



# **National Qualifications 2023–24**

## **Research: Comparison of Respondent Experiences**

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# Introduction

This report compares the lived experience of learners, educators and SQA Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development staff<sup>1</sup> (SA/QD) on a range of topics related to National Qualifications (NQ) in 2023–24 including perceptions of NQs, perceptions of assessment, awarding, results and standards as well as perceptions of the legacy of COVID-19 impact on learning. It does not aim to compare all findings found in the substantive reports, but highlights areas of particular interest.

The substantive reports are:

- ◆ [National Qualifications 2023–24 Research: Learner Experiences](#)
- ◆ [National Qualifications 2023–24 Research: Educator Experiences](#)
- ◆ [National Qualifications 2023–24 Research: Senior Appointee and Qualifications Development Colleague Experiences](#)

These findings represent the views of the National Qualifications Survey 2024 respondents, and you should be cautious of generalising these findings to the wider population. In particular, the sample size of SA/QD respondents is substantially lower than learner and educator respondents, which may result in greater uncertainty about the results from this group. Also, note that these findings were gathered during a period of intense external scrutiny of the consistency of NQ standards across years. There is more information about the research methods used in the [Methodology Report](#) and the [Technical Appendix](#).

In general, SA/QD respondents held the most positive attitudes towards NQs in 2023–24, particularly regarding the fairness of assessment and some aspects of Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications. Learner perceptions of NQ in 2023–24 were generally positive. For many questions, educators had the poorest perceptions of NQ, particularly when asked about National 4.

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<sup>1</sup> The role of SA colleagues is to cover all aspects of the examination process. This includes the development and quality assurance of all assessments, invigilating the exams, and marking candidates' assessments.

# **Comparative perceptions of National Qualifications**

Responses to the suite of questions about different National Qualifications were compared across different stakeholder groups. While perceptions of National 4 were generally the poorest among all groups surveyed, they were markedly poorer among educator respondents. Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications were generally held in higher regard among educator and SA/QD respondents, while there was no clear pattern as to which qualifications were most highly regarded by learners.

## **Trusted qualifications**

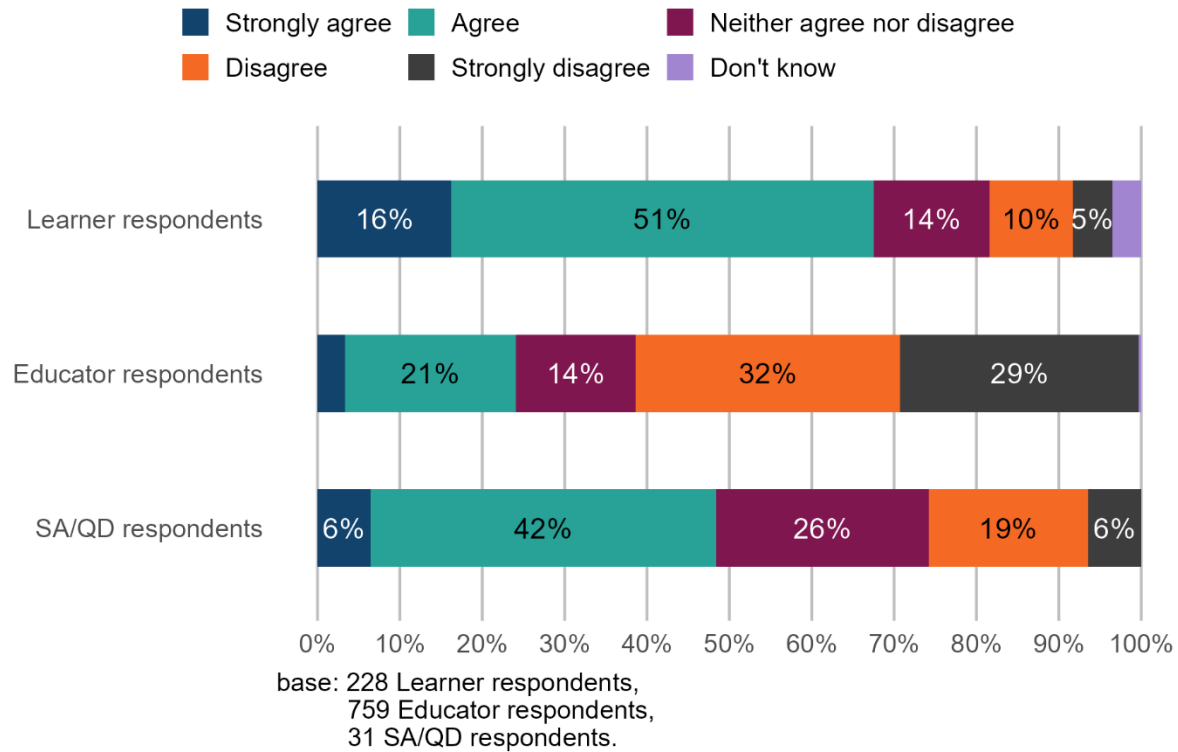
When asked whether different National Qualifications were trusted, National 4 had the lowest level of agreement across all respondent groups. Around half of learner respondents (52%) and SA/QD respondents (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that National 4s were trusted qualifications, while only 13% of educators felt the same way. The highest levels of agreement for all respondent groups were for Highers, with 83% of learner respondents, 91% of educator respondents and 99% of SA/QD respondents opting for agree or strongly agree.

