

Improving Assessment in National Courses Research: Higher Environmental Science

Published: June 2026

Higher Environmental Science findings

Proposal

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

- We are proposing making Paper 2 of the Higher Environmental Science exam shorter, reducing the marks from 100 to 80 and the time from 2 hours 30 minutes to 2 hours.
- There would be no changes to Paper 1 or the Assignment.
- The weightings of the exams and the assignment 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 Higher Environmental Science are:

Current

Component	Marks	Duration	Weighting
Paper 1	20	45 minutes	
Paper 2	100	2 hours 30 minutes	80% (Papers 1 and 2 combined)
Assignment	20	Not applicable	20%

Proposed

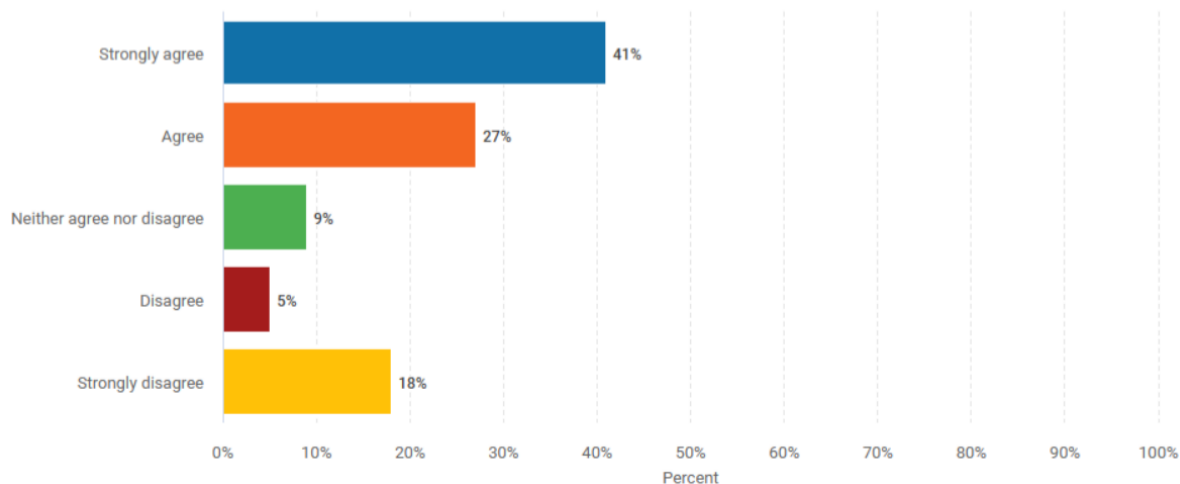
Component	Marks	Duration	Weighting
Paper 1	20	45 minutes	
Paper 2	80	2 hours	80% (Papers 1 and 2 combined)
Assignment	20	Not applicable	20%

Findings: learners

We received responses from 22 learners who said they had studied Higher Environmental Science. As shown in Figure 1, the majority (68%) of learner respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this proposal should be made, while 23% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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

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

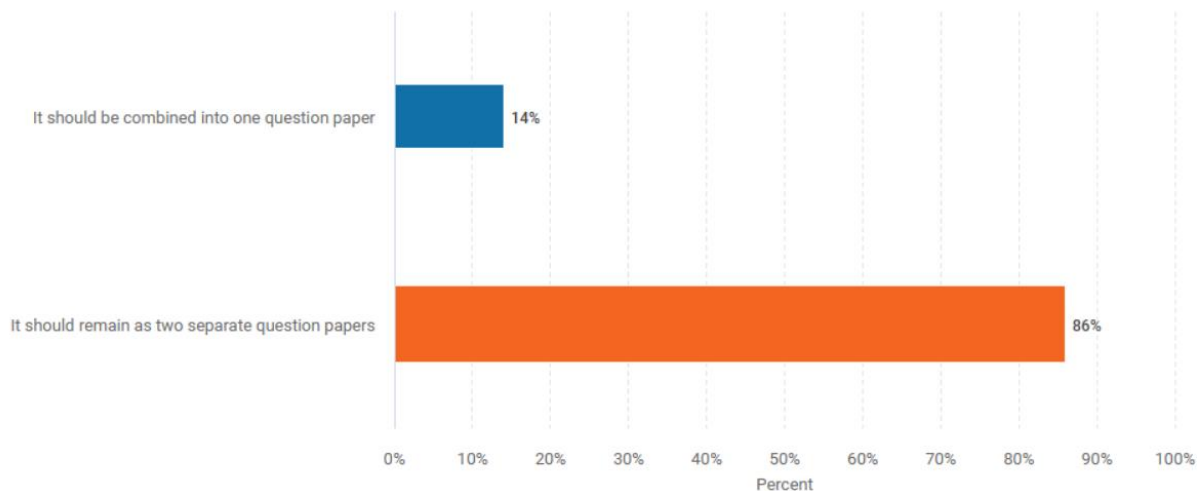


Base: 22 learner respondents who stated they had studied Higher Environmental Science.

