



Course report 2023

Higher Religious, Moral & Philosophical 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 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: 3,541

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 3,889

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	884	Percentage	22.7	Cumulative percentage	22.7	Minimum mark required	56
B	Number of candidates	895	Percentage	23	Cumulative percentage	45.7	Minimum mark required	46
C	Number of candidates	880	Percentage	22.6	Cumulative percentage	68.4	Minimum mark required	36
D	Number of candidates	627	Percentage	16.1	Cumulative percentage	84.5	Minimum mark required	26
No award	Number of candidates	603	Percentage	15.5	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

The question paper did not perform as expected and as a result the grade boundary was slightly amended to reflect this. However, the question paper was valid as it adhered to the course specification, covered the required topics, and met expectations in terms of content coverage. Similar question stems to the 2022 paper were used to provide continuity and consistency for candidates. This should have allowed candidates to apply the skills, knowledge and understanding gained during the course, and to demonstrate their grasp of the subject matter for each section.

Centres must use the skills, knowledge and understanding listed in the course specification when preparing candidates for assessment as using different terminology can lead to candidates being unable to access questions. Teachers and lecturers must strike a balance between covering content and developing analytical and evaluative skills. While knowledge and understanding are foundational, learning and teaching should also prioritise the development of critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation abilities among candidates. A holistic approach that includes both content and skills development equips candidates well to ensure they are able to meet the standards expected for Higher RMPS.

Assignment

The requirement to complete the assignment was removed for session 2022–23.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper 1

In general, candidates performed well across most sections. It is evident that candidates have been effectively taught and equipped with a wealth of knowledge and understanding in each section and topic. However, it remains a challenge for many candidates to effectively apply this knowledge and to highlight their skills when writing their essays.

World Religion

Buddhism

Candidates appeared to know a lot of information but did not always select relevant knowledge and understanding (KU) to answer the question. Candidates seemed to be confused between devotional practice, for example meditation, and the act of devoting yourself to teachings, for example the Five Precepts. The 10-mark question on devotion was challenging for many candidates, with many not attempting it or achieving low marks. Most candidates scored well in the 20-mark question. KU was very strong with many candidates achieving full marks but some lacked the ability to critically analyse or evaluate throughout their answers. Markers noted that candidates were being taught a large amount of KU and now teachers and lecturers should focus on teaching skills with modelling of examples. Structure remains an issue — models such as PEEL and MESS are not helpful for candidates and do not generate the correct allocation of KU, analysis and evaluation.

Christianity

A number of candidates seemed to have no knowledge of the term 'Eucharist' and were therefore unable to answer the question. However, some candidates demonstrated a good level of KU for both questions. A significant number of candidates included far more KU points than could gain marks but struggled to analyse and evaluate throughout their responses. Structure was evident in places and candidates attempted to use the wording of the question to help with their analysis and evaluation but did not gain marks as they presented more KU rather than skills.

Hinduism

As with Buddhism, candidates knew a lot of information but did not always select relevant KU to answer the question. Most candidates answered the 10-mark question on puja fairly well although most provided a large amount of KU, which at times became irrelevant, while many struggled to provide analysis of purpose. Most candidates handled the 20-mark question poorly, which was disappointing given that beliefs about Isvara is clearly listed as a bullet point in the course specification and has not previously been sampled in the question paper. Candidates struggled to keep their KU relevant, often trying to fit in as much general KU as possible.

Islam

Candidates did well in both questions and were able to access these questions better than last year. Candidates had improved the structure of their essays and more used answer stems to support their analysis and evaluation. Some candidates still answered the 20-mark

question like a comparative question and included every bit of knowledge of other Muslim beliefs other than Muhammad. For example, some candidates gave an in-depth description about the Five Pillars and simply evaluated benefits and weaknesses. Overall candidates answered the 10-mark mosque question well and it was refreshing to read that many centres had visited mosques as part of their learning experience. Similar to other world religions, it appears that KU is being overtaught, leading to confusion around different beliefs and practices.

Judaism

Similar to the responses to Islam, candidates generally answered questions well, effectively showing their extensive KU while successfully using their analytical skills in both essays. However, some answers concerning the synagogue tended to be overly descriptive, lacking analytical depth. However, candidates comprehensively answered the question related to the Covenant, effectively demonstrating their skills throughout their essays. Candidates engaged critically with the topic and provided well-supported arguments and analysis. Overall, candidates displayed a solid level of skills, particularly in relation to the Covenant question.

Sikhism

For the 10-mark question, some candidates were confused with sewa and simran and missed KU marks as a result. Others tackled the question well, demonstrating good, clear KU of simran and focusing on the purpose, which gained analysis marks. In the 20-mark question, candidates struggled to evaluate relevance. Teachers and lecturers can support candidates by practising the difference between importance, relevance and significance when evaluating.

