Course report 2026

National 5 Geography, 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: 10,056

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 9,239

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	3,321	35.9	35.9	70
B	1,834	19.9	55.8	59
C	1,558	16.9	72.7	49
D	1,360	14.7	87.4	38
No award	1,166	12.6	100	Not applicable

We have 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 was well received and accessible to most candidates. The paper was in standard format, with question 1(b) and question 2(b) giving candidates a choice of feature. It contained a good range of 3-mark questions and match-type questions, making it accessible to all candidates.

The question paper helped to differentiate between candidates. Some questions at National 5 level are more demanding than others to allow discrimination between candidates. Most of these questions are worth 5 or 6 marks, with candidates who perform less well often having more difficulty accessing all the marks by giving an extended explanatory answer. Question 9 was more demanding than expected. We considered this when setting the grade boundaries.

The most popular global issues options were climate change, health, and environmental hazards. Less popular were the options on natural regions, tourism, and trade and globalisation. The climate change question was the most popular option with most centres delivering this option.

Most candidates completed the three sections in the allocated time. A few candidates answered all questions in the paper. A few candidates may have been presented at the wrong level.

Assignment

The assignment performed as intended.

A few candidates demonstrated personalisation and choice. The assignment allowed for the appropriate differentiation between candidates in sections A (research methods) and B (findings and conclusions).

From session 2025–26, we changed the assessment conditions to allow candidates to complete the assignment write-up over more than one sitting within the one-hour time limit. We made no changes to our marking approach, and we shared this approach on our Understanding Standards website.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper

Question 1(a) and question 2(a)

Most candidates answered these questions well, showing good mapping skills by matching different landscape features to the correct grid reference.

Question 1(b) and question 2(b)

Many candidates demonstrated their knowledge and understanding of physical processes in the formation of their chosen feature.

Question 3

Most candidates performed well in this question by matching the correct letters to the land uses on the cross-section diagram.

Question 5

Most candidates had a very good knowledge of their case study and performed well in this question by explaining ways in which land use conflicts can be managed.

Question 8(a)

Many candidates performed well in this question, demonstrating that they were well prepared for urban map work.

Question 8(c)

Most candidates performed well in this question by correctly matching the labels on the photo to the features on the map.

Assignment

Section A

Most candidates performed well in the research methods section and discussed how they had gathered data for their assignment.

Section B

Most candidates achieved all 3 marks available for description. Some candidates had written many more descriptive points than required for full marks.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Question 6

Many candidates had difficulty achieving full marks for this question as they did not manage to explain the factors that affect average UK temperatures throughout the year.

Question 9

Many candidates missed out on marks because they described changes in the Central Business District (CBD) of a city they had studied, and not the inner city.

Question 10

Many candidates identified physical and human factors influencing global population distribution but did not link explanations to areas of high or low population density.

Question 13(b)

Some candidates did not explain the effects of rainforest destruction on people and the environment adequately and therefore could not access all the available marks.

Question 14(b)

Some candidates did not explain the impact of a named tropical storm sufficiently and therefore could not gain full marks.

Question 17(b)

Some candidates missed out on marks because they did not fully explain the impacts on people and the countries affected by their chosen developing world disease.

Assignment

Section A

Some candidates had issues accessing all available marks for their research methods as they had difficulty exemplifying them.

Section B

Some candidates had difficulty gaining the full range of explanation marks available as they needed to give more detailed explanation.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

Many candidates were very knowledgeable about their case studies, for example, on management of land use conflicts, tropical storms, and health. These candidates wrote detailed answers demonstrating their in-depth geographical knowledge and therefore accessed all available marks in discriminator questions that were worth the highest marks. This enabled these candidates to achieve a higher overall mark in the question paper. Some candidates missed out on marks because they did not answer questions with the depth of explanation required at National 5 level.

Many candidates referred to up-to-date examples studied in class and then discussed these in a way that was related to the question. For example, in question 5 (explain ways land use conflicts can be managed), some candidates made references to good examples of recent management strategies such as the use of ‘disco bins’ to encourage people not to litter on Dorset Coast.

Centres should ensure that all case studies are relevant and up to date. It is important that candidates can use current examples when answering questions in all three sections of the National 5 Geography question paper. We encourage centres to refresh teaching materials to ensure candidates’ answers are accurate and more likely to achieve full marks. Tourism, for example, provides opportunities to teach global case studies and broaden candidates’ knowledge of worldwide contexts.

