Course report 2026

National 5 Art and Design, SCQF level 5

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: 11,227

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 11,743

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	4,461	38.0	38.0	175
B	3,767	32.1	70.1	150
C	2,607	22.2	92.3	125
D	771	6.6	98.8	100
No award	137	1.2	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

Feedback from markers, centres and candidates indicated that the question paper was received positively and was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. Marker feedback and the statistical data indicate that all questions generated a wide range of marks from candidates and discriminated effectively between candidates with different levels of understanding.

In response to the mandatory questions, candidates selected a range of works by historical and contemporary artists and designers. In expressive art studies, Frida Kahlo was most common with Peter Howson, Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings and Vincent van Gogh also popular choices. In design studies, works by Alphonse Mucha, A M Cassandre and Saul Bass were popular in graphic design, while in jewellery design, most candidates chose works by René Lalique or Peter Chang.

The optional questions that most candidates chose were:

Expressive art studies:

- question 2 — ‘The Vegetable Stall’ by William York Macgregor
- question 4 — ‘Boulangerie Florence Kahn’ by Emily Sutton

Design studies:

- question 8 — ‘Clipper Teabags packaging design’ by Big Fish Design Studio
- question 9 — ‘Pro Barista Expresso Coffee Machine’ by Sage

Question 6, which focused on sculpture, and question 10, which focused on architecture, were the least-attempted questions.

Expressive and design portfolios

Both portfolio assessment tasks 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.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper

Most candidates followed the instructions in the question paper and selected appropriate questions to answer.

The marking team saw a mixed range of responses to the question paper. The highest performing candidates demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of art and design issues. They managed their time effectively and made focused and justified comments in response to the questions.

In the mandatory questions, well-prepared candidates applied their knowledge and understanding of specific art and design works. Candidates with good knowledge and understanding of art and design terminology accessed the full range of marks available. Many candidates responded effectively to part (b) of the mandatory questions, identifying two influences on the artist or designer they had studied and describing how these influences could be seen in the artist's or designer's work.

Many candidates who demonstrated in-depth knowledge and understanding of art and design practice and concepts responded effectively to the given prompts in the optional questions.

Expressive portfolio

Many candidates focused on areas of personal interest.

Most candidates performed well when they had the opportunity to select their own themes and use the media and materials most appropriate to their style, technique and approach.

Most candidates achieved 10 marks for highly relevant analytical drawings and investigative research appropriate to their selected theme.

Most candidates chose to apply the concise approach of two investigation studies, two development studies, and a final piece, as set out in 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 National 5 Art and Design subject page.) This approach allowed them to submit streamlined and considered portfolios with a clear layout. Many of these candidates accessed the highest mark ranges.

Candidates performed well when working in media that suited their skills. Many candidates focused on one or two materials and developed these. This allowed them to produce focused portfolios that performed well through refinement of skills and media handling.

Many candidates demonstrated great observation skills, impressive handling of media and techniques, and a final piece that was skilfully executed.

Most candidates selected an appropriate scale for their final piece, with work ranging from smaller than A4 through to larger A2 pieces. They considered scale in relation to earlier development work.

Many candidates' evaluations featured appropriate use of art terminology and reflective comments using evaluative language. Many candidates used bullet points to keep their responses focused.

Design portfolio

Many candidates had a clear and focused design brief that allowed them to focus on the assessment task and perform well. These achievable briefs allowed candidates to identify relevant and inspirational source imagery that supported them to demonstrate clear visual continuity throughout their portfolio.

Most candidates achieved 10 marks for highly relevant thematic imagery and presented three pieces of market research appropriate to their design brief.

Many candidates focused on a specific range of appropriate materials and/or techniques in relation to their design brief. This allowed them to demonstrate the level of skills appropriate for National 5.

Most candidates accessed the higher mark ranges by showing continuity through a clear single line of enquiry with considered process and evidence of refinement of skills.

Many candidates submitted 3D portfolios, which provided excellent opportunities for exploring functional design issues. Many candidates who chose to design a body adornment or work with ceramics showed clear consideration of appropriate design issues while demonstrating skill in handling media and materials. They showed this through 2D and 3D ideas, concepts and presentations. Some candidates used digital technology effectively to visualise their ideas, along with drawings that illustrated the refined ideas in 2D and 3D. Many candidates photographed samples, which allowed them to effectively illustrate how they explored placement, scale, pattern and texture.

