

# Assessment options and home education

Notes on the 2021 exam consultation

[Home Educators' Qualifications Association](#), 20 January 2021

## The consultation and home-educated children

This document provides a preliminary assessment of the ongoing [Consultation on how GCSE, AS and A level grades should be awarded in summer 2021](#).

A core aim of the consultation is to ensure that it will be possible for private candidates to receive grades, following undertakings by the Secretary of State who, responding to a question in Parliament about home educated children, [said](#):

*I have asked Ofqual to take up this issue, to look at it directly and to make sure that there are measures in place so that those students will be in a position to get a grade.*

and the Chief Regulator, who wrote in [a letter to the Secretary of State](#):

*We will consider carefully the different experiences of private candidates and the opportunities available to them to make sure the approach is fair to all and that they are not disenfranchised.*

The consultation describes several possible approaches to achieving that aim. Three things are evident in the consultation document:

- Ofqual and the DfE are determined to find an approach that works for private candidates
- The consultation is being run at a stage when there is scope to influence policy
- Some of the policies under consideration are practicable for home-educators

For home educators these represent a substantial and welcome improvement over the Government's approach in 2020.

## This document: scope and approach

This document assesses the challenges and obstacles involved in implementing the approaches to private candidate assessment proposed in the consultation. For some approaches, additional government intervention (e.g. to change deadlines or ensure venue availability) is needed to make the approach practicable. For other approaches there may be no feasible solution to making the policy practicable for most home-educated candidates.

Although the consultation asks about private candidates' preferences, this document focuses primarily on feasibility. The HEQA membership includes a variety of home educators with different preferences, and so we leave the question of preferences for individual responses.

This document groups the four approaches described in the consultation under two headings: [Assessment via schools](#) and [Assessment via exams](#). The final section discusses [reliability and comparability](#).

# Assessment via schools

## Assessment via schools is unworkable for most home-educated candidates

One approach described in the consultation involves assessing private candidates via schools:

*(b) for private candidates to work with a school or college willing to assess the standard at which they are performing – using the same type of evidence the school and college is considering for its students.*

In 2020 some home-educated candidates were awarded Centre-Assessed Grades through schools, and it is also possible to assess some such candidates with teacher assessment in 2021. However, there are challenges to making this approach practicable for many home-educated candidates, and there are insuperable obstacles to making it practicable for all.

## Challenges for assessment via schools

There are several challenges for assessment via schools that it may be possible to overcome.

First, **few centres are equipped** to assess home-educated candidates. Home educators follow a wide variety of approaches and subjects, which often include subjects not studied in most schools (e.g. Ancient Greek or Astronomy), and which most schools consequently cannot assess.

Second, **few centres are willing** to assess home-educated candidates, particularly at a time where resources are stretched.

Third, **confidence in these centres is low** among some home educators, following experiences with the few centres willing to perform assessments in 2020. One HEQA member writes:

*I had the same experience ... as did all of us with South West Science who were entered through Tutors & Exams. It was horrendous and I'd never trust them again*

and another writes:

*Just to put it in perspective, my son achieved an average of 92% in his Maths assignments and Wolsey Hall predicted he would achieve a grade 6 in the exam.*

Fourth, **centre assessment is very expensive**. A HEQA member writes:

*My daughter is already booked to take 3 GCSEs (not IGCSEs) this summer. ... We've paid £300 for the exams ... I just checked what it would cost us to switch to Tutors and Exams, if we were expected to pay their earliest entry fees plus £100 per subject for a tutor to interview her. It came to £910 – tripling the cost.*

The costs of such assessments put them beyond the reach of many home-educating families. Furthermore, mandating assessments that are only practical for large commercial centres is likely to exacerbate the ongoing problem of exam centre access for home-educated candidates, causing costs to rise further.

## Insuperable obstacles to using only assessment via schools

The problems above could perhaps be addressed sufficiently to allow some home-educated candidates to receive some grades via school assessment. However, for many candidates, there are obstacles to school assessment that do not appear to have solutions:

Many home-educated candidates preparing for exams **do not have portfolios** of work that could be used for assessment. For example, one HEQA member writes

*We study over two years but we work orally in the main. Revision is also mainly oral, with Quizlets, and only working on written work towards the end.*

Many home-educated candidates **prepare for exams at quite different speeds** to schoolchildren. Covering an entire GCSE syllabus in a few months is not uncommon, and in such cases there may be almost no evidence available in February of preparation for an exam in May.

The majority of home-educated candidates **study without any tutors** for at least some subjects. A poll of a support group for home-educating families this week found that

*while many families have external support in some subjects, 80% have at least one subject without it. Less than 7% have existing high quality evidence in all subjects that would be easy for exam centres to verify.*

Where there are no existing relationships with tutors, it is very unlikely that reliable assessment will be possible. In 2020 Ofqual rejected teacher-assessed grades in favour of teacher-assessed ranks because the evidence that teachers are able to assess grades accurately for their own pupils is so weak. It seems even more **unlikely that tutors are able to accurately assess students they do not know**: teacher assessment not based on existing relationships is probably inherently unreliable.

