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Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

Private candidate support grant

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Introduction

On 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that, in the government's view, exams for general qualifications (GCSE, AS and A level) and some vocational technical qualifications (VTQs) could not go ahead as planned in summer 2021. We conducted a joint consultation with Ofqual about alternative arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level, and alternative arrangements for vocational technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications in 2021.

The Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed that there will be a clear and accessible route for private candidates to work with an approved exam centre to receive a grade this year, at the same time as other candidates, and without significantly increased cost compared to a normal year. We are working with the sector to ensure there are sufficient centres accepting private candidates.

Private candidates can find a list of available centres on the JCQ website and are encouraged to register with a centre as soon as possible. Exam boards have announced that private candidates will not incur late fees until 26 April for GCSE, AS level and A levels.

Private candidate support grant

A grant will be available to support approved exam centres to meet costs associated with the additional demands of assessment for private candidates this year. This is to avoid those extra costs being passed on to candidates. The department encourages all exam centres to offer to support private candidates to access a grade in this exceptional year.

The grant will be £200 per entry for GCSE, AS, A level, and for VTQs and other general qualifications which are subject to alternative arrangements to exams. An entry means one private candidate for one qualification in one subject. This is open to any exam centre, provided the centre meets the eligibility criteria.

List of centres

DfE is supporting candidates who have not yet registered to find a centre. For GCSE, AS and A level, the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) has published a list of centres that plan to claim the grant and have capacity to accept further private candidates. Private candidates can use the list to find an exam centre.

Centres have been asked to provide details of:

- the subjects and specifications they cover
- how private candidates should contact them to register
- the main points of their assessment approach, particularly whether they can work with private candidates remotely
- what forms of assessment they plan to use

A centre does not need to be on the JCQ-produced list to claim the grant. For example, a centre may only take a small number of private candidates who have an existing relationship with the centre or may not have capacity to accept more candidates at this stage. However, DfE encourages all GCSE, AS and A level private candidates to use the list to find a centre if they do not already have one.

Private candidates are encouraged to register with a centre before 26 April to avoid late entry fees and to allow enough time for assessment. This does not affect existing private candidate entries, who do not need to re-register. Exam centres may claim the grant for existing private candidates if they meet the relevant criteria.

For VTQs and other general qualifications, a list will not be published but candidates are advised to contact their awarding organisation if they are unsure of their nearest centre. Centres that are already approved by an awarding organisation should liaise with the awarding organisation directly to tell them if they can take private candidates. They may alternatively be contacted by the awarding organisation to see if they can accommodate private candidates. Entry deadlines may also be different for these qualifications.

Eligibility

Candidates

Exam centres can claim this grant for private candidates in England only (or in some exceptional cases, for candidates in Wales). A private candidate is defined by Ofqual as a learner in relation to whom there is no relevant centre. A relevant centre, in relation to a learner, is a centre which has:

- purchased the general qualification or VTQ on behalf of the learner
- materially contributed to the preparation of the learner for the assessment (whether through teaching or instruction provided by teachers employed by it or otherwise)

It is the responsibility of centres to satisfy themselves that candidates meet the criteria.

Examples of private candidates include:

- individuals who are electively home educated
- individuals who are alternatively educated
- independent adult learners
- individuals otherwise not affiliated with a school, college, or similar provider

Students who are enrolled in a school or college (state-funded or otherwise), but taking an additional subject that they have studied entirely without support from that school or college, can be included in centres' grant claims for that additional subject only.

Centres cannot claim for a candidate resitting a qualification if they are resitting at the centre where they originally took that qualification and that centre funded their previous entry, or if their resit is already funded by an educational provider. However, the centre can claim the grant if the candidate originally sat the subject as a private candidate, or if the candidate can no longer return to the original centre to resit the qualification.

Centres cannot claim funding for candidates resitting GCSE English Language or Maths as a condition of funding.

Centres should not claim for the grant if exam fees are already included in a broader fee for tuition or a course of study, for example:

- students paying for an independent school
- students on a college course, part-time course, or distance learning course where the exam fees are included in the course cost

Funding is only available where an individual would normally pay a specific cost just for exams.

Students who are enrolled with an approved centre, for example a distance learning provider, for the purposes of tuition only, and who would ordinarily have made a private candidate entry with a different centre for the purpose of sitting the exam, can be included in a claim for funding by the centre that ultimately enters them, provided that exam fees are not already included in a broader fee for tuition or a course of study.

