

Awarding bodies and home education

Notes on assessment in Summer 2021

[Home Educators' Qualifications Association](#), 16 February 2021

In January and February 2021, HEQA met with several awarding bodies to discuss the challenge of assessment for home-educated candidates following exam cancellation. This document sets out some constraints on possible solutions, collating information from those meetings, from published consultation responses, from experience in 2020, and from our members.

We are encouraged to find that awarding bodies share our goal of finding solutions that can accommodate all home-educated candidates. Reaching consensus about those solutions may be challenging, but we believe it is possible. This document sets out a path to consensus, first describing the shared [goal](#), then eliminating what is unworkable (the [hard constraints](#)), leaving room to explore the possibilities that remain (subject to the [soft constraints](#)) via a small set of [questions](#).

Goal: universal, reliable, simple assessment

HEQA and the boards share a common goal: helping the government to form **policy that will allow all home-educated candidates, regardless of circumstances, to access assessment**.

This is a challenging goal, because home educators' circumstances vary widely, and it is made more challenging by several additional requirements:

- the grades awarded should be as **reliable** as reasonably possible
- the approach should be **simple** and **appealing** to candidates, centres and the public
- the approach should **avoid damaging home educators' relationship with exam centres**

Hard constraints

The set of approaches under consideration for private candidates is broad: the Government has taken the admirable (if unusual) approach of consulting before policy is determined. However, the set of fully workable approaches is narrower: it is constrained by the expertise and resources available at exam boards and exam centres, by home educators' circumstances, by the deadlines associated with progression, and by Government policy around assessment in schools.

This section describes some hard constraints on possible solutions, with the aim of removing unworkable approaches from consideration.

Boards cannot invigilate

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| Exam boards cannot invigilate private candidate entries; centres can do so |
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As [OCR's consultation response](#) explains, exam boards do not have the capabilities to oversee papers taken by private candidates:

To enable private candidates to complete the papers set by exam boards independently of a registered examination centre [...] presents a number of challenges.

Any scenario in which private candidates are to complete the papers set by exam boards outside of usual examination centre arrangements, for example in their homes, would require a logistical capability of a scale and complexity that is beyond the capacity of current delivery arrangements.

In normal years, responsibility for invigilation of home educators' exams lies with exam centres, many hundreds of which accept entries from private candidates each year. Centres are often flexible and accommodating, accepting entries for sessions in which their own students are not sitting exams, and for boards not used for the centres' own candidates. For example, one HEQA member writes that a school agreed to take a private candidate:

for his Level 3 Applied Business Studies (AQA) in January. The school was not offering any January exams to its own students, publishing the same on its website, and was closed to all their students

and another member writes

my son sat WJEC GCSE Latin at Corelli College in Greenwich despite the school not using WJEC for other subjects and not offering Latin.

HEQA anticipates that such centres will be willing to accept and oversee private candidate entries again this year, provided that their responsibility is explicitly limited to invigilation, not assessment.

Centres cannot assess

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| Centres lack expertise and capacity to assess private candidate entries |
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As the quotes above suggest, many schools accept private candidate entries for subjects or qualifications that they do not teach. Another HEQA member writes:

My son was going to sit Edexcel GCSE maths last summer at a school that does AQA, and was also going to sit both Environmental Management IGCSE, and Physics IGCSE at the same school this summer [...] they don't teach Environmental Management at all and they do GCSE physics.

Another HEQA member suggests that it is unusual for entry to be restricted to subjects taught at the school:

Locally I am only aware of one school that only allows candidates sitting the same exams as the school [...] The others take private candidates for a range of subjects across several boards

The exam centres' flexibility is valuable to home educators, who are disproportionately likely to study less common subjects, but it has a clear consequence for assessment in 2021: many

centres that invigilate entries cannot assess those entries. A school that does not teach Latin can invigilate a Latin exam, but is not in a position to assess Latin entries.

Compounding these difficulties, the teaching unions strongly oppose giving schools general responsibility for private candidate assessment. The [NAHT's consultation response](#) says:

Where a private candidate does not have an existing relationship with a centre, to avoid last year's situation where they were unable to be awarded a grade, they should complete the papers set by exam boards and these should be marked by the exam boards.

The [ASCL's consultation response](#) takes a similar view:

It is important, therefore, that the exam boards are able to devise a process by which they can assess private candidates themselves

Giving schools the responsibility for marking private candidate papers is therefore not workable. Giving schools the responsibility for assessing portfolios of work from candidates with whom they have no existing relationship is clearly unworkable, too. Even without the additional difficulty of assessing subjects not taught at the school, assessment of unknown students based on wildly varying bodies of evidence is inherently unreliable.

Portfolios cannot be compulsory

Many home educators do not produce schoolwork and cannot be assessed via portfolios

In some cases — for example, where candidates are unable either to leave their homes or to access remote invigilation — assessment via portfolios of work may be the only workable option. *Permitting* assessment via portfolios where possible will avoid excluding such candidates. However, *requiring* portfolios would prevent some home-educators from accessing assessment.

HEQA's note [Assessment Options and Home Education](#) explains that many home educators do not have portfolios of work that can be used for assessment. For example, one 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.

More generally, home educators take many different approaches to learning. Where there is written work available it may take different forms in each family, and in many cases it is unlikely to be a suitable basis for external assessment.

