Course report 2024

Higher Modern Studies

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:   9,973

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   9,495

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	3,490	Percentage	36.8	Cumulative percentage	36.8	Minimum mark required	76
B	Number of candidates	2,030	Percentage	21.4	Cumulative percentage	58.1	Minimum mark required	64
C	Number of candidates	1,709	Percentage	18	Cumulative percentage	76.1	Minimum mark required	53
D	Number of candidates	1,208	Percentage	12.7	Cumulative percentage	88.9	Minimum mark required	41
No award	Number of candidates	1,058	Percentage	11.1	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 1

Overall, question paper 1 performed as expected, presenting an appropriate level of challenge.

The most popular questions in each section were as follows:

♦ Section 1, Democracy in Scotland and the United Kingdom, question1(a)
♦ Section 2A, Social inequality, question 2(a)
♦ Section 2B, Crime and the law, question 2(c)
♦ Section 3C, World powers, question 3(b)
♦ Section 3D, World issues, question 3(c)

Some questions were deliberately broad, for example 1(a), 2(c) and 3(a) while some questions were slightly narrower in their focus, for example 1(c), 2(b), and 2(d). Some candidates may have provided pre-prepared answers, which did not always fit the specific question asked.

Question paper 2

Questions 1 and 2 performed as intended and candidate responses were in line with previous years.

Question 3 was more challenging for candidates but showed an improvement in responses from 2023. Many candidates continue to provide generic, undeveloped answers, which did not demonstrate the required justifications or understanding of the sources.

Assignment

The assignment task did not change between 2019 and 2024. Marking instructions were also unaltered.

Overall, the assignment proved more challenging than in 2019. Sections B, C and E were more challenging for candidates than sections A and D.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1

Question 1(a)

Most candidates demonstrated their knowledge and understanding of the ways in which either the UK Parliament and/or the Scottish Parliament can hold their respective governments to account. Most candidates considered Prime Minister's Questions and/or First Minister's Questions, committee structures and procedures, and the House of Lords. Most candidates successfully considered the limitations of such factors. A few candidates included other methods such as debates and private members' bills.

Question 1(c)

There was a reduction in the number of purely descriptive answers compared to the last time pressure groups were assessed. Most candidates tried to add analysis and evaluation to their knowledge. Many candidates focused their response on the campaign methods used by different pressure groups. Some candidates focused their discussion on types of pressure group, for example insider or outsider. Both approaches were appropriate. Exemplification was more relevant and up to date than in previous years.

Question 2(a)

Many candidates were well prepared for this question and were able to provide details of various causes of income and wealth inequalities. Factors such as race, gender, education and employment were widely considered. Some specifically Scottish exemplification was old and some of this was inaccurate.

Question 2(c)

Many candidates performed well in this question, which was the most popular option in the crime and the law section. Candidates discussed a variety of potential causes of crime, including genetic issues and the impact of socio-economic inequality. Some candidates referenced theorists such as Merton and Durkheim.

Question 3(b)

Candidates answered mainly on the USA, with some focusing on China and a few on South Africa. Candidates were relatively well prepared and displayed some good knowledge of government initiatives in all three of these world powers. A few candidates provided out of date exemplification.

Question 3(c)

This question was the most popular of the world issues options. Some candidates considered the causes of their world issue in a comprehensive manner, tackling social, economic, and political issues.

Underdevelopment in Africa remains by far the most popular choice of world issue. Some candidates completed this well, but some only provided very generic exemplification about Africa. Candidates covered other topics such as the war in Ukraine, the ongoing conflict in and around Syria, LGBTQ+ discrimination, terrorism and world conflict.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — source conclusions

Many candidates gave clear conclusions about crime in Scotland.

Conclusion 1: some candidates identified the link between gender and Scotland's prison population and provided evidence from the sources to support their accurate conclusion. Some confused violent behaviour with imprisonment.

