Practitioner views on current and future access arrangements

Research and Innovation

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Executive summary

A recent increase in the number of access arrangement requests for GCSE, AS and A-level exams (Ofqual, 2022) has prompted an investigation into what is working well in the current system and what may need reforming in the future. The current study sought to gain insights into the attitudes and concerns of special educational needs coordinators and exams officers via interviews and focus groups.

Three main themes were generated from a reflexive thematic analysis of the data: patterns in access arrangements, factors affecting access arrangements, and accessibility of on-screen assessment. Participants highlighted the following:

- an increase in access arrangement requests for students with social, emotional and mental health needs

- inequality in terms of access to resources, both at the student and the school level

- issues arising from the influence that parents can exert, exacerbated by a lack of awareness among parents and professionals as to the breadth of access arrangements available

- potential benefits of on-screen exams include greater independence for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); however, new accessibility issues may arise with the integration of technology into assessment.

A key message that arose from all the interviews and focus groups was that the needs of a student are unique to the individual, and access arrangements cannot be based on diagnosis alone. Rather, the focus must be on the support that each student needs to overcome the impact of their condition.

With a move towards greater digital assessment, ensuring adequate access and preparation for all learners must be paramount. It is crucial that the challenges that digital screens and accompanying functionality may bring for learners with SEND are considered alongside the benefits of integrated accessibility features.

Introduction

In England, it is a legal requirement to ensure all groups of students have equitable access to assessment (Equality Act, 2010). An adjustment that makes an exam more equitable for a student is referred to as an access arrangement. Access arrangements are outlined by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ, 2022) and vary depending on the needs of the student; examples include extra time, rest breaks,

modified papers and using a communication professional such as a British Sign Language interpreter. A 'one size fits all' approach to accessibility cannot be taken; access arrangements should be tailored to the needs of the individual student (Leveroy, 2013). While two students may have the same diagnosis, their support needs are likely to differ. However, the literature suggests that there may exist inequalities in terms of the access arrangements that students receive (Woolrich, 2017), and some groups of learners may currently be underserved by the system (Wood & Happé, 2020).

Within a school, the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and the exams officer undertake the majority of the work to ensure that students have equitable access to assessment. A SENCo is responsible for documenting the needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and applying for access arrangements. Exams officers make the practical arrangements for exams, such as ensuring there are enough rooms. Exams officers are also involved in organising access arrangements. For example, they play a key role in ordering large-print papers, ensuring rooms are accessible for students with physical disabilities and arranging extra time.

Data from Ofqual (2022) indicates an increase in the number of access arrangement requests for GCSE, AS and A-level exams, which may have been exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Communicate-ed, 2022). In light of this increase, it is more important than ever that we understand what is working well in the current system and what may need reforming in the future.

The landscape of assessment is changing, and the subject of on-screen exams (OSEs) has been gaining attention within the assessment community (Pickering, 2022). The proposed introduction of OSEs for high-stakes GCSE and A-level qualifications could eventually mean students taking all their exams on screen. Accessibility will need to be a key consideration when it comes to developing platforms for delivering these on-screen assessments (AlphaPlus, 2021).

The current study sought to gain insights into SENCos' and exams officers' attitudes and concerns regarding the current access arrangements system, as well as their views on changes that will be needed in the future, particularly in relation to OSEs. Such insights can help us to ensure accessibility considerations are embedded in OSEs from the outset.

Methods

A sample of SENCos and exams officers (n=17) were recruited from schools and colleges across England to take part in either face-to-face or online interviews or focus groups to discuss assessment accessibility in England. Due to logistical constraints, SENCos were interviewed one on one, while exams officers took part in focus groups. The question schedule, included in the appendix, was designed to explore participants' experiences of current access arrangements and evidence gathering, and to find out the extent to which current access arrangements fit the needs of their students. Participants were also asked about what they would like to see available for students in the future.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was then carried out to generate themes in the data.

Findings and discussion

Three main themes were generated from the analysis: patterns in access arrangements, factors affecting access arrangements, and accessibility of on-screen assessment. These themes, and their various subthemes, are explored in more detail below.

