

The Impact of The Pandemic on Requests for Access Arrangements

The COVID pandemic disrupted education in the UK from March 2020 with long periods of home learning during lockdowns, two years of cancelled public examinations and high levels of staff and student absence that continued disruption into 2022. The NHS reported an acute rise in the number of students experiencing mental health challenges during this time, with much of the increase being attributed to the circumstances created by the pandemic.

In the early weeks of 2022, Communicate-ed discussed with members of Ofqual's general qualifications directorate, anecdotal reports of schools and colleges receiving more requests for access arrangements/reasonable adjustments. **(Please see Appendix 1 for more information about access arrangements/reasonable adjustments.)** To facilitate more understanding by all parties about this potential rise in requests, Communicate-ed conducted a survey of its substantial membership and subscribers, comprising staff in state secondary and independent schools and also some independent consultants. The aim was to assess what impact the pandemic may have had on Access Arrangement and Reasonable Adjustment requests, taking into account the fact that schools and colleges need to consider their obligations to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students under the Equality Act 2010.

146 detailed responses were received, 84.5% of which reported an increase in demand for access arrangements and reasonable adjustments compared to previous years. The average level of reported increase was about a 30% rise in the number of referrals for assessment for access arrangements. Some of the highest reported increases were in sixth form and FE settings where students sitting A level or equivalent were still yet to have taken a public exam, and where many are re-sitting GCSEs. Many respondents mentioned a significant increase in parent requests for access arrangements (as well as increased student and teacher requests).

When asked which arrangements are more in demand now, there was a very high level of consistency in answers, naming four main arrangements:

Separate Invigilation (separate room)

Extra Time

Word Processor

Supervised Rest Breaks

(Readers - and read aloud - were also mentioned, as were scribes, but to a lesser degree.)

Over half of respondents felt that their centre would not have capacity to accommodate all the requests received for access arrangements in 2022. Many expressed being overwhelmed by the time needed to process the number of access arrangement requests

received, as well as the time needed for the administration of these during exams, on top of already busy roles.

So, what are the possible causes of this demand, what specific issues are raised in centres (other than the all-pervasive one of staff time), and what suggestions – many coming from feedback in the survey - can we offer to help those dealing with these? (It should be added that there would seem to be no 'quick-fix' solutions.)

Separate Invigilation

Causes?

It was widely felt that the increase in generalised anxiety and other mental health conditions, including ADHD and Tic disorders, accounted for the increase in demand for separate invigilation. Most respondents attributed this to the pandemic and reduced face to face input at school. It was acknowledged that students hadn't had much experience of working in the context of a large group of peers for much of the last 2 years, and many had never sat a public exam.

Issues for Centres

- **Space/Rooms.** A majority of respondents cited a lack of space and separate rooms to accommodate all separate invigilation requests.
- **Staffing.** It was widely acknowledged that the requested arrangements require more invigilators, and respondents were concerned they had insufficient staffing to meet the need.

Suggestions

- Some centres are using classrooms to accommodate 10 or so students who have requested separate invigilation, including a couple with readers or scribes, where the background noise level can remain at a low level (often preferable for those anxious students who don't like silence).
- With the above in mind, one centre has stopped using the term 'separate invigilation' on the basis that this implies a separate room and invigilator for each student. Instead, they refer to 'sitting the exam outside of the main hall'.
- Where a candidate really does need to be in a room on their own and needs the help of a reader or scribe, the reader/scribe can also be the invigilator (if trained in both), so only one exam helper will be required.
- Because of the lack of recent experience of taking exams, many centres are finding that spending more time preparing students for the exam experience is worthwhile. Ideas include using the main exam hall for some shorter internal tests that might previously have taken place in the classroom, allowing the most vulnerable students to choose where they are seated in the hall. Also, anxiety may be reduced if students with access arrangements can meet separately before the exam in a calm space, entering the hall just before the exam start time, when everyone else is seated and settled.

Training and recruitment of more Invigilators.

