Course report 2024

Higher Sociology

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:   846

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   885

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	360	Percentage	40.7	Cumulative percentage	40.7	Minimum mark required	77
B	Number of candidates	139	Percentage	15.7	Cumulative percentage	56.4	Minimum mark required	66
C	Number of candidates	116	Percentage	13.1	Cumulative percentage	69.5	Minimum mark required	55
D	Number of candidates	111	Percentage	12.5	Cumulative percentage	82.0	Minimum mark required	44
No award	Number of candidates	159	Percentage	18.0	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

The question paper performed as expected.

Most candidates demonstrated their understanding of what was required and completed the three sections of the question paper in the allocated time.

The paper provided opportunities for discrimination between A-grade and C-grade candidates. More candidates than in previous years produced good-quality A-grade responses, and these candidates tended to produce quality responses across all three sections of the paper. Section 1 provided opportunities for C-grade candidates to perform well.

Most candidates attempted all questions. Candidates achieved generally higher marks in the shorter response questions in section 1, but many candidates scored well in section 2 and 3. A-grade candidates tended to score well in all three sections.

Across the paper, candidates were able to access all questions gaining marks ranging from zero to almost full marks.

Assignment

The assignment requires candidates to complete a 1,500–2,000-word report on a social issue of their choice, using at least one sociological study. The marks are then divided into sections, for example 6 marks for findings from two sources.

Overall, the assignment performed as expected, with candidates gaining slightly higher marks than in previous years. Candidates continue to achieve high marks in the sections requiring knowledge, for example findings from sociological studies.

Candidates continue to choose a wide range of topics on social issues, from the influence of social media on mental health to the relationship between poverty and crime. Candidates used a wide range of sociological studies and other sources of sociological significance for their assignment.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Section 1: Human society

Candidates generally performed well in this section, attaining the full range of marks across all questions. A-grade candidates tended to perform consistently well in all questions (theories and methods).

Overall, questions on action theories were answered better than in previous years. Many candidates answered question 1 by clearly describing features of symbolic interactionism and using terms such as micro, significant others, 'I' and 'me'.

Many candidates also managed to explain one difference between Marxism and Weberism (question 2) demonstrating at least a basic understanding of both theories.

Whilst some candidates answered very well, some candidates found it difficult to achieve full marks on question 3.

Many candidates answered the questions on research process and methods well, especially question 4 and question 6.

Section 2: Culture and identity

Candidates generally performed well in this section, attaining the full range of marks across all questions. A-grade candidates tended to perform consistently well in all questions (theories and methods).

Many candidates answered question 7 well. Strong answers explained primary and secondary socialisation as well as specific agents of socialisation and their impact on the formation of identity. Some candidates referred specifically to gender and/or age identity, and some referred to identity in general.

A-grade answers used sociological language such as norms, values and agents of socialisation.

Most candidates attempted question 8 and many answered it well. Most candidates who answered well, answered using Marxist theory and gave accurate contemporary examples of both types of culture.

Most candidates found question 9 accessible and some achieved full marks for part (a), some found question 9 (b) challenging and were unable to explain the strengths and weaknesses of one of the course's mandatory studies.

Section 3: Social issues

The essay question asked candidates to analyse a social issue of their choice, this could be the mandatory topic (social mobility) or the candidate's chosen social issue. Candidate responses therefore contained a very wide range of topics from crime to education, from Formula 1 to online gaming and utilised a wide range of studies.

In general, the overall essay mark was much in line with the last few years. Many candidates managed to finish the essay question and gain marks. Candidates who were awarded marks in the A range tended to use the structure shown in SQA's Marking instructions and followed the scaffolding given in the question paper for question 10.

A-grade essays tended to have an introduction which outlined the sociological importance of the social issue and consistently used sociological language throughout the essay.

Assignment

There was a slight increase in the mean mark of assignments this year.

Candidates who completed assignments that met all requirements as outlined in the coursework assessment task, for example hypothesis, findings, references and so on, tended to achieve high marks.

Candidates continued to choose very diverse topics that are current and of interest to them. However, social issues are often complex and multi-faceted, and therefore the best results were achieved by candidates who chose a topic they understood, and who chose accessible sources that were relevant to their topic.

Most candidates coped well with introducing their topic and describing research findings. Candidates who chose sociological studies and/or studies of sociological significance tended to find it easier to describe findings and therefore to analyse the findings.

Most candidates who gained high marks in analysis and/or conclusion sections tended to use two sociological studies and/or a sociological study and a study of sociological significance. Many candidates who provided good analysis and conclusions tended to apply sociological theories to their topic (although this is not the only way to gain such marks). Assignments that achieved marks around the C grade tended to describe the social issue rather than analyse the issue.

A-grade assignments consistently featured sociological language, for example using the terms 'valid' and 'reliable' in relation to evaluating sources. Candidates who produced an academic-type report, written in the third person and using references, tended to achieve high marks.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Section 1: Human society

Many candidates seemed to find question 3 challenging although they appeared to understand the question and gain marks about the similarities and differences between consensus and conflict theories. Some candidates seemed to have some knowledge related to conflict and consensus theories but were unable to express this in writing.

Many candidates answered question 5 in generic terms, making points that are generic to all methods that generate qualitative data. Responses that gained the higher end of the marks available made specific points with regards to focus groups, for example Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann (2010) 'Uncool to do sport': A focus group study of adolescent girls' reasons for withdrawing from physical activity.

Section 2: Culture and identity

In question 8, a few candidates tried to link Marxism and/or other theories to the concepts of high culture and low culture but found it very challenging. The question did not require this but was a possible way to explain the concepts.

Some candidates found question 9 challenging, including some who found describing the findings of Cohen's study difficult. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is a mandatory study and candidates should be able to describe the main findings and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study.