Patterns in access arrangements

SENCos and exams officers discussed the patterns they had identified in access arrangement requests over recent years, with many observing that these patterns were more notable since the pandemic. While these patterns chiefly relate to the volume of requests for access arrangements, others relate to the types of needs students have, issues with extra time, and the participants' interactions with parents and professionals involved in the care of students with SEND.

All participants were asked to describe their role and the needs of their students. While some patterns in access arrangements differ from school to school, some were recognised across the sample. Both SENCos and exams officers felt there had recently been a marked increase in requests for access arrangements.

> We've seen a big increase this last year out of Covid, but actually year on year it's been increasing gradually. (Exams Officer 2, Focus Group B)

Accordingly, data from Ofqual (2022) shows that the percentage of students receiving access arrangements increased by 14.4% between the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

Types of need

As well as an overall increase in requests for access arrangements, the SENCos and exams officers both highlighted that there had been a particular increase in requests relating to social, emotional and mental health needs.

> We've seen a huge increase in the number of students who are really struggling to cope in the mainstream hall for example and therefore … are using a smaller room or sometimes their own room because of the sensory overload or they['re] used to being able to do their exams at home, you know, during Covid I think it's stemmed from there. (SENCo, Interview G)

This pattern is also reflected in findings from Newlove-Delgado et al. (2022), which show that the rate of 16- to 19-year-olds with a probable mental health condition rose from 1 in 10 in 2017 to 1 in 4 in 2022. Some SENCos attributed the rise in social, emotional and mental health needs to the impact of the pandemic, while others talked about greater awareness of mental health in the student population and easier access to information.

> There has been an increase in the anxiety around exams. I don't know if that's a post-pandemic thing, it may well be but we've seen that. (SENCo, Interview D)

> I think it's just the way that they're much more articulate with their feelings, so they will name it anxiety before they've been diagnosed. So, I talk about a capital A anxiety and a little a, because their Tiktok feeds are full of people describing their anxiety, so they name themselves as having a capital A, but they're not actually diagnosed or doing anything to help improve them. (SENCo, Interview C)

While information may be easier for students to find due to platforms like Tiktok, it may not always be accurate. In a recent study of Tiktoks that contained hashtags implying they were informative resources about mental health, 83.4% contained misleading information. In the case of Tiktoks about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, all the videos contained some level of misleading information, making it a particular area of concern (Plushcare, 2022).

When discussing the needs of their students, SENCos commonly noted that each student's needs were unique, often requiring a custom package of access arrangements.

> I think the problem with it is it's trying to produce something that is suitable for everybody, but the problem with special education needs is they're so individualised that it can be really difficult. (SENCo, Interview F)

This view has also emerged in the literature, with many papers stressing the need for a tailored approach that addresses a student's individual needs, rather than applying access arrangements based solely on their diagnosis (Leveroy, 2013; Peacey & Peacey, 2007; Woods et al., 2019).

Extra time

The majority of SENCos and exams officers cited extra time as the most commonly requested access arrangement. This aligns with the Ofqual (2022) finding that 65.3% of approved access arrangement requests in 2021 to 2022 were for 25% extra time. As well as a general increase in requests for access arrangements, as discussed above, SENCos also noted that they have seen a considerable increase in requests for extra time.

> I've also got I think an increased number of students who are qualifying for extra time as well. So I don't know whether it's lost learning or lost processing or maybe Covid has highlighted the difficulties in learning because we have had like an influx of students who have been assessed by EPs [Educational Psychologists] or specialist assessor. (SENCo, Interview G)

There were concerns among the participants that extra time may not be the appropriate arrangement for some students; however, SENCos have felt external pressure to apply for it. This issue may stem, in part, from a lack of wider awareness regarding the range of access arrangements available to students. Issues raised by SENCos around extra time are often closely related to their interactions with parents, students and other professionals, and the influence these parties have on the arrangements that students end up receiving.

> I've had concerns about the parents and the pupils thinking extra time is the answer to any problem. And I get an awful lot of queries for extra time, going we need extra time, you know, this is happening, and it's not the right arrangement always. (SENCo, Interview D)

SENCos' interactions with professionals are discussed in more detail in the following subsection, and the role of parental influence is explored under the heading 'Factors affecting access arrangements'.