Many candidates produced skilled 3D models in development and final design work for their architecture portfolios. The models were handmade or 3D concept models from a variety of angles, created using appropriate software.

Many candidates used inexpensive materials to skilfully communicate and refine ideas for jewellery, fashion and body adornment designs. 3D portfolios allow for the use of inexpensive materials and resources. Many candidates successfully manipulated paper and card to create lighting, architecture and headpiece concepts and ideas.

Graphic design was very popular, and many candidates executed their graphic design portfolios with appropriate skill. Markers fed back positively about individual candidate decision-making through the manipulation and combination of key graphic design aspects of layout, scale, lettering, imagery and colour. There was a balanced mix of hand-drawn and digitally created graphic design for a range of purposes. Most portfolios that achieved the highest mark ranges had a clear concept built on strong foundations, which allowed candidates to develop their work, either digitally or through hand drawing. Many candidates successfully integrated digital and hand-drawn approaches in their portfolios.

Repeat pattern design was a popular area. Many candidates showed their final pattern design in relation to a suitable context. Strongly performing candidates

demonstrated their creativity and maintained visual continuity when applying their pattern to the specific context outlined in the brief.

Many evaluations demonstrated understanding of appropriate design terminology, with comments identifying strengths and weaknesses with clear justification.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Some candidates did not respond fully to all three prompts in a question and did not use appropriate art and design terminology.

Mandatory questions (1 and 7) tested knowledge and understanding of artworks and designs that candidates had studied. Some candidates did not demonstrate the required underpinning knowledge in their responses. Some candidates gave speculative answers, containing incorrect information in response to these questions. Some responses to questions 1(a) and 7(a) did not address the prompts in the question. For a few candidates, the selected artworks or designs did not offer enough scope to answer the question effectively at National 5 level. A few candidates gave no response to questions 7(a) and (b).

Many candidates either made a poor attempt at answering part (b) of the optional questions or gave no response. Many candidates stated if they liked or disliked the artwork or design work but did not relate this to what the question asked.

Specific prompts that candidates did not answer well included:

- Question 1(a)
    - Prompt: tone — markers noted that most candidates did not demonstrate an understanding of tone in art terminology. Many candidates used the term ‘tone’ as it’s used in the English language to express emotion and included comments like ‘the painting has a sad tone’. Some candidates used ‘tone’ to refer to colour and made comments about warm and cold colours, such as ‘the room has cool blue tones’.

- Question 2(a)
    - Prompt: composition — many candidates provided a list of subject matter in the artwork and did not demonstrate an understanding of compositional devices, such as focal point, balance, leading lines and overlap to create depth.
    - Prompt: colour — many candidates did not demonstrate knowledge and understanding of basic colour theory in response to this artwork.
- Question 2(b)
    - Prompt: visual impact — many candidates stated if they liked or disliked the artwork without mentioning visual impact and did not demonstrate understanding of this prompt.
- Question 4(b)
    - Prompt: style — most candidates did not gain any marks for question 4(b). Their responses did not demonstrate knowledge and understanding of this prompt.
- Question 7(a)
    - Prompt: style — some candidates made unclear comments referring to inspiration. Some candidates gave speculative responses, rather than demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the style of their selected design.
- Question 12(a)
    - Prompt: materials and/or techniques — some candidates did not demonstrate understanding of this prompt.

Expressive portfolio

For a few candidates, the choice of theme and/or subject matter impacted their work, and they did not successfully communicate their ideas throughout their portfolio.

A few candidates did not edit their portfolios and included additional compositions or developments that were less relevant to their theme and skills. A few candidates produced several very similar compositions instead of including varying viewpoints, scale and positioning to allow for improvement in development ideas.

In a few portfolios, candidates did not refine their handling of media and/or techniques as their work progressed to the final artwork. Many of these candidates included a wide range of media and techniques, which resulted in a lack of focus and opportunity to refine their skills. A few candidates' final pieces did not show the same level of skill as their earlier development work.