Additionally, learner respondents were asked if the Higher Environmental Science assessment should be combined into one question paper, with a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers. As shown in Figure 2, the vast majority of learners (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment should remain as two separate question papers, while 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 2: In the event the proposed changes are made to Higher Environmental Science, should the assessment be combined into one question paper with a duration of 2 hours and 25 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers? Learner views.

In the event the proposed changes are made to Higher Environmental Science, should the assessment should be combined into one question paper with a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers?

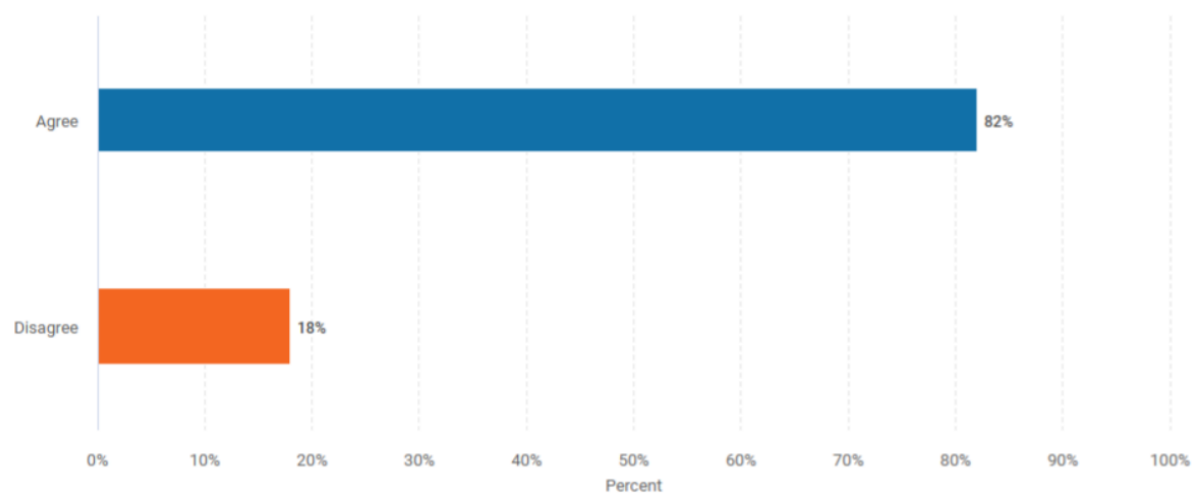


Base: 22 learner respondents who said they had studied Higher Environmental Science.

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 vast majority of learners (82%) agreed, while 18% disagreed.

Figure 3: In the event that the proposed changes are made for Higher Environmental Science, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026–27? Learner views

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



Base: 22 learner respondents who said they had studied Higher Environmental Science.

Qualitative analysis

Learner respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to Higher Environmental Science. Eight respondents left a comment, but there were no comments directly about the changes being proposed.

