

Making the most of accessible exam papers

Guidance for centres

Learners with special educational needs, disabilities or temporary injuries who have difficulties with standard examination arrangements can use 'Access Arrangements' to access examinations. Access Arrangements should not change the demands of the assessment, should be based on evidence of need, and should be consistent with the learner's normal way of working.

Centres can now apply to Awarding Bodies for a digital version of their examination paper for learners with print impairments who qualify for a reader. The digital papers are provided in PDF format to enable learners to use the computer to listen to the text or magnify the contents of the paper if it is their normal way of working.

In order to ensure that PDF files provided by Awarding Bodies are compatible with assistive reading tools, the UK Association for Alternative Formats (UKAAF) have provided standards and guidance on the accessibility of PDFs for use in assessments. This guidance is now available but you will need to check with individual awarding bodies to find out whether their papers meet these standards. There is evidence that centres which use digital exam papers save money by reducing the support needs for learners in examinations.

The standard exam in digital format is referred to as a "non-interactive" digital paper and uses Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF). Such documents are viewed using Adobe Reader or similar software. If constructed properly they can have a high degree of accessibility,

allowing a wide range of learners with different disabilities to independently access the exam onscreen using either the built-in features of Adobe Reader or assistive technologies such as computer reader or text-to-speech.

If an awarding body has produced its examination papers as accessible PDFs then there are tangible benefits for the learning provider as well as for the learners themselves. This document explains what those benefits might be and what you need to do in order to access them.

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Leadership team – senior managers and governing bodies

Your influence

You will be responsible for overseeing the policies that will have a direct impact on the ability of print impaired learners to make the most of the opportunities afforded by examination papers in digital format.

Things to consider

Print disabled learners are often significantly underserved in education. Recent figures from Scotland (where digital papers have been available since 2008) show that over half the secondary schools are now using digital papers; some centres request over 100 digital papers while 10% of centres currently request only 1 digital paper. Given the incidence of print impairment in the general population it is possible some learning providers are risking challenges under the Equality Act.

If you enable your print impaired learners to access examination papers in digital format you can:

- » **Minimise barriers to achievement** allowing learners to instantly adapt the paper to meet their needs, for example changing the text size or background colour or using text-to-speech
- » Offer **reasonable adjustments** in a wider range of subjects - since computer readers and assistive technologies enable candidates to demonstrate their skills independently. This may assist with improving candidates attainment and confidence
- » **Minimise support costs** because candidates will not need human readers if they use text-to-speech tools with a digital examination paper. Free or low-cost technology solutions are available and compatible with digital papers
- » **Reduce the need for in-house production** of alternative formats. If the awarding body has produced an accessible digital exam paper the vast majority of disabled learners will be able to use it with no adaptation. This can **reduce costs** as well as **reducing the risks of errors** in the final version

To access these new opportunities, you need to ensure that the **learner's normal way of working** includes accessing digital versions of textbooks, handouts or online materials in lessons, coursework or assessment activities. This will have implications for classroom practice so will be affected by your **IT policies** (and possibly Bring Your Own Device policies) as well as **staff development** opportunities so that **teaching staff** and **learner support staff** are comfortable with **digital textbooks** and **assistive technologies** like text to speech. It is strongly advised that you join the free **Load2learn scheme** to access key texts in digital formats. Scottish schools and colleges can also access the **Books for All Scotland Database** (booksforallscotland.org.uk/).

Disability support manager / SENCO / Principal teacher support for learning

Your influence

Different learners have different needs and benefit from different features of digital exam papers. Your role will be to help print impaired learners be aware of features relevant to them and of the potential benefits. Studies have reported candidates will read materials more when using a computer reader instead of human read in an assessment situation. Candidates also report higher confidence and self esteem as they are able to demonstrate their skills independently.

Things to consider

Assessments in digital format come as PDF documents. These are read using a PDF reading application such as Adobe Reader. If learners are to benefit from assessments in digital format they need to be familiar with using:

- » the accessibility features built into your PDF reading software and/or
- » supplementary assistive technologies like text-to-speech tools or colour overlay tools
- » Past papers in suitably accessible formats

Adobe Reader has many built-in accessibility features including the ability to:

- » **change background colours** to suit any colour/contrast needs or preferences

- » **navigate efficiently** through the document to reduce the disadvantage of working from a screen
- » **magnify and reflow** text (to ensure any magnified text fits the page without scrolling right to reach the end of the sentence)
- » Use auto scroll to **reduce the number of mouse clicks** required to read a magnified document

There are also many free of low-cost text to speech and assistive technology tools available include those that will run off USB Pen drives.. You should encourage candidates to access these free tools at home to build familiarity.

Disability support teams may, in turn, need support in developing their own technology skills if they are to be able to train learners to make the most of examination papers in PDF format.

Extra time taken in updating staff skills and giving learners good technology training should be outweighed by the reduced support needs of learners.

Examinations officer / coordinator

Your influence

Your key influence will be to ensure that print disabled learners can make informed and timely decisions about whether to request their papers in electronic format.

Things to consider

Digital exam papers can offer significant **independence to learners** and can also have a positive impact on the **management of exams**. Learners requiring a reader need to be in a room on their own and may need one-to-one invigilation but learners using text-to-speech with headphones can be accommodated more flexibly. There will however need to be close liaison with:

- » the IT team to ensure that the laptops used meet the security requirements of awarding bodies
- » the awarding body and disability support / SENCO / Support for Learning team to ensure appropriate assistive technology support is in place if the learner requires more than the inbuilt functionality in Adobe Acrobat Reader

Tutors / teachers

Your influence

If you are able to support your print impaired learners in using technology on a regular basis in your lessons and homework assignments they will be entitled to apply for digital versions of the exam. Using such tools could lead to higher attainment, engagement and confidence for your students.

Things to consider

Are your key course textbooks available in digital format for your print impaired learners? If not, work with the disability support/SENCO/Support for Learning team to obtain the books either through the **Load2Learn service (load2learn.org.uk/)** or the **Books for All Scotland Database (booksforallscotland.org.uk/)** or directly from the publishers (Load2Learn have an automated book request service to support this).

What evidence can you provide that this is the learner's normal way of working?