



Course report 2024

Advanced Higher Geography

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

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 978

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 994

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	251	Percentage	25.3	Cumulative percentage	25.3	Minimum mark required	105
B	Number of candidates	301	Percentage	30.3	Cumulative percentage	55.5	Minimum mark required	88
C	Number of candidates	271	Percentage	27.3	Cumulative percentage	82.8	Minimum mark required	71
D	Number of candidates	122	Percentage	12.3	Cumulative percentage	95.1	Minimum mark required	54
No award	Number of candidates	49	Percentage	4.9	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ ‘most’ means greater than 70%
- ◆ ‘many’ means 50% to 69%
- ◆ ‘some’ means 25% to 49%
- ◆ ‘a few’ means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

It was encouraging to see another rise in the number of candidates, and a notable increase in the number of new and returning centres presenting Advanced Higher Geography this year.

Question paper

Overall, the question paper performed as expected with feedback from centres and markers suggesting it was positive and fair in terms of accessibility. Candidates appeared prepared in general and performed well.

Two questions were found to be more demanding than expected and grade boundaries were adjusted accordingly to take this into account.

Project-folio

The project-folio is made up of two components:

- ◆ Section A — geographical study
- ◆ Section B — geographical issue

No changes were made to the project-folio for the 2023–24 session. Feedback from markers indicated notable improvements, especially in the geographical issue section. Across the project-folio, markers noted that candidate justifications and wider reading were done particularly well.

Candidates continue to research a wide range of interesting and relevant topics. Despite average marks in the geographical study still being slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels, candidate confidence in Advanced Higher Geography appears to be gradually returning.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Question 1: map interpretation and gathering and processing techniques

- Question 1(a): This question was answered well by most candidates. Many candidates were able to identify appropriate sites in terms of access and relief, and many candidates demonstrated their knowledge of scale by correctly drawing their sites accurately.
- Question 1(b)(i): Most candidates were able to achieve 3 or 4 marks for this question. Many candidates clearly detailed the importance of relief, access, drainage and minimising conflict with some going into greater detail and accessing the full range of marks available.
- Question 1(b)(ii): Many candidates clearly understood the requirements of this question to focus solely on negative impacts of the lorry park, thus accessing the full range of marks.
- Question 1(c)(i): Many candidates were able to answer the first part with skill. This was a familiar gathering technique, with many candidates clearly demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of traffic surveys.

Question 2: data handling

- Question 2(a)(i): Many candidates achieved 3 or more marks for correctly describing data from the triangular graph. Candidates were very detailed, and some of those who achieved full marks were able to do so from describing just one axis on the graph.
- Question 2(a)(iii): This question was done well by many candidates. A few who found part (i) difficult were able to address those challenges in part (iii) and achieved full marks in this question.
- Question 2(c): Many candidates were able to achieve the full range of marks available for this question. There was an element of familiarity which meant candidates could use their prior learning to help develop key points.

Project-folio: geographical study

Section A

Most candidates performed very well in section A of the geographical study. Candidates developed their justifications through use of wider reading and purpose with clarity. Candidates appeared to have a greater understanding of the relevance of their study in a wider geographical context this year. Markers noted the variety of topics presented in the geographical study this year. These included many physical topics like soil and vegetation studies, beach profile and river studies, and an increased variety in human topics like urban comparisons, LEZ related investigations and conflict studies.

Sections B and C

Many candidates showed skill and ingenuity in their gathering techniques. Markers commented that some candidates continue to demonstrate a wide range of new technology

and innovative techniques to generate data alongside good evaluations of the reliability of these techniques.

Section D

Markers commented on an increase in the use of explicitly referenced wider reading to help with analysis.

Project-folio: geographical issue

Section A

Many candidates achieved full marks for section A of the geographical issue. Markers noted a great variety in original topics for the geographical issue, with most being current topics and many candidates supported their topic with extensive bibliographies.

Section C

Most candidates achieved 5 or more marks. Markers commented that the quality of summaries has continued to improve.

Section D

Skills in evaluation continue to improve with many candidates achieving 6 or more marks.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

- Question 1(b)(iii): While candidates performed well in question 1(b)(ii), some candidates did not think of appropriate and realistic strategies to minimise those negative impacts. Some candidates could have developed their ideas further.
- Question 2(a)(ii): Many candidates referred to development data in their atlases, but a few didn't really explain, and a few described more data from the triangular graph.

