

# Evaluation of the changes to English writing assessment

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## Executive summary

As this research was conducted in the autumn of 2025, there are references to SQA, rather than Qualifications Scotland, throughout.

Beginning in the session 2024–25, SQA tightened the conditions of assessment in National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English writing portfolios to support teachers and lecturers with authenticating learners' work and to improve the reliability of the assessment. These changes mean that there is now a mandatory requirement for learners to complete their first draft during class time, under the supervision of their teacher or lecturer. The associated theory of change (available in the appendix) set out five intended outcomes:

- Educators and learners understand and apply the new requirement consistently.
- Educators feel more confident in authenticating learner work and detecting any anomalies between drafts and final pieces.
- Learners adapt smoothly to supervised drafting, perceiving the process as fair.
- More consistent assessment practices across schools and colleges.
- Stakeholder groups view portfolios as a valid and reliable form of assessment.

This evaluation tested the extent to which these outcomes are being met. It comprised surveys with more than 400 educators and 1,000 learners, in-depth interviews with 10 educators, and a learner focus group.

### **Intended outcome: Educators and learners understand and apply the new requirement consistently**

A large majority of both educator and learner respondents indicated that they understand the new supervision requirements and that these have been fully implemented. However, implementation has varied widely across centres, particularly in relation to supervision, timing, and access to information and communications technology (ICT). Moreover, the main theme to emerge from educator participants is

that implementation has caused significant logistical issues in their centres, leading to a reduction in teaching time and increased workload and stress.

**Intended outcome: Educators feel more confident in authenticating learner work and detecting any anomalies between drafts and final pieces**

A majority of educator respondents suggested that authentication has become easier, as the supervision approach limits the use of artificial intelligence (AI), tutors, and other outside influences. However, several educator participants noted that they were already well practised in authenticating learner work. Some respondents also felt that the new conditions have limited efficacy, with plagiarism, AI use and other unauthorised inputs still possible. A key concern was that AI could be used at multiple stages, particularly at the redraft stage, and that this risk is likely to increase over time as AI capabilities continue to evolve.

**Intended outcome: Learners adapt smoothly to supervised drafting, perceiving the process as fair**

While not a unanimous view, learner respondents generally appeared to adapt smoothly to supervised drafting, with many appreciating the support from teachers and lecturers, the perceived reduction in malpractice, and the allocated time to focus. More than half of learner respondents agreed that supervised drafting was fair. A recurring theme in learner comments was that fairness was increased because all learners completed the first draft under the same conditions, including time allocation and restrictions on external input.

**Intended outcome: Consistent assessment practices across schools and colleges**

Less than a quarter of educator respondents agreed that the changes had increased consistency of practice across centres, making this a significant concern. While there were calls for more prescriptive guidance from Qualifications Scotland, participants also recognised that this is challenging given the diversity of centre contexts. Nonetheless, the reported lack of consistency was widely perceived as unfair and inequitable.

**Intended outcome: Stakeholder groups view portfolios as a valid and reliable form of assessment**

Just under half of educator respondents agreed that the changes had increased reliability. Although not a major theme, some educator participants commented that reliability had improved through easier authentication and consistent supervised drafting across Scotland. However, concerns were also raised about validity, with some educator (and learner) participants feeling that the new requirements limit creativity and constrain natural writing development. There were also repeated calls for a broader rethink of the folio assessment itself, including suggestions that it be incorporated into the exam rather than assessed as coursework.

## Key findings

This section summarises the key findings from this research. Full details and analysis are provided later in the report.

### Educators

Almost all educator respondents agreed that they understand the conditions of assessment, that the requirements are clear, and that they understand what ‘under supervision’ requires. A majority also agreed that the course specification is clear and is useful. However, findings on reliability and authenticating learners’ work were much more split and almost half of respondents disagreed that consistency of practice has increased. Moreover, three-quarters agreed that the changes have caused significant logistical challenges.

**Table 1** summarises the findings from the educator survey quantitative questions. For mean score, 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

**Table 1: Educator survey quantitative questions summary**

Statement	Strongly agree + Agree	Strongly disagree + Disagree	Mean score
I understand the conditions of assessment for the English writing portfolio.	96%	3%	4.5
The requirement for learners to complete a first draft under supervision is clear.	90%	8%	4.3
I understand what ‘under supervision’ requires.	86%	9%	4.3
The changes introduced in 2024–25 increase the reliability of the assessment.	46%	35%	3.1
The course specification is clear.	77%	13%	3.9
The course specification is useful.	63%	18%	3.6
The changes have increased my confidence in authenticating learners’ work.	43%	36%	3.1
The changes have increased consistency of practice across centres.	24%	47%	2.6
The changes have created significant logistical challenges in my centre.	75%	12%	4.1

A range of views were expressed through the educator qualitative comments. At times, these were contradictory. For example, it is notable that a large majority of educator respondents agreed that they understand what 'under supervision' requires, but there were repeated concerns about a lack of consistency across centres. Furthermore, some educators thought that a supervised first draft limited malpractice, while others thought that it could not. Concerns were centred particularly on substantial logistical challenges and the perceived limited efficacy of supervision.

The main benefits of the supervised first draft identified by educators were that it:

- Helps with the authentication of learner work and limits malpractice
- Allocates time to the folio, meaning more submissions within deadlines
- Increases learner commitment to the production of a folio
- Allows for more monitoring and support

The main challenges identified were that the supervised first draft:

- Presents significant logistical challenges, including the reduction of teaching time and increased workload and stress
- Has limited effectiveness in preventing or reducing malpractice
- Disadvantages learners and inhibits their creativity
- Has not been implemented consistently across centres

In other comments, some educators called for the reform or the removal of the folio, with suggestions that it should be conducted under exam conditions or as part of the exam.

## **Learners**

On the whole, learner respondents agreed that they understood the supervision requirement, that it was clearly explained to them, and that it helps teachers and lecturers authenticate learner work. More than half of the learner respondents agreed that the supervision requirement is fair and that it felt supportive. However, almost half agreed that completing the first draft in class felt stressful and that it made it hard for them to do their best work.

**Table 2** summarises the findings from the learner survey quantitative questions. For mean score, 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

**Table 2: Learner survey quantitative questions summary**

Statement	Strongly agree + Agree	Strongly disagree + Disagree	Mean score
I understand the requirement to complete the first draft of my writing portfolio under supervision.	87%	7%	4.2
My teacher or lecturer explained the reasons for this requirement clearly.	86%	5%	4.2
Completing the first draft in class felt supportive.	53%	17%	3.5
Completing the first draft in class felt stressful.	49%	23%	3.4
Completing the first draft in class made it hard for me to do my best work.	44%	26%	3.3
Completing the first draft in class is fair to all learners.	52%	27%	3.3
Completing the first draft in class means that teachers and lecturers can ensure that learners' work is their own.	73%	12%	3.8

Again, a range of views were expressed through the learner qualitative comments, and these were sometimes contradictory. For instance, some thought that producing a first draft under supervised conditions improved focus, while others thought that it made focus more difficult; some thought that it reduced AI use, while others thought that it had no effect.

The main benefits of the supervised first draft identified by learners were that it:

- eliminates or reduces malpractice
- facilitates more immediate support from teachers and lecturers
- improves focus
- provides dedicated time for writing
- increases fairness for all learners
- acts as exam preparation

The main challenges identified were that the supervised first draft:

- is perceived to constrain the time that learners can spend developing their folio
- increases stress
- makes concentrating in a classroom environment difficult
- has a limited effect on the potential for malpractice
- takes up learning time
- means that those who have been absent struggle to catch up

Learners identified the main advantages of assessing writing through coursework instead of an exam as that it:

- is less stressful
- allows learners to fully demonstrate achievement
- allows for more time to develop their writing
- provides an opportunity to improve on their grade
- enables support from teachers and lecturers

## Acknowledgements

The author extends sincere thanks to all the educators and learners who contributed to this evaluation, whether through the survey or by taking part in interviews and the focus group. Grateful acknowledgement is also given to members of the English National Qualification Support Team; the English, Languages and Business Qualifications Team; the Research and Evaluation Team; and the Policy, Analysis and Standards Administration Team for their valuable support and contributions to this work.

## Context

Up until 2021, there was a requirement for learners to submit two pieces of writing for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English. This was reduced to one piece during the pandemic, and this change was made permanent in 2023. The rationale for this was to reduce duplication of assessment and free up time for teaching and learning.

Beginning in the session 2024–25, SQA tightened the conditions of assessment in [National 5](#), [Higher](#) and [Advanced Higher](#) English writing portfolios to support teachers and lecturers with authenticating learners' work and to ensure the reliability of the assessment. These changes mean that there is now a mandatory requirement for learners to complete their first draft during class time, under the supervision of their teacher or lecturer. This enables teachers and lecturers to review learners' first drafts before learners continue to work on them independently. Learners then complete their final piece under some supervision and control, as was previously the case.

The changes were made in response to ongoing feedback from the English teaching profession that, under the previous portfolio assessment conditions, it could be difficult to verify learners' work as their own. There were some concerns related to external input when learners were working on their draft outside of school or college hours. Moreover, more recently, feedback suggested that it was becoming more challenging to ensure that plagiarism hadn't taken place in the portfolios, due to the rapid development of generative AI platforms.

This evaluation explored whether the changes are supporting educators in authenticating learners' work, how centres and learners are managing the changes to the conditions of assessment, and if they are experiencing any significant challenges.

A theory of change is available in the appendix. This gives more detail on the reasons for the change. The intended outcomes were:

- educators and learners understand and apply the new requirement consistently
- educators feel more confident in authenticating learner work and detecting any anomalies between drafts and final pieces
- learners adapt smoothly to supervised drafting, perceiving the process as fair
- more consistent assessment practices across schools and colleges
- stakeholder groups view portfolios as a valid and reliable form of assessment

## **Methodology**

### **Research objectives**

The evaluation aimed to gauge to what extent the changes to the English writing assessment are meeting the expected outcomes detailed above. Specifically:

- How are educators and learners experiencing the change?
- Are centres facing logistical challenges?
- Are educators more confident in authenticating learners' work?
- Is there now more consistent practice across Scotland?
- Do centres understand the new conditions of assessment and their parameters?
- Do the changes maintain the validity of the assessment while increasing reliability?
- What do educators and learners think are the benefits and challenges of the first draft being produced in supervised conditions?
- Do educators find the changes to the course specification useful and clear?

## Research methods

This research took place in the autumn of 2025. A mixed methods approach was taken. Large-scale surveys of learners and educators, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, were followed up by interviews with educators and a focus group with learners to explore the issues in more depth.

## Sampling and recruitment

The surveys used a convenience sampling approach. The learner and educator surveys were distributed to centres via SQA co-ordinators on 28 October. SQA co-ordinators were asked to forward the survey links on to educators who teach National 5, Higher and/or Advanced Higher and learners who are sitting these qualifications. The survey links were also shared via SQA News on 6 November. These surveys remained open until 18 November and generated 1,176 learner responses and 425 educator responses.

