Improving Assessment in National Courses Research: Advanced Higher Physics

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Proposal

The following proposal was shared with respondents who had stated they had taught or studied Advanced Higher Physics:

- We are proposing reducing the marks of the question paper from 155 marks to 130 marks.
- We are proposing making the Advanced Higher Physics exam shorter, reducing the time from 3 hours to 2 hours 30 minutes.
- There would be no changes to the project.
- The weightings of the exams and the project would stay the same.
- We are proposing these changes to improve the exam experience for learners and for schools, while maintaining appropriate sampling of subject content.

The proposed changes for Advanced Higher Physics are:

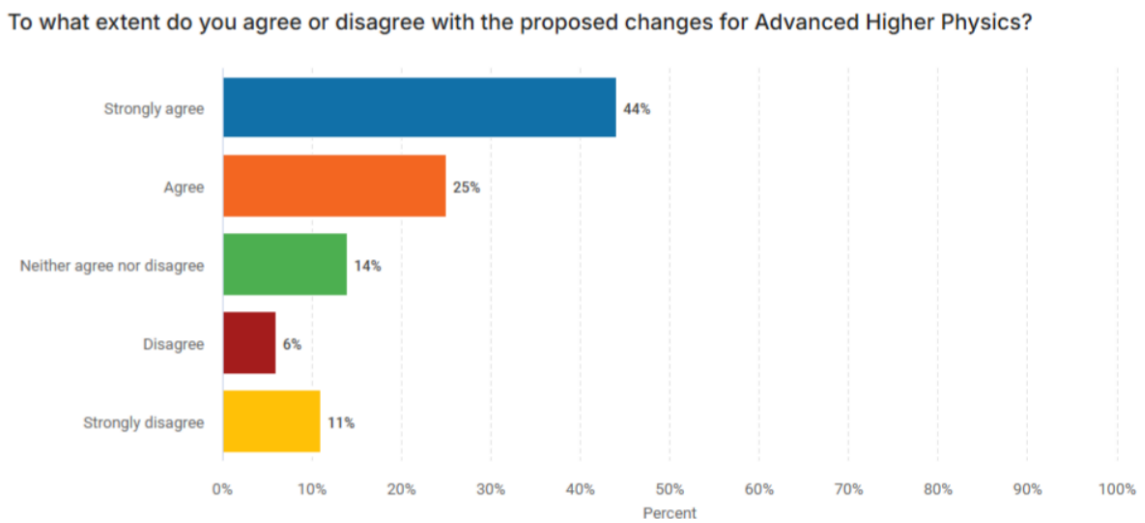
Component	Current marks	Current duration	Current weighting
Question paper	155	3 hours	75%
Project	30	N/A	25%

Component	Proposed marks	Proposed duration	Proposed weighting
Question paper	**130**	**2 hours 30 minutes**	75%
Project	30	N/A	25%

Findings: learners

We received responses from 36 learners who stated they had studied Advanced Higher Physics. As shown in Figure 1, the majority (69%) of learner respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this proposal should be made, while 17% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

