



Course report 2023

Advanced 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: 249

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 212

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	98	Percentage	46.2	Cumulative percentage	46.2	Minimum mark required	98
B	Number of candidates	40	Percentage	18.9	Cumulative percentage	65.1	Minimum mark required	84
C	Number of candidates	34	Percentage	16	Cumulative percentage	81.1	Minimum mark required	70
D	Number of candidates	21	Percentage	9.9	Cumulative percentage	91	Minimum mark required	56
No award	Number of candidates	19	Percentage	9	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

Many candidates answered question 1 in the Philosophy of Religion section. In the optional sections, most candidates selected questions 5 and 11. The number of candidates opting for Religious Experience has increased. The essay questions performed as expected and the range of responses to the Philosophy of Religion questions was addressed during the standardisation procedures. The source questions (questions 4, 8 and 12) performed as expected.

Project-dissertation

The dissertation is worth 50 marks, comprising 20 marks for knowledge and understanding (KU) and 15 marks each for analysis and evaluation. The dissertation performed as expected. Candidates found evaluation the most challenging skill to demonstrate in the dissertation.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Markers were impressed by the amount many candidates were able to write in the time allocated. In general, candidates found the source questions more difficult to respond to than the essay questions.

Many candidates appear to have benefited from the course modifications and were more likely to have revised this area of the course in greater depth.

Section 1: Philosophy of Religion

Most candidates answered question 1, which reflects the area of the course specification identified in the course modifications.

Section 2: Part A — Religious Experience

Most candidates wrote much better essays this year and markers noted that candidates handled question 7 particularly well. Few candidates responded to question 6 but those who did handled the question well.

Section 2: Part B — Medical Ethics

Most candidates answered questions 9 or 11. The few candidates who tackled question 10 mostly responded to a high standard.

Sources

Candidates who were aware of the course modifications clearly prepared towards this. Candidates are still finding analysing and evaluating the given source challenging but there is a clear improvement in the techniques many candidates are using.

Project-dissertation

Overall, the standard of dissertations has improved. Many candidates performed well in the dissertation, setting themselves excellent, appropriate questions. Markers commented that candidates who used 'To what extent' as a stem answered their questions well. Many candidates identified issues clearly and researched issues thoroughly. Some candidates gave clear aims and focused fully on their own question throughout. Many candidates demonstrated excellent knowledge and understanding of their chosen area, used their sources, and analysed their chosen issues well.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Essays

Candidates found Section 1: Philosophy of Religion demanding, and this was taken into account when setting the grade boundaries. Some candidates responded to the topic and focused on that rather than the question. In Section 2: Part A — Religious Experience, a few candidates attempted to answer question 5 by discussing the validity of James' arguments rather than focusing on Swinburne, as they appeared to have little knowledge of Swinburne.

In Section 2: Part B — Medical Ethics, a few candidates found evaluating the validity of religious responses demanding and lacked enough knowledge to focus on religious responses in depth. Some responses focused on the topic rather than the question as a result.

Sources

Markers noted that although the source questions were accessible, some candidates analysed and evaluated the topic and not the given source.

Project-dissertation

Aims

More candidates emphasised their aims but not every candidate stated their aims. Explicitly stating and explaining aims is essential to obtaining a good mark overall as it provides focus and coherence across the project.

Wording of questions

Some candidates found setting clear, legitimate questions with relevant aims and then answering their own question problematic. Some candidates did not have a valid question or failed to answer their own question. Some candidates overcomplicated their questions. Some candidates used closed questions or narrow questions, which limited their responses and the scope of their evaluation. This was particularly noticeable in medical ethics dissertations. A few candidates chose questions that resulted in a lack of depth, for example tackling all the arguments for God's existence. Where candidates attempted a 'compare and contrast' question, they found it difficult to sustain a level of discussion throughout their dissertation. A few candidates researched and presented a dissertation that was different from their question and/or their aims.

Evaluation

Some candidates attained lower marks for evaluation where there was a lack of reasoning or poor reasoning to support the judgements being made. A few candidates attempted to evaluate by simply stating strengths and weaknesses but made little attempt to make judgements or conclusions.

Medical ethics

A few candidates expressed their views passionately about medical ethics but lacked balance in their arguments. This had an impact on their analysis and evaluation. A few candidates showed a lack of understanding regarding the moral issues surrounding abortion.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Essays

Candidates need to read the questions carefully and determine whether they are being asked a very open question or a more specific question. Some candidates are writing overarching answers rather than focusing on the given question. Candidates should try to avoid the use of ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ as it is learned KU in places rather than evaluation. Medical ethics candidates need to focus on the moral issues surrounding each issue, which will help improve analysis and evaluation. Candidates need to ensure that if they use abbreviations, it should be made clear what they are abbreviating. Centres should remind candidates that any areas of the course specification can be assessed.

Sources

Centres should advise candidates to respond to the given source and not analyse and evaluate the topic in general. Some candidates break down elements of the source, and this ensures candidates can try and access the full marks, rather than give a generic attempt at analysis or evaluation of the whole source.

It is vital that centres are familiar with the course specification and ensure that their candidates are also familiar with it. Centres should use Understanding Standards materials, attend events if possible, and make use of the opportunities offered by the Subject Implementation Managers. It is beneficial for all centres to develop and make use of formal and informal networks but particularly useful for centres who have small numbers of candidates.

Project-dissertation

Centres should advise candidates to ensure their aims are clearly stated at the beginning of their dissertation in order to access all KU marks. Candidates need to clearly link the aims to the question being asked and ensure that the aims support and reflect the structure they are using. Candidates should review their aims when they think they have completed their dissertation.

Centres should advise candidates to keep things simple by using open questions that are related to the content. Some candidates made good use of recent past paper questions as a starting point for developing their question. Using topics outwith the course specification can put some candidates at a disadvantage.

Centres should advise candidates that as they set their own question, they need to answer that question. If they deviate from the question during the writing period, they should review or change the question to match their written dissertation.

Centres should make candidates aware that evaluation should come from answering their question throughout the body of work — mini conclusions that relate back to the question throughout makes evaluation marks more attainable.

Where candidates choose to complete a dissertation on medical ethics, centres should encourage candidates to develop their skills from Higher at identifying ‘moral issues arising from’, to help them identify the moral issues they are focusing on at Advanced Higher. This will help improve the structure of their dissertations.

Centres should advise candidates to stay within the 4,000-word count as those who exceed the word count frequently self-penalise as they lose focus on their question. Centres should remind candidates to avoid generic statements and be specific when referring to sources, for example ‘people would agree’ or ‘Christians think’, which is not specific enough for Advanced Higher RMPS. Markers commented that it would be helpful if, when submitting dissertations, candidates used a minimum of 12 point, 1.5 spacing, and page numbers. Markers noted that where candidates used their question as a header on every page, they were far more focused on answering their question.

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](#).