

Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers: Comparing the responses of learners, educators, and senior appointees and qualifications development staff

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Introduction

This report compares the data collected from learners, educators and SQA Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development staff (SA and QD) on a range of topics related to National Qualifications (NQ) in 2024–25. The topics covered include perceptions of NQs, perceptions of assessment and awarding, standards, and the impact of COVID-19 on learning. It does not aim to compare all findings found in the substantive reports listed below, but highlights areas of particular interest.

The substantive reports are:

- [Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, and Highers 2024–25: Learner perspectives](#)
- [Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, Highers, and Advanced Highers 2024–25: Educator perspectives](#)
- [Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, Highers, and Advanced Highers 2024–25: Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development staff perspectives](#)

These findings represent the views of learners, educators and SA and QD staff who completed the Experiences of National 4s, National 5s, and Highers survey. The sample of learners, educators and SA and QD staff was not proportionally representative of these groups, so readers should be cautious of generalising these findings to the wider population. In particular, the sample size of SA and QD respondents, and the population of SA and QD group as whole, is substantially lower than learner and educator respondents, which may result in greater uncertainty about the results from this group.

Responses to questions with the same, or very similar wording, were compared to the responses collected in the 2024 survey. Percentage frequency distributions were compared between the two survey years. Only changes over time with at least an eight percentage point difference were included in the report for learners and educators. For SA and QD respondents, the sample size was comparatively smaller in this survey compared to the learner and educator surveys. As such, changes over time may appear to be more dramatic for this group, but this is likely to be because fewer respondents represent a percentage change, rather than because of a significant change in attitudes over time. For this reason, only changes over time that differed by at least 20 percentage points are included for SA and QD respondents.

There is more information about the research methods used in the [Methodology Report](#) and the [Technical Appendix](#).

Across most topics, SA and QD respondents had the most positive attitudes. Learner perceptions of NQs, assessment and awarding, and the impact of COVID-19 on learning were generally positive, while educator respondents displayed the lowest levels of agreement across all topics surveyed. In general, all respondent groups had poorer perceptions of National 4 compared to the other qualifications surveyed.

National Qualifications

National 4

Learner respondents, educator respondents and Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development colleagues were presented the same four statements relating to National 4, and educator respondents and SA and QD respondents were asked a further two statements. These were:

- National 4s are trusted qualifications
- National 4s are good preparation for further study
- National 4s are good preparation for work
- National 4s develop a broad range of skills for learners
- National 4s are well understood by the general public (Educator and SA and QD only)
- National 4 standards are maintained year on year (Educator and SA and QD only)

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of respondents who expressed agreement with the statements relating to National 4 generally were low (20% to 39%) or around mid-range (40 to 59%) for all respondent groups. However, they were higher in general among learner respondents than educator and SA and QD respondents.

There were some statements for which different respondent groups expressed similar levels of agreement. Agreement with the statement 'National 4s develop a broad range of skills for learners' was similar across all respondent groups with the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed all falling in the mid-range (40-59%). SA and QD respondents also showed similar levels of agreement with the statement 'National 4s are well understood by the public', although this agreement was far lower with just 11% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

There were differences in the responses to the other four statements among the various respondent groups. A high proportion of learner respondents (60%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'National 4s are good preparation for further study', while a low proportion of educator respondents (33%) and a mid-range proportion of SA and QD respondents (47%) felt the same way. Similarly, a mid-range percentage of learner respondents (52%), a low percentage of educator respondents (20%) and a very low percentage level of SA and QD respondents (16%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'National 4s are trusted qualifications'. A high level of SA and QD respondents (63%) expressed agreement that 'National 4 standards are maintained year on year', while a mid-range (43%) level of agreement with this statement was expressed by educator respondents.

Finally, a similar low proportion of educator respondents and SA and QD respondents (21% and 30% respectively) expressed agreement that 'National 4s are good preparation for work', while a mid-range level (51%) of learner respondents felt the same way.

Table 1: Comparison of the proportion of stakeholders who strongly agree/agree with statements related to National 4

	Learners (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Educators (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development colleagues (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)
National 4s are trusted qualifications	52%	20%	16%
National 4s are good preparation for further study	60%	33%	47%
National 4s are good preparation for work	51%	21%	30%
National 4s develop a broad range of skills for learners	57%	43%	52%
National 4s are well understood by the general public	N/A	11%	11%
National 4 standards are maintained year on year	N/A	43%	63%

Changes over time

When compared to the data gathered in the previous year's survey, views on National 4 remained broadly similar, particularly among learner respondents. Among educator respondents, perceptions of National 4 either remained the same, or had improved in regard to some aspects.

