Course report 2024

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Design)

Advanced Higher Art and Design (Expressive)

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   689

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   741

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	254	Percentage	34.3	Cumulative percentage	34.3	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	239	Percentage	32.3	Cumulative percentage	66.5	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	199	Percentage	26.9	Cumulative percentage	93.4	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	40	Percentage	5.4	Cumulative percentage	98.8	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	9	Percentage	1.2	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

'most' means greater than 70%
'many' means 50% to 69%
'some' means 25% to 49%
'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the statistics and information page of our website.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   1,250

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   1,313

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	481	Percentage	36.6	Cumulative percentage	36.6	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	431	Percentage	32.8	Cumulative percentage	69.5	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	322	Percentage	24.5	Cumulative percentage	94.0	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	68	Percentage	5.2	Cumulative percentage	99.2	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	11	Percentage	0.8	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Portfolio

The creative process

The portfolios submitted this year continued to show that most candidates have a clear understanding of researching, developing and resolving creative ideas. This process of responding to a theme, stimulus or design brief, is the basis of both the Design and Expressive courses. Markers commented on the way most candidates approached the challenge of Advanced Higher Art and Design with a deliberate sense of direction and a familiarity with materials and relevant visual elements, suggesting that the portfolios had been created on a foundation of preparatory work.

Artistic Independence

The reduced submission of 6 to 12 A1-size sheets (or equivalent) has allowed candidates' progression from Higher to Advanced Higher Art and Design to become more gradual and straightforward. Time and flexibility over the extended period in which the portfolio is created allows candidates to change the emphasis or direction of their work, and to gain ownership of their project. This artistic independence, 'the voice of the candidate', was seen in sketchbooks, personal statements, evaluations, and in the diversity of themes and design briefs.

Diversity of themes and design briefs

As in the previous year, this year some candidates took on contemporary issues such as historical injustice, climate change, feminism, income inequality, religious beliefs, the meat industry, pacifism, political propaganda, disinformation and satire. Some portfolios looked at more personal topics such as identity, friendship, body image, family life, familiar places, pets, teen life, nostalgia, personal memorabilia, leaving home, cultural roots, and genealogy. Nature, biology and the environment — from sea life, woodlands, insects, birds, and animal tracks to human arteries and viscera — allowed starting points for some candidates to develop shape and colour. For some candidates, nature was also a means of exploring types of biomimicry in design. Some portfolios were evidently influenced by current culture, including music, film, literature, pop imagery, ordinary objects and cultural stereotypes. Candidates also explored the world of fantasy, from children's illustration and folklore to mythology and the supernatural, in a range of forms, including animation and fashion design.

Materials and techniques

The breadth and variety of materials used in both the Design and Expressive courses has increased in recent years. While traditional painting skills were the basis of many expressive portfolios, collage, printmaking, and mixed media were used experimentally and in resolved work.

Drawing

For many candidates, drawing was the most fluent and flexible means of trying out and investigating ideas. Many candidates often used their observation skills with confidence in extending their range of techniques and subject matter. From sketchbooks or sheets of

preliminary studies to resolved works, drawing skills underpinned standards in both the Design and Expressive courses.

Digital media

Markers commented on the increasing proportion of digital technology in portfolios. Some candidates are seeing that computer software such as Photoshop or Procreate can add an extra dimension to their work. Most of these portfolios showed a hybrid approach in which candidates created aspects of digital research and development through image manipulation, merging or layering, and combined with drawing and a variety of traditional art materials.

Using basic materials

Some candidates produced exciting work from basic, inexpensive materials, including using corrugated card, sensitive drawings made from pencil or pastels, a whole portfolio of expressive portraits in charcoal, and one example of fashion design from bin bags.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Practical expressive and design work

The voice of the candidate

Many of this year's portfolios clearly demonstrated evidence of candidates' personal choice of theme, and the independent development of ideas, materials, and techniques. This ownership of the work was seen in the commitment to the creative process, awareness in selecting research, and discernment in presenting resolved ideas.

