

NCFE Level 1 Technical Award in Music Technology (601/6777/4)

NCFE Level 2 Technical Award in Music Technology (601/6774/9)

Assessment window: 11 March 2019 - 15 March 2019

Assessment: Practical

Paper Number: P000729

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	Level 2 Distinction	Level 2 Merit	Level 2 Pass	Level 1 Distinction	Level 1 Merit	Level 1 Pass	NYA
36	27	21	15	12	10	8	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.

Max UMS Score	Level 2 Distinction	Level 2 Merit	Level 2 Pass	Level 1 Distinction	Level 1 Merit	Level 1 Pass	NYA
140	112	98	84	56	42	28	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.*

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

The majority of learners attempted all sections of the assessment. However, some learners had produced very limited evidence. In some cases learner work indicated time management issues in not responding to all elements of the assessment.

Learners should consider the time requirements against indicated suggestions in each section. Typically, learners had not approached tasks in the latter part of the assessment, suggesting that they had run out of time. A minority of learners who did not attempt any element were clearly not sufficiently prepared to undertake the external assessment.

It is recommended that learners build confidence in preparing for the external assessment by sitting the available practice papers in appropriate conditions, to become familiar with the structure and time demands of the assessment.

Learners who achieved well, tended to have attempted all tasks within each section and provided logically presented documentary work demonstrating knowledge and application of skills. Audio files tended to demonstrate technical and musical attention to detail. Some learners had provided detailed explanative and evaluative work, which typically indicated confidence in completing tasks. Detailed written work was often reinforced by usefully considered screenshots showing detail of editing.

Learners who achieved less well, tended not to have completed all tasks, or to have not supplied appropriate evidence of completion. Some submissions gave limited identification of activities, and often did not consider the application of tools or indicated the learners creative intentions.

It is recommended that learners make themselves aware of the specific evidence requirements for each section, and consider how best to present evidence that accurately reflects their knowledge and skills.

Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment

Malpractice

There were 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

There were instances of maladministration 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 and the Qualification Specific Instructions for Delivery documents in this respect.

There has been reported instances whereby learners have accessed audio files from previous assessment and then used in order to respond to the current brief. Importing the incorrect audio files will affect being able to successfully complete tasks.

Referencing of external assessment tasks

As in previous assessments learners tended to have produced a mixture of hard copy and electronic submissions. The majority of learners had chosen to produce word-processed evidence rather than make use of the supplied paper log, which is completely acceptable and may benefit some learners.

Examiners noted that referencing of evidence was generally somewhat improved in this session, but some notably instances of poor referencing were observed. Word-processed documents, screenshots and audio files for example, were not always labelled in line with instructions, which sometimes presented difficulties in terms of crediting the evidence.

All evidence should be referenced to the specific task that it seeks to address, in accordance with the instructions given in the paper. The Chief Examiner would like to take this opportunity to remind learners of the importance of correctly labelling files, both in terms of undertaking an external assessment and more generally as a music technologist.

Examples of good practice in electronic submissions included clearly named folders for each section of the assessment. However, multiple sub folders should be avoided.

If hard copy is produced from electronic submissions (i.e. word-processed work is printed for submission) it should be checked prior to submission to ensure that the content is as intended.

Learners should submit only definitive versions of evidence. Multiple versions of electronic or hard copy evidence are not useful in providing accurate assessment. It is strongly suggested that learners make use of the supplied checklist within the assessment to ensure that all required evidence is in place, and that duplicate files or otherwise unacceptable materials are removed from the submission.

Evidence creation

Many learners had presented word-processed responses to document their work. It is advised best practice would be to save word-processed documents as PDFs to ensure that formatting (and any embedded graphics) are displayed as intended.

If document types other than .PDF are used, learners should be aware software versions and compatibility may potentially affect the file opened by the Examiner. As in the previous session, there was an increase in the number of PDF documents submitted, and consequently fewer evidence issues.

