

National Course modification summary: Physics



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	45 minutes
Question paper 2	130 scaled to 95	2 hours 15 minutes

Question papers

There are **no changes** to the question papers.

The format and the length of the exam papers will remain unchanged, since there was not strong support for the proposed modification. Additionally, maintaining the current format and balance of the papers, without adding additional skills-based questions means that candidates can be familiar with the style and format of the papers through practising past papers and the specimen paper.

The majority of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly with the proposal to reduce the length of the examination to pre-2019 length (approximately 63%, with approximately 25% being in favour).

However, a proportion of the respondents who selected either disagree or disagree strongly went on to make comment that they agreed with the proposal and the disagreement was with the scale of the changes proposed. Those responses would not be sufficient to result a majority in favour of the proposal.

Reducing the length of the exam was not seen as helpful and could increase teacher workload, since prelims may need to be rewritten.

A minority of respondents suggested introducing some optionality to the question papers. In a number of these responses this was presented as an option between removing coursework or introducing optionality, with removal of coursework being the preference, but some asked for both. There are considerable difficulties with introducing optionality into the physics papers, owing to the structure of the questions and issues of comparability. Introducing optionality would require an almost complete rewrite of the exam paper and the removal of questions that integrated knowledge from across different parts of the course, which is part of the assessment design principles. It would also mean candidates were faced with an unfamiliar style of question paper, in what is likely to be a difficult year for them.

Some respondents requesting the removal of coursework, suggested that additional questions testing the skills normally assessed in the coursework could be added to the question papers. The question papers already contain a number of 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 as many of the skills developed and assessed through the coursework were covered in the question paper would change the balance and nature of the paper, making it less familiar in style to candidates.

A minority of 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 may have already covered content that ended up being removed. Additionally, removing content would increase teacher workload, as much of teaching, learning, and assessment material would need to be rewritten.

Assignment

The coursework element (the assignment) has been removed from the course for session 2020-21, as there was overwhelmingly strong support for this modification.

The great majority of respondents indicated that their preferred modification would be the removal of coursework for this year. The overwhelming rationale put forward for this move was the difficulty in carrying out practical work safely, following the guidelines issued by SSERC. It was also noted by many respondents that access to IT facilities is an issue and that would impede on candidates' ability to undertake literature research.

Almost all respondents suggesting this move said it should be for this year only. A small number stated they wanted the permanent removal of coursework.

Advanced Higher course assessment 2020–21

Component	Marks	Duration
Question paper	155	3 hours

Question paper

There are **no changes** to the question paper, although scaling of marks is not required since there is only one component.

The format and the length of the exam paper will remain unchanged, since there was not strong support either for or against the proposal. Additionally, maintaining the current format and balance of the paper, without adding additional skills-based questions means that candidates can be familiar with the style of questions by practising past papers and the format of the paper through the specimen paper.

A minority of respondents suggested introducing some optionality to the question paper. In a number of these responses this was presented as an option between removing coursework or introducing optionality, with removal of coursework being the preference, but some asked for both. There are considerable difficulties with introducing optionality into the physics papers, owing to the structure of the questions and issues of comparability between options. Introducing optionality would require an almost complete rewrite of the exam paper and the removal of questions that integrated knowledge from across different parts of the course,

which is part of the assessment design principles. It would also mean candidates were faced with an unfamiliar style of question paper, in what is likely to be a difficult year for them.

Some respondents requesting the removal of coursework, suggested that additional questions testing the skills normally assessed in the coursework could be added to the question papers. The question papers already contain a number of 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 as many of the skills developed and assessed through the coursework were covered in the question paper would change the balance and nature of the paper, making it less familiar in style to candidates.

A minority of 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 may have already covered content that ended up being removed. Additionally, removing content would increase teacher workload, as much teaching, learning, and assessment material would need to be amended.

Project

The coursework element (the project) has been removed from the course for session 2020-21, as there was overwhelmingly strong support for this modification.

The majority of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly with the proposal to make no change to the assessment (approximately 52%, with approximately 22% being in favour and 26% being neutral).

The great majority of respondents indicated that their preferred modification would be the removal of coursework for this year, albeit reluctantly, and there was widespread recognition of the status and worth of the project at Advanced Higher. The overwhelming rationale put forward for this move was the difficulty in carrying out practical work safely, following the guidelines issued by SSERC. Some also highlighted that they often rely on university facilities for equipment that they don't have in school, and universities have indicated that they will not be able to offer such facilities this year, resulting in additional problems within schools around practical work and apparatus.

Respondents were very clear that this move should be for this year only.

Some respondents suggested implementing a slimmed-down version of the project with new marking instructions. However, the problems associated with practical work are the same whether a candidate is conducting the usual three or four experiments or just one or two, and a slimmed-down version is unviable. It would also mean centres and candidates having to get to grips with the new requirements in a very short period of time.

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