The 425 complete educator responses represent around 16% of [English teachers in Scotland](#). The sample size for the learner survey is smaller, and likely to be between 1% and 2%: there were 1,176 complete learner responses, and, in 2025, there were just over 90,800 [National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher English entries](#). While not random samples, the number of responses means that these are likely to be sufficient for indicative analysis.

As shown in **Table 3**, independent schools and FE colleges were slightly over-represented in the educator survey data and independent schools were over-represented in the learner survey data.

**Table 3: 2025 National 5 to Advanced Higher English entries and survey respondents by centre type**

	<b>N5-AH English entries</b>	<b>Learner survey respondents</b>	<b>Educator survey respondents</b>
Local authority school	93%	85%	90%
Independent school	6%	14%	8%
FE college	1%	1%	2%

Source: [SQA attainment statistics](#)

There was also a target of 10 educator interviews. In total, 128 educators submitted their details to indicate that they would be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview to explore the issues in more depth. A random sample was invited to participate. Ten interviews took place with educators from local authority and independent schools.

Additionally, members of the English National Qualification Support Team were asked if they would be interested in hosting a learner focus group as part of the evaluation. One focus group took place with learners from a local authority secondary school. The target had been for two learner focus groups, but, despite interest from another local authority secondary school and an FE college, logistically, these proved too challenging to schedule.

## **Data analysis**

Quantitative data from the surveys was downloaded from SmartSurvey and analysed in Excel to produce descriptive statistics. Furthermore, quantitative questions, which were answered on five-point Likert scales, were converted to numerical values from 1 to 5 for analysis and the mean score for each question was calculated.

Qualitative data from the surveys, interviews and focus groups was analysed using MaxQDA.

A number of qualitative questions were included in the learner and educator surveys. This allowed us to develop a greater depth of understanding of the views of learners

and educators. To build on this qualitative data, we interviewed a range of educators and held a focus group with learners. These followed a semi-structured approach which aimed to allow respondents to freely share their experiences and views without too much direction, while still ensuring that all topics were covered. The resulting qualitative data is intended to illustrate a range of perspectives and is not necessarily fully representative of the wider population. Interviews and the focus group were recorded and non-verbatim transcribed.

Qualitative survey, interview, and focus group data has been analysed using an inductive approach. The researcher analysed these qualitative answers by categorising responses and drawing out themes, producing codes that allowed analysis across responses.

Most analysis of qualitative survey questions is discursive and looks to summarise and discuss the reasons that respondents have provided. Generally, the most commonly cited reasons will be discussed first. Nonetheless, particularly for the qualitative survey data, it is important that we are able to describe the proportion of respondents who share similar views. Therefore, in the qualitative survey analysis, the framework in **Table 4** is used.

**Table 4: Qualitative analysis framework**

<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Unanimous or almost all	100% or almost all participants gave the same answers
A vast majority	Nearly all participants, with a small number still having different views
Most	More than 75% of participants
A majority	More than 50% but fewer than 75%
Many	Nearly 50%
Some	More than 20%
Several	Less than 20%
Few	Less than 10%

## Limitations

The evaluation made use of non-random sampling techniques; respondents and participants selected themselves to take part. It is possible, with any research activity of this type, that those who chose to participate were motivated to do so by having particularly strong opinions that they wished to share. It is also possible that those who chose to take part in this research may not be entirely representative of the wider population; see the note above on sample sizes.

This evaluation is based on participants' perceptions, which are shaped by personal experiences and local context. For example, although many educators reported that they understood the new requirements, responses indicate considerable variation in how these were interpreted and applied, with some evidence that aspects were not implemented as required.

Participants' views are not necessarily objective or universally shared, but they provide meaningful insight into how the supervised first draft of the English writing folio was experienced by educators and learners across centres. Taken together, these perceptions help to illuminate the range of responses to the changes and should be understood in that context.

## Ethics

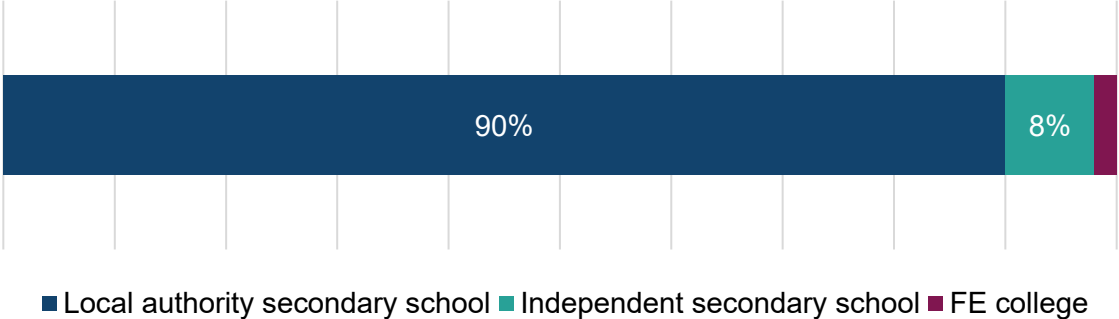
The research was designed to ensure that it was conducted safely and that participants were protected. This included ensuring that the research approach aligned the principles set out in the [Code of Research Practice](#). A Research Project Proposal that outlined the proposed aims, design, analysis and dissemination of the research was presented to the Senior Research Team (SRT). The research did not specifically target vulnerable populations, but because not all participants were aged over 18, it did trigger a full ethical review. After review, the research was approved by the SRT to be conducted.

To ensure the research was being conducted ethically, interview and focus group participants were given detailed information about the research prior to taking part so they could give informed consent. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were made aware that they could stop their participation at any point during data collection. Participants could also choose to withdraw their data up to a week after the interview had been conducted. It was also emphasised to participants that their responses would be completely anonymous and that any information, such as locations, centres, names, or anecdotes that could identify them or others would not be published in the research outputs.

## Educator participants

Of the 425 educator survey respondents, 90% were from local authority secondary schools, 8% from independent schools, and 2% from FE colleges.

**Figure 1: Educator survey respondents' centre type**

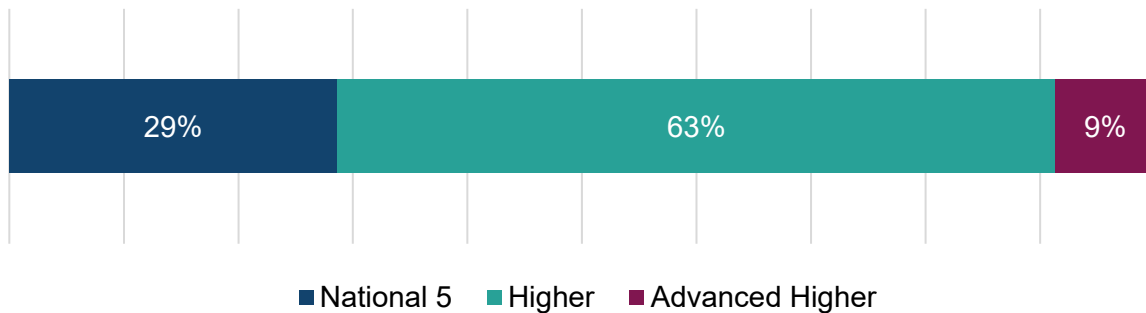


Base: 425 respondents

## Learner participants

Of the 1,176 learner survey respondents, 29% were studying at National 5 level, 63% at Higher, and 9% at Advanced Higher.

**Figure 2: Learner respondents' level of English study in 2025–26**

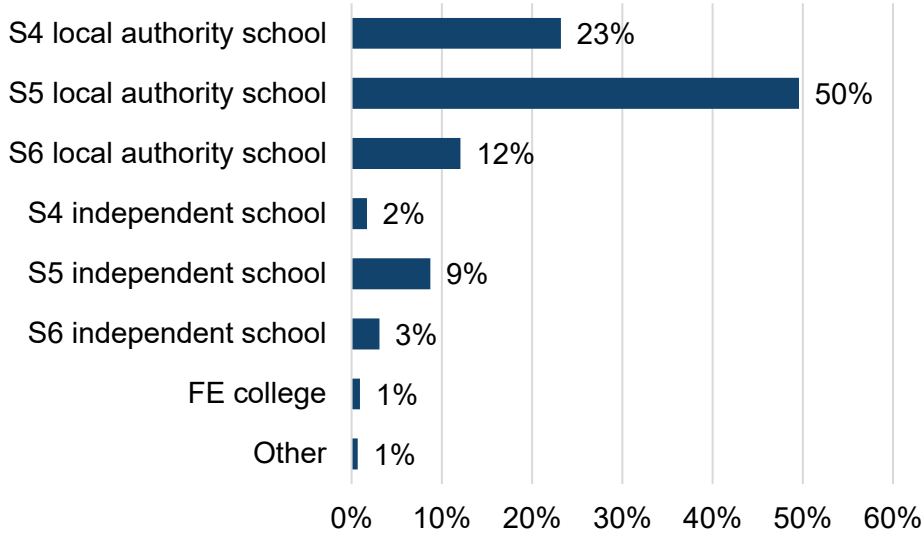


Base: 1,176 respondents

Of the learner survey respondents:

- 50% were in S5 in a local authority school
- 23% were in S4 in a local authority school
- 12% were in S6 in a local authority school
- 9% were in S5 in an independent school
- 3% were in S6 in an independent school
- 2% were in S4 in an independent school
- 1% were studying in an FE college

**Figure 3: Where are you studying this year?**



Base: 1,168 respondents

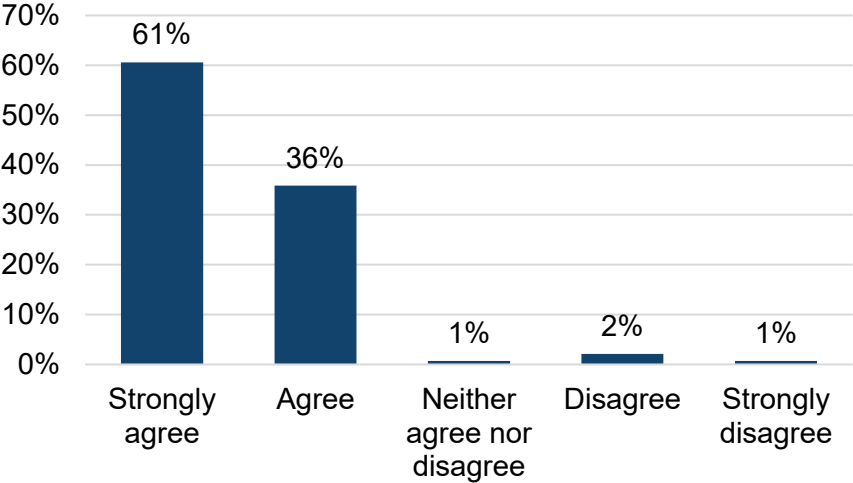
A small number of respondents chose 'other' at this question, but their comments suggested that their centre type would fit into the categories above.