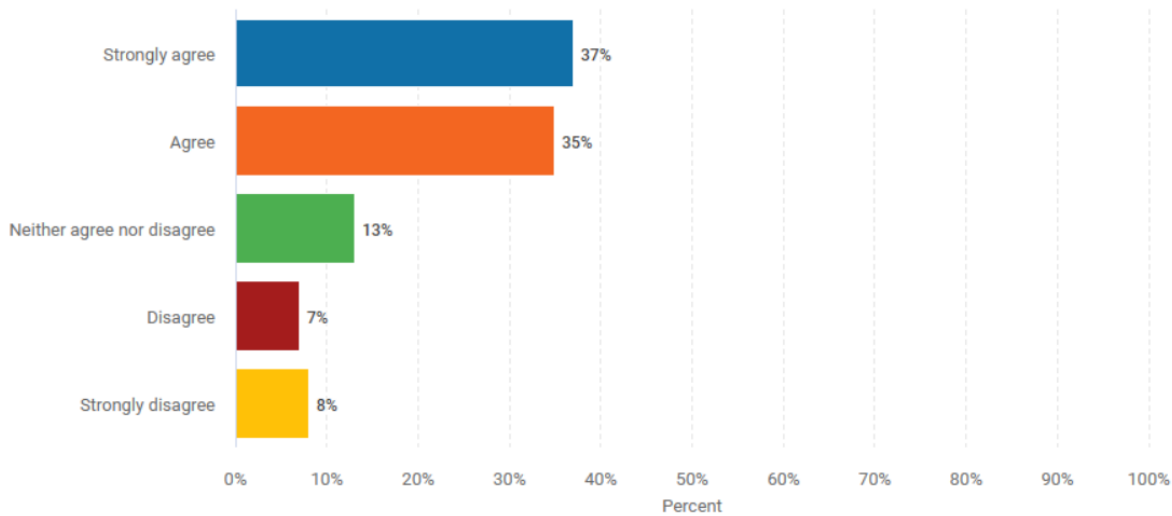
Although out of the scope of what Qualifications Scotland is proposing at this time, the general themes from these comments concerned the course containing too much content, with the majority of respondents suggesting that the number of topics should be reduced with the remaining topics being studied in more detail.

Findings: educators

We received responses from 59 educators who said they had taught Higher Environmental Science. As shown in Figure 4, 72% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes for Higher Environmental Science, while 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Higher Environmental Science? Educator views

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

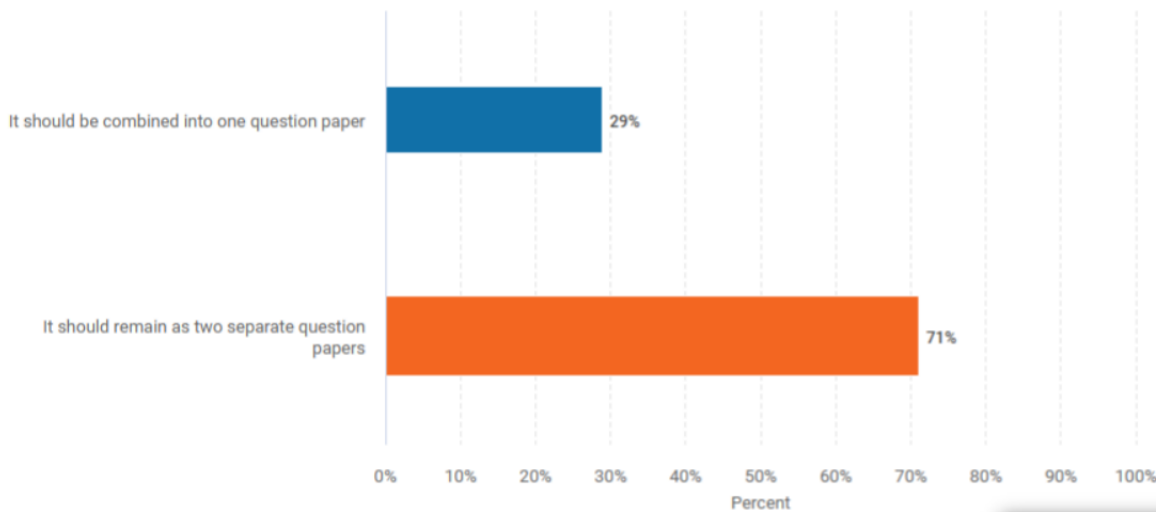


Base: 60 educator respondents who stated they had taught Higher Environmental Science

Educator respondents were further asked if the Higher Environmental Science assessment should be combined into one question paper, with a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers. As shown in Figure 5, the majority of educators (71%) agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment should remain as two separate question papers, while 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 5: In the event that the proposed changes are made to Higher Environmental Science, should the assessment be combined into one question paper with a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers? Learner views

In the event the proposed changes are made to Higher Environmental Science, should the assessment should be combined into one question paper with a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or remain as two separate question papers?

