Chief Examiner Report

NCFE Level 3 Applied General in Music Technology (601/6779/8)

Assessment window: 28 January - 27 February 2019

Assessment: Practical

Paper Number: P000761

This report contains information in relation to the external assessment from the Chief Examiner, with an emphasis on the standard of learner work within this assessment window.

The aim is to highlight where learners generally perform well as well as any areas where further development may be required.

Key points:

- grading information
- administering the external assessment
- standard of learner work
- Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment
- referencing of external assessment tasks
- evidence creation
- interpretation of the tasks and associated assessment criteria
- planning in the external assessment.

It is important to note that learners should not sit the external assessment until they have taken part in the relevant teaching of the full qualification content.

Grade Boundary Information

Each learner's external assessment paper is marked by an Examiner and awarded a raw mark. During the awarding process, a combination of statistical analysis and professional judgement is used to establish the raw marks that represent the minimum required standard to achieve each grade. These raw marks are outlined in the table below.

Max Mark	Distinction	Merit	Pass	NYA
60	47	34	22	0

Grade boundaries represent the minimum raw mark required to achieve a certain grade. For example, if the grade boundary for the Pass grade is 25, a minimum raw mark of 25 is required to achieve a Pass.

Maximum UMS Score*	Distinction	Merit	Pass	NYA
150	97.5	82.5	67.5	0

** In order to ensure that levels of achievement remain comparable for the same assessment across different assessment windows, all raw marks are converted to a points score based on a uniform mark scale (UMS). For more information about UMS and how it is used to determine overall qualification grades, please refer to the qualification specification.*

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Administering the External Assessment

The external assessment is invigilated and must be conducted in line with our Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment. Learners may require additional pre-release material in order to complete the Tasks within the paper. These must be provided to learners in line with our Regulations.

Learners must be given the resources to carry out the Tasks and these are highlighted within the Qualification Specific Instructions Document (QSID).

Standard of learner work

This was the third external assessment window for the qualification, with a growing number of learners entered. A small number of learners had entered as a re-sit following the summer 2018 window.

Assessed learner work spanned the full range of available grades. The majority of learners in this session provided creditable submissions, both in terms of audio outcome and process evidence by responding to each section of the paper.

Clear planning, use of musical elements and review were less well undertaken by some learners than practical activities. In some cases this had affected the overall outcome for the learner.

A minority of learners did not produce creditable evidence in one or more tasks, and these submissions tended to suggest limited technical knowledge.

Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment

Malpractice

There were no reported instances of malpractice in this assessment window. The Chief Examiner would like to take this opportunity to advise learners that instances of malpractice (for example, copying of work from another learner) will affect the outcome on the assessment.

Maladministration

No instances of maladministration were reported in this assessment window. The Chief Examiner would like to highlight the importance of adhering to the Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment document in this respect.

Referencing of external assessment tasks

Learners should clearly reference submitted materials to the external assessment task for which they are intended to provide evidence. In this session the majority of learners had referenced their work, producing a mixture of hard copy (including word processed and hand written work) and electronic submissions.

Examples of good practice in electronic submissions included folders for each task, containing word-processed evidence and audio files as required.

If hard copy of written work is printed from electronic evidence for submission, it should be checked to ensure that content and formatting is as expected. The definitive version of the evidence should be submitted for the purposes of assessment, and duplicates of evidence (for example, a .pdf and .doc version of the same evidence, or the .doc file from which a printed submission is derived) should not be submitted.

Evidence creation

Learners in this session typically produced a mixture of handwritten responses, word-processed documents, screenshots and audio files. Evidence was in genera logically presented and relevant to the given tasks.

Word processed work was in many cases appropriately presented in PDF form, as suggested by the external assessment instructions. The Chief Examiner advises that submissions should be rendered to PDF to ensure that formatting and embedded graphics files are displayed correctly. If electronic document types other than PDF are used, learners should be aware that software versions and compatibility could potentially mean that documents are not displayed as intended, and that information could be lost.

Some word-processed documents were submitted in formats not approved by NCFE (for example, as Apple Pages documents). Learners should take care to ensure that files are submitted in a format approved by NCFE to ensure that work can be opened by examiners and assessed without delay.

DAW files and / or project folders were sent as evidence in some learner submissions. Learners should note that DAW files will not be accepted as evidence in this assessment. The Chief Examiner would therefore like to discourage the practice of including DAW files and / or project folders.