- The proportion of educators who agreed or strongly agreed that 'National 4s develop a broad range of skills for learners' increased from 30% to 43% between 2024 and 2025, and the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed that 'National 4s are good preparation for further study' grew from 43% to 52% in this same period.
- However, for SA and QD respondents, between 2024 and 2025, the percentage who expressed agreement that National 4s are trusted qualifications dropped from 42% to 16%, while the proportion who said they disagree or strongly disagree grew from 48% to 63%.

National 5

In comparison to the responses to the statements related to National 4, the proportion of all respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements about National 5 were generally high (60 to 79%) or very high (80% to 100%). The level of agreement with each of the statements can be seen in Table 2.

Though there were high or very high levels of agreement with most of the statements relating to National 5, learner and educator respondents tended to show lower levels of agreement overall with the statements than SA and QD respondents.

Agreement with the statement 'National 5s are good preparation for work' was noticeably lower than other statements among all respondent groups. The proportion of learner and educator respondents expressing agreement with this statement was at a mid-range level (55% and 50% respectively). The proportion who agreed with this statement among SA and QD respondents was high (75%), but this was lower than the proportion of SA and QD respondents who agreed with the other five statements, which all fell in the very high range (80 to 100%).

Table 2: Comparison of the proportion of stakeholders who strongly agree/agree with statements related to National 5

	Learners (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Educators (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development colleagues (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)
National 5s are trusted qualifications	78%	81%	88%
National 5s are good preparation for further study	78%	71%	89%
National 5s are good preparation for work	55%	50%	75%
National 5s develop a broad range of skills for learners	72%	66%	84%
National 5s are well understood by the general public	N/A	63%	89%
National 5 standards are maintained year on year	N/A	67%	93%

Changes over time

- The perceptions of National 5 among stakeholders remained largely similar to 2024 findings, yet there were some areas where views on these qualifications had improved among learner and educator respondents: The proportion of learner respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that 'National 5s are good preparation for work' had risen by 10 percentage points between 2024 and 2025 (45% and 55%, respectively).
- The proportion of learner respondents who agreed with the statement 'National 5s develop a broad range of skills for learners' also rose between 2024 and 2025, from 70% to 78%.
- The proportion of educator respondents who agreed with the statement 'National 5 standards are maintained year on year' was 67% in 2024–25, nine percentage points higher than the previous year.

Higher

A similar pattern to the one for National 5 was observed among the statements related to Higher. Again, the proportion of respondents who agreed with the statement 'Highers are good preparation for work' was in general lower among all respondent groups than their level of agreement with the other five statements (Table 3). A mid-range proportion of learner (55%) and educator (58%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, whilst a high proportion (79%) SA and QD respondents agreed. In comparison, the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed with the other five statements relating to Higher was in the high (60 to 79%) or very high (80 to 100%) range among all respondent groups. The level of agreement was generally higher among SA and QD respondents than learner and educator respondents.

Table 3: Comparison of the proportion of stakeholders who strongly agree/agree with statements related to Higher

	Learners (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Educators (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development colleagues (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)
Highers are trusted qualifications	85%	92%	100%
Highers are good preparation for further study	80%	80%	95%
Highers are good preparation for work	55%	58%	79%
Highers develop a broad range of skills for learners	66%	66%	82%
Highers are well understood by the general public	N/A	87%	95%
Higher standards are maintained year on year	N/A	64%	98%

Changes over time

Educator respondents and SA and QD respondents expressed similar views about Highers in 2025 as they had done in 2024. However, among learner respondents, perceptions of Higher had improved since 2024 in regard to several elements:

- The proportion of learner respondents who agreed/strongly agreed that Highers were good preparation for further study increased by 7 percentage points from 73% in 2024 to 80% in 2025.
- There was also an increase of eight percentage points in the proportion of learner respondents who expressed agreement with the statement ‘Highers develop a broad range of skills for learners’ from 58% in 2024 to 66% in 2025.
- In 2024, 44% of learner respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Highers are good preparation for work, but in 2025, the proportion had increased by 11 percentage points to 55%.