## **Preparation for further study**

A similar pattern was observed for the statement 'National 4 / National 5 / Higher / Advanced Higher qualifications are good preparation for further study'.

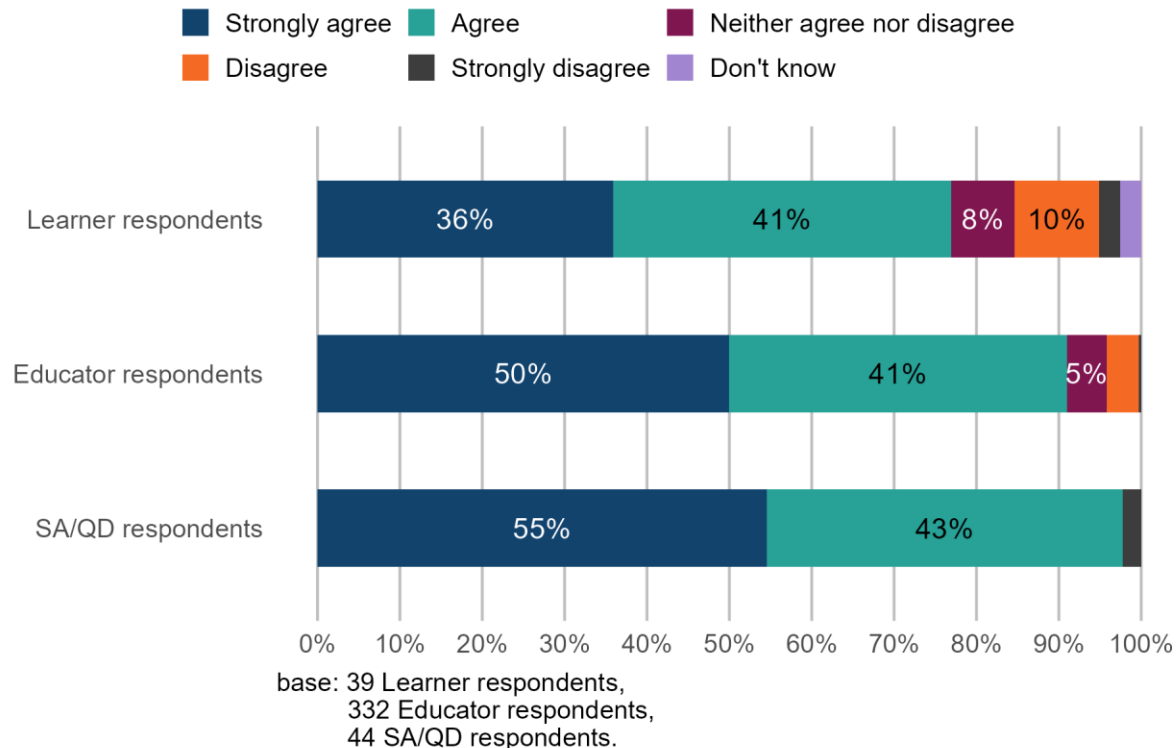
As shown in Figure 1, National 4 qualifications had the lowest levels of agreement among all respondent groups with 24% of educator respondents, 48% of SA/QD respondents and 67% of learner respondents saying they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement for National 4.