Autumn exams cannot support progression

Delaying assessment until autumn delays progression to college or university

Many private candidates were excluded from assessment in Summer 2020. The autumn series made it possible for such candidates to take exams without waiting a full year, but did little to help progression. A HEQA member writes:

My 19 year old missed out on going to Bath uni last year when the exams were moved to the autumn

As the [Association of Colleges consultation response](#) says:

There should be no need for an autumn series if arrangements are made which include all candidates in the summer.

Grades cannot be made comparable

There are two options for assessing home-educated candidates: unworkable and incomparable

[OCR's consultation response](#) opposes a normal exam series for private candidates, saying

From a public confidence perspective, it would not be possible to achieve parity of standards – real and perceived – between the two differing routes to the award of grades.

The claim is indisputable: different assessment routes will clearly lead to different standards. Unfortunately, the disparity is also unavoidable: it is not possible to assess most home-educated candidates using the approach proposed for schools. Teacher assessment of home-educated candidates, even if possible, would not achieve parity of standards, since it relies on the existing relationship between teachers and pupils. Workable assessment for home-educated candidates is so different to teacher assessment that loss of comparability is inevitable.

More generally, although comparability is an important consideration in most years, it has been largely abandoned as impossible in 2021. The [consultation document](#) says:

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

Soft constraints

The hard constraints discussed above eliminate certain unworkable options. The options that remain are workable, but the soft constraints discussed in this section make some of them challenging. There are two key constraints: perceived fairness, and resource limitations.

Perceived fairness

Identical treatment of home-educated candidates is impossible; what will the public think?

Several awarding bodies are concerned about the public response if a different assessment route is available to private candidates. [OCR's consultation response](#) is especially strongly phrased:

It would be iniquitous to make the option of taking exams available to private candidates but to no one else.

HEQA does not share this view, and does not believe that the public shares it, either. For example, the [consultation response from Whole Education](#) (a group of around 40 schools with reservations about exams) says

We believe that, on balance, [a normal summer exam series] is the most appropriate approach for private candidates in 2021, at least in the core subjects.

Similarly, the [Independent Schools Religious Studies Association's consultation response](#) strongly agrees that exam boards should run a normal series for private candidates, but opposes other candidates being permitted to enter.

HEQA's discussions with CAIE provide further insight into the public view. Schools taking CAIE exams have, following pressure from parents, asked for exams in the UK to be replaced by teacher assessments, which they see as an easier option. These parents clearly see exams (which will go ahead in other countries) as a burden to be avoided, not an unfair advantage to be envied.

Awarding bodies may have a more enthusiastic view about exams than parents. However, adopting the view that exams are a burden is likely to attract public sympathy. Exams (or exam-like assessment) might be presented as follows: schoolchildren will enjoy the benefits of grades without the burden of exams, but private candidates will not escape so easily. Furthermore, exam boards will take on the burden of assessing private candidates in the only feasible way, avoiding a repeat of last year's disaster, and saving already-overworked teachers from additional obligations.

Resources

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| Small exam cohorts are challenging: they use up papers and pose difficulties for boundaries |
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HEQA's discussions with exam boards have revealed concerns about resources for private candidate assessment. One board considers the demands of running a dedicated exam series for private candidates to be prohibitive. There are three problems:

First, experience with the 2020 Autumn series shows that it is costly to set **grade boundaries for small cohorts**, since [the usual statistical methods cannot be used](#), and expert judgement must be applied instead.

Second, small cohorts **use up exam papers**, which are costly to produce.

Third, supporting teacher assessment in Summer 2021 is likely to place exam boards' resources under considerable strain, making it **difficult to find resources to simultaneously run an exam series**.

Open questions

After the constraints above are used to eliminate unworkable solutions, several questions remain.

Q: How reliable should results be?

Ensuring reliability of qualifications is one of [Ofqual's statutory objectives](#). However, even in normal years, a degree of unreliability is considered an acceptable price for keeping costs low. For example, there is a degree of variation in exam marking that could be eliminated by having several examiners mark each script, at a considerable increase in costs.

The alternative arrangements for private candidate assessment in 2021 involve a similar balance between costs and reliability. At the cheaper end, assigning grades randomly could be done with minimal overheads. At the more expensive end, a full exam series, similar to the Autumn 2020 series, could bring reliability for private candidate grades close to levels in normal years. The central challenge is to create as reliable a solution as possible within the resource constraints.

Q: What should be assessed?

The Government's plans for schools in Summer 2021 include papers produced by the exam boards for use by teachers in assessing their pupils. It is likely that teachers will have discretion, both whether to use the papers at all, and which topics to examine.

If these papers are to be used for private candidate assessment, who will select the questions? How will topics be selected? How will grade boundaries be determined?

One possibility is to allow centres to construct papers using a system such as Pearson's [examWizard](#), OCR's [examBuilder](#), AQA's [examPro](#) or WJEC's [Create a Paper](#). While centres are unable to assess candidates, a sufficiently simple system that constructs a paper from a candidate-supplied list of topics might be workable. Are exam boards equipped to mark ad-hoc papers constructed in this way, and to determine grade boundaries?

Another possibility is for exam boards to provide set papers that cover particular portions of each syllabus.

Q: Who can remotely invigilate?

If assessment involves invigilated tests, it is likely that remote invigilation will be needed for some candidates. Can exam centres support remote invigilation? Is a centrally-administered approach needed?