Several reasons were suggested as to why extra time may not be suitable for all students. For example, one SENCo (Interview E) commented that 'some students will run out of knowledge before they run out of time'. Another consideration is that extending the length of the exam is likely to increase students' anxiety or cause fatigue. Wood and Happé (2020) highlight that the length of exams can particularly impact students with autism.

> Parents tend to think that extra time is the answer to everything. It doesn't matter what your problem is. Some of the students will run out of knowledge before they run out of time, and we can say that to parents but they still feel that extra time is essential in order for them to perform well. (SENCo, Interview E)

> Often with SEN [special educational needs], extra time isn't going to make them know, it's not going to give them an unfair advantage in that way, but so many students get, more and more so anxiety is coming to the forefront of exams. (SENCo, Interview C)

> We get a lot of well they can have extra time, that seems to be a very generic thing that's used. Our children get incredibly tired very quickly. (SENCo, Interview F)

Concerns about the use of extra time have been raised in previous research; for example, findings from Duncan and Purcell (2020) highlight that without piloting a test to see how long it takes typically developing students to complete, it is difficult to assess whether providing extra time to certain students makes the test more equitable, or whether it gives those students an unfair advantage as all students would have benefited from extra time.

Interactions between SENCos and others involved in access arrangements process

SENCos have contact with many people, both within the school and externally, particularly when gathering evidence to support applications. Some participants reported that they found this process to be relatively easy, while others reported that it can be time consuming, with difficulties stemming from interactions with teachers and parents who do not understand what evidence is needed.

Some of the SENCos reported that they themselves are able to conduct the relevant testing to evidence students' applications, or they have someone within the school who can do this; others rely on external testing. SENCos and exams officers mentioned being stretched in terms of time and resources, often working to tight deadlines or having large seasonal changes in workload. This sometimes impacts how 'hands on' their approach is.

> I am qualified to do access arrangements, but, quite frankly, the job is so busy that I've tended more to actually use external people to actually do the testing and I just do the admin side to process access arrangements. (SENCo, Interview E)

In a large study of 1,903 SENCos, Curran and Boddison (2021) found that over half of their respondents had teaching responsibilities on top of their work as a SENCo. Furthermore, many SENCos were undertaking other specialised roles in the school such as safeguarding officer or lead for learners with English as an additional language. This suggests that the experience of participants in our sample may be generalisable and that variation in resourcing and concerns about workload are widespread.

The SENCos in this study reported that they rarely interact with exam boards, and typically only do so when cases are complex. However, there was some discussion of the need for personal relationships when it comes to interacting with exam boards and other bodies involved in assessment. Some exams officers who took part in the focus groups mentioned that they had positive experiences when calling about complex cases.

> I think when you do ring up access arrangements specifically, they're always very helpful (Exams Officer 2, Focus Group B)

That said, a lack of personal contact and relationship building in the past led some participants to report negative experiences with some organisations.

> Exam boards are quite distanced from the SENCos and the exam officers, but as a SENCo I have to deal with this faceless entity of JCQ. (SENCo, Interview B)

> I did originally raise it in an email… and was waiting over six weeks, didn't hear anything, so yeah, that's why I ended up calling. (Exams Officer 1, Focus Group A)

SENCos also shared concerns about a lack of awareness among parents and professionals as to the range of access arrangements available.

> Psychiatrists, when it comes to exams are difficult, they only know about extra time, and they write 'extra time'. And the same for the parents, I think, they're not aware of the breadth of things that can be put in place. (SENCo, Interview B)

Findings from Curran and Boddison (2021) suggest that many SENCos are concerned that their colleagues do not fully understand what their role involves, and that many teachers and parents view them as an expert on all aspects of SEND. As a result, they turn to them for information about their student's condition and progress in school, which further increases the SENCo's workload. Findings from Wood and Happé (2020) suggest that access arrangements may be applied inconsistently and students with conditions such as autism may not be provided with some arrangements for which they are eligible, possibly due to a lack of awareness.

Factors affecting access arrangements

During the study, the SENCos and exams officers highlighted barriers that impact the support that students receive and factors that can influence or impact what arrangements are provided.