Selecting a theme or design brief

Candidates are asked to state their expressive themes or design briefs and give a summary of their creative intentions in their evaluation templates. Most candidates used this outline of their enquiry to present ambitious conceptual proposals. For example, a candidate with a portfolio of self-portrait studies introduced the work with the idea of identity, ambiguity and 'the fluctuating self'. In another portfolio, a design brief for fabric was introduced as 'portraying the organic nature of cellular forms and using upcycled materials.' This may be considered ambitious, but this brief helped to guide, personalise and deepen the creative process in many portfolios.

Identifying steps in the creative process

Markers noted that many candidates presented work in a clear, coherent way. The process of developing ideas and experimenting with techniques and visual elements when investigating a topic is not sequential — it is naturally intuitive and disjointed. However, many candidates managed to identify each step in the creative process by numbering and annotating their sheets and linking their development work to research.

Technical skill

In many portfolios there were exciting examples of technical skills, such as printmaking, card model-making, sewing, jewellery, digital drawing, and Photoshop editing and image manipulation. There were also outstanding examples of drawing and painting in many portfolios in which candidates showed assured understanding of materials, tonal values and techniques.

Digital media

Digital media was often used with discerning visual awareness and imagination in a creative process. In some cases, digital media allowed candidates with limited drawing skills to realise ideas — for example, in graphics, architecture, animation, film or illustration — that might otherwise have been unattainable.

Contextual analysis

New approaches to contextual analysis

Some candidates successfully used the inspiration for their practical work to write about related topics. Examples of this include a contextual analysis titled 'The influence of clowns in film and popular culture' that was related to a practical portfolio with expressive drawings and paintings of clowns. Another contextual analysis was titled 'How nature has inspired the shapes and forms of contemporary fashion design' and was related to a fashion design enquiry based on forms in nature. These candidates analysed examples of art or design, but they also addressed a specific question related to the context of their practical portfolio.

Evaluation

In the evaluation, many candidates commented on the changes of direction they took while making their portfolio. This aspect of the evaluation encourages candidates to explain their intentions and why they reached a turning point or felt the need to alter or rearrange their work. Many candidates performed well in this aspect of the evaluation because they discussed the possible options and evaluated their choices.

Some candidates produced effective evaluations that explained the aims of the conceptual work which may not have been obvious from the practical work, while also providing a critical appraisal and important insights.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Practical expressive and design work

Developing ideas

Investigating, experimenting, or trying out creative ideas can be a challenging part of the course. Some candidates struggled to present more than one single idea in response to their theme, stimulus or design brief. From the initial research to the resolution of the enquiry, the composition, or design had hardly changed. The capacity to rethink possible solutions or rearrange ideas or to reimagine the initial stimulus in different forms is an essential, yet demanding, element of the creative process.

Applied understanding of art or design practice

Markers noted that in some portfolios, candidates used images only as a mood board and did not show how this research informed the development of their practical work. Candidates with only a passing reference to art or design practice often lacked the breadth of inspiration that can inspire and take creative ideas in new directions.

Repetitive experiments

Candidates showed their understanding of the visual elements by trying out variations of, for example, composition, shape, colour, or texture. Some portfolios, however, presented a development of ideas that repeated versions of the same image, such as a print, a tracing, or a digitally re-coloured copy. These repetitive experiments may appear to create a matching, visually coherent portfolio, but they do not always demonstrate a creative process.

Storyboarding as development

Some candidates who presented videos, animations, or films, did not demonstrate the planning and research stages of their work. Developmental work in the form of storyboards, outtakes, or shot planning may be rough in nature, but it is more valuable to the process than screenshots of the finished work. Screenshots are no substitute for genuine development of ideas.