**Figure 1: National 4s are good preparation for further study by respondent group**



Advanced Highers had the highest levels of agreement, with 77% of learners, 91% of educators, and 98% of SA/QD respondents opting for agree or strongly agree for this statement (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Advanced Highers are good preparation for further study by respondent group**



However, it should be noted that the proportion of learners who agreed or strongly agreed only varied by 10 percentage points between National 4 and Advanced Higher, while the levels of agreement for educator and SA/QD respondents were more disparate. Educators had a difference of 53 percentage points between National 4 and Advanced Higher, and SA/QD respondents had a difference of 43 percentage points.

## Developing a broad range of skills for learners

When asked whether different National Qualifications helped learners to develop a broad range of skills, National 4 again had the lowest level of agreement among all respondent groups, with 54% of learner respondents, 30% of educator respondents and 67% of SA/QD respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. The highest level of agreement with this statement was observed for Advanced Higher among educators (82%) and SAQD respondents (89%). Learner respondents had broadly similar levels of agreement with this statement across the four qualifications, fluctuating between 54% and 62%.

## Preparation for work

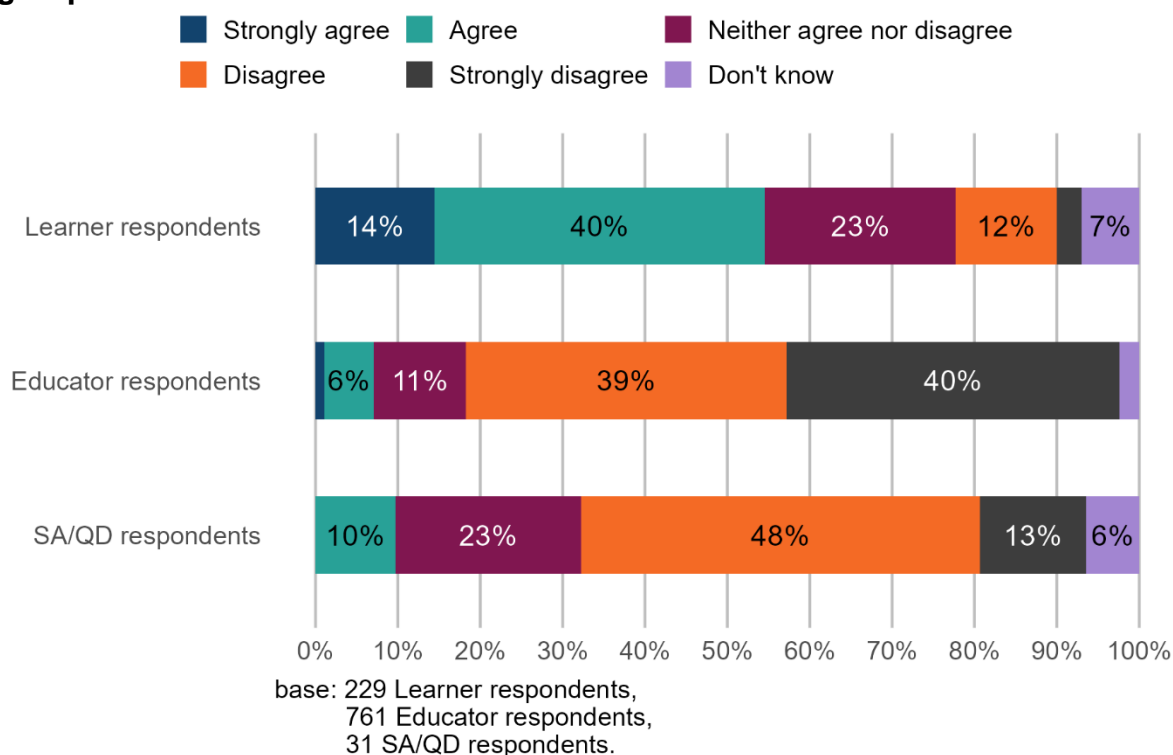
There were differences in perceptions among respondent groups for the statement 'National 4 / National 5 / Higher / Advanced Higher are good preparation for work'. Perceptions of National 4 for this statement were the poorest among educators, with 17% opting for agree or strongly agree, while 38% of SA/QD respondents felt the same way. Among learner respondents,

National 4 was perceived slightly more favourably with 50% saying they agreed or strongly agreed, while learner respondents showed the lowest levels of agreement for National 5 and Higher (45% of agreement for both qualifications). All respondent groups displayed the highest levels of agreement with this statement for Advanced Higher, with 54% of learner, 68% of educator and 78% of SA/QD respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing.

