



Course report 2025

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 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 5,180

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 5,037

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	2,305	45.8	45.8	70
B	1,475	29.3	75.0	60
C	810	16.1	91.1	50
D	341	6.8	97.9	40
No award	106	2.1	100%	Not applicable

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 or equal to 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 question paper with a mix of accessible and challenging questions. The content was consistent with previous years and had good course coverage of concepts and styles.

Assignment

Candidates composed in a broad range of styles and genres. They wrote for a wide variety and number of instruments and/or voices. A few candidates used digital audio workstations.

Most candidates submitted the three required pieces of evidence — an audio file, a score or performance plan, and a composing review. Most centres submitted these files digitally.

Performance

Most candidates performed a variety of music on instruments from the approved instrument list. Most candidates met the required performance time of 12 minutes — performing on two instruments or one instrument and voice.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

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

Most candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 3(a) — identifying plainchant
- Question 4(f) — describing an interval of a 4th in a music literacy question
- Question 5(b) — identifying jazz funk

Many candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 1(b) — identifying sonata
- Question 3(b) — identifying diminished 7th
- Question 3(c) — identifying irregular time signature
- Question 4(c) — transposing notes in a music literacy question
- Question 4(e) — inserting a bar line in a music literacy 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 at least 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 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 2 — identifying a prominent rhythmic feature
- Question 2, part 4 — identifying saxophone
- Question 4(b) — identifying chords in a music literacy question
- Question 4(d) — writing notes in a music literacy question

Many candidates found the following questions challenging:

- Question 2, part 5 — identifying an imperfect cadence
- Question 4(a) — identifying the subdominant note of G major 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: style/structure, melody/harmony and rhythm/tempo. Some candidates incorrectly offered instruments and the type of voice.

Assignment

Composition

Many candidates:

- who wrote for instruments that they were unfamiliar with did not demonstrate effective instrumental writing, including knowledge of their range
- 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, frequently received lower marks

Some candidates:

- struggled to write effective harmonic progressions in their chosen style
- showed a lack of harmonic understanding that often resulted in unexplained dissonance between melodic lines
- composed melody lines lacking shape and a sense of phrasing
- had difficulty creating convincing instrumental parts, particularly when writing for larger ensembles

A few candidates:

- who chose to work with pre-recorded loops did not provide sufficient detail in either their performance plan or composing review to clearly show their creative input
- submitted poor scores or performance plans; examples of this included:
 - notating only one part, with other parts only in TAB
 - not providing information about harmonies

- not detailing the structure of the piece

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

Composing review

Many candidates:

- did not provide sufficient explanation of their exploration and development of musical ideas
- showed limited or very limited identification of strengths and areas for improvement
- did not include enough musical detail

Performance

Most candidates' 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 or more pieces, or only performed part of a piece, meaning their performances were under 12 minutes.

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 cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates played sections of music below the minimum requirement (Grade 4).

A few candidates who performed chordal guitar or chordal ukulele did not perform 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 minimum 18 chords required.

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 drum kit programmes did not meet the minimum required number of fills.

A few candidates performed keyboard programmes without left-hand chords. If a candidate plays with right hand only, they will be awarded 0 marks for the piece.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Teachers and lecturers should refer to recent past papers and the specimen question paper for examples of question styles and marking instructions. Concepts in the Higher question paper are drawn from all levels from National 3 to Higher, so candidates are expected to have a secure understanding of concepts from all four levels.

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

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 2025 Higher question paper).

For the 'identify 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.

Candidates should listen carefully to the excerpt in multiple choice questions and consider the musical context to avoid choosing concepts that are clearly unrelated.

Teachers and lecturers should give candidates regular opportunities to listen to performances using notated sheet music, 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 music literacy questions.

When preparing formal assessments, centres must consider the following information:

- A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety cannot be the only evidence submitted for the examination exceptional circumstances consideration service. [Past papers](#) are accessible on SQA's website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.
- Centres may need to amend some questions from older past papers as they may not provide appropriate scope, coverage or balance.

Assignment

The following SQA [Understanding Standards](#) materials provide useful information for teachers and lecturers:

- The [assignment resource](#) (published in 2023) includes marked candidate evidence with commentaries across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels.
- The Music Assignment Catalogue, available on SQA's secure site, lists approximately 120 pieces of candidate evidence across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels, including marks and commentaries. There is a wide range of instrumentation, approaches and development of ideas in the compositions.

Composition

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 bars

These restrictive templates would go beyond the acceptable amount of reasonable assistance.

Candidates must submit a score or performance plan of their composition. Markers award 0 marks for a composition if a score or performance plan is not submitted.

Performance plans should be clear and informative, with a well-defined harmonic framework to inform the marking process. Markers award 0 marks for a performance plan containing only screenshots of a digital audio workstation with no other information. Candidates could include, for example, information about loops, which instrumental parts the candidate has played in, where and how an instrumental part develops, and the structure of the piece.

A score or performance plan that is only tablature (TAB) is not sufficient. Markers award 0 marks in this instance. Candidates should notate any parts written in TAB; this can be done using most notation software.

Candidates who choose to work with pre-recorded loops must ensure that they use them in the context of a wider composition. Candidates must clearly identify their creative input in their composing review, for example by stating if they created some or all of the loops, or they were sourced from elsewhere.

If candidates choose to compose a serial piece, they must annotate their note rows in the score. Markers award 0 marks if note rows are not annotated on the score. Candidates should refer to how they have explored and developed their rows in their composing review.

Candidates must use harmony in their composition at Higher level. Note that bagpipe drones alone are not sufficient to show use of harmony. Markers award 0 marks to pieces that have no harmony.

Composing review

Teachers and lecturers should:

- ensure that composing reviews are submitted in the one-page mandatory template available on the [subject page](#) of our website

- encourage candidates to write their composing review as they make their decisions and explore and develop their musical ideas. Candidates should not leave writing the review until the end of the process
- not give candidates composing review templates with, for example, pre-populated phrases that require candidates to only insert one or two words into the text at designated places

Candidates should:

- clearly identify their input in their composition; for example, they must make it clear if any part of a piano or guitar accompaniment has been realised by someone else
- clearly identify if they used any software to generate chord progressions
- indicate in their composing review if they select a chord progression and use an electronic program to devise an accompaniment
- include the main decisions they made. This could include initial ideas such as the chosen instruments and/or voices, time signature, tempo, 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
- include how they explored and developed their musical ideas. They should give musical detail
- include their 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. Candidates must give a minimum of two strengths and/or areas for improvement

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

- the flyleaf is completed accurately, and the ticks indicate whether parts of the assignment have or have not been submitted

- all digital files are clearly labelled with candidate names and which part of the assignment it contains; for example, audio, score or performance plan, or review
- all instrumental parts can be clearly heard in the audio file
- the Ex 6 form (attendance register) is completed to indicate if any candidate has not submitted an assignment and/or they have been withdrawn

Performance

Centres should make sure they are familiar with the performance sections in the course specification document, which is available on the [subject page](#) of our website. Teachers and lecturers should also refer to the information for teachers and lecturers document for visiting assessment. This is published on SQA's secure site and issued alongside the candidate marksheets in January.

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 it. 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

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

For most National Courses, we aim 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, we hold 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 our 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. We 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.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).