Project-folio: geographical study

Section B

Some candidates did not research enough sites meaning they did not have enough data, which then impacted analysis and conclusions.

Section E

A few candidates produced simplistic processing techniques or used a very limited range.

Section F

A few candidates did not have enough data to generate good quality analysis and did not have enough wider reading to help explain ideas.

Section G

A few candidates repeated findings but did not do this in detail and did not refer to the purpose and aims detailed in their justification.

Project-folio: geographical issue

Section B

A few candidates lacked wider reading which then limited evaluations. A few candidates also used broadly similar viewpoints or out-of-date sources.

Section E

A few candidates repeated portions of their summaries and evaluations without linking to their justifications. A lack of wider and background reading in this section also prevented a few from accessing the full range of marks.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

- ◆ Candidates and centres should be encouraged to read the [course specification](#) on SQA's website. They should be aware of the skills and required knowledge and understanding that are being assessed in the 'Gathering and processing techniques' and 'Data handling' sections of the question paper. Awareness and practice of these skills and knowledge can then benefit and enhance the project-folio.
- ◆ Centres should continue to help candidates to understand the relevance and significance of information contained within text boxes and supplementary items. This was evident in candidate responses this year, resulting in answers that correctly related to the context of the question.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to read over their answers carefully to avoid repetition of information.

Map interpretation

- ◆ Centres should ensure candidates continue to practise using the tracing overlay for question 1.
- ◆ Candidates should also practise using string to help determine the length of potential routes.
- ◆ The accuracy of drawing a site to scale needs to be precise. Marks are not awarded where there is a deviation from the size of site required, in this case, 1.2cm x 1cm in question 1(a). Continued practice using scale and rulers is essential.
- ◆ Most candidates understood the requirements of a lorry park, and correctly chose sites within an appropriate distance of access roads.
- ◆ Care must be taken to avoid simplistic answers when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a site. It's flat, so it is 'easy to build on' is not detailed enough at this level.
- ◆ Use of the atlas is crucial, but in that information must be paired with prior learning and the OS map.
- ◆ It's important that candidates are taught to think realistically about their choice of sites or routes in map interpretation questions. For example, a lorry park will not be a tourist attraction, nor will it be an ideal stopover for families because it happens to have a café.

Gathering and processing techniques

- ◆ It would be beneficial for candidates to have more practice in explaining how they would collect data and how they would evaluate data. Where possible, candidates should be encouraged to practise these techniques within the local area or around their schools. For example, many candidates correctly explained how they would gather traffic survey data in question 1(c)(i) because they were familiar with conducting this technique. Consequently, those candidates could more reliably evaluate the technique based on their own experiences for question 1(c)(ii).

- ◆ Candidates should continue practising the variety of processing techniques described in the coursework assessment task document. Candidates should be encouraged to always evaluate those techniques as well.

Data handling

- ◆ Candidates, in class, should be encouraged to practise describing data from a variety of different graphical techniques. Many candidates correctly described data from the triangular graph in question 2(a)(i).
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to practise hypothesis testing and creating null hypotheses.
- ◆ Candidates should continue to practise explaining the advantages and disadvantages of statistical techniques described in the course specification but should ensure that this is linked to the scenario and data given.
- ◆ Candidates should take time to practise explaining the result of a statistical technique in terms of the null hypothesis. For example, is the answer significant? Is it higher or lower than the critical values at a specific degree of freedom? Is there a positive or negative relationship? Do you accept or reject the null hypothesis?
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to look at different kinds of data, and practise explaining what statistical techniques would be best to analyse the data. For example, many candidates correctly suggested using Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient or Spearman's rank correlation coefficient to test some of the data seen in diagram 2 in question 2(b).
- ◆ Similarly, candidates should practise looking at data and thinking about graphical techniques that could be used to process it.
- ◆ When referring to the data, for example, the population data in the triangular graph, candidates should think back to what they have learned at National 5 and Higher.

Project-folio

- ◆ Candidates and centres should pay close attention to the coursework assessment task for Advanced Higher Geography. It is a very helpful document, found in the coursework tab of the Advanced Higher Geography subject page.

