

HEQA submission to the [Home Education Inquiry](#)

6 November 2020

Introduction

The [Home Educators' Qualifications Association \(HEQA\)](#) is a recently-established UK organisation which provides a communication channel between home educators and organisations involved in exams such as awarding organisations, regulators and governments. Our members live in many different parts of the UK, and home educate their children for many different reasons: special educational needs, insufficient local authority provision, educational philosophy, etc.

We are writing in response to the question in the Call for Evidence, which asks "what improvements have been made to support home educators since the 2010-15 Education Committee published their [report on 'Support for Home Education' in 2012](#)". That report said:

It does not seem reasonable to us that home educators in some areas have such a struggle accessing examinations centres for their children. We recommend that the Government place a duty on every local authority to ensure access to local centres for home-educated young people to sit accredited public examinations.

As we describe below, exam provision for home educators has in several respects deteriorated markedly since 2012, and especially rapidly since March 2020. We first summarise the consequences of Government policy for home-educated children due to take exams in Summer 2020, and then detail some long-standing challenges, several of which have been heightened as a result of that policy.

Although our members have a range of views on the other aspects of the inquiry, HEQA's scope (and consequently the scope of our submission) is confined to exam issues.

Exams for home-educated children in Summer 2020

On 16 March 2020, Ofqual produced a 24-page paper, "[Contingency planning for Covid-19 – options and risks](#)", which presented various options for GCSE and A level assessment in 2020 and a detailed consideration of their risks. The paper contains no mention of home-educated children and other private candidates, and no mention of the risk that some of Ofqual's proposals would leave home-educated children without grades. (Other much smaller groups, such as the tiny number of students in Northern Ireland who take English GCSEs, are considered explicitly.)

Following Ofqual's advice, the Education Secretary [announced \(18 March 2020\) the cancellation of exams in Parliament](#), saying "We will work with the sector and Ofqual to ensure that children get the qualifications that they need." and promising "We will make sure that every child gets the proper recognition that they deserve."

However, the policy that emerged over the following weeks did not give every child the proper recognition that they deserved. In particular, many thousands of children learning outside of school, who were due to take exams in the summer, received no results at all. Although their education itself was generally disrupted very little, they did not receive the estimated grades that were awarded to schoolchildren in lieu of exam results.

The direct effects of the policy were disastrous for many children, who lost college and university places as a result of being denied the opportunity to receive the grades they had worked for. However, the Government's policy has also had a number of indirect consequences, described below, which will have harmful effects for home-educated children in years to come.

Challenges for home-educated children taking exams

Taking exams currently involves a range of challenges for home-educated children. Some of these are outside the scope of this inquiry: for example, there are longstanding difficulties accessing the past papers that exam boards provide to schools to prepare their pupils for exams. However, several of the difficulties fall within the Department for Education's (and consequently the Committee's) remit.

Difficulties finding exam centres

Finding exam centres (typically schools) willing to accept exam entries from home-educated children has long been challenging.

In 2020 schools who had made provision for home-educated children to take exams were placed in a regrettable and unreasonable position: they were obliged by Ofqual either to attempt to estimate grades for those children — a difficult task, since they had no involvement with the children's teaching — or to withdraw their exam entries. As a result, many of those schools have decided not to accept entries from home-educated children in future. One member writes:

As far as I am aware there is nothing west of Exeter offering exams for home educators this year. I have even rung around lots of local providers who offer 19+ adult learning provision and none are taking younger candidates for Functional Skills exams or IGCSE/GCSE either.

Another member describes similar difficulties:

I pestered the schools which were suggested on the exam board websites as having accepted private candidates in the past, with emails, phone calls, and letters containing stamped addressed envelopes for replies, but only one school replied - it took them 4 months, and the reply was an apologetic no.

and suggests that local authorities

be obliged to provide regularly updated information about the nearest exam centres in their locality, even if there are none in their county. I feel this would be really valuable, as it can be so time consuming/impossible to get this information.

Access arrangements

Access arrangements are changes to examination conditions such as extra time, or the use of practical assistants, for candidates who have special educational needs. There are many such candidates among home-educated children — indeed, many parents choose to educate their children at home because local authority provision for their children's special educational needs is inadequate.

For example, one member writes:

[my child] is home schooled as the education system has already discriminated against him [...] He has a physical disability of his brain (a bit of it is missing) [...] And yet, despite being disabled, and because of it, he has not been able to access an education through the normal means.

To go with any one exam centre we face an uphill battle of the exams officers not understanding the JCQ guidance and rules, not knowing about such things as Form 8 and Normal Ways of Working. It is a nightmare. [...] This is discrimination as we have had to fund our education and special educational needs all the way through and now we are having to pay over the odds for his exams. [...] Now we can't afford to let him take an exam let alone get access to an exam to sit it. Discrimination, based on the fact that the education system already discriminated against him all the way through.

Finding exam centres able to cater to candidates who need access arrangements is challenging: not all are able to do so. Such centres typically charge more, with additional fees for assessments of need. Candidates taking exams at more than one centre, another common situation, must pay for these assessments separately at each centre.

The combination of a reduction in available exam centres following the 2020 exam-replacement policy, and the limited number of centres supporting access arrangements for home-educated children is a cause of particular difficulties. A member writes:

If it was difficult to find an exam centre before, it is much worse now since Covid. It took me ages to find a school that didn't cost an arm and a leg where my son could sit his exams. It's now closing its doors to private candidates. I now have to rely on a private centre which is double the price. He requires rest breaks and his own room [...] I have written to our LA so that they are aware of the discrimination that exists where a school can choose to take private candidates with no access arrangements whilst closing their doors to disabled candidates but unsurprisingly, they say there's nothing they can do.

High exam fees

The Committee's 2012 report made a number of observations about the high cost for home educators for taking exam fees. For example:

"Some witnesses cited costs of several hundred pounds, or more, for a suite of GCSEs alone."

It appears that fees have risen substantially since then. For example, one well-known exam centre catering to home educators charges £205 for a single English Language IGCSE (rising to £365 for late entries).

Costs for other exams can be significantly higher: for example, the NEC charges home educators £1500 per subject for Science A levels that include the practical certification required for admission to many universities; this price is for assessments only, and does not include any teaching.

The Government's 2020 exams policy has exacerbated this problem, in both the short and long terms. In the short term, Ofqual's system led schools to unilaterally withdraw the exam entries for home-educated candidates; it also provided a means for a few hundred of those candidates to transfer to two specially-designated exam centres. Predictably, those exam centres charged high prices: in some cases around £700 for assessing a single paper (i.e. a third of a single subject entry). In the longer term, the number of exam centres accepting entries from home-educated children has dropped significantly; it is inevitable that this drop in supply will lead to additional price rises.

These high fees are regrettable, because they obstruct access to public examinations, and consequently to many other opportunities in education and work. The Committee's 2012 report noted the same problem, and went on to recommend State funding:

[M]any home educators do contribute to the education system through their taxes, and yet still have to meet the costs of sitting public examinations. We do not consider this to

be fair, and therefore recommend that the costs of sitting public examinations be met by the State.

However, this recommendation was not adopted, and home-educators consequently generally have to meet these costs themselves.

One member suggests that a step towards addressing the problem would be a list of recommended charges; a similar list published by the Musician's Union seems to provide useful guidance to pupils and teachers.