

National Course modification summary: Human Biology



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.

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 62%, with approximately 29% 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 Human 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 human 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.

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