

Improving Assessment in National Courses Research: Higher Biology

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Proposal

The following proposal was shared with respondents who said they had studied or taught Higher Biology:

- We are proposing making the exam for Higher Biology shorter, reducing the time from 3 hours to 2 hours 30 minutes. The proposed changes to the exam duration will mean a return to one question paper.
- We would shorten Paper 1 by removing 5 multiple choice questions, and would shorten Paper 2 by removing 15 marks worth of questions, and then combine the two papers.
- We are proposing these changes to improve the exam experience for learners and for schools, while maintaining appropriate sampling of subject content.

There are no proposed changes to the assignment at this stage. The assessment of practical work would be part of the full reform of National Qualifications.

The weightings of the exam and the assignment would remain the same.

The proposed changes for Higher Biology are:

Component	Current marks	Current duration	Current weighting
Paper 1 + Paper 2	25 + 95	40 minutes + 2 hours 20 minutes	80%
Assignment			20%

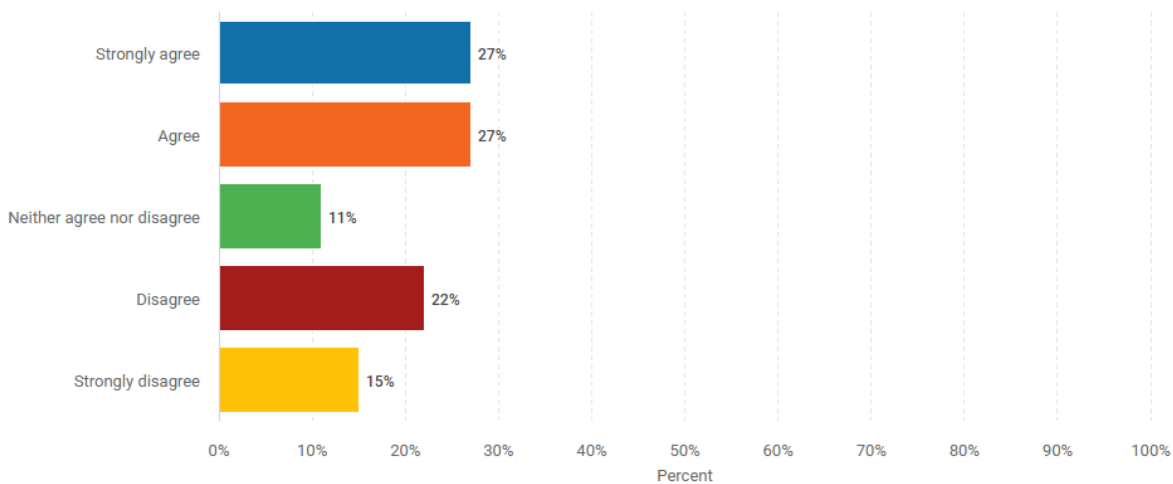
Component	Proposed marks	Proposed duration	Proposed weighting
Paper Section 1 + Section 2	20 + 80	2 hours 30 minutes (one question paper)	80%
Assignment			20%

Findings: learners

We received responses from 200 learners who said they had studied Higher Biology. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of learner respondents (54%) agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal, while 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Higher Biology? Learner views

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Higher Biology?

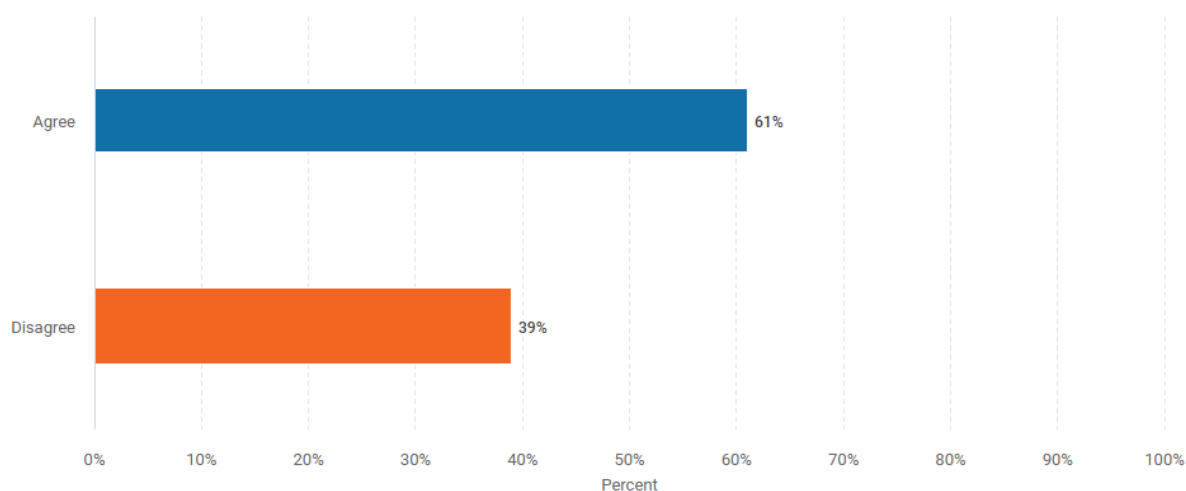


Base: 200 learners who said they had studied Higher Biology

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 (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that the change should be made from the 2026–27 session, while 39% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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

