



Course report 2025

Higher Art and Design

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 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 5,952

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 5,874

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	1,105	18.8	18.8	182
B	1,784	30.4	49.2	156
C	1,937	33.0	82.2	130
D	887	15.1	97.3	104
No award	161	2.7	100%	Not applicable

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 or equal to 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

Marker feedback and the statistical data indicates that the questions in this year's exam effectively differentiated between candidates of different abilities and levels of understanding. Performance in the question paper showed improvement with an increase in the average mark compared with the previous year.

The question paper was well received by candidates, centres and markers. Feedback from markers indicated that the question paper was fair and accessible for candidates in terms of coverage and overall level of demand.

Most candidates were able to attempt all six questions in the time allocated, understood the format of the question paper and selected questions appropriately.

There was no significant difference in candidate performance between 'Section 1: Expressive art studies' and 'Section 2: Design studies'.

Candidates selected a range of works by different artists and designers in response to the mandatory questions. Markers commented on an increase in the variety of artists and designers being studied compared to last year. Popular choices in the expressive arts section included Joan Eardley, Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, S J Peplow and Pablo Picasso. In the design section, A M Cassandre, Peter Chang, Iris van Herpen, René Lalique and Alexander McQueen were popular.

The optional questions that most candidates chose to respond to were:

Expressive art studies:

- question 2 — 'The Gift' by Janet Rickus
- question 3 — 'Spray' by Harold Williamson
- question 6 — 'Self Portrait' by Kerry James Marshall

Design studies:

- question 9 — 'Beach LT Origami Kayak' by Oru Kayak

- question 10 — ‘Victorian-Style Drop Earrings’ by Grainne Morton
- question 12 — ‘Fashion Shoes (17th to 18th century)’ by unknown designer

Expressive portfolio

Candidates continued to approach the expressive portfolio assessment tasks successfully, indicating that it was accessible for them in terms of level of demand. Many markers commented on candidates’ personal input and high level of involvement shown through their portfolios. It is evident that both candidates and centres have approached the task with positivity and commitment this session.

Candidates who chose to follow the expressive portfolio guidance were able to access the full range of marks available, while meeting the minimum guidance stated. An increasing number of candidates included additional work, beyond the minimum guidance. Many of these candidates were also able to access the full range of marks available. A significant number of candidates opted to work on a smaller scale throughout the development of their portfolio and for their final piece. For many candidates, this led to successful refinement and a resolved, succinct approach to the portfolio.

As in previous years, candidates demonstrated a wide range of individual choices when it came to selecting themes for their work. Many chose to explore still life, with a selection of significant objects, or self-portraiture or portraiture with a personal significance.

Candidates who opted for a considered and selective choice of media often benefited from the opportunity to develop their skills throughout their portfolios. Many candidates also combined their use of materials well, demonstrating a skilful use of mixed media. This approach, alongside candidates who opted to use a single media, such as graphite pencil, acrylic paint or coloured pencil, allowed for demonstration of high levels of skill.

As in previous years, the majority of portfolio work submitted was 2D. An increased number of candidates chose to work on a larger scale and submit high-quality photographic evidence of their work.

Design portfolio

Most candidates continued to approach the design portfolio assessment task positively, and most candidates produced in excess of the minimum requirements set out in the design portfolio guidance. As in previous years, candidates continued to select a variety of creative design briefs and continued to demonstrate a wide variety of approaches to the assessment task.

Markers noted that many portfolios explored personalised briefs that appeared to relate to areas of interest for the candidate. This helped candidates to access the full range of marks available. 2D graphic design and 3D body adornment continued to be the preferred areas of exploration for most candidates. As in previous years, most candidates selected design briefs that were realistic and manageable. This allowed candidates to successfully engage in the design process and fully explore their chosen brief while demonstrating their full range of skills.

Candidates continued to demonstrate highly effective and creative use of accessible materials, such as paper, cardboard or recycled materials in many cases. Markers commented on candidates' creative approach and the variety of techniques they explored at the development stage. This year saw the continued use of digital design, with a significant number of candidates exploring digitally produced graphic design and illustration. In addition to this, many candidates who chose to work using traditional methods opted to use digital technology to aid the further development and refinement of their portfolio.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Most candidates understood the format of the question paper and selected appropriate questions to answer.