Morality and Belief

The Morality and Belief section has various layers that candidates must navigate skilfully in order to gain high marks. Several candidates demonstrated an excellent ability to access and effectively address these questions, showing a strong grasp of the subject matter. They used a well-structured approach that significantly enhanced the quality of their responses.

As in previous years, religious responses outperformed non-religious responses. Candidates who engaged with religious perspectives demonstrated a higher level of understanding and analytical ability, allowing them to provide more comprehensive arguments. These religious responses often displayed a deeper grasp of the subject matter, drawing on religious teachings, doctrines, and ethical frameworks to support their viewpoints. Non-religious responses sometimes lacked the same depth and breadth of analysis, as candidates struggled to present coherent and well-supported arguments from a non-religious standpoint. It is important for centres to recognise this disparity and ensure that candidates are able to engage with both religious and non-religious perspectives, giving a balanced and inclusive approach in their responses.

When presenting both religious and non-religious responses, it is crucial for candidates to clearly communicate the specific religious and non-religious perspectives they are using. This ensures clarity and transparency in their arguments, enabling markers to accurately assess and evaluate the candidate's line of reasoning. Clearly indicating the religious framework or perspective being referenced and the non-religious perspective being used

helps establish a solid foundation for analysis and evaluation. By providing this contextual information, candidates can effectively convey their understanding and engage in a more comprehensive and well-informed discussion.

Morality and Justice

Overall, candidates did not perform as well as expected in this section. Similar to the World Religion section, candidates demonstrated a large amount of KU of, at times, the whole course and, in particular, the section that was removed from being assessed — causes of crime. Candidates provided fairly poor responses to question 13, even though it was a straightforward question on protection. Many candidates answered this question as if it was a question about prison and focused on the morality of prison and responses to crime rather than the morality of protection as a purpose of punishment. The non-religious responses were mostly vague with candidates unable to present key aspects of the viewpoint and therefore struggling to apply it meaningfully to the moral issue. When candidates used humanism as a non-religious response, it was poorly explained. Candidates showed some excellent KU in question 14, as well as some good analytical responses but overall, evaluation was limited. Candidates were unable to access high marks due to a lack of structure. Candidates struggled to link religious responses to the moral issue, which resulted in a lack of evaluation marks.

Morality and Relationships

In order to effectively address the Morality and Relationships section, it is crucial for candidates to provide more specific information about particular denominations rather than saying 'All Christians' as this is not an accurate statement to make. By delving into the unique perspectives and values upheld by specific religious groups and non-religious perspectives, candidates can demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the diverse moral frameworks that exist within society.

Morality and Global Issues

Candidates gave better responses to question 18 than to question 17, with many displaying commendable KU of poverty. They were able to effectively identify and analyse the moral dilemmas that arise from this societal issue. However, some candidates found question 18 difficult, and struggled to evaluate the religious perspectives on moral issues associated with poverty. Instead, they mainly focused on evaluating the issue itself. Many candidates found question 17 challenging. Their understanding of resource management was limited, and their knowledge of non-religious responses to this issue was noticeably lacking.

Morality and the Human Body

In question 19, some candidates were confused about the difference between beating heart donation and living donation. This confusion significantly impacted their ability to accurately identify the moral issues specific to beating heart donation, resulting in lower marks. Many candidates performed better in question 20, effectively presenting precise KU of voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia, while also identifying and analysing the moral dilemmas associated with this topic. However, candidates showed a lack of structural coherence in several of the 20-mark essays, which prevented them from gaining marks for evaluation. Instead of evaluating the religious responses to the moral issues stemming from euthanasia, candidates focused on evaluating the issue itself.

Question paper 2

Religious and Philosophical Questions

Across all sections of question paper 2, candidates presented an excessive amount of content in their essays, which hindered their ability to effectively analyse the specific areas within each topic. Furthermore, evaluation, which should ideally involve a critical assessment of arguments and their merits, often fell short as candidates tended to focus on presenting generic 'strengths and weaknesses' without adequately tying them to the question. As a result, many candidates found it challenging to connect arguments to the overall question.

Many candidates struggled with developing a coherent and focused structure for their essays, often resorting to presenting general statements without delving into specific religious perspectives. Instead of providing insights into the beliefs and teachings of specific religious traditions, candidates simply stated generic statements such as 'religious views' without specifying which religious group or tradition they were referring to. This lack of specificity resulted in a superficial analysis and limited their ability to engage with the complexities of religious and non-religious perspectives.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Candidates should focus on the following key areas: reading the question, presenting accurate knowledge, and developing analysis and evaluation skills. Markers noted that there is a need to bridge the gap between knowledge acquisition and skill deployment, enabling candidates to translate their depth of understanding into successful essay writing.

