



Exams During Covid-19:

Guidance for Higher Education
Providers supporting blind and
partially sighted students.

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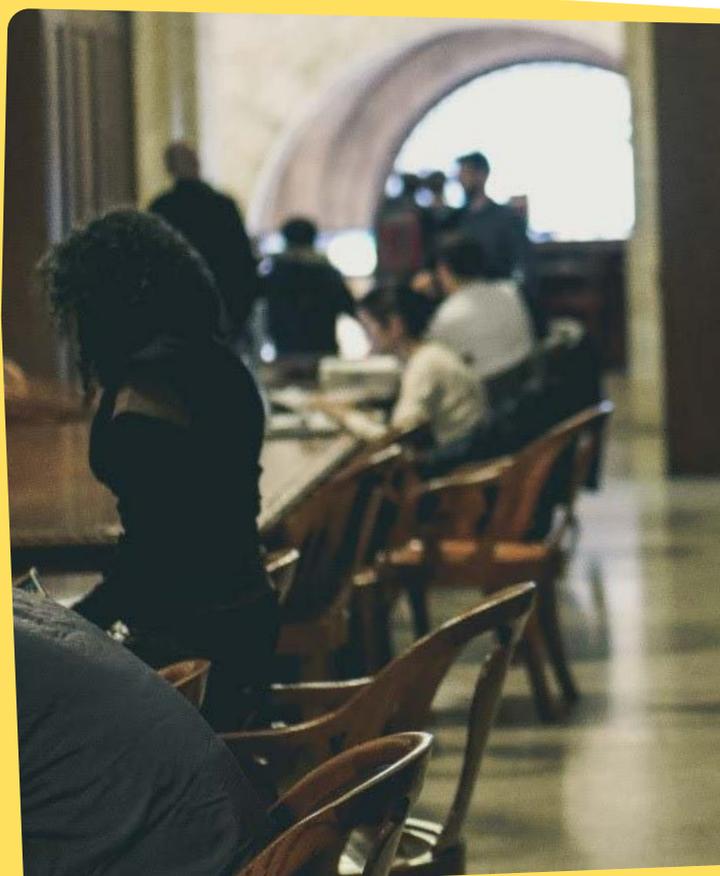
Exams During Covid-19:

Covid-19 has resulted in a sharp change to how we live, work and study. Higher Education providers (HEPs) have had to completely review how they deliver courses, including how students are assessed. This has created new challenges for supporting students with additional needs.

This guidance is designed to help staff supporting blind and partially sighted students to anticipate potential barriers, prepare necessary adjustments and to advise on the options available. It covers essential points, including:

- **Accessibility testing**
- **Academic support**
- **Regulatory bodies**
- **Proctored exams**
- **Addressing inaccessibility**
- **Supporting students through remote exams**

This work has been informed by a number of professionals working in the university and disability support sectors. We thank all those who have contributed for sharing their insight and expertise.



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Impact of switching to online exams

The traditional view of how an exam should be conducted has been challenged this year, as staff and academic institutions have had to adapt their practices. Proactiveness and flexibility should be encouraged and supported across the organisation, as new circumstances call for new approaches. Retaining focus on the core purpose of the assessment and the learning outcomes of the course can help revise expectations and adjust to a 'new normal'.

The use of online exam platforms has presented a variety of challenges for blind and partially sighted students. The most common include compatibility with assistive technology, additional eye strain, discomfort due to extended screen time and the replication of on-campus support. When switching to online exams, HEPs should consider:

How has accessibility been tested?

Any proposed exam platform should be tested for the specific exam style (i.e. multiple-choice questions, data entry, etc.) and the student's individual access needs. 'Accessible' does not always mean 'useable.' The ease of navigation for the student must be considered, especially if graphs or large data sets are used.

Students should be consulted as early as possible to ensure all their needs are considered. Testing and feeding back can be a lengthy process and should be completed on the student's behalf, to reduce the administrative burden and disruption to their studies.

Once fully tested the student should be offered time one-to-one to check that the platform is fully accessible. They should be allowed time to learn how to navigate the platform.