## Findings

### Educator survey

Educator respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, 'I understand the conditions of assessment for the English writing portfolio.' Sixty-one per cent strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 1% neither agreed nor disagreed, 2% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 4.5.

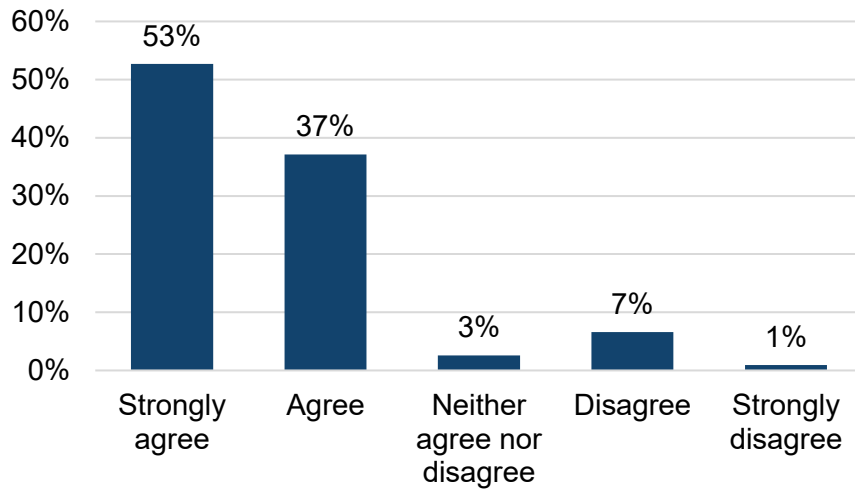
**Figure 4: I understand the conditions of assessment for the English writing portfolio**



Base: 424 respondents

Fifty-three per cent of educator respondents strongly agreed that the requirement for learners to complete a first draft under supervision is clear, while 37% agreed, 3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 7% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 4.3.

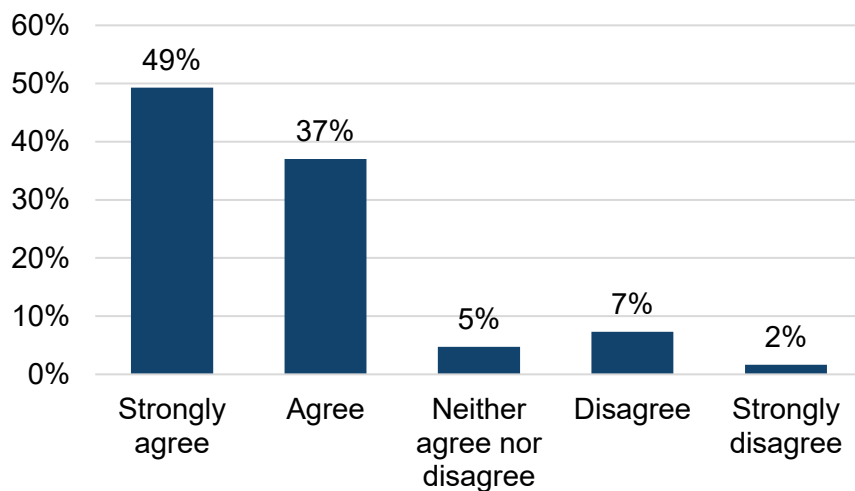
**Figure 5: The requirement for learners to complete their first draft under supervision is clear**



Base: 423 respondents

Relatedly, 49% of educator respondents strongly agreed that they understand what 'under supervision' requires; 37% agreed, 5% neither agreed nor disagreed, 7% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 4.3.

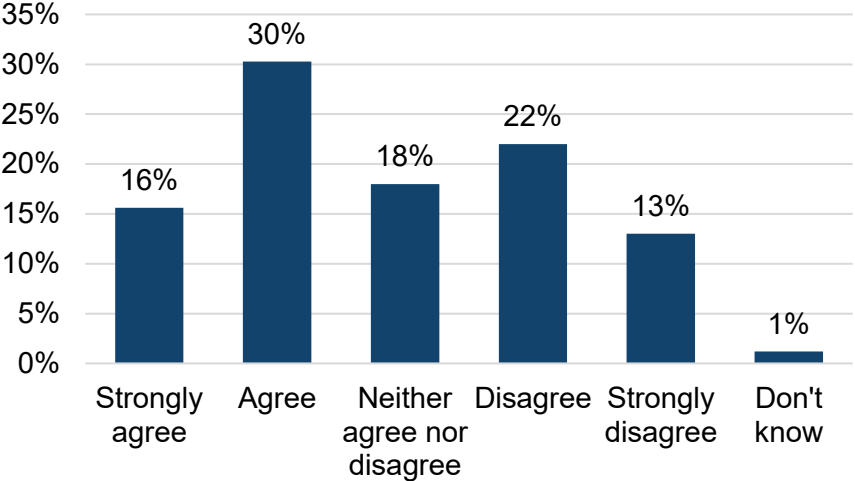
**Figure 6: I understand what 'under supervision' requires**



Base: 424 respondents

When asked the extent to which they agreed that the changes introduced in 2024–25 increase the reliability of the assessment, 16% of educator respondents strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 18% neither agreed nor disagreed, 22% disagreed, and 13% strongly disagreed. One per cent said that they did not know. Excluding the ‘don’t know’ responses, the mean score for this question was 3.1.

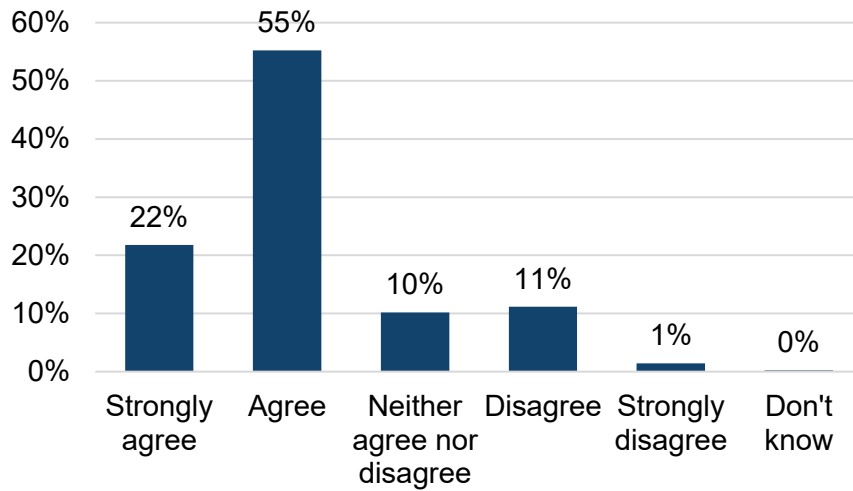
**Figure 7: The changes introduced in 2024–25 increase the reliability of the assessment**



Base: 424 respondents

Educator respondents were asked questions about the course specification. When asked the extent to which they agreed it was clear, 22% strongly agreed, 55% agreed, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed, 11% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. Only one respondent said that they did not know. Excluding the ‘don’t know’ response, the mean score for this question was 3.9.

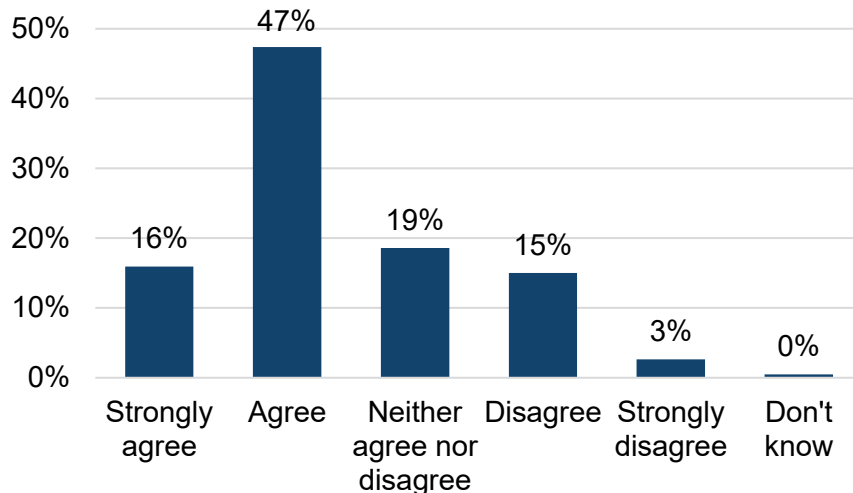
**Figure 8: The course specification is clear**



Base: 422 respondents

Sixteen per cent of educator respondents strongly agreed that the course specification is useful, while 47% agreed, 19% neither agreed nor disagreed, 15% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. Only two respondents said that they did not know. Excluding the 'don't know' responses, the mean score for this question was 3.6.

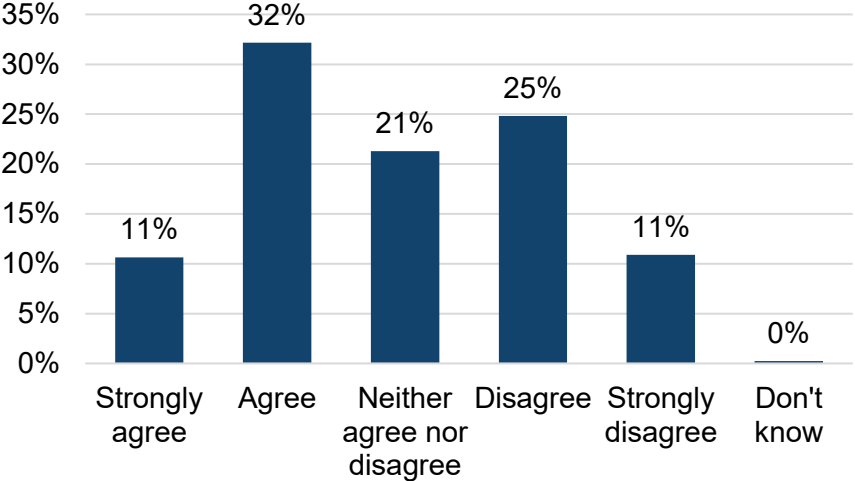
**Figure 9: The course specification is useful**



Base: 420 respondents

Educator respondents were then asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, 'The changes have increased my confidence in authenticating learners' work.' Eleven per cent strongly agreed, 32% agreed, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 25% disagreed, and 11% strongly disagreed. One respondent said that they did not know. Excluding the 'don't know' response, the mean score for this question was 3.1.