Most candidates structured their responses using a streamlined approach, providing separate succinct points for question prompts. Candidates who used an exam technique such as ‘what, where, why’ or ‘point, evidence, explain’ were able to convey their responses effectively. The highest performing candidates were able to explain, analyse and fully justify the impact for each prompt they discussed.

Many candidates with in-depth knowledge and understanding were able to respond effectively to the given prompts in the mandatory questions, particularly regarding the impact of social, cultural and/or other influences.

Many candidates who had good knowledge and understanding of art and design issues and understood the expectations of question prompts were able to apply art and design terminology effectively in the optional questions.

Expressive portfolio

Most candidates displayed a sound understanding of the assessment task and were able to achieve maximum marks for highly relevant investigation work, in line with the portfolio guidance. This allowed candidates to establish a strong foundation on which to develop their single line of enquiry. Markers commented that most portfolios demonstrated refinement as they progressed towards the final piece.

Many candidates submitted succinct portfolios in line with the minimum guidance. In many cases this, combined with the considered use of media, allowed candidates more time to work towards fully resolved final pieces.

Working on a smaller scale allowed many candidates to demonstrate their creative potential and produce a more refined level of finish, while still accessing the full range of marks.

Digital technology and photography continued to be used creatively by some candidates to develop their portfolios. This was particularly effective when used for compositional development, or to enhance mood and atmosphere. Most candidates who made use of digital technology combined this with the use of traditional materials; however, a few candidates completed their entire portfolio digitally and were able to meet the assessment requirements and access the full range of marks.

Candidates who focused on evaluative comments and their decision-making process were able to access higher marks for their evaluations. It was also felt that the general quality of candidates' evaluations was stronger, with more fully justified comments being made. As in previous sessions, successful candidates made use of relevant art terminology throughout their evaluative process.

Design portfolio

Most candidates selected well-written and relevant design briefs, which gave a clear focus for the development of their portfolio. This allowed candidates to effectively follow a single line of enquiry, based on the key design elements. This benefited candidates by creating a clear and manageable task that followed through to focused and resolved portfolios.

The most effective design portfolios demonstrated a clear, single line of enquiry from the starting point of the design brief, through the investigation and development stages, to a resolved design solution. This clarity of process allowed many candidates to experiment and creatively explore the design process, with a strong focus on developing skills and resolving the design issues set out in their brief. An increasing number of centres adopted this focused approach this session.

Many portfolios focused on the exploration of a particular design issue, visual element or exploration of technique, giving the portfolio a strong overall focus and visual cohesion. This focus also gave candidates the scope for more experimentation and resulted in highly creative approaches.

Candidates who considered function alongside aesthetics tended to access the highest mark ranges; for example, exploring the function of a headpiece by considering how it would be worn in relation to the human body, alongside considering aesthetic values such as colour and form.

Candidates who chose to work within the areas of 3D design produced highly effective results with basic or inexpensive materials. This experimentation gave the opportunity for many of these candidates to demonstrate some excellent approaches to body adornment using materials such as paper and fabric.

Candidates who chose to work solely with digital media to develop graphic design portfolios made much improved and effective use of techniques such as digital layering, editing and digital drawing. Candidates also documented the stages of their working process well, allowing them to access the full range of marks.

An increased number of candidates made use of specific design terminology in their evaluations and effectively considered the success of their design in relation to their chosen brief, successfully gaining marks.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Markers noted that many candidates found it challenging to provide developed responses for each question.

Many candidates did not respond fully to all three prompts in a question, and did not demonstrate the analytical skills necessary at Higher level. Some candidates did not demonstrate a clear understanding of art and design terminology or the expectations

of prompts. Some candidates discussed prompts in general terms without referencing the artwork or design work, limiting the marks that they could achieve.

In the mandatory questions, a few candidates appeared to provide a pre-prepared response and did not relate their knowledge and understanding of the artwork or design work to the prompts in the question. A few candidates discussed the artwork or design work they had studied, however, did not identify the work, artist or designer in their response.

In question 1, many candidates responded to the prompt 'materials and/or technology' by discussing techniques or working methods. In question 7, some candidates found it challenging to convey justified responses for the prompt 'techniques', instead referencing materials used within the design work.