Availability of resources

Across the sample, SENCos and exams officers expressed concerns around fair and equal opportunity to obtaining access arrangements. This relates to how availability of resources varies between students, based on their socioeconomic background, and between schools, based on school type. The limited budgets of state schools, compared to independent schools, was seen to create inequalities and prevent some learners accessing the support needed to demonstrate their true abilities.

Some of the participants felt that independent schools may have access to specialist staff, such as onsite psychiatrists. As a result, independent schools would be able to produce the evidence of need fairly easily in contrast to state schools. This inequality in the education system was recognised by SENCos in both state and fee-paying schools; for example, one SENCo from an independent school (Interview C) commented that their 'peers in state schools are really struggling and it's not equal'. Correspondingly, Ofqual (2022) data shows a disparity between state and independent schools in terms of the percentage of students who have approved access arrangements, with 22.7% of state school students receiving 25% extra time compared with 35.8% of students from independent schools. Participants also had concerns around unequal access to resources at the student level, with one SENCo (Interview E) suggesting that 'parents can also afford to pay a psychiatrist outside of school for an assessment'.

There was a recognition among participants that independent schools have an advantage in terms of affordability of technology both in the classroom and in exams that could enable them to provide the right access arrangements to their students. The stark contrast between independent and state schools was viewed as a potential challenge for the JCQ.

> Youngsters [in independent schools] will be doing their lessons as a normal way of working on a laptop and the impact that they could then have on centres and probably subsequently how JCQ are going to deal with that. (SENCo, Interview H)

Both exams officers and SENCos reported that schools may face challenges in providing separate rooms for students to take their exams, due to lack of available rooms or invigilators.

> She can't have her own room, because, as a small college, we didn't have lots of spare rooms to put her in and that then needs another invigilator and it just, the knock-on effects. You've then got however many extra rooms that need to be staffed, we've got an invigilator shortage. (Exams officer, Focus Group B)

> We've got a whole bunch that think that they need to have single rooms for their child and we just can't offer it and yet they think that you're being discriminatory. (SENCo, Interview C)

Lack of adequate resourcing also emerged as a key theme in work by Vidal Rodeiro and Macinska (2022). Taking an international perspective, they found that resourcing issues relating to access arrangements commonly included not having enough space or staff to put students' access arrangements in place, challenges with funding the required testing or evidence gathering, and lack of technological resources.

The government has announced that between 2022 and 2025, £2.6 billion will be invested to improve the SEND and alternative provision system (Department for Education, 2023); this has the potential to address some of the inequalities seen in the system and/or elevate some of the issues raised about increasing workload. That said, findings from Curran and Boddison (2021) suggest that a prominent issue is the lack of time allocated for SENCos to do the work associated with their role, which is something that may not be addressed by the government's plans.

Provision of evidence of need

SENCos are required to submit evidence when applying for students to have any of the following (JCQ, 2022):

- extra time

- a scribe

- speech recognition technology

- word processors with grammar or spell checks on

- language modification

- human or computer readers.

Some of these applications must be supported with documentation from specialists and medical professionals (not a general practitioner), or test scores showing a significant impairment, while others need a SENCo to confirm that the access arrangement is the student's normal way of working in the classroom. Applications for the arrangements mentioned above are submitted through the Access arrangements online tool; all other access arrangements can be arranged within the school and do not need to be applied for (JCQ, 2022).

It is the SENCo's responsibility to keep records for students from Year 7 onwards, evidencing any difficulties that significantly impact the student's learning, including any differences seen in test scores.

> I will be tracking children from Year 7, so I know by the middle of Year 9 who I'm going to be testing. I do the teacher feedback, talk and then I now do a student questionnaire. (SENCo, Interview A)

The practitioners in this study raised how late requests can be problematic, as evidence can be difficult to gather when working to compressed timelines.