## Assessment via exams

**Exam-style assessment for home-educated candidates is challenging but workable**

The consultation describes three related approaches involving exam-like assessment

*(a) for private candidates to complete the papers set by the exam boards for use in schools and colleges. The exam boards would mark the papers (and any completed non-exam assessment) and issue a grade to the private candidate based on their performance.*

*(c) for the exam boards to run normal exams for private candidates to take in the summer of 2021 – appropriate venues would need to be provided*

*(d) for the exam boards to run normal exams for private candidates to take in the autumn of 2021 – appropriate venues would need to be provided.*

Each proposal involves assessment via papers set and marked by the exam boards. Proposals (a) and (d) differ in the details from a normal exam series: proposal (a) involves "mini-exams" taken outside the usual system, while proposal (d) involves exams taken outside the usual time.

## Challenges for assessment via exams

Assessment via exams poses several challenges, though almost none appear to be insuperable.

First, it is likely that some **candidates will be shielding**, or otherwise unable to attend public exams as a result of the pandemic. A HEQA member writes:

*I think the Covid situation is so uncertain and with the highly transmissible new variant, the mixing of groups of students in an indoor environment in exam centres is one I would prefer my son to avoid, at least until my partner and I have had our vaccine.*

HEQA has learnt that at least one international exam board operating in the UK plans to change its regulations to allow remote invigilation this year. However, as described below, remote invigilation is not an appropriate alternative for all candidates.

Second, as the consultation document notes, it will be necessary to **find suitable venues**. (While this may be challenging, it is certainly easier than finding centres willing and able to assess grades.) For Autumn 2020, the government made it possible for schools to book additional space and invigilators; a similar approach may again be necessary this year.

Third, taking exams may involve **substantial costs**, both for exam boards and for candidates. (Again, it is likely that these costs will be lower than for centre-assessed grades.) Costs for candidates largely arise from the difficulty of finding exam centres. A [recent Guardian story](#) described how one home educator, Amanda Jordan,

*spent more than £2,000 travelling across the country to find an examination centre where her daughter could take her AS-level exams in the special autumn series arranged by the government, after the exam centre where she was originally registered said it could not accommodate her.*

Fourth, it is possible that there might be objections to exams for private candidates on the grounds of **perceived unfairness**, since exams have been cancelled for schoolchildren. There do not appear to be many such objections at present: as the Guardian story quoted above indicates, there is instead considerable sympathy among the public for those private candidates who missed out on opportunities for grades in 2020. It seems unlikely that attacking an evidently disadvantaged group will be a popular public position to take.

## Insuperable obstacles for assessment via exams

For a few home-educated candidates exam-based assessment is entirely unfeasible this year. In particular, for some candidates who cannot attend centres due to health concerns, remote invigilation is not a suitable alternative. A HEQA member writes:

*Additionally any sort of remote invigilation will not work for a substantial proportion of the candidates we work with, some of whom come from what the Government would label a*

*relatively deprived minority ethnic group, who have no access to laptops and ropey or non-existent internet. We did some Zoom mini-mocks last year and that couldn't work for that group and was very difficult for many others. There are a substantial number of home educated students who have a diagnosis of ASD, and the thought of being watched in any way is not going to work.*

For autumn exams, timing is also an insuperable obstacle, as described below.

## Additional considerations: summer exams

**Summer exams pose surmountable challenges, but are optimal for most**

As a HEQA member writes, following Government assurances that exams in 2021 would go ahead,

*many / most of us are planning / were planning for exams this summer and have continued to work towards those goals.*

With preparations underway, the opportunity to take exams as planned is, for many, the least disruptive option.

There are other advantages to running exams as normal: for example, existing mechanisms, such as exam board moderation and appeals, will be available, and exam officers are familiar with the requirements. A HEQA member writes:

*I asked [an exam officer at a secondary school] which of the options she thought exam officers would most prefer and therefore be more likely to accept private candidates for, and she said running regular exams would be by far the easiest as they know what they are doing there.*

However, there are also some challenges.

First, **entry deadlines are rapidly approaching**, and some deadlines (e.g. for ordering modified papers) have already passed. [Simon Lebus's blog post about the consultation](#) says

*We expect to publish the next steps by the end of February*

If exams go ahead for private candidates it is likely that entry deadlines will need to be adjusted.

Second, the **challenge of determining grade boundaries** for small cohorts (previously [seen in Autumn 2020](#)) would arise again, possibly introducing limitations on inter-year grade comparability.