In the event that the proposed changes are made to Higher Biology, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026/27?



Base: 196 learners who said they had studied Higher Biology

Qualitative analysis

Learner respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to Higher Biology. Thirty-two learners submitted a comment. Despite most learner respondents overall supporting the proposed changes, most of those who commented cited perceived challenges.

Benefits of implementing this change

In terms of the perceived benefits of the proposed change, a couple of learner respondents said that they supported having one question paper rather than two. One explained that having one question paper would be better for their focus as they found the current break in the middle to interrupt this.

‘The break in between just causes stress, as just as you’re starting to settle into the exam, paper one is done, and you have to take a break when you’re in the flow.’

Furthermore, one respondent thought that current exams are too long, so shortening exam length would be beneficial, and another suggested that removing some questions would provide more time for checking answers over.

Challenges with implementing this change

The main challenge to emerge from learner comments was a concern around the move from two question papers to one. Other themes included the perceived challenge of demonstrating a breadth of knowledge if sampling of the course was reduced in the assessment, and a concern around an overall reduction in exam time.

Preference for two question papers

The issue that elicited the most comments from learner respondents was that of the proposed move from two question papers to one. While some respondents simply stated that they preferred two papers without any further elaboration, others explained that a break was beneficial for maintaining focus and reducing stress.

‘I quite like having 2 separate papers for multiple choice and an extended response paper. Allows time for my head to have a break and think with more clarity.’

‘The separation of papers makes it easier for people to prepare for different types of questions and doing both question papers together may cause stress due to the amount of content being assessed.’

Demonstrate breadth of knowledge

Several learner respondents raised concerns that a reduction in marks could constrain their ability to demonstrate knowledge across the breadth of the course. Respondents perceived that a higher number of marks allowed for weaker performance in particular topics to have less impact on their overall grade, whereas an increased weighting per mark would amplify this effect.

‘I think it is a good thing having more marks because you cover so much content that if you don’t understand a certain part of a topic you don’t lose as many marks.’

‘I think that the extra marks allow for more questions on different key areas that results in more fair results if you are better at different key areas.’

Reduction in exam length

There were some learner respondents who expressed disquiet in the overall reduction in exam time proposed. A couple of learners suggested an exam length of around two hours 45 minutes and a few thought that the shortened time would make the exam more challenging.

‘I don’t think that changing the time limit is appropriate as it’ll make the exam much more harder.’

‘The time for the exam should be 2hrs 40mins as already I feel there isn’t enough time.’

A couple of respondents also contrasted the perceived demand of the Higher course with National 5 in support of their argument of retaining a longer exam.

‘I don’t think 2 hours 30 mins is long enough for both sections especially since the questions and course material is harder than National 5.’

More time to adapt to the change

A few respondents suggested that centres and learners would need time to adapt to any changes and, for that reason, they should not be introduced for session 2026–27.

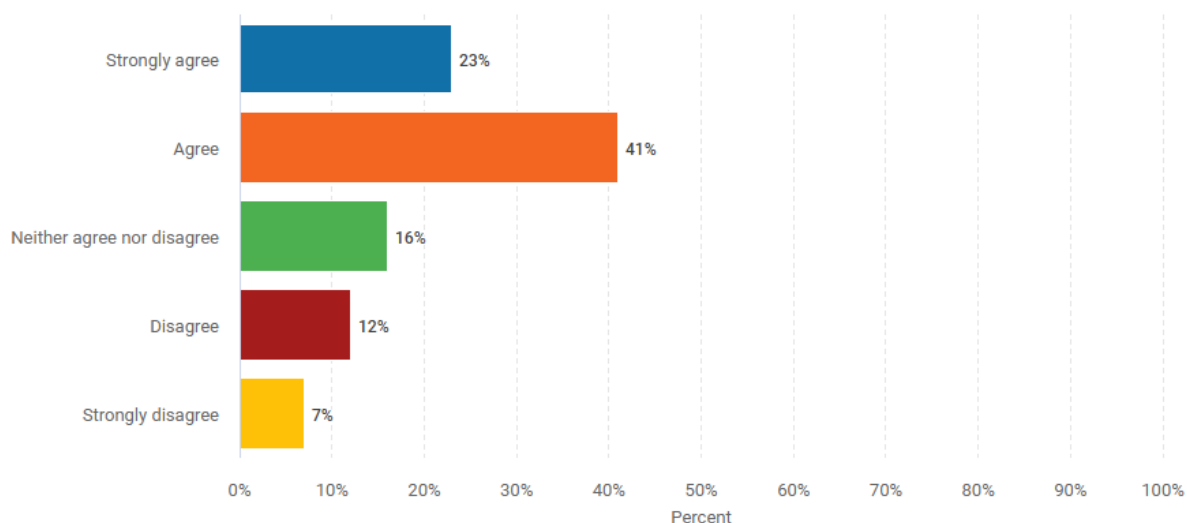
‘Time should be given for schools, educators and students to adapt to these numerous changes.’