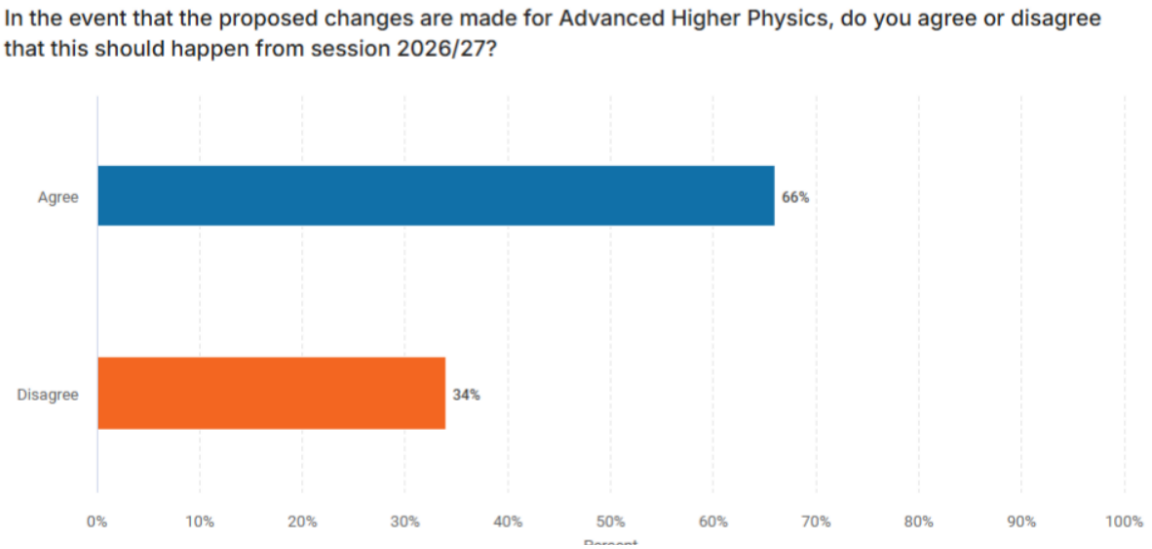
Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Advanced Higher Physics? Learner respondent views



Base: 36 learner respondents who stated they had studied Advanced Higher Physics.

Learner respondents were also asked to what extent they agreed with the decision to begin the proposed change in 2026–27, should the change be made. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of learners (66%) agreed, and 34% disagreed.

Figure 2: In the event that the proposed changes are made for Advanced Higher Physics, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026–27? Learner views



Base: 35 learner respondents who stated they had studied Advanced Higher Physics.

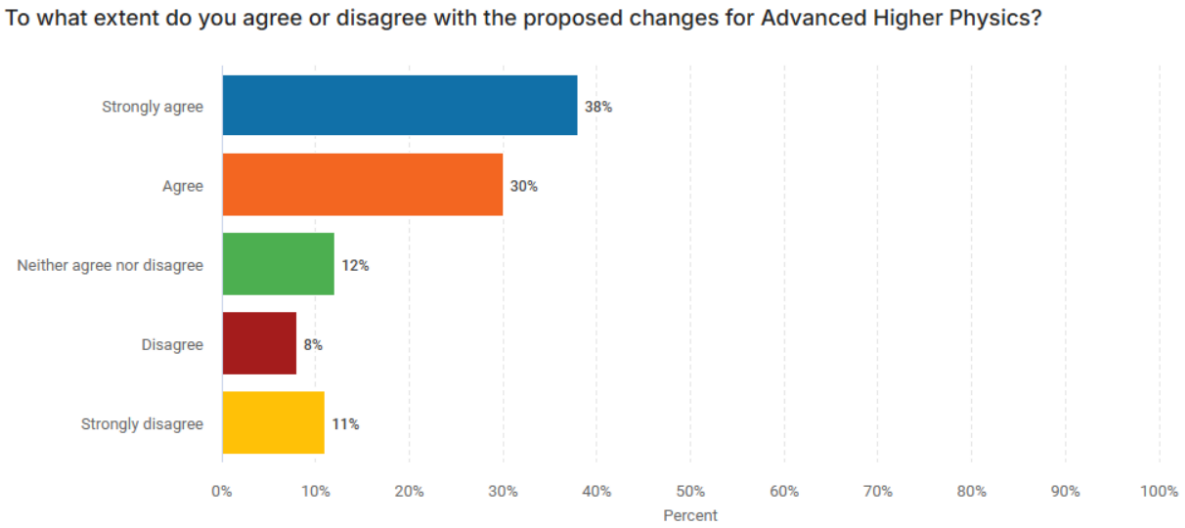
Qualitative analysis

Learner respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to Advanced Higher Physics, and six respondents left a comment. The general theme from these comments expressed concern that the proposed reduction in the duration of the exam would disadvantage candidates due to timing issues. However, a few respondents welcomed the reduction in duration and thought this would benefit candidates who struggle to concentrate for long periods of time.

