



Review into the removal of the question paper from practical subjects

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Background

In 2017–18, a new question paper was introduced to practical subjects following the removal of unit assessment. The purpose of this question paper was to assess the candidates' ability to integrate and apply breadth, knowledge, understanding and skills from across the course.

Since this introduction, SQA has received informal feedback that suggests these question papers are no longer an appropriate form of assessment for learners in seven courses (Table 1).

Table 1: Practical subjects under review

Level	Subject
National 5	Fashion and Textile Technology
Higher	Fashion and Textile Technology
National 5	Practical Cake Craft
National 5	Practical Cookery
National 5	Practical Electronics
National 5	Practical Metalworking
National 5	Practical Woodworking

In this project, SQA consulted practitioners on the value of the question paper to investigate whether it can be replaced with another form of assessment. As the project took place while learners of these subjects were completing their prelims, it was decided that learners would not be consulted at this stage.

Method

From 18 January to 7 February 2024, a short survey was distributed to practitioners familiar with these subjects. The survey asked: 'Please indicate the extent you agree or disagree that the question paper component should be removed from this subject.'

Practitioners were invited to participate in the online survey via email sent to 361 centres and 10 key stakeholder groups, including the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, College Development Network, Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Education Scotland, Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA), NASUWT, The Teachers Union, and School Leaders Scotland (SLS).

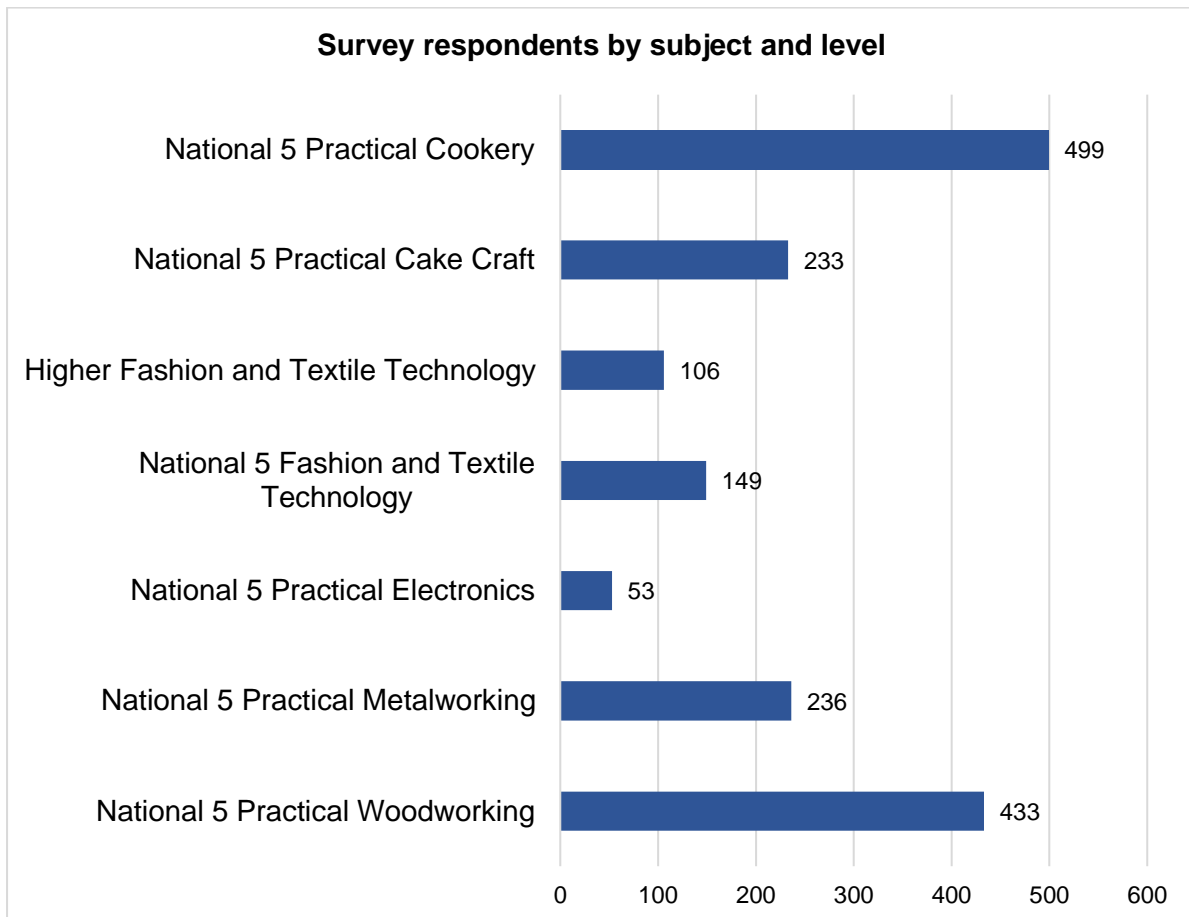
In total, 1,026 practitioners completed the survey. Figure 1 shows the number of practitioners in the survey that taught each course; several respondents taught multiple courses, which is why the total in Figure 1 is greater than 1,026.

