

National Course modification summary: Biology



National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course assessment in session 2020–21

The Deputy First Minister has announced that National 5 exams will not take place in session 2020–21. SQA is working with stakeholders to develop an alternative certification model for National 5 that is based on teacher and lecturer estimates.

At present, Higher and Advanced Higher exams are still planned for 2021 and this will remain under review. We continue to work with stakeholders to put contingency plans in place to respond to any changes in public health advice, or local or national lockdowns, that may result in further changes to the 2021 exam diet — including changes to the timetable.

For up-to-date information on arrangements for National Courses in session 2020–21, including timetable information and guidance on estimates, please visit our website at www.sqa.org.uk/nq2021.

Modifications to assessment

Following our public consultation on proposed modifications to National 5 to Advanced Higher course assessment, which closed on 24 August 2020, we are making changes to course assessment for session 2020–21. The changes detailed on the following pages are intended to support the delivery of learning and teaching, while maintaining the validity, credibility and standard of the courses.

We have published a high-level report on the outcomes of the consultation, which is available from www.sqa.org.uk/nq2021. This includes details of the modifications to National 5 course assessment, which were planned prior to the 2021 National 5 exams being cancelled.

As a result of the modifications, we are exploring the implications for National 3 and National 4 courses, and freestanding units at SCQF levels 5, 6 and 7, in session 2020–21 and will provide further guidance in due course.

National 5 course assessment 2020–21

There will be no external assessment for National 5 courses in session 2020–21.

Candidates will not be required to sit exams and SQA will not assess coursework.

Instead, we are working with stakeholders to develop an alternative certification model for National 5 that is based on teacher and lecturer estimates.

Centres need to gather evidence of candidates' attainment and use this to determine estimate grades and bands. We have published separate guidance on gathering evidence and producing estimates and there is an SQA Academy course available to support teachers and lecturers.

We are also developing subject-specific guidance for teachers and lecturers on gathering evidence and producing estimates. This will include how the previously-intended National 5 modifications could be used to support with gathering evidence and producing estimates in session 2020–21. This guidance will be published from the end of October.

Details of the modifications we had previously intended to make to National 5 course assessment in session 2020–21 are included in our high-level report on the outcomes of the consultation.

To view the high-level report, and to access the guidance on gathering evidence and producing estimates, visit www.sqa.org.uk/nq2021.

Higher course assessment 2020–21

Component	Marks	Duration
Question paper 1: multiple choice	25	40 minutes
Question paper 2	95	2 hours and 20 minutes

Question papers

There are **no changes** proposed to the question papers. The structure and length of the question papers will remain unchanged as there was not enough strong support for the proposed modification.

Most respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to reduce the length of the question papers to pre-2019 length (approximately 58%, with approximately 25% being in favour). A small proportion of the respondents who disagreed commented that they agreed with the proposal and that their disagreement was with the scale of the changes proposed. Those responses were not sufficient to result in a majority in favour of the proposal.

Reducing the length of the question papers was not seen as helpful in terms of reducing the workload of teachers, lecturers, or candidates. Teacher and lecturer workload would increase, as prelims and other assessment materials would need to be rewritten.

Some respondents suggested removing content from the course. However, this was countered by responses recognising the difficulty of doing so, since there is no set order in which to teach the course and some centres may have already covered content that could potentially be removed. Most respondents who suggested this were more in favour of removing the assignment. Some respondents asked for both content and the assignment to be removed. Removing content would increase teachers' and lecturers' workload, as teaching, learning, and assessment material would need to be amended. Candidates would also face an unfamiliar style of question paper in what is likely to be a difficult year for them.

A minority of respondents requesting the removal of the assignment suggested that additional questions testing the skills assessed in the assignment could be added to the question papers. The question papers already contain several questions related to practical work and the skills associated with practical work, and it is important that teachers and lecturers continue to develop these skills. However, to add additional questions to ensure the

skills developed and assessed through the assignment were covered in the question papers would change the balance and nature of the question papers. This would again make them less familiar in style to candidates.

