

Improving Assessment in National Courses Research: Higher English

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Proposal

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

We are proposing the following changes to the critical reading question paper, section 1 Scottish text:

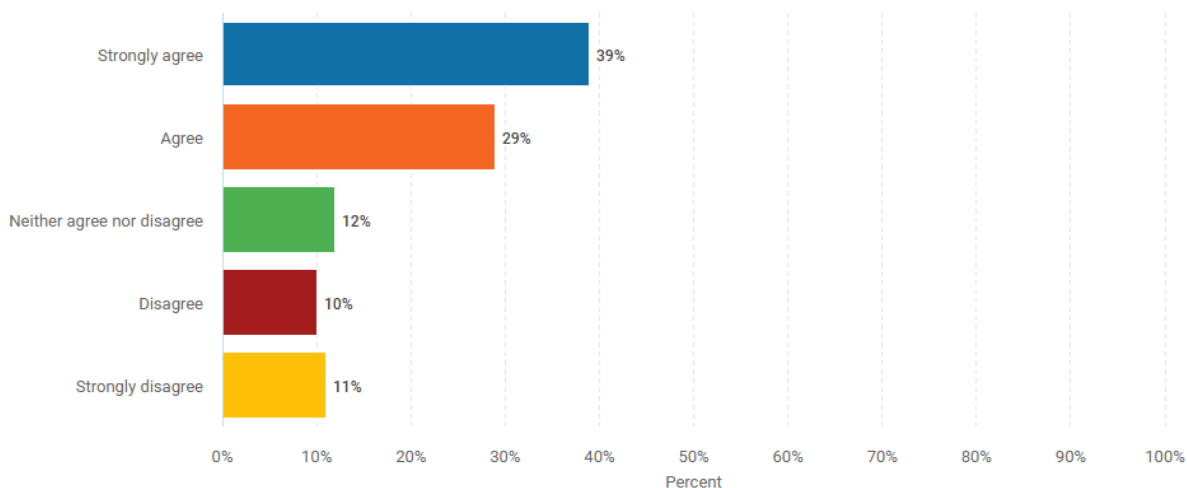
- Reducing the number of marks for the final question of the Scottish text question from 10 marks to 8 marks.
- Adding 2 marks to the questions on the printed text / extract.
- Updating the marking instructions for the final question to clarify that 4 marks, rather than 6, are available for discussion of the rest of the text / other texts.
- There are no proposed changes to the current assessment structure, weightings or mark allocations.

Findings: learners

We received responses from 624 learners who had studied Higher English. As shown in Figure 1, two-thirds of learner respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal, while 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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

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

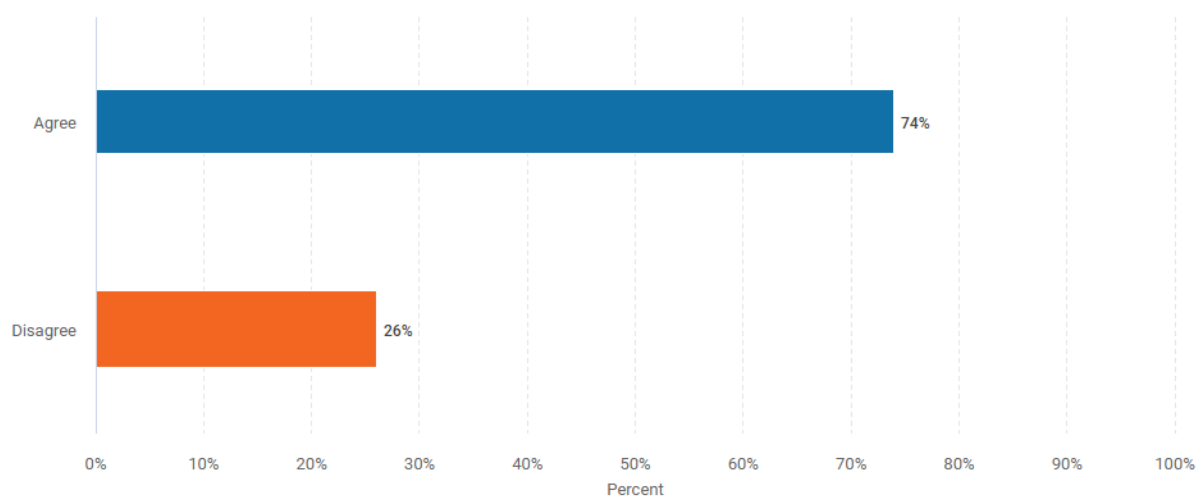


Base: 624 learners who stated they had studied Higher English

Respondents were also asked to what extent they agreed with the proposal to begin the changes in 2026–27, should they be made. As shown in Figure 2, of the 617 learner respondents, just under three quarters (74%) agreed, while just over a quarter (26%) disagreed.