According to the Scottish Government's 2022 teacher census, 800 practitioners taught home economics as their main subject and 1,228 practitioners taught technical education as their main subject in secondary schools in Scotland¹. These figures suggest that the survey had

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/teacher-census-supplementary-statistics/>

good coverage of eligible practitioners. However, this cannot be used to accurately estimate the proportion of eligible practitioners who took part in the survey (that is, the survey response rate). The teacher census figures included subjects that were not a part of this review, only reflected those employed in secondary schools, and only where the subject was considered their 'main' subject. Furthermore, practitioners in the focus groups provided feedback that the survey did not reach all of their colleagues who would have been eligible to take part.

Figure 1: Survey respondents



Invitations to the focus groups were not linked to survey responses. At the end of the survey, all participants were asked if they wanted to take part in a focus group. The focus groups discussed if and how the question paper could be removed or replaced.

The 93 interested practitioners were asked for their availability for five online focus groups running from 5 March to 12 March 2024; 50 practitioners signed up for a focus group session and 28 attended the groups.

The focus group details are shown in Table 2. Focus group participants were grouped based on their subjects.

Table 2: Focus group participants

Subject	Date	Participants (Total: 28)
Fashion and Textile Technology	Monday 11 March 4.15–5.00pm	4
Practical Cake Craft and Cookery	Tuesday 5 March 4.15–5.00pm	9
	Friday 8 March 5.15–6.00pm	5
Practical Metalworking, Woodworking and Electronics	Thursday 7 March 5.15–6.00pm	6
	Tuesday 12 March 4.15–5.00pm	4

Fourteen Practical Cake Craft and Practical Cookery practitioners were split across two groups. One of the 14 participants was unable to attend the group and shared their responses directly with the facilitator via email. The results of the two focus groups and the emailed feedback have been combined.

Ten Practical Metalworking, Practical Woodworking and Practical Electronics practitioners were split across two groups. Only one practitioner across the groups taught Practical Electronics. The results of the two focus groups have been combined.

There was only one focus group for Fashion and Textile Technology practitioners, as there were fewer interested respondents. Four practitioners attended this group, and one of the four joined the session late. As this was a much smaller group, the total range of experiences covered in the group was smaller.

The questions in the focus groups were:

- 1 What do you believe are the strengths of the question paper?
- 2 What do you believe are the limitations of the question paper?
- 3 What feedback have you received from learners about the strengths and limitations of the question paper?
- 4 To what extent do you believe the question paper should be removed entirely?
- 5 What changes could be made to the structure of the question paper?
- 6 How else could knowledge and understanding be assessed without the addition of another component?
- 7 What, if any, other forms of assessment could replace the question paper? How would the chosen replacement of the question paper impact validity, reliability and fairness?
- 8 How would the removal (or replacement) of the question paper impact the practicality and manageability of assessing your subject(s)?

Findings

Overview

Table 3 shows a summary of the key findings of the study, in order of agreement with removal of the question paper.

Table 3: Summary of key findings by subject

Subject	Agree	Disagree	Comments
Practical Metalworking (Nat 5)	79%	16%	Across the subjects, Practical Metalworking practitioners were most in favour of removal. Focus groups discussed both complete removal to suit practically skilled learners and replacement options.
Practical Woodworking (Nat 5)	75%	20%	The majority of practitioners were in favour of removal and felt replacing the question paper with an assessment with more real-world applications would be better for learners.
Practical Cake Craft (Nat 5)	72%	21%	Removal was less contentious than for Practical Cookery as the question paper is more limited in coverage. While the majority agreed with removal, several practitioners (who also taught Practical Cookery) were strongly against it.
Fashion and Textile Technology (Nat 5)	67%	30%	There was more support for changing the question paper at National 5 than Higher level. The focus group was small, but all were opposed to removal as the question paper sets the groundwork for the Higher course. They considered the possibility of reducing the weighting of the question paper.
Practical Cookery (Nat 5)	61%	34%	In the focus groups, those who were strongly opposed expressed that removal or replacement would impact credibility, costs and workload. There was considerable interest in changing the assignment instead.
Practical Electronics (Nat 5)	58%	32%	Support for removal was much lower than other technical subjects as Electronics is more aligned to the sciences and engineering. However, few practitioners were involved in the research, making it difficult to generalise our findings.
Fashion and Textile Technology (Higher)	53%	40%	Removal of the question paper was divisive as theory is seen as integral to the course. Practitioners felt the question paper creates parity with other Higher qualifications for progression.

Overall, the table shows that support for the removal of the question paper varied widely across the subjects. It is important to consider the percentages of practitioners who agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) alongside those who disagreed (strongly disagreed or disagreed), and the reasons why, for a full understanding of support for removal.

