

Improving Assessment in National Courses Research: Higher Physics

Published: June 2026

Proposal

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

- We are proposing reducing the marks of Paper 1 from 25 marks to 20 marks.
- We are proposing reducing the marks of Paper 2 from 130 marks to 110 marks.
- We are then proposing combining Paper 1 and Paper 2 into a single exam paper with two sections and reducing the time from 3 hours across two papers to 2 hours 30 minutes for one combined paper.
- There would be no changes to 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 Physics are:

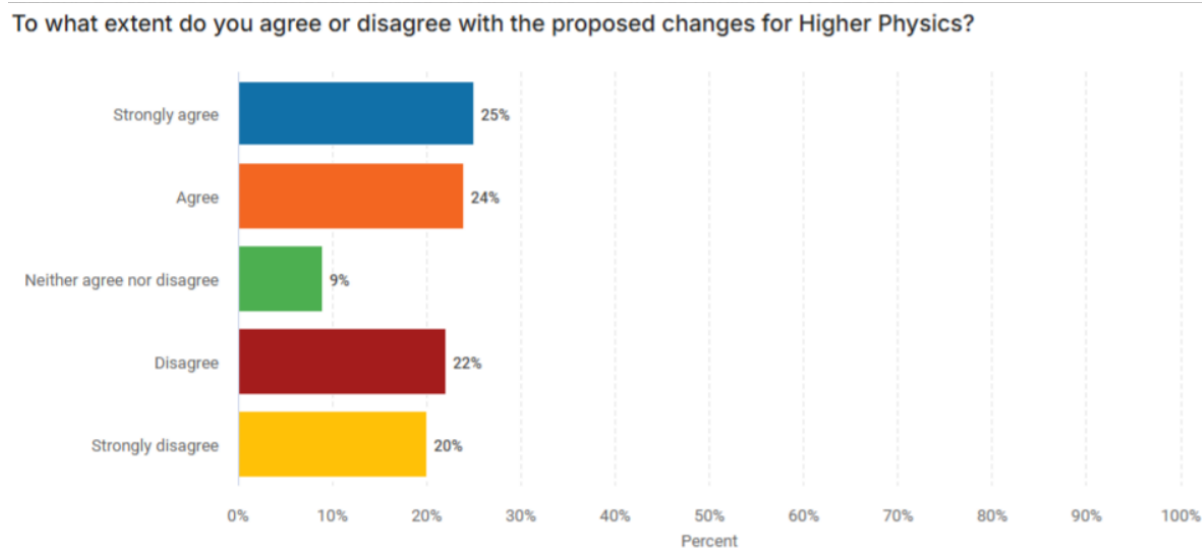
Component	Current marks	Current duration	Current weighting
Paper 1 + 2	25 + 130	45 minutes + 2 hours 15 minutes	80%
Assignment	20	N/A	20%

Component	Proposed marks	Proposed duration	Proposed weighting
Sections 1 + 2	20 + 110	2 hours 30 minutes	80%
Assignment	20	N/A	20%

Findings: learners

We received responses from 209 learners who had stated they had studied Higher Physics. As shown in Figure 1, just under half (49%) of learner respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this proposal should be made, while 42% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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