A minority of respondents suggested introducing some optionality to the question papers. A number of these responses suggested either removing the assignment or introducing optionality to the question papers, with removing the assignment being preferred. Some respondents asked for optionality to be introduced to the question papers and for the assignment to be removed. There are considerable difficulties with introducing optionality into Biology question papers, owing to the structure of the questions and issues of comparability between options. Introducing optionality would require an almost complete rewrite of the question papers and the removal of questions that integrate knowledge from across different parts of the course, which is part of the assessment design principles. Maintaining the current format and balance of the question papers will maintain consistency with the style and format of past papers and the specimen question paper. Candidates can continue to use these resources to prepare for the 2021 examination.

Assignment

The development of practical skills in biology is essential, and candidates should undertake and experience practical work in science courses at all levels. However, in these unique circumstances, **the assignment is being removed from the course for session 2020–21**. There was overwhelmingly strong support for this modification. Almost all respondents requesting this said it should be for one year. A small number of respondents wanted the assignment permanently removed.

The rationale for this modification was the difficulty of carrying out practical work safely due to social distancing requirements, local authority health and safety protocols, and compliance with the guidelines issued by the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre (SSERC). Many respondents commented that removing the assignment would allow them to make up for lost time and deliver the course content. Many respondents noted that access to IT facilities is an issue and that this would impede candidates' ability to undertake the research element of the assignment.

Advanced Higher course assessment 2020–21

Component	Marks	Duration
Question paper	100 (scaled to 120)	3 hours

Question paper

There are **no changes** proposed to the question paper. The structure and length of the question paper will remain unchanged.

Most respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to make no change to the overall course assessment (approximately 47%, with approximately 23% being in favour and 31% being neutral). However, most respondents were in favour of removing the project.

Some respondents requesting the removal of the project suggested that questions testing the skills assessed in the project could be added to the question paper. The question paper already assesses investigative biology, one of the key areas in the course, as well as the appropriate range of skills associated with practical work, and it is important that teachers and lecturers continue to develop these skills. Maintaining the current format and balance of the question paper will maintain consistency with the style and format of the specimen question paper in what is likely to be a difficult year for candidates. Candidates can continue to use the specimen question paper to prepare for the 2021 examination.

A minority of respondents suggested introducing some optionality to the question paper. A number of these responses suggested either removing the project or introducing optionality, with removing the project being preferred. Some respondents asked for optionality to be introduced to the question paper and for the project to be removed. There are considerable difficulties with introducing optionality into Biology question papers, owing to the structure of the questions and issues of comparability between options. Introducing optionality would require an almost complete rewrite of the question paper and the removal of questions that integrate knowledge from across different parts of the course, which is part of the assessment design principles. It would also mean candidates would face an unfamiliar style of question paper.

A minority of respondents suggested removing content from the course. However, this was countered by responses recognising the difficulty of doing this, since there is no set order in which to teach the course and some centres may have already covered content that could potentially be removed. Removing content would increase teachers' and lecturers' workload, as teaching, learning, and assessment material would need to be amended. It would again mean that candidates would face an unfamiliar style of question paper.

Project

The development of practical skills in biology is essential, and candidates should undertake and experience practical work in science courses at all levels. However, in these unique circumstances, **the project is being removed from the course for session 2020–21.**

There was overwhelmingly strong support for this modification. The great majority of respondents indicated that their preferred modification would be the removal of the project for one year. There was widespread recognition of the status and worth of the project at Advanced Higher.

The overwhelming rationale for this modification was the difficulty of carrying out practical work safely due to social distancing requirements, local authority health and safety protocols, and compliance with the guidelines issued by the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre (SSERC).

Many centres have links with consortium hubs to help them deliver the project. This will be difficult to arrange this year. Some respondents highlighted that they rely on universities for equipment and facilities that they do not have in their centre, and that universities cannot offer their equipment or facilities this year. This has caused additional problems for centres around practical work and apparatus. Many respondents commented that removing the project would allow them to make up for lost time and deliver the course content.

If you have any questions about these changes, please email NQ2020@sqa.org.uk.