The rest of this report, using data from the survey and the findings from the focus groups, discusses these six themes:

- ◆ Support for the removal of the question paper
- ◆ Practitioners' views on the strengths and limitations of the question paper
- ◆ Learner perspectives on the question paper
- ◆ Possible changes to the question paper
- ◆ The impact of removing the question paper
- ◆ Possible replacement to the question paper

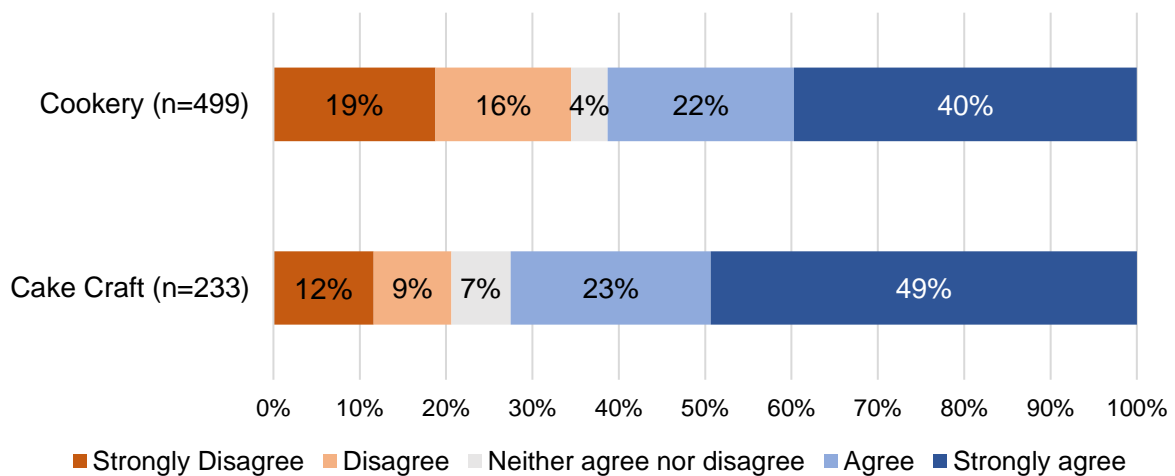
Practical Cake Craft and Practical Cookery

Support for the removal of the question paper

Practical Cookery (PC) was the subject taught by the most practitioners who took part in the survey. Of the practitioners who taught Practical Cake Craft (PCC), 92% also taught Practical Cookery.

Figure 2 shows the agreement with the removal of the question paper across Practical Cake Craft and Practical Cookery.

Figure 2: Practical Cake Craft and Practical Cookery practitioners' agreement with the removal of the question paper



For both Practical Cookery and Practical Cake Craft, the majority of practitioners agreed (agreed strongly or agreed) that the question paper should be removed, at 62% and 72%, respectively.

It is important to note that roughly a third of 499 practitioners of Practical Cookery who took part in the survey disagreed with the removal of the question paper. The focus groups were dominated by practitioners who were strongly opposed to the removal of the question paper.

There was higher support for the removal of the question paper for practitioners in Practical Cake Craft, but the number of respondents for each subject differed. There were more than double the number of Cookery practitioners than Cake Craft practitioners. This may be due to actual differences in the number of practitioners for each subject or a bias in the sample. Therefore, it is unclear if higher support for removal is influenced by the smaller sample.

Practitioners' views on the strengths and limitations of the question paper

Practitioners mentioned several strengths of the question paper. They felt that the question paper:

- ◆ allows learners to demonstrate knowledge
- ◆ adds credibility
- ◆ is consistent
- ◆ keeps costs of delivery low

The question paper is seen to 'back up' the knowledge developed throughout the practical elements of the course. It also adds credibility to the course, keeping these subjects 'on par' with academic subjects and allowing the subject to 'gain respect' amongst parents, carers and colleagues.

I think it undermines the subject a little bit as well if it doesn't have a question paper, which is what I'm worried about. (PC practitioner)

The question paper allows learners who are not as strong practically to demonstrate their knowledge.

Another benefit of the question paper is that it adds an element of consistency to the course. This was expressed from two perspectives. One practitioner mentioned how the course had already undergone 'so many changes', implying that removing the question paper adds to uncertainty. Another practitioner mentioned how the question paper itself provides consistency for learners:

I don't have an issue with the number of questions or the way, I mean it's always the same format, which is good. And you know because then they know what to expect, the time is fine. The number of questions is fine. (PC practitioner)

Practitioners also discussed that a limitation of the question paper is the depth of information that learners are required to know for Practical Cookery. One practitioner felt the scope of ingredients that learners need to know should be reduced. Other limitations mentioned were the assessment criteria, and practitioners explained that the writing expectations were challenging for learners. However, practitioners who discussed these limitations did not sway towards wanting the question paper removed.

One practitioner, who was in favour of removal, felt that the limitation of the question paper is that it does not fit in with the 'practical nature' of the course.

Practitioners suggested that the question paper is 'more beneficial' in Practical Cookery, as cooking time is limited and there is a lot to be covered. On the other hand, Practical Cake Craft practitioners felt that there is not as much theory to cover, which leads to learners being 'over-assessed' in areas.