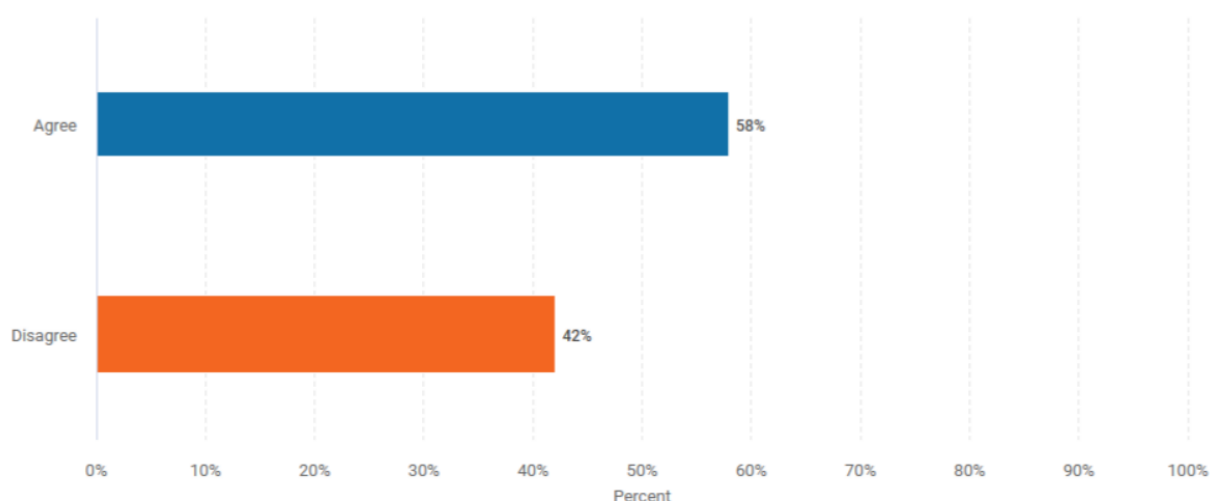


Base: 209 learner respondents who stated they had studied Higher Physics.

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 (58%) agreed, and 42% disagreed.

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



Base: 206 learner respondents who had studied 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 Higher Physics, and 45 respondents left a comment. The key theme that emerged was related to challenges they perceived with combining the question paper. Less common themes were concerns with the time and number of marks being reduced.

Benefits of implementing this change

There were a few comments from learner respondents who indicated they were in favour of the changes being proposed to Higher Physics. One respondent stated that the changes to the question paper would benefit learners who tend to struggle with time pressure for this qualification. Another respondent felt that the changes better reflected the structure of National 5 and Advanced Higher.

‘Highers being two papers was always very perplexing given its predecessor and successor levels of Physics both comprise only one. Good idea.’

Challenges with implementing this change

The most common theme that came out of the responses from learner respondents was concerns about the two question papers being combined into one paper. It was common for learner respondents to say that they found the break between the two papers to be beneficial for reducing stress. Some also said it was helpful to manage their time or do extra revision.

‘Compiling the whole exam into one paper may cause additional stress to students. I believe the paper being split into two components allows pupils to relax and fuel themselves. I do think the shortening would be helpful though.’

‘Should keep section 1 and 2 [separate], the small break in between is useful to quickly revise any topics last minute’

‘Also it is helpful to have the split in the paper to let your brain relax and to help you manage your time effectively.’

Another concern was related to reducing the overall time of the question paper. A few learner respondents expressed that they felt pressure to complete the exam in the time available currently, and were concerned they would not have enough time under the proposed changes, even if the number of marks was being reduced. One learner felt that the proposed time did not allow for learners time to relax into the exam, while another stated that reducing the time might mean that some learners achieve lower grades.

‘I think you need a long enough time to not have to rush through the exam, even if there are less questions.’

‘Physics is also terribly hard so cutting down the time will probably result in people getting lower marks.’

Related to this was the sentiment among a few respondents that reducing the marks would mean that the course was not sufficiently sampled. Of these respondents, a few expressed that the weighting of each mark would increase, putting learners at a disadvantage. One respondent felt that it would limit the opportunity for more able candidates to demonstrate the breadth of their learning.

A few learner respondents also felt concerned that reducing the time and marks would lead to a reduction in the course content that could be assessed.

‘Reducing the amount of questions may make it difficult to explore all topics within the course’

