



Course report 2024

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 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: 5,060

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 5,180

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	2,486	Percentage	48.0	Cumulative percentage	48.0	Minimum mark required	69
B	Number of candidates	1,468	Percentage	28.3	Cumulative percentage	76.3	Minimum mark required	59
C	Number of candidates	807	Percentage	15.6	Cumulative percentage	91.9	Minimum mark required	49
D	Number of candidates	304	Percentage	5.9	Cumulative percentage	97.8	Minimum mark required	39
No award	Number of candidates	115	Percentage	2.2	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

Question paper

The question paper performed as expected. Marker feedback and statistical analysis indicate that it was a fair, well-balanced paper with wide coverage of concepts and a range of styles and genres at an appropriate level of demand. Some questions were accessible to all candidates, while others were more challenging.

Assignment

Most candidates submitted an audio file, a score or performance plan, and a composing review.

The return of full course assessment meant the reintroduction of the assignment (composition) and full performance times being re-instated. The increase in performance times, combined with the re-introduction of the assignment, where learners had no previous assessment experience of composition, were considered in reaching grade boundary decisions.

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 with question types and displayed appropriate exam technique. Most candidates attempted all questions.

Most candidates answered the following questions well:

- ◆ Question 2 part 1 — identifying arco
- ◆ Question 3(a) — identifying irregular time signatures
- ◆ Question 4(a) — describing an interval of a 5th

Many candidates answered the following questions well:

- ◆ Question 3(c) — identifying soul music
- ◆ Question 5(a) — identifying four concepts in a multiple-choice question

Many candidates answered the following questions quite well:

- ◆ Question 7 — identifying common concepts in two excerpts
- ◆ Question 8 — identifying features in a lyrics question

Assignment

Some candidates composed good pieces, with a few writing very good or excellent compositions. These candidates imaginatively developed a range of musical ideas, and selected and used elements creatively.

Some candidates who chose instrumental or vocal forces, and a style that they were familiar with, achieved higher marks. Many candidates who wrote for a small number of instruments were successful.

Many candidates gave a satisfactory account of their main decisions in their composing reviews. Some candidates gave sufficient explanation of the exploration and development of musical ideas, and a satisfactory identification of strengths and/or areas for improvement.

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 challenging:

- ◆ Question 2 part 3 — identifying a major scale
- ◆ Question 2 part 4 — identifying a rhythmic feature
- ◆ Question 2 part 5 — identifying a dominant 7th chord
- ◆ Question 4(b) — correcting the rhythm in a music literacy question
- ◆ Question 4(c) — identifying the dominant note of F major in a music literacy question
- ◆ Question 4(e) — identifying chords in a music literacy question

Many candidates found the following question challenging:

- ◆ Question 4(f) — writing D.C. at the appropriate place in the guide to the music

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: style, melody/harmony and rhythm/tempo. Some candidates incorrectly offered instruments and instrumental techniques.

Assignment

Many candidates who wrote for instruments that they were unfamiliar with did not demonstrate effective instrumental writing, including knowledge of their range.

Some candidates struggled to write effective harmonic progressions in their chosen style. In addition, some candidates had difficulty creating convincing instrumental parts, particularly when working with larger ensembles.

Some candidates composed melody lines lacking shape and a sense of phrasing.

Many candidates' compositions did not demonstrate successful development of musical ideas appropriate to their chosen style. Pieces that simply repeated a substantial section without any development of, for example, melody, rhythm, harmony or timbre were frequently awarded lower marks.

Some candidates who chose to work with pre-recorded loops often did not provide sufficient detail in either their performance plan or composing review to clearly show their creative input.

A few compositions were outwith the mandatory time requirement. They must last between a minimum of 1 minute and a maximum of 3 minutes and 30 seconds.

In their composing review, many candidates had difficulty describing their exploration and development of musical ideas. In such cases, musical detail was frequently lacking. Many candidates also showed limited identification of strengths and areas for improvement.

Performance

Most candidate mark sheets indicated a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 12 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 12 minutes overall.

A few programmes did not meet the minimum time requirements of 4 minutes on either of the two selected instruments, or instrument and voice, although the overall performance time was appropriate.

Where judicious cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates were playing 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 five 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 2024 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.
- ◆ In the question on identifying the most prominent concepts, 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. Ensuring assessments meet the criteria below will help teachers and lecturers establish candidate estimates. 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 SQA's 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 and music 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 SQA's website.

Assignment

Teachers and lecturers should refer to the Understanding Standards materials on SQA's secure website for a range of approaches and development ideas for the Higher Music assignment. The Music assignment catalogue, which is available on SQA's secure website, lists approximately 120 pieces of candidate evidence across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels, including marks and commentaries. In addition, in September 2023, SQA published audio presentations at these three levels showing marked candidate evidence with commentaries.