> I'll get so-and-so needs to have extra times in their exams. It's like well can you show me where you've given it to them in lessons, where they've had it in their mocks, I need more information, I need data. (SENCo, Interview H)

In Curran and Boddison's (2021) survey of SENCos, 71% reported that administrative tasks such as filling out forms took up the majority of their time. The SENCos who participated in the current study reported that they were generally satisfied with the application process for access arrangements. However, they raised concerns about maintaining rigorous paperwork, and highlighted that Form 8 is a lengthy

document that needs to be reviewed. This form comprises three parts and is used for submitting applications for access arrangements that require either evidence from specialists or test scores showing a student's impairment. Part 1 must be completed before a student is assessed, part 2 is completed by the assessor and part 3 is filled out by the SENCo after the student has been assessed (JCQ, 2022). Despite the collection of evidence being a lengthy process, SENCos acknowledged the importance of ensuring that the required evidence is in place to support the application.

> I don't find the process difficult. It is just a bit long but also informative … As a SENCo that's where most of my time is setting up the Form 8 ready for the assessments, making sure the evidence is inputted in there. (SENCo, Interview G)

Importance of clear guidelines

Most of the SENCos in the study expressed that they were satisfied with the JCQ regulations and felt that such clear guidelines facilitate their work and ensure the correct arrangements can be organised efficiently.

> Guidelines and regulations have tightened up, it's made my job much easier. It means we can have an access arrangements policy that clearly states we cannot accept reports that have been done without our knowledge and without our involvement… And the more information the assessor has the better, the better the quality of the report, the quicker we hit on the right access arrangements. (SENCo, Interview B)

SENCos mentioned referring to the JCQ guidelines regularly, as they provide a framework that ensures that access arrangements are made in a consistent and fair manner. They also expressed strong agreement with the stipulation that the student should be assessed by a professional approved by the school. The type of professional required is dependent on the kind of arrangement being requested and can include both private and NHS practitioners, which impacts the cost and timeliness of diagnosis. Assessments are not valid if they are carried out without the school's knowledge.

> JCQ arrangements state that if you have an EP [educational psychologist] report or a diagnostic report, it has to be carried out by somebody known to the school and it cannot be privately commissioned. I am in full agreement. (SENCo, Interview E)

Parental influence

Across the sample, SENCos highlighted that pressure from parents can make their job stressful. While parental influence is interwoven with other themes, it also emerged as a theme in its own right, with parents impacting every stage of the access arrangement process. Many of the SENCos had experience of parents putting pressure on them to apply for arrangements that may not be required, potentially giving an unfair advantage to some students. One SENCo (Interview C) expressed that 'parents are becoming more articulate and demanding of the rights of their child'.

> As we get closer and closer to the deadline of March, the panic in the parents seems to get worse and worse and they seem to be looking for every which way they can to give their child potentially an advantage in some cases. Some are totally valid, but the tricky ones are where there's a mental issue. (SENCo, Interview E)

SENCos emphasised that the guidance around socioemotional and mental health conditions lacks clarity on what parents and students can expect regarding access arrangements. Again, a disparity was highlighted in terms of the ease of evidencing a need for access arrangements between those with more affluent parents who can afford private care and those who rely on public services, which often have long wait times and can be hard to access.

> Tightening up over evidence required for access arrangements when a student has a mental issue, because it does seem easy to go and pay a psychiatrist to write a report. (SENCo, Interview E)

Increased parental advocacy and the ability to pay for private assessments was also noted by Woods et al. (2018), both as a potential reason for the increase in requests for access arrangements and also as a source of inequality in student outcomes.

While SENCos acknowledged the importance of taking on board the concerns of parents, they stressed that the responsibility to determine and request the appropriate access arrangements specifically lies with the SENCo.

> I don't give in to pressure of parents. Some parents seem to think that they can just ask for it and it will happen. It doesn't work like that. I am like the gatekeeper. (SENCo, Interview A)

Concerns around parents applying pressure to benefit their child have played out in the media for some time, with a particular focus on parents leveraging socioeconomic privilege to gain their children access to resources for which they may or may not be genuinely eligible (Woolrich, 2017). However, some suggest that the higher proportion of access arrangements allocated to students from higher-SES backgrounds may be due to better support and recognition of SEND conditions, rather than any attempt to play the system (Grierson, 2017).