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

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



Base: 617 learners who stated they had studied Higher English

Qualitative analysis

Learner respondents were asked if they had any further comments they would like to share about the proposed changes to Higher English. Eighty comments were provided. The majority of comments were on broader points that related to general change, the exam or the qualification rather than the specific changes proposed in the survey. There were also a number of comments expanding on why respondents were either in favour or against the proposed change.

Benefits of implementing this change

The main themes that emerged from learner respondents who were in favour of the change were that the current 10 mark question in Section 1 of the question paper was too large, and that the changes would improve progression from National 5 to Higher.

There were a number of comments from learner respondents that simply expressed agreement with the proposed changes but did not expand their reasoning further.

‘This will be an excellent decision!’

‘I very strongly agree this is a really good idea’

Among those who expanded on why they agreed with the proposed changes to Higher English, the most recurring theme was that reducing the number of marks in the 10-mark question in

Section 1 of the question paper would benefit learners. Some respondents thought that the current format of the question was too difficult to complete under the time constraints due to the high number of marks and the complexity required. They thought that the question would be made more manageable by reducing the number of marks in this question.

‘I definitely think the 10 marker is too big so I think this would be a really positive change.’

‘Within the time frame we have, 10 marks are far too difficult to complete in a TA, due to the amount of detail we need to go into. Reducing these marks would make it a lot easier. [...]’

Related to this was another common perception that this change could result in future candidates’ responses being of better quality. One respondent felt that they currently spent a disproportionate amount of time on the 10-mark question at the expense of the rest of the paper.

‘I think the 8 marker instead of the 10 marker would be very effective, and would allow pupils to produce stronger work.’

‘This would be helpful, as with the ten marker it is very time consuming and I am left with not a lot of time to do the rest. This would help with that.’

A few learner respondents also felt that reducing the number of marks would also improve the question paper’s accessibility and give better articulation from National 5 English to Higher English.

‘I feel minimising for 10 to 8 marks would be good for the streamline approach from National 5 to higher.’

‘I believe this would reduce pupil stress significantly, especially for those who do not take well to their texts, as sometimes the pressure of the amount they need to know can be daunting and even a 2 mark difference can really make the paper as a whole feel more approachable and in some cases less of a jump in difficulty from National 5.’

There were also a couple of comments from learners who felt that the changes may help to build analytical skills as there would be less focus on memorisation.

Challenges with implementing this change

There were four main themes that emerged from learner respondents who cautioned against the proposed changes. These were that the proposed changes would limit the opportunity for learners to demonstrate their knowledge of the texts, that learners would not be appropriately

challenged, that the exam would become more difficult, and that the changes were not necessary.

The most prevalent theme from learner respondents was a perception that the proposed changes could reduce opportunities to showcase deeper or wider understanding of the texts they had studied and that this change could devalue fully knowing the literature in this part of the course. A few respondents also expressed concerns that the allocation of marks would be similar to National 5 English, which they felt was unhelpful as it did not help learners to show the deeper knowledge they had gained through sitting Higher.

‘In the set text, if you are made to learn 6 poems, 4 marks isn’t enough to cover all of the poems and it seems like a waste of time covering them in class. You also cannot show your whole understanding of everything you have learned.’

‘Reduces the chance of people to fully discuss things and how is it different to Nat 5 then? [...]’

‘I think that the 10 marker is valuable as it is a real step up from N5 and allows significantly more liberty for discussion, analysis, and exploration of themes acting as a bit of a "mini essay". It makes me feel more able to engage with the text in depth rather than the strictly formulaic shorter questions.’

Another theme presented in the learner comments was the perception that the proposal could reduce the demand of the exam and potentially impact the overall integrity of the qualification. These learners expressed that they should be appropriately challenged when sitting Higher qualifications.

‘Having sat the Higher course, I believe taking marks off the questions makes the course easier and less stressful and it shouldn’t be this way. It’s a step up and should remain difficult if not harder. People should want to work and pass; if they don’t, amendments shouldn’t be made. Although, I think maybe more time would be suitable for the course exam.’

‘I am very strongly of the opinion that we should properly assess candidates in a meritorious yet fair fashion. Of course, if we make it significantly easier to score marks on the Scottish Set Text paper, then we wouldn’t be properly allowing candidates sitting the exam to show their academic flair and really highlight the skills they’ve used to go above and beyond the course. [...]’