Geographical study

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to develop their own skills and should not feel pressured into writing a study based on a particular group fieldwork experience. There should always be options and choices for the geographical study.
- ◆ Marking is holistic and therefore, separate pages are much preferred. Binding folios is unhelpful as it makes it difficult for markers to cross-reference.
- ◆ Most candidates included page numbers which, due to holistic marking, is very helpful. Please encourage candidates to do this.
- ◆ Where candidates are sharing data, centres must make sure that candidates acknowledge this and are always working independently. Candidates must not share processing techniques and analytical points.

Justification

- ◆ The justification should be no more than one page, including diagrams; please note that any more could impact later sections in a word-restricted investigation. Though some candidates this year wrote several pages of introduction, it was good to see many candidates writing clear, succinct and well written 1-page justifications that scored full marks.
- ◆ Candidates should include purpose, for example, ‘the purpose of this study is to...’. This can also be cleverly done in the title, and many candidates did this well.
- ◆ Wider reading must be clear and explicitly demonstrated. Candidates should practise proper citation techniques and take advantage of the many valuable ‘how to’ resources available online. This year, more candidates used citations, footnotes and other direct references to secure marks for wider reading.
- ◆ Wider reading should be relevant and geographical in context.
- ◆ Candidates should thoroughly discuss the area under investigation, providing relevant context by identifying current issues. They should avoid delving into historical narratives; for example, an investigation of an urban area should focus on contemporary challenges rather than a detailed history of urban development.

Planning

- ◆ As a guide, candidates should research ten or more sites at this level. This year, a few candidates used only two or three sites, resulting in insufficient data, limited analysis and, as a result, lower marks. Planning should begin as early as possible to maximise the time available for data collection. For example, in a river study, examining a minimum of eight to twelve sites should provide enough data for a thorough analysis.
- ◆ Candidates should also include information about their sampling techniques.
- ◆ Advanced Higher candidates should not rely on Higher assignment data; there simply isn’t enough data for Advanced Higher candidates to produce a good study.
- ◆ Candidates should create their own research questions, aims or hypotheses. These must not be centre led.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to avoid simplistic research questions.
- ◆ Candidates should include a labelled map of their research sites. Those who did this were able to contextualise their research with greater ease.
- ◆ It was good to see candidates continue to develop the use of technology and innovative techniques to generate data, for example, the use of online surveys.
- ◆ Group fieldwork and the sharing of data is acceptable, but it can reduce the opportunity for candidates to develop and demonstrate their own ideas and skills. Candidates should state in their planning and evaluation sections if data was gathered collectively.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to use a wide range of data gathering techniques. Secondary sources are just as valid as primary sources; however, some candidates continue to treat different websites as different secondary sources. Centres should encourage the use of online questionnaires, textbooks, books, journals and make use of online technology to help them conduct interviews using software like MS Teams, as well as ‘standard’ research on websites.

Evaluation and reliability of research techniques

- ◆ There is no need for candidates to explain their methodology. We expect candidates at Advanced Higher level to know this already. Many did so this year and used up valuable words when not required. Instead, candidates should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their research techniques, not how they did it. They should reflect on the reliability of the data that they have gathered. Candidates who did this well, discussed in detail the limitations of their research because they experienced those limitations and could therefore develop their points.
- ◆ Candidates should also discuss next steps, for example, the way in which their data collection may be improved.
- ◆ A few candidates cleverly incorporated evaluations into tables alongside their list of methods and sampling techniques, but candidates need to ensure that they can be easily read because poor formatting can make them very difficult to follow.
- ◆ Evaluation in tables is included in the word count.

Knowledge and understanding (KU)

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to use wider reading to support their own findings in the geographical study. A theory section can demonstrate KU, but it rarely helps analysis.
- ◆ The Bradshaw Model, for example, may not be the most appropriate method to compare candidate-researched small sections of streams, and may not be suitable as the basis of an entire study. Wider reading often benefits candidates who conduct river studies. Centres should encourage candidates to explore the impacts of climate change, changing river ecology and geomorphology, water quality and other factors when considering river studies in addition to comparing their streams to various models.
- ◆ Candidates should back up analysis with explicit references to wider reading.
- ◆ Candidates who demonstrated appropriate wider reading in all parts of their findings obtained high KU marks.