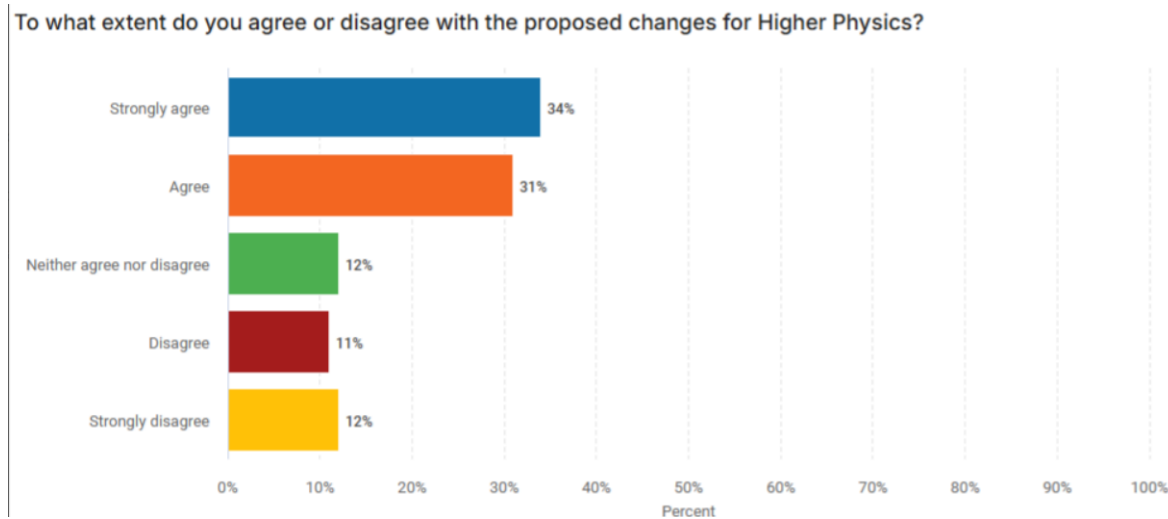
‘If there are less marks available there is less of a cushioning for the quantity of marks you can lose to still get an A which is more stressful.’

‘[...] reducing the overall number of questions on a paper also reduces the number of unusual/unique questions, which students who better understand the course and/or have worked harder tend to do better in. I believe the proposed change favours students who are less diligent [...]

Findings: educators

We received responses from 352 educators who stated they had taught Higher Physics. As shown in Figure 3, 65% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes for Higher Physics, while 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

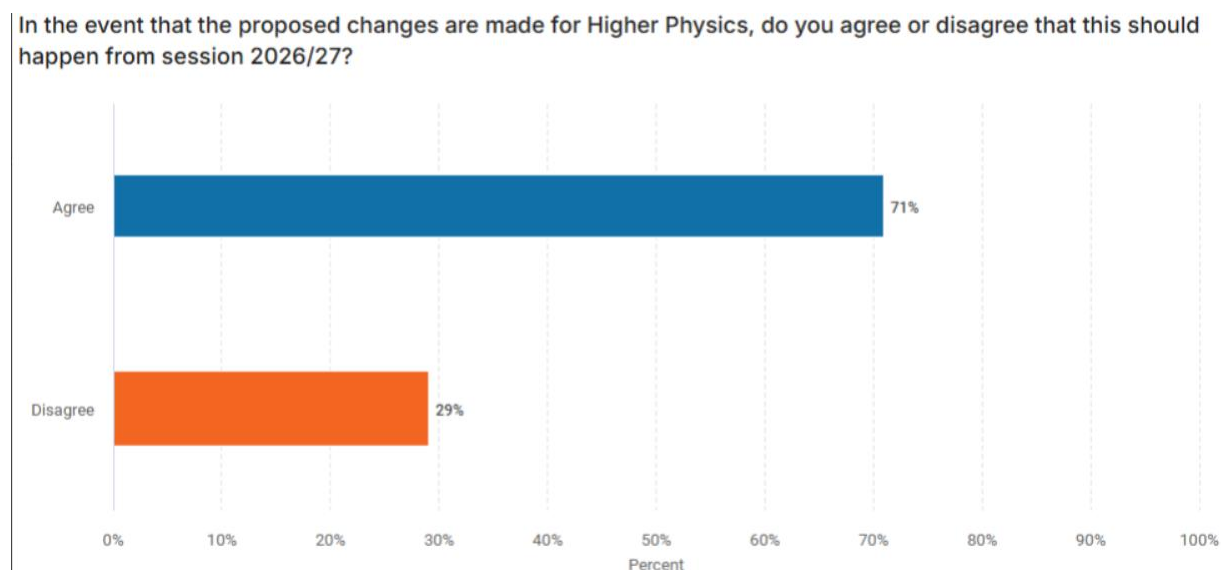
Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for Higher Physics? Educator views



Base: 352 educator respondents who stated they had taught 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, 71% of educator respondents agreed and 29% disagreed.

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



Base: 352 educator respondents who stated they had taught 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 Higher Physics, and 175 left comments. Although the most common response from educator respondents was to agree with the proposals, more of the comments were from respondents who were concerned either specifically about the proposed changes or, more broadly, about aspects of Higher Physics that were not in scope of the research.