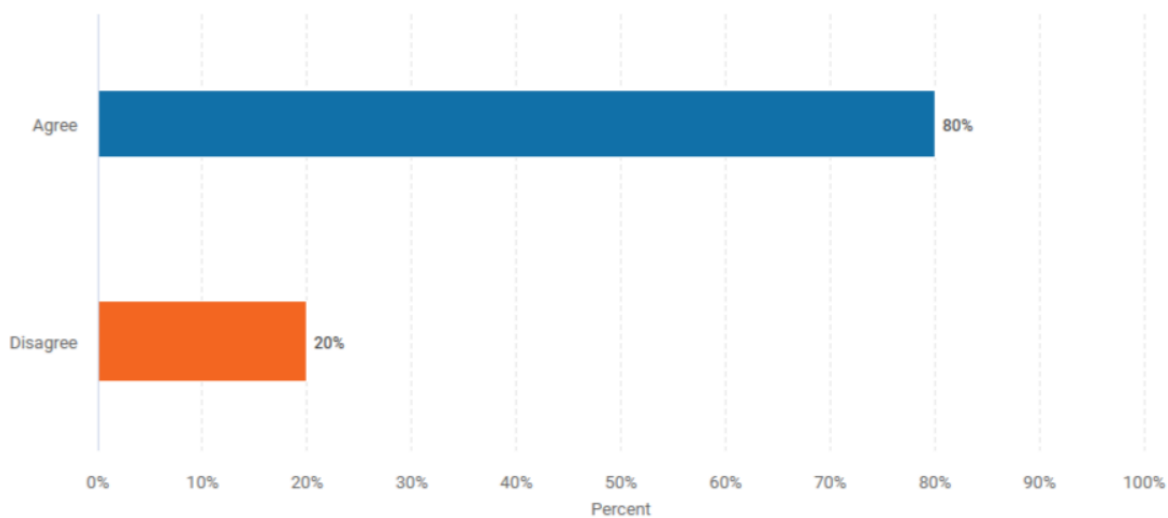


Base: 59 educator respondents who said they had taught Higher Environmental Science

As shown in Figure 6, 80% of educator respondents agreed and 20% disagreed that the proposed changes should be implemented from the 2026–27 session, if they were to go ahead.

Figure 6: In the event that the proposed changes are made for Higher Environmental Science, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026–27? Educator views.

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



Base: 59 educator respondents who stated they had taught Higher Environmental Science

Qualitative analysis

As with learner respondents, educator respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to Higher Environmental Science. Forty-two respondents left a comment. The vast majority of comments gave alternative suggestions for changes to be made to Higher Environmental Science other than what was being proposed. However, there were a few comments that related directly to the changes being proposed.

Views on the proposed changes

There were a few comments from educator respondents related to the benefits of implementing the proposed changes. One respondent thought that cutting down the number of marks would benefit pupils, while another said that combining the two papers would allow learners to better manage their own time.

‘Agree that cutting this down would be of benefit to pupils.’

‘[...] I believe combining the papers would benefit pupils as it would allow them to balance their time between paper 1 & 2 as they deemed necessary which is appropriate for senior learners’

There were also some comments from educator respondents who expressed concerns with the changes being proposed. There were a few comments around the proposed length of the question paper. A couple of respondents felt that learners would not be able to demonstrate the same level of knowledge and skills with the shortened length, while another said that more processing time would be needed to answer the particularly complex questions. Another respondent felt that the current length of time was appropriate for the level of demand that was expected at Higher.

‘The complex nature of some of the questions and obscure contexts that are given mean that additional processing time is required for this subject. Just taking off 30 minutes and dropping a question will not address this. Many pupils with additional time will still be sitting a paper for 2 hours 30 to 3 hours and struggling through up to 3000 words of information to answer questions, in many cases for 1 or 2 marks.’

‘I do not think that the exam is too long — it reflects an appropriate level of attention and resilience for the age and stage of Higher candidates.’

Somewhat related to this was the view among a few respondents that the combining the two papers would result in one very long exam. Some respondents explained further that there would be logistical difficulties with arrange exams of this length for learners with additional time, and others expressed that the length would be challenging for these learners themselves.

'I agree with the reduction of time and therefore marks. However a single 2 hour 45 minute sitting is a long time. Longer than even the current or proposed chemistry exam. I think the options should be a single 2.5 hour exam (with reduced marks) or a 45 minute and a 2 hour exams with the proposed marks.'

'[...] I am further concerned that merging papers will make it harder to provide support for pupils who require additional support such as additional time.'

'Separate papers helps learners with additional learning needs compartmentalise and organise their efforts during long exam is harder to accommodate students with extra time than shorter examinations.'

There were a few other challenges with the proposed changes that were explained by just one or two respondents. These were:

- The structure of the exam would be too different from the other sciences
- Removing the essay question will make it more difficult to differentiate between the abilities of different candidates

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 Environmental Science. 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.