Processing techniques

- ◆ It was great to see some candidates using a wider variety of processing techniques this year. Candidates should be encouraged to ensure scales are consistent. This is especially important in cross-sectional diagrams.
- ◆ Page 6 of the course specification outlines techniques that candidates could use to process their data. Candidates should be encouraged to develop and enhance their skills and avoid simplistic processing techniques.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to demonstrate as many different processing techniques as possible. Candidates who achieved full marks this year demonstrated the wide variety of processing skills they developed in Advanced Higher.
- ◆ Simple techniques like bar graphs could be ‘upskilled’. For example, descriptions could be labelled onto the graph. The bar graphs themselves could be used as annotations on a map to allow for comparisons.
- ◆ A few candidates grouped all their techniques together on several pages. Please advise candidates not to do this. Integration of techniques is vital. Description and analysis should be around the techniques, not several pages afterwards.

- ◆ Marks are not awarded for anything in an appendix and if graphical evidence is in the appendices, marks for ‘integration of techniques’ will be lost.
- ◆ There was an improvement in the number of candidates presenting fewer pages of appendices.

Analysis

- ◆ Encourage candidates to thoroughly explain their findings. Even simple statements like ‘this is due to’ can earn some analytical marks, but more detailed explanations are preferable.
- ◆ Some candidates effectively used wider reading in introductory theory paragraphs to set the context. They then introduced their data, comparing it with the broader literature, which enhanced their analytical potential.
- ◆ Candidates who excelled this year often used wider reading to support or challenge their findings, thereby strengthening their arguments.
- ◆ Advise candidates who are struggling to consult online resources or textbooks for ideas. Encourage them to find evidence to help explain any unexpected data outcomes.
- ◆ Recommend that candidates use linking words and phrases to create cohesive and clear explanations. Words such as ‘firstly’, ‘secondly’, ‘additionally’, ‘likewise’, and ‘similarly’ were used effectively by many candidates this year to develop and enhance their explanations.
- ◆ Encourage candidates to clearly link findings back to the original hypotheses or research questions. Candidates should use specific examples from their data to make their analysis more convincing. This was seen in many good analyses this year.

Conclusion

- ◆ Conclusions remain difficult to access for many. As a starting point, advise candidates to restate the purpose of their study, and what the key focus areas were in the research questions.
- ◆ Some candidates summarised each research question well, and in detail with reference to specific data. Many of them did this at the end of each research question, whilst others did this in the traditional conclusion part of their geographical studies. Encourage your candidates to summarise each research question in detail.
- ◆ Candidates who excelled in this year’s conclusion effectively discussed the implications for each research question in their summaries.
- ◆ It was good to see some candidates use wider reading to support their conclusions, particularly when suggesting future research. For example, candidates studying rivers and explaining what could be done in the future, helped their cases by using examples from wider reading where those approaches had been put into practice.
- ◆ Strong statements to finish conclusions helped candidates to achieve marks this year. Encourage candidates to pay attention to the purpose of their study throughout their concluding remarks.

Geographical issue

- ◆ There was a range of styles this year in the geographical issues essay. It is clear that some candidates prefer to integrate summaries and evaluations, however, that can be challenging for candidates who might find the geographical issue essay more difficult. Encourage these candidates to structure their essay with headings, and distinct sections. This will make the essay more manageable, and accessible.

Justification

- ◆ Candidates this year demonstrated well-researched and strong justifications. Like the geographical study, the justification should be no more than a page.
- ◆ Encourage candidates to clearly state the purpose of their issue. Even a simplistic ‘the purpose of this essay is to’ is clear enough. Most candidates did that well this year.
- ◆ The relevance of the issue is important. Candidates should clearly provide the link to geography. There were many climate-change themed essays this year. That relevance can then be deepened by expanding on why the issue is worth investigating. Many candidates who did well this year firstly contextualised the issue. For example, essays about plastic pollution could discuss the immediate and local effects on wildlife in the oceans before expanding to issues concerning climate change.
- ◆ Wider reading must be clear and explicitly demonstrated. Candidates should practise proper citation techniques and use ‘how to’ resources available online. This year, more candidates used citations, footnotes, and other direct references to secure marks for wider reading.
- ◆ Wider reading in the justification should contain references to relevant geographical literature. Encourage candidates to find sources that contain geographic ‘substance’.