Accessibility of OSEs

Awareness and expectations of OSEs

In England, OSEs may be high on the agenda for those who are involved in the design and production of assessments; however, among the wider education and assessment community, awareness of OSEs may be more limited. For example, one of the SENCos (Interview E) asked 'What do you mean by on-screen assessment?'. Recent data would suggest that only 60.8% of schools are currently embedding technology use in their classroom pedagogy and that the type and prevalence of technology usage differs widely between schools (Knight, 2022). It would appear there may also be some confusion between 'remote' assessment, with remote learning widely adopted by schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, and 'on-screen' assessment.

> So are you talking about assessments where a student is doing a public exam at home and being invigilated through Zoom? (SENCo, Interview E)

Participants also spoke about their apprehension relating to students' technological abilities that could make cheating and malpractice harder to police. Such concerns may have stemmed from a lack of available information about what OSEs would look like in practice.

> My fear would be that could they slightly get stuff implanted into computers, like tiny memory aids even, you know. (SENCo, Interview A)

In its report on the barriers to greater adoption of on-screen and online assessment in high-stakes exams, Ofqual (2020) highlighted potential new risks around security, cheating and malpractice. While much has already been done to address security concerns, it may be beneficial to reassure teachers and the general public about the security features in place, to improve public confidence.

Across the sample of participants, expectations of OSEs varied. Some felt the introduction of OSEs may help overcome some of the practical issues of paper-based exams, such as exam papers getting lost or

scaling issues in large-print papers; others expressed concerns about technology failing during the exam, potentially putting their students – particularly those with social, emotional and mental health needs – into crisis.

SENCos expressed that there would be a need for exam boards to provide reassurance as to the quality of on-screen products.

> We'd have to be absolutely certain that the quality of what we're getting from yourselves and the quality of what we've got on site means that we're providing absolute best that we can do. (SENCo, Interview F)

Several SENCos felt that OSEs would mirror how students work in the classroom and would allow them better access to exams.

> For some of them, because it's their normal way of working, that's how they're going to be able to be successful in their exams. (SENCo, Interview H)

However, in many cases, SENCos' expectations were guided by their current experiences of technology use in the classroom.

> It probably just changes the accessibility, because we have got some pupils who are really struggling with using screens in the classroom. And if they were made to do on-screen assessment I think they could be disadvantaged by it. (SENCo, Interview B)

When describing the perceived benefits of OSEs, a number of SENCos expected improved functionality, which may not be available as standard. Commonly, this included students' ability to change fonts, text size and colours, although other potential arrangements for certain groups of students were suggested.

> You've got that say the changing of the font, the colour of the screen perhaps, all that sort of thing is good. I don't know, can you build in rest breaks and that sort of thing as well. (SENCo, Interview D)

> Again, having touch typing opportunities for children to be able to respond in braille as well, so rather than them having to have a scribe we'll let them use their method of response. So, if they can write in braille please let them answer their questions in braille. (SENCo, Interview F)

Student independence

A recent Department for Education report (2022) found that one of the key benefits of introducing EdTech in schools and colleges was increased engagement and confidence for students with SEND; findings from the current study reflect this. Many SENCos were excited about the potential for OSEs to increase students' sense of independence; they felt that, in some cases, it would reduce the need for certain access arrangements.

> Being able to do online assessments that don't need to have that scribe or that reader, it does give them (student) independence not having to rely on an adult to help them with those parts of their exam. (SENCo, Interview H)

> That's really important to give them that confidence that they're going to go out into the real world and be able to do it themselves. So I think it's good. (SENCo, Interview D)

However, some SENCos were concerned that technology may not be an adequate replacement for human scribes and readers. As such, students who require these access arrangements may not benefit from the increased independence that OSEs could afford.

> We've tried in the past with the electronic scribes and the readers but pupils hated it (SENCo, Interview A)

Familiarity was raised as a potential issue for students, not only in terms of students' familiarity with the tools used in the exam, but also the comfort that familiarity can bring students during an assessment. SENCos drew on prior experience of digital readers and reader pens, noting that accents that are not familiar or local to the students can be distracting or difficult to understand.

