

Improving Assessment in National Courses: National 5 Chemistry

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Proposal

The following proposal was shared with respondents who stated they had studied or taught National 5 Chemistry:

- We are proposing making the exam for National 5 Chemistry shorter, reducing the time from 2 hours 30 minutes to 2 hours.
- We would shorten Section 1 by removing 5 multiple choice questions. We would shorten Section 2 by removing 15 marks worth of questions.
- The proposed weightings of the exam and the project would remain the same at 80% and 20%.
- 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 proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry are:

Component	Current marks	Current duration	Current weighting
Section 1 + 2	25 + 75	2 hours 30 minutes	80%
Assignment	20	N/A	20%

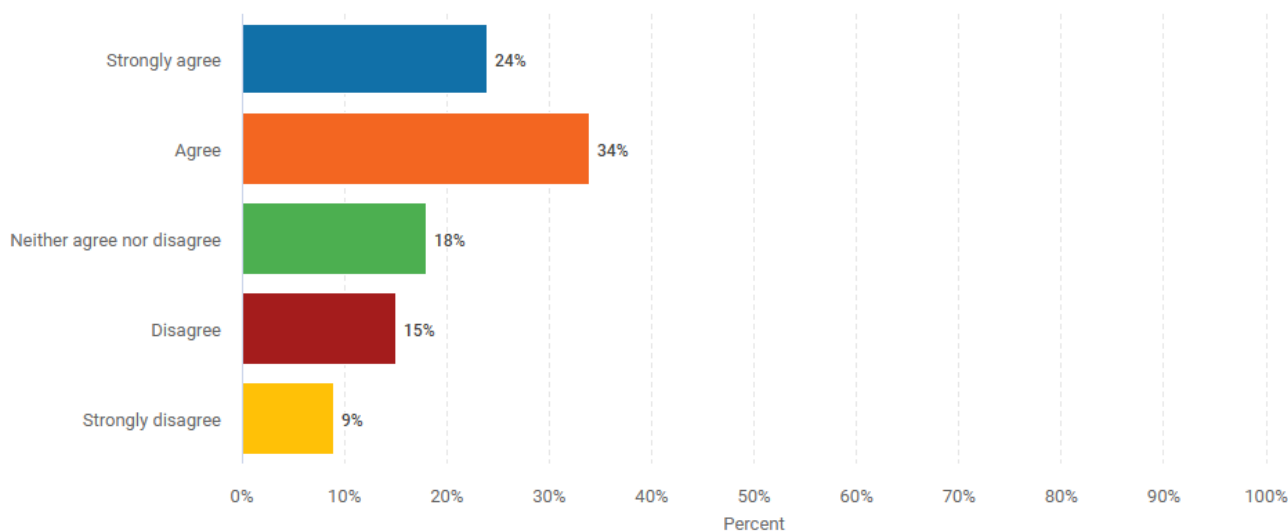
Component	Proposed marks	Proposed duration	Proposed weighting
Section 1 + 2	20 + 60	2 hours	80%
Assignment	20	N/A	20%

Findings: learners

We received responses from 512 learners who stated they had studied National 5 Chemistry. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of learner respondents (58%) agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal, while 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry? Learner views

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry?