Conversely, some learner respondents perceived that the proposal could actually make the exam harder than it currently is. However, there were different reasons for why they thought this, such as reducing the number of marks in the 10-mark question would make it more difficult

to pick up marks, it would be more difficult to reuse quotes, and that it was more difficult to pick up marks in the printed text/extract so moving marks to here would be more challenging.

‘I think it would overall make the paper harder as the previous questions already strain the content of the paper, meaning if there were more marks available [on the printed text/extract] they would be harder to obtain.’

Lastly, a number of respondents felt the change should not go ahead as they felt it was unnecessary, and preferred the assessment in its current format.

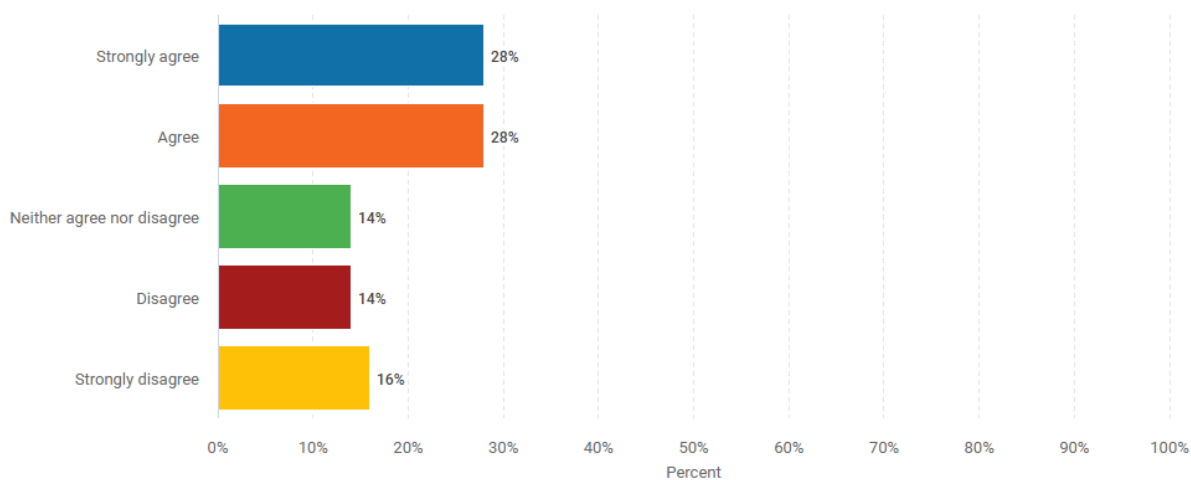
‘I think the way the English grade is split up across the different sections is very fair.’

Findings: educators

We received responses from 495 educators who stated they had taught Higher English. As shown in Figure 3, just over half of educator respondents (55%) agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal, while 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed with it.

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

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

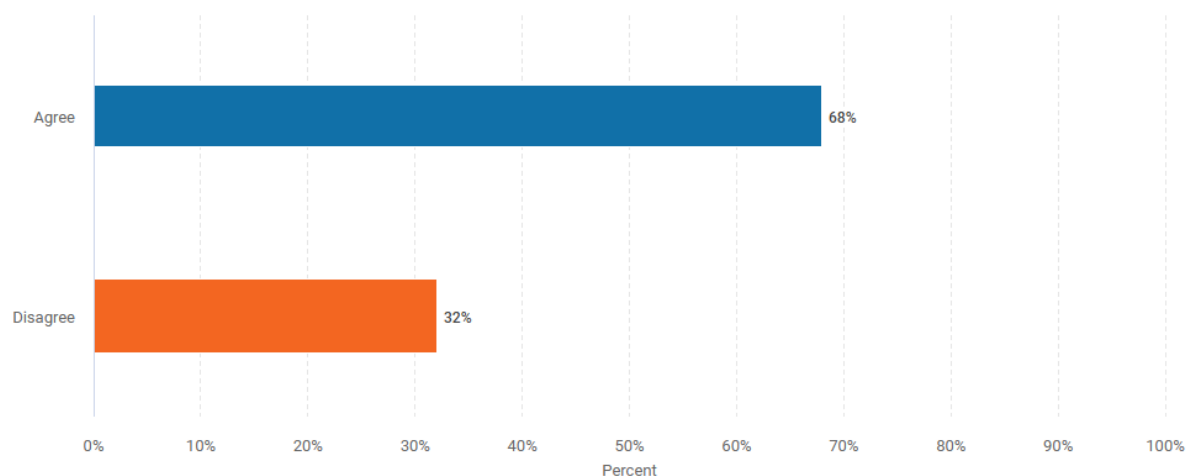


Base: 494 educators that stated they had taught Higher English

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, 68% of educator respondents agreed and 32% disagreed.

