



Course report 2023

Higher English for Speakers of Other Languages

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 693

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 853

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	268	Percentage	31.4	Cumulative percentage	31.4	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	238	Percentage	27.9	Cumulative percentage	59.3	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	208	Percentage	24.4	Cumulative percentage	83.7	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	105	Percentage	12.3	Cumulative percentage	96	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	34	Percentage	4	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied 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 more statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of SQA's website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Listening

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

Recording 1 was felt to be the most demanding of the three listening sections. The topics covered by the recordings were felt to be appropriate and accessible as well as current and relevant to candidates. Question 14 was less demanding than expected, with most candidates achieving full marks on this question. Questions 4, 7 and 20 were slightly more difficult than anticipated.

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

Question paper: Reading

Feedback from centres and markers suggests that this question paper was slightly less demanding than previous years. Markers commented that text 1 appeared to be the most challenging text for candidates, with text 3 being the most accessible. The topics covered by the texts were felt to be appropriate, accessible and current.

All question types were attempted well, with no one question type causing more problems for candidates than others. Overall, multiple-choice style questions were completed slightly better than other question types.

The slightly lower level of demand in the reading question paper compared to previous years was considered when setting grade boundaries.

Question paper: Writing

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

In part 1 (a blog task on achieving a work life balance), some candidates focused more on good and bad activities to do in your free time, rather than address the specific question of how to achieve a work life balance. Some candidates were not prepared in the genre and style of a blog posting.

In part 2, when presented with the option between the work and study tasks, most candidates attempted the essay question with few candidates attempting the report. Marks for those who attempted the report and those who attempted the essay were very similar this year.

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

Performance: speaking and listening

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

In the sample verified, where centres used assessment briefs from SCQF level 6 unit assessment support packs or prior verified centre-produced assessment briefs, the difficulty of the topic and the scaffolding provided was as expected for this level.

Many centres this year produced their own assessment brief, the majority having an appropriate level of challenge, to take account of personalisation and choice, and candidates engaged well with the choice of topics.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Listening

The questions that most candidates performed well in were questions 14 (multiple choice), 15 (single answer) and 18 (multiple answer).

Question paper: Reading

Questions 1 (no more than x words), 2 and 12 (short answers) and 13 (multiple choice) were the most successfully completed.

Question paper: Writing

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

This year, candidates seemed to be more familiar with the conventions and layout of both discursive essays and evaluative reports. Reports were completed better this year with much less use of formulaic language and bullet points.

Performance: speaking and listening

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

Most centres assessed candidates in pairs rather than small groups. Most pairings were well matched, and candidates worked together effectively to maintain the discussion. In most cases the discussion was well balanced, so that sufficient evidence of each candidate's language skills was provided. The candidates developed the discussion well with a good focus on the importance of their interaction.

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

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Listening

Although there were no particular areas of the listening paper that candidates consistently found challenging. 'Complete the sentences using no more than x words' questions appear to be more challenging than the multiple-choice style questions. The questions that candidates found most demanding were 4, 12, 13 and 20.

Spelling was poorer this year than previous years, and candidates often struggled to complete their responses within the three-word requirement.

Question paper: Reading

There were no particular areas of the reading paper that candidates consistently found challenging. The most demanding questions were questions 3, 9, 10, 18 and 21. Most of these were short answer questions. Candidates struggled with identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the text. Some candidates struggled with following the instructions on the question paper and used more than the three words requested or used their own words rather than using words from the text.

Question paper: Writing

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

The range of vocabulary used by candidates was not as wide this year. There was quite a lot of copying words from the rubric without paraphrasing or using synonyms.

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

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

Performance: speaking and listening

Some discussions were too short, and the candidates were not able to demonstrate a range of complex and detailed grammar and vocabulary.

Some candidates went off topic during the discussion and did not make full use of the bullet points on the assessment brief.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

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

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

Question paper: Reading

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

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

- ◆ use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the question paper and to practise at the speed and within a timed limit at which they need to read the texts in the exam

Question paper: Writing

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

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

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

Performance: speaking and listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- ◆ know what is required of them for the performance, introducing the six aspects of speaking and listening to be assessed
- ◆ understand the marking instructions and provide them with consistent feedback on how they are progressing throughout the course
- ◆ have opportunities to practise discussions, using assessment briefs with a sufficient level of challenge, and recording these interactions
- ◆ are provided with topics and contexts that are wide-ranging and bullet points specific enough in the assessment brief to allow them to fully demonstrate their language skills
- ◆ are in pairings or groups that facilitate a balanced discussion with opportunities for equal participation, taking into consideration their strengths and personalities
- ◆ are given guidance in how to use the 15 minutes preparation time effectively, on their own, to consider the assessment brief, the points they want to make, and any useful vocabulary for the topic
- ◆ know they must not attempt to script or rehearse the discussion
- ◆ know they must always attempt to complete the task, as stated in the assessment brief given to them

Teachers and lecturers are reminded that there are Understanding Standards packs available on SQA's secure site for the Higher Performance: speaking and listening. These contain audio and/or video recordings of candidate performances, and detailed commentaries with examples of candidate language. The commentaries and examples of language relate directly to the marking instructions.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).