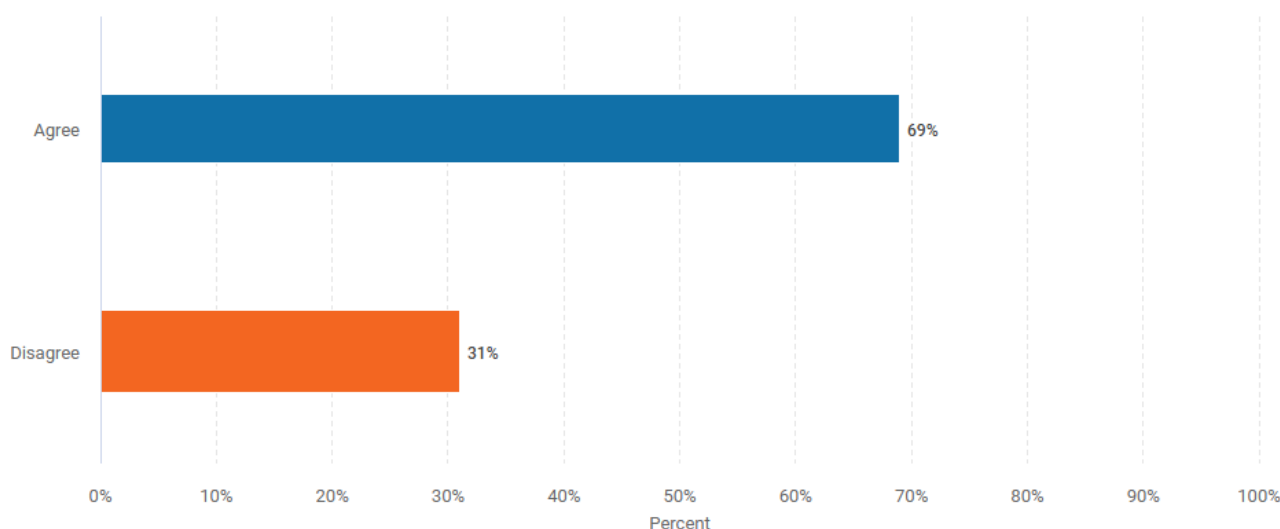


Base: 512 learners who stated they had studied National 5 Chemistry

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 (69%) agreed, and 31% disagreed.

Figure 2: In the event that the proposed changes are made for National 5 Chemistry, 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 National 5 Chemistry, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026/27?



Base: 504 learners who stated they had studied National 5 Chemistry

Qualitative analysis

Learner respondents were asked if they had any further comments that they would like to share about the proposed changes to National 5 Chemistry. Fifty three respondents left a comment. While over half (58%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal, almost all comments were from those who disagreed with the proposed changes.

Benefits of reducing the length of the exam paper

There were a small number of comments from learner respondents regarding the benefits they perceived with the changes being proposed. Several learner respondents indicated that they welcomed the shortened question paper because two hours made the exam feel more manageable. One respondent explained that they felt the current exam was too long without a break.

‘As National 5 is the first level of exams for most candidates, I think it is good to not suddenly have a long gruelling exam.’

‘It would be perfect if the school did that because 2 hours 30 mins is too much especially without a break’

Challenges with changes to the question paper

A common theme among National 5 Chemistry learner respondents was the opinion that reducing the number of marks would mean the course content would not be adequately covered in the exam paper. Some learner respondents felt that the reduction of marks would mean that they would not be given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, which may impact their results. A few felt that it would undermine the exam validity.

‘Removing questions means that fewer areas of content will be questioned and so reducing opportunities for success in areas which may not come up.’

‘I felt the exam was good as it was as there were enough questions to cover each topic evenly.’

‘National 5 science exams are too long, but the number of marks should not be lowered as it is not sufficient to test the entire course.’

For similar reasons, several learner respondents that two hours would not be long enough to assess sufficient coverage of the course.

‘No reason to shorten it. 2 hours is NOT long enough to assess the entire course, as it contains a wide range of material. It should stay 2 hrs 30mins.’

‘I don't believe that the National 5 chemistry exam should be shortened, as last year, when I sat it, it felt as though it only just tested all areas of my knowledge. Thus, shortening the exam would certainly result in less rigorous and thorough testing for candidates, which we simply cannot have. In fact, I finished the exam forty minutes early, which allowed FAR too much time. We should shorten the exam whilst still keeping the amount of marks the same so that we actually test candidates properly.’

Less common themes related to challenges with the proposals

There were some ideas expressed by a minority of learner respondents about why they disagreed with the proposed changes to National 5 Chemistry. These were:

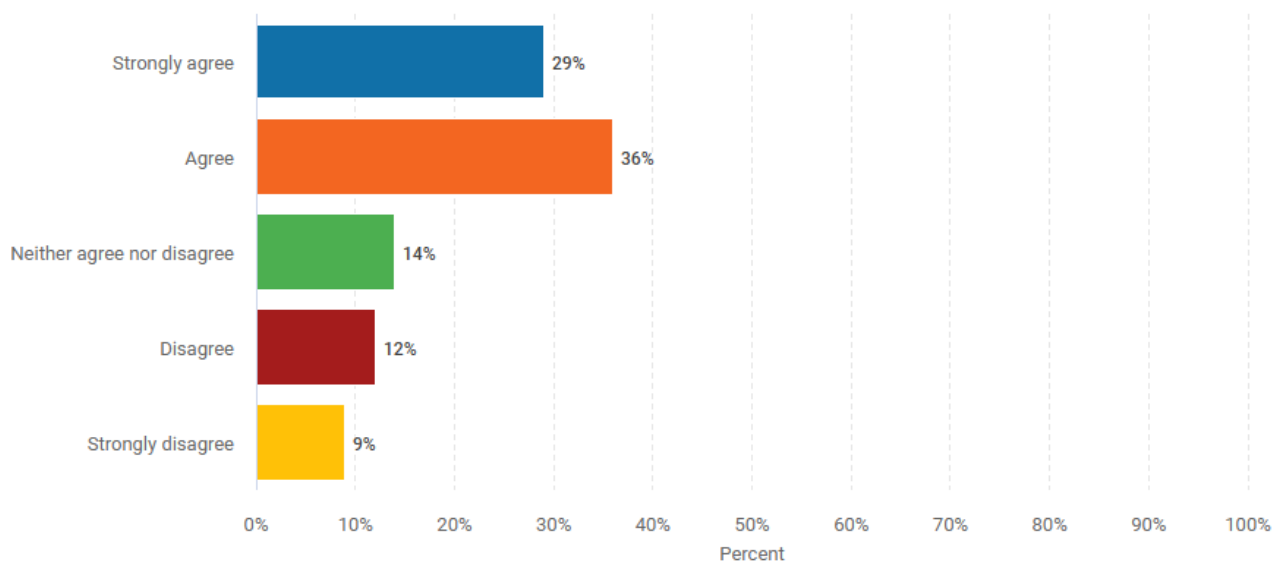
- Have only one open ended question
- Increase the weighting of the project
- Phase changes in over a two year period
- Separate into two papers so there is a break between them
- Remove assignment and open ended questions