- The Exams Office (www.theexamsoffice.org) offer Invigilator training on the 'Instructions for Conducting Examinations' booklet for member centres.
- Communicate-ed (www.communicate-ed.org.uk) offer online training for invigilators and also training for adult helpers in exams (readers, scribes etc).
- The Exams Office have developed this Invigilator recruitment map to enable centres to advertise their invigilator vacancies at no cost.

Better preparation of candidates who have little or no experience of public exams.

- The Exams Office have shared this Instructions for Candidates resource to support centres in preparing their candidates for examinations
- Communicate-ed have produced Guidelines for Candidates and their parents about access arrangements, and the evidence required to put them in place.

Extra Time

Causes?

Respondents acknowledged there were probably several different factors driving the increase in demand for extra time. Many suggested that during lockdowns, parents witnessed their children struggling with learning for the first time, leading them to seek a diagnosis of difficulty or extra time.

Some felt that a lack of exam experience means students are not used to the timing requirements of exams, and that a lack of handwritten work over the last two years has impacted speed of handwriting. Both of these factors have caused students to incorrectly believe they were eligible for extra time, when in fact there was no assessed evidence of need.

Some staff acknowledged that the pressures of the COVID situation, allied with a fear of grades dropping, may have caused colleagues to look to extra time as a solution. Several respondents reported that parents often feel that if their child has a diagnosis for anything, they should be entitled to extra time.

In Further Education, it was noted that some students with weaker literacy skills have been accepted onto courses where they may not have been previously. This may be due to them never having taken a formal examination or because of more available places on some courses, leading to reader and extra time requests when students are unable to work at the level of the course.

Issues for Centres

- This increase in external requests for extra time has led to more requests for extra time for students who are not actually eligible for it. This presents issues around communication with parents and authors of independent reports.
- In Further Education, for students with learning difficulties, the increased rigour requiring two low scores (on Part 2 of Form 8 for new qualifications such as A level GCE and Level 3 BTEC) means there has been a need to reassess students who previously were allowed extra time but only had a low standardised score for one area of processing. (For GCSE re-sits, an existing Form 8 can roll forward where there is just one below average standardised score). This, together with the fact that some

secondary schools missed assessing students at GCSE as there were no public exams in 2020 and 2021 (in spite of JCQ advice to the contrary), has contributed to a considerable rise in assessment numbers for FE centres this year.

Suggestions

- Communicate-ed have made a short video [Helping candidates to use their extra time in examinations](#) available free. This is also relevant to the general timing of exams, especially those requiring extended writing.
- Staff training [Extra time in examinations](#) – how to assess the need
- Messaging to parents about AAs and the JCQ requirements before Exam season. Communicate-ed have produced [Guidelines for Candidates](#) and their parents about access arrangements, and the evidence required to put them in place.

Word Processors

Causes?

This increase in demand for using a word processor in exams was attributed to the fact that many students and parents feel this has been the normal way of working (NWOW) for much of the last two years, so students should be entitled to it in exams. There was also a sense that handwriting has become slower or poorer where not used as much.

Issues for Centres

- **Resources.** A lot of respondents suggested they simply didn't have enough laptops to accommodate all the word processor requests.

Suggestions

- Of course, increased funding for laptops in schools would have a positive impact on this issue.
- However, in the shorter term, perhaps IT departments could be persuaded to re-timetable activities during the exam period to accommodate those needing word processors in an IT suite – sometimes housing up to 30 desktop computers. Priority could be given in this to exams requiring extended writing e.g. English, History, Geography.

*NB: Interestingly, one respondent reported that the increase noted in their centre in students wanting to use word processors had now gone **down** again; several students trialled it as their NWOW and then chose to go back to writing by hand.*

Supervised Rest Breaks

Causes?

The increase in demand for supervised rest breaks was again attributed to the marked rise in anxiety and other mental health conditions. Many people reported an increase in the

diagnosis and self-diagnosis of ADHD among students. A lot of respondents commented that students haven't been used to working and focussing for long periods of time over the pandemic, often taking regular breaks at home, leading to problems with sustaining focus and attention. While the pandemic will also have played a part in this, it was acknowledged that the wide spread use of mobile phones, computer games and social media may also be contributing long-term factors.

