# Scottish Mathematical Council

## The Difficulty Level of the 2026 Higher Mathematics Papers

The Scottish Mathematical Council provides an independent voice on matters concerning mathematics learning, teaching and assessment. It does so here in regard to the difficulty level of the 2026 Higher Mathematics papers and the reaction to those papers by candidates, their families and some of their teachers, especially via social media, and to an extent by news media.

The Council considers this year's papers to be a little harder than the last three years but neither unfair nor inappropriate.

**Specific points**

We provide here some specific comments on Paper 1 (non-calculator) and Paper 2 (calculator).

**Paper 1**

Questions 1-3 and 6-9 were routine, offering plenty of marks for Higher candidates.

Question 4 was worth 8 marks and any candidates who had done past papers might have managed to gain 6 or 7 of them, even if they had not spotted the trigonometric identity for the final mark.

Question 5 started with three very easy marks and then a one-marker about range (where domain is a more common request).

Question 10 had limits that were fiddly but nothing beyond the skills expected at this level.

Question 11 has some unfamiliar language – "explain why $(x + 2)$ is the only linear factor". We would hope that students at Higher would be familiar with the term linear (given that straight line is one of the topics) but even if they did not, this is a significant clue that the quadratic factor cannot be factorised, as shown by the discriminant. This question is entirely fair in its phrasing and in the demands it makes on candidates.

Question 12 (on the inverse graph of an exponential function) is rightly challenging and a fitting end to a Higher paper.

**Paper 2**

Questions 1-7, 9-11 and 13-14 were standard, and a well-prepared candidate should have been able to bag a goodly number of marks towards a decent overall score.

Question 8 was in two parts, the first of which was routine and provided four marks; the second featured a nice twist on the usual gradient/angle topic for two marks.

Question 12: the first part, to find stationary points for three marks, was routine; the second part, carrying three marks, asking for maximum and minimum values in closed intervals, is assessed less frequently and perhaps therefore is more demanding.

Question 15, a trigonometric identities question, might have seen a good National 5 candidate gaining some marks even without knowing the double-angle formula for sine. We note that there have certainly been years in which the final question on Paper 2 made greater demands on the candidates.

**Comments**

To have success in Mathematics examinations, students must be responsible, resilient and realistic.

- Every student has to put in the effort and the hours to learn Mathematics and to revise well. Teachers have a responsibility to deliver every bit of required content and a range of techniques using all the skills they have honed over the years.
- Students need to be willing to face the challenge of tackling a problem set in an unfamiliar context. Teachers should embrace clever examination questions which do not mirror routine types but encourage deeper thinking, preparing students with such questions in class whenever possible.
- Students need to recognise that there is value in accomplishing something challenging and so we must not jump to the conclusion that a difficult examination is a bad examination. There is a responsibility and hence a need for standards to be maintained if Higher Mathematics is a qualification worth gaining, worth celebrating and worth the subsequent entrance to University. Teachers need to equip students for the level of difficulty they will face while continuing to sell Higher Mathematics as a demanding but worthwhile course and Advanced Higher as a rigorous but helpful pathway to Mathematics beyond school level.

Kneejerk critical reaction to whatever papers are presented by the examination authority is unhelpful and often (as here) unwarranted. Social media outbursts and "lower-the-pass-mark" online petitions are easily generated but rarely justified.

On balance, the 2026 Higher Mathematics examination papers test many standard, well-worn techniques with the essential inclusion of some more challenging elements that probe the understanding of the candidates. We deem the papers fair.

**Note**

Andrew Moulden has provided an excellent analysis of Paper 1, completely separate from ours, at

www.maths.scot/higher-maths-2026-paper-1 .