When screenshots are used, they should be accompanied with annotation to explain the intent and details shown within the graphic. Screenshots that are not referenced or explained in text are unlikely to provide useable assessment evidence.

The majority of audio files were presented as an appropriate type (.wav, .mp3 and.aiff). Tasks 3,4 and 5 require stereo audio mixdowns, and omission of these files is likely to diminish the available credit in these tasks. Learners should be aware of CD standard as 44.1kHZ /16bit, particularly with reference to Task 5 where the use of correct audio formats forms part of the assessment.

It is important to listen back to audio files to ensure that they have exported as intended from the DAW to avoid export errors impacting upon assessment.

Very few learners had used screencasts as evidence in this session. This evidence form is acceptable and may be useful for some learners in allowing spoken commentary to be recorded. The Chief Examiner advises that for screencasts to be most effective in terms of assessment the audio from both the learners' microphone and DAW should be recorded.

The Chief Examiner would like to stress that where screencasts are used as evidence that they should be concise and focused upon generation of evidence against a specific task.

Responses of the Tasks within the Sections of the external assessment paper

Section 1

In this section the learners were required to plan how they would undertake the remix task, based on the given audio and MIDI files. The learners were asked to explain their planning in the context of parameters set within the task and their own creative intent.

The musical style of the remix was not specified in this session, which led to learners approaching the remix for a number of different stylistic directions. Learners who performed well tended to clearly define the intended style of the remix to inform musical decisions.

Some learners produced plans that considered stylistic use of all musical elements in detail. However, learners were generally more confident in planning rhythmic, structural and instrumental features. Melodic and harmonic ideas were often less specific when linked to style and the audio/MIDI material, with few learners considering key signature, chord progressions and melodic patterns using appropriate terminology.

Inconsistency in knowledge and understanding of key musical features of the source material and the intended style in some cases impacted upon the outcome in this section, and upon the ability of learners to develop coherent musical material in the following sections.

The task asks for a minimum of 16 tracks to be used, and that these should be a combination of software instrument / MIDI and audio tracks. A detailed plan should therefore clearly show how the learner anticipates that the track count will be fulfilled. It is important that learners demonstrate usage of sufficient numbers of tracks in order to achieve.

A length of between 3 minutes 40 seconds and 5 minutes was specified for the remix, which the majority of learner submissions met. Learners who achieved well tended to be able to relate track and time parameters to musical development in their initial plan, which allowed them to undertake practical work with confidence.

A clear and detailed plan in this section tended to allow learners to produce more focused work in subsequent sections of the assessment.

Section 2

In this section learners were required to develop original sounds, including one synth patch and one sampler patch for use in their remix. The majority of learners had created a synth patch and a sampler patch using software instruments to meet the basic task requirement.

Learners who performed well tended to have produced original patches with clear intentions with regards to texture, style and musical purpose and were able to explain the editing process in developing the sounds in detail and using appropriate terminology.

Synth patches were generally based on variations of (software based) subtractive synthesis, and many learners were able to relate the use of components (for example – oscillators, filters, envelope generators and modulators) to the intended outcome.

The creation of sampler patches was generally less confident and many learners did not make use of more advanced sampler functions (e.g. looping, velocity splits). Successful learners were able to demonstrate basic key mapping, although fewer considered tuning of samples relative to mapping which led to some less musical results. A number of learners made creative use of sampling, for example by developing vocal harmonies, resampling drum sounds or taking elements of the supplied material and manipulating into a more abstract texture.

The use of annotated screenshots helped learners illustrate the work undertaken in this section.

Learners who performed less well in this section tended to rely on pre-set patches and in some cases loops, which did not allow them to access the full range of the mark scheme. A minority of learners had not demonstrated appropriate skills or knowledge, for example by confusing creation of a patch with application of effects to a pre-set.

Few learners made reference to saving patches independently of the DAW project. Saving patches would be good practice in ensuring accurate playback and portability, and would avoid issues of patches not playing back correctly in the remix.

Section 3

In this section the learners were required to demonstrate the use of MIDI and audio editing tools in developing their remix.

Learners who achieved this section tended to be able to apply a range of editing tools, showing clear intent to meet a planned outcome. Successful learners typically applied editing correctively and creatively (for example - by removing unwanted audio, pitch tuning, corrective quantise, application of velocity to create ‘feel’, use of crossfades to tidy audio edits).

