

On-screen assessment: what are the challenges and opportunities?

The rise in online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated demand for reliable digital assessment.

Our research is exploring implications for high-stakes exams, gathering views and perspectives from students and teachers to help shape the future of on-screen assessment (OSA).

Exploring experiences and gathering feedback

During April and May 2022, AQA researchers gathered detailed feedback through surveys and focus groups with students and teachers participating in OSA pilots. These pilots involved Year 10 students (aged 14–15 years) taking assessments in GCSE English Language, GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Sciences.

Our sampling approach aimed to ensure the findings were as representative as possible. Schools were grouped into strata (1–5) from lowest to highest achieving and mapped to ensure geographical distribution. We also asked teachers to select students from a range of backgrounds.

As part of our research study, we held post-test focus groups with students and teachers to gain insight into:

- students' perspectives on taking an OSA
- teachers' perspectives about the experience of delivering OSAs.

Four key themes arising from this research were:

- **preparation**
- **fairness**
- **functionality**
- **infrastructure.**

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Preparation

Challenges/support required

- Students need time and practice to become confident digital users.
- Teachers need targeted support and guidance.

Opportunities/benefits

- Students and teachers are keen to be active participants alongside awarding bodies during the transition to OSA.
- Students found OSA, and typing in particular, more relevant than paper-based assessment.

Functionality

Challenges/support required

- Questions about whether new functionality in OSA could alter the nature of teaching and learning, for better or for worse.
- Awarding organisations need to develop new methods of assessment design for digital purposes.
- Specific challenges with transitioning maths from paper to digital.

Opportunities/benefits

- In English, the ability to highlight and annotate texts while responding to questions.
- In science, the potential for OSA to produce more engaging and interactive item types.
- Students no longer need to worry about losing marks due to illegible handwriting.

Fairness

Challenges/support required

- OSA may exacerbate existing social divides (eg in terms of internet access, familiarity with technology, device use).
- Concerns exist around whether the first cohort sitting digital exams will be disadvantaged.

Opportunities/benefits

- Students and teachers are excited to see how innovation could bring more interactive and accurate assessment of knowledge and skills.

Infrastructure

Challenges/support required

- School infrastructure is not currently suitable for high-stakes OSA, especially in schools with lower overall levels of technological resources.
- Government intervention and funding are needed to create a level playing field for all schools.

Opportunities/benefits

- England can learn from approaches taken by other countries¹ to continuously improve digital access; for example, through collaborating with policymakers, schools, academics and other stakeholders.

¹ Drawing particularly on experiences from Finland, New Zealand, Israel, Wales and Australia, as advanced OSA users.

While our findings highlight challenges to the implementation of large-scale OSA, there is the possibility to address these with the right support and investment. Our research in this area will continue, with a particular focus on perceptions of fairness across stakeholders.