Learner perspectives on the question paper

Practitioners said that learners would be in favour of removal, but found that pupils think the question paper is fair, and they:

... don't think any pupils enjoy any QP in any subject. (PC practitioner)

Another mentioned how their pupils 'don't mind the paper' compared to the assignment:

It is the written assignment they find really difficult and in my opinion the assignment should be used for a Higher rather than Nat 5. (PC practitioner)

Practitioners went on to discuss learner performance in the question paper. They said that some learners find it difficult to answer using exam question techniques and some do not

revise well for the Practical Cookery question paper. However, an advantage of the question paper is that learners have the time to develop their understanding:

By the prelim they have a better understanding and by the final exam they definitely understand what is needed and the depth of answering questions (PCC and PC practitioner)

In addition, another practitioner mentioned how the more 'practically-minded' learners gain confidence from the question paper when it is in a practical subject they excel:

I think it's really important that once [practically-minded learners] cracked the formula and they can see that you know [...] how they're supposed to present the knowledge. Then you know, it's a boost to them as well. (PCC and PC practitioner)

Possible changes to the question paper

There was some interest in restructuring the Practical Cookery question paper so that learners still have the opportunity to be assessed on theory. One practitioner suggested reducing the weighting of the question paper to reduce workload while keeping the validity of the course.

There was some discussion about the way that the question paper is assessed in terms of command words. A few practitioners felt the requirements of the command words restrict learners' ability to demonstrate their knowledge:

They've got to learn that and if they don't remember it, then they get no marks, and that's heartbreaking. You know, I've had kids come in 'but I only got 2 out of about 25 or 35'. Yeah, but you haven't answered it correctly. (PCC and PC practitioner)

The impact of removing the question paper

Practitioners felt that the question paper was needed to maintain fair grade boundaries:

Generally practical marks are high, so the QP helps level things out. (PC practitioner)

When the question paper was introduced, the grade boundaries came down. It was much more fair. (PCC and PC practitioner)

Several practitioners felt that the removal of the question paper would impact the quality and credibility of the course.

If they're removing the question paper and they don't put something else in, then it decreases the validity of the assessment in the first place because all they're really assessing is practical skills. (PCC and PC practitioner)

It's going to end up being just like Skills for Work course and it's going to get taught at college. (PC practitioner)

There was also a concern that without the validity of the question paper, parents and carers would discourage learners from taking the courses.

The question paper is seen as essential to assessing knowledge, especially for areas like hygiene.

I just think it's pointless taking out the question paper. I just don't see the knowledge getting assessed in any other way. (PCC and PC practitioner)

Practitioners frequently discussed the impacts of removing the assessment on knowledge. One practitioner mentioned that the question paper provides an incentive for learners to engage with the theoretical aspects of the course. Another practitioner mentioned how the theory assessed in the question paper builds on what is taught in Broad General Education (BGE), for example, nutrition.

Practitioners felt that the removal of the question paper might impact progression pathways:

[removal of the question paper] reduces scope for the pupils as well... It limits what they can do. (PCC and PC practitioner)

Many learners go on to study Health and Food Technology (HFT) and Practical Cookery, and practitioners felt that the question paper prepares learners for assessments at Higher HFT.

Another common consideration was the cost of delivering an entirely practical course.

We just couldn't afford to cook every single lesson. (PC practitioner)

This led to one practitioner being concerned that increasing the costs of the course could raise questions about its worth:

I've been in teaching far too long. And I've had many fights with senior management and what have you to keep the subject in the way that it is... I don't want it to be an excuse for, you know, schools, senior managers to take the subject away even more than it already is. And I know it's a costly subject. But we're worth it. We're absolutely worth it. (PC and PCC practitioner)

Possible replacement to the question paper

Practitioners struggled to see how knowledge and understanding could be assessed at National 5 level in any other way. One practitioner, who was the only one in their group who voted to remove the question paper, explained that it was difficult to consider what the replacement could be because what is being assessed needs to be known before deciding on the method of assessment:

I think it's just about establishing what you want the test to do and then working out the best format for it. (PCC and PC practitioner)

Internal assessments were opposed as this would increase the workload for practitioners.

An internal assessment is just adding to workload... People are already like on their knees with how much they've got to do... If they change it to [internal assessment], I'm not doing it anymore. You can't add it. (PCC and PC practitioner)

There were several suggestions that the removal of the assignment would be a better solution to improve the course and reduce practitioner workload. This was corroborated across both focus groups.

I think a lot more people would want to keep the question paper than the assignment. (PC practitioner)

Practitioners felt that a question paper externally assessed by SQA 'ensures fairness and consistency'. Practitioners did not support using auto-marked multiple choice as an alternative:

What's the point in teaching on theory for them to just do multiple choice? Eenie meenie miney mo! (PCC and PC practitioner)

Central marking was also ruled out due to the number of candidates for Practical Cookery.

A couple of practitioners showed interest towards the idea of case studies. However, they believed that case studies should be 'put in as part of the question paper' instead of discussing them as a potential replacement. It would be difficult for a case study outside the question paper to 'include all the different components and make it a balanced and worthwhile paper'.

Practitioners agreed that oral assessments or professional discussions would be difficult for their learners, and there would also be hurdles on a practical level due to class sizes.

