Course report 2024

Higher Philosophy

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:   655

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   562

Statistical information: performance of candidates
Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	126	Percentage	22.4	Cumulative percentage	22.4	Minimum mark required	74
B	Number of candidates	85	Percentage	15.1	Cumulative percentage	37.5	Minimum mark required	63
C	Number of candidates	89	Percentage	15.8	Cumulative percentage	53.4	Minimum mark required	53
D	Number of candidates	102	Percentage	18.1	Cumulative percentage	71.5	Minimum mark required	42
No award	Number of candidates	160	Percentage	28.5	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

The question papers performed largely in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicated they were received well by centres and were fair papers in line with the specifications. The spread of marks achieved by candidates reflects the range of marks we would expect to see across the two papers.

Question paper 1

Paper 1 performed in line with expectations. With a return to the full assessment arrangements, and no modifications in place, candidates had no choice about essay questions in the knowledge and doubt section for this paper. The open question for this section performed as was intended to allow for differentiation by outcome.

The marking for essays in both sections of paper 1 is holistic and takes into consideration the candidates' knowledge and understanding of the content as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation. The scaffolding in the questions continued to help weaker candidates to show their skills and knowledge in response to the questions asked. In the moral philosophy section, more candidates answered question 2 than question 3.

Question paper 2

Candidates did not perform as well in this paper as they have previously. The arguments in action section performed in line with expectations. However, in the knowledge and doubt section both questions proved more challenging for candidates than anticipated and the grade boundary was adjusted to reflect this. In the moral philosophy section, the 4 marks questions proved more demanding than anticipated. This extra demand would have affected candidates at the upper A and lower A band more than at the C grade level and this and this was also reflected in the grade boundary adjustments.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper 1

As a whole, candidate performance in paper 1 has improved slightly on the previous exam diet.

In question 1, the Descartes essay was a deliberately open question that allowed candidates to select content from the course text to answer the question. There were many possible ways to address this question and it meant that candidates should have been able to make use of the areas of content they felt most confident in to construct their answer. This meant that there were many different approaches to this essay which could find success.

Most candidates were good at describing parts of the Meditations. Some candidates showed precise knowledge of the text with awareness of the connection between the aspects of the text they selected and Descartes' search for knowledge using reason as a basis. However, many candidates found it more challenging to evaluate how effective Descartes' use of reason was to support his search for certain knowledge.

In the moral philosophy section, for both essay questions 2 and 3, many candidates were able to provide a detailed description of aspects of Utilitarian philosophy. Some candidates were only able to provide this very superficially. For example, they may have described the hedonic calculus as being a tool to aid Utilitarians in finding which action would maximise pleasure and minimise pain but did not explain how the different criteria were considered or the way in which it was used to support their moral decision making.

In question 2, the scenario, most candidates were able to consider some of the impacts of the choices the surgeon had and how this might increase happiness or minimise suffering. Many candidates were also able to say to some extent how this would determine what a Utilitarian would consider should be done in this situation. Candidates found it more challenging to evaluate the Utilitarian response to the scenario and to criticise the Utilitarian theory based specifically on how it deals with this situation rather than simply giving general criticisms of the philosophy.

In question 3, the quotation, most candidates were able to describe key features of the philosophy on a superficial level. Some candidates did this very effectively with depth and detail, for example, being able to clearly distinguish Act Utilitarianism from Rule Utilitarianism. Many candidates were able to refer to a least one common criticism of Utilitarianism in their answers. Candidates found it more difficult to analyse and evaluate Utilitarianism in depth on the basis that it required people to act against their intuition.

Question paper 2

Section 1: arguments in action

Question 1 was a very straightforward question requiring an example of a conclusion indicator and most candidates gained this mark.

Question 2 required candidates to draw on their knowledge of the features of an argument. Many candidates were able to gain full marks for this question. Some candidates failed to

recognise that this passage was not intended to be persuasive and so was an explanation rather than an argument.