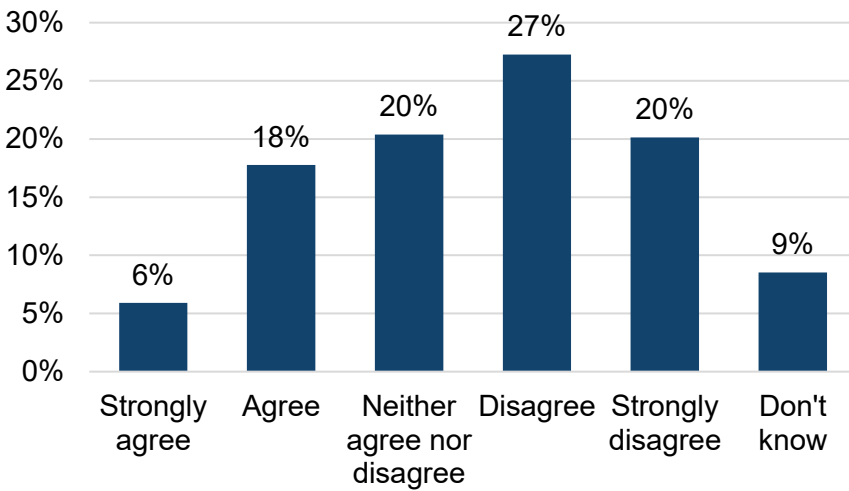
**Figure 10: The changes have increased my confidence in authenticating learners' work**



Base: 423 respondents

Six per cent of educator respondents strongly agreed that the changes have increased consistency of practice across centres, while 18% agreed, 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, 27% disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed. Nine per cent did not know. Excluding the 'don't know' responses, the mean score for this question was 2.6.

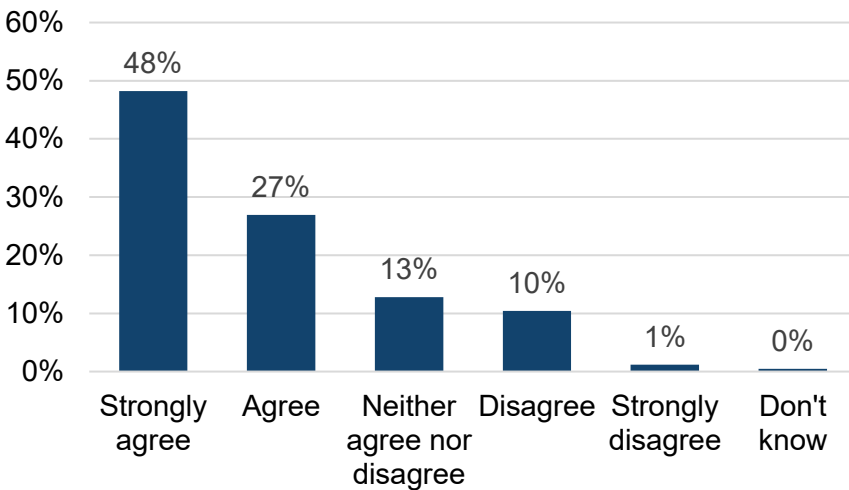
**Figure 11: The changes have increased consistency of practice across centres**



Base: 422 respondents

Forty-eight per cent of educator respondents strongly agreed that the changes have created significant logistical challenges in their centre, while 27% agreed, 13% neither agreed nor disagreed, 10% disagreed, and 1% disagreed. Two respondents said that they did not know. Excluding the 'don't know' the mean score for this question was 4.1.

**Figure 12: The changes have created significant logistical challenges in my centre**



Base: 423 respondents

## Benefits

In an open-text question, educator respondents were asked about what benefits they had observed from the new conditions of assessment. There were comments from 354 respondents; frequently comments covered more than one topic.

Some respondents suggested that there were no benefits. While most of these simply stated 'none', others cited issues such as that the supervision of the first draft created logistical issues or did not prevent malpractice. These topics are covered further in the section on challenges.

### Authentication of learner work

A majority of respondents to this question suggested that a benefit of the new conditions of assessment was that it was easier to authenticate learners' work, as it prevents or reduces the use of AI, tutors and other outside influences.

*There is a lower chance of issues with AI and plagiarism. There is also less opportunity for private tutors to be involved in the folio first draft.*

*The benefits are that it is easy to see pupils are working independently and not using online tools or tutors to help them write their first draft.*

*We can verify the first draft is actually the student's own.*

According to a few respondents, the level of supervision, combined with greater consistency across centres, led to a more reliable assessment.

*Standardising the assessment across centres is a huge benefit.*

*Increased reliability of assessment.*

Related to this, a small number of respondents said that this was something that had already been in place in their centre, so they were pleased about its wider introduction. Equally, a small number of respondents said that a benefit was increased learner and parent and carer awareness about plagiarism and AI usage.

*We already completed a form of supervised essay writing before this was brought in, so I am glad that it has been formalised.*

*New conditions engineer more conversations around the importance of authenticity.*

A few respondents said that a benefit was having a record of learner writing and a few also suggested that completing the first draft in class was fairer for all learners.

*It helps level the playing field for pupils who have difficult home environments which impact their ability to work at home.*

*It creates a more level playing field, as we are able to prevent [the involvement of] tutors/ siblings/ AI.*

## **Allocated time**

Some respondents felt that having class time allocated to the first draft was beneficial, as it has led to more learners submitting their folios on time and meeting deadlines independently, reducing the need for educators to chase up late or missing work.

*Almost 100% on time submissions.*

*Work is completed in a timely manner without excessive chasing of late or missed work.*

*It does increase the likelihood of getting a folio piece from every student.*

## **Increased learner commitment**

Several respondents argued that the change to conditions of assessment means that learners now take the folio writing process more seriously. According to these respondents, completing the first draft under supervision has strengthened learner commitment, leading to greater accountability, sharper focus, and a heightened sense of the task's importance.

*For some learners, the increased seriousness of [the] first draft has led them to apply themselves more at this early stage.*

*The pupils, now with a specific deadline to be ready, seem to be taking it more seriously.*

*Having a writing period in school gave the folio more prestige; candidates were clear in their understanding that this was an important piece of work that holds weight.*

*Completing the draft in controlled conditions in class seemed to help pupils focus and concentration ... This was an added and unexpected benefit.*

## **Monitoring and support**

A few respondents reported that the supervised drafting time allowed them to monitor learners' progress more effectively, giving greater awareness of individual strengths, weaknesses and emerging difficulties. As a result, these educators feel better able to provide timely support, and learners themselves are more likely to ask for help when they need it.

*Having them complete the first draft of their essay in the class has allowed me to give them support and also allowed me to see what they are capable of.*

*With pupils writing in front of you, there is the opportunity to check in with them and answer any queries as they work.*

## **Challenges**

In an open-text question, educator respondents were asked about the challenges they had observed under the new conditions of assessment. A total of 388 respondents provided comments, with many addressing more than one issue. Many respondents expressed strong views, particularly regarding the logistical challenges created by the requirement for supervised drafting.

A small number of respondents suggested that there were no challenges, and a small number mentioned perceived issues around the marking of folios, not directly related to this research.

## **Logistical issues**

Many respondents highlighted the loss of teaching and learning time now allocated to folio writing. There were strong concerns that this has squeezed other areas of the course, making it challenging to cover all required content.

*It eats into learning and teaching time: each class is losing at least a week's worth of teaching time to write these under supervision, and if they do more than one genre, then that time is multiplied once or twice over.*

*It has become extremely difficult to teach the other components of the course, due to the class time taken up by supervised folio work.*

Some stated that this also has a knock-on effect on the types of content covered.

*Teachers are still expected to deliver the same amount of learning and teaching while somehow timetabling many periods during the year for folio work. This naturally means that the RUAE, SST, and Critical Essay components of the course are rushed, and shorter texts are now often preferred.*

Likewise, a few respondents suggested that the requirement had narrowed the writing styles that learners experience.

*The amount of class time needed for this impacts the teaching of other areas and also forces schools to only complete one folio piece. ... It is important that students are given the experience of writing different styles: it is supposed to be a portfolio and there should still be a requirement that they work on both discursive and creative styles. This now forces schools to focus ... on one.*

*It does cut down the number of writing pieces pupils complete, which was not the intention when the portfolio was re-introduced.*

Relatedly, some respondents highlighted the significant issue of absences and the challenges of arranging supervised catch-up time for learners who miss the scheduled first draft session.

*Pupils being off – having to catch up under supervised conditions is a logistical nightmare.*

*The new conditions also create great difficulty with regard to pupil absences, which are an issue across the country.*

Less specifically, some respondents just suggested that the organisation and administration associated with the supervised first draft was substantial, increasing educator workload and stress.

*The logistics of running these supervised sessions has become a massive workload issue.*

*It has created significant logistical challenges.*

Some respondents highlighted challenges related to technology. Access to ICT resources is uneven across centres, resulting in varying approaches to producing the first draft. Despite the conditions of assessment allowing candidates to carry out research before they write their draft, a few respondents also suggested that learners' research for discursive writing was constrained by restrictions on technology.

*We have many pupils who use their phones to type because we have very little ICT provision.*

*My centre requires pupils to handwrite a first draft; we have very limited access to ICT as we are a huge school, with no access to secure ICT.*

*When ICT is not available, it means candidates need to handwrite their essay and then type this up at a later date – double work for candidates.*

Linked to this, a few respondents cited challenges related to learners requiring additional assessment arrangements (AAA). These learners need to be provided with accommodations, including ICT and extra time, adding to the logistical challenges in centres. A few educators were concerned that this disadvantages these learners.

*ICT provision [is] problematic for those who would use this for AA – rather than accessing ICT at home, this needs to be provided for in school.*

*ICT/ other support for pupils who have additional support needs.*

*AAA pupils may need more class time – we do not have the hours required to do this and teach [the] course.*

## **Limited efficacy**

Some respondents reported that the new conditions of assessment have limited efficacy in preventing plagiarism, the use of AI, or other unauthorised inputs. Despite the additional supervision, concerns remain about maintaining assessment integrity.

While plagiarism and input from family members and tutors were mentioned, a key concern was that learners could use AI at several stages in the process, most particularly at the redraft stage.

*Pupils can still find ways round the supervising.*

*There is absolutely no way I can have my eyes on 30 iPads at once. It is just not possible.*

*Allowing them to then complete second draft outwith supervision is obviously fraught with issues and undermines the first draft being written under supervision.*

*[Does] not help with authentication at all as second drafts are not controlled in any way, thereby defeating the purpose of attempting to ensure work is [a] learner's own.*

A small number of respondents said that they face uncertainty about how to respond when malpractice is suspected but denied. Despite the course specification stating that if a teacher doubts the authenticity of a piece, it should not be submitted, these respondents suggested that they were not supported by their senior leadership teams to do this.

*We can accuse students and question them, but ultimately if they want to submit it then we have to let them. I'd like a form I can complete to say that I believe a piece of work is AI before I send it off.*

On the other hand, a small number of respondents noted that it can be difficult to identify malpractice, as some level of improvement between the first and second drafts is expected under normal circumstances.

## **Effect on learners**

Some respondents felt that the new conditions of assessment disadvantage learners.

As noted above, a small number of respondents said that there had been a narrowing of the types of writing that learners experience.

*I know multiple centres that now only tackle one type of writing as they can only fit one session.*

*Many centres are only giving pupils the chance to work on one type of writing due to avoid giving two writing weeks.*

Others thought that the supervision requirement stifles learner creativity, with many learners better able to develop their writing outside the classroom.