Conclusion 2: many candidates identified that reconviction rates are lower for women than for men. Evidence to support this was more complex than for conclusion 3, but many candidates still achieved 2 or 3 marks.

Conclusion 3: most candidates identified that there is a strong link between alcohol consumption and crime, providing detailed evidence to support this link.

Overall conclusion: many candidates concluded that North Macedonia's prisons are most like Scotland's and provided comparative evidence to secure the 2 marks available.

Question 2 — source objectivity

Most candidates provided appropriate evidence from within and between the sources to support and oppose the view. Most candidates made it clear which way they were arguing and successfully linked evidence, displaying effective synthesis. Many candidates achieved high marks from the 8 marks available for this.

Some candidates managed to successfully provide an overall conclusion on the extent to which poorer countries were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, using phrases such as 'to a large extent' or 'the statement is mostly true'.

Question 3 — source reliability

Source A: many candidates correctly identified sample size as a positive point and explained that this creates a representative result.

Source B: many candidates correctly identified date as a negative of this source and explained that 'many things will have changed in ten years'. Many also recognised that reliability was increased as Sir Harry Burns is an expert in this field of study.

Source C: many candidates identified the Guardian as being a well-respected newspaper with high journalistic standards. They also argued it was unreliable as it has a left-wing bias, usually supporting the Labour Party.

Overall judgement: many candidates chose source A as the most reliable source on the grounds that it represented a spread of opinion rather than one individual's opinion or the

opinion of a biased newspaper. A few candidates chose source C as the most reliable as it was the most recently published and therefore most likely to be accurate.

Assignment

Most candidates demonstrated a good level of knowledge concerning the background to their issue and managed to effectively frame their options. Some candidates gained most, if not all, knowledge marks for the background and framing of their issue by opening with an introductory section sometimes titled 'background and framing' or 'background to the issue'. Although this approach is not mandatory as no specific structure for the assignment is specified, most candidates used it.

Most candidates adopted a 'social problem with potential solutions' approach to the assignment. A few candidates approached the assignment in an essay-like format, tackling a question, for example 'Which type of electoral system would create the fairest representation after a UK general election?' or 'Which factor influences voting behaviour the most in Scotland?' Although not as common as the 'social problem with potential solutions' approach, this approach is valid and was equally successful. Structure marks remain high across both broad approaches.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1

Question 1(b)

Some candidates managed to provide only a simplistic description and discussion of First Past the Post in their response. These candidates could not achieve high marks. Some introduced a second or third system as part of their analysis of their overall discussion — usually this was on a simplistic level. A few candidates managed to provide accurate, in-depth explanations of how each system created, for example, unfairness, voter choice and under representation. Although exemplification tended to be up to date, many examples lacked accuracy. Many candidates argued erroneously that the simplicity of First Past the Post led to higher turnouts. This did not gain any marks.

Question 2(b)

Only a few candidates completed this question and most who did so, misinterpreted the question and answered it as an 'effectiveness of …government measures' question. Such responses were limited to a maximum of 6 marks as is stipulated in the marking instructions, for focusing on government policy. A few candidates referred to the broad ideologies of collectivism or individualism and accessed the full range of marks.

Question 2(d)

Only a few candidates attempted this question. Many candidates who attempted it answered it as an 'impact of crime on victims, offenders and their families' question. Few marks could be awarded for this type of response.

Question 3(a)

Many candidates who focused on the USA displayed relevant, up-to-date knowledge of the ability of US citizens to influence the actions of government. However, many responses did not provide any detailed analysis or evaluation of the effectiveness of citizen action or participation. Although much of the exemplification provided was up to date, it supported knowledge points rather than being part of analysis or evaluation.

Responses focusing on participation in China and South Africa tended to be more successful in terms of analysis and evaluation.

The USA remains the most popular choice in world powers, followed by China. A few candidates answered on South Africa.