With the exception of some candidates in Wales, candidates should be in England and registered with an England-based centre, or otherwise have a reasonable expectation that they would have taken exams in England if the exams had gone ahead. There is no candidate age restriction for this grant.

Candidates in Wales

Exceptionally, where a candidate has been unable to find an opportunity to enter for their qualifications in Wales, a centre in England can include a candidate in their claim who is in Wales or would have had a reasonable expectation that they would have entered exams in Wales if they had gone ahead. With the exception of the requirement to be in England, the candidate must meet all other eligibility criteria in this guidance. In addition, the candidate must not be receiving any other financial support specifically for the cost of assessing that qualification from the Welsh government or Welsh local authorities (for example, elective home education funding). The qualifications in scope for these candidates are GCSE, AS, or A levels, provided by a board other than WJEC. Centres should note that they will be required to indicate in their claim which candidates are from Wales, as funding for these will be provided by the Welsh government, not the DfE.

Qualifications

The qualifications eligible for the grant are:

- GCSEs, AS levels and A levels, in all subjects
- all vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications that are regulated by Ofqual and are used to progress to further education and higher education on the same basis as GCSE, AS and A level, and would normally have assessments or exams in the summer term
- functional skills qualifications which would normally have had an exam between March and June 2021 inclusive and need to be assessed under alternative arrangements

Awarding organisations will set out on their websites how each of their qualifications will be awarded under the alternative arrangements announced on 25 February.

The grant is available only for teacher assessed grades produced in summer 2021, not to any other assessment period, due to the unique circumstances this year. Candidates may enter for multiple subjects, though candidates should only enter for subjects they were already planning to enter this summer.

International GCSEs and A levels are not eligible because these are not regulated by Ofqual.

Fees for private candidates

In a normal year, most private candidates pay the entry fee for their qualification, and an additional charge for the centre to administer that entry. This will remain the same for summer 2021. The available grant of £200 per entry is intended to cover the additional costs an exam centre would incur this year because the assessment approach is different.

The department, in offering the grant, would expect exam centres to consider minimising or removing the impact of passing on any other charges to private candidates. Exam centres are expected to only charge private candidates the same fee they would charge in previous years where exams have taken place. The private candidate should, at a minimum, pay the exam board entry fee.

Exam centres will not be eligible to claim the grant if the candidate has been required to contribute more than a maximum fee, including both exam board entry fee and the centre fee. This maximum is:

- £350 per subject at A level
- £250 at AS level
- £200 at GCSE

For VTQs and other general qualifications, the fee differs by qualification. Centres will not be able to claim the grant if the cost charged to the candidate is higher than the candidate would have been charged in the 2018 to 2019 academic year, before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

If a private candidate was already registered with the centre before this grant was announced, the centre may still be able to claim the grant for this candidate, if they meet the other criteria. The centre should check that they meet the criteria, and reimburse fees if necessary, if they wish to claim the grant for this candidate. If this is not possible, the candidate can choose to maintain the previous agreement, or transfer to another centre. It is at the existing centre's discretion to consider refunding any fees paid so far if the candidate changes centre.

The department is not able to get involved with individual disputes.

Extra fees for private candidates

The exam centre fee for private candidates must include all fees that the candidate could not reasonably avoid, for example an additional 'per candidate' fee or additional fees for reasonable adjustments.

For GCSE, AS and A levels, private candidates should not be charged any additional fees by a centre if they choose to appeal, as this cost has been reflected in the level of the subsidy. However, optional fees or fees that could be avoided by reasonable action on the part of the candidate do not need to be included, for example tutoring beyond that required to produce evidence for a grade or late entry fees.

The department expects exams centres to be reasonable and transparent with their fees.

Exam boards have confirmed there will be no late fees for entries until 26 April 2021 for private candidates for GCSE, AS and A level. If a candidate registers after this date, they are still eligible for the subsidy, but the department will not be able to provide additional funding to cover late fees. The department will also not cover late fees for VTQs or other general qualifications, and the relevant dates and late fees will be set out on awarding organisations' websites for each qualification.

The grant amount has been informed by market research and is, in the view of the department, sufficient to cover the reasonable costs incurred by the change in assessment approach this year. Centres cannot claim for further additional costs for private candidates under this grant. However, it is at the discretion of centres whether they wish to participate, and any exam centre can choose not to participate and so charge private candidates a higher rate. They can also choose to provide some subjects within the grant, and others at a higher cost, if the centre feels it cannot deliver them within the criteria of the grant. Additionally, centres should not pass on additional charges to private candidates where they expect to receive a grant from the department which has not been paid or if payment has been delayed for any reason.