Most candidates performed well in mapping questions in both the ‘physical’ and ‘human environments’ sections. We remind centres that ordnance survey (OS) map skills are an integral part of the National 5 Geography question paper. OS mapping is an important skill, and maps allow us to assess candidates’ knowledge of physical and urban landscapes, land uses, and land use conflicts. Centres should make good use of OS maps and ensure that they fully incorporate map skills into National 5 Geography courses.

In the ‘skills’ section of global issues questions (part a), candidates did well by describing line graphs and bar graphs in detail by quoting figures. For example, in question 12(a) candidates described in detail the changes in the UK’s wind power production between 2013 and 2023. Candidates did well by identifying trends from the graphs. Some candidates missed out on marks because they used descriptions like ‘highest’ or ‘lowest’ in skills questions asking for changes — question 12(a), question 13(a), question 14(a) and question 17(a).

For global issues skills questions that use maps, candidates were skilled at showing their geographical knowledge when recognising places from world maps. You should encourage candidates to make full use of the keys in these maps to highlight places that are affected by the different categories displayed. For example, in question 16(a), an excellent response would include reference to specific areas that have less than 1 million, 1–9.9 million, 10–30 million, and more than 30 million aeroplane passengers.

In part b of the global issues questions, candidates demonstrated a good knowledge of case study areas. However, it is important that they relate their case study knowledge to the question appropriately. For example, in question 14(b), most candidates were aware of the impacts of their named tropical storm. However, some candidates wrote lists such as ‘52 people killed’, ‘homes destroyed’ and ‘flights cancelled’, but did not then expand on the details such as ‘the strong winds and storm surge resulted in at least 52 deaths’.

It is vital that candidates know the difference between ‘explain’ and ‘describe’ questions as many candidates confused these two command words. Some candidates missed out on marks because they described rather than explained. You

should emphasise the need for candidates to fully explain what they have learned in their case studies to access all available marks.

In question 9 (describe the main changes which have taken place in the inner city over recent years), some candidates missed out on marks because they explained some changes, without giving enough description of changes in the inner city.

You can refer to our Understanding Standards website for examples of candidate responses to National 5 Geography question papers. We've marked each anonymised response and provided a commentary to explain why candidates have, or have not, gained marks.

You should not draw comparisons between National 5 and Higher question papers as they differ in structure, content, and level of demand, and marks are scaled at Higher level.

Assignment

As many candidates did not carry out fieldwork (primary data) to complete their assignments, many assignments were desk-based (secondary data). Most candidates completed assignments related to human geography, with fewer candidates focusing on physical geography.

As outlined in the coursework assessment task, whole class fieldwork on the same topic is acceptable and candidates can gather different data in small groups. Individuals should then process the information and produce their own graphs for their processed information sheets.

Some candidates did not demonstrate understanding of the topic of study for their assignment, particularly river or coastal studies, and urban studies linked to the Burgess model. Therefore, they could not access all available marks.

Most candidates produced assignments that addressed both sections of the task and used appropriate sources or graphs linked to their title. Some candidates presented their findings in a clear and well-organised structure. You should encourage candidates to write as clearly as possible, so that markers can read their responses correctly.

To access all available marks in section A, candidates should name their sources in the research methods section, for example *The Guardian* newspaper or Worldometer website. Candidates should not write names of sources on processed information sheets as this is classed as a 'lift' and cannot gain marks.

Some candidates included background information, introduction, hypothesis and/or disadvantages of research methods in their assignment, which are not allocated marks at National 5 level.

Candidates should ensure their graphs have titles and readable scales, and that graphs are appropriately sized on their processed information sheets. Candidates do not need to include extra graphs in their processed information to fill up both pages of A4 paper if they are not going to use them in their assignment write-up.

Some candidates missed out on marks because they copied numbers from a table or included them on the top of bars or segments of graphs. You should remind candidates that they will not achieve marks from information that they copy or 'lift' from their processed information sheets. Candidates should use the information on graphs to draw comparisons, for example, 'higher' or 'lower' to avoid copying data in their write-up. Candidates are not required to include complex calculations of data.

When describing graphs in the processed information, some candidates used descriptive language such as 'just under' or 'around' instead of reading their graphs accurately. Some candidates gave very precise numbers not shown in that level of detail on their graphs. Candidates can gain marks for correctly describing graphs or maps included in the processed information.

You should remind candidates that using pictures and symbols as a coded draft of the assignment is not acceptable and could result in a malpractice referral for the candidate. Appropriate processed information examples are available on our Understanding Standards website.

Candidates should ensure they write their assignments in blue or black ink.

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