Markers found it difficult to identify what a few candidates were presenting for investigation, development and final artwork, as the pieces of work were mounted together with no clear labelling. A few portfolios were incomplete, with unfinished or missing work.

Markers noted that a few evaluations were very descriptive. A few candidates did not reflect on personal decisions and provide justified reasons for their decisions.

A few centres adopted an approach where all candidates followed the same process, using identical subject matter, materials and techniques. This limits the opportunity for candidates to demonstrate personal choice and creativity.

Design portfolio

A few portfolios contained unclear design briefs that stated several things to be designed, rather than focusing on one specific design. A few portfolios contained a lot of inspirational imagery, which led to an unclear process stage that lacked focus. Some portfolios included unnecessary work, making the 'single line of development' less effective and, at times, difficult to identify.

A few candidates submitted one or two pieces of market research. These candidates did not demonstrate the breadth of investigation required to access the full range of marks.

A few graphic design portfolios explored more than one line of development, which meant these candidates could not access the full marks range for process. A few candidates made very minor changes to their development ideas, and did not show meaningful refinement of layout, colour, lettering, typography or scale. A few candidates gave no clear indication of how the idea evolved. A few candidates used existing imagery, which became repetitive and restricted their ability to develop their design ideas. A few candidates did not fully explore typography and lettering.

Instead, they appeared as an add-on rather than an integral part of the design. There was evidence that a few candidates were not fully proficient with the software they used, with their final designs showing limited refinement.

Some portfolios with repeat pattern did not experiment with scale and did not demonstrate understanding of a proper pattern repeat. For some candidates, the process seemed driven by a centre approach that led to limited personalisation. Some candidates overused software and generated too many ideas that did not relate to their original theme. This led to pattern development that lacked focus, making it difficult to identify the original idea within the final design work.

A few candidates' architecture portfolios did not present the form and function of the building clearly. These portfolios placed greater emphasis on the final design than on the development process.

A few candidates who designed a body adornment, headpiece or fashion item did not consider function, or how the design would interact with the body in terms of ergonomics. They did not explore closures, catches and fittings appropriately in relation to how their designs would be worn, secured or removed.

A few candidates produced final design work that did not show refinement from the development stage. A few candidates selected a weaker development idea to refine into a final design solution. Unclear photos made it hard to see changes between the development and the final design in a few candidates' portfolios. A few candidates mounted more samples or images than required or included photographs to document how they made their design solution. This unnecessary material does not attract marks.

A few candidates' evaluations were descriptive and repeated the design brief. They did not use appropriate design terminology to reflect on strengths and areas for improvement and include justified reasons.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

You should allocate appropriate time to prepare candidates for the question paper. Candidates should familiarise themselves with the art and design terminology they will encounter in the question paper. Appendix 2 of the course specification contains a list of prompts that can feature in the question paper and gives further detail on how candidates could interpret and develop these subject-specific terms in their responses.

You should encourage candidates to explain where the prompt they are commenting on can be seen in the work and the effect it has on the work. Candidates must justify each point they make, demonstrating their understanding and knowledge of art and design terminology at National 5 level. You should give candidates opportunities to develop their exam techniques so that they can answer questions effectively and manage their time during the exam.

Responses to the mandatory questions (1 and 7) should demonstrate that candidates have studied the works selected. Candidates must base their comments on correct information from reliable sources and show appropriate knowledge and understanding. You should make sure that the artworks and designs candidates choose for the mandatory questions give them opportunities to demonstrate enough knowledge and understanding to gain marks. Choosing artworks or designs with very little available information could cause issues for candidates.

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

We updated the format of the National 5 Art and Design question paper in session 2024–25. You can access the updated specimen question paper and the 2025 and 2026 past papers and marking instructions on the National 5 Art and Design subject page. Other past papers and marking instructions are also available on our website. These illustrate the level of response required, and how the question paper is marked.

Understanding Standards resources are available in the ‘Understanding Standards’ section of the National 5 Art and Design subject page. The resources include the audio presentation ‘Changes to the 2025 Question Paper’, the 2025 National 5 Art and Design webinar recording, and examples of candidate evidence with commentaries.