At the mention of the portfolio, practitioners were unsure of this due to assessment history:

They've kind of done that, haven't they? (PCC and PC practitioner)

It's almost like going back to when we had to do the units and, you know, building up the portfolio over the year and that was taken away to reduce workload. (PC practitioner)

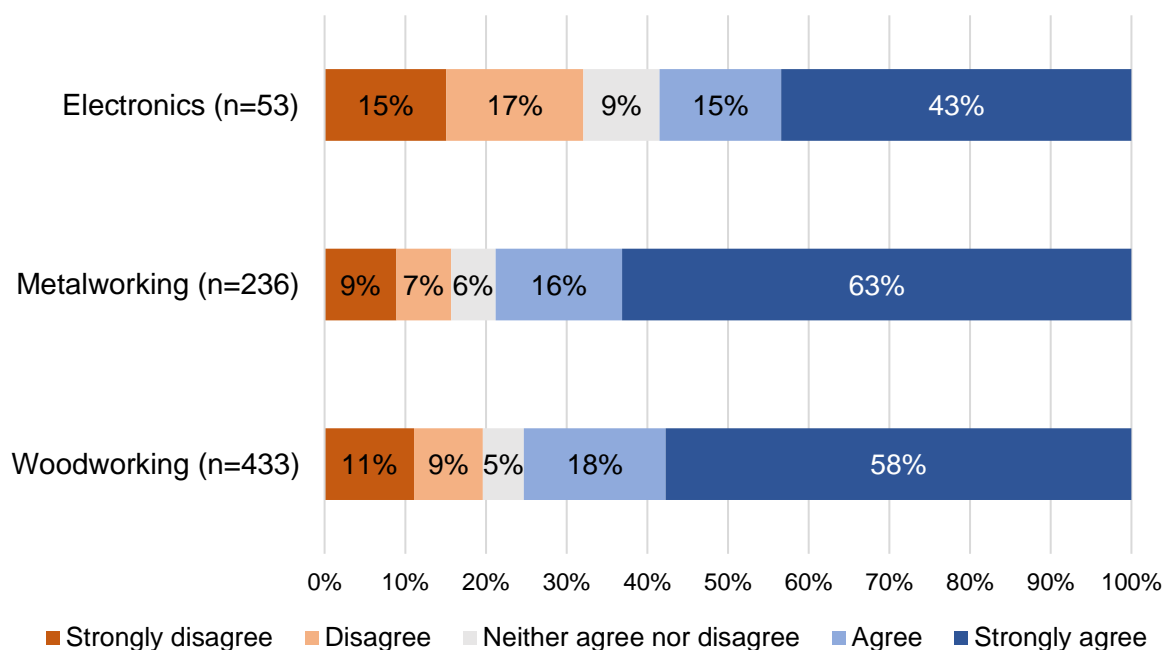
Practical Metalwork, Practical Woodworking and Practical Electronics

Support for the removal of the question paper

Combined, Practical Metalwork, Practical Woodworking and Practical Electronics practitioners accounted for 70% of the participants who took part in the survey. Roughly 40% of Practical Electronics practitioners also taught Practical Metalworking and/or Practical Woodworking. Almost all Metalworking practitioners (97%) in the survey also taught Practical Woodworking.

Figure 3 shows the agreement with the removal of the question paper across Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalworking, and Practical Electronics.

Figure 3: Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalworking, and Practical Electronics practitioners' agreement with the removal of the question paper



For Electronics, Metalworking, and Woodworking, the majority of respondents agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) that the question paper should be removed, at 58%, 79% and 76%, respectively. While 32%, 16% and 20% of respondents disagreed (strongly disagreed or disagreed) with the question paper being removed, respectively.

It is important to note that although just over 30% of respondents from Practical Electronics disagreed with the removal of the question paper, compared to the other practical subjects in this group, they had a considerably lower number of participants. Therefore, it is unclear whether this is biased by the smaller number of respondents from Practical Electronics.

Practitioners' views on the strengths and limitations of the question paper

There was a range of views about the question paper in both the focus groups that were conducted with practitioners teaching Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalwork, and Practical Electronics. Some practitioners felt that the question paper gives credibility to the

subject and adds authenticity for people outside the course. This was especially the case for the Practical Electronics subject as it is heavily rooted in science and engineering, and so requires the question paper to fully assess the learners.

I'm strongly in favour of keeping the exam assessments in all of them... keeping those elements in there just gives a wee bit more credit to the subjects, to be quite honest. (Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalworking, and Practical Electronics practitioner)

One practitioner who taught all three subjects also mentioned that the question paper can help a small number of candidates who are 'less practically capable' still achieve good grades. However, other practitioners stated that the majority of their pupils are not as 'academically capable'; they have all the practical skills and knowledge needed but are not getting the grades they deserve because of the question paper.

They can talk through what to do. And most importantly, they can demonstrate it to just quite a high level of tolerance. But to then sit down and have to write it in an exam structured form is challenging. It's challenging for a lot of these kids and it's not their skill set. (Practical Woodworking practitioner)

There was some interest around keeping the question paper, but not necessarily in its current form, as exam conditions add a lot of pressure on pupils. Practitioners suggested an alternative written assessment.

In terms of the limitations of the question paper, practitioners mentioned that it is not a reflection of what learners would need to know in the real world, nor does the question paper add to the practical skills that they need for their careers.

Some questions in the paper that they're being assessed on aren't questions that in the real world of work they would be asked. They're very limited to asking them, like, how would you measure and mark out a certain woodworking joint? No tradesperson's going to be asked that in the real world that's it. Feels like it's just adding questions for the sake of questions rather than actually being something that would be assessed on. (Practical Woodworking and Metalworking practitioner)

Learner perspectives on the question paper

Practitioners stated that learners are not in favour of the question paper as it is viewed as being detrimental to their overall grade and the theory aspect is not relatable to their practical experiences.