Accessibility Checklist

1. Are there sufficient options for adjusting the colours and contrast on-screen?
2. Does the platform offer screen magnification and in sufficient quality?
3. Is all of the text (including that in separate boxes or within diagrams) screen reader accessible and formatted correctly to enable easy navigation?
4. Question and answer format: where is the answer box in relation to the question? Is it easy to know which aligns with which?
5. Is there Alt text or audio description for all visual aids and pictorial representations such as graphs?
6. Overall navigation: will the whole exam be presented on one page? How do you navigate between the questions and any supplementary materials such as permitted reading, equations or data sets?

How appropriate are reasonable adjustments and other agreed support?

Any needs assessment and support plans agreed before the introduction of online exams will need to be adapted. It will need to reflect if the student is sitting their exams at a different location, if there is a new exam schedule, or if they are sitting a different style of assessment.



Accessibility Checklist

1. How will the support look different? Will this reduce its effectiveness?
2. Are there alternatives that fit better with this new way of working?
3. Is new equipment needed, such as a secondary screen? Particularly for open book exams.
4. What barriers are no longer an issue due to the move online?
5. What new barriers are there that need to be addressed?
6. Has the student been informed of the exam requirements and format, so they can suggest what support fits them best? Have they been provided an opportunity to trial new methods or exam formats, to understand their needs and preferences?

Professional awarding bodies and regulatory boards

For subjects such as Law and Medicine, the regulatory boards adjudicating the exams define what adaptations and adjustments a HEP can implement for their students.

Covid-19 has resulted in some regulators taking an active role in exam delivery. It is vital that HEPs work with regulatory bodies when designing accessible methods of assessment, to advocate for the student and communicate their needs.

TOP TIP:

Before suggesting solutions for approval, HEPs should request guidance from the regulatory body. They may have already addressed similar situations with other academic institutions and can share best practice. Having a discussion early, on what is possible can speed up and simplify the process and ensure the student gets the best outcome possible.

Proctored exams

Proctored exam platforms restrict the ability to switch between screens during the assessment or to run other software in parallel. This can prevent the student from accessing their assistive technology or permitted materials on-screen.

Some universities have excluded the use of proctored systems for this reason, though they are still used by some professional regulatory bodies. In these cases, alternative methods for completion should be explored, such as verbal submissions.



Potential solutions for inaccessibility

Occasionally, it will not be possible for exam platforms to be made accessible, due to technology and time limitations. When this occurs, other methods for completing the exam must be designed.

TOP TIP:

The student should be given final say on the suitability of solutions - it is important they are comfortable accessing every part of their exams. They may want to trial sitting the assessment for themselves in advance, to confirm that the platform and any agreed reasonable adjustments meet their accessibility needs.

Time-based adjustments

Many students have been offered extensions, deferrals or agreed leave as options to mitigate or avoid exam complications due to Covid-19. However, the student should be made aware of the possible impact of each of these decisions:

- **Extensions** of time given to sit exams, particularly when 24 or 48 hours, will mean that periods of rest in between are essential. Prolonged screen time can exacerbate a sight condition and cause eye strain.

- **Deferrals** can mean that students are faced with a later exam period consisting of assessments for multiple terms of study. There is likely to be an overlap of content as one module is still being revised/assessed while teaching has moved on to the next. Additionally, delaying their assessment(s) may impact their graduation date or uptake of placements.
- **Leave** can buy the student and HEP time, but potentially delays course progression. This is likely to have significant financial implications for the student.