Section 3: Social Issues

In this section, essays that were not planned or organised tended to be awarded marks at the lower end of the range. Some candidates continue to provide overly long introductions or introductions that merely described what they were going to write about so did not gain marks.

Question 10 did not specify which theories to use but did require candidates to use at least one structural theory. Some candidates chose theories that did not make it straightforward to analyse their social issue with and therefore were unable to pick up marks available.

Some candidates found the application of theories to their social issue challenging. A -grade candidates tend to do this well as they can make connections between points from the chosen theory to their social issue.

Assignment

Some candidates chose social issue topics that were too complex for their sociological understanding. This meant they were unable to analyse the issue as they did not fully understand it.

Similarly, some candidates found it challenging to identify suitable sources for their assignment. For instance, some candidates found it difficult to understand and use academic

research papers or sociological studies and therefore found it difficult to achieve marks across the sections on findings, analysis, and conclusions.

Many candidates continue to find evaluating sources and studies challenging. Answers that are awarded marks at the higher range discussed validity or reliability by focusing on the methodology or methodologies used. A few candidates missed this section out completely.

Some candidates continue to find it difficult to make conclusions or conclusive points about their assignment issue and merely repeat the content covered. These candidates were unable to access the conclusion marks.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Centres must make sure that candidates are familiar with the course specification, particularly the content required. This will ensure that they are ready to answer questions on all the specified content.

Candidates should be prepared by centres to answer questions on all theories noted in the course specification. Candidates are required to understand the main features, strengths, weaknesses, and differences between theories listed in the 'Human society' section of the course specification. Candidates are also required to apply these theories to 'Culture and identity' and 'Social issues' questions. Centres should ensure that candidates know which theories are required in each section and this information is also found in the Higher Sociology Course Specification on [SQA's website](#). Practising past paper questions is always a good way to build and develop these skills.

Candidates who achieved A grade used sociological language consistently across the three sections of the paper for instance qualitative data, roles, norms, socialisation. Candidates who scored highly in questions about theories or using theories, typically used language associated with the theory, such as when discussing feminism using 'patriarchy' and 'gender roles' or when using Marxism talking about the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'proletariat'.

Candidates who are successful in the question paper demonstrate good answering technique, and centres should try to prepare candidates to develop good practice. Centres should ensure that candidates understand command words (see SQA's Past Paper Marking Instructions).

Good answering technique across all sections requires candidates to be specific, for example question 1 is looking for the specific features of symbolic interactionism and not just action theories in general. Similarly, when answering questions in section 2 or 3, candidates must recognise the command word and answer specifically. For example, in section 2 question 8, candidates were asked to explain high and popular culture using a theory. Successful candidates used their theory to show cause and effect (ie explain) for example using Marxism to explain, '…because they control the superstructure the bourgeoisie use their control of the institutions such as media to put forward their ideas about what is and is not high culture'.

Candidates who produce A-grade responses tend to understand how many marks each question is worth and therefore how long their response should be. For example, a 2-mark question should elicit a shorter response than a question worth 4 marks. Some candidates wasted time on overlong answers for questions worth only 2 or 4 marks.

Centres must prepare candidates to answer questions on Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, this should include evaluation of the study. Centres should prepare candidates by discussing the continued relevance of Cohen's findings.

When practising essays, centres and candidates should use SQA's published marking instructions and past papers as part of their preparations. Understanding Standards materials will also help candidates to prepare. In essay questions, the most successful candidates have full knowledge and understanding of the course content specified in the Higher Sociology Course Specification on SQA's website. Centres should ensure candidates understand that the essay question can appear in Section 2: Culture and identity or Section 3: Social issues and therefore it is essential that candidates are familiar with the content required on Culture and identity, and Social issues. This content will be sampled every year in the question paper.

Questions in sections 2 and 3 tend to be more challenging than those in section 1 and require higher order thinking skills, for example to analyse (Analyse the relationship between gender and identity using two contrasting theories 2019) or complex sociological concepts (explain the significance of power and status in relation to high culture and popular culture 2019). Centres must therefore help to prepare candidates to answer these types of questions through learning and teaching that explores the relationships, concepts and connections etc.

Centres should prepare candidates to complete essays. Building the essay up by beginning with sections is a tried and tested learning and teaching approach that has been proven successful. A-grade essays answer the question directly by using the theories and study required to do so for example, 'A study that backs up the Marxists' view on X is …'. In essays that scored highly, candidates used the theory to analyse the issue for example, 'Feminists claim that women are under-represented in media because we live in a patriarchy and media is an example of a male dominated institution'.

Centres should remind candidates to use sociological language and terminology throughout the paper and that they must not use stereotypical language.

Assignment

Centres should continue to support candidates to choose appropriate topics for their assignments. The topic should be a social issue and one that enables the candidate to meet the requirements, for example identifying at least one relevant sociological source that is accessible. Choosing a topic the candidate is interested in can provide motivation, choosing an issue they have personal history with, or are personally invested in, can make it challenging to take a sociological approach and try to remain objective. It is therefore worthwhile asking the candidate to consider this before choosing their social issue.

Centres should support candidates when they choose sources for their assignment. Candidates who choose academic sources such as research papers from universities face some challenges such as understanding the content and concepts aimed at university level or to what extent the source represents current sociological thinking on their social issue.

Candidates should be prepared to evaluate the sources that they use for their assignment. Sources should be considered on the basis of the methodology used, for example the sample size or pros and cons of using questionnaires. Centres should ensure that candidates have a sound grasp of the research process, including methods as this will help candidates to evaluate sources.

Centres should prepare candidates in the skill of drawing conclusions from evidence in order for them to be able to do this in their assignment.

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](#).