*Limits creative potential for pupils who may work better outwith class.*

*Learners are disadvantaged by stop-start structure of the school bell – not conducive to creativity!*

*The writing process should be given more creative freedom. If the goal is to measure writing, then the circumstances should be suitable to this creative process.*

A few respondents specifically mentioned Advanced Higher. Because it has no word or time limit, it was deemed especially challenging to schedule supervised first drafts for this level and these respondents were concerned that their time was taken up with watching learners write, rather than teaching them. It should be noted, however, that in acknowledgement of the potential length and complexity of Advanced Higher writing pieces, the course specification states that the first draft does not need to be produced in its entirety at this stage.

## **Implementation disparities**

Several respondents expressed misgivings that the conditions of assessment are implemented differently across centres, with variations in timings, use of notes and research, use of exam conditions, use of technology, and supervision. This raised concerns about reliability and fairness.

*My main issue is with the lack of consistency in how this has been rolled out in schools and how this disadvantages those following the spec.*

*No real consistency across different school and some schools don't even do it. The understanding of what 'supervised conditions' means isn't a shared understanding.*

A small number of respondents questioned how adherence to the new conditions of assessment was being monitored.

*Issue is around fairness generally. I am fully aware that many centres are still allowing pupils to write this without supervision. ... People are just not following the guidance. What is SQA doing to monitor this or quality assure the conditions it has stated must be put in place?*

These respondents generally argued that the conditions were correctly followed in their own centres but not in others; the accuracy of these perceptions cannot be determined.

Relatedly, a few respondents called for clearer guidance from Qualifications Scotland, including on purpose, conditions, and timings. This is despite the course specification stating that a full first draft should be produced under supervision at National 5 and Higher.

*I think there needs to be more clarification on what counts as a first draft eg would a couple of paragraphs suffice, to show a pupil's writing style?*

*Further national guidance and exemplification would help support equity of approach.*

*I think it would be useful to standardise this across Scotland.*

## **Other comments**

Educator respondents were asked if they had any other comments on the requirement for learners to complete their first draft under supervision. There were comments from 287 respondents.

## **Reform the folio**

Many respondents suggested that the folio should be reformed in some way. Some argued that it should be conducted under exam conditions, should be submitted after the first draft (like assignments in other subjects), or that writing should be part of an exam.

*I suggest a more structured assignment (provided by the SQA) where all pupils are issued with the same set of sources in class and are asked to write a relevant essay in the allocated time.*

*The only way to verify that their final draft is completely their own work is to make it an exam.*

Several respondents thought the current approach compared unfavourably with Standard Grade.

*I think we should revert to the way of Standard Grades, asking pupils to complete a piece of writing in the exam using a provided stimuli or prompt. It's a much fairer way to assess their ability.*

*Replace it with a timed piece of writing under exam conditions, similar to the Standard Grade exam. Have the critical essay/set text completed in class instead, where their best piece of work can be submitted for review.*

Others thought that the folio component needs to be rethought and re-designed entirely.

*The assessment is no longer fit for purpose, rather than applying sticking plaster fixes it would be better to figure out a different, better assessment.*

*The portfolio, as it stands, is no longer fit for purpose. It fails to reflect the evolving digital landscape, and the challenges educators face in maintaining academic standards. A fundamental rethink is urgently needed to ensure the assessment remains robust, equitable, and reflective of genuine learner ability.*

*Ultimately, I believe the folio to be an outdated assessment tool. ... There will always be room for unfairness.*

*I think this part of the course should be scrapped.*

## **Effect on learner creativity**

In contrast, a few respondents highlighted that they saw the disadvantages of the current approach as being about inhibiting learner creativity and writing development.

*The time constraint/ class time requirement spoils part of the purpose - you want them to explore and experiment, to try different ideas out and then see where they go.*

*We are not only shackling those who might commit AI fraud, we are also hobbling the creativity of wonderful creative writers who are not getting the opportunity to have that first foray into a story draft as an intimate exploration between the mind and the page.*

*It is reductive of the experience of writing ... Writers don't sit down and write like that, nor should one size fit all so that entire classes ... are being put through a single type of writing.*

*Pupils are preparing reduced versions of their writing capacity, limiting scope of their imagination and research ... In the end, our teaching seems to reduce pupil learning rather than expand it.*

A few respondents merely suggested that the new conditions of assessment were not required and that educators could authenticate learner writing without them.

A small number of respondents suggested that the folio should remain, but, in the interests of learner independence, this should be completed and submitted directly by the learner, without any supervision or authentication requirement on educators.

## **Themes already covered**

Note that the other themes to emerge from these comments have already been addressed under the challenges section.

Some respondents re-iterated that they did not believe the new conditions of assessment were meeting their intended aims, with malpractice — particularly relating to AI — remaining a concern. Several stated that, while they understood the rationale for the changes, the measures had not been (and, in the evolving digital landscape, could not be) fully effective. A small number suggested that schools or Qualifications Scotland should receive funding for AI-checking software, while only a couple argued that learners should be allowed to use AI in their folio, to prepare for further study or work.

Several respondents also highlighted the logistical challenges covered earlier, noting that these were increasing educator workload and stress with little discernible benefit. Similarly, some re-iterated concerns about inconsistent practices across centres and the need for clearer national guidance.

A few respondents felt that the new conditions of assessment were a good idea and agreed that some action was needed, although many qualified this by noting that the approach is sound in theory but not necessarily effective in practice.

## **Educator interviews**

In in-depth interviews, educators from a range of local authority and independent secondary schools shared their perspectives on the new conditions of assessment. Discussions covered the implementation and logistics of supervised drafting, authentication and reliability, consistency of practice, support and guidance, and perceived benefits and challenges. Overall, the views shared in the interviews echoed those provided in the qualitative survey responses.

Participants were asked how the new conditions of assessment had been implemented in their centres. Responses indicated variations in how the guidance and requirements had been interpreted and applied. For example, some centres had adopted exam-style conditions, while others applied a more open approach to supervision. Practices also varied in relation to ICT access, the use of the internet, and whether learners were required to handwrite their drafts. In some centres, learners completed the full first draft in class, whereas others required only a 500-word sample (despite the requirements set out in the course specification). Participants generally felt that this degree of flexibility was problematic and could lead to unfairness or inequity.

*I know even in my own local authority area that there are multiple different approaches to how this is done.*

Several participants suggested that Qualifications Scotland's guidance needs to be more prescriptive.

*I would make the guidelines super clear ... so that every centre was following it in the same way... Yeah, I think that would be the main thing to ensure ... consistency and fairness.*

*We need more detail about how it should be conducted just so that there is more consistency. I think that if you're trying to have a consistent approach, you don't get a consistent approach by having a very open instruction.*

However, it was acknowledged that greater prescription is difficult when centres operate in such diverse contexts.

*You know, what works for us in our centre is not going to work for everyone and I appreciate that. I do think consistency is important, but I do understand that flexibility probably is needed and that's maybe why some centres do have a very different approach or haven't changed their approach very much.*

*Whatever you prescribe [has to be able to] be achieved by a school where you've got weak classes, you've got high absences, you've got high teacher turnover. It needs to be able to be achieved by those under those conditions. And if it can't be achieved under those conditions then the most vulnerable ... they're going to be even ... further at back of the pack.*

Some participants said that the supervision requirement had increased their confidence in authenticating learners' work.

*Benefit is it definitely does ensure that it's not AI writing it... Like if you've got an engaged teacher who's wandering around the class and checking, you've got the tech to watch the kids are writing, then absolutely.*

*I think it's definitely helped authenticate the work.*

Others felt that they already had effective approaches to authentication and did not require the change. A few noted that their centre required learners to complete a folio plan (supervised in some cases) beforehand and considered this helpful for monitoring learners' work as it developed.

Several participants also described the practical difficulty of supervising large numbers of learners at once, suggesting that this limited the overall efficacy of the approach. There was also recognition that learners could still use AI either prior to the first draft or at the redraft stage.

*You can't have eyes on every single pupil all the time.*

*I don't know because ... the fact that they go away and they work on it ... how much can we really supervise what's happening with that piece of work?*

Concerns about the effectiveness of supervision led some participants to question the longer-term value and viability of the folio, with a few suggesting that writing might be better assessed through an exam.

*The general murmuring was 'What's the purpose in this now? Are we really assessing the skill properly and well?' And I think the general answer is no.*

*It starts to get into the realms of 'Why are we continuing to do this folio if it's such an onerous task on ourselves and on children?'*

In contrast, several participants were concerned that completing the first draft under supervision — and the perception of a more summative approach — could negatively affect learners and their creativity. This was linked to worries about a narrowing of the curriculum, as some centres felt compelled to limit learners to one type of writing for logistical reasons.

*I just I think that there is a very real risk to Scottish education and Scottish writing this presents. I mean, I know why it's been done, but it presents a huge risk to quality of the writing that kids are going to do. It's so easy to teach them to do persuasive essay writing. It doesn't teach them creativity. It doesn't make them love writing. It becomes a mechanical, brutal, dull process.*

*And the question we're currently discussing is, do we have to actually decide ... we're going to let you specialise in discursive or creative.*

Specific concerns were raised about Advanced Higher, where it was felt that supervised drafting did not align well with the spirit of the qualification.

Logistical issues emerged as a major theme. Participants highlighted the loss of teaching and learning time and the difficulty of arranging supervised sessions for learners who were absent during the scheduled period.

*Its biggest hit for me personally as a faculty head is ... teaching time in class, and that is teaching time lost for other things.*

*I've always been able to cover the course in good depth and have plenty time for revising. And I would say that this is the first year we really feel like that's a challenge. It's twofold. One is because of the pupil absence ... but then we add in the approach that we've taken, choosing to write two pieces ... I've lost three weeks of teaching and revision time.*

However, other participants noted that allocating class time for the first draft had the benefit of encouraging more learners to complete their drafts on time.

Technology and access to ICT also emerged as a significant issue, reinforcing earlier concerns about inconsistency. Some learners were able to access the internet while completing their first draft, while others were not. Some were required to handwrite their draft, while others could type using centre devices or their own. Participants raised concerns about the equity implications of such discrepancies, as well as the logistical challenges associated with managing limited ICT resources.

*So, they handwrote theirs last year ... and then typed up and redrafted at home.*

*In [other local authority] all pupils have an iPad. So, the children have their own access to that iPad, whereas the Chromebook resources that we have in our classroom are shared as a whole school resource. Everybody wants them. So, you can't even get a hold of them for a double period.*

*The access that you have to ICT I think is a real issue and I know that there's no stipulation that you have to use ICT, but it's 2025 and children like to type their*

*folios and we're starting to worry this year because we have got an issue with Chromebook access at the moment.*

While a few centres had technology that allowed teachers to monitor learners as they worked, this was far from universal.