Findings: educators

We received responses from 384 educators who stated they had taught Higher Biology. As shown in **Figure 3**, 64% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes, while 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Higher Biology?



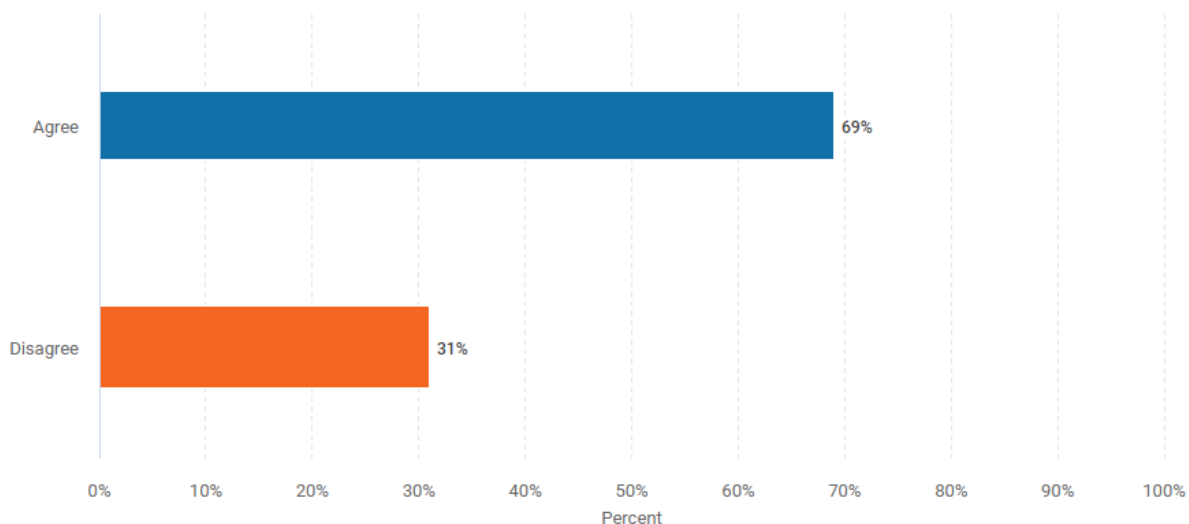
Base: 384 educators who said they had taught Higher Biology

As shown in **Figure 4** In the event that the proposed changes are made for Higher Biology, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026–27? Educator views

, when asked in the event that the proposed changes went ahead whether they should be implemented from the 2026–27 session, 69% of educator respondents agreed and 31% disagreed.

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

In the event that the proposed changes are made to Higher Biology, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026/27?



Base: 381 educators who said they had taught Higher Biology

Qualitative analysis

Educator respondents were asked if they had any further comments they would like to share with us, and 157 respondents submitted a response. In common with the learner responses, while most educator respondents overall supported the proposed changes, more of the educator comments concerned perceived challenges than benefits.

Benefits of implementing this change

The main benefits identified in educator respondent comments were around combining the question papers. Much smaller numbers of comments were received on other aspects of the proposed change, including reducing the exam time and the number of marks in the exam.

One question paper

Several educator respondents suggested that they were supportive of returning to one question paper, even if some of them still had reservations about other aspects of the proposal. Some stated that they did not know why the exam had been split into two papers.

‘One single paper is absolutely the right way to examine pupils.’

‘Absolutely make it one paper! Why is this even a question?’

‘Always thought it was pointless splitting the exam anyway.’

While, in general, these respondents gave only limited elaboration, some did suggest that moving to one question paper meant that Higher Biology would align better with practice at National 5 and Advanced Higher.