### Well understood by the general public

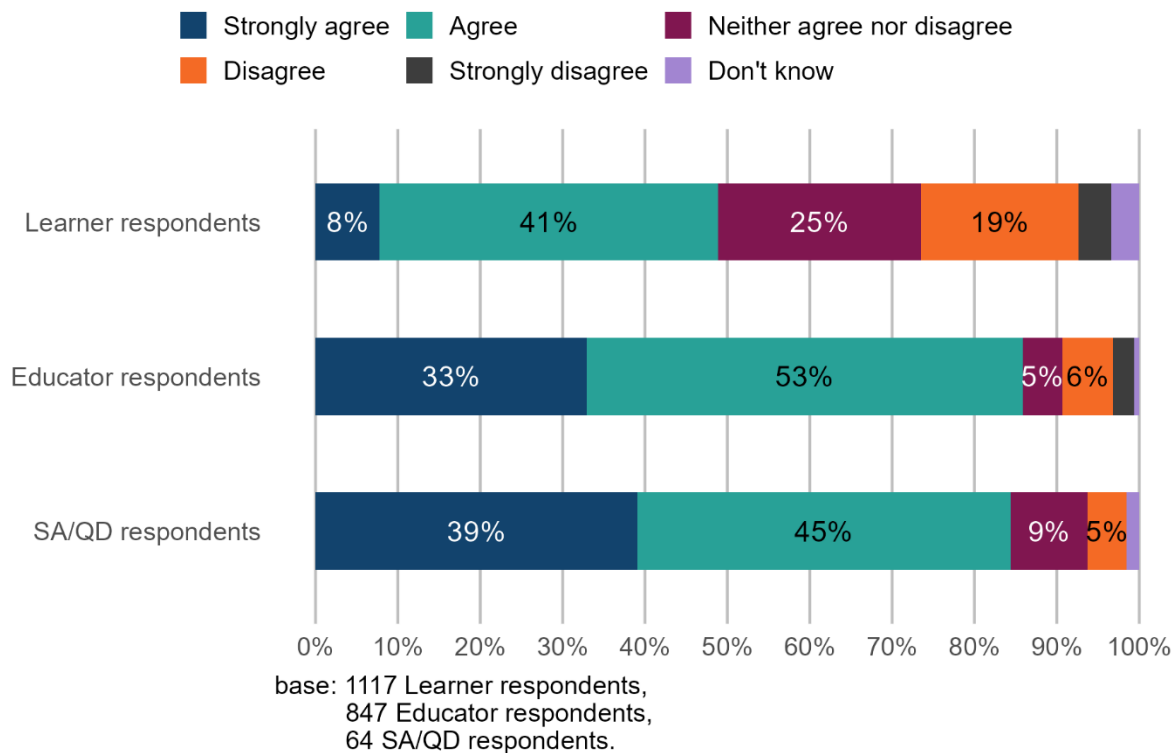
When asked whether different qualifications were well understood by the general public, there were differences in opinion by respondent group. As shown in Figure 3, just 7% of educator and 10% of SA/QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed that National 4 was well understood by the general public while over half (54%) of learners expressed agreement with the same statement.