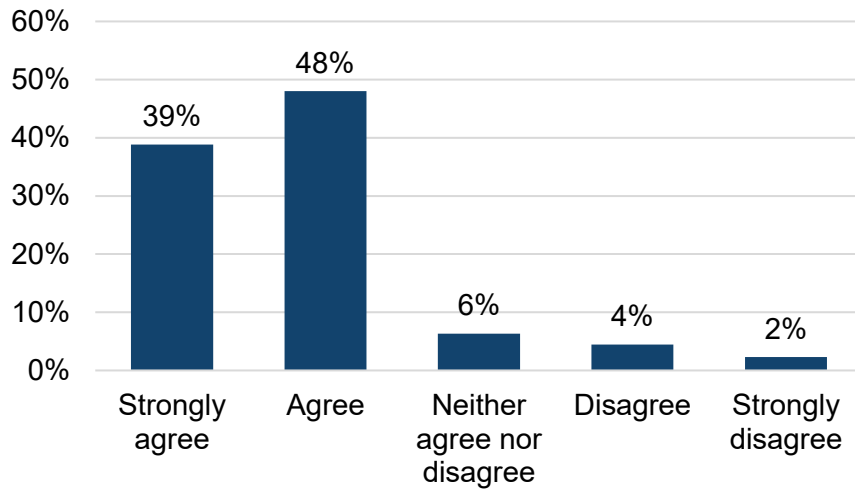
A small number of participants felt that supervised drafting was the correct — and perhaps necessary — approach, even if imperfect. Others understood the intent behind the changes but were uneasy about their practical implications.

Finally, several participants felt that the new conditions had at least helped to bring issues around AI to the fore for both educators and learners. A couple argued that learners should be permitted to use AI, given its relevance to further study and work.

## **Learner survey**

Learner respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'I understand the requirement to complete the first draft of my writing portfolio under supervision.' Thirty-nine per cent strongly agreed, 48% agreed, 6% neither agreed nor disagreed, 4% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 4.2.

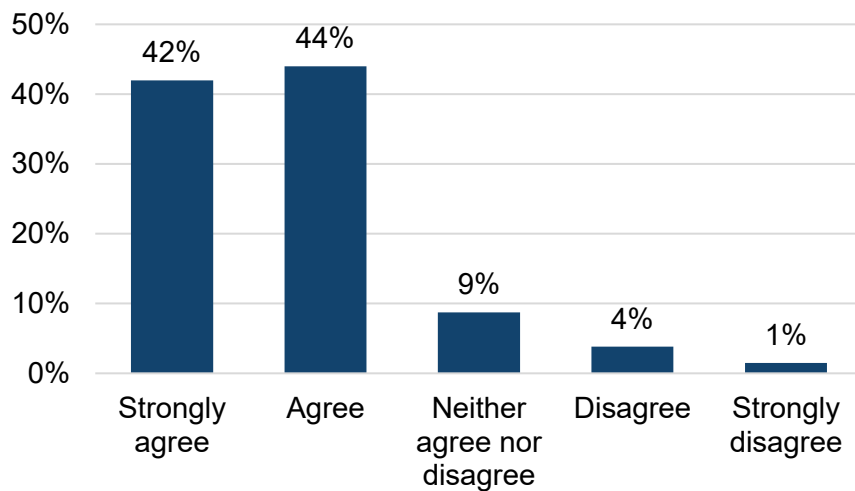
**Figure 13: I understand the requirement to complete the first draft of my writing portfolio under supervision**



Base: 1,166 respondents

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'My teacher or lecturer explained the reasons for this requirement clearly,' 42% of learner respondents strongly agreed, 44% agreed, 9% neither agreed nor disagreed, 4% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 4.2.

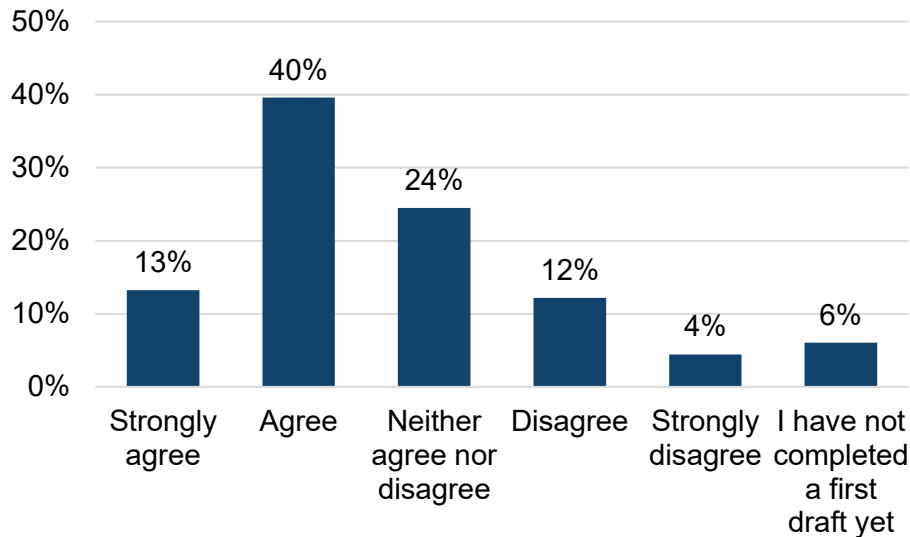
**Figure 14: My teacher or lecturer explained the reasons for this requirement clearly**



Base: 1,144 respondents

Thirteen per cent of learner respondents strongly agreed that completing the first draft in class felt supportive, while 40% agreed, 24% neither agreed nor disagreed, 12% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed. Six per cent of respondents said that they had not yet completed their first draft. Excluding those who had not completed their first draft, the mean score for this question was 3.5.

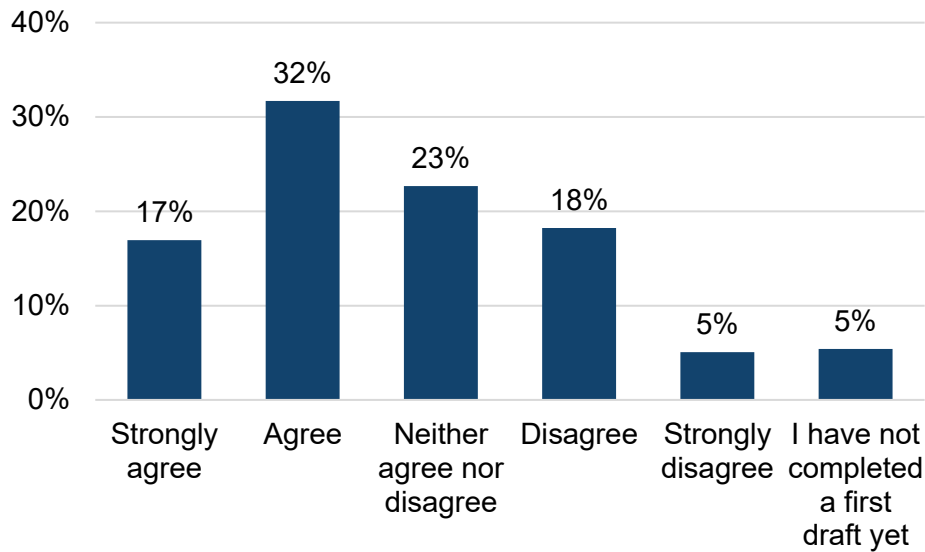
**Figure 15: Completing the first draft in class felt supportive**



Base: 1,172 respondents

Meanwhile, 17% of learner respondents strongly agreed that completing the first draft in class felt stressful, while 32% agreed, 23% neither agreed nor disagreed, 18% disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed. Five per cent of respondents said that they had not yet completed their first draft. Excluding those who had not completed their first draft, the mean score for this question was 3.4.

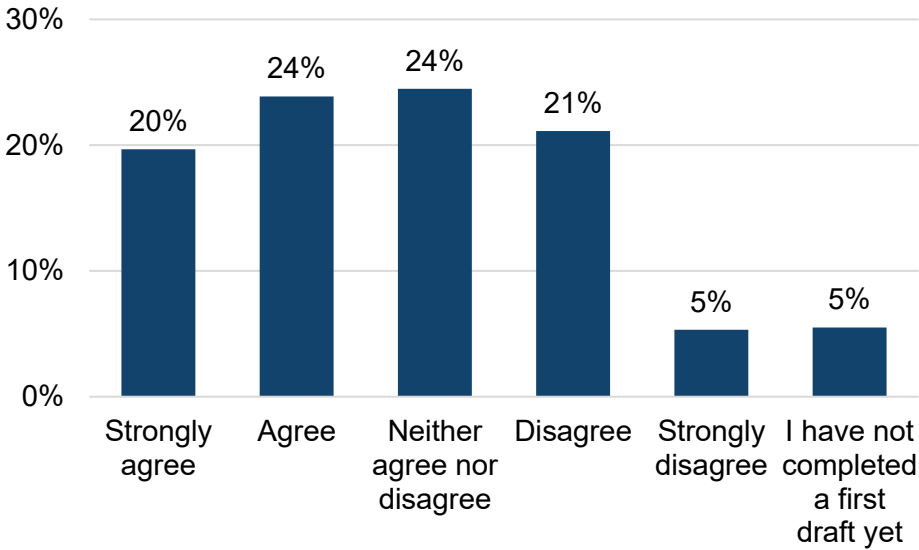
**Figure 16: Completing the first draft in class felt stressful**



Base: 1,164 respondents

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'Completing the first draft in class made it hard for me to do my best work,' 20% of learner respondents strongly agreed, 24% agreed, 24% neither agreed nor disagreed, 21% disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed. 5% of respondents said that they had not yet completed their first draft. Excluding those who had not completed their first draft, the mean score for this question was 3.3.

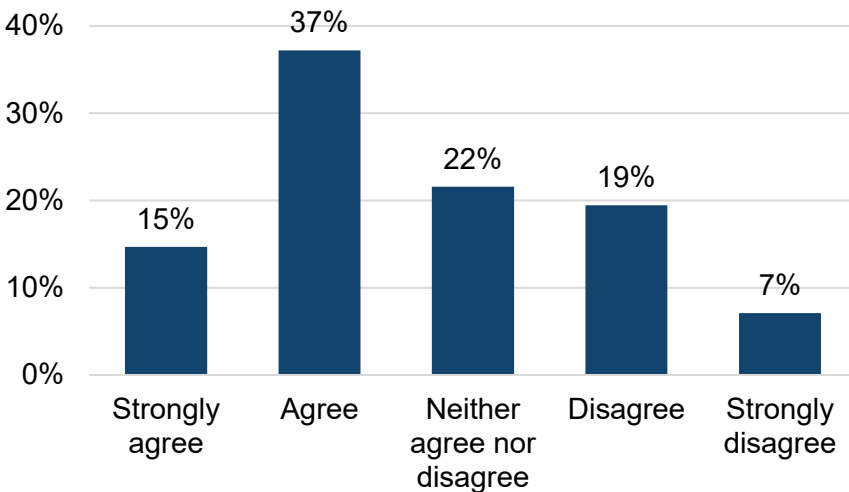
**Figure 17: Completing the first draft in class made it hard for me to do my best work**



Base: 1,164 respondents

Fifteen per cent of learner respondents strongly agreed that completing the first draft in class is fair to all learners, while 37% agreed, 22% neither agreed nor disagreed, 19% disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 3.3.