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

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



Base: 495 educators who stated they had taught Higher English

Qualitative analysis

Educator respondents were asked if they had any further comments they would like to share about the proposed changes to Higher English, and 215 chose to do so.

Although just over half of educator respondents agreed with this specific proposal, the majority of comments were either views on broader matters pertaining to the qualification, or provided detail as to the nature of their concerns with the proposal. The remaining comments either gave detail of why respondents were in favour of the proposal or why they were ambivalent towards it.

Benefits of implementing this change

Three broad themes emerged from comments from educator respondents. These were that the changes would: encourage the development of analytical skills and deeper engagement with the texts; improve progression between National 5 and Higher; benefits learners by improving time management, lowering stress, and making the exam fairer.

Deeper engagement with texts

The most prevalent benefit that educator respondents perceived was that the change would encourage a focus on analytical skills, as well as better engagement with the texts. Several respondents also mentioned that it would lessen the need for learners to memorise quotes and rote learning from candidates.

'I think this is an excellent idea. It articulates much better with National 5 while still asking for more in terms of analysis rather than just identification. It would also focus candidates on understanding and analysing the texts overall rather than feeling they have to memorise up to six quotations or specific references.'

'Higher should be about depth of knowledge, not quantity of points memorised.[...]'

Better progression between National 5 and Higher

The next most common theme was the perception that this change could lead to better progression from National 5 English to Higher English, with a number of respondents commenting that, currently, the change in demand is substantial. For these educators, the proposed changes to Higher English would match the structure of the National 5 exam better allowing learners to be better prepared, while still providing appropriate challenge for Higher.

'I strongly support the proposed changes to the Scottish Text section of the Higher English Critical Reading paper. Currently, the jump from the National 5 (8-mark) final question to the Higher (10-mark) version is too significant. By aligning the mark allocation more closely with the National 5 structure, we provide a more logical progression for candidates, reducing the 'assessment shock' that many face when moving into the second part of the Senior Phase.'

'[...] Drawing the final question in line with N5 in terms of marks but having more challenging questions is a better way to engage learners with more complex texts.'

Benefits to learners

Another recurring, but less prevalent, theme to emerge was the perception that this change could benefit learners, for example by improving their time management during the exam and reducing stress. Some respondents felt that learners currently focus and prepare for specific aspects of the course at the expense of others, so the proposed changes would help to bring balance across the question paper.

'Together with the extra 15 minutes being allocated for Paper 2 this should help. During revision and study, feedback from students is that they tend to focus on the 6 mark part of the final question, i.e. 'elsewhere', and cannot think about anything else.'

'[...] massively positive implications for learners, as the current 10-mark question is too challenging to complete within the time given.'

'I think this would improve learner's chances to succeed. Students are already placed under immense time pressure and will have to learn (at the bare minimum) 7 or 8 quotations for the Critical Essay. The pressure of the exam and the perceived

importance of the essay lead to many students avoiding the references to other poems in the Commonality question.'

Some educator respondents also said that this change could lead to a fairer exam, while maintaining the same level of difficulty required for Higher. These educators felt that the changes took the emphasis off the final question, which was viewed as a 'deciding factor' in learners' overall achievement.

'Good idea to have it mirror N5. Also think this will reduce scope for the final question being such a deciding factor in performance. There can be variations in the difficulty of this Q from year to year.'

'Fully support the proposed changes to the Scottish text section of the Critical Reading paper. The revisions place greater emphasis on analysis of the printed extract and reduce the weighting on wider text recall, which should help make the assessment more accessible for learners while still maintaining appropriate challenge and balance within the existing assessment structure.'

Less common themes

Finally, a small number of comments were a reiteration of being in favour of the change. A couple also thought that such a change would be of little imposition to teachers.

'I think the reduction in the marks for the "elsewhere" section opens up further opportunities to assess different aspects of the text without too much change required to the actual teaching and learning processes.'

Challenges with implementing this change

Educator respondents perceived a number of challenges with the proposed changes to Higher English. The main themes to come out of the comments were that respondents felt that the changes would reduce the challenge of the exam and that it would encourage a more surface-level knowledge of the literature. Some also felt that the change was not necessary or indicated ambivalence towards the proposal.

Reduces the challenge of the exam

The most common theme, by far, was a concern that the change could dilute or reduce the challenge of the qualification. Several respondents expressed that the view that Higher English is appropriately demanding, and felt that the proposed changes were designed to make it easier to pass.