**Figure 3: National 4s are well understood by the general public by respondent group**



For Higher, 83% of educator and 99% of SAQD respondents agreed that they were well understood, yet only 49% of learners felt the same way (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Highers are well understood by the general public by respondent group**



### Standards are maintained year on year

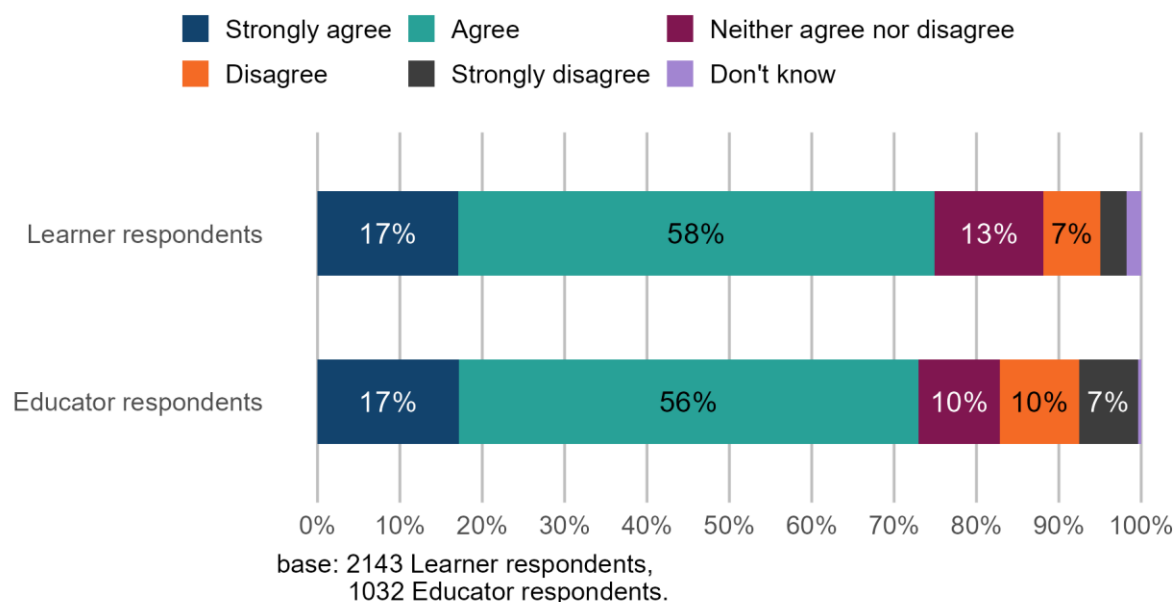
Similarly, there was variation in the level of agreement between different respondent groups for the statement 'National 4 / National 5 / Higher / Advanced Higher standards are maintained year on year'. Among learners, Highers had the lowest level of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing (39%), while National 4 had the highest (51%). Educator and SA/QD respondents both displayed the lowest level of agreement for National 4 (37% and 48% respectively).

The levels of agreement with this statement for educator and SA/QD respondents was comparatively higher for the externally-assessed qualifications than for National 4, and fell within a tighter range. For educators, the proportion that agreed or strongly agreed for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher was between 58% and 71%, while for SA/QD respondents, the proportion was between 86% and 97%.

## Comparative perceptions of assessment, awarding and results

In general, satisfaction with assessment communications was high among respondents, but was slightly lower for educators for some aspects. The proportion of learner and educator respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how grades would be determined in 2023–24 was very similar, with 75% of learners expressing agreement and 73% of educators (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: I understood how grades would be determined by respondent group**



Similarly, 67% of learners and 60% of educators agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment processed was communicated effectively.

In regard to the statement ‘I received information on how my grades would be determined early enough in the academic year’, there was some variation by respondent group, with 86% of learners agreeing or strongly agreeing. The proportion who expressed agreement with this statement dropped by 33 percentage points for educator respondents with 53% agreeing or strongly agreeing. A similar statement was posed to SA/QD respondents: ‘Information about the approach to awarding/grade boundaries was published early enough in the academic year’ and 87% of this group agreed or strongly agreed.