Reading the question

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to carefully read and understand the question. This involves picking out key terms, identifying any specific requirements, and ensuring a clear understanding of the overall context of the question. For example, 'Evaluate religious responses to moral issues arising from capital punishment':

- ◆ define capital punishment
- ◆ present moral issues
- ◆ analyse the moral issues
- ◆ present the religious responses
- ◆ analyse the religious responses
- ◆ make a judgement on the religious response to the moral issue

Example

Capital punishment is the act of the state executing someone as a punishment for a serious crime (KU). There are many methods of execution, one of which is lethal injection. This is when the criminal is placed in a room that has a viewing room for the family or victim's family to watch and drugs that stop the body's functions are passed through (KU). One moral issue arising from capital punishment is that it is a cruel and unusual punishment with many waiting on death row upwards of 20 years before the execution will occur (KU).

An implication of the time spent on death row can be seen as a form of psychological torment and suffering inflicted upon the criminal awaiting execution (KU). This raises ethical concerns about the humaneness and fairness of capital punishment that subjects criminals to prolonged periods of anxiety, and emotional distress (A). Furthermore, the extended waiting period also raises questions about the effectiveness and purpose of capital punishment as a deterrent. If the purpose of capital punishment is to discourage people from committing crimes, the long wait before executions take place may make it less effective (KU). The extended waiting time reduces the feeling that punishment will happen right away and weaken the impact it can have on deterring potential criminals (A). As a result, the delays could make the punishment less influential in discouraging people from engaging in criminal activities (A).

One religious response to the moral issue is Christianity. Many Christians believe in the inherent value and sanctity of human life (KU). They may argue that subjecting individuals to prolonged periods of suffering and mental anguish on death row contradicts the principle of

respecting the dignity and worth of every person (KU). As a result, they may campaign for the abolition or reform of capital punishment systems that inflict unnecessary psychological distress and deny individuals their inherent dignity (A). I agree with the Christian response to the moral issue as by fighting against lengthy suffering on death row, it upholds the principle that all individuals deserve to be treated with respect and compassion even if they have done wrong in their lives as people deserve that right (E).

Presenting accurate knowledge

Candidates should present accurate knowledge by thoroughly studying and revising relevant course material. This includes a comprehensive understanding of religious, moral, and philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments. They should also be familiar with different interpretations and perspectives on these topics.

Teachers and lecturers must adhere to the course specification, focusing on the bullet points in the 'course content' section. This year, some candidates emphasised excessive KU without fully using their analytical and evaluative skills. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers and lecturers encourage candidates to explore in-depth analysis and evaluation alongside their effective presentation of KU.

Developing analysis and evaluation skills

Candidates should work on developing strong analysis and evaluation skills. Candidates can achieve this through practice exercises that require critical thinking, comparing and contrasting different viewpoints, identifying strengths and weaknesses in arguments, and supporting their own assertions with evidence and reasoned explanations. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to engage in discussions, debates, and essay writing, which will also help them refine their analytical and evaluative abilities, and ensure they are ready for future assessments.

Question paper 1

World Religion

Centres should teach candidates essay structure that aligns to the allocation of marks, for example 10-mark question — two paragraphs each consisting of three KU points and two A points.

Candidate performance significantly improved when essays had a well-organised structure and when they effectively used the wording of the question. For example, an opening such as 'One purpose of the synagogue is...' and then linking it to its significance for Jews enables candidates to convey their understanding more effectively. By using this approach, candidates can provide clear and concise responses that directly address the question, thereby enhancing their overall essay coherence and depth of analysis.

Morality and Belief

In session 2023–24, centres can prepare candidates for this section by using the current structure for future questions:

- ◆ Analyse religious responses to moral issues arising from... (10)

- ◆ Analyse non-religious responses to moral issues arising from... (10)
- ◆ Evaluate religious responses to moral issues arising from... (20)
- ◆ Evaluate non-religious responses to moral issues arising from... (20)
- ◆ Evaluate religious AND non-religious responses to moral issues arising from... (20)

Teachers and lecturers must ensure that when answering this style of 10-mark question, candidates analyse the religious or non-religious response to the moral issue and **not** the moral issues within the question. For the 20-mark question, candidates will gain marks for any relevant analysis, for example analysis of the moral issues or analysis of the religious or non-religious perspectives, but will only pick up evaluation marks for evaluation of the religious or non-religious response to the moral issue.