Scribe, readers, amanuensis or other exam assistants

One-to-one help from an exam assistant may be offered to describe inaccessible screen displays and to enter data into the exam platform on behalf of the student. However, it is important to consider these points:

- Exam assistants must be booked by the student for the duration and time they intend to work on the exam paper. If the exam is to be sat over a 24 or 48-hour period, and with limited knowledge of the exam format, it may be difficult to judge when support may be needed and for how long. This also restricts the hours the student can work on the exam in comparison to their peers, as there is limited availability of support out-of-hours.
- Working as an exam assistant in person is very different to providing support online. They may need additional training on how to deliver remote support and the boundaries for what support is allowed.
- The assistant will need to be proficient in using the exam platform, which may require training.
- Both the student and assistant will require access to an invigilator during the exam to clarify queries, just as they would on campus. They should also be made aware of any back up support that is available, should difficulties or connectivity issues arise.
- If the student's preferred way of working is to use assistive technology and to work independently, they should be enabled to do this. For some students, relying on an exam assistant when they are not used to this support can cause significant stress and therefore should be the last resort.



On-campus and test centre exams

If deemed safe, the student may prefer to sit their exam at a test centre. However, the Equality Act (2010) section 92 (5) states a person with a disability should have equal access to the services a HEP provides or offers to provide. The additional health risk and anxiety caused by travelling, particularly for those reliant on public transport, means HEPs must also provide them an option to avoid these risks and to be assessed remotely like their peers.

Alternative assessments

If it is proving difficult to adapt the prescribed exam, an equivalent assessment should be designed for the student. In line with the Equality Act (2010) section 96 (8), the student should be judged against the same competency standards, but the method in which they demonstrate their abilities should be adjusted to minimise any disadvantage resulting from their disability. Focussing on the true purpose of the exam helps evaluate other methods for measuring abilities, reassess what must be controlled and ensure the new assessment is just as effective and reliable [2].

Examples of suitable alternative assessments may include coursework, verbal responses or a presentation.

Unified approach

Wherever possible, students should have one method agreed for all their exams. This will cut down on time spent testing, reviewing and adjusting to new processes. Additionally, there should be consistency across the HEP, with an acceptable standard of accessibility defined and a process applied to all assessment design. Defining this in advance can be helpful for anticipating barriers and to which to refer back when issues arise.

TOP TIP:

Avoid making assumptions about what students might need and discuss the matter with them directly. The student should meet with the exams officer and module lead (or other person designing the assessment) to discuss the requirements of the assessments and the alternative adjustments that could be made. They can then be fully informed and evaluate all options available to them.



Other considerations

Once the mode of assessment has been decided and accessibility has been ensured, the student can confidently start preparing for their exams. However, there will need to be further steps taken to ensure that the exam runs smoothly on the day.

Sufficient working set-up in the home environment

Students may rely on university facilities for the completion of online work, or have difficulty establishing a good working environment at home.

Students may need help getting equipment to their home address, especially if they are international students who are now studying at home.

They may require support to ensure they can sit their exams undisturbed, or to maintain sufficient internet connection. This will impact their ability to prepare for and complete their exams, so this should be addressed as early as possible.

Accessing remote support

The student should be made aware of who they can contact if they experience issues

during the exam, require IT support or have queries when navigating the platform. Messages sent through the exam platform or other online channel may not be accessible. Often pop-up notifications are undetectable for screen readers or are not visible due to screen magnification.

TOP TIP:

Students should be asked their preferred communication channels, so that all messages from support staff or invigilators can be communicated in a way that is accessible and prominent throughout the exam.

Further support

Do you have any further questions?

Do you have experience supporting blind and partially sighted students through this difficult time? If you are aware of barriers not covered here, or ideas that may help others looking for ways to address them, we would love to hear from you! –

studentsupport@pocklington-trust.org.uk

References Helpful resources for learning more about accessibility adjustments: **An article demonstrating the impact of visual adjustments:** <https://webdesign.tutsplus.com/articles/accessibility-basics-designing-for-visual-impairment--cms-27634?fbclid=IwAR0RiiZPV2JMZSsSMJMUTUSh3RCEflqXpvVNLa64N7TB74vZYypDF9bJzg>

The A11Y project, with a range of resources covering the laws and guidelines for accessibility and how to implement best practice: <https://www.a11yproject.com/>

For evidence and further information, please see the 'Understanding the interaction of competence standards and reasonable adjustments' document, available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/understanding-interaction-competence-standards-and-reasonable-adjustments



www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