Photography portfolios

Advanced Higher Art and Design offers a broad range of opportunities for candidates who have completed Higher Photography and want to expand their creative ideas. However, a few candidates who submitted photography portfolios did not demonstrate creative experimentation with visual elements, materials or photographic techniques.

Digital techniques

A few candidates presented work created with digital techniques that had very little supporting information or contextual material. In these instances, the work appeared to have limited connection to the portfolio and seemed out of place in the whole scheme of work. A highly finished digital print, or a resolution of a design without evidence of a process or clear connection to the enquiry can make the practical work less coherent.

Design briefs

A few candidates included a detailed brief that described the design they were going to make. This limited the creative process to small decisions about, for example, the colour or pattern of a predetermined resolution. This approach to the design brief often created a straight line from the brief to the solution, where candidates demonstrated limited alternative ideas.

Contextual analysis

Making the subject too big

In the contextual analysis, candidates are asked to provide evidence of their ability to select a single artwork or design, with relevance to their practical expressive art or design work, and discuss the impact of related contexts through analysing the features of the art or design work. Some candidates enlarged the scope of the subject to the point that it became too broad and generalised to gain marks. For example, a candidate might begin with one design by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and expand the subject to all of Mackintosh's work.

Biographies

Many candidates demonstrated a link between the life of an artist or designer and the artist's or designer's work. In many examples, candidates placed a short biography beside the analysis of the chosen work without making any connection between the two. It can be useful to link aspects of a biography to the features of a chosen work, but placing biographical details into the text does not automatically create a context.

Analysis

Some candidates chose too many examples, selecting features of one work and then moving on to another. These candidates diluted the effect of the analysis, and were sometimes unable to look in detail at the effects of technique, content, or (in the case of design) function, style, or impact.

Evaluation

Some candidates wrote an account of their Advanced Higher Art and Design year, rather than evaluative comments on their work. Some candidates were unable to access the full range of marks as they included a 'story of the portfolio', rather than giving an evaluation of the work.

Self-criticism

Many candidates did not include self-critical points in their evaluations. Candidates who can see areas of improvement, as well as strengths, in their practical work are more likely to access the full range of marks.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Practical expressive and design work

Before starting

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to take time to consider a range of options before starting the portfolio. Candidates who choose their theme or design brief early may be more likely to change their mind later, and may not be fully prepared for the uncertain process of developing ideas.

Sketchbooks

Sketchbooks are a way of encouraging candidates to take an individual approach. Candidates can begin to form ideas from a series of quick sketches and collections of material around a theme. At this stage, it is important for candidates to be adaptable and to create more than one idea so that they have other options.

Learn research skills

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore and look for examples of art and design that relates to their theme to build up some background material. Research should be an on-going process that is done together with developing and resolving ideas.

Influences from artists and designers

Teachers and lecturers could encourage candidates to adapt ideas from artists or designers they admire. It is useful, even at an early stage, for candidates to make notes or find quotes about the methods, ideas, or practice that they like. This may be useful when writing the contextual analysis.

Links between written and practical work

For the contextual analysis, candidates are required to choose a topic with a clear connection to their practical work. Markers note that previous portfolios have often been informed and enhanced by the influence of an artist or designer. A well-chosen topic for the contextual analysis can support the research and development of the practical work, the candidate's ability to apply their understanding of art or design practice, and the production of a well-informed contextual analysis.

Introduce basic design ideas

Candidates can develop ideas by exploring visual elements such as negative space, tonal contrast, scale, colour variation, cropping, proportion, viewpoint, and perspective. Rough models or mock-ups, storyboards, and photographic contact sheets can also be used to investigate ways in which abstract shape or form can suggest alternative ways of expanding a creative idea.

