Course report 2023

Higher Music

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:   4,934

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   5,060

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade.

A	Number of candidates	2,648	Percentage	52.3	Cumulative percentage	52.3	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	1,453	Percentage	28.7	Cumulative percentage	81	Minimum mark required	59
C	Number of candidates	634	Percentage	12.5	Cumulative percentage	93.6	Minimum mark required	49
D	Number of candidates	247	Percentage	4.9	Cumulative percentage	98.5	Minimum mark required	38
No award	Number of candidates	78	Percentage	1.5	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 performed as expected. Marker feedback and statistical analysis indicate that it was a fair paper with wide coverage of concepts at an appropriate level of demand. Most candidates attempted all questions. Some questions were accessible to all candidates, while others were more challenging.

Assignment

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

Performance

Most candidates were well prepared for the performance and, as in previous years, most candidates demonstrated a very good level of skills in this area.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Most candidates demonstrated familiarity and knowledge of question types and displayed appropriate exam technique.

Most candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 2 part 3 — identifying pizzicato
- Question 4(a) — inserting a note an interval of a 4th higher than the previous note

Many candidates answered the following question well:

- Question 3(b) — identifying plainchant

Many candidates answered the following question quite well:

- Question 1(a) — a multiple-choice question

Performance

Most candidates were well prepared, and many performances were of a high standard.

Personalisation and choice were evident in most candidates' programmes, and they presented a wide variety of instruments in a range of musical styles.

A few candidates opted to perform pieces above the minimum requirements and performed very well.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Most candidates found the following questions very challenging:

- Question 1(b) — identifying passacaglia
- Question 2 part 4 — identifying French horn
- Question 3(c) — identifying mass
- Question 4(c) — inserting missing notes in a music literacy question
- Question 4(f) — identifying chords in a music literacy question
- Question 5(c) — identifying tierce de Picardie

Many candidates found the following questions challenging:

♦ Question 2 part 2 — identifying an interrupted cadence
♦ Question 2 part 5 — identifying a dominant 7th chord
♦ Question 4(d) — correcting the rhythm in a music literacy question
♦ Question 4(e) — inserting missing rests in a music literacy question

Some candidates did not always read the stem of the question carefully. An example of this was in question 6 where candidates were asked to identify the most prominent concepts from each of the following headings: melody/harmony, rhythm, and style/texture. Many candidates incorrectly offered instruments, instrumental techniques and dynamics.

Performance

Most candidate mark sheets indicated a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 10 minutes. However, during the performance assessment a few candidates either did not attempt to perform one of the pieces or only performed the opening bars of one of the pieces. As a result, these programmes did not meet the minimum time requirements of 10 minutes overall.

Where centres made judicious cuts to accommodate timings, a few candidates played sections of music below the minimum requirements (Grade 4).

A few candidates who played chordal guitar or chordal ukulele programmes did not play along with a melody. Centres must provide a melody line to give a context for the performance of the chords.

A few chordal guitar or chordal ukulele candidates did not demonstrate the 18 chords required.

A few drum kit programmes did not meet the minimum required number of fills. A few drum kit candidates did not select their four styles from the drum kit style bank and did not demonstrate four-way independence in every style.

A few candidates performed keyboard programmes without left-hand chords.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Teachers and lecturers should refer to the specimen question paper and recent past papers for examples of the question styles and marking instructions.

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the question paper:

♦ Questions requiring short answers (one, two, or three words) specifically examine concepts at Higher level. This does not apply to the sequential listening question (question 2 in the 2023 Higher question paper).

♦ In multiple choice questions, candidates should listen carefully to the excerpt and consider the musical context to avoid choosing concepts that are clearly unrelated.

♦ Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to read the stem of the question carefully.

♦ Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates when writing more than one rest in a music literacy question, that the order of the rests matters.

♦ In the identifying the most prominent concepts question, teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to write responses under each of the given headings relating to the music heard. These headings may change from year to year depending on the audio excerpt.

♦ Teachers and lecturers should give candidates regular opportunities to listen to performances using scores, where possible, to promote music literacy skills and develop aural perception and discrimination. Giving candidates the opportunity to relate what they hear to what they see will directly benefit their attainment in these types of questions.

If centres are submitting exceptional circumstance evidence for the question paper, the assessment papers used for prelim-type events should replicate the question type and mark allocation from the course assessment. Centres should also submit the sources, and a full copy of the marking instructions, even if questions are drawn from SQA specimen or past question papers. When preparing prelim and listening assessments, centres must consider the following information:

♦ A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety cannot be the only evidence submitted for exceptional circumstances. These papers are accessible on the SQA website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.