The main perception from our kids is that it's not adding to their experience and it's not adding to their marks. It's actually a risk that they can work really hard in the workshop, do really good work and then they've got the risk of this work this exam at the end that can undo a big chunk of what they've done. (Practical Woodworking practitioner)

Practitioners also mentioned that learners engage more with the practical aspects of the subject and do not engage with the theory of the subjects.

*They just don't engage... you can just watch them zone out when you're doing it.
(Practical Woodworking practitioner)*

Additionally, practitioners mentioned learners being disengaged as they have to learn theory but do not get a chance to put it into practice for themselves.

I think the feedback that I've mostly had from pupils is the amount of stuff that they have to learn theory wise that's not practically assessed for them. It's probably one of the things that they're like: 'but we don't need to do that in the workshops. Why do we need to learn the theory about it so?'. Maybe streamlining that a wee bit would be easier 'cause they'd actually see the purpose in it. (Practical Woodworking and Practical Metalworking practitioner)

Possible changes to the question paper

Although the main focus of the discussion was the question paper, participants in both groups mentioned changes to the logbook, especially that if it is to be kept, it should be restructured and made more practical and effective.

Practitioners were in favour of having a question paper that assesses the skills of the learners, which they believed it does not do in its current form.

The disproportionate marking and weighting of the question paper were criticised by practitioners.

*They know what they're talking about because they can demonstrate that in the workshop day-to-day, but they perform significantly worse in the question paper than even like, say, their homework suggests that they should be able to do because they're not getting the exact right answer for that one single mark.
(Practical Woodworking practitioner)*

60 mark paper that they get 60 minutes for that then gets weighted down to the equivalent of 30 marks. Why not just have a 30 mark paper then? ... It's asking questions for the sake of asking questions almost to a point. (Practical Woodworking practitioner)

The impact of removing the question paper

Maintaining robustness and consistency were important themes that came up when discussing the impact that removing the question paper would have. Practitioners questioned the level of verification that would be required if the question paper was removed, and the course assessments became 100% entirely practical.

My fear would be what the integrity is because the manpower isn't there at SQA to be able to carry out a rigorous and consistent and regular verification at every school. (Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalworking, and Practical Electronics practitioner)

Participants were also concerned about their workload if the question paper was removed.

I'm teaching 5 subjects at various levels. I would need to be very content that my workload wouldn't be massively increased by whatever changes were being proposed. (Practical Woodworking, Practical Metalworking, and Practical Electronics practitioner)

Removing the question paper would increase the chance and ability of some learners to achieve a National 5 qualification.

We get a lot of learners in our school that Practical Woodwork and Practical Metalwork is the only place that they can achieve a National 5. They might not have any other Nationals, and then things like having an exam paper ... can be the stress element that tips them over the edge, times that can be the difference between different bands and different grade levels that they can achieve. (Practical Woodworking and Practical Metalworking practitioner)

Possible replacement to the question paper

Practitioners mentioned ways in which the question paper could be replaced. Most practitioners were against the question paper but were in favour of having some sort of theory element to the course. This included using naturally occurring evidence throughout the year. There was also a discussion of replacing the question paper with an assessment that takes place in class along with the practical model, which will give learners more hands-on practical opportunities rather than just writing it out in an exam.

Like when they go out into the real world, that employer would be checking their work. So we want to check that they've got these skills and it just gives them a bit more accountability of being able to independently do stuff. (Practical Woodworking and Practical Metalworking practitioner)

A portfolio approach was favoured by practitioners in both focus groups. A portfolio would allow learners to gather evidence and have something to show for in interviews.

A lot of kids that are going for these interviews and jobs like they kind of get a bit nervous, they don't know what they've to talk about and that might just give them like a base of, 'I've done a health and safety module. I've done a this module. I've done a this module and here's all the things that I was managed to achieve. And here's the evidence of me doing it.' ... It doesn't have to be literacy based or exam written based. (Practical Woodworking and Practical Metalworking practitioner)

However, practitioners were concerned about the increase in workload for them and the learners and how it would be assessed.

I really like the idea of it when we're actually discussing it, but I think if we actually see the SQA portfolio, I'm really concerned that they're gonna come back with an incredible quantity of work that we just can't provide them. (Practical Woodworking practitioner)

Other suggestions of replacements to the question paper included online multiple-choice exams that are very short with only 20 questions. Participants also suggested having an exam with video and photo components which can be similar to the hazard perception aspect of a driving test. This would make it more engaging and beneficial for pupils.