Findings: educators

We received responses from 485 educators who said they had taught National 5 Chemistry. As shown in Figure 3, over half (65%) of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry, while 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry? Educator views

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes for National 5 Chemistry?

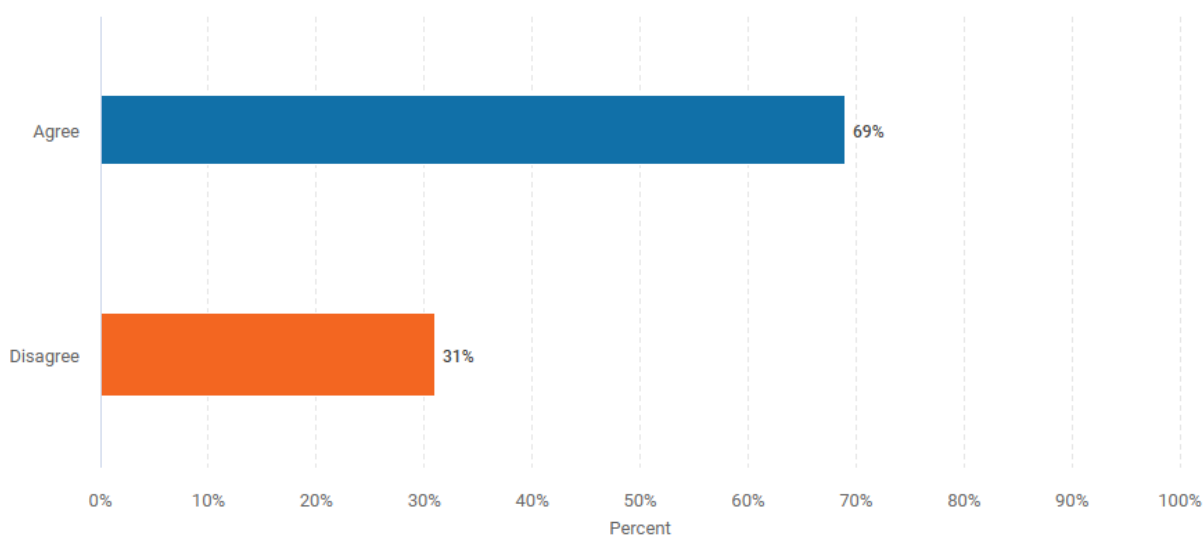


Base: 484 educators who stated they had taught National 5 Chemistry

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, 69% of educator respondents agreed and 31% disagreed.

Figure 4: In the event that the proposed changes are made for National 5 Chemistry, 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 National 5 Chemistry, do you agree or disagree that this should happen from session 2026/27?



Base: 485 educators who said that they taught National 5 Chemistry

Qualitative analysis

Educator respondents were asked if they had any further questions they would like to share with us, and 211 respondents left a comment. Although the most common response from educator respondents was to agree with the proposals, the majority of comments were from respondents who had views on restructuring or changes to the assignment and not the question paper.

Benefits of changes to the question paper

There were several educator respondents that agreed with the proposal and left positive comments regarding the benefit to the candidate of decreasing the number of marks and time. The main theme that emerged was that it would help candidates who experience exam related stress and struggle to focus for a long time in exams, as there would be less content overall. Some also mentioned that it was beneficial to National 5 learners who would likely be sitting exams for the first time.

‘The exam is far too long for young learners who then panic and don't perform as expected.’

‘A shorter exam while slightly less content could be covered may be beneficial to pupils as first exams and may relieve some of the stress associated with exams.’

‘The extended length of the examination does not benefit learners & in fact adds stress & tiredness. The same outcome can be achieved in a reduced length exam.’

Learners with ASN were mentioned by a few educator respondents who felt that another benefit would be to reduce the pressure on learners, and on schools that have learners with additional support needs as they expressed that long exams can be very difficult for them to organise and accommodate the number of learners with ASN.