A free online National 5 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 National 5 Art and Design subject page.

General portfolio guidance

Volume of work

You should refer to the current portfolio guidance and consider applying the streamlined approach. This approach still allows candidates to access the highest range of marks. Portfolios should only include relevant work. A succinct and focused approach is often more effective and less time-consuming for the candidate. You should encourage candidates to consider the scale and time frames for the development and final piece or solution so that they can maintain a consistent level of quality across the portfolio.

Approach

You should support candidates to select appropriate themes, subject matter and design briefs. While it can be practical for centres to place some limitations on National 5 candidates, you should avoid very formulaic ‘house style’ approaches. Candidates should have some scope for personalisation and choice.

Evaluation

You should give candidates appropriate time to work on evaluations. You should encourage candidates to use succinct, evaluative language. You can give candidates a word bank to support the appropriate use of art and design terminology.

If possible, candidates should type their evaluations. Handwritten evaluations can be very difficult for markers to read. You must not give candidates writing frames or model answers for the evaluation. You must make sure that candidates understand that their evaluation must be their own work.

Layout and presentation

Candidates should present their portfolios in a concise way. They do not need to use three A2 sheets. You should consider whether using fewer sheets could work for your candidates, for example using two A2 sheets, or one A1 sheet in portrait format. You should encourage candidates to streamline their portfolios. Candidates do not need to completely fill each sheet with work.

Benchmark portfolios and commentaries

You can find examples of expressive portfolios with commentaries on our Understanding Standards website. Example design portfolios and commentaries are available on our secure site.

Expressive portfolio

Media and techniques

You should encourage candidates to explore their chosen media and techniques in depth to refine skills, rather than use too many different media or techniques with little refinement. Candidates should work with the materials they are most confident with and work at an appropriate scale for their skills.

Development

Candidates should explore and vary viewpoint, scale and framing when developing their idea. You should encourage them to consider how the background contributes to the composition. For example, does leaving the background blank benefit the artwork and relate to the theme?

Final piece

Candidates do not need to produce an A2 final piece if they are more confident working on a smaller scale, for example A4 or A5. You should encourage candidates to make their final piece their strongest piece of artwork, which demonstrates their skills.

Layout and presentation

Candidates should ensure work is fully dry before submitting, as wet work can stick together and become damaged. It is good practice to add paper between folded sheets to protect artwork.

Design portfolio

Design brief

Candidates should keep design briefs simple and focus on one thing to design. The design brief should be clear and concise, and highlight aims, requirements and opportunities for the candidate to explore. You should encourage candidates to refer to their design brief and investigative material to improve their process.

Approach and investigation

Candidates should have a clear starting point. They should only include relevant work to help refine their development towards a strong design solution. To access all available marks for market research, candidates should have at least three appropriate market research images.

Image banks for investigation images and market research can remove candidates' opportunities for personalisation and decision making. You should make sure candidates understand that their market research images should be based on existing designs that are relevant to their brief.

Expressive drawing is not a requirement in the design portfolio. Drawing for design can have an important place, but this is often a type of drawing that is used to explore shape, texture, form and/or pattern.

The link between research and development is key, and it is vital that candidates refer to their research material when they move to develop their ideas. There is a balance between repetition of an idea, and a single line of development. Considering the questions that a design brief delivers helps to combat repetition.

Development

A clear and sequential process of changing and improving a design idea often helps candidates reach a well-resolved outcome. Fewer, well-considered developments are more effective than numerous subtle changes.

You should remind candidates to address function in their designs.

Media and technology

Using technology can be creative and inspiring when a candidate has the opportunity to develop their skills and understanding in appropriate ways in relation to the design process. However, you should consider if the candidate can produce stronger work without software.

Final solution

Candidates should show 3D solutions from multiple viewpoints. If their design is intended to be worn by a person, it is useful to show the design on a model. Candidates should present their solutions clearly, with well-lit photographs if appropriate.

Digital outcomes should be in a high resolution to maintain quality.

Layout and presentation

Candidates should aim for a clear presentation and clearly label their development to help the marker. For example, candidates can use arrows to show the process.

Candidates should not fill empty space with additional work that is irrelevant.