Question 3(d)

A few candidates attempted this question. Many who completed it provided vague, confused and often inaccurate examples. A few misinterpreted the question, providing details of government actions rather than those of international organisations.

Question paper 2

Question 1 — source conclusions

In conclusion 1, some candidates confused violent crime statistics with statistics concerning imprisonment. Some candidates also used international statistics in this conclusion.

In the overall conclusion, some candidates appeared to misinterpret the word 'country's' as a plural. Having done this, they then gave two or more countries as their answer, gaining no marks.

Question 2 — source objectivity

A few candidates did not compare rich and poor statistics effectively, failing to show which group of countries had been most affected.

Many candidates did not gain the 2 marks available for their overall judgement on the extent of the statement's accuracy. Some argued that the statement was completely accurate and did not include any quantitative judgement. Such responses did not gain any marks. A few candidates did not provide an overall judgement at all.

Question 3 — source reliability

Some responses to this question were overly generic. Many candidates did not provide the degree of explanation required at Higher level. A few candidates erroneously argued that there is a cut-off point at which sources cease to be reliable, for example 'Source C is within the five-year limit that is acceptable in Modern Studies'.

Source A: some candidates argued that source A was reliable as it was from a professional polling company. This was a direct lift from the source and required further explanation.

Only a few candidates qualified their answer by arguing that despite being from four years ago, it is a reliable snapshot of opinion at the time, as the sample size was big and therefore representative of the population. Therefore, it could be used as a reliable comparison if a similar poll was carried out now.

Source B: many candidates argued that the source was too old but did not develop this or explain why this would create unreliability.

Source C: many candidates claimed that the source was in date and therefore reliable, even though there is a clear example in the text of the source that is not up to date — Liz Truss as Prime Minister. Some gave generic 'newspapers are all biased' responses. A few argued that a UK newspaper cannot report accurately on US events.

Overall judgement: most candidates chose source A as the most reliable but failed to provide a valid, active comparison with the other two sources.

Assignment

A small number of candidates chose a research topic that may have been more suited to Geography, RMPS, Chemistry or Biology. Topics such as 'fracking', 'global warming' and 'plastic pollution' may well contain some elements of Modern Studies, but some candidates were unable to restrict their discussion to social, economic or political considerations.

Some candidates only included web addresses or newspaper names, with a single quote from each, on their research sheets. The quotes were then linked together with little or no added analysis or evaluative comment. However, this type of 'planning' is becoming less common.

Some candidates gained their 5 background and framing knowledge marks in an introductory section but failed to include any knowledge worthy content thereafter. The bulk of their report consisted of source use.

Some candidates who included only URLs on their research sheet simply told the reader, from their memory, what the source said. Candidates must go further in developing this information if it is to be worthy of achieving marks. They must use it as analysis, synthesis or evaluation of their chosen issue.

Most candidates attempted to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of their sources. A few evaluated sources that were not included on their research sheets, gaining no marks.

Some candidates who attempted to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of their sources, answered in very generic terms without making specific reference to the sources they used, for example, 'I used a newspaper, and all newspapers are biased'.

A few candidates missed out the evaluation of sources.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper 1

Centres should continue to provide candidates with up-to-date examples with which to illustrate their points. Responses to this year's question paper showed overall improvement in exemplification especially in questions 1(a), 1(c) and 3(b). However, this was less evident in the responses to 3(a), 3(c) and 3(d).

Centres should encourage candidates to avoid generic story-type answers using only broad generalisations and stereotypes. For example, candidates should be encouraged to use real statistics about identified African countries and their development issues rather than broad 'in Africa' comments.

Centres should encourage candidates to learn the topic and not simply to memorise a series of essays. Memorising a series of model answers in question paper 1 often leads to candidates producing responses that do not accurately fulfil the demands of the question. Centres should ensure that candidates are reminded to read the questions carefully and fulfil the demands of the question being asked. While a certain amount of resource sharing through online groups or portals can have a positive impact on candidate performance, centres are advised to check the accuracy of the knowledge, analysis and evaluation contained within.

