

Course report 2026

Higher Music, SCQF level 6

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question paper and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 5,037

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 5,258

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	2,519	47.9	47.9	70
B	1,470	28.0	75.9	60
C	809	15.4	91.3	50
D	323	6.1	97.4	40
No award	137	2.6	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- 'Most' means greater than or equal to 70%.
- 'Many' means 50% to 69%.
- 'Some' means 25% to 49%.
- 'Few' or 'a few' means less than 25%.

You can find [statistical reports](#) on our website.

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's 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 make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use 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.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

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](#).

How the course assessment performed

Question paper

The question paper performed as expected. Marker feedback and statistical analysis show that it was fair and balanced, with an appropriate mix of straightforward and challenging questions. The content was consistent with previous years and covered a wide and appropriate range 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. Candidates presented a wide variety of instruments in a range of musical styles.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

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 1(a) — identifying concepts in a multiple choice question
- Question 2, part 4 — identifying pizzicato
- Question 3(b) — identifying irregular time signature
- Question 3(d) — identifying musique concrète
- Question 4(b) — describing an interval of a 6th in a music literacy question

Many candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 3(c) — identifying harmonics
- Question 6 — identifying the most prominent concepts

Many candidates answered the following question quite well:

- Question 4(a) — transposing notes in a music literacy question

Assignment

Some candidates composed good pieces, and a few candidates composed very good or excellent pieces. These candidates imaginatively developed a range of musical ideas, and selected and used elements creatively in their chosen style.

Many candidates gave at least a satisfactory account of their main decisions in their composing reviews. Some candidates sufficiently explained their exploration and development of musical ideas, and satisfactorily identified their 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.

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

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Most candidates did not answer the following questions well:

- Question 2, part 1 — identifying French horn
- Question 2, part 2 — identifying augmentation
- Question 4(c) — identifying chords in a music literacy question
- Question 4(d) — writing notes in a music literacy question

Many candidates did not answer the following question well:

- Question 3(a) — identifying melodic minor scale

Some candidates did not follow the instructions given in questions. For example, in question 6, candidates were asked to identify the most prominent concepts from each of the following headings: melody/harmony, rhythm/tempo and style/texture/form. Some candidates gave instruments as their answer.

Assignment

Composition

Many candidates:

- Who wrote for instruments they were unfamiliar with did not demonstrate effective instrumental writing, including knowledge of their range — for example, when writing for both hands on a piano.

- Did not demonstrate successful development of musical ideas appropriate to their chosen style. Candidates who repeated a substantial section without any development of — for example — melody, rhythm, harmony or timbre frequently gained lower marks.

Some candidates:

- Did not write effective harmonic progressions in their chosen style.
- Wrote pieces containing unexplained dissonance between melodic lines and accompaniment.
- Composed melody lines lacking shape and a sense of phrasing.
- Did not create 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; for example, that provided:
 - a part only in TAB
 - no information about harmonies
 - no details of the structure of the piece
 - individual parts only instead of one score
 - song lyrics only, with no harmonies
- Submitted compositions that were outwith the mandatory duration of 1 minute to 3 minutes and 30 seconds.

Composing review

Many candidates:

- Did not sufficiently explain how they explored and developed 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 showed 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 level (Grade 4).

A few candidates who performed chordal guitar or chordal ukulele did not perform with a melody. You must provide a melody line to give a context for 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 receive 0 marks for the piece.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

You should:

- Refer to recent past papers and the specimen question paper for examples of question styles and marking instructions.
- Encourage candidates to have a secure understanding of concepts from National 3, National 4, National 5 and Higher, as the question paper draws from all four levels.
- Encourage candidates to read the stem of the question carefully.
- Remind candidates that 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 2026 question paper).
- Encourage candidates to write responses related to what they hear under each of the given headings in the 'identify the most prominent concepts' question. These headings may change from year to year depending on the audio excerpt. You should encourage candidates to avoid writing long lists of contradictory concepts unrelated to the music.
- Encourage candidates to listen carefully to the excerpt and consider the musical context in multiple choice questions.
- Give candidates regular opportunities to listen to performances, using notated sheet music where possible, to develop their music literacy skills, and 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, you must consider:

- A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety must not be the only evidence submitted for examination exceptional circumstances consideration. [Past papers](#) are accessible on our website, so candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.

- You may need to amend some questions from older past papers as they may not provide appropriate scope, coverage or balance.
- You must submit a copy of the marking instructions even if questions are drawn from past papers.

Assignment

You may find the following resources helpful:

- a new [Academy course](#) providing support for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assignments
- materials on the [Understanding Standards](#) website, including an audio presentation highlighting changes to the course specification and coursework assessment tasks in session 2025–26, and the [assignment resource](#)
- the Music Assignment Catalogue, available on [our secure site](#)

Composition

You should encourage candidates to choose instrumental or vocal forces, and compose in a style that they are familiar with.

Avoid structured template approaches to composition. For example, you must not set any 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

This would go beyond the acceptable amount of reasonable assistance.

Candidates must:

- Submit a score or performance plan of their composition. They will receive 0 marks for their composition if they do not. 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 consisting of

screenshots of a digital audio workstation, which may include only names of instruments, and 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.

- Show the chords in their performance plan if they are writing a song with lyrics.
- Notate any parts written in TAB, which they can do with most notation software. An instrumental part written as TAB only will receive 0 marks.
- If using pre-recorded loops, ensure they use them in the context of a wider composition. They must clearly identify their creative input in their composing review — for example, by stating if they created some or all of the loops, or sourced them from elsewhere.
- If composing a serial piece, annotate all note rows in their score. They will receive 0 marks if not all note rows are annotated. Candidates should refer to how they have explored and developed their rows in their composing review.
- Use harmony in their composition. Bagpipe drones alone do not sufficiently show use of harmony. They will receive 0 marks for a piece that has no harmony.

Composing review

You should:

- Ensure that candidates' composing reviews are in the one-page mandatory template available on [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 with spaces for candidates to insert one or two words.

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 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 and structure.
- Include how they explored and developed their musical ideas. They should give musical detail.
- Include their strengths and/or areas for improvement. These should 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.

We provide additional guidance about the assignment in the [common questions](#).

Performance

You should familiarise yourself with the performance sections in the course specification, which you can find on [our website](#).

You should also refer to the information for teachers and lecturers document for visiting assessment. This is published on [our secure site](#) and issued alongside the candidate mark sheets in January.

We provide additional guidance about performance in the common questions.