Rebalancing of Assessment Research: Methodology

Published: June 2026

Introduction

As part of the ongoing maintenance of National Courses, Qualifications Scotland identified some straightforward changes that could improve the current assessments across a range of qualifications. Wider reform will take place in the coming years.

Qualifications Scotland has committed to being open, collaborative and forward-thinking by putting learners' and educators' voices at the heart of decision-making (Qualifications Scotland, 2026). In line with this commitment, we asked teachers and learners who had taught or studied these qualifications for their views on the proposed changes to assessment. The overall aim was to proceed with the adjustments at the beginning of the 2026–27 session if the educators and learners who took part in the research indicated approval of them.

The courses where we sought to make changes to assessments were:

- Biology – National 5 to Advanced Higher
- Business Management – National 5 and Higher
- Chemistry – National 5 to Advanced Higher
- Dance – National 5 and Higher
- Economics – National 5 and Higher
- English – Higher
- Environmental Science – National 5 and Higher
- Human Biology – Higher
- Latin – National 5 and Higher
- Media – National 5 and Higher
- Politics – Higher
- Physics – National 5 to Advanced Higher

Methodology

1 Research aims and objectives

In February 2026, we launched Qualifications Scotland (formally Scottish Qualifications Authority). One of our organisation's key aims was to put learners' and educators' voices at the heart of decision making (Qualifications Scotland, 2026).

As part of our regular maintenance of qualifications, we identified some straightforward changes that could be made to assessments in national courses for the 2026–27 session. Through this research, we sought to find out learners' and educators' perceptions of the changes being proposed.

The overall aim of the research was to provide an evidence base through which we could make a decision on whether the changes should be made, and triangulate this evidence with professional judgement and expertise.

We formulated the following research questions:

- To what extent do learners agree or disagree with the changes being proposed to assessments in qualifications they have studied?
- What are the benefits and challenges that learners perceive with the changes being proposed to assessments in qualifications they have studied?
- To what extent do educators agree or disagree with the changes being proposed to assessments in qualifications they have taught?
- What are the benefits and challenges that educators perceive with the changes being proposed to assessments in qualifications they have studied?

2 Research ethics

To mitigate ethical concerns, the research was designed in line with Qualifications Scotland's Code of Research Practice, which sets out principles through which research should be conducted ethically, inclusively and sustainably.

While the nature of the research topic was not considered to be sensitive, the research involved learners who were under the age of 18. Because of this, the design was underpinned by Qualifications Scotland's Working with Children and Young People guide in relation to research. Respondents who were under 18 were informed that they could complete the survey alongside a trusted adult.

Respondents were assured that their participation would be anonymous, and were given information about what their data would be used for.

An ethical review process was successfully completed for this research.

3 Research design

A rapid-research approach was employed to allow the organisation to meet urgent decision-making needs.

To address the research aims and questions, we designed a survey that would allow for quantitative data to be gathered on perceptions of the changes being proposed for 24 different qualifications. It also allowed them the space to provide more in-depth feedback through open-text questions.

The survey was designed to show learners and educators proposals[1] for only the subjects that they stated they currently taught or studied, or had in the past. The purpose of this was to gather more reliable data from those who had direct experience of the qualifications being surveyed. The survey was tested from the point of view of different users to ensure that it was working correctly.

4 Recruitment and sampling

The research used a non-random sampling technique called self-selection to recruit participants for the survey. Qualifications co-ordinators in centres across Scotland that delivered National Courses were sent an email on 4 February 2026 asking them to recruit learners and educators that had taught or studied specific courses to take part in the survey.

We advertised the survey on social media sites Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and Bluesky throughout the field period. We sent out a reminder via our weekly update newsletter on 5, 12 and 19 February 2026.

The purpose of this was to capture the views of as wide a group of learners and educators as possible.

5 Fieldwork

The fieldwork period ran from 4 February 2026 to 25 February 2026. We chose this three-week timescale for several reasons.

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[1] The tables showing the proposals in the reports are formatted slightly differently than the format used in the survey. This was amended to make the tables accessible to readers using screen readers. The information contained in the tables is the same.

- The survey start date coincided with the launch of Qualifications Scotland, and was therefore the first piece of research that contributed to Qualifications Reform.
- The three-week period also ensured that participants coming from different local authority areas had sufficient time to complete the survey, even if their mid-term breaks fell on different weeks.

The survey was self-administered by respondents online using the Smart Survey platform. Respondents consented to take part in the survey by proceeding with the survey questions, after reading the consent information. Overall, we received 1227 responses from learners and 2536 responses from educators.

5a Analysis

We analysed responses to the quantitative data by respondent type so we could compare percentage frequency distributions of each question between learners and educators. This is a way to organise the number of times a specific response to a question occurs, proportionately to the number of participants.
We downloaded graphs showing the frequency distributions of the quantitative questions by respondent type from Smart Survey.

Note that some figures in the graphs do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

We then aggregated the data to show the total proportion who agreed and strongly agreed, and who disagreed and strongly disagreed. (Some aggregated figures may differ slightly from the graphs by one percentage point due to rounding.)

We downloaded the data collected from the open-text questions from Smart Survey and saved it in a secure folder that was only accessible by those working directly on the analysis. Qualitative data was then analysed using thematic analysis so that all the opinions related to a particular theme could be viewed together.

Data that could potentially identify respondents through the existence of small sample sizes was suppressed in the outputs.

5b Limitations

As with any piece of research, there were a number of limitations that should be taken into account when assessing the veracity of the data.

Due to budgetary and time constraints, we could not use a random, representative sampling approach to recruit participants. This means that it is not possible to generalise the results to the wider population with confidence or ensure that all parts of the population are heard.

It was also not possible to ensure that every centre's qualifications co-ordinator passed on the survey to all learners and educators with experience of the qualifications being surveyed. Also, the survey was voluntary, so invitees did not have to take part even if they did receive an email inviting them to do so. As a result, the data in this survey could be affected by self-selection bias. (Self-selection bias occurs when participants select themselves to take part in a research study and the views of these participants are systematically different from the population of the target group as a whole.) It is possible that those who chose to respond were motivated to do so by having specific opinions that they wished to share with us.

There was also some anecdotal evidence that some respondents answered questions about subjects they did not have direct experience of studying or teaching.

This means that the responses cannot be considered to be truly representative of learners and educators from our centres in Scotland, and the results cannot be generalised with confidence.

Finally, the qualitative findings in these reports are based on data gathered through open-text comments. A limitation of gathering qualitative data in this way is that researchers cannot probe for deeper insight and understanding of the participant's views.

It often also means that the qualitative data is more skewed towards those with more negative opinions because researchers are restricted in exploring the full range of views available.

However, in a rapid-research environment, the benefits are that qualitative data can be gathered quickly to understand where issues may arise from the changes being proposed.