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the composition:

- ◆ For candidates to demonstrate creativity, teachers and lecturers should avoid structured template approaches to composition. For example, they must not set some or all of the following features in a template:
 - number of instruments
 - instrumentation
 - prescribed harmonies in certain bars
 - changes of time signature in certain bars
 - prescribed rhythmic, melodic or structural features in certain barsThis restrictive template would go beyond the acceptable amount of reasonable assistance for the assignment.
- ◆ Candidates are required to explore and develop musical ideas to create an original piece of music for their assignment. For teaching and learning purposes only, it is acceptable to provide candidates with, for example, accompaniment patterns, bass lines or rhythm banks. However, as the assignment is an assessment and not a learning and teaching exercise, candidates should then create their own individual composition. Candidates should not select, copy and paste musical ideas provided by their teacher or lecturer into their composition.
- ◆ Candidates who were allowed to choose the style and instrumentation of their composition often achieved higher marks.
- ◆ Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to develop ideas creatively as the music progresses, within the context of their chosen style.
- ◆ Candidates must use at least four musical elements from melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre, one of which must be harmony. Note that bagpipe drones alone are not sufficient to show use of harmony. Markers award no marks to pieces that have no harmony.
- ◆ Candidates who choose to work with pre-recorded loops or electronic music must ensure that they use these in the context of a wider composition, and show the compositional process. Candidates must clearly identify their actual creative input in their composing review. For example, if they select a chord progression but use an electronic program to devise an accompaniment, they must indicate this in their review.
- ◆ A composition may contain sections of improvisation, but this must be in the context of a wider composition that demonstrates composing skills. Markers award no marks to pieces that are solely improvisation.
- ◆ Candidates should submit either a score or performance plan. Performance plans should be clear and informative, with a well-defined harmonic framework to inform the marking

process. A screenshot from a digital audio workstation with no additional information is not sufficient.

- ◆ A composition that is submitted solely using tablature (TAB) is not sufficient. Candidates should submit a score or performance plan showing the harmonic framework. A performance plan that includes, for example, a guitar riff in TAB within a harmonic framework is acceptable.
- ◆ At Higher level, candidates must not submit an arrangement of someone else's piece of music.
- ◆ In serial compositions, tone rows should be annotated on the score. Candidates should refer to how they have explored and developed their rows in their composing review.

The following advice may help to prepare candidates for the composing review:

- ◆ Candidates must clearly identify their input in their composition. For example, they must make it clear if any part has been realised by someone else.
- ◆ Teachers and lecturers should ensure that composing reviews are submitted in the one-page mandatory template available on the [Higher Music subject page](#).
- ◆ The composing review must be individual to each candidate and their own work.
- ◆ Teachers and lecturers should not give candidates composing review templates with, for example, pre-populated phrases that only require candidates to insert one or two words into the text at designated places.
- ◆ Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to write the composing review as they write the piece and not leave it until the end of the process.
- ◆ Candidates must include:
 - the main decisions they made. This could include initial ideas such as the chosen instruments and/or voices, time signature, tempo, rhythms, key, and initial chord progressions. They could also write about further decisions they make as they compose their piece, such as different chord progressions, key changes, structure and articulation.
 - how they explored and developed their musical ideas. It is advised that candidates take note of significant developments as they work through the assignment rather than writing their review when they have finished the composition.
 - their strengths and/or areas for improvement. Candidates must give a minimum of two strengths and/or areas for improvement. These should ideally refer to musical aspects rather than the candidate's feelings. For example, 'the B section featuring accents and a key change to a minor key contrasts well with the A section' shows clear details of a strength, whereas 'I like the B section compared to the A section' is a weak statement.

To help the marking process run smoothly, teachers and lecturers should ensure that:

- ◆ all instrumental parts can be clearly heard in the audio file
- ◆ all audio files are in any of the following formats — MP3, MP4, WAV or WMA. Teachers and lecturers must not submit any other type of files, including music notation software files. These should be exported into an acceptable format before submission
- ◆ all digital files are clearly labelled with candidate names and which part of the assignment it contains; for example, score, review or audio file
- ◆ the flyleaf is completed accurately, and the ticks indicate the parts of the assignment submitted for the candidate

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. 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 performed 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 staff; 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
- ◆ Drum kit programmes should specify each style performed and style bank number. It 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 right and left hands in performance. Candidates playing only a right-hand melody will receive no 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 candidates' chosen performance time on each instrument. It is helpful if centres consider the time allocated for each 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 the candidate 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.

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](#).