Wider reading

- ◆ As a guide, candidates should prioritise three main sources to summarise from a wider range of sources. Some markers noted that some candidates had excellent and relevant academic sources in their wider reading yet chose to summarise less rigorous articles.
- ◆ In the bibliography, candidates should include the publication date of articles instead of when they were viewed.
- ◆ While the issue should be as current and up to date as possible, there is no age limit on sources being used. This may make sense for some topics; however, it does not make any sense to have out-of-date prioritised sources when the rest of the wider reading is much more recent.
- ◆ An issue or study without a bibliography is self-penalising. Bibliographies should be correctly formatted (not just a list of websites). There are online reference generators that centres should encourage candidates to use.
- ◆ There were clear improvements in the quality of bibliographies this year. A bibliography should be a work-in-progress throughout the entire project–folio writing process and should be reflected within the issue and study through citations and footnotes or endnotes.
- ◆ Very few candidates included vast bibliographies without any real evidence that wider reading was used. Where that did happen, it made it difficult to achieve marks in this section. Everything listed in the bibliography should be explicitly included in the essay.

- ◆ In terms of prioritisation of sources for the geographical issue, candidates should clearly identify their main sources.
- ◆ Candidates should keep their three main sources separate in the bibliography to make them more easily identified. Some candidates cleverly put their three main sources under a separate title in their bibliographies this year.

Summaries

- ◆ The quality of summaries has steadily improved, with many this year integrating facts, statistics and diagrams from the source material.
- ◆ A reader should come away from the summary with a clear understanding of the source's content.
- ◆ Common phrases like 'the author says...' should be accompanied by specific details about the author's points.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to avoid a paragraph-by-paragraph approach, as this suggests they are merely summarising each section without fully demonstrating an understanding of the source.
- ◆ Diagrams should be included if they enhance the explanation of the source and can be labelled to provide additional enhancement.
- ◆ In a word-restricted essay, it is understandable that candidates are trying to be concise. However, this section is worth 10 marks and should be given the same importance as the evaluation section to ensure a balanced essay.
- ◆ Some summaries this year included examples of wider reading to further develop the points made in the sources.

Critical evaluations

- ◆ Candidates should discuss the reliability of the author and the credibility of the source. Encourage candidates to use wider reading to demonstrate this.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to think about the strengths and weaknesses of each source and give evidence that demonstrates this. Comparing to wider reading is helpful.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to identify areas of bias and exaggeration within the sources. This can be strengthened by comparing to wider reading. Candidates who did this well, often found statistics and up-to-date facts in wider reading but did not present these in some of their sources, demonstrating bias.
- ◆ Some candidates divided their critical evaluations into sections allowing markers to see clear evidence of wider reading. For example, some had a paragraph that stated, 'research that supports this viewpoint includes...' and 'research that opposes this viewpoint includes...'. This is certainly a helpful method for many candidates to access the full range of marks.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to compare their three main sources in all their critical evaluations. Some candidates this year skilfully used wider reading to support one of their sources, and then used that to demonstrate weaknesses in their other sources.

Conclusion

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to refer to their titles and justifications to reinforce what the essay was about.

- ◆ Good conclusions saw candidates answering their title questions, clearly and with evidence from all their sources and wider reading.
- ◆ Candidates should review the main holistic points outlined by each of the sources. Sometimes an identification of the more reliable sources can work.
- ◆ Candidates should attempt to link the points made by each source to their justification. It's important that candidates keep referring to the purpose of their essay.
- ◆ Candidates who researched widely and used wider reading throughout their essay, tended to bring more insight and development to their conclusions.
- ◆ Candidates should think about the implications, reflect on the questions or make suggestions about why the issue is important. Good examples this year saw candidates use wider reading to suggest possible courses of actions. A strong and insightful closing argument demonstrates the candidate's breadth of knowledge.

Word count

- ◆ Candidates are required to read and sign the flyleaf; this includes their stated word counts and an acknowledgement of those limits.
- ◆ Centres should remind candidates that the folio-project is an assessment and as such, the work submitted must be their own.
- ◆ Centres should continue to encourage candidates to adhere to the word limit. Word limits ensure fairness, help avoid repetition of ideas in essays, test candidates' communication skills and help focus candidates' evaluative and analytical skills.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

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

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

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

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

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

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).