> The audio side of things, a lot of our children are very used to for example a nice Liverpool accent. And so they might find it quite difficult if it's a different sounding voice with a different accent that they're not used to, they're not going to recognise it and it's not going to help them to feel calm in any way. I think we have to think very carefully about digital voice and what that is and what that means to us, particularly if you have no vision that is a very unique sound. (SENCo, Interview F)

While it may impede their independence, many students still prefer to use a human reader over a technology-based reader.

There were also concerns that some arrangements cannot be easily mapped onto a new digital medium.

> Depending on how you do an on-screen assessment, an equivalent isn't necessarily available. (SENCo, Interview B)

> Because technology doesn't come like an A4 sheet of paper, sometimes you can't be looking at the diagram when you're typing the answer and so forth because it's always split screen, so I don't think it's there yet, I don't think for some SEN users it's helpful. (SENCo, Interview C)

The impact of font size and scrolling has been explored by Lynch (2022), who noted that scrolling could disadvantage students during an OSE in several different ways; for example, the additional strain on memory, or the additional time navigating back to an item or stimuli when there is no fixed location for it on screen. There have also been concerns in the literature about the use of electronic readers, as some of them struggle with complex text, symbols and mathematical formulas (James & Trott, n.d.; Noble, 2014).

Reflection of current pedagogies

While the uptake and use of technology varies widely between schools (Knight, 2022; Ofqual, 2020), SENCos in the current study saw the move towards OSEs as a reflection of a general increase in technology usage, both inside and outside the classroom.

> We're very lucky we work in a school that can provide laptops, and we do provide laptops, so all our students have a device to work on and they're using them in the classroom and then we take them away for the exams and it doesn't seem quite right. (SENCo, Interview D)

> They go on to university and everything is on a laptop, so why wouldn't A-levels be on a laptop. (SENCo, Interview E)

> I don't have a problem because I tend to think using a laptop is a way of life and I'm surprised that more aren't on a laptop, because children are now using laptops daily. (SENCo, Interview E)

However, some participants felt that a move towards typing in assessments reflected a loss of skill when it comes to handwriting.

> Students aren't building up the fine motor skills to actually write so they're wanting to use the laptop. (SENCo, Interview C)

Additionally, the quality of students' work and the level to which they process information when using a computer was brought into question.

> We do have some pupils who, they have terrible handwriting, and they've struggled with the legibility of their handwriting, but when they type they just don't process the information in the same way. And when they type the quality of their writing isn't as good. (SENCo, Interview B)

Some research has suggested that students who type in class may not form as deep an understanding as those who write their notes by hand, although there was no evidence that this had an impact on students' recall of information in test conditions (Horbury & Edmonds, 2021). Additionally, Ihara et al. (2021) found that those who used pen and paper were in a better mood at the end of the task than those who did not. When it comes to students with SEND, some occupational therapists have voiced concerns about the lack of research to inform their practices and decisions as to whether they should be encouraging a student to handwrite or type while in school (Nightingale et al., 2022).

In the current study, moving away from handwriting was not universally seen as a negative.

> I know myself I hardly ever handwrite anything now. So why are we pushing that skill when actually we're only doing it for the sake of the exams, no other purpose. (SENCo, Interview D)

Previous research has suggested the possibility of mode effects between OSEs and paper-based exams (Fishbein et al., 2018; Lynch, 2022); however, little research has looked at the impact or mode effects on specific conditions or disabilities. When researching mode effects in assessments, there should be careful consideration of students with SEND as their behaviours and outcomes cannot be assumed to be the same as their typically developing peers.

Predicting the impact of OSEs

While discussing the future of access arrangements for assessment, many of the SENCos considered the potential impact that switching to on-screen assessment could have on their students. Some predicted a reduced need for certain access arrangements.

> I think there probably wouldn't be as much of a need for extra time, especially for those youngsters where their difficulty is to do with their speed of reading – because if they've got the computer reading for them, it kind of speeds things up a bit. (SENCo, Interview H)

However, others voiced concern about increased eye strain and screen fatigue, particularly for those with SEND.