Experiment with materials and techniques

The technical challenge of making art or design work, such as the exploration of tonal contrast, colour variation, printmaking on fabric, or constructing in card, can also be the central inspiration for the portfolio for many candidates. Candidates could explore ideas, new techniques, and formats with a view to extending the ways they can represent a visual idea. Candidates can use a range of inexpensive materials to explore mark-making or shape-making, such as collage, monoprinting, thread, paint rollers, palette knives, craft knives, scissors, and stencils. More sophisticated equipment could include sewing machines, printing presses, scanners, and software such as Photoshop, Procreate, or SketchUp. Candidates could experiment with mixing digital images with sketching, for example drawing on top of digital images, to look at the theme in a new light.

Research themes widely

In addition to researching their chosen theme, candidates could draw, take photos, and explore related themes to find a wide range of sources to develop. For example, in fantasy-based portfolios, as well as looking at a range of fantasy art, candidates could explore nature and the urban environment to further develop their ideas.

Digital images

When presenting digital images, it is important for candidates to:

♦ make a clear connection to the whole body of work
♦ document the stages in the process of creating the images
♦ annotate the image by explaining the type of software used
♦ show how the same image might be recomposed, or experiment with different styles, compositions or techniques

Contextual analysis

Before candidates choose a topic, they should do wider research into the background of their whole field of interest. If they find that their chosen example offers too little information, they can expand the subject while still focusing on one work. For example, a single drawing of a ballet dancer by Edgar Degas might become all Degas' studies for a particular painting, such as 'The Rehearsal'. Equally, a single fashion design by Iris van Herpen might become part of a collection by van Herpen, such as the 'Micro' collection.

Make visual connections

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to choose a topic that has influenced their practical work and discuss aspects of the work that candidates can see in their portfolio.

Answer questions

Candidates could begin by explaining what they are writing about in the form of questions, which can provide a structure. For example:

♦ How did Degas break away from the academic style of posed figures to make drawings of people that look natural and unposed? Why did he choose young dancers as his subject? What was the position of these young people in society at the time?

♦ How do Iris van Herpen's designs relate to natural form? Where did she get her ideas? How did she collaborate with scientists to research and make the forms for her 'Micro' collection? Are they wearable? If so, for what occasions?

Analyse the topic with illustrations

The presentations in the Understanding Standards section of SQA's secure website show how candidates can use images along with text to explain visual elements. Candidates should include relevant images and ensure they clearly link them to the text.

Explain quotes

When discussing an artist's or designer's work, candidates can use quotes. They can be from almost any source that makes an interesting comment on the subject. For example:

♦ What did Degas mean when he said, 'People call me the painter of dancing girls. It has never occurred to them that my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement'?
♦ What did Degas mean when he said, 'The artist does not draw what he sees, but what he has to make others see'?
♦ In writing about Iris van Herpen, what does the critic mean by, 'A fascination for architecture has been with van Herpen from the very beginning'?
♦ What does the critic mean by, 'Her creative process brings together architecture and nature'?

Include discussion

Candidates may benefit from including statements in their contextual analysis, as these can help form a discussion. For example:

♦ Although Degas' ballet pictures are thought to be pleasing scenes of beauty, they, in fact, depict the lives of young people who were exploited.
♦ Despite van Herpen's interest in nature, her work is made in the most unnatural way.

Writing about context and influence is often subjective. As part of their analysis, candidates should discuss why artists or designers might have been influenced by, commented on, or created something.

Evaluations

The evaluation offers candidates an opportunity to look back at their initial creative intentions and determine if they achieved what they set out to do. Candidates could:

♦ explain their initial ideas, stimulus, theme, or design brief. This could be a short statement to explain how they developed their initial research
♦ show to what extent their initial ideas developed or changed. They could identify turning points in the development of their ideas. They could consider how effective their ideas were and what they might have done differently
♦ evaluate things they did well and less well and if they achieved what they set out to do. They should explain any changes they would make

Portfolio submission

Candidates should be encouraged to review their portfolio, and:

♦   identify and annotate steps in the creative process
♦   number their sheets
♦   bookmark relevant pages in their sketchbook (if applicable)

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims 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 is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA 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.

The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.

The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.

Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

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.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in March 2024 and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).