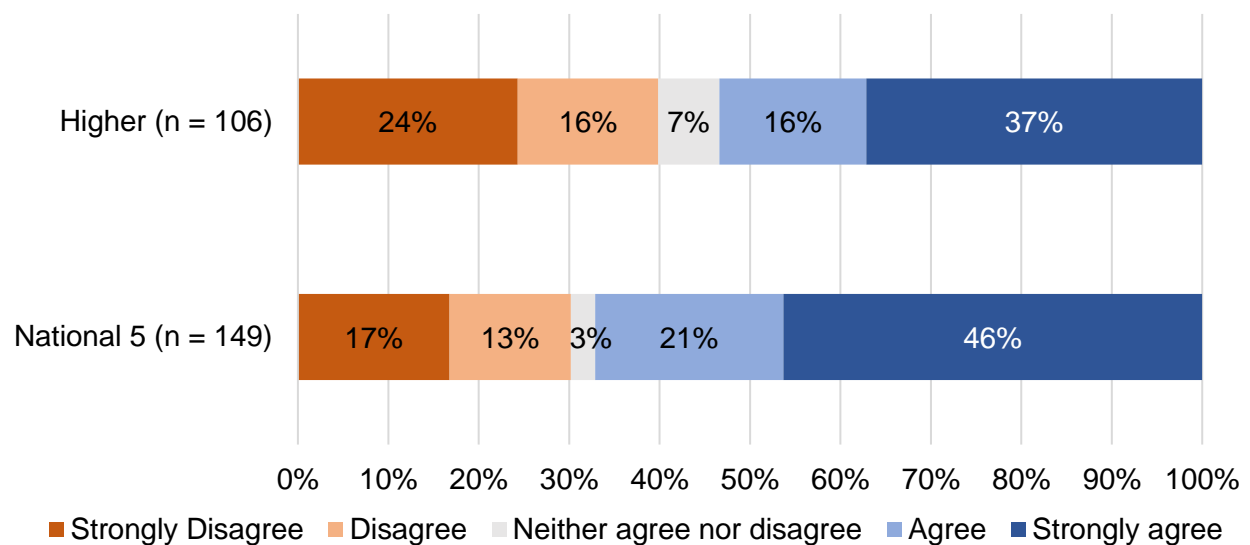
Fashion and Textile Technology

Support for the removal of the question paper

Fashion and Textile Technology (FTT) was the subject taught by the second fewest practitioners who took part in the survey, for both National 5 and Higher. Of the practitioners who taught Higher Fashion and Textile Technology, 99% also taught National 5.

Figure 4 shows the agreement with the removal of the question paper across Higher and National 5 Fashion and Textile Technology.

Figure 4: Higher and National 5 Fashion and Textile Technology practitioners' agreement with the removal of the question paper



For National 5, the majority of practitioners agreed or agreed strongly that the question paper should be removed (67%). For Higher, roughly half (53%) of practitioners agreed or agreed strongly that the question paper should be removed.

Two out of five (40%) practitioners in Higher Fashion and Textile Technology who took part in the survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with removal of the question paper. In National 5 Fashion and Textile Technology, roughly one out of three (30%) practitioners disagreed or strongly disagreed with the removal of the question paper. The focus groups were dominated by practitioners who were opposed to the removal of the question paper.

Practitioners' views on the strengths and limitations of the question paper

Practitioners in the focus group described several strengths of the question paper. Of these strengths, validity and credibility was brought up the most frequently. This was often tied to students being able to progress into further and higher education.

*We can't have them come into a subject where at the end they discover that it carries no weight to where they want to go. So I think we've got to be careful as well of any change that we do make that we're absolutely certain that that change does not undermine the integrity of the qualification that we're offering.
(FTT practitioner)*

Validity and credibility was also often discussed in comparison to other courses, such as Higher Photography and Higher Art, indicating that the perception of validity and credibility may be linked to understandings of the wider sector:

Unfortunately, although everything shouldn't come down to there being an exam paper, while that is still the case in pretty much every other subject, if Fashion doesn't have it, it will be seen as lesser. And I would say at Highers, it wouldn't be accepted on the same level as other Highers. (FTT practitioner)

The structure of the question paper was discussed as a strength because it provides a reliable and 'reasonably familiar' assessment structure to learners.

Practitioners felt that coverage of knowledge, theory, and creativity was better in the question paper than in other forms of assessment:

I think there are certain areas to the course spec that wouldn't necessarily be covered through the assignment or the practical activities. (FTT practitioner)

Although this focus group was only made up of practitioners who disagreed with the removal of the question paper, some limitations were mentioned. These limitations were:

- ◆ the content coverage is too broad
- ◆ the question paper is difficult
- ◆ the timing of the question paper makes it more difficult
- ◆ the weighting of the question paper

It is important to note that when this group was asked directly about limitations, there seemed to be an initial struggle or hesitancy to discuss any limitations to the question paper. There were some disagreements when limitations were mentioned. One disagreement was about to what extent there is 'too much content' covered in the question paper. When this was mentioned, another practitioner said that the current question paper had already been 'scaled back' and that the breadth of content covered in the question paper may just be a reflection of 'the nature' of the course. Another disagreement was what the weighting of the question paper should be; one participant suggested that the question paper should weigh the minority of the course (under 50%), another suggested half (50%) and another suggested the majority (60%).

Learner perspectives on the question paper

Learner views on the question paper as expressed by the practitioner focus group were mixed. On one hand, a couple of practitioners discussed that learners did not like the question paper. However, during this discussion, they said that the dislike for question papers was about question papers in general and not specific to the Fashion and Textile Technology question paper:

I've never had them like, go moan about our question paper [...] I think it's just question papers in general across the board they're not particularly keen on. (FTT practitioner)

However, one practitioner somewhat disagreed with that discussion, adding that they had asked their learners, who said they 'don't mind' the question paper. This practitioner indicated that learners prefer the question paper to the assignment.