Findings: educators

We received responses from 239 educators who stated they had taught Advanced Higher Physics. As shown in Figure 3, 68% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes for Advanced Higher Physics, while 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

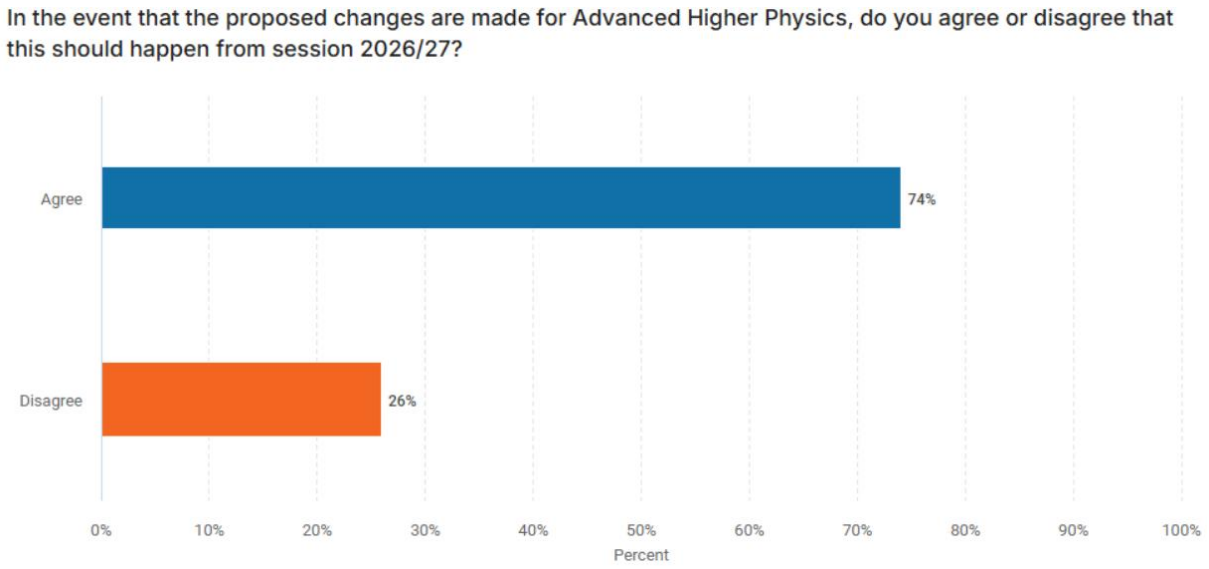
Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Advanced Higher Physics? Educator views



Base: 239 educator respondents who stated they had taught Advanced Higher Physics

As shown in Figure 4, when asked, in the event that the proposed changes went ahead, whether they should be implemented from the 2026–27 session, 74% of educator respondents agreed and 26% disagreed.

Figure 4: In the event that the proposed changes are made for Advanced Higher Physics, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026–27? Educator views.



Base: 238 educator respondents who stated that they taught Advanced Higher Physics

Qualitative analysis

Educator respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to Advanced Higher Physics and 95 respondents left a comment. Although the most common response from educator respondents was to agree with the proposals, a number of respondents spoke about challenges they perceived with the proposals.

Benefits of implementing this change

The key benefit that educator respondents perceived with the proposed changes was that the reduction in time from three hours to two hours and 30 minutes would improve learner concentration and benefit learners overall.

> ‘Exams have been far too long for years, any change that makes it a less stressful experience for students has got to be a good thing.’

> ‘3 hours has always felt far too long for an exam. I feel that 2.5 hours even though it is only 30 minutes left is much more manageable for students. [...]’

> ‘3 hours is an awful long time to maintain the level of concentration required for answering questions at this level.’

Several educator respondents also suggested that the reduced time would be helpful for learners who received extra time, as they would not have to spend as long on their exam as previous candidates did.