Some respondents thought that the move to one paper instead of two would benefit centres in terms of prelim and exam timetabling and logistics.

‘A return to one paper will be welcomed by staff recreating exams in a prelim situation as it will be easier to plan without a break.’

‘The logistics of emptying and re-filling an exam space in such a short turnaround are not effective.’

Moreover, a small number of educators thought that a single question paper may support improved learner focus and flow.

Reduced exam time

Several educator respondents suggested that they supported shortening the overall exam time, but with limited explanation as to why. However, one respondent did think that it would be beneficial to ASN learners.

Reduction in marks

A number of respondents suggested that they supported the removal of marks from the exam but, again, offered limited explanation. One educator, however, mentioned that 100 marks would bring Higher Biology in line with National 5.

Challenges with implementing this change

Those educator respondents who commented raised a variety of challenges they perceived with implementing the proposed changes to Higher Biology. The three main themes to emerge from these comments were concerns over the sampling of course content, concern that centres would need more time to implement the changes, and disagreement with moving to one question paper.

Course sampling

Several educator respondents raised concerns that the proposed changes would reduce the extent to which the course, which was widely perceived as content-heavy, was sampled in the exam.

‘Removing more marks from the exam will not maintain an appropriate sampling of course content. It will mean that even less of the course is covered in an exam.’

‘Higher should stretch the pupils so the extra questions are important.’

Respondents suggested that less sampling of course content in the exam could limit assessment of key areas and reduce learners’ opportunities to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge across the course. Some expressed that this would then make the paper more difficult to pass.

‘Surely this provides the pupils with less opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of knowledge that they have learned.’

‘To cut the length of the exam will only serve to narrow the opportunities we have to fairly assess all of the knowledge we have taught them.’

‘[...] assessing less of the course might make it more challenging to pass.’

A number of respondents also suggested that some of the course content should be removed if the changes go ahead.

Preference for two question papers

Several respondents suggested that they would like to retain two question papers. This was for a variety of reasons, including that one question paper would be too long and would impact on learners’ focus, especially those with extra time.

‘Combining the two papers will mean learners with extra time are in one paper for much longer, impacting focus and preventing them having a break.’

‘Extending the paper further may negatively impact ASN candidates who get extra time.’

Furthermore, a number of educator respondents thought that having two question papers reduces learner stress and that learners benefit from a break between papers.

‘Pupils get to do the MC [multiple choice] and then get a break afterwards. It [...] eases them into the exam experience and settles nerves.’

‘I think the 2 papers also gave candidates a good opportunity to have a break and consolidate before starting the harder second section.’

A number of respondents suggested that they were happy with the current approach and that this should not be changed.

One respondent suggested that combining the papers would mean that learners would likely struggle for time completing the second part of the exam. Another expressed that combining papers means that all the pressure for learners is on one paper.

Impact on centres

Several respondents stated that any proposal to implement changes in time for the 2026–27 session was unrealistic. These respondents suggested that this would not provide sufficient time for centres to prepare, particularly given that the school academic session begins after the examination diet in June. The need to amend prelims and internal assessments, in particular, was highlighted.

‘We need time in schools to change our assessments and prelims.’

‘Centres need time to amend internal assessments so that they reflect the external exam.’

‘Each change requires teachers to alter resources/ homework/ assessments, particularly prelims. It would be hoped that sufficient time would be allowed before changes [are] implemented – ie a full academic year.’

A number of educator respondents suggested that they would require more detail on the proposed change before coming to a firm view on whether or not they supported it. It was most common for educator respondents to ask which types of questions would be removed from paper 2 to account for the removal of 15 marks from this paper. Some respondents also asked how the course would be sampled and whether new exemplar papers would be released.

‘Further information on where marks and questions would be removed would be helpful.’

‘It would be useful to know if this is a reduction in content, problem solving or data analysis questions.’

Level of demand

A few educators thought that the current approach prepares learners for progression to Advanced Higher and to higher education, something they thought may not be the case if the changes were to be implemented.

‘Removing any problem-solving / experimental questions would, in my opinion, be a mistake as these prepare learners for some question styles at Advanced Higher.’

‘Scientific literacy is a skill required in further education and the skills it assesses are required in industry. When pupils are prepared and take their time, they can access more marks using these question styles so why remove?’

Similarly, two respondents thought that the proposed changes would make the exam less challenging and would reduce standards.

‘The current exam is appropriately demanding and a shortening of the exam amounts to a reduction in standards, which would be a disservice to our learners.’

Other comments

A small number of educator respondents mentioned that fewer marks will mean that the relative weighting of each mark will increase. There was also one comment that the assignment should carry a greater weighting.

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 Higher Biology. 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.