

Access Arrangements for GCSE and A Level in England: 2014/15 Academic Year

Additional report



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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Background	2
Access Arrangements Online.....	3
Data presentation.....	3
Completeness of data	4
Findings	4
Number of approved access arrangements by centre type	4
Types of access arrangements	5
Categories of access arrangement as a percentage of each centre type's total arrangements	7
Conclusion.....	8

Introduction

In November 2015 we published statistics¹ on numbers of access arrangements for GCSEs and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We reported that access arrangements in the 2014/15 academic year were up 5 per cent compared to 2013/14, and that the most frequently granted access arrangement was 25 per cent extra time.

In 2014, we asked exam boards to collect more detailed information on the number of access arrangements they grant. In October 2015, the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ), which is an umbrella organisation for the exam boards, provided us with additional data broken down by type of school² for the 2014/15 academic year.

We are often asked about the reasons for the increases in the number of access arrangements, and whether access arrangements are more common in certain types of school.

This report provides more detail about the volume and nature of access arrangements in certain types of schools in England. However, the data should be interpreted with caution, for the following reasons. We only have information on those schools that applied for access arrangements, and the school types are likely to overlap – for example, there may be independent schools that have a high proportion of disabled students or students with special educational needs, but they are not always classed as a special school. We also do not have data on the number of disabled students or those with special educational needs in each school.

Background

‘Access arrangements’ is a collective term used for provisions made for students to ensure that they are not unfairly disadvantaged when taking an assessment because of a disability, illness or injury. These are requested by schools and colleges from exam boards. Access arrangements can be given to students taking exams, controlled assessments or coursework and who meet the eligibility criteria. The exam boards, through their Centre Inspection Service, inspect schools and colleges to make sure access arrangements are properly applied for and used.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-arrangements-for-gcse-and-a-level-201415-academic-year>

² In this report we use the term ‘school’ to refer to any school or college undertaking the delivery of GCSEs or A levels.

Some access arrangements are ‘reasonable adjustments’³ that are made for disabled students. Disability is defined by the Equality Act 2010. Exam boards have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students who, because of their disability, would otherwise be at a substantial disadvantage when demonstrating their skills, knowledge and understanding in an assessment. Reasonable adjustments include arrangements such as providing modified question papers for students with visual impairments or extra time for students whose disability means it takes them longer to process information. Ofqual exercises its power⁴ to limit the type of reasonable adjustments that can be made for students taking GCSEs, AS and A levels and other qualifications taken for similar purposes.

Other access arrangements are provided to students who are not disabled but may have experienced a temporary illness or injury, or other unforeseen circumstance which will impact on their ability to undertake an assessment. Such arrangements can include the provision of a scribe (for example for a student who has broken their arm) or a reader (where a student might have a temporary visual impairment).

Access Arrangements Online

Access Arrangements Online is a centralised system, operated by the exam boards, that schools and colleges use to request access arrangements. It enables schools and colleges to make one central application for each student rather than applying to each exam board separately. The ability to extract detailed statistical information was not part of the scope for the original system design and therefore there are limitations in the data produced by the system.

Data presentation

The data included in this report cover all approved access arrangements that were granted for assessments taken at any time during the academic year 2014/15. This is different to the data published in our November 2015 Access Arrangements report, which shows approved arrangements applied for between 1 September 2014 and 26 June 2015. Applications made outside these dates, even if they were for the 2014/15 academic year, were not included in the figures in the November 2015 report. As a result, there will be differences in some of the figures in this report and the November 2015 report.

³ Condition G6 of our [General Conditions of Recognition](#) requires exam boards to have in place clear arrangements for making reasonable adjustments in relation to qualifications they make available, and to publish details of their arrangements for making reasonable adjustments.

⁴ LINK to our s96 specification

Completeness of data

The online system only collects information on those schools who have made an application for access arrangements. We have matched the data provided to us by JCQ with data from the Department for Education⁵ on school types. Due to differences between the two data sets, not all schools were matched successfully, and so a small number were excluded.

Where the number of schools is reported, it refers to the number of schools which have received approved access arrangements, and not to the overall number of schools in England.

Findings

Number of approved access arrangements by centre type

Table 1 shows the number of approved access arrangement requests, broken down by school type. For example, of the 4,485 schools and colleges that had access arrangements approved for the 2014/15 academic year, 35.1 per cent of them were academies, 15.6 per cent were independent schools and 9.3 per cent were special schools.

Table 1 also shows the total number of approved access arrangements broken down by school type, and the proportion of the total access arrangements broken down by school type. In general, the proportions of the total access arrangements are in line with the proportions of school types, but some are higher or lower. For example, 14.7 per cent of the schools with approved access arrangements were independent schools but only 10.4 per cent of access arrangements came from independent schools. Special schools make up 9.3 per cent of schools with approved access arrangements, yet they account for only 4 per cent of the total access arrangements.

There may be good reasons for these differences. We do not have access to the data on how many students in each of these schools were taking exams in the academic year 2014/15. Schools vary enormously in their size. It is likely that academies, colleges and maintained schools will, in general, have larger cohorts than independent schools and special schools. It is therefore difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the data.

