

Home-educated candidates in Summer 2021

[Home Educators' Qualifications Association](#)

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Background and scope

This document describes various challenges for exam-replacement assessment of home-educated children. Most of the document focuses on the particular difficulties of the 2021 summer series, but this section lists some more general issues that apply in any year.

Home-educated children's circumstances differ from schoolchildren's in several ways, with corresponding implications for assessment.

Circumstance: most home-educated children have no teachers for most subjects

Consequence: **assessment relying on teachers' judgment will not work for most**

Circumstance: study pace varies significantly: preparing a GCSE may take 6 months or 3 years

Consequence: **it is unreasonable to assume availability of evidence**

Circumstance: post-qualification applications are common, so grades are often vital

Consequence: **leniency in college/university admissions is not sufficient**

Circumstance: learning is largely unaffected by school closures

Consequence: **concerns about lack of teaching provision are largely inapplicable**

Private candidate numbers in 2021

Summary: there are more private candidates than 2020, but fewer are registered for exams

There are two ongoing trends in private candidate numbers. First, there is evidence that **the pandemic has caused private candidate numbers to rise**. The administrator of a Facebook group for UK home educators preparing for exams writes:

At the height of the Covid flood in August we were getting 300 plus members a week, a staggering number with year 10/11 children

Second, **private candidate exam registrations have fallen**, since the exam cancellation announcement came a long time before the deadline.

There are two reasons for the drop in registrations. First, candidates have been delaying exam entries due to uncertainty. Second, centres are unwilling to accept private candidates; they are reasonably concerned about being required to assess or expel those candidates, as in 2020.

Consequently, many private candidates are not yet associated with centres, and the private candidate exam entries made so far are not a reliable guide to the number of private candidates intending to take exams in 2021.

Exam centre availability

Summary: there are far fewer exam centres than 2020; centre access is a significant challenge

There are many reports of centres turning private candidates away, e.g.:

I was told this morning that my exam centre was not taking any more registrations until they knew more.

and:

We have written twice to our exam centre practically begging them to allow us to book for the summer exams [...] We are still awaiting their response and I can't say that I'm holding out much hope!

Any proposal that depends on candidates having an existing relationship with a centre will be unworkable for many home-educated children.

Which subjects should be available?

Summary: restrictions to core subjects will severely disadvantage private candidates

The Guardian [reports](#) (5th January 2021):

One of the options under consideration is holding exams in core subjects such as English, maths and possibly science at GCSE

However, such restrictions would disadvantage home-educated children. A HEQA member writes:

Home educators often only take the number of exams needed for their next steps, mostly due to the costs involved, and are more likely to choose the less common subjects as part of that. So for us, e.g. Astronomy is not a 'nice to have' 10th GCSE - it's the one that gets us into college or not.

Available statistics bear this out. For example, in Pearson's summer 2019 figures ([GCSE](#); [IGCSE](#)), in subjects with low entry numbers private candidates make up a higher proportion of entrants. For Physics and Biology, private candidates make up a tiny proportion of entrants:

High-entry subjects	Private entries	All entries	Private entry %
Physics GCSE	12	23244	0.05%
Biology IGCSE	468	15711	0.30%

but for Astronomy and Human Biology private candidates are a significant fraction of the whole:

Low-entry subjects	Private entries	All entries	Private entry %
Astronomy GCSE	53	1293	4.1%
Human Biology IGCSE	53	171	31.0%

Travel & costs

Summary: many private candidates need to travel to centres; costs are often prohibitive

Some HEQA members are concerned about the safety of in-person exams, both to candidates and to their family members. Others note that there are increased risks for private candidates:

Unlike a student attending a local school, in order to take exams private candidates often require multiple members of the family to travel considerable distances and stay overnight in hotels etc. This obviously increases the risks and things outside their control that could go wrong (such as hotels being closed), as well as the people in the family affected - so we can argue that "special considerations" should be widened outside of just the candidate's status.

Despite these risks, many home educators are strongly in favour of exams, and remain willing to travel considerable distances. Referring to International GCSEs, a member writes:

I agree with you that exams are the only fair system, and I would like exams to go ahead for private candidates. [...] I don't have any confidence in other methods of assessment. [...] I'd consider travelling to Belgium or France to do them there if we are allowed to, rather than defer again!