> I would worry about the children that are visually impaired: if they were having to look at a screen all the time, it wouldn't be good for them. (SENCo, Interview A)

Use of digital screens is linked to an increased risk of eye strain, especially for those with pre-existing eye conditions, such as visual impairments. Recommended interventions for students using digital screens include ergonomic alterations, taking breaks, ensuring a proper lighting set-up and maintaining less than four hours of screen time a day (Ganne et al., 2021).

In terms of access arrangements for students with visual impairments, there were also concerns about layout and readability. In paper-based exams, enlarged or modified papers are available; these are produced in accordance with clear guidelines around layout, format and production quality (see Backhouse, 2022, for more details). There would need to be similar considerations in relation to on-screen assessment.

> Digitally it's even worse because there's so few lines of text on the screen. So at least if you've got an A3 sheet in front of you it's all on the one sheet, whereas on the page you're scrolling. So those are the type of things you've got to think about. So it's not as easy as just increasing font size. (SENCo, Interview F)

Students' familiarity with technology was typically viewed as an advantage in terms of a transition to OSEs; however, some SENCos were concerned that the line between work and play may not be as clear for students with SEND when it comes to using a computer.

> I suppose some children would probably quite enjoy it, and they might, but I don't know if they'd actually take it seriously enough. (SENCo, Interview A)

Exam boards are legally required to ensure that their assessments do not disproportionately disadvantage any particular group of students. As such, where students may be disadvantaged by an OSE, despite any reasonable adjustments, a paper-based alternative would likely be made available. However, such a concession would not address the SENCos' concerns about ensuring access arrangements are based on individual students' needs. Participants stressed that OSEs may not level the playing field for all and could instead introduce new, unforeseen hurdles for some students.

> For all of them to be able to access on-screen assessment? I think it might result in more access arrangements actually. (SENCo, Interview B)

Conclusions

In line with recent figures from Ofqual (2022), this study found that SENCos and exams officers have experienced an increase in requests for access arrangements. The study also highlights the logistical challenges that schools face as demand for access arrangements grows. The participating SENCos were generally content with their interactions with exam boards and felt the guidance available to them was useful. Robust guidelines were seen to help speed up the process of finding the right access arrangements for students, while also rebuffing some of the pressure applied by parents.

However, there were concerns around a lack of awareness among parents and other professionals as to the breadth of access arrangements available, and the allocation of extra time when it is not always the best fit for the student. Following the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, social, emotional, and mental health conditions also appear to be putting additional strain on the system; increased awareness of how to support these learners is needed. SENCos highlighted that the needs of a student are unique to the individual, and access arrangements cannot be based on diagnosis alone. Rather, the focus must be on what support a student needs to overcome the impact of their condition. Furthermore, with a move towards greater digital assessment, ensuring adequate access and preparation for all learners must be paramount. It is crucial that the challenges that digital screens and accompanying functionality may bring for learners with SEND are considered alongside the benefits of integrated accessibility features.

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Appendix

Interview schedule for SENCos

Introductions, context and consent

- Thanks for taking part

- I'm X, a researcher at AQA

- Background info about our study

- Explain structure of the interview

- Verbal consent and permission to record

Could you tell me a bit about your role in the school and the students you work with?

Part 1: Current access arrangements

What are the most frequent **access arrangements** you apply for, for the SEND pupils you work with?

Which conditions do your students tend to require arrangements for? E.g. Do you have learners with visual impairment, learners with hearing impairment, learners with specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia), learners on the autism spectrum?

How are you finding the process of applying for access arrangements?

How easy/difficult is it for you to gather the evidence to support the application?

To what extent are current arrangements fit for purpose?

What would you say are the main challenges of getting access arrangements in place?

Part 2: The future of accessibility in exams

What kind of access arrangements would you like to see in the **future**?

Feel free to refer to specific groups of learners: e.g. learners with visual impairment, learners with hearing impairment, learners with specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia), learners on the autism spectrum.

How do you see the role of AQA in helping shape this future?

What are your thoughts on **on-screen assessment** (OSA) in terms of accessibility?

What would be the benefits of having OSA for SEND pupils?

What would be the challenges of having OSA for SEND pupils?

What needs to take place for students to be able to fully access OSA? E.g. processes, equipment etc.

Wrap up

Is there anything you thought we might cover today that we have not discussed?

Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?