Candidates should establish a clear essay structure to achieve success in these assessments. Candidates should limit their response to two distinct paragraphs for the 10-mark question, including key knowledge (KKK) and analysis (AA) components, repeated twice (KKK, AA) (KKK, AA). Similarly, for the 20-mark question, it is recommended that candidates use three separate paragraphs, covering key knowledge (KKK), analysis (AA), and evaluation (EE) components, repeated three times (KKK, AA, EE) (KKK, AA, EE) (KKK, AA, EE). An introduction or conclusion is not necessary for either essay. By adhering to this structured approach, teachers and lecturers can improve candidates' understanding and ensure their responses are focused and well-organised.

While many centres still prioritise teaching Utilitarianism, it is important to address the limitations observed in candidates' application of this perspective. Candidates are often unable to go beyond superficial phrases such as 'the greatest good for the greatest amount of people' or 'ensuring the majority's happiness'. Utilitarianism includes a broader range of principles and considerations that candidates should explore. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to delve deeper into Utilitarianism to enhance their understanding and application of this ethical framework. For example, they could explore concepts such as consequentialism, the role of happiness and wellbeing, the challenges of quantifying utility, or the potential conflicts between individual rights and collective welfare. By expanding their exploration of Utilitarianism, candidates can offer more comprehensive analyses, leading to a more thorough engagement.

Example

Applying Kant's moral philosophy to moral issues arising from euthanasia could look like this:

Categorical Imperative: Kant's Categorical Imperative directs individuals to act according to principles that could be universally applied without contradiction. When considering euthanasia, one could evaluate whether the principle of allowing individuals to choose the timing and manner of their own death could be consistently applied to all people in similar circumstances. Kant might argue that a universal rule allowing euthanasia could lead to problematic consequences or undermine the inherent value of human life.

Deontological Ethics: Kant's deontological approach places emphasis on moral duty and adherence to principles. In the context of euthanasia, Kant would likely argue that moral actions should be guided by a sense of duty and respect for human life, regardless of the

pain or suffering involved. He may argue that intentionally causing the death of another person conflicts with the duty to protect and preserve life.

Autonomy and Rationality: Kant recognises the importance of individual autonomy and rational decision-making. In the case of euthanasia, he might consider the capacity for autonomous choice and the rationality of the decision-making process. Kant might argue that individuals, being rational agents, should have the freedom to make autonomous decisions regarding their own lives, including end-of-life choices such as euthanasia. However, he might also emphasise the need to carefully weigh the ethical implications and ensure that autonomy is not compromised by external factors or undue influence.

Morality and Relationships

Centres must ensure that the resources they use for teaching align closely with the course specification. This ensures that the materials used are accurate, relevant, and in line with SQA guidelines. This can be achieved by using the language specified in the course materials. Some centres are using outdated Higher resources, particularly in the context of gender, which may disadvantage candidates. Furthermore, markers noted that candidates often struggle to differentiate between society, religion, and the media. In order to address this challenge, centres must give clear instructions on these three distinct areas.

Question paper 2

Religious and Philosophical Questions

Candidates need to consider essay structure and avoid generic statements, particularly when discussing religious views. To improve their essays, candidates should provide more specific references, such as 'Some Christians would argue' or 'Islamic teachings emphasise', allowing them to give precise and informed analysis of religious views within the context of the given question. By adopting a more focused and specific approach to discussing religious or non-religious perspectives, candidates can enhance their essays and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

There are limited questions that can be asked in this section.

Origins

- ◆ To what extent can religious and scientific views on origins be compatible?
- ◆ To what extent are religious views on origins (of life / universe) the most convincing?
- ◆ To what extent are scientific views on origins (of life / universe) the most convincing?

The existence of God

- ◆ To what extent can religious and non-religious arguments provide conclusive proof about the existence of God?
- ◆ To what extent do you agree with religious arguments for the existence of God?
- ◆ To what extent do you agree with non-religious challenges against the existence of God?

The problem of suffering and evil

- ◆ To what extent does suffering and evil lie with both God and humans?

- ◆ To what extent does suffering and evil lie with God?
- ◆ To what extent does suffering and evil lie with humans?

Miracles

- ◆ To what extent can religious and non-religious views on miracles be compatible?
- ◆ To what extent do you agree with religious explanations for miracles?
- ◆ To what extent do you agree with non-religious explanations for miracles?

Centres should focus on teaching evaluation skills to the question, for example 'I agree with this religious view on miracles because...' and 'I agree that suffering and evil lies at the hands of humans because...'

Many candidates being taught the cosmological and teleological arguments in the Origins section, are using this learned KU incorrectly. Furthermore, candidates are using terminology such as 'liberalist Christians', 'literalist Christians', 'scientific materialists' and 'creationists' with some inaccuracy.

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](#).