If a centre is state-funded, or if it has informed the board that the candidate is a private candidate by using the private candidate marker ('flag'), the boards will not charge for that appeal. If a centre has been charged a fee by an awarding organisation for an appeal because they entered a private candidate but did not use the private candidate marker or ('flag'), and that candidate's entry is part of their claim for the grant, they will be able to claim the cost of this in addition to the £200 as part of their claim for the private candidate support grant. Therefore, centres claiming the grant should not charge candidates any costs for making an appeal. Further guidance on this will be made available to centres in due course.

Centre requirements

For GCSE, AS and A Levels, eligible exam centres must:

- have been approved by one or more exam boards to assess the qualifications in scope
- have been assigned a JCQ National Centre Number (NCN)
- be registered with each board they wish to make entries for and meet all relevant requirements of that board - this includes being able to deliver the quality assurance and moderation processes required by the exam boards

For VTQs and other general qualifications, all exam centres must:

- have a centre agreement with the relevant awarding organisations that they wish to make entries for
- meet all relevant requirements of that awarding organisation - this includes being able to deliver the quality assurance and moderation processes required
- already offer the qualification or qualifications, or after conversation with the awarding organisation have agreement to adapt their centre agreement to cover the additional qualifications, that they want to enter private candidates into

Provision for candidates

The exam centre must comply with JCQ, Ofqual and awarding organisation guidance on the awarding of grades this year. In particular, the exam centre must make clear to private candidates, at the point of registration, the main elements of its assessment approach. This would include whether a candidate will be able to:

- sit awarding body provided assessment materials
- present existing evidence
- create new evidence with the centre
- provide evidence remotely

If the centre offers different assessment approaches for the same specification, for example a choice of using existing evidence or creating new evidence, they must not charge candidates differently for the different approaches when claiming this grant.

The exam centre must be able to provide the private candidate with reasonable adjustments on the grounds of disability in line with the Equality Act 2010 (at no additional cost to the candidate).

In addition to providing the candidate with an assessed grade, exam centres will need to take responsibility for issuing results to the candidate and supporting them through the appeals process, if required.

In some cases, exam centres may wish to work with a tutor or with other educational providers to assess a candidate. Only the exam centre which enters the private candidate can apply for the grant. If another educational provider is working with the exam centre, it is for the centre and the provider to determine any financial agreements.

Making a claim

Exam centres' claims for the grant will be made retrospectively, through an online claims service, opening in autumn 2021, with the timing of payments to be confirmed. Details of how claims can be made will be published in the summer.

Any claim will require the exam centre to already have or be prepared to create a registration of bank details on the department's supplier registration system. The online claims process will require each centre to provide claim details, which will include several declarations to ensure the eligibility criteria are met. Some further supporting evidence will also be required. Where claims are made in error, the department will reserve the right to seek reimbursement of grant payments. This may extend to situations where exam boards cannot ratify the quality of assessment and therefore a grade could not be awarded.

When making a claim, the centre must provide:

- a National Centre Number (or centre agreement as applicable)
- their UKPRN if they have one - if a centre does not have one, they should register for a UKPRN number as soon as possible
- a candidate number, awarding organisation and qualification title and code for each private candidate entry

This information will be checked and verified through the claims service, which could include checking with the exam boards.

Exam centres must make reasonable efforts to check that the candidate is not entered for the same subject at the same level anywhere else, for example through a candidate declaration. This includes entering for 2 different specifications. Centres must also make reasonable efforts to ensure that if the private candidate has an existing centre relationship where they could be entered at no cost to themselves, they have made a reasonable effort to be registered there instead.

Further information

Ofqual have published information for centres on the submission of teacher assessed grades for GCSE and A level qualifications, including details on how private candidates should be assessed.

JCQ have also published guidance on assessing all candidates, including private candidates and a list of centres accepting private candidates. If a private candidate still cannot find a centre after using the list, they should contact the relevant awarding organisation for assistance.

VTQ awarding organisations will set out on their websites which of their qualifications will be subject to alternative arrangements during this academic year. If you have any queries regarding assessment, please address this with the relevant awarding body.

The Welsh Government website has further information for private candidates in Wales.

If you have a query about the grant or eligibility criteria which is not covered in this guidance, contact dfe.coronavirushelpline@education.gov.uk and include 'private candidate support grant' in the subject field, and whether your query relates to GCSE, AS or A level, or another qualification.

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