♦ Class tests, or other forms of evidence, must demonstrate that candidates have knowledge and understanding of concepts appropriate to the course assessment.

♦ Centres may need to amend some questions from older past papers as they may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance.

♦ The marking instructions used for centre-devised assessments should reflect the marking instructions used in the final exam. Half marks are not used. You can find examples of marking instructions for past papers on the SQA website.

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Assignment

A series of audio presentations is available on the Understanding Standards website to support candidates, teachers and lecturers with the re-introduction of the (composing) assignment. The presentations summarise the requirements, signpost the range of Understanding Standards materials available from National 5 to Advanced Higher level, and give advice on the requirements and possible approaches to the assignment.

The assignment catalogue is available on SQA's secure website and can be accessed through your SQA co-ordinator. This catalogue details all available Understanding Standards candidate evidence and commentaries. It can be used to find, for example, compositions in a particular mark range, performance plans, and those with specific instrumentation.

Important information about preparing candidates for both the composition and composing review is in the following documents available from the Music subject pages on SQA's website:

♦ 2019 Higher Music Course Report
♦ 2018 and 2019 National 5 Music course reports

The advice given in these reports will apply to Higher and National 5 assignments.

Performance

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the performance components:

♦ Centres should ensure that the overall programme is of the appropriate length. For session 2023–24, a Higher programme should last a minimum of 12 minutes between the two instruments. The maximum time is 13 minutes. The performance time on either of the two selected instruments, or instrument and voice, must be a minimum of 4 minutes within the overall 12-minute programme. Centres must ensure that candidates adhere to the minimum and maximum time limits. Centres should also ensure that the music to be played is at the appropriate level (Grade 4 or above).

♦ Carefully timed cuts may be appropriate to keep within the time limit, as long as they do not lower the technical demands. Centres should also consider the length of individual pieces after any cuts have been made. If significant cuts are made to a piece of music, it can become challenging for a candidate to access all the marks available.

♦ For guitar and ukulele programmes, centres should specify if the candidate is performing a 'chordal', 'melodic' or 'mixed' programme. Chords can be included in a melodic guitar or melodic ukulele programme but are not counted if it is not a chordal programme.

♦ Chordal guitar and chordal ukulele programmes must:
— include 18 chords
— be in standard notation — this could simply be a copy of the melodic line that the guitar or ukulele is accompanying, with the chord names printed above or below the stave; tablature (TAB) alone is not sufficient for assessment purposes, and neither is a lyric sheet with only chord names and no music notation
— have a melody for candidates to play along with (played, sung or from a backing track) — this is essential to provide a context for the performance of the chords

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- Drum kit programmes should specify each style performed and style bank number. For session 2023–24, a programme must include five different styles, with four different fills within each style. Teachers and lecturers should refer to SQA's style bank for a list of acceptable styles. Drum kit programmes must exhibit four-way independence in every piece. For notated music, the minimum requirement is four bars of the groove and four fills with a performance plan or map.
- Keyboard programmes must include both the right and left hand in performance. Candidates playing only a right-hand melody are awarded 0 marks for that piece.

To help visiting assessment run smoothly:

- Candidate mark sheets issued by SQA must be completed in pen (not pencil) by centre staff and be available to the visiting assessor at the start of each assessment session (morning or afternoon). The candidate mark sheet is the formal record of the assessment event, and it is very important that it is completed accurately.
- Centre staff should give the visiting assessor a running order with approximate timings at the start of each session.
- To avoid unexpected candidate absence disrupting the planned running order, centre staff should have the next two candidates ready to perform. This ensures the maximum use of the visiting assessor's time.
- Timetabling should take account of the candidates' chosen performance time on each instrument. It is helpful if centres consider the time allocated for each candidate performance to make the best use of the visiting assessor's time in each centre.
- Details of the instruments, or instrument and voice used, the pieces to be performed, and all timings of pieces should be clearly indicated on the candidate mark sheet. The total length of time for each instrument or voice should also be indicated.
- Each drum kit style should be clearly named on the candidate mark sheet, irrespective of the title of the piece, for example 'Download' — rock, bank 1.

If a candidate is absent for the performance exam for health reasons or other unexpected circumstances, SQA will try to arrange an alternative date for them to sit the exam. If this is not possible, centres must submit evidence of the candidate's attainment in performance. Centre staff should submit an audio or video recording of as much of the candidate's programme as possible, along with copies of the music and the marks awarded for all the pieces performed. Many centres routinely make audio or video recordings of prelim exams for this eventuality. If centres do not have an audio or video recording of the candidate's performance programme, they should submit alternative evidence to show that the candidate has demonstrated attainment at Higher level. Other supplementary evidence may include a certificate from a graded examination at an appropriate level.

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.