Section 1: Expressive art studies

For question 2, some candidates responded to the prompt 'colour' with comments about tone or 'the colours' in general terms. In question 3, some candidates demonstrated limited understanding for the prompt 'texture', with comments that lacked description or the effect on visual impact. In question 6, many candidates referred to the use of 'pattern' generally, without stating the type of patterns and where they featured in the artwork.

Section 2: Design studies

For question 9, some candidates did not fully analyse the prompt 'fitness for purpose' and did not provide the necessary justification in their responses. In question 10, some candidates demonstrated limited knowledge of colour theory within design, responding to the prompt 'colour' in general terms. In question 12, some candidates did not convey an understanding of design or use relevant terminology, resulting in descriptive responses for the prompt 'decoration'.

Expressive portfolio

Some centres adopted a formulaic approach. This would include multiple similar compositions with little refinement, or a similar choice of materials used without any

further consideration. This approach can limit the opportunities for candidates to show individual strengths.

A few candidates chose to work on a large scale, which resulted in them struggling to complete their final piece or achieve the quality that was evident earlier in their portfolio. Had they worked on a more achievable scale, they could have overcome this issue and increased their opportunities to access the full range of marks.

A few candidates chose to work on top of digitally generated images with traditional drawing and painting materials. If choosing this approach, candidates should ensure that they can clearly demonstrate their working method and skills.

A small number of centres provided a bank of photographic images or the same still-life objects to work from, or adopted the use of one particular medium for all candidates throughout their portfolios. This led to similar compositions for multiple candidates, and limited candidates' opportunities to personalise and become fully invested in their portfolio. This type of approach can also be detrimental to some candidates, as it may prevent them from working towards individual strengths that would allow them to maximise their marks.

As in previous years, at the evaluation stage, some candidates continued to state the steps of their working process rather than evaluating their processes and the effectiveness of their working methods. Although many candidates tackled this area more successfully this year, some candidates did not access the full range of marks.

Design portfolio

While most candidates selected relevant design briefs with an appropriate level of challenge, a few candidates continued to select briefs that were complex and challenging to resolve within the remits of the assessment task. By selecting a difficult or very large task, candidates immediately become disadvantaged and can struggle to work through and resolve their chosen brief. For example, if designing a character, it would be better for candidates to focus on that one character in depth rather than designing the entire world around it.

A few candidates submitted a volume of work beyond the amount stated in the portfolio guidance. Markers noted that this was often evident at the investigation stage, which should be streamlined and focused, with only a few inspirational images or drawings, and a few relevant examples of market research.

A few candidates did not appear to edit their work to create a more streamlined and focused approach. Some candidates included development work that only showed the construction and layout of their final design solution, rather than demonstrating their creative design process.

While many candidates made relevant and justified comments in their evaluations, some candidates made comments that described the stages of their portfolio rather than the effectiveness of the decisions they made. A few candidates also included evaluative comments mounted throughout their portfolio, rather than on the evaluation proforma. Unfortunately, marks cannot be awarded for this as candidates are limited to the space available in the evaluation template to make comments.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Teachers and lecturers should give candidates time throughout the year to become familiar with art and design terminology. The [Higher Art and Design course specification](#) contains a list of terms that are sampled in the question paper. [Appendix 2 of the course specification](#) gives details about how candidates can interpret and develop these subject-specific terms in their responses.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure the selected artworks and design works that the candidates study for the mandatory questions give them sufficient opportunity to demonstrate specialist knowledge and understanding in their responses. Selecting artworks or design works with limited accessible information for candidates to study may place them at a disadvantage, as it could be difficult to find enough information to allow them to respond to the possible prompts.

Throughout the course, teachers and lecturers should give candidates the opportunity to access a diverse range of art and design imagery, the full range of question prompts, and exam techniques. Practising selecting appropriate questions, structuring streamlined responses and time management should also help candidates respond effectively to the question paper. The specimen question paper, past papers and marking instructions are available on the [subject page](#) of our website.