> ‘Absolutely the right choice. [...] Three hours is excessive, and made even worse for students with extra time allowance.’

> ‘This is a good move, as a 3 hour exam is especially challenging for those who also need extra time through AAAR to complete their assessment.’

Challenges with implementing this change

While the majority of respondents agreed with the proposals, many educator respondents perceived challenges with the changes being proposed. The key challenge was that they felt it would not be possible to assess the course content fully with a reduction in exam time. Minor themes that there would not be enough time to implement changes and adapt lesson plans and prelims for the upcoming diet.

Number of marks

It was common for educator respondents to express concern that reducing the number of marks without reducing the volume of content in the course would not benefit learners. These respondents felt that this would make it more difficult for learners to prepare for and predict questions. Some also said that learners would still be burdened with learning the same amount of course content, without being given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.

> ‘The pupils will still have to learn the whole course content. It does not change what they will have to do. Yes the exam will be shorter, but there will still be the same rush to complete all the content unless the course is shortened.’

> ‘By reducing the length of the exam but not decreasing the required examinable content, you will make it more difficult for learners to attain an award in Physics and more stressful for learners. Currently, learners know that certain questions (like solving a kinematic relationships question by calculus method) appears every year, however if you reduce the length of the exam by removing questions, it may actually cause more stress on learners preparing for the exam.’

There was also a concern that the reduction in marks without reducing the course content would not help to reduce teacher workload. A few expressed that the changes would increase teacher workload as they felt they would need to adapt resources in response to the changes.

> ‘[…] keeping 100% of the teachable course content whilst reducing the marks available means that there is the same content that needs to be taught but not necessarily be examined […]’

> ‘There are workload implications for teachers. They will need to spend time adapting current prelims and class assessment etc to fit in with the new marks.’

Related to this was the concern expressed by a few respondents that the course content would not be adequately sampled because of the reduction in the number of marks being proposed. Whole aspects of the course might be missed in the assessment, and learners might not have the opportunity to show their knowledge as much as previous candidates. However, one respondent expressed that they were happy with the proposal as long as the sampling of topics across the exam was maintained.

> ‘Huge content base, would it mean whole subtopics are missed in assessment’

Some respondents also indicated disagreement with the reduction in the number of marks being proposed as they said that the weighting of each mark would increase.

> ‘Shortening the exam simply increases the importance of each 'mark' rather than diluting the effect of getting one question wrong.’

Changes to the length of the question paper

Some educators also expressed concerns about the length of the exam being reduced from three hours to two hours and 30 minutes. These respondents felt that three hours was appropriately demanding for Advanced Higher level, and that it was fitting for the Advanced Higher exam to be longer than Higher.

> ‘There is no issue with the current length of exam papers. University level assessments are long and rigorous.’

> ‘I feel that 3 hours is right for the Adv. Higher exam. It seems a logical progression: two hours for National 5, two and a half hours for Higher, three hours for Adv. Higher.’

Implementing the changes for 2026–27

A less common, although still notable, concern from educators was that implementing the proposed changes from 2026–27 would leave insufficient time to prepare learners for the changes to the assessment. A few respondents thought that the changes should come later than 2026–27, while one respondent felt that the change should be implemented from June 2026 for the start of the new timetable.

> ‘The change to assessment are welcome […] However, introducing them as soon as 26–27 may be too soon as it may need more time to ensure that cover of the course is of an equal distribution.’

> ‘Leave it to the year after to make changes.’

Alternative suggestions

Some educator and learner respondents used the free text box to give varying suggestions for alternative changes that they felt should be made to Advanced Higher Physics. We haven’t included these comments in the analysis, as they did not directly answer the research questions and were out of scope of this research. We passed the comments on to our Qualifications Development teams to make them aware of the themes that emerged on this topic. We’ll consider alternative changes to National Courses as part of wider qualifications reform in the future, and learners and educators will have opportunities to share their views and input more directly to this work.