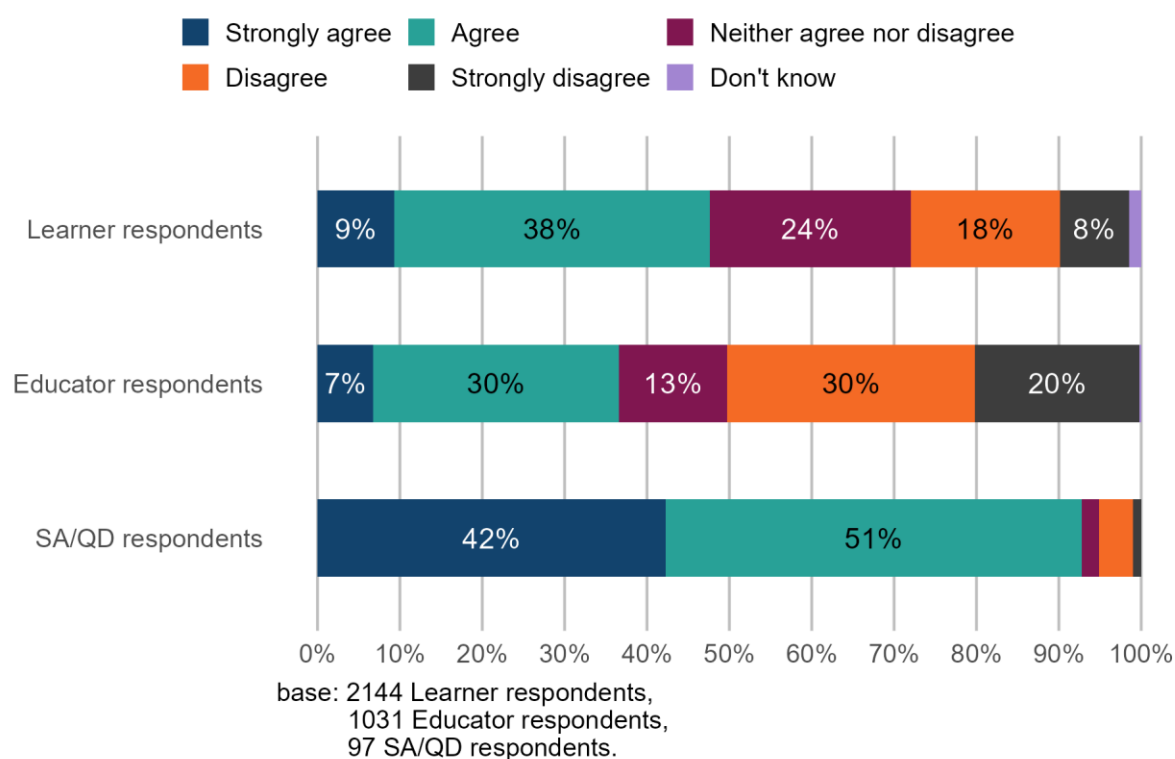
Perceptions of assessment fairness scored less well among educators and learners than had their perceptions of assessment communications, and there was a sharp distinction in the perceptions of fairness among educator respondents and SA/QD respondents. Among learners, 53% agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment process was fair to them in 2023–24, whilst 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed.



Educators and SA/QD were asked whether they felt the process was fair to *all* learners, so it cannot be directly compared with the response from learners. However, analysing these two questions together helps to build a picture of the perspectives of different stakeholders on this issue. Bearing this in mind, 37% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the process was fair to all learners in 2023–24, while 51% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In contrast, 90% of SA/QD respondents expressed agreement that the process was fair to all learners in 2023–24, and only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 6 shows that satisfaction with the assessment process in 2023–24 was lower among learners and educators, with 47% of learners agreeing or strongly agreeing and 36% of educators. In contrast, 93% of SA/QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the assessment process.

