

# **Teachers' and students' views of access arrangements in high-stakes assessments**

Conference Abstract

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## Abstract

Access arrangements are pre-exam arrangements that aim to remove any barriers that might prevent students with specific needs (*e.g.*, special educational needs, disabilities, temporary injuries) from accessing the assessment and demonstrating their knowledge and skills. Access arrangements are not intended to change the assessment demand or reduce its validity.

Evaluating the provision, implementation and impact of access arrangements is important to ensure that the diverse learning needs of students are addressed and that the performance outcomes are a true reflection of students' knowledge and skills (Duncan and Purcell, 2019; Vidal Rodeiro and Macinska, 2021). However, evidence regarding students' and teachers' perceptions of how well access arrangements work is rarely gathered. In the context of high stakes examinations in England, Woods (2007) highlighted that the lack of data relating to the perspectives of students with special educational needs or disabilities, and the perspectives of their parents/carers and teachers, is an obstacle to the effective evaluation of access arrangements. More recently, Hipkiss and Robertson (2016) and Woods, James and Hipkiss (2018) have said that user feedback on access arrangements is particularly important to develop effective arrangements. Moreover, Lovett and Leja (2013) argued about the importance of students' feedback on the usefulness of access arrangements. They mentioned, in particular, that if students are provided access arrangements that they do not believe to be helpful, they might not want to use them and that students' feedback is needed to determine how well the arrangements are working.

Using a survey questionnaire, the present study reports on the views of 258 centres in eight countries around the world regarding teachers' and students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of access arrangements, including their usefulness, fairness, consistency, implementation, and perceived effectiveness of use. The survey questionnaire included a mixture of closed and open-ended questions covering the following themes: awareness and provision of access arrangements; resources to provide access arrangements; views on access arrangements; overall views on access and inclusion.

Descriptive analyses for each question were carried out. Responses to open-ended questions were coded and analysed by the researchers in an attempt to bring together recurring themes.

Some of the key findings from the research are summarised below.

- The levels of awareness and provision of access arrangements were high. This is important as inclusion of students with special educational needs or disabilities into general education settings (rather than special schools) means that they would receive access to the curriculum and assessments through the use of access arrangements.
- Respondents reported that school records, good knowledge of students, teachers being able to identify possible needs or parents (or students) informing the centre about a possible need for support were some of the mechanisms that helped them to identify and request the relevant access arrangements.
- Lack of resourcing to provide access arrangements in schools usually related to staffing or physical space needs to implement/deliver the access arrangements (*e.g.*, readers; separate invigilation rooms), to the cost of gathering the evidence of need (*e.g.*, paying for cognitive tests) or to technology.

- Students awarded access arrangements found them useful, making them feel more comfortable and relaxed when taking the assessments.
- Most teachers agreed with access arrangements being necessary when assessing students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, and that access arrangements made a difference in the education of such students, providing them with a fair chance to demonstrate their knowledge and skills without giving an unfair advantage.
- The majority of survey respondents did not think that students awarded access arrangements feel ashamed or embarrassed because they need assistance in their exams. Furthermore, students without arrangements did not think that arrangements provide an unfair advantage. In fact, participants reported that students understood why some students have access arrangements and others do not and that students without them were supportive of their peers. Only a handful of responses reported feelings of unfairness.

It was noted, however, that some cultures stigmatised learning difficulties making parents reluctant to have their children assessed, and that some students felt embarrassed and either refused access arrangements or had to be persuaded to use them.

Overall, views on access and inclusion were positive. This is encouraging as attitudes and beliefs have a powerful influence on how successfully inclusive education practices (e.g., the use of access arrangements in exams) are implemented.

Stakeholders' (e.g., teachers, parents, students) views on access arrangements should be gathered more regularly. This would provide evidence for timely and effective evaluation of the provision, the administration and the impact of access arrangements.

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