Advanced Higher

The proportion of educator and SA and QD respondents who agreed with all the statements relating to Advanced Higher all fit within the high (60 to 79%) or very high (80% to 100%) range (Table 4). Although learner respondents who had studied Advanced Higher were asked to what extent they agreed with the same statements, the number of responses was too low to report without the risk of identifying respondents.

All statements produced a high level of agreement, yet the statement with the comparatively lowest proportion agreeing with it was 'Advanced Highers are well understood by the general public', with 60% of educator respondents and 75% of SA and QD respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

Table 4: Comparison of the proportion of stakeholders who strongly agree/agree with statements related to Advanced Higher

	Educators (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)	Senior Appointees and Qualifications Development colleagues (% who agree and strongly agree with the statement)
Advanced Highers are trusted qualifications	85%	100%
Advanced Highers are good preparation for further study	94%	100%
Advanced Highers are good preparation for work	68%	89%
Advanced Highers develop a broad range of skills for learners	85%	93%
Advanced Highers are well understood by the general public	60%	75%
Advanced Higher standards are maintained year on year	77%	100%

Changes over time

Between 2024 and 2025, views on Advanced Higher generally showed no significant changes across all stakeholders. However, there was one element where views on Advanced Higher improved among SA and QD respondents:

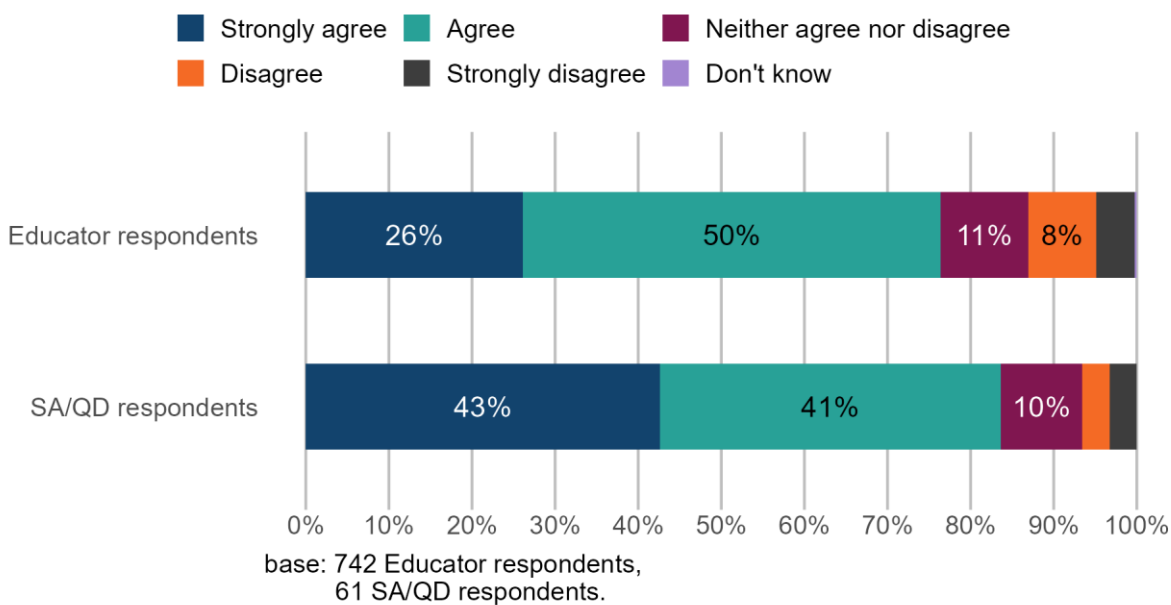
- The proportion of SA and QD respondents who expressed agreement that Advanced Highers were well understood by the general public increased from 62% to 89% between 2024 and 2025.

Standards

There were distinct differences in the proportion of educator and SA and QD respondents who expressed agreement with the statements relating to standards. Almost all SA and QD respondents (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘The national standard is articulated clearly in the course specification and other documentation’. However, this figure dropped to 53% for educator respondents. Similarly, 84% of SA and QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Understanding Standards’ materials provide educators with the resources they need to understand the national standard’, while 53% of educator respondents felt the same way.