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/edubase/home.xhtml>

Table 1: Total number of approved access arrangements by school type, academic year 2014/15

School/college type	No. of schools	% of all schools with approved access arrangements	Total no. of approved access arrangements	% of all access arrangements approved
Academies	1,573	35.1%	125,531	36.1%
Colleges	407	9.1%	57,071	16.4%
Free Schools	18	0.4%	796	0.2%
Independent schools	699	15.6%	36,339	10.4%
Local Authority maintained schools	1,343	29.9%	112,760	32.4%
Other types ⁶	27	0.6%	1,485	0.4%
Special schools	418	9.3%	13,996	4.0%
Total	4,485		347,978	

Types of access arrangements

Table 2 shows the different types of access arrangements granted during the 2014/15 academic year, broken down by school type. The most frequently granted access arrangement was the allowance of 25% extra time, for which 182,498 requests were approved (52.4 per cent of all access arrangements).

Academies, Local Authority maintained schools and colleges had the highest number of pupils granted 25% extra time. However, it is likely that they will have larger cohorts than other school types, and so may have more students who might be eligible for access arrangements. We only have data from the schools and colleges that had approved access arrangements and we do not know whether they are a representative sample of all schools and colleges.

⁶ 'Other types' are schools with a Department for Education establishment name of miscellaneous, offshore schools or special post-16 institution.

Table 2: The number of approved access arrangements, by category and centre type, academic year 2014/15

Centre type	25% extra time	Alternative accommodation	Bilingual dictionary with extra time up to 25%	Computer reader	Exam on coloured paper	Extra time > 25%	OLM ⁷	Other	Practical Assistant for practical paper	Practical Assistant for written paper	Reader	Scribe	SLI ⁸	Grand Total
Academies	62,152	896	1,916	1,881	3,242	1,505	616	178	339	309	35,356	17,140	1	125,531
Colleges	36,394	79	776	607	3,072	1,653	95	116	91	139	9,609	4,440		57,071
Free Schools	376	2			40	6	4		1	1	242	124		796
Independent schools	25,191	96	3,603	336	490	796	63	48	50	50	3,191	2,425		36,339
Local Authority maintained schools	51,830	1,245	2,081	1,876	2,908	1,101	706	135	223	225	33,833	16,595	2	112,760
Other types⁹	968	16	13	46	31	39	7	4	5	4	254	98		1,485
Special schools	5,587	164	1	266	133	290	284	40	88	123	3,820	3,200		13,996
Total	182,498	2,498	8,390	5,012	9,916	5,390	1,775	521	797	851	86,305	44,022	3	347,978

⁷ Oral language modifier.

⁸ Sign language interpreter.

⁹ 'Other types' are centres with a Department for Education establishment name of: miscellaneous, offshore schools, or special post-16 institution.

Categories of access arrangement as a percentage of each centre type's total arrangements

Table 3 shows approved access arrangements for the five most common categories, as a proportion of all arrangements approved for each centre type. For example, 49.5 per cent of the access arrangements granted to academies were for 25 per cent extra time.

While the figures in table 3 vary between school types, it is difficult to draw any conclusions without more information on the particular needs of the students in the different types of school. For example, special schools have a relatively low proportion of their access arrangements that are 25 per cent extra time, compared to other types of school. However, it is likely that the students in special schools will have a more diverse range of needs, and therefore there will be a greater proportion of other access arrangement used. Independent schools have a relatively high proportion of bilingual dictionaries with up to 25 per cent extra time. We do not know whether this is because they have a higher than usual proportion of students whose first language is not English.

Table 3: Five most common categories of access arrangements, as a percentage of total arrangements for each school type, academic year 2014/15

Centre type	25% extra time	Reader	Scribe	Exam on coloured paper	Bilingual dictionary with extra time up to 25%
Academies	49.5%	28.2%	13.7%	2.6%	1.5%
Colleges	63.8%	16.8%	7.8%	5.4%	1.4%
Free Schools	47.2%	30.4%	15.6%	5.0%	0.0%
Independent schools	69.3%	8.8%	6.7%	1.3%	9.9%
LA maintained schools	46.0%	30.0%	14.7%	2.6%	1.8%
Other types¹⁰	65.2%	17.1%	6.6%	2.1%	0.9%
Special schools	39.9%	27.3%	22.9%	1.0%	0.0%
Total	52.4%	24.8%	12.7%	2.8%	2.4%

¹⁰ 'Other types' are centres with a Department for Education establishment name of: miscellaneous, offshore schools, or special post-16 institution.

Conclusion

This is the first time that we have reported in more detail on access arrangements used by different types of school. We asked exam boards to provide more data so that we were able to respond to requests for more detailed information. However, it is clear that there are limitations to the data available to us. We will consider whether there is further information we could collect in future, to enable us to address some of the questions we have highlighted.

For example, we do not know the year group of the students for which applications are made. Access arrangements, once approved, are valid for up to 26 months (with the exception of arrangements granted for a temporary injury or impairment) and so schools will make applications at different times. In addition, it is difficult to establish how many students in total may have been taking exams in each school type, and who therefore are potentially eligible to apply for access arrangements in this academic year.

The Access Arrangements Online system was designed to simplify the process for schools and colleges applying for access arrangements from more than one exam board; it was not designed to provide detailed management information on those access arrangements. One of the main limitations of the data we have is that we do not have information on the special education needs of the students in the different school types. As a result we cannot draw any conclusions from the data we currently have about whether the arrangements are being targeted appropriately.

The aim of the access arrangements system is to provide a level playing field for students, so that they are not disadvantaged by a permanent or temporary disability. We do not know, though, whether schools use the system in a consistent way. It appears that not all schools apply for access arrangements. There are currently over 6,400 examination centres in England registered to take GCSEs and/or A levels.¹¹ In this report, we only have data from 4,485 schools and colleges. We do not know whether the remaining 2000 or so schools and colleges have students with special education needs that might be eligible for access arrangements.

¹¹ Source: JCQ

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