Course report 2024

Higher English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

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 in conjunction 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:   853

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   1081

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	405	Percentage	37.5	Cumulative percentage	37.5	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	283	Percentage	26.2	Cumulative percentage	63.6	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	248	Percentage	22.9	Cumulative percentage	86.6	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	106	Percentage	9.8	Cumulative percentage	96.4	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	39	Percentage	3.6	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.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Listening

Feedback from centres and markers suggests the question paper was of the standard expected at Higher level. Analysis of the overall marks of candidates indicate that there was consistency in candidate performance across all three question papers, with no paper being stronger than the others.

Recording 2 was felt to be the most demanding of the three listening sections. The topics covered by the recordings were felt to be appropriate and accessible as well as current and relevant to candidates. Questions 2, 5 and 17 were less demanding than expected, with most candidates achieving full marks on these questions. Questions 1,10 and 19 were slightly more difficult than anticipated. Overall, the question paper performed as expected and no changes to grade boundaries were made.

Question paper: Reading

Feedback from centres and markers suggests this question paper was of the standard expected at this level.

Markers commented that text 3 appeared to be the most challenging text for candidates. The topics covered by the texts were felt to be appropriate, accessible and current. Question 9 was less demanding than expected, with most candidates achieving full marks on this question. Questions 16 and 21 were slightly more difficult than anticipated.

All question types were attempted well. Overall, the question paper performed as expected and no changes to grade boundaries were made.

Question paper: Writing

All topics in the writing tasks allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. Markers felt that topics were accessible to all candidates. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates. Comments from markers and the marks awarded indicate that the cohort this year was similar to last year.

In part 1 (a blog task on friends and friendship), some candidates were insufficiently explicit on the influence that friends have on others. Some candidates were not prepared in the genre and style of a blog posting. For the optional work and study tasks in part 2, most candidates attempted the essay question with few candidates attempting the report. Those who attempted the report gained slightly lower marks compared to those who attempted the essay.

Overall, the question paper performed as expected and no changes to grade boundaries were made.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

The performance functioned as expected, enabling candidates to perform to the extent of their language ability. Overall, the marks awarded were in line with national standards and assessors had made good use of the detailed marking instructions for each of the aspects of performance to determine marks within the bands for both speaking and listening.

In the samples verified, most centres used assessment briefs from SCQF level 6 unit assessment support (UAS) packs and a few centres used centre-produced assessment briefs. The difficulty of the topic and the scaffolding provided was as expected for this level. Although most centres had used assessment briefs from SCQF level 6 UAS packs, the centres selected assessment briefs from different UAS packs depending on the interests of their candidates. A few centres had produced their own assessment briefs, that were appropriately adapted from an SQA UAS pack, providing sufficient challenge for the candidates to fully demonstrate a range of detailed and complex language appropriate to the level.

Most centres had taken a holistic approach to the judgements, following the instructions in the Higher coursework assessment task, where the general approach described in the marking instructions is to identify the band which best describes the candidate's performance.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Listening

The questions that most candidates performed well in were questions 2, (gap fill), 5 (multiple choice) 8 (multiple choice), 17 (multiple choice) and 23 (multiple answer).

Question paper: Reading

Questions 7 and 9 (matching), 12 and 13 (gap fill), and 18 (pick list/multiple answer) were the most successfully completed.

Question paper: Writing

Candidates were generally better at writing in an informal rather than a formal style. Many candidates were able to add support for the bullet points provided and add their own ideas in some cases.

Most candidates were familiar with the conventions and layout of both discursive essays and evaluative reports.

Most candidates completed reports this year without excessive use of formulaic language and bullet points.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

A good range of marks across the bands was seen, with many candidates performing well and fully demonstrating their English language skills.

Most centres assessed candidates in pairs rather than small groups. Overall candidates were well matched for the assessment and were very comfortable having a discussion with each other. A few centres chose to assess the performance in groups of three, this worked well when the centre had carefully considered the group dynamic beforehand. In most cases the discussion was well balanced, so that sufficient evidence of each candidate's language skills was provided.

It was clear that many candidates had prepared well for the performance throughout their course, and this was evidenced through their contribution to the topic, their competences in initiating and turn-taking, and in considering and responding to their partners' comments. These candidates were very comfortable having discussions with each other, showing well-developed speaking and listening skills in relevant contexts.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Listening

Recording 2 was found to be the most challenging. Across the three recordings, 'Complete the sentences using no more than x words' questions appear to be more challenging than the multiple-choice style questions. The questions that candidates found most demanding were 1,10 and 19.

The spelling of some candidates was poor this year, and some candidates struggled to complete their responses within the three-word requirement.

Question paper: Reading

Text 3 was the piece that candidates found most challenging. The most demanding questions were questions 3, 16, 21 and 27. In terms of question type, the multiple-answer questions were found to be the easiest, followed by matching, then gap fill and finally multiple choice.

Some candidates struggled with following the instructions on the question paper and used more than the three words requested or used their own words rather than using words from the text.

Question paper: Writing

Many candidates struggled with the genre and formality of writing, using language that was too informal in the work and study-related context tasks and struggling with the genre of a blog in the everyday life question.

In terms of cohesion, some candidates were trying to use different discourse markers and conjunctions, but these were sometimes used illogically or incorrectly. There was a lack of paragraphing with some scripts showing no evidence of paragraphing, which is heavily penalised at this level.

Punctuation was weak this year, with some candidates not using capitalisation or full stops. Handwriting was an issue with some candidates, some responses were difficult to read, with a handful being almost indecipherable.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

A few centres had conducted the assessment as an interview with the interlocutor rather than a discussion with another candidate or peer, disadvantaging candidates from displaying fully their ability to take part in the discussion.

