

Review on barriers to online and on-screen assessment published



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An Ofqual review published today has identified the key barriers to greater adoption of online and on-screen assessments in high stakes qualifications such as GCSEs and A Levels.

The review, commenced prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, focused on the operational barriers to delivery.

The evidence came from 3 sources: a review of research literature, a workshop with informed stakeholders, and interviews both with experts and with leaders who have introduced on-screen or online assessments elsewhere - New Zealand, Finland and Israel.

This work is particularly timely, with and increasing interest in online assessment in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The review, however, found five major barriers associated with taking this approach. None are insurmountable, given the will, but together they do confirm that we could not move large-scale standardised tests (such as A levels) on line in the immediate future.

IT provision in schools and colleges: current provision and the ability to prepare, at pace, varies widely. Different devices and browsers/operating systems could lead to compatibility issues with the tests and differences in performance, disadvantaging some students. The cost of additional IT provision would be significant.

Insufficient or unreliable internet and local network capabilities: substantial local differences (and issues in rural areas) were a major concern.

Staffing: a lack of specialist IT staff and issues around training other staff (teachers, examinations officers) were raised by schools and colleges.

Security: school and college experience was often limited to managing security for paper-based examinations and variability in IT infrastructure would make security risks difficult to manage consistently.

Planning: the most effective approaches to introducing online/on-screen testing depended on large-scale, collaborative efforts, with clear system leadership, investment, piloting and a well-considered appetite for risk. Robust risk management plans and mitigations and robust disaster recovery were needed. This would be highly challenging to implement in the timescales available.

The review also examined measures which might be taken to overcome the main barriers. While these must address the unique context of each jurisdiction, key themes include the importance of political support for any transition, commitment to a vision for the role that assessing on-screen or online plays in wider societal changes and a well-considered approach to addressing the inevitable risks of implementation.

While the barriers to on-screen assessment at scale in 2021 are significant and likely insurmountable, this report is intended to stimulate wider discussion on the future role that the use of technology may play in improving the validity and security of high stakes assessments taken in schools and colleges.

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