Possible changes to the question paper

Participants in the focus group were against the removal of the question paper in Fashion and Textile Technology. Whenever limitations to the question paper were mentioned, there were also suggestions of how it could be changed, rather than seeing this as a cause for removal. Changes to the question paper suggested were:

- ◆ whether the question paper should weigh the minority, equal, or majority of the overall grade compared to the practical assessments
- ◆ changing the timing of the question paper to make it easier for learners

However, participants also agreed that the assignment needed more modifications than the question paper. Overall, discussions about changing other parts of the course were more prevalent than discussing changes to the question paper:

[The question paper is] definitely the part that has done the poorest, but I don't necessarily think that means it's the part that has the biggest problems. I think it sounds like we're all in agreement that you can't really just look at one element of this and think that will fix the whole course. I think there are tweaks that need to be made everywhere. (FTT practitioner)

The impact of removing the question paper

The impacts of removal mentioned were mainly to do with:

- ◆ learners no longer choosing the subject
- ◆ not having the subject recognised by universities
- ◆ subject being seen as less academic
- ◆ losing some creative elements of the course

Losing some creative elements of the course was brought up by one participant who expressed support for changes that had already been made to the question paper. This change to the question paper was understood to have brought a more creative element to the course that was otherwise lacking:

I would say the course overall [the subject is] really not anywhere near as creative as it could be. So anything that injects a bit more creativity but links it to that subject based knowledge and application of appropriate properties of fabrics for the context of the question are really good. (FTT practitioner)

Possible replacement to the question paper

Participants had difficulty responding to the question about what could replace the question paper. Initially, there was no receptiveness to answering the question. Participants instead favoured discussing other assessments:

Well, we've already kind of suggested, haven't we, modifications to the assignment or the practical activity where there could be more demonstration of their understanding or some of the knowledge. (FTT practitioner)

The portfolio was mentioned as another assessment form, although negatively and in passing:

I don't know if the portfolio is quite similar to the assignment or something along those lines. (FTT practitioner)

The only element discussed in regards to potential replacements to the question paper was that it needs to be externally assessed. This was corroborated by all participants:

... there's something nice about having that external element of it marked. (FTT practitioner)

I just feel without the external kind of rubber stamp from SQA, the subject will lose its status, if not immediately, but over time. (FTT practitioner)

Conclusion

Final remarks and recommendations from the survey and focus group across the subjects:

1. The question paper contributes to the credibility of the course.

Almost all practitioners discussed how removal of the question paper could impact the reputation of the course as it demonstrates the assessment of theory. Even where there was support for removal, practitioners acknowledged that the question paper adds a perception of credibility to the subjects. Any removal or replacement of the question paper should consider the impact on the course's credibility.

2. Support for the removal of the question paper is not unanimous.

Considerable proportions of practitioners disagreed with the removal of the question paper, ranging from 16% to 40%. In the focus group discussions, possible consequences of removing the question paper included a loss of interest from learners, schools no longer delivering the courses, and in some cases, practitioners no longer wanting to teach the course. Considering the high impact of removal and the proportion of practitioners who opposed removal, further research is needed to address these concerns before making a decision on removal.

3. How practitioners have interpreted the meaning of 'removal' may differ due to the question wording of the survey.

Some practitioners took this to mean complete removal, while others thought this could mean replacement with an alternative assessment. As a result, how this question was answered might have differed depending on the interpretation. While this was explored in the focus groups, it should be taken into consideration that the survey results do not provide a definite statement on the perceptions of practitioners on removal or replacement. Some practitioners remarked that their answers to the survey would have changed if they had been presented with more options. This may have contributed to the different perspectives on removal that came out of the survey compared to the focus groups.

4. The question paper is not the only part of the assessment that practitioners want to improve.

Practitioners welcomed the opportunity to discuss how to improve their subjects but many practitioners prioritised changing other parts of the course over the question paper such as logbooks and assignments. Some practitioners felt that for a fuller picture, perceptions of the question paper should be considered in relation to other components of the course rather than in isolation.

5. Removal of the question paper should consider how this aligns with progression pathways.

Practitioners discussed how the removal of the question paper would impact how prepared learners would be to progress onto relevant Highers, further education courses,

and employment. They felt the decision for removal should involve these stakeholders and not just the practitioners for the subjects under review.

6. Removal or replacement of the question paper would need further research and involvement with practitioners.

Practitioners appreciated being involved in the review of their courses, but some felt that SQA should make attempts to allow more practitioners to give qualitative feedback. This is especially important as changes to the question paper are likely to impact their workload. Only 9% of practitioners in the survey expressed interest in participating in the focus groups, and only 3% took part, affecting the ability to apply the qualitative work more widely. Engagement with the survey and the focus groups varied by subject. There were fewer responses from practitioners of Practical Electronics and Fashion and Textile Technology — courses where there was also the least support for removal. There may need to be more targeted recruitment for further research to explore perceptions of the question paper in these groups especially.