In a few centres, candidates were overprepared for the discussion and used scripted dialogue or had rehearsed what they were going to say. This disadvantages candidates from demonstrating their ability to initiate with spontaneity and show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking, as well as to respond with fluency and to support or develop what their partner has said.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Teachers and lecturers are reminded that there are published Understanding Standards materials available for all components of the Higher ESOL course on [SQA's Understanding Standards website](#).

Question paper: Listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

♦ use the allocated time at the end of the listening paper to check their spelling to ensure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions
♦ know that minor spelling errors are acceptable in the listening paper as long as the word is recognisable, and it is clear that they understand the meaning
♦ use clear, legible handwriting in the exam
♦ adhere to the word limit when a question asks for 'no more than x words'
♦ are aware that they will not gain marks if they use more than the requested number of words. Even if they include the correct answer within this, they will not gain the mark as it is not clear that they have fully understood the question
♦ work on recognising and identifying paraphrasing and synonyms when listening, which helps them to complete all question types
♦ work on identifying key words in the questions, brainstorming synonyms and listening to check, which will support them in the exam

Centres should use practice exams and past papers to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter in the paper.

Question paper: Reading

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

♦ check their spelling carefully, particularly if they finish before the end of the exam time. Words copied directly from the texts are expected to be spelled correctly
♦ understand that when the question asks for 'words or phrases from the text' they should choose words found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions
♦ are careful not to copy long chunks from the text when answering questions that ask for short answers, as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and therefore they will not gain the marks
♦ work on identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the classroom, as this will benefit them in the exam. Underlining key words in the questions and then identifying relevant parts of the text would be useful for candidates
♦ adhere to the prescribed word limit when given in a question
♦ focus more on identifying opinion and overall purpose of the text when developing reading skills in class
♦ develop a depth of vocabulary across a wide range of topics that will help them cope with the lexical demands of the text in the exam

- clearly score through incorrect answers to highlight which answer they would like to submit
- use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the question paper and to practise at the speed and within a timed limit at which they need to read the texts in the exam

Question paper: Writing

Centres should focus on writing skills and provide more guidance on writing tasks.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- can use punctuation correctly. Lack of capitalisation or inconsistent use of full stops will significantly reduce the available marks for a piece of writing at this level. Providing texts without punctuation and asking candidates to add punctuation will focus attention on the difficulty of following the message when punctuation is missing, and the importance of accurate punctuation
- spend time working on the structure of a paragraph and how and when a new paragraph should be used. Teachers and lecturers could provide texts without paragraphing and ask them to identify topic sentences and paragraph breaks or identify the structure within a paragraph
- practise the use of discourse markers, linking and signposting in longer writing tasks, especially the essay task in part 2. Clear and correct use of these features can improve a writing task considerably
- focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks, as style is important in the writing tasks at this level
- have opportunities to use online writing tasks such as authentic blog and social media posts, as this genre may be part of future question papers
- work on comparing different writing styles. Rewriting a formal written task in an informal style or vice versa helps them develop the ability to use both types of registers and highlight the importance and impact of different styles
- spend more time practising different essay structures, for example discursive essays and for or against essays, as well as focusing on the academic language style expected in an essay
- ensure their work is legible, and practise writing by hand under test conditions
- try to produce answers within the recommended word count and be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words
- are aware that more is not always better and at times a longer piece of work receives fewer marks as candidates get tired, and lose focus on the communicative quality and accuracy of their work
- can proofread and edit their work, and are advised to factor in time for this during the exam
- practise reading (and re-reading) the questions carefully, fully understanding what is expected of them and fulfilling the task required, rather than trying to recycle previously completed writing tasks to fit the exam

Performance: Speaking and Listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates focus on the development of their speaking and interactive listening skills from the beginning of the course. They should explain to candidates what will be required of them for the performance, introducing the six aspects of speaking and listening to be assessed.

Centres can support candidates to develop their skills by making use of the marking instructions throughout the course. Centres should provide candidates with feedback to identify their strengths and the aspects they need to further develop. Using the marking instructions will provide them with consistent feedback on how they are progressing.

Providing opportunities for candidates to practise discussions, using assessment briefs with a sufficient level of challenge, and recording these interactions is an essential part of preparing for the performance. Using or adapting speaking tasks available in the unit assessment support packs, or modelling tasks on these, should provide candidates with an appropriate level of challenge.

Centres should ensure that candidate pairings or groups facilitate a balanced discussion with opportunities for equal participation, taking into consideration candidate strengths and personalities. If the assessor believes that a candidate has been disadvantaged by a pairing or group, that candidate can be re-assessed in a different pairing or group at the time of the assessment or at a later date with a different assessment brief. Using peer interlocutors when there is not a suitable candidate pairing and where this is possible is good practice. Candidates can also be paired with a candidate who has already been assessed and is not being re-assessed.

Centres should provide candidates with guidance on how to use the 15-minute preparation time effectively, on their own, to consider the assessment brief, the points they want to make, and any useful vocabulary for the topic. This approach enables candidates to participate in the discussion with confidence. They must not attempt to script or rehearse the discussion.

The majority of centres benefitted from the series of webinars that have been offered by SQA over the past few years and where assessors and internal verifiers had participated in these webinars there was a good level of understanding of the assessment standards. Centres are reminded that recordings of these webinars are available on SQA's secure site. There are also Understanding Standards packs available on SQA's secure site for the Higher performance: speaking and listening. These contain audio and/or video recordings of candidate performances, and detailed commentaries with examples of candidate language. The commentaries and examples of language relate directly to the marking instructions.

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.