Issues for Centres

- Staffing to support the arrangement
- Correctly timing the end of examinations when many candidates are taking supervised rest breaks at different times
- An understanding of the difference between, and appropriateness of, supervised rest breaks and extra time

Suggestions

Staff training

- Communicate-ed (www.communicate-ed.org.uk) offers online training for adult helpers in exams (including supporting rest breaks).
- Online training for teachers and support staff in Supporting students with mental health issues during exams (please email online@communicate-ed.org.uk for a 50% discount code)

Parental/Candidate Understanding

Alongside these Access Arrangement-specific issues, there was an often-repeated thread in answer to why there has been an increase in demand for access arrangements. This centred upon parental and candidate understanding of how the Access Arrangement regulations and processes work.

- An increase in private diagnostic assessments/reports for mental health and other conditions, and self-diagnosis of some disorders (ADHD, tic disorders and hypermobility were all mentioned several times). Respondents reported assumptions from parents and report-issuers that these will lead to access arrangements even though appropriate JCQ evidence may not be there. The cost in terms of time and emotional energy of disagreement with parents is significant.
- As mentioned under extra time, parents have been more involved/present with their children's learning and, having picked up on difficulties for the first time, are now asking for assessment and help.

Suggestions

In response to this we have wondered whether better external messaging to parents about access arrangements and reasonable adjustments could help their understanding and reduce the burden on school teams having to repeatedly communicate the same things. This could perhaps take the form of an annual open evening to present a synopsis of the approach taken by the school, supported by a written document sent to parents covering

the main issues e.g. the requirement that any external assessor have an existing relationship with the centre for their report to be used as formal evidence for an AA.

The following documents could be of help to centres in doing this:

- PATOSS (www.patoss-dyslexia.org) have provided this free online course: Understanding exam access arrangements-a guide for parents
- Communicate-ed have produced Guidelines for Candidates and their parents about access arrangements, and the evidence required to put them in place.

Additional resource:

- Lorraine Lee Training offers a course Rebuilding skills after lockdown (secondary) for parents

Appendix 1

Access arrangements are pre-examination adjustments for candidates based on evidence of need and normal way of working. This includes arrangements such as readers for those who have difficulty with reading by themselves, or extra time for those who work very slowly. Access arrangements can also be provided for students who are injured or ill at the time of the assessment – for example, a scribe for students with a broken arm, or rest breaks for students who will tire because of illness.

Reasonable adjustments are the adjustments disabled candidates require to take exams to avoid substantial disadvantage. Schools and colleges are under a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to provide them. The reasonable adjustment may be found in the list of access arrangements outlined by the Joint Council for qualifications, or may be unique to the disabled person. More guidance about reasonable adjustments from the Equality and Human Rights Commission can be found at: [EHRC Reasonable Adjustments](#)

Under the Equality Act a person has a disability if he or she has a physical or mental impairment that has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. ‘Physical or mental impairment’ includes sensory impairments such as those affecting sight or hearing. Further guidance on the definition of disability is available in the Appendix to the [Statutory Code of Practice](#)

Not everyone who requests ‘access arrangements’ will meet the definition of disability under the Act and therefore be entitled to reasonable adjustments. Schools and colleges need to distinguish between reasonable adjustments required under the Equality Act and discretionary access arrangements. Some difficulties may appear similar but have different causes and therefore different entitlements.

Example

A scribe could be either a reasonable adjustment or an access arrangement. So, if a student has a disability that means they cannot write independently because of their disability, then the use of a scribe is a **reasonable adjustment** to which they are entitled under the Equality Act. But if a student broke their arm the week before the exam and needed a scribe, that would be an **access arrangement**. Although both arrangements might be referred to by the centre as an access arrangement, but the former is a legal entitlement, whereas the latter is not.