Learners must ensure submitted files are in an acceptable file format listed. If files are saved in a format which is not accepted then work may not be assessable or marked.

The screenshots required within tasks are intended to provide evidence of activities for Examiners, so that the learners' work can be credited appropriately. Screenshots should be regarded as complementary to the written evidence to enhance meaning.

Learners are advised not to submit screenshots without further written work or annotations, as marks that can be achieved without explanation are potentially limited. In this session screenshots were generally improved in terms of providing useful information. Best practice for project screenshots would be to include all elements of the screen, along with annotations to indicate work undertaken.

Screenshots which do not show details relevant to the tasks, or are indistinct due to poor quality / size do not generally provide evidence which aids Examiners in crediting learners.

As in the previous session the Chief Examiner was pleased to note that many learners had incorporated additional screenshots into their work (for example, showing detail of software instrument or effects editing) which very often allowed Examiners to find creditable evidence. The Chief Examiner would encourage learners to consider what each screenshot is intended to show in terms of evidence, and present accordingly.

Learners who achieved well in written responses tended to write concisely using appropriate technical language, demonstrating knowledge and intent. Learners who achieved less well tended to provide limited explanations, or simply identified activities using wording given in the task. It is recommended that learners should attempt to evidence what skills were employed, how tools were used and what the intention was in undertaking each task.

Examiners were pleased to note that there was some continued reduction in the number of learners submitting DAW files (for example, Logic / Cubase / Reason project folders). However, some learners had submitted files of this type in place of, or in addition to the required evidence. As per assessment instructions, DAW files are not accepted and will therefore not form creditable evidence under any circumstance.

Audio files were generally saved in appropriate formats as listed in the paper (.wav, .aiff, .mp3). Learners should be aware that audio files which are not saved in accepted formats may be disregarded as evidence.

Production of stereo mixdowns in this session was generally improved from previous sessions. Learners who achieved well in these task elements followed instructions and exported the full length of the song for all three mixes.

Some common technical and musical errors in stereo mixdowns which potentially limited learner achievement included :-export of individual regions only (for example, a copied drum part only), inappropriately applied muting and soloing (for example, instruments not muted as required by the task or only one instrument audible), truncated start or end (for example, material cut from start of the song or delay tails cut off), inaccurately set locators (resulting in only a portion of the song being exported) and noticeable distortion.

Learners should listen back to their mixes to check that the outcome is as intended, in line with all work undertaken as a music technologist.

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

Section 1

In this section learners were asked to configure the DAW project, including the import of the supplied audio and MIDI files.

Learners who achieved well in this section were able to complete practical work effectively and provide commentary for each element of the tasks. Learners who achieved less well tended to not fully complete configuration tasks and / or provide limited evidence of process.

Description of DAW hardware and software was detailed in some submissions, with some learners able to relate the features of their equipment to the task. Learners who achieved less well tended to provide limited description of equipment, or approach the task from a hypothetical viewpoint (for example, by describing the purpose of a DAW, but not referencing the specific equipment that they were using).

Learners were typically able to identify some relevant software features (e.g. track types, editing tools, processing) but appeared less confident in regards to hardware. Learners did not always describe setup of the audio output, which tended to suggest limited knowledge of hardware configuration.

The majority of learners were able to create the correct number of tracks, select appropriate track types and correctly set the tempo. A small number of learners did not create software instrument tracks, which in some cases led to no playback of the supplied MIDI file.

A minority of learners adjusted tempo following import of audio, which in some software resulted in instances of audio tempo shifting, and some subsequent misalignment of audio and MIDI parts. Learners should be aware of potential for large scale changes to audio, given the increasingly powerful audio editing facilities available within software.

Screenshots showing the entire DAW arrangement page and clear file alignment were helpful to examiners in crediting learner work in this section.