Despite these differences, a strong majority of both educator and SA and QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding of the national standard. As shown in Figure 1, 76% of educator respondents and 84% of SA and QD respondents expressed agreement with the statement ‘I have a good understanding of the national standard’.

Figure 1: A comparison of the responses to ‘I have a good understanding of the national standard’ from educator and SA and QD respondents

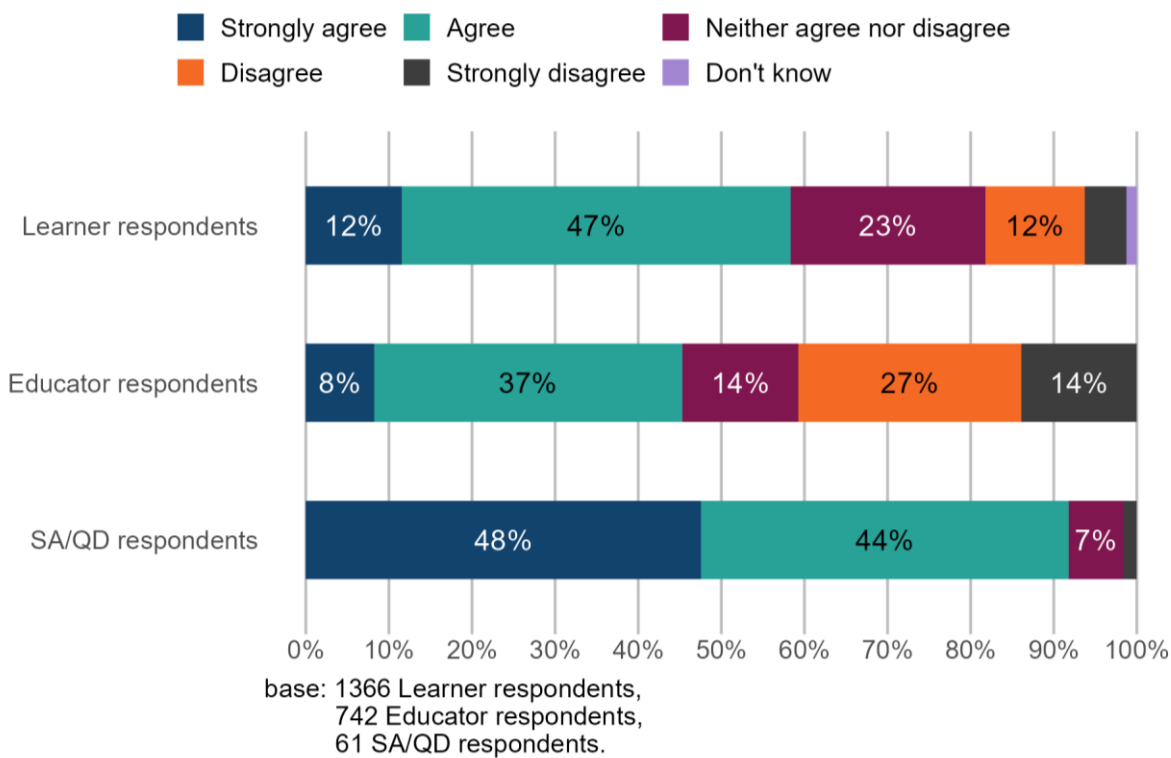


Assessment and awarding

All respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that they were satisfied with the assessment process in 2025. While the responses from learners and educators were largely similar, SA and QD respondents had a far more positive perception of the process.