## Additional considerations: mini-exams

**Mini-exams offer few advantages, but may be workable**

The mini-exams proposed in the consultation offer several advantages for schoolchildren: they can be used as one component of a multifaceted assessment, and they support examining only a

reduced part of the syllabus where teaching has been disrupted. These advantages do not apply to most home-educated candidates, for whom mini-exams offer no substantive advantages over a regular summer series besides a superficial similarity to the assessment proposed for schools.

The principal limitation of mini-exams is that **they are designed as tools for teachers to use**. The consultation document describes them as

*a set of papers, which teachers use with their students as part of their assessment.*

Using these papers to assess independent learners without teacher guidance is unlikely to produce reliable results. Teachers will receive guidance and training to assess their own pupils using these papers; it is **not feasible for home-educating families to be equally prepared**.

Many **home educators rely heavily on past papers for exam preparation**; this approach will not be feasible if the papers used for assessment are structured in a different way to exam papers:

*I would be concerned that mini-exams could disadvantage private candidates whose preparations will be based on the format of past papers, and who would be faced by a novel format without benefit of briefing via school teachers on how it should be approached.*

## Additional considerations: autumn exams

<b>Autumn exams are a convenient addition, but do not support progression</b>
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The Government's aims, set out in the consultation document, are to ensure that all students

*... including those who are studying independently or who are home educated, will get a grade at the same time as other students, so they have an equal opportunity to progress.*

An autumn exam series would not accomplish this goal, since grades would not arrive in time to support progression to university or college.

However, some families would welcome an autumn series as a secondary option. A HEQA member writes:

*for my own family, I'd be very pleased if there was an Autumn option this time, as in some subjects we're behind schedule due to all the disruptions*

Experience in 2020 shows that it is possible to run an autumn series successfully. However, running exams outside of usual times is **disruptive for schools**. A HEQA member writes:

*I think being expected to run November exams for PCS has been terribly inconvenient for our centre (which is an International Boarding school)*

Furthermore, delaying assessment to the autumn is also **disruptive for candidates**. Two more HEQA members describe their experiences with autumn exams last year:

*People ended up having to defer their plans and put their lives on hold or they had to study for A levels alongside their GCSEs. It was a disaster*

*For us, having to keep exam-ready for a further five months is awful!*

## Reliability and comparability

**Intra-year comparability is unachievable; reliability & comparability could be signalled**

Reliability and comparability are related concepts.

**Reliability** is [defined](#) as "the extent to which a candidate would get the same test result if the testing procedure was repeated".

For example: If a candidate had taken a different paper, marked by a different examiner, would the result be the same?

**Comparability** is concerned with the extent to which grades awarded under different circumstances carry the same meaning.

For example: Is grade B in 2014 AQA English GCSE equivalent to grade B in 2018 OCR English GCSE?

Reliability of qualifications and consistency between comparable qualifications are Ofqual's [first statutory objectives](#) and, in normal circumstances, it is keen to promote them.

The Government's 2021 policy is not compatible with reliability or comparability. The Chief Regulator's letter plainly states that reliability will be compromised under teacher assessment:

*Without exams we will not achieve the same degree of reliability and validity as in normal years.*

and the consultation document says that teacher assessment will compromise comparability, too:

*The usual assurances of comparability between years, between individual students, between schools and colleges and between exam boards will not be possible.*

### Will private candidates' grades be reliable?

Reliability is a property of a single grade or assessment. Although school pupils' grades will be less reliable in 2021, private candidates' grades may still be reliable, if they are assessed by exams.

However, unless the two modes of assessment are distinguished, employers and universities will not know that private candidates' grades are reliable.

## Will private candidates' grades be comparable?

Comparability is a relationship between two or more grades or assessments. Since teacher assessment does not allow assurances of comparability, private candidates' grades will not be comparable with grades awarded by teacher assessment, regardless of how private candidates are assessed.

Private candidates' grades may retain comparability with grades awarded in other years, if private candidates are assessed by exams in 2021.

However, unless the two modes of assessment are distinguished, employers, universities and colleges will not know that private candidates' grades are comparable with grades awarded in other years.

## Two types of grade?

The consultation document, discussing the possibility of exams being run abroad, says:

*A dual system, whereby some students in other countries took GCSE, AS and A level exams, but students' grades in England were determined by teacher assessment, might give rise to concerns that there were 2 types of grades awarded –one based on a student's performance in exams and one based on teacher assessment.*

Whether or not it gives rise to concerns, it is clear that two modes of assessments will result in two types of grades. The pertinent question is whether the qualifications awarded will reflect or obscure the distinction.

At a recent meeting with an international exam board, HEQA learnt that the board is considering introducing a distinguishing mark on exam certificates to indicate whether grades were awarded through exams or through teacher assessments. The mark will allow employers and universities to determine which grades carry the usual guarantees of reliability and comparability. If Ofqual considers it valuable to indicate whether grades are reliable and comparable, it might consider adopting a similar system.