As per previous assessments, the most common issue noted by examiners in this section was learners misaligning files upon import. Learners did not always align the tracks correctly to the given start point, which led to issues in terms of correct bar reference points in later sections. Some learners misunderstood the task and cut audio files inappropriately (for example, cutting portions of audio files away) which resulted in musical and technical problems.

A very small minority of learners chose not to engage with the supplied material in any meaningful way and instead made use of their own loops. This allowed for very limited credit in terms of the assessment.

Appropriate software instrument patches were generally selected by learner, although the choice of sound was not always explained which tended to impact upon available marks. Learners who achieved well tended to be able to consider the part in context, apply knowledge of software instruments and use aural skills to make a musically pleasing selection.

Some learners had not selected patches, or had not routed the audio output of the software instrument to the mix, which meant that the part was inaudible. A minority of learners had selected unpitched or monophonic patches, which were not musically or technically appropriate for the supplied chordal part.

Section 2

In this section, learners were asked to edit the supplied material using audio and MIDI tools.

Learners who achieved well in this section tended to have completed editing tasks successfully and clearly documented the processes undertaken. Learners who achieved less well tended not to have completed all tasks or applied tools with inaccurate results.

Some learners had explained the editing processes undertaken in detail, with reference to specific tools and demonstrating considered use, often with illustrative annotated screenshots. Learners who achieved less well generally provided limited description of activities or merely affirmed that the task was undertaken by repeating the wording of the activity given in the assessment.

2a. The majority of learners were able to use audio editing to move or copy hi-hat parts into time. Many learners used copy and paste to lift the previous bar, with some learners refining this by adding a fade to remove unwanted cymbal wash. Some learners had been able to apply sophisticated editing techniques, including audio quantise / flex time to move the parts.

Not all learners were able to recognise the timing issues, or apply editing correctly. A minority of learners applied editing but moved the parts unmusically (for example, by applying audio quantise to the nearest bar). In this case learners were credited for some knowledge of methods, but available marks for application and outcome were more limited.

2b. Many learners were able to use MIDI tools to change the pitch of notes within the supplied organ part. Learners could most typically aurally identify the incorrect notes, but were not always able to consider this in appropriate musical terms – making correction of notes a process of trial and error. Learners who achieved well in this task were able to consider the notes in context and apply MIDI editing to reach the desired musical outcome. Some learners were unable to identify the incorrect pitches, and did not attempt to apply editing. A minority of learners attempted to use inappropriate tools (for example, by applying pitch correction or pitch shifting plugins) often with somewhat unmusical results.

2c. The majority of learners responded to this task by applying appropriate audio tools to copy and paste a drum part. Some learners were able to make use of more sophisticated editing techniques (e.g. use of marquee tool and crossfades) and documented intent in the use of tools. Learners who achieved less well in this task tended to have cut the audio an incorrect point, or copied the part to an incorrect starting point (typically placing the copy on the first beat of the bar, rather than beat 2 as required by the task).

2d. Learners had generally submitted a stereo audio file in response to this task. Learners who achieved well correctly exported the entirety of the song with parts muted as detailed in the task, showing process. Some learners did not appear confident in applying muting to tracks, leaving all parts playing. A minority of learners produced inappropriately long or short audio files (cutting material off, or with long periods of silence at the end of the track).

Examiners noted that fewer distortion issues from inappropriately adjusted master outputs than in previous sessions. As elsewhere in this report the Chief Examiner strongly advises learners to check mixdowns for audio issues, as would be expected when working as a music technologist.

Section 3

In this section learners were asked to develop the supplied material by adding a musical part and editing a software instrument to create a new sound for the chordal MIDI part.

Learners who achieved well in this section were able to undertake creative editing and musical development, with documentary evidence of intent and process. Learners who achieved less well tended not to have undertaken software instrument editing or created an appropriate melodic part.

3a. Learners who achieved well in this task tended to be able to undertake editing of instruments at sound generation level (for example, by editing of filters to shape timbre and ADSR to shape the envelope) and explain their intentions in doing so. Learners who achieved less well tended to attempt to edit, often via the application of EQ or Effects plug-ins, with varying degrees of success.

