Practical guidance for private candidates

New A-level sciences for teaching from September 2015

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The new A-levels in Biology, Chemistry and Physics are open to private candidates. However, as science is a practical subject, there are some key factors private candidates will need to consider to ensure they're not at a disadvantage.

Ofqual agreed with all the exam boards that every student taking an A-level in one of the three sciences must have carried out at least 12 required practical activities. Most of these activities require specialised equipment (such as potometers, burettes and oscilloscopes), so are not suitable for doing outside a school laboratory.

These practicals must also be assessed by a teacher who will endorse their skills as part of the overall assessment. This ensures students have covered a specified range of apparatus and techniques. The assessment criteria cover aspects such as applying investigative approaches and working safely with a range of equipment. Any student who has not received an endorsement (or fails to meet the criteria) is likely to have "not classified" recorded on their certificate. We're led to believe at least 70% of universities are planning on asking for a pass in the endorsement as part of their entry requirements for science subjects.

Within the written question papers, a minimum of 15% of marks will be on practical work and the necessary skills within them. Any private candidate who has not carried out these required practicals will therefore be at an immediate disadvantage.

Any private candidate who wishes to study for A-level Biology, Chemistry or Physics will have to find a school or college who are willing to carry out the required practicals and to assess them against the endorsement criteria. There is likely to be a considerable cost attached to this. Unfortunately, we do not keep lists of schools and colleges who are able to help, so would suggest that private candidates contact local schools and colleges directly to discuss their needs.