'I believe that such a change would make Higher English less challenging. The current allocation of marks is fair and ensures that there can be challenge for the most able whilst also ensuring that everyone is able to access the assessment at some level.'

'I feel that the proposed changes are reductive and lessen the demands of the qualification. There needs to be a degree of challenge and additional time has already been given over to the paper to support learners. Any further changes reduce the value of the course further.'

There were also several respondents who expressed concerns that the proposed changes would impact the integrity or standards of the qualification, as it was perceived that the changes would make the exam easier. A few of these respondents mentioned that 15 minutes had previously been added to the paper and questioned the reasoning for the reallocation of marks being proposed along with the extra time allowed.

'This would make the Scottish Set Text element of the Higher Course far too easy. Pupils have already been given 15 minutes extra time to complete this paper, the difficulty level needs to remain challenging to uphold the integrity of the course.'

'[...] Reducing the content that pupils are required to do will require less intelligence, not more. This devalues the Higher. [...]

'The value of the qualification is diluted when we lower the standards expected instead of addressing the systemic issues which are harming the development of literacy and critical thinking skills required for exams and wider life.'

It was also common for respondents to say that reducing the number of marks from ten to eight in the final question would make the exam too similar to National 5, although it should be noted that the requirements to gain these marks would be different in the two courses. For these respondents, the changes would not allow for the level of challenge that would be expected at Higher, particularly in terms of allowing deeper engagement with the texts.

'The ten-mark final questions allows for a full response to show what they know about their author instead of more textual analysis type questions. This would dumb down Higher English even more to make it the same as National 5 in terms of marks (although level of analysis is much higher).'

'I think making it an 8-mark question devalues the ability of candidates to differentiate between N5 and H TA [Textual Analysis]. I'd rather it was kept the same as it forces candidates to think more widely.'

Related to this, there was a concern among a few respondents that making these changes would mean there was a risk of Higher learners being ill-prepared to study at Advanced Higher level, or university.

‘This appears to be reducing further the depth of literary study at Higher. The assessment is already a poor mechanism for the assessment of literary study and does not prepare young people for the rigours of Textual Analysis or Literary Study at AH.’

Encourages shallow knowledge of texts

The second most common theme was the view that such a change could reduce the opportunity for candidates to showcase their deeper and wider understanding of the texts they had studied. Educator respondents who held this view felt that this would encourage a more surface-level knowledge of the texts covered in the Scottish text section. Some felt that this would allow learners to pick up marks more easily with less revision of the texts. This was because they saw more focus given to the extract supplied in the paper, and marks taken away from the final question.

‘I don't feel marks should be taken away from the discussion of other texts as it provides less opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of the full body of work.’

‘I feel like, although not disastrous, these changes would take away from the overall appreciation and consideration of the other studied texts for SST that are not the extract selected for the paper. The comparison question ensures that equal attention is paid to all the other texts studied — otherwise it reduces the value of studying so many.’

‘This reduces the importance of analysing / comparing other texts / parts of the text.’

Several respondents also mentioned that the current structure of the questions allowed for learners to look holistically across different texts, encouraging an in-depth understanding of a range of literature. These respondents felt that reallocating the marks as proposed would disincentivise learners to revise all the texts studied in class. One also stated that this question enabled the distinction between the abilities of different candidates to become apparent.

‘The rigour of the ten-mark question in Scottish Text allows for differentiation between candidates[...] This question encourages the candidates to view the separate texts (eg poems) as one coherent text with connections and comparisons rather than cherry-picking parts that they want to focus on.’

One respondent also stated concerns that the extract would not be substantial enough for learners to access the full 12 marks available.

Change not necessary

Some educator respondents were of the view that the change was not required, either because the current structure of the question or exam was appropriate or because of the recent addition of 15 minutes to the duration of the exam.

‘Ten marks provides suitable challenge and learners appreciate the demanding aspect of the task.’

A number of respondents did not feel that the proposed change was a clear cut positive or negative, with some comments suggesting that the proposal was either minimal, with limited impact and therefore unnecessary, or more clearly stating ambivalence towards the matter.

‘This seems like a minor change that will have little impact on teaching or pupil preparations for this part of the exam.’

Alternative suggestions

Educator and learner respondents also gave varying suggestions for alternative changes that they felt should be made to Higher English. As the comments did not directly answer the research questions, they were not included in the analysis; however, these were passed on to Qualifications Development teams so that they were aware of the themes that emerged on this topic. While alternative changes are out of scope of what Qualifications Scotland is proposing at this stage, there will be targeted opportunities for learners and educators to input more directly on wider qualifications reform in the future.