Some learners made no attempt create a new sound, and in some cases did not appear to understand the concept of editing, with some learners simply selecting a new preset patch in response to the task.

Not all learners were able to explain their sound creation choices. Many candidates offered a screenshot to show changes made, but gave no explanation as to what they hoped to achieve in terms of a final sound.

3b. In this task learners were asked to record MIDI data via a controller. Learners who achieved well were able to demonstrate application of note selection and MIDI recording, usually by use of a controller keyboard. A number of learners went on to refine their recordings by use of quantise, which demonstrated knowledge of process.

Some learners did not attempt to make use of a MIDI controller, and in some cases did not appear to be aware of available controllers. In these cases learners generally entered the notes via the mouse, with a minority exploring step time input. The outcome was in many cases musically correct, but learners were limited by not being able to demonstrate knowledge of process.

Although many learners were able to accurately identify an Am chord this was not universal. A number of learners had recorded / input notes with seemingly limited regard for musical outcome.

3c. Examiners noted that more learners had engaged musically with the compositional task in this section than in previous assessments. Learners who achieved well demonstrated useful musical knowledge with reference to the provided harmonic framework, and were able to discuss intent in terms of sound selection and melodic shape. Some interesting and creative parts were in evidence in submissions.

Learners who achieved less well tended to be able to demonstrate limited thought given to planning, which often impacted on the musicality of the outcome.

3d. Not all learners submitted an audio file for this section, which generally impacted available marks. Similar issues were apparent in some submissions as described in commentary regarding task 2b. However, a number of learners had pleasingly refined audio at this stage showing musical and technical consideration.

Section 4

In this section learners were asked to produce a final mix by use of corrective and creative balancing and processing.

Learners who achieved well in this section submitted well considered and balanced audio, often showing creative application of processing, along with clear documentation of intention and application. Learners who achieved less well tended to produce inconsistent audio results with limited evidence of process.

Examiners noted that not all learners had attempted this section, and suggested that this may be due to time management issues on the part of learners. Lack of evidence showing tasks being attempted may have impacted upon available marks.

4a. The majority of learners had chosen to use volume automation to create a short fade at the end of the guitar part, and this was completely acceptable. Some learners had chosen to a fade at audio file level which was also potentially a useful response.

In general learners appeared comfortable in applying volume automation, but where not always so confident in applying panning automation. Some learners had mistakenly applied volume rather than panning automation, or had drawn in data but had bypassed automation. In some cases learners had panned the part to the incorrect side of the stereo field (which suggested that the audio output or headphones were not correctly set).

Learners were not always accurate in applying editing at given points. In the work of some learners there appeared to be misunderstanding of bar and beat references, which sometimes led to less creditable results.

4b. Many learners had successfully applied a delay effect to the vocals via insert of a plugin. Editing of delay settings was not always correctly applied, and in some cases was not explored at all. A minority of learners had applied settings which were detrimental to the outcome (for example, bypassing the plug in so no effect was heard, using 100% wet settings so that only the delay could be heard, incorrectly setting the delay time so as to be much too long or short – ranging from 20mS to 2 seconds and applying the delay plug in across the main stereo output, leading to some confusing mixes).

4c. Some learners did not apply any additional mixing beyond applying static volume balance to their mix. However, learners who achieved well in this task were able to consider and apply mixing techniques to their work. Some learners were able to show clear intent and document technical decisions in creating their mixdown, in some cases extending commentary to further creative application of effects, dynamics processing and EQ.

Examiners were pleased to note that learners working well in this section had often produced creative and contextually pleasing audio outcomes. However, in some cases over processing of the audio or errors of balance had impacted on the success of the final outcome.

As in other sections, the Chief Examiner would like to advise learners to listen back to the audio outcome in line with standard practice as a working music technologist.

Chief Examiner: Graham Lees
Date: 28 April 2019