Chief Examiner Report

NCFE Level 1 Technical Award in in Music Technology (601/6777/4)
NCFE Level 2 Technical Award in in Music Technology (601/6774/9)

Assessment Window: 17 June 2019- 21 June 2019

Assessment: Practical

Paper Number: P000730

This report contains information from the Chief Examiner in relation to the external assessment, 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:

- grade boundary 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

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
400	320	280	240	160	120	80	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 Assessments. 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).

Centres must ensure that access to DAW software and associated hardware is made available to learners during the external assessment.

Standard of Learner Work

This was the fourth external assessment window for the qualification. Learner submissions covered the full range of available grades.

In this session the majority of learners had attempted all sections of the assessment and in most cases produced creditable responses. However, in some cases learners had not attempted all tasks within sections or had not completed the paper in its entirety.

The most common missing responses were in section 4 of the assessment. In these cases it is suggested that some learners did not complete due to running out of time. Learners should consider the time requirements against indicated suggestions in each section and apply these to the assessment.

A small 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 in order to become familiar with the structure and time demands of the assessment.

Learners who achieved well tended to have responded to all tasks in each section and demonstrated knowledge and application of skills in doing so. Some learners had provided detailed explanative and evaluative work, which typically indicated confidence in completing tasks and was often backed up by convincing audio work.

Learners who achieved less well tended not to have completed all sections, or missed significant numbers of tasks within sections. As in previous sessions some submissions suffered from issues with regards to audio files, indicating that learners are still not fully engaging with the process of checking audio outcomes.

It is felt that the overall standard of learner work is increasing in this assessment, as learners become more familiar with the process of the assessment and time demands.

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

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.

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.

Referencing of evidence was generally improved in this session, but some notable instances of poor referencing were observed. Word-processed documents, screenshots and audio files for example, were not always labeled 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 labeling 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 (e.g. 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 accessible 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 and it is therefore suggested that the requested screenshots should be created to show details of tasks undertaken in each section (e.g. in section 1 it would be useful for screenshots to show alignment of imported files, tracks types and tempo setting).

As in the previous session the Chief Examiner was pleased to note that many learners had incorporated additional screenshots into their work (e.g. 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. DAW files should therefore not be included within the submission.

Audio files were generally saved in appropriate formats as listed in the paper (.wav, .aiff, .mp3) although in this session there was an upturn in the number of submissions which did not include appropriate audio files. Learners should be aware that audio files which are not saved in accepted formats may be disregarded as evidence.

Production of stereo mix downs 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.

As in previous sessions some common technical and musical errors were evident in stereo mix downs, which potentially limited learner achievement. This included: export of individual regions only (e.g. a copied drum part only), inappropriately applied muting and soloing (e.g. instruments not muted as required by the task or only one instrument audible), truncated start or end (e.g. material cut from start of the song or reverb / delay tails cut off), inaccurately set locators (resulting in only a portion of the song being exported) and noticeable distortion.

A small minority of learners had exported as two mono files (left and right of stereo mix) which was not fully creditable as evidence.

Learners should consider that as music technologists the practical audio outcome is extremely important. Learners should therefore listen back to their mixes to check that the outcome is as intended at every step.

Responses of the Tasks within 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.

Q1a. 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 (e.g. 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 or processing) but appeared less confident in regards to hardware.

Q1b. The majority of learners were able to create the correct number of tracks, select appropriate track types and correctly set the tempo. Learners did not always describe setup of the audio output, which tended to suggest limited knowledge of hardware configuration.

Q1c. Import of audio and MIDI files was generally improved in this session, with learners importing the given material and aligning correctly at bar 1. A minority of learners, as per previous sessions, imported the audio and MIDI and failed to align correctly leading to timing issues. A small number of learners continued to misread instructions and attempted to align files incorrectly based on a misreading of the instructions. Learners should be aware that it is standard practice for files to be supplied to be aligned from bar 1 for a mixing project, so it is unlikely that more complex alignment will be required.

