

Making assessment accessible for all

We want to ensure that every student has a fair and equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. This means putting accessibility front and centre – embedding it in our questions and papers during assessment design.

Our research, which has been guided by a recent [Ofqual consultation](#),¹ has focused initially on four groups of learners: those with visual impairment, those with hearing impairment, those with specific learning difficulties, and those on the autism spectrum.

Learners with visual impairment

These students are the highest attaining of all groups with special educational needs according to a 2021 [DfE review](#).² However, research indicates that they still experience a negative impact on academic achievement.

Challenges to address

- Lack of teacher knowledge about the range of access arrangements available.
- Non-standard exam papers may not be compatible with assistive technologies (eg magnification equipment).
- Difficulty in finding modified past papers for student exam preparation.

Building on evidence

- Raise teacher awareness about access arrangements through the provision of clear guidance from exam boards and the regulator.
- Ensure appropriate support to meet the needs of students with colour vision deficiency.

Learners with hearing impairment

Further research is needed to explore why students within this group often underperform at GCSE.

Challenges to address

- Difficulty in accessing proficient communication professionals (sign-language interpreters) in some regions.
- Many students have additional learning requirements.
- Recognising that students with hearing impairment may also suffer from concentration or listening fatigue.

Building on evidence

- Continue to seek guidance from specialist organisations (eg BATOD³) to improve accessibility of exams.
- Integrate access considerations into planning for on-screen assessment, eg potential to embed BSL video clips.⁴

¹ [gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-designing-and-developing-accessible-assessments](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-designing-and-developing-accessible-assessments)

² [gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2021](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2021)

³ British Association of Teachers of the Deaf

⁴ doi.org/10.1002/pits.22326

Learners with specific learning difficulties

Dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties (SpLD) can be hard to definitively identify, and students' requirements can vary extensively.

Challenges to address

- Students often report a failure to connect various aspects of their condition when organising access arrangements, both in the classroom and in exams.
- Some classroom environments may be detrimental, distressing or distracting to students with SpLD, autism or other learning difficulties.

Building on evidence

- Avoid a 'one size fits all' approach.
- Include students in mainstream exams, where appropriate.
- Incorporate students' requirements into design of on-screen assessments to reduce need for future access arrangements.

Learners on the autism spectrum

We are continuing to explore issues that restrict access for this group of learners and to identify ways to help address low attainment.

Challenges to address

- Ambiguity and inferencing requirements in questions cause the most significant accessibility issues for learners on the autism spectrum.
- Disparity in access to qualified support professionals.

Building on evidence

- Conduct analysis to see where questions can be altered without reducing difficulty.
- Check phrasing, diagrams and pictures to ensure they are not ambiguous.
- Remove inference from questions where inference is not specifically tested.
- Ensure exam boards have sufficient autism expertise when reviewing papers.



Next steps

A potential move to on-screen assessment will have an impact on all these groups, bringing new opportunities alongside different challenges.

As we look to the future, we will listen to these groups of students, as well as teachers and special educational needs coordinators, to learn from their experiences and ensure that our assessments are as fair as possible.

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