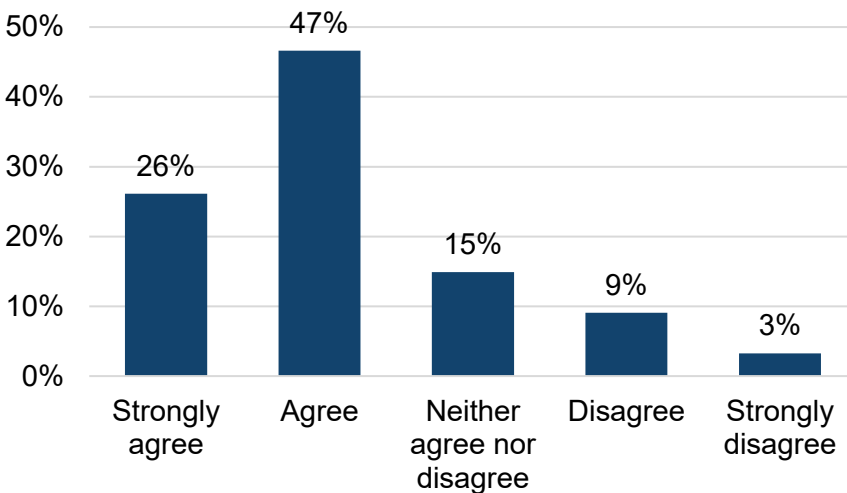
**Figure 18: Completing the first draft in class is fair to all learners**



Base: 1,172 respondents

Learner respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, 'Completing the first draft in class means that teachers and lecturers can ensure that learners' work is their own.' 26% strongly agreed, 47% agreed, 15% neither agreed nor disagreed, 9% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. The mean score for this question was 3.8.

**Figure 19: Completing the first draft in class means that teachers and lecturers can ensure that learners' work is their own**



Base: 1,167 respondents

## Benefits

In an open-text question, learner respondents were asked what they thought the benefits of completing the first draft of their folio under supervision were. There were 1,057 responses.

## Malpractice

A majority of respondents cited the elimination or reduction of malpractice as a benefit. Many respondents suggested that the supervision requirement meant that it would be more difficult to plagiarise and, therefore, that teachers and lecturers could better authenticate learner work.

*To stop people from cheating.*

*Your teacher can know it is actually your own work.*

*Useful so that teachers know how the student writes.*

Related to this, several respondents thought that it was a benefit that supervision would mean that learners would not be unjustly accused of plagiarism. A few respondents also mentioned that it removed any temptation for them to cheat.

Some learners specifically mentioned AI and that teachers and lecturers being able to prevent its use was a benefit.

*Makes sure we don't cheat using AI.*

*Teachers can make sure no AI is used.*

## **Support**

The second most prevalent perceived benefit was the support offered by teachers and lecturers during the supervised first draft process. Some respondents suggested that they appreciated being able to ask for immediate guidance and support when required. A few respondents also stated that they could more easily access support and guidance from peers when they undertook the first draft in school or college.

*If you do it under supervision the teacher can be there if you have a question.*

*Help was easy to get since you can ask your teacher easily.*

Related somewhat to support, a few respondents believed that completing the first draft in school or college was less stressful than completing it at home.

*The possibility for guidance makes it less stressful to work on.*

## **Improved focus**

Several respondents thought that a benefit of completing the first draft under supervision was that it improved their focus. These respondents suggested that the classroom presented fewer distractions than their home environments.

*You may focus more in class as you know you have to get it done, whereas at home you might get distracted easily.*

*Allows for an environment without distractions ... and means that all focus is given to the essay and no other homework/ assignments are getting in the way.*

## **Allocated time**

Similarly, several learner respondents stated that, by undertaking the first draft in class, a benefit was that they had an allocated time to complete it. These learners appreciated that the first draft of the folio did not take up either their free time or time for other homework, but also that it set expectations on how long should be spent on the draft. A few also suggested that it ensures that everyone completes their draft, without teachers or lecturers having to chase learners up.

*There is an allocated time for you to write your folio, rather than having to find time at home.*

*Being in class ensures that children have started on their folio pieces in good time.*

## **Fairness**

Drawing on both the themes of malpractice and allocated time, several respondents thought that the benefits of the requirement to complete the first draft under supervision was that it increased fairness. These learners valued all learners undertaking their first draft under the same conditions.

*Everyone is given the same amount of time to complete their draft.*

*You work in the same environment as everybody else.*

*Everyone has a fair chance at their portfolio.*

## **Exam preparation**

In the final perceived benefit, a few learners suggested that completing their first draft under supervision provided exam preparation.

*It prepares you for timed/ exam conditions.*

*Helps to maintain proper time limits to strengthen the skill of being able to write lots under pressure, essentially as practice for exams.*

## **No benefits**

While in a minority, several respondents suggested that they did not think that there were any benefits to the first draft of the folio being completed under supervision. Most of these respondents just stated that they did not think that there were any benefits, but a few mentioned that they found it easier to work at home, that teachers and lecturers are not allowed to help anyway, or that it does not prevent malpractice. These points are covered further in the section on challenges, below.

## **Challenges**

In an open-text question, learner respondents were asked what they thought the challenges of completing the first draft of their folio under supervision were. There were 1,038 responses.

Of these, a few stated that they did not think there were any challenges and several mentioned challenges that are not directly related to completing the first draft under supervision – choosing topics, structuring their work, and word count, for example.

## **Time constraints**

The most prominent theme to emerge when learners were asked about challenges was that of time constraints. Some respondents suggested that the time dedicated to the first draft was not enough to ensure a quality piece of work.

*Limits the amount of time one has on completing the first draft.*

*Lack of time; sometimes, time constraints can get in the way of quality work.*

Other respondents suggested that having to complete the first draft in class meant that they could not work at their own pace and that those who take longer with their writing were penalised.

*Some students take more time to write than others meaning the supervised writing week isn't enough time.*

## **Stress**

Some respondents suggested that the requirement to complete the first draft under supervision increased pressure and stress on learners. These respondents suggested that such stress could affect the quality of learners' folios.

While for some respondents, the issue of stress was related to that of time constraints, for others there was a feeling that a classroom environment was more stressful than working at home.

*A challenge of completing a first draft in class is having to write it in a designated amount of time which can cause stress and often means the writing is not people's best work.*

*Students are faced with significantly more pressure than if writing at home.*

Several respondents suggested that the conditions of supervision — exam conditions in some cases — made the process stressful and, for some, the process felt like an exam.

Others likened it to assignments in other subjects and thought the supervision element had increased pressure on the assessment.

*Exam conditions can put people under stress and cause anxiety.*

*Writing things in class often makes it hard as it is a stressful environment and makes it feel like a test.*

A few respondents also mentioned that they found the process of supervision itself stressful.

*Being under the watchful eye of Big Brother (teacher) further emphasised the race against time.*

*I thought a challenge was ... knowing someone was observing me and evaluating my work.*

A small number of respondents suggested that it was stressful to compare their progress to others'.

*You are constantly comparing how much you have written compared to others.*

## **Distractions**

In contrast to those who thought that completing the first draft in class increased focus, a larger number of respondents suggested that it made concentrating and focusing more challenging.

*Classrooms can be very noisy sometimes and it can be hard to focus on your writing.*

*Writing in class means that we can be easily distracted by others, rather than completely focused.*

Likewise, a few respondents said that it could be challenging to write about sensitive or private topics in a class environment.

*Some people might be writing personal experiences and it's hard to write it knowing there's people behind you and beside you ... [who] could easily look over at your work.*

*If they are doing a personal folio on a sensitive topic, they may feel more comfortable doing it elsewhere.*

A few respondents also suggested that the classroom environment and set times for the production of the first draft may not be conducive to creativity and may stifle learners' inspiration.

*So many people in one room may make it difficult to think creatively.*

## **Limited efficacy**

For a few respondents, the main challenge of the new conditions of assessment was that they were perceived as being ineffective. These learners suggested that malpractice could still occur and AI, particularly, could still be used in the process: either beforehand, to prepare; during the supervised period, because the teacher or lecturer cannot effectively monitor all learners; or at the second draft stage.

*The teacher is unable to watch every single student at once, meaning that there are cracks and flaws in the system that can be exploited.*

*How can this method prove that this is my own work? ... After completing a first draft, it can then be worked on at home and what is to stop changes being made from other sources?*

*Does not prevent people using AI. People might use it to create their first draft then memorise it to do under the conditions. People can still use AI to better their second or third drafts.*

A small number of respondents also expressed concerns that different schools and colleges were implementing the supervision requirement in different ways.

## Other challenges

A number of other challenges were identified by smaller numbers of respondents. In order of recurrence, these are listed below.

- A few learners felt that they needed to memorise a first draft before completing it in class. While a few suggested this then became a memory test, other comments suggested that some respondents used AI beforehand and tried to remember it in class.
- Depending on individual centre decisions, a few respondents cited the difficulties of carrying out research under supervised conditions. These learners said that they could not use the internet to, for example, look things up, develop ideas further, or check synonyms and spelling. Some of these respondents had no access to the internet during the writing process in class, while others had restricted access.
- In contrast with those respondents who said that support was a benefit, a few respondents suggested that the lack of support was a challenge. These learners were frustrated that their teacher or lecturer was in class but could only offer limited advice and feedback. For others, the teacher or lecturer had too many learners in class to be able to offer effective support. A small number of learners suggested that they would have liked to have discussed their ideas with friends or family.
- For a few respondents, there were concerns that completing the first draft in class time takes up valuable teaching and learning time that could be spent on other things.
- In terms of logistics, a few respondents mentioned that it was challenging to catch up if learners had had to miss the folio supervision period, for whatever reason. Others suggested that their school or college had encountered technical issues in their scheduled supervision period.
- Needing to complete the first draft of the folio over several periods was cited as a challenge for a few respondents. These learners thought that completing their draft over several periods was disjointed and interrupted the flow of their writing.
- A few learners expressed frustration that they had had to handwrite their first draft, when they would have preferred to type them. In some cases, this was because appropriate IT was not available.
- A small number of respondents felt that the requirement to complete the first draft under supervision demonstrated a lack of trust in learners.

- A very small number also thought that, given the direction of travel in wider society, learners should be able to make use of AI in folio writing.

## **Advantages of coursework**

Learner respondents were asked what they think were the advantages of having writing assessed through coursework rather than an exam. Overall, 1,017 learners commented, although a small number said that there were no advantages, and they would prefer an exam. A very small number also suggested that now that the first draft was supervised, the folio was more like an exam than coursework.

### **Less stressful**

A majority of learner respondents argued that coursework was less stressful than a single high-stakes exam. This was by far the most prominent theme to emerge from the learner comments.

Respondents suggested that there was more anxiety around exams, because of the potential for learners to have an off day.