Benefits of implementing this change

There were a number of comments from educator respondents regarding the perceived benefits of implementing the proposed changes. A few of these related to the advantages of a reduction in overall exam time, but most focused on the benefits of combining papers 1 and 2. The main benefit identified was that learners would be better able to manage their own time.

‘I agree with combining papers 1 and 2 as pupils then get the freedom and choice to decide what time they dedicate between the two sections and there is no disparity between National 5 and Higher.’

‘A single paper ... means pupils can manage their effort between the multiple choice and extended answer papers as they wish.’

A couple of educator respondents thought a reduced exam duration would specifically benefit those learners who require extra time.

Challenges with implementing this change

Despite several educator respondents endorsing combining the two papers, suggesting it would benefit learners, most of the comments expressed concerns around this and around the associated combined exam duration.

Preference for two question papers

A few educator respondents expressed concerns about a combined exam paper. On the whole, they felt that the break between papers 1 and 2 benefitted learners. This was particularly in terms of managing learner stress.

‘I used to like the break between Paper 1 and Paper 2, it allowed us to calm students down before the big written paper after the multiple choice.’

‘The separation of the two halves of the paper makes sure students who panic in exams or mismanage their time are less disadvantaged.’

‘By grouping the two papers into one you are effectively making the exam experience worse for learners - pupils who struggle to focus and work to their best effort for an extended period of time will now have a more difficult experience.’

In contrast to those who thought that one paper would aid learners with time management, several educator respondents thought that a combined paper would be detrimental to learners’ managing their own time.

‘Students benefit hugely from having two separate papers. Merging will affect time management and greatly affect performance negatively in the MC [multiple choice] section.’

‘I quite like that the multiple choice section is a separate paper at this level forcing students to spend time checking it over.’

‘Splitting the MC [multiple choice] and paper 2 is a benefit to candidates as it allows them [...] to manage their time in the exam and prevents them spending too long on the MC [multiple choice] section.’

Exam duration

A number of educator respondents were concerned about a single exam being two and a half hours long. They felt that this was too long for many learners to focus, especially those who received extra time as part of additional assessment arrangements.

'I think 2 hours, 30 minutes is too long for a single paper at this level, particularly for pupils who require extra time.'

Respondents expressed concern over learners' level of concentration over such a long exam period and how it might affect performance. Similarly, a small number of educator respondents suggested that this would increase learner stress.

'In a student's mind, although there would only be one paper, it will go from 2 hours 15 minutes ... to 2 hours 30 minutes. In students' minds it will feel like the exam is longer!'

'Pupils will be really stressed with the time and time constraints will be a big issue.'

Course content

Several educator respondents raised concerns that the proposed changes would reduce the extent to which the course is sampled in the exam. They expressed concerns about the potential effect on learners and on standards.

'My question would just be will all key areas and skills still be assessed? Reassurance to teaching staff that [there will be] no change in the standard.'

Respondents suggested that less sampling of course content in the exam could limit assessment of key areas, reduce learners' opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, and reduce the capacity for the exam to differentiate between the abilities of different learners.

'Less questions, less assessment, less of a spread between students' results and therefore less opportunity to differentiate between grades.'

'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 a question from almost every key area is likely to appear, however if you reduce the length of the exam by removing questions, it may actually cause more stress on learners preparing for the exam.'

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

Impact on centres

Whether they were supportive of the proposed changes or not, several educator respondents expressed concerns around the prospective implementation timelines. They emphasised that centres would need time to prepare and that introduction in 2026–27 would be challenging or even unwelcome.

‘Bringing in changes next session is unreasonable. When would this be decided and then announced to centres? Would there sufficient information regarding content to amend prelims? Would there be sufficient time? Need to consider staff workload.’

Level of demand

In contrast to those respondents who suggested that the changes may make Higher Physics more challenging for learners, a few educator respondents questioned the need for the changes and were concerned about maintaining standards.

‘There is no point in this other than to make the exams easier and cheaper to mark. The Higher is already significantly easier than it was in the past. This change would be unnecessary and unwise.’

A small number of educators expressed that the current approach prepares learners for progression to higher education.

‘The gold standard being watered down is a concern for what they might end up doing in further study. It's more than just knowing the content, they need to cope with all exams — pressure, time management etc.’

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

One respondent thought that no significant changes should be made before the full reform of National Qualifications.

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 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.