Most candidates were able to correctly identify the type of argument diagram presented in question 3(a), (b) and (c). Most candidates also found it straightforward to provide examples of linked and convergent arguments for question 3(d). However, only some of the candidates were able to provide a correct serial argument. Many candidates found it difficult to correctly identify a second statement that followed logically from their first rather than simply providing additional evidence for the final statement.

Question 4 on conductive strength and sufficiency, proved difficult for many candidates. However, although many candidates were unable to explain the concept of conductive strength, many were able to gain at least 1 mark for their analysis of the sufficiency of the argument in question 4(b). Only a few candidates gained 3 marks for this question. This was meant to be a more challenging question.

In question 5 most candidates successfully identified the fallacy as a slippery slope. However, most candidates did not effectively capture what a slippery slope fallacy entailed and only a few candidates gained full marks. Many candidates recognised that it involved a jump from one reasonable step to a more extreme and negative final outcome, but many did not explain that, therefore it was argued that we should not take the first step, nor did they explain that the claim that the first step would lead to the final one was somehow unjustified. Although this was the case, many gained at least 1 mark in their discussion of whether the argument provided was in fact a slippery slope fallacy.

Question 6 proved challenging for many candidates. Many did not get any marks for 6(a). Many candidates recognised that an *ad hominem* fallacy involved an attack on the person but did not explain that in *ad hominem* fallacies generally, this attack was irrelevant to the conclusion drawn in the argument. Nor were many candidates able to explain that in an *ad hominem* circumstantial that the attack involved claiming the person was likely to gain from the claim being accepted or that they were making the claim because of their personal circumstances. Many were, however, able to identify the *ad hominem tu quoque* in question 6(b).

Question 7(a) proved challenging for candidates, and many candidates could not accurately explain what an analogical argument was. However, for question 7(b) half of the candidates were able to gain at least 2 marks for their discussion of the strength of the analogy, with a few candidates gaining full marks. The marks gained for this question were spread quite evenly between those who gained 0, 1, 2, and 3 marks.

Question 8 was intended to be a simple recall of definitions of the different types of ambiguity. Many candidates gained a mark for their description of lexical ambiguity and many also gained a mark for their description of syntactic ambiguity. Fewer candidates gained the mark for 8(b) than 8(a).

Many candidates were able to give an example of the denying the antecedent fallacy in question 9(a). Half of all candidates were able to gain at least 1 mark in the explanation of why the premises in the fallacy were not sufficient in question 9(b). Some were able to gain both marks for question 9(b).

Section 2: knowledge and doubt

Hume — questions 10 and 11 were focused questions around Hume's copy principle and candidates found them surprisingly challenging.

Question 10 was focused on the arguments Hume gave to support the copy principle. Only a few candidates were able to gain full marks for this question. Many candidates got waylaid by describing the distinction between impressions and ideas for Hume rather than the arguments he uses.

Question 11 was intended to discriminate between A and C candidates however it proved more challenging than intended and many candidates did not get more than half the marks. Some candidates spent a lot of time discussing problems with the distinction between impressions and ideas and did not link this to the copy principle so were unable to gain marks for these criticisms.

Section 3: moral philosophy

Question 12 was on the second formulation of the categorical imperative and was intended to discriminate between candidates. This did prove more difficult than intended and many got 2 or fewer marks out of 4.

Question 13 and 14 were on perfect and imperfect duties and were intended to require a straightforward recall of terms. Many candidates were successfully able to gain the mark for these questions. However, more candidates were able to describe perfect duties than imperfect duties.

Question 15 was a difficult question, and as expected candidates gained a range of marks from 0 to 4. Only a few candidates were able to gain 3 or 4 marks. Many candidates were able to discuss why imperfect duties proved problematic because Kant does not give a clear guide as to when to apply them, however few candidates were able to say anything positive about their inclusion in his philosophy.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

It is important to ensure familiarity with the most up-to-date advice and documentation. The course specification that was updated extensively and published on [SQA's website](#) in September 2022 remains the main source of information for teachers about the requirements of the Higher Philosophy course. Teachers and lecturers know their candidates and can use their discretion to judge what resources will be most useful to prepare their own candidates. Further support can also be found in the course support section of the Higher Philosophy subject page and updates have been made to include moral philosophy support materials, as well as model questions which have been moved from the Understanding Standards site in the last academic year. Examples of candidate evidence and commentaries are available on [SQA's Understanding Standards website](#).