Candidates should be reminded that evaluative comments in question paper 1 responses should be judgements that provide an overall answer to the question. Often candidates produce 'mini conclusions' after each point but these (and overall conclusions at the end of an essay) must be more than just a repetitive summary of the main body of the essay.

Centres should make sure that their international issues topic sufficiently relates to the five bullet points of mandatory content stipulated in the course specification. For example, topics that focus on civil war may not sufficiently cover the international nature of section 3.

Question paper 2

Candidates should be reminded that their overall judgement in the 'objectivity' question should contain a quantitative statement to show the extent of the statement's accuracy. Vague phrases such as 'partly' or 'to an extent' will only gain partial marks. Absolute statements will not gain marks.

Centres should encourage candidates to expand their points and explanations in the 'reliability' question. Candidates should provide an explanation of why an aspect of a source deems it to be reliable or unreliable.

Centres should remind candidates that their responses in the 'reliability' question should be specific to the three sources in the paper and not generic, for example, 'Source C is a newspaper, and all newspapers are biased'. Candidates should also be reminded that background knowledge about a source can also gain marks, for example, knowing that the Guardian has a left-wing bias.

Centres should stress that answers concerning the age of the sources are not always as straightforward as 'old' is always unreliable and 'recent' is always reliable. Such answers can be qualified by the trustworthiness of the source's creator, for example, 'Although the Ipsos survey is four years old, which detracts from its reliability as opinions are likely to have changed since then, it is a well-respected polling company whose business relies on its reputation for accuracy. If a similar poll could be repeated in 2024, source A would prove a very reliable comparator'.

Candidates should be made aware that there is no absolute cut-off age for reliability. It is not the case, for example, that any source less than two years old is reliable.

It should be stressed to candidates that the overall conclusion on the most reliable source of information should contain points of comparison between all three sources. A simple statement on the strength of the chosen source will receive only partial marks.

Assignment

Centres should continue to emphasise to candidates that their research sheets should not be used as a plan. Source material should be clearly attributed on the research sheets (including dates and authors), and information intended as background knowledge should not be included.

Centres should ensure that candidates include background knowledge in their report, which helps frame the topic and the alternative decisions to be considered, as well as knowledge that supports the use of source material during analysis and synthesis.

Centres should stress to their candidates that 2 marks are available for an evaluation of the reliability and usefulness of a source or sources. The source or sources referred to must be included on the research sheets. This should focus on the actual sources used by the candidate and should not be generic in nature.

Centres should remind candidates that direct copying from the research sheets will achieve no marks. Notes taken from written, audio and visual sources are acceptable, but centres must ensure that candidates add analysis and comment to these notes. Simply joining a series of quotes or notes together should be avoided.

A list of URLs is acceptable on research sheets, but centres should emphasise that simply telling the reader what a source says (even if this involves information not actually written on the research sheets), will not gain marks. The candidate must 'do something' with this information, for example, use it as part of their analysis, synthesis or evaluation.

The research sheets should include evidence from the sources used in the candidate's research, for example, survey results, extract from a newspaper article, questions asked and answers received during an interview, reply to an email, statistics, tables and graphs from a website.

When reaching a decision (often but not only in a conclusion at the end of the report), centres should remind candidates to give evidence and reasons why they rejected alternative options, as well as evidence and reasons in favour of their preferred option. If

evidence is only given to support their recommendation or choice, they can achieve only 2 of the 4 marks.

Candidates should be cautious around the choice of topic for the assignment. Topics such as environmental campaigning, pollution and the death penalty have proven problematic in recent years. Centres must make sure that the focus of these topics is social, economic and/or political.

Centres are also reminded that conditions for the write-up have not changed. These should be conducted in controlled conditions, lasting 90 minutes and in a single sitting. Candidates should only have access to their two A4 research sheets during this time.

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](#).