An appropriate software instrument patch, in this case a piano, was generally selected by learners. 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.

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

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.

A common issue continues to be that some learners do not appear to understand basic musical / sequencing terminology – particularly the term 'bars'. This tends to significantly hamper learners in making accurate editing choices.

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.

Q2a. Many learners were able to accurately identify and rectify the majority of pitching errors in the MIDI part. Learners who achieved well tended to apply musical knowledge to identify the errors and describe how appropriate MIDI tools were used to move notes.

Not all learners were able to identify the pitch issues and had not attempted to change the notes, or had not made correct note choices. In the latter case marks were awarded for description of method and process. A minority of learners had applied inappropriate processing, for example rhythmic quantise or insertion of a pitch correction / pitch shift plug-in. Application of such processing tended to be detrimental to the musical outcome and showed a lack of understanding in regards to basic MIDI editing.

Q2b. Many learners were able to use MIDI editing to change the timing of the cello part to match the audio. Learners who achieved well tended to consider use of available tools and describe how these were applied. Some learners had chosen to use quantise to make the rhythmic changes. However, quantise settings were not always musically applied to achieve the correct rhythm with many learners not referencing the setting used or defaulting to applying semiquaver (16) settings which typically had some unmusical results.

Q2c. The majority of learners were able to make use of audio editing to silence a part and move another. Many learners applied cut / copy / paste tools to the task, although some learners were able to make use of more advanced tools (for example, application of crossfades to the edits). Learners who achieved less well in this task tended to have cut the audio at an incorrect point, or copied the part to an incorrect starting point.

Q2d. Learners had generally submitted a stereo audio file in response to this task as required. Learners who achieved well correctly exported the entirety of the song with parts muted as detailed in the task, showing the process undertaken to do this.

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).

As elsewhere in this report the Chief Examiner strongly advises learners to check mix downs 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.

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 musical part.

Q3a. Learners who achieved well in this task tended to be able to undertake editing of instruments at sound generation level (e.g. 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. This approach was creditable, but often limited in outcome.

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. A number of learners created sounds which did not blend well with the cello part as requested and did not prove useful in regards to task 3b (often lacking the required sustain characteristics).

It is noted that sound creation continues to be an area of weakness for many learners. The Chief Examiner would like to restate the importance of learners being aware of the powerful nature of software instruments in creating new sounds through synthesis and / or sampling.

Q3b. In this task learners were asked to make use of a controller to record in a held MIDI note. Learners who achieved well were able to play in a note and describe the process. A minority of learners did not appear familiar with the concept of recording MIDI (and / or controllers) and choose to draw the note in via edit pages. The outcome was in many cases musically correct, but learners were limited by not being able to demonstrate knowledge of the requested process.

A lack of basic musical knowledge was suggested by some learners being unable to identify the note E1.

Q3c. Not all learners had attempted to create a percussion part in response to the task. However, a variety of interesting parts were created which made use of unpitched and pitched percussion. Not all learners who choose pitched percussion were able to sustain melodic and harmonic ideas, but often had made some creditable attempts. The majority of learners choose to create a drum or hand percussion part, with varying degrees of complexity and stylistic success.

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.

Q3d. 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 2d. 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.

Q4a. 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 on the learners workstations).

Learners were not always accurate in applying editing at given points. As noted elsewhere there appeared to be misunderstanding of bar and beat references, which sometimes led to less creditable results.

Q4b. Many learners were able to apply reverb successfully. However, few learners engaged with the task in terms of considering selection or editing or reverb to match ambience.

A minority of learners had applied settings which were detrimental to the outcome (e.g. 100% wet settings on inserts so only reverb could be heard, or insert of a reverb plugin across the main mix outputs rather than within a channel strip or via a buss).

Q4c. Many learners in this session 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 mix down, in some cases extending commentary to further creative application of effects, dynamics processing and EQ.

Q4d. Not all learners submitted an audio file for this section, which as in other tasks concerned with audio file submissions, impacted on available marks.

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.

Report by: Graham Lees
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