Question paper 1

As this paper is essay based, candidates will benefit from essay writing practise as they develop knowledge and understanding of the course. A focus on creating a line of argument in response to essay questions is valuable. Candidates should also be taught that the essay question is intended to allow them to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the core philosophy. Candidates should practice describing the core content of the knowledge and doubt section accurately as well as the moral philosophy sections. In addition, they should be able to draw a line of argument in relation to the question. Focused practice to develop these skills will help candidates to perform well in this paper.

Candidates should find the scaffolding of suggested content for the essay questions provides a useful guide as to the kind of content they might include in their essay. Candidates can approach essays in a variety of ways, and they should not feel constrained to include everything identified, nor to exclude content not referred to. There may be many appropriate ways to answer the question asked.

In the knowledge and doubt essay question for this exam diet, the open nature of this question meant candidates could select the most appropriate aspects of the course text that they wanted to write about to answer the question. It is important to note that there was no expectation that candidates would cover the entire meditations in their essay. Some candidates did attempt to do this and if time allowed them to go into depth in discussing this, they did sometimes achieve high marks in their essays. However, this approach was likely to lead to the candidates' essays being overly heavy in their description of the text, with little or no analysis or evaluation in relation to the question. It is therefore recommended that teachers encourage candidates to curate what they choose to write about to allow them to achieve the depth required. It is acceptable for candidates to focus on a small aspect of the course text or to draw from more than one part in order to answer the question. Some candidates chose to select very focused content of the text from within more than one meditation, for example Descartes concluding that he is certain of his own existence and how it led to the clear and distinct rule. This approach tended to be very successful as it was focused in its description and allowed depth in the analysis and evaluation in relation to the question.

In the context of an exam, it is unlikely that candidates will be able to include all relevant content to address a particular question and it will be helpful for teachers to practise planning essays, as well as writing them, with candidates. In particular, they might look at how to select the most important content to engage with for different essay questions. Candidates who gained high essay marks tended to be clear about what they intended to do in their essays from the start and this suggests they had taken time to think about their essay plan before starting writing, or that they may have practised similar essays prior to the exam.

Candidates who achieved the highest marks in essays were able to explain the philosophies they studied fully and in depth. Evaluative comments in essays should be more than a list of strengths or weaknesses. An essay in the highest band range will likely engage in a form of conversational critique considering possible rebuttals to points of criticism and providing personal judgements on the quality of critical points made.

In the knowledge and doubt section, candidates that do well show that they are familiar with the course text that they have studied and they understand the narrative provided by the philosopher. For the moral philosophy section, candidates should show knowledge and understanding of the moral philosophies studied. Teachers and lecturers may find it helpful to provide opportunities for candidates to practise applying the moral theories to different moral issues and scenarios, as well as in evaluating them.

In quotation questions where a scenario is not provided, candidates did well when they used their own examples to demonstrate how the moral theory is applied and used in real life situations. In scenario questions candidates can get sidetracked by an extended discussion of possible ways that the different actions might play out without relating it clearly to any analysis of the moral philosophy. It is important that the scenario is used to enable them to apply the moral theory to a situation and demonstrate their understanding of this. Similarly, the aim is to make use of the scenario to highlight strengths and/or weaknesses of using the moral theory to make moral decisions in that situation. Candidates in the A range will focus their evaluation on the specific issues raised by the scenario.

Question paper 2
This paper is made up of short and sometimes extended answer questions. These types of questions require candidates to demonstrate precision and accuracy in describing and explaining philosophical ideas and arguments. Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are familiar with all the content listed in the course specification. It may be helpful to provide candidates with a glossary of key terms. There is a glossary of terms in the appendix of the course specification which may be useful to candidates. Regular testing of definitions is likely to be useful for candidates to develop the precision required for answering many questions in this paper. Teachers and lecturers may want to provide candidates opportunities to practise answering questions across all areas of the course, as well as across the skill sets to ensure they are fully prepared for this paper.

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](#).