To access the full range of marks, candidates must answer all prompts in the selected questions. Up to 4 marks are available for each prompt. Candidates do not need to make four points for each prompt. There is some flexibility on how they can structure their responses to access the 10 marks available for each question.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to make it clear where in the work they can see the specific aspect of the prompt and explain and analyse what effect the prompt has on the work. Candidates should fully justify each point they

make, demonstrating their understanding and knowledge of art and design terminology at this level. The course support notes in the course specification provide an example of how to make effective analytical points by considering 'what, where, why' to help structure responses.

Understanding Standards evidence and commentaries and an audio presentation are available on SQA's [Understanding Standards](#) website. Teachers, lecturers and candidates can use this material to understand how the question paper is marked, and the required level of response.

For candidates whose handwriting is illegible under exam conditions, teachers and lecturers should recommend special arrangements.

Expressive portfolio

Centres should continue to advise candidates to follow the expressive portfolio guidance on the [subject page](#) of our website. This guidance allows candidates to submit streamlined and focused portfolios that maximise the time available, while also allowing them access to the full range of marks.

Candidates should clearly state a theme of their portfolio. Centres should take care to advise candidates to select appropriate themes in keeping with the candidate's skills and interests, as well as their age and stage. This theme should then be evident through the single line of development, on to the final piece.

Centres should continue to ensure that candidates carefully review and edit their portfolios. A streamlined and succinct portfolio will follow the assessment task and allow the candidate to focus on developing their skills throughout the portfolio. When less relevant work is included, the line of development can become disjointed and potentially impact the marks awarded.

Candidates should present portfolios with a clear, chronological layout. Work should be presented in a straightforward vertical format, and there is no requirement to use expensive mounting materials. All work should occupy its own space on the portfolio and avoid overlapping. The portfolios must not exceed three A2-sized single-sided sheets or equivalent.

Centres should try to avoid prescriptive approaches. While choosing to focus on a single genre, such as still life or portraiture, can aid the delivery of the course, candidates should be given the scope to develop their own creative response within the chosen area of study. The coursework assessment task allows for personalisation and choice, which can contribute positively to candidate engagement with the course. Candidates should consider their strengths and the time available to them, in relation to the scale of their work and choice of media. This consideration at the start of the portfolio allows candidates to focus on more in-depth skills development throughout the process. A focused approach creates a cohesive look to the portfolio and will maximise the marks available.

Candidates who choose to work digitally should document the stages of their working methods to ensure that all potential marks can be awarded.

Design portfolio

Centres should continue to follow the portfolio guidance. Streamlined portfolios can access the full range of marks available. Design briefs should be carefully considered to give the best advantage to candidates. Candidates should consider function alongside aesthetics. Functional consideration might include practical issues, such as ergonomics, choice of material and fastenings in fashion, body adornment or jewellery design. In graphic design, learners should consider the target market and how to communicate a message. Where candidates take a more experimental approach, they can gain additional marks by considering alternative methods of construction and/or layout, and developing their use of media or materials.

Candidates should edit and present their work, ensuring a clear and progressive design process. Candidates should present a clear line of development in sequential order, leading to the fully resolved design solution. When submitting digital portfolios, candidates should show each stage of their development (taking screenshots) to ensure that all the marks available can be awarded. This stage should exemplify the development of the candidate's work rather than showing the capabilities of the program they are using.

When using 3D design, candidates should consider the most relevant materials during the development stage of their portfolio. Candidates should work with the materials that best exemplify their skills. Materials do not need to be expensive, and recycled or low-cost materials such as paper often produce highly creative results. There is no requirement to send large 3D outcomes. Clear, well-presented photographs from various angles, with some detailed shots, will be sufficient to represent candidates' work.

When mounting their work, candidates should consider the layout of their portfolio in clear chronological order with their design brief and investigation work on their first sheet. They should mount work in a single layer and not layered or attached in booklet form.

Evaluations — Expressive and Design

Candidates should complete their evaluations independently. They must complete them without assistance, which includes using AI or templates provided by the centre. Candidates may find it beneficial to use a bullet point structure when completing their evaluation. Centres should ensure that the correct evaluation has been attached to the first sheet and avoid overlapping any work. The evaluation template should not be modified, and the font size should not be reduced. Each sheet of the portfolio should be identified with the SQA sticker labels provided, and the completed flysheet must be attached to the back of the portfolio.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, we aim 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, we hold 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 our 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. We 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.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).