‘The level of additional support needs alone make this a priority. Schools are struggling to finish exams in the allotted calendar window of an afternoon or morning.’

‘Learners who have additional time as part of their AAA actually have more challenges due to the length of our current papers. The proposed reduction would be a support for these learners in particular.’

Several respondents also mentioned that they would like to see the changes brought in as soon as possible.

Challenges with implementing this change

Several educator respondents highlighted challenges that they thought would be an issue with the proposals. The key challenge they perceived were that reducing the number of marks without reducing the course content would disadvantage both learners and educators. There were also concerns that the course content would not be sufficiently sampled and that the weighting of each mark overall would increase. Other themes included the impact of the changes on the rigour of the exam, progression to Higher and needing more time to implement the changes.

Reduction in marks

By far, the most-recurring challenge expressed by educator respondents was that reducing the number of marks and time available, while keeping the amount of course content the same, would negatively impact both learners and educators. Educator respondents who expressed this view felt that the pressure would remain on themselves to teach the full course content and for learners to revise the full course, while taking away the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in the exam.

‘Removing 30mins (20 marks) of questions has very little (if any) impact on learner experience in the classroom (content and assessment) the whole year, and very little impact on learner preparation at home. They still need to study for all topics and all the content. [...] In fact, all this change does is trigger workload for teachers as present resources that mirror the structure and format of the exam’

'There seems to be no reason to reduce the number of marks available in the exam when the same volume of course content will still be being covered. Pupils have to learn just as much but are not given as much of an opportunity to show their learning.'

Related to this was the view from a number of respondents that the course could not be sufficiently sampled by the reduced number of marks available. For these respondents, there was a risk that the full breadth and depth of the course would not be examined. This led some of these respondents to question how this proposed change would benefit learners.

'I think the exam is a good length at the moment and gives learners sufficient opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge across curricular areas. Including problem solving questions and skills questions which are a vital part of chemistry. Taking down the number of marks in the paper could risk the breadth and depth of assessment for learners.'

'Reducing the length of the written/multiple choice sections means it will be harder for the examining team to sample across the full breadth of the course and produce balanced Question Papers. This reduction in number of marks (in my opinion) would not change much, for the candidates, in terms of their required preparation for their exams.'

Moreover, a number of educators respondents expressed worry that, under the proposed change, each mark would carry more weight towards the learner's grade. Some perceived that learners who struggled with specific areas of the course would be disadvantaged to a greater degree if they lost marks in this area, compared with the current arrangement. A few respondents stated that this would impact learner's stress levels and pressure to perform well.

'By reducing the number of questions this will raise the value of the remaining questions as they still contribute to the overall exam percentage of 80% this will make the exam assessment less representative of the student's broad subject knowledge. This raising of the stakes for each question will increase the penalty for a single minor error in one answer.'

'Reducing the length of the exam means that errors in the proposed changes will be worth a higher percentage. Meaning that 1 error with the proposed change is more detrimental than 1 error in the current form of assessment.'

Rigour of the exam

There were several educator respondents who expressed the view that the changes being proposed would impact on the rigour of the exam, making the qualification less valuable. Some felt that the proposed changes would reduce the challenge of the exam as learners would not be assessed on as much of the course as they were previously.

'The current length of the exam allows pupils to work towards and demonstrate a relatively high level of academic competence and perseverance. Reducing the length of the exam will do pupils the disservice of reducing the meaningfulness and rigour of the qualification, depriving them of opportunities to demonstrate their ability.'

'I am concerned that these changes will reduce the breadth and scope of material covered in the exam making it easier and undermine the value of the qualification.'

Some also felt that the changes being proposed would make it more difficult to differentiate between the abilities of different learners.

Progression to Higher

Some educator respondents also expressed concern that reducing marks in the paper would mean that the progression to the Higher qualification was negatively impacted, making this harder for learners.

'National 5 is the least complex and I think shortening the exam would remove challenge and make the jump to higher even more unattainable for some learners.'

'...I disagree this is not the full change and therefore it's impossible to see how this would be anything other than making N5 easier and therefore making the transition to Higher even more difficult.'

Some educator respondents mentioned that National 5 was a base for even further study, and this reduction in marks would impact learners' educational paths much further in the future.

Time to implement the changes

Several educator respondents also said they needed more time to fully implement the changes to their resources, such as prelims. Other educator respondents felt that students also needed time to become used to the new format of the exam and that more discussion was needed with educators before implementing the changes.

'We rushed the introduction of N5, let's not do it again. We will need to know a lot more about proposed changes than this.'

'It is too soon to change courses by next term for teachers and students this requires time for teachers and students to prepare.'

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 National 5 Chemistry. 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.