Learners who performed less well in this section tended to use a more limited range of tools in less sophisticated ways. Whilst evidence often showed application, learners did not always demonstrate thought given to intentions in using the tools. As in the previous external assessment windows, few learners chose to make use of pitch bend or MIDI controllers to enhance areas of programming.

A minority of learners appeared unfamiliar with basic editing tools and terminology, in some cases struggling to apply corrective tools. This lack of knowledge to tended to limit achievement in this section of the assessment.

Annotated screenshots provided learners with opportunity to evidence use of editing, for example by discussion of ‘before’ and ‘after’.

Learners were required to produce a stereo audio mix as part of the evidence for this section, and the majority of learners achieved this. A significant minority of learners however did not create a mix at this point, which impinged on the creditable evidence available to examiners.

The Chief Examiner would like to stress the importance of listening back to mixes to ensure that they are free from errors (for example missing audio, solo’d or muted tracks and output distortion) which may adversely affect the audio and therefore the outcome.

Section 4

In this section learners were required to apply tools and techniques to create a final mixdown of their work.

Leaners who performed well in this section tended to have approached all required areas of processing (EQ, effects, dynamics, balance and automation) and considered application of tools and techniques to meet an intended outcome.

Some learners had made imaginative use of EQ, effects, dynamics and automation in their mixes to refine stylistically and add interest. Learners working at this level tended to consider editing of tools in technical and musical terms in context with the remix.

Learners who performed less well in this section tended to be less comfortable in the use of dynamics processing and EQ in creating a mix, and often did not fully consider the use of bussing in effects. Some learners relied heavily on the application of EQ and dynamic processing pre-sets, which were not always sonically effective and showed limited evidence of intent and understanding.

Notably a number of learners applied side chain compression effectively and creatively. However, some learners appeared to apply this technique with little regard for the musical outcome, sometimes resulting in erratic balance. Similarly many learners made musical use of volume and panning automation, but a small number of learners applied automation with seemingly limited intent and often inconsistent results.

Learners were required to create a stereo audio file of the mix. As elsewhere in the submission learners should take care to listen back to the exported stereo audio file to check for errors.

As in Section 3 minority of learners had not provided a stereo audio file of the mix. Learners should be aware that credit is likely to be lost for omission of this required evidence.

Section 5

In this section learners were required to produce two mastered stereo audio files. The intention of this task is to allow learners to consider appropriate audio file formats for specific contexts (for example, a CD production master and a master for streaming) and apply tools to achieve the best result.

The majority of learners had made use of this section to apply mastering processing, usually via plug ins inserted on the stereo output of the DAW.

Learners who performed well tended to apply subtle and appropriate processing including EQ, compression and limiting based on specific intentions to enhance the mix. A number of learners had made considered use of metering plug ins to consider bandwidth and phase.

Learners who performed less well in this section tended to be less focused in application of processing, sometimes leading to output level issues or significant detrimental processing in terms of EQ and dynamics (for example, significant reduction in clarity, dynamic range and introduction of distortion). Some learners relied heavily on application of pre-sets with limited consideration of the sonic effect upon the material, and provided little evidence of intent.

As in Sections 3 and 4, learners should take care to listen back to the resultant stereo audio files and particularly consider if the audio has been enhanced by the mastering applied.

As in previous sessions a number of learners supplied files that would not be immediately suitable for CD production in terms of bit depth and/or sample rate.

A minority of learners had not provided two mastered files. Learners should be aware that omission of this required evidence is likely to result in loss of credit in this section.

Section 6

In this section learners were required to review the process and outcome of producing the remix.

The majority of learners had approached this section logically and set out their response to each area required by the task. A minority of learners did not consider all required areas of the evaluation, which tended to limit available credit.

Learners who performed well in this section tended to be able to consider their work based on evidence produced in previous sections using appropriate evaluative and technical language.

Learners who had produced less detailed planning and developmental evidence in Sections 1-5 tended to produce less focused commentary.

A minority of learners did not provide any evidence in response to this section, which potentially significantly limited achievement. Learners should consider the suggested time allocation for each section of the assessment to inform planning and ensure that the available 10 hours are used effectively.

Chief Examiner: Graham Lees
Date: 17 April 2019