Another member raises the costs of traveling from Scotland to England for exams:

I wonder if I can bring up the many home educators in Scotland [...] We already have a much more limited number of exam centres but most of them seem to be shutting their doors to home educating families. Our big issue will be finding a centre willing to accept us [...] If the exams can go ahead, the cost of travel for two of our children to go to centres in England on so many different dates would likely be cost prohibitive.

Another member reports:

I also registered with 3A in Bristol although it's about 4 hours from where we live.

Exam fees are another source of financial worry. The shrinking number of exam centres willing to accept private candidates has led to large price rises. Worse, in 2020, only two UK exam centres were authorized to accept the many displaced private candidates; unsurprisingly, they charged fees that are out of reach of many families. A HEQA member writes of one of these two centres:

My daughter is already booked to take 3 GCSEs this summer. We intended to use no tutor support for these subjects. 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. If we didn't enter her until February, which seems likely as we may not know what is happening until then, it would come to £1150. That is a huge difference but for families following a typical school pattern, of taking 9 or more exams the summer of year 11, it could be far worse.

Several families report additional costs from engaging tutors, anticipating a CAG-like system being introduced again:

We are only using tutors for next year's exams and only to avoid all of this. I may need to employ tutors for this year's despite us not needing them.

Exam access arrangements

Summary: candidates are already encountering difficulties with access arrangements

Many home-educated children have special education needs or disabilities. Awarding bodies offer *Exam Access Arrangements (EAA)* such as modified papers to help such candidates access exams. In 2020 EAA were used to inform CAGs; they may also be needed by any exam replacement system this year. However, HEQA members report difficulties with EAA following exam cancellation:

Just had an update from my exam centre – the Exam Access Arrangements tests have now been postponed [...] the JCQ are asking assessors to not assess for EAA

If EAA are to be used, it is likely that deadline adjustments will be needed. A member writes:

Some of us as once again are faced with the dilemma of making blind entries for the summer now to fit in with the deadlines for modified papers and access arrangements which is the end of this month . There is no option of private candidates with access arrangements to make late entries once there's a clearer picture of what is going to happen

Autumn series

Summary: autumn exams, if needed, should not be limited to those with summer entries

In 2020 access to the special autumn exam series was mostly limited to those entered for summer exams. A similar policy this year would disadvantage many, since many private candidates have been unable to make exam entries. A member writes:

Our centre stopped taking registrations for non-international exams on Tuesday, after the announcement, so this would be a disaster for my A-levels-sitting daughter.

More broadly, the 2020 autumn exam series was largely inadequate as a mitigation for the damage done to home-educated children's prospects by the summer 2020 exam cancellations, since the results were not available in time to allow progression.

Appendix: letters from exam centres (January 2021)

As I am sure you are aware, the Government announced on 6 January 2021 that the Summer series of GCSE and A Level examinations have been cancelled. Therefore, we will be withdrawing all examination entries made for private candidates through the Connie Rothman Learning Centre.

Unfortunately, we cannot offer assessed grades to any private candidates.

As you already know, the Education Secretary explained yesterday that for students in schools, their grades will be determined by a predicted grade from their teacher. Regarding external candidates the situation has not been confirmed. However, if we go by what happened last summer, when the exams were cancelled, we were able to submit a predicted grade for those external candidates, whose tutors were suitably qualified and had strong evidence to support their predicted grades. For this summer, I am advising all private candidates, that if they are not in the position of providing us with a robust predicted grade from a qualified tutor, there is no point in being entered for these exams this summer.

Regrettably we are not in a position now to accept applications from private candidates for exams this Summer in light of the Secretary of State for Education's announcement in Parliament on the 6th January 2021 regarding the cancellation of exams.

The GCSE and A level exams are cancelled in Summer 2021 and some form of teacher assessment will be used to award grades. As a centre we do not have the capacity (and certain subject expertise) to review external candidates work and provide a teacher assessed grade. Therefore we are sorry to have to tell you that we will not be able to proceed with xxxxxxx's current entries with us. We will refund any payment you have made for xxxxxxx's GCSE exams. Please reply with your sort code and account number and we will make the arrangements with finance.