**Figure 6: I was satisfied with the assessment process by respondent group**

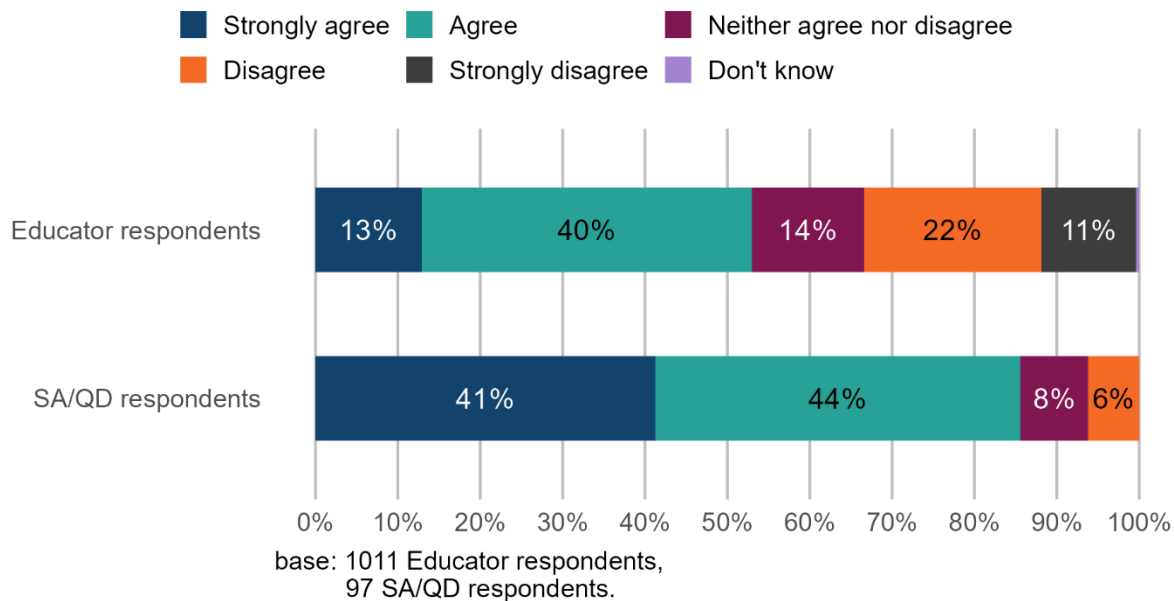


## Comparative perceptions of standards

There were notable differences in perceptions of how well the national standard was communicated and understood among educator respondents and SA/QD respondents.

Eighty-five per cent of SA/QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'Understanding Standards' generally provides educators with the resources to understand the national standard, while only 53% of educators felt the same way — a difference of 32 percentage points (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Understanding Standards provided educators with the resources they need to understand the national standard**



Similarly, 89% of SA/QD respondents expressed agreement that the national standard was clearly articulated in the course specification and other documentation, but only 47% of educators said they agreed or strongly agreed — a 42-percentage point difference.

On the other hand, when asked whether they felt they had a good understanding of the national standard, 73% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed. However, when SA/QD respondents were presented with the statement 'the national standard was consistently understood and interpreted by educators in 2023–24', only 50% expressed agreement. Again, it should be noted that the statements that educator and SA/QD respondents were asked to respond to were worded differently to account for their different roles in the assessment process, so they are not directly comparable. However, it does indicate how views between educator and SA/QD respondents may differ on the same topic.

## Comparative perceptions of the legacy of COVID-19 impact on learning

The respondent groups surveyed had different perceptions of the extent to which COVID-19 had an impact on learning in 2023–24. All stakeholder groups continued to agree that the pandemic had had a substantial impact on learning in 2023–24, but educator and SA/QD respondents felt that the impact had diminished slightly since 2022–23, while learners did not.

Senior Appointee and Qualifications Development respondents perceived positive changes since the previous survey year in relation to COVID-19 and its impact in learning. In 2023, 84% of SA/QD respondents had agreed or strongly agreed that the pandemic continued to have a significant impact on learning and teaching in centres for some learners in 2022–23, but this figure decreased to 72% in 2024 when asked the same for the 2023–24 NQ programme. When asked whether they believed there was evidence of recovery from the pandemic compared to the previous academic year, 54% of SA/QD respondents in 2023 had agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 66% in 2024. For educators, perceptions of learner resilience showed a slight improvement. In 2023, 94% of respondents had agreed or strongly agreed that many learners were less resilient than their predecessors before the pandemic. By 2024, this figure was lower at 87% — a 7-percentage-point decrease. Additionally, in 2023, 84% of respondents had believed that many learners were not as well prepared to study for National Qualifications compared to pre-pandemic learners. In 2024, this fell to 76%, showing an 8-percentage-point decrease.

However, this trend was not reflected among learners, where there appeared to be minimal change in views. In 2022–23, 47% of learner respondents had agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'The pandemic continues to have an impact on my learning.' In 2023–24, this proportion increased by 4 percentage points to 51%. Similarly, for the statement, 'I feel that the pandemic continues to affect my mental wellbeing,' 38% had agreed in 2022–23, with a slight increase to 39% in 2023–24.