Course report 2023

National 5 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.

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Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   1,003

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   1,348

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	398	Percentage	29.5	Cumulative percentage	29.5	Minimum mark required	69
B	Number of candidates	370	Percentage	27.4	Cumulative percentage	57	Minimum mark required	59
C	Number of candidates	320	Percentage	23.7	Cumulative percentage	80.7	Minimum mark required	49
D	Number of candidates	172	Percentage	12.8	Cumulative percentage	93.5	Minimum mark required	39
No award	Number of candidates	88	Percentage	6.5	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.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Listening

The overall performance of candidates in the listening paper was good, with the average mark achieved being slightly higher than that of the reading and writing question papers, and slightly improved results than in 2019 and 2022. Marker feedback indicated that the level of challenge of this paper was suitable for candidates at National 5 level.

Markers commented that the topics in the three recordings were appropriate and relevant to candidates. Candidates performed better in the first recording than in recordings 2 and 3.

The question paper performed as expected.

Question paper: Reading

Candidate performance in this paper had declined slightly from 2019 and 2022. Topics were considered relevant and with an appropriate level of challenge, although candidate performance in text 3 was poorer overall in comparison to the other two texts. A high level of no response to questions 27 to 31 in text 3 (short answer questions requiring written answers) when compared to the rest of the paper indicated that some candidates ran out of time.

The question paper performed as expected despite the slightly lower mean marks achieved compared to 2019 and 2022. This was taken into consideration 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. Statistics and marker feedback indicate that candidate performance was marginally better in this paper than in 2019 and 2022.

Part 1 (a formal email to a leisure centre manager) was generally answered to a reasonable level. However, some candidates used the incorrect register, and a few misinterpreted the task of being an employee at the leisure centre or failed to understand the meaning of the term 'leisure centre'.

In part 2, there was a good balance between the work and study tasks, which has not been seen in previous years at this level. The topics and questions were perceived as being clear and relevant to candidates. Marks for those who attempted the report and those who attempted the essay were very similar, however both were quite poor. Markers commented on the standard of candidates' written work, noting that some candidates exhibited a level of writing which was far below the standards expected at National 5.

Overall, the question paper performed as expected.

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 National 5 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 5 unit assessment support packs or prior verified centre-produced assessment briefs, the appropriateness of the topic and the scaffolding provided was as expected for this level. Many centres this year produced their own assessment brief, 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
Most candidates performed well in questions 4(ii) and 6(ii) (complete the gap with x words) and question 10 (multiple choice).

Question paper: Reading
Questions 7 and 11 (complete the gap with x words) and questions 14 and 17 (multiple choice) were the best answered overall.

Question paper: Writing
Candidates performed slightly better in part 1 (the formal email) than in part 2. Most candidates supported the bullet point suggestions and their own ideas with detailed responses.

A much larger percentage of candidates attempted the report question in part 2 than in previous years. This may be because of the increase in candidates and new centres as well as more support being offered in Understanding Standards events. Reports were better structured this year in terms of format, layout and style than in previous years.

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 conversation. In most cases the conversation was well balanced, so that sufficient evidence of each candidate's language skills was provided. The candidates maintained the conversation 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 conversations with each other, showing well-developed speaking and listening skills in relevant contexts.

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Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Listening

Questions 4(iv) and 6(iv) were found to be challenging for most candidates and had the highest incorrect answer and no response rate. Both were 'complete the gap with x words' questions and were designated as A-band questions. Multiple-choice questions were generally attempted by most candidates. Question 9 (a 2-mark multiple-choice question) was not answered well, as some candidates did not read the instruction that this question required two boxes to be ticked.

Question paper: Reading

Text 3 proved more challenging than the first two texts. Questions 27 to 31 were poorly answered and had a high no response rate. These were all questions requiring written answers and came near the end of the paper, suggesting that some candidates ran out of time. In addition, throughout the paper some candidates struggled with following the instructions and used more than the three words requested or used their own words rather than using words from the text.

Question paper: Writing

Some candidates had difficulty using the correct register in their writing, particularly in part 1 (the formal email) and in part 2 (the report). The language was typically too informal in both.

Some candidates exhibited a weak range of vocabulary and/or grammatical structures for the level, with markers commenting that some writing tasks appeared to resemble National 3 or National 4 level written work rather than National 5.

Punctuation was inconsistent, with some candidates not using capitalisation or full stops and sentence or paragraphs being too long.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

Some candidates did not cover the points in the task during the conversation 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 and 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 information within this, they will not gain the mark as it is not clear that they have fully understood the question

Centres should use practice exams and past papers to prepare candidates for the different question types and to help understanding of instructions that 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 specifically asks for 'words or phrases from the text' they should choose only words found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions
♦ take care with short answer questions – they should not copy long chunks of the text as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and 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 a useful practice activity 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
♦ understand what to do if they change their mind about an answer. In such instances, candidates should clearly score out the incorrect answer and/or indicate clearly 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 necessary speed and within a timed limit at which they need to read the texts in the exam

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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. 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
♦ focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks, as style is important in the writing tasks
♦ 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
♦ 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
♦ use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the paper and to practise at the necessary speed and within a time limit at which they need to produce two pieces of writing during 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 conversations, 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 conversation with opportunities for equal participation, taking into consideration their strengths and personalities

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- 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 conversation
- 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 National 5 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.

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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

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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.