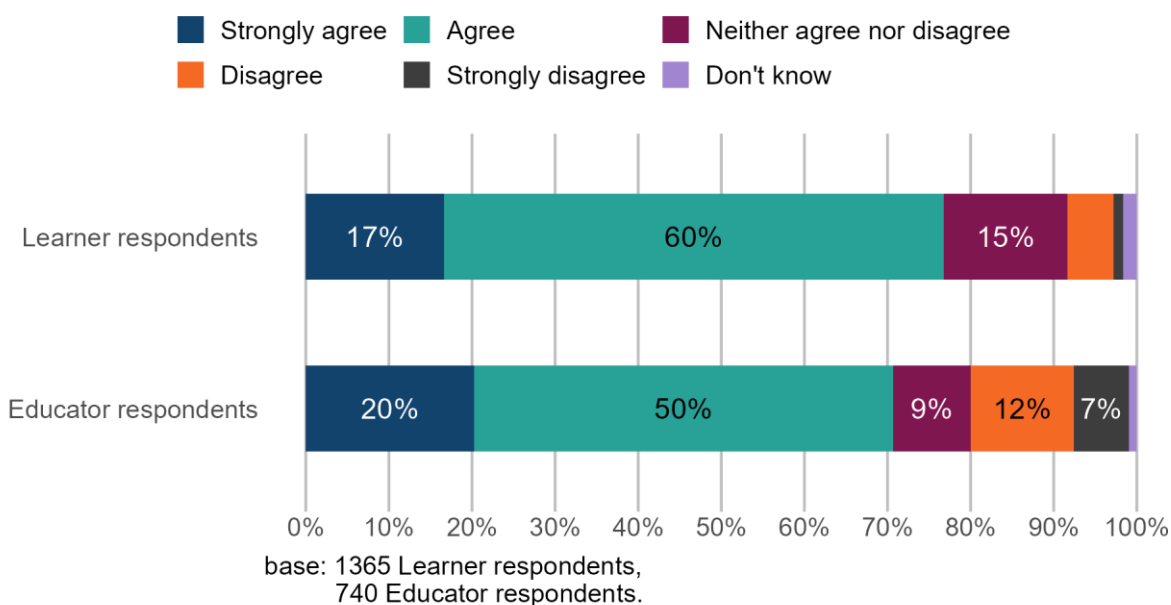
Fifty-nine per cent of learner respondents and 45% of educator respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the assessment process in 2025. While 41% of educator respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement compared to 17% learner respondents. In contrast, 92% of SA and QD respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and 2% strongly disagreed.

Figure 2: A comparison of the responses to ‘I was satisfied with the assessment process’ by respondent group



Learners and educators were also asked to what extent they agreed with the statement ‘I understood how my/learners’ grades would be determined’. Seventy-seven per cent of learner respondents agreed with this statement, while 70% of educator respondents felt the same way. On the other hand, seven per cent of learner respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while 19% of educator respondents felt the same way.

Figure 3: A comparison of the responses to ‘I understood how my/learners’ grades would be determined’ by learner and educator respondents



Changes over time

When asked whether respondents were satisfied with the assessment process, the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed grew from 37% to 45% between 2024 and 2025 among educator respondents, and from 47% and 59% for learner respondents in the same period. In 2024, 53% of learner respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment process was fair to them, but this rose by 10 percentage points to 63% in 2025. Otherwise, perceptions of assessment and awarding among stakeholders remained the same as the previous year.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on learning

Different respondent groups were asked different questions about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on learning in 2024–25, so the responses to questions are not directly comparable. However, there were some questions that could be presented as common themes.

Learner respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement ‘I feel that the pandemic continues to affect my mental wellbeing’ and 27% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while a higher proportion (49%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Educator respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that in 2024–25 ‘many learners are less resilient than their predecessors were prior to the pandemic’ and 86% agreed or strongly agreed.

While these questions are not directly comparable, they both relate to perceptions of mental wellbeing as a result of the pandemic and indicate that learner respondents and educator respondents had differing views on this topic.

Changes over time

Perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on learning had changed over time among all respondent groups, suggesting that respondents think the impact of the pandemic has lessened.

Between 2023 and 2025, the proportion of learner respondents who expressed agreement that the pandemic continued to impact on their learning decreased from 47% to 35%, a difference of 12 percentage points. In the same time period, the proportion of learner respondents expressing agreement that the pandemic has had an effect on the development of their skills and knowledge dropped from 66% to 45%, a difference of 21 percentage points. The proportion of learner respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the pandemic continued to affect their mental wellbeing also dropped from 38% in 2023 to 27% in 2025.

For educator respondents, in 2024 76% had agreed or strongly agreed that many learners are not as well prepared to study for NQs as their predecessors were prior to the pandemic, but this dropped to 68% in 2025. For SA and QD respondents, in 2024, 66% agreed that skills

development in their subject area continued to be impacted by the pandemic. The subsequent year, in 2025, this figure had dropped to 44%.