*It means that all of your grade is not relying on one day.*

Others thought that the classroom environment was less intimidating than an exam hall.

*Coursework is better as it feels like a classroom activity and in a place you're used to rather than an exam hall.*

*It feels less like an impending doom and more like a little check-up.*

Similarly, many respondents suggested that the perceived stressfulness of exams means that learners can fail to produce their best work, whereas this is not the case with coursework.

*Exams are stressful compared to doing it through coursework which would make it better for people who struggle under pressure.*

## **Opportunity to demonstrate attainment**

Several respondents argued that, given concerns that exams may inhibit performance for some, coursework provides a more accurate demonstration of learners' attainment across the year, outwith the stressors associated with a one-off exam.

*It's an assessment of work over a period and not just in one sitting which can demonstrate people's ability better.*

*It can show your capabilities better since it is a more thought-out piece of work.*

A few of these respondents argued that exams can amount to memory tests, comparing them unfavourably with what they viewed as the more rounded assessment provided by coursework.

*It shows more of an understanding rather than just a memory test.*

*It's based off your true learning and not just off memory.*

A small number of respondents just suggested that coursework is fairer than exams.

## **More time**

Some respondents thought that the advantage of coursework was that it provided more time than an exam would. This, they suggested, can facilitate more quality folios and benefits those who can take longer to complete their work, including those who are neurodivergent.

*You can take your time, and the folio will be your best piece of work.*

*Neurodiverse students can gain merit based on raw skill rather than the unfair advantage to neurotypical students in exam halls. Someone who works at a slower pace at the same or better quality is not punished for being careful.*

On a similar note, several respondents thought that writing being assessed as coursework allows learners to fully develop and perfect their folios over time.

*We can write our best piece of work, and ensure that it has no mistakes and is thorough with enough detail, unlike in the critical reading paper when we are timed and the essay we write isn't always our best work. So, writing a folio as coursework is better as we can perfect it.*

*Being able to edit your work until you reach a folio you are happy with, allowing you to show the full potential of your writing that may come across in a timed exam.*

A few respondents also thought that completing their writing assessment through coursework allows for a level of creativity that would not be possible in an exam. Consequently, some of these learners suggested that this folio assessment was the most interesting to them.

*Allows students to fully express themselves.*

*Allows more freedom to be more creative rather than restricted by exam monotony.*

*[You're] more likely to be passionate about the work, can research something you find interesting or reflect on a meaningful experience.*

## **Opportunity to improve grade**

A few learner respondents mentioned that writing being assessed through coursework means that learners have an opportunity to improve their grade. Again, this linked to the perceived stressfulness of exams and concerns that learners may not perform well on the day.

*If the students were to not do very well on their exam, their folio can help boost their grade.*

A number of these respondents mentioned that it can be a relief walking into the exam knowing that 30% of their grade has already been completed.

*Allows us to feel better that the folio is banked and out of the way.*

*You can also go into the exam knowing that part of your final result is done.*

## **Support**

The support of a teacher or lecturer was perceived as an advantage of coursework for a few respondents. These learners appreciated being able to improve their performance based on feedback.

*You receive constructive feedback to improve your essay.*

*I can get feedback and refine it.*

## **Learner focus group**

The themes to emerge from the learner focus group largely mirrored those in the qualitative survey questions. Participants suggested that they knew why the conditions of assessment had been changed and that their teachers had explained that the purpose was to guard against the use of AI in folio writing. The benefits participants identified included limiting malpractice (and specifically AI use), having teacher support readily accessible, perceiving the approach as fair, and having dedicated class time allocated to writing the first draft.

*I prefer doing it in class because it means you just get it done with.*

*There are more opportunities to ask the teacher about any questions you have with your work.*

*I think that the teacher reads the first draft, and they know your writing style, so it's hard to use AI then and they won't notice.*

*Yeah, like no one's like cheating. So, you're all, like, on the same level.*

On the other hand, there was some discussion around the efficacy of the approach in reducing malpractice, with a view that supervision could not be completely effective, either in class or once folios were taken away for redrafting.

*The teacher can't see your iPads, so people can just use AI anyway.*

*After you've done that first drafting class, you can go away and redraft it anyway, can't you?*

Other challenges noted by participants included finding drafting in class distracting, feeling that it was not conducive to creativity, experiencing increased pressure due to the time limit, and feeling uncomfortable writing about sensitive topics in such an open environment.

*I didn't use it [writing time] very well. I think it was hard, too, when you've got a group of your friends at school. I can concentrate better at home.*

*And you've got your neighbour looking over your shoulder and you don't want to write about anything personal.*



*Covering it in time. Like you couldn't... if you didn't finish something on the day ... the sheet of paper gets taken off you, [you] can't like go home and add stuff to it.*

Issues with technology were also raised, particularly that websites being blocked on school computers inhibited research required for discursive essays.

*A lot of the websites were blocked, so a lot of good sources were restricted, so it was harder to find research.*

However, despite these challenges, all participants suggested that they preferred writing being assessed as part of coursework rather than an exam. There was a strong feeling that exams are more stressful and that dependence on a one-off performance in a high-stakes exam is not the best way to demonstrate learner attainment.

## Appendix: Theory of Change

<b>Situation</b>		Through engagement with the teaching profession, SQA identified a need to tighten the assessment conditions of writing portfolios.		
<b>Aims</b>		The change to the conditions of assessment for the writing portfolio will further support teachers and lecturers and help to protect the validity and reliability of the portfolio.		
<b>Process</b> 		<b>Impact</b> 		
<b>Inputs</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator expertise and time.</li> <li>• Updated course specification.</li> <li>• SQA policy position on AI and guidance on authentication.</li> <li>• Engagement and feedback from stakeholders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish revised assessment conditions and supporting guidance.</li> <li>• Deliver communications on changes.</li> <li>• Educators supervise first drafts.</li> <li>• Ongoing review of practice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners complete first drafts under supervision across all centres.</li> <li>• Centres apply more consistent practices.</li> <li>• Updated specs.</li> <li>• Evidence and feedback on implementation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators feel confident authenticating learner work.</li> <li>• Learners adapt and perceive the process as fair.</li> <li>• More consistent application of conditions across centres.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualifications maintain credibility, fairness, and trust.</li> <li>• Portfolios remain a valid and valued form of assessment.</li> <li>• The system has more resilience to AI and emerging assessment risks.</li> </ul>
<b>Risks</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators and centres may struggle with time, workload, or consistency in applying the new supervised drafting requirement.</li> </ul>		

## Context

Up until 2021, there was a requirement for learners to submit two pieces of writing for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English. This was reduced to one piece during the pandemic, and this change was made permanent in 2023. The rationale for this was to reduce duplication of assessment and free up time for teaching and learning.

Beginning in the session 2024–25, SQA tightened the conditions of assessment in National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher English writing portfolios to support teachers and lecturers with authenticating learners' work and to ensure the reliability of the assessment. The changes mean that there is now a mandatory requirement for learners to complete their first draft during class time, under the supervision of their teacher or lecturer. This enables teachers and lecturers to review learners' first drafts before learners continue to work on them independently. Learners then complete their final piece under some supervision and control, as was previously the case.

The changes were made in response to ongoing feedback from the English teaching profession that, under the previous portfolio assessment conditions, it could be difficult to verify learners' work as their own. There were some concerns related to external input when learners were working on their draft outside of school or college hours. Moreover, more recently, feedback suggested that it was becoming more challenging to ensure that plagiarism hadn't taken place in the portfolios, due to the rapid development of generative AI platforms.

Introducing a mandatory requirement for learners to complete their first draft during class time allows teachers and lecturers to observe how learners' work is developing without any outside influences. This helps to identify if there are any unusual changes in the quality and content of a learner's writing portfolio at the final submission stage, or if the final piece is unrecognisable from the first draft, which may indicate that it's not the learner's own work. This also protects the validity of the writing portfolio, which is an important feature of National 5 to Advanced Higher English coursework assessments.

The writing portfolio allows learners to show their writing skills outside of a test or exam environment by following a writing process that takes them from initial ideas to a final draft.

In the course of developing the change, some of the schools SQA spoke to stated that they had already proactively taken steps to supervise learners' first drafts, which had a positive impact on their ability to authenticate learners' work.

Introducing this change for all schools and colleges ensures a fairer and more consistent approach across the country.

## Expectations

**Table 5: Outcomes and impacts**

<b>Outcome (short-medium term)</b>	<b>Linked impact (longer term)</b>	<b>Possible evidence of success</b>
Educators and learners understand and apply the new requirement consistently.	Qualifications remain credible and trusted.	Feedback showing clarity amongst stakeholders and more consistent implementation across centres.
Educators feel more confident in authenticating learner work and detecting any anomalies between drafts and final pieces.	Stronger system resilience to risks of plagiarism and AI misuse.	Educator survey and interview results.
Learners adapt smoothly to supervised drafting, perceiving the process as fair.	Equity of assessment strengthened — reduced potential for unfair advantages from outside support or AI.	Learner surveys and focus groups.
More consistent assessment practices across schools and colleges.	Long-term fairness and comparability.	Educator survey and interview results.
Stakeholder groups view portfolios as a valid and reliable form of assessment.	Ongoing recognition of portfolios as a meaningful representation of learner writing ability.	Educator survey and interview results; views from unions and NQST.

## Assumptions

**Table 6: Assumptions**

Inputs	Activities	Outputs
Existing course specifications.	Update National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher English course specs.	Revised assessment documents published and shared with centres.
SQA qualifications team expertise; input from centres, unions, NQST, HEIs.	Feedback gathered from centres, unions, and HEIs on authentication challenges and AI risks.	Guidance and communications issued.
Time and resources within centres to supervise draft writing.	Educators implement new supervised drafting requirement during class time.	Learners complete first drafts under supervision in line with new conditions.
Ongoing monitoring and review processes within SQA.	Collect feedback from centres; track AI developments.	Evidence base to inform further maintenance or adjustments.

## Risks

**Table 7: Risks**

Risk	Possible mitigation
Educators lack sufficient time/resources to supervise first drafts, resulting in inconsistent implementation, increased educator workload and stress, and lower buy-in.	Provide clear, practical guidance on how supervision can be managed flexibly; share workload-friendly models; monitor workload impact in reviews.
Learners perceive supervised drafting as restrictive or unfair, resulting in reduced learner engagement or perception that portfolios are less valid.	Communicate the rationale clearly (fairness, authenticity, AI risks); gather learner feedback.
Centres interpret/apply requirements inconsistently, resulting in unequal learner experiences and fairness and equity undermined.	Develop standardised guidance, FAQs, keep comms open for educator feedback.
Teachers struggle to detect inauthentic work despite supervised drafts.	Share examples of effective practice; encourage professional dialogue within departments.
AI technologies evolve faster than current mitigations increasing the malpractice risk.	Ongoing monitoring of AI trends; explore supplementary authentication tools/techniques if needed.
Stakeholders (HEIs, employers, public) lose confidence in the portfolio as a valid and reliable assessment.	Proactively engage stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation.