of stress and aggression were least popular. Across the different optional topics, candidate performance was consistent with only minor variations.

Assignment

The assignment performed as expected, with a very similar mean mark to 2025 and 2024. Feedback from the marking team, lecturers and teachers suggested it was appropriately demanding.

A few candidates carried out unethical research; however, the number of unethical breaches reduced compared to 2025.

The assignment task remained the same as 2025. Candidates demonstrated their skills in research by planning, conducting, evaluating and analysing their own primary research. They calculated and interpreted descriptive statistics and utilised communication skills to write a report on their research that follows a specific format.

How candidates performed

Question paper

Section 1: individual behaviour — sleep and dreams

Question 1(a)

Most candidates provided explanatory information about REM and non-REM stages of sleep. Many candidates gave information relating to the functions of these stages of sleep within restoration and reorganisational theory and therefore gained some marks.

Question 1(b)

Many candidates were able to describe Freudian aspects of dreams effectively and some candidates were able to provide some analytical points relating to supporting evidence, however, it was noted that their evaluative points were not fully developed and so could not gain marks.

Some candidates compared psychodynamic processes with other sets of processes and different theories of sleep; however, these took the form of simplistic statements about what each set of processes or theory referred to and were not analytical in nature.

A few candidates did not respond to this question at all or focused on the Little Hans study or described psychodynamic processes without applying these to the topic of sleep and dreams.

Section 2: social behaviour — conformity and obedience

Question 2(a)

Many candidates were provided explanatory comments on these types of social influence and provided research evidence and examples to support their points of explanation to gain 4 or more marks.

Question 2(b)

Questions about conclusions are intended to act as differentiation questions as they draw on the skill of analysis. This question performed this function with many candidates providing one conclusion of the Mori and Arai study only. A few candidates were able to provide more than one conclusion and/or further detail on conclusion(s) provided.

Question 2(c)

Most candidates were able to achieve marks for theoretical knowledge related to the factors affecting obedience and applying these effectively to the scenario. Many candidates explained factors affecting obedience and applied these to the scenario. They gained 5 or more marks for this question.

Many candidates provided explanatory points on perceived legitimate authority, proximity of the authority figure, linked these to the scenario effectively and used research evidence to support their points. In addition, some candidates explained factors such as socialisation, agentic and autonomous levels of behaviour and authoritarian parenting and linked those to the scenario effectively.

Section 3: optional topic

Questions 3–8 part (a)

Many candidates demonstrated their knowledge of this part of their optional topic and provided at least two points of explanation in their response. For the topics of depression, memory, stress, and social relationships, most candidates achieved half marks and more. For the topics of prejudice and aggression, many candidates achieved half marks and more.

Questions 3–8 part (b)

Many candidates provided undeveloped evaluative points and so the mean mark awarded for these questions was, for most topics, less than half. To gain more than half marks, candidate responses tended to contain one fully developed evaluative point and one or more undeveloped evaluative points.

Questions 3–8 part (c)

For the social relationships topic, many candidates provided some theoretical points and applied these to the scenario to gain 5 marks or more. For the depression, memory, stress, prejudice, and aggression topics, some candidates provided responses that included theory and applied this to the scenario to gain 5 marks or more.

Assignment

Introduction

Most candidates provided a relatively detailed theoretical background and a description of two research studies related to their primary research and gained 7 marks or more for this section.

Introduction — aim and hypotheses

Many candidates provided an appropriate aim and some candidates were able to write a hypothesis that was fully operationalised. Many candidates did not provide a sufficiently operationalised hypothesis which meant they could not be awarded the hypothesis mark. Candidates completing a correlational study sometimes provided a causal hypothesis. Correlational hypotheses should predict a relationship or association between the co-variables rather than a cause-and-effect relationship. As a result, hypotheses that implied causation were not awarded the available mark.

Method

Most candidates accurately identified their method and research design for their assignment. However, some candidates did not provide an adequate justification for their choice of research method.

Many candidates identified their research variables appropriately, although a few candidates did not give the conditions of their Independent Variable (IV) (where appropriate) or fully operationalise their Dependent Variable (DV) or co-variables.

Many candidates described their sample and accurately identified their chosen sampling method. A few candidates described their procedure in sufficient detail to permit replication. Most candidates achieved 3 or more marks for this section.

Method — ethics

Many candidates correctly applied the ethical guidelines specifically to their own research and explained the way(s) they had avoided ethical breaches.

Some candidates provided some generic points on ethical guidelines and procedures showing an overall knowledge of ethics in psychological research. Generic points about ethical procedures, such as debriefing candidates and providing the right to withdraw, are awarded up to 2 marks from the 4 marks available for this part of the method section.

Marks for the method section were impacted if candidates completed unethical research. Those candidates did not gain the mark for their procedure or the mark for the justification for their research.

The ethical breaches identified in 2026 included the following:

- depriving participants of sleep in some way
- exposing participants to difficult words to memorise or difficult cognitive tasks to complete
- manipulating participants' pre-sleep routine, for example, exposing participants to blue light before sleep or changing their caffeine consumption (including asking participants to consume caffeine before going to sleep)
- Jenness/Asch style replications
- recreating exam anxiety
- using incentives to reward candidates for participation
- physical fitness tests
- approaching strangers to act as participants (ethical guidelines protect candidates as well as participants and obtaining participants in this way puts candidates at risk)

- using participants who are under 16 years of age (it is clearly stated in the coursework assessment task that participants under the age of 16 must not be used)

A few candidates used questionnaires with invasive and inappropriate questions. These included questions on the following: medical conditions and history, medications, drug or alcohol consumption, anxiety levels, learning difficulties, academic attainment, sleep disorders, or if they are on medication that affects their sleep.

Deception

A few candidates completed unethical conformity experiments involving replications of Jenness/Asch style experiments. These candidates created experiments that deceived participants by using confederates or group discussion in a situation of overt social pressure.

Confidentiality or data breaches

Many candidates asked participants to provide their date of birth on the consent form. While this was intended to confirm that participants met the required age criteria, collecting a date of birth alongside a participant's printed name and signature could constitute a breach of data protection requirements and is therefore considered unethical. This breach of ethics also applies if candidates ask for identification or proof of age.

A few candidates included information about their centre or class group that could allow participants to be identified which is a breach of confidentiality. This occurred in section C of the report and in the appendices.

A few candidates included personal contact details, such as a mobile phone number or personal email address on participant information or debrief sheets. This is a safeguarding concern for candidates.

Results

Most candidates chose appropriate statistical procedures to describe their data; however, many candidates could not justify their use. Many candidates presented

their data in an appropriate format; however, some candidates did not label these in enough detail to enable interpretation (titles were vague, missing axes labels).

A few candidates did not include calculations in their appendices. Many candidates provided an accurate statement of whether their results supported or refuted their hypothesis. Some candidates who completed research using a correlational design did not choose appropriate measures to describe or present their data, focusing on mean scores and using bar charts instead of a scattergram and raw data table. Most candidates achieved half marks or more for this section.

Discussion — analysis and evaluation

Analytical points made by candidates included the way their results confirmed or refuted their hypotheses and the way in which their results related to psychological theories and research in their introductions and real-life applications of the research. Most candidates attempted to write a conclusion at the end of their discussion, however, this often did not include key statistical information and/or a concluding statement and so candidates could not gain a mark.

Many candidates identified variables that may have influenced their results but they often did not explain specifically how these variables affected their results. Where candidates compared their own investigation with the research studies discussed in their introduction, their comparisons often focused on methodological aspects such as the research method, sample or procedure rather than comparing the findings themselves. As a result, these responses did not meet the requirements for gaining marks in this area.

There was a range of evaluative points made by candidates. Some candidates provided at least two developed evaluative points, and some candidates provided four fully developed evaluative points relating to their procedure, sample or research method. A few candidates focused almost exclusively on providing evaluative points related to their sample, and while this attracted some marks, full marks for this section are not given for evaluations of the sample.

The marks for this section were normally distributed indicating that many candidates were able to provide at least some analytical points relating to their results and some

fully developed evaluative points. Most candidates achieved half marks or more for this section.

Style and presentation

Candidates must provide references in a format that enables the information to be located by a third party and present their research in the style and format of a formal psychology report. Some candidates fulfilled these requirements and gained the full 2 marks. A few candidates included their references at the very end of their assignment which is not in the style and format of a psychology report.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

Candidates are expected to have full knowledge of the course content for each topic listed in the course specification. The course specification is available on the Higher Psychology subject page on our website:

You should help candidates to develop the skills required by the course, with particular focus on the higher order skills of application and analysis. Candidates may be expected to analyse processes, theories, explanations and research studies, and so should be well prepared for this.

You should focus on skills development to ensure candidates have the capacity to apply their knowledge to novel questions. Many candidates were able to respond well to questions that were familiar or similar to past paper questions, but novel questions seemed to attract fewer marks. You should support candidates to learn to apply their knowledge to new questions and reduce their reliance on example responses.

You should support candidates to develop their evaluation skills so they can provide fully developed evaluative points, particularly in relation to aspects of the course specification such as theory, techniques and treatments. Many candidates provided undeveloped evaluative points in the 2026 question paper.

You can find detailed guidance in the appendix of the course specification. You can also access our Higher Psychology: command words course on our Academy website.

You can also use past papers support candidates develop these key skills. These are available from the past papers section of our website. Our Understanding Standards website has examples of candidate evidence and detailed commentaries explaining mark allocations.

Many candidates taking Higher Psychology are new to the subject. Given the abstract nature of the content at this level and the skills required to respond effectively to unseen questions, centres should carefully assess the suitability of candidates before enrolling them in the course.

Assignment

You should make sure that candidates are aware of the requirements of the assignment. The coursework assessment task document is available on the Higher Psychology subject page on our website.

As the report for the assignment is written under open-book conditions, you should take steps to ensure the assignment is the candidate's own work, particularly with the increase in availability of AI.

Understanding Standards materials are designed and presented to support teachers and lecturers, and overreliance on these by candidates could detract from their own capabilities and compromise the integrity of their submission.

In the introduction section, emphasis is placed on the relevance of research studies to the candidate's aim. At least one study must be directly relevant to the aim to be awarded full marks.

Candidates would benefit from support and guidance to enable them to provide hypotheses that are fully operationalised. As research is designed around the hypothesis, an improved understanding as evidenced by appropriate hypotheses, would also support candidates towards making decisions about the method and statistical procedures they use.

You should support candidates to developing the skills of justifying their choice of method (in the method section) and using descriptive statistics (in the results section). The justification should be linked specifically to the candidate's own research, so this does require a deeper understanding of why the candidate used the method they did and why they have chosen specific statistical procedures to describe their data.

Candidates should use appropriate terminology and avoid terms such as 'prove', 'statistical significance' (unless inferential statistics have been calculated) and 'relationship' (unless correlational research designs have been used). Candidates should also be supported towards writing in the third person as the report is an objective account of their research process.

Ethical research procedures are essential, and you must make sure candidates think carefully about the impact of their research on participants. You should help candidates adhere to the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines when they plan and conduct their research. The guidelines are available on the British Psychological Society website. There is also additional guidance on human research ethics on the BPS website.

You can find more guidance on ethical procedures in the Higher Psychology course support notes at the end of the course specification on our website. You can also read the Guide to Ethics on the Association for the Teaching of Psychology (ATP) website.

Our Understanding Standards website has examples of candidate assignments with detailed marking commentaries.