

HELPING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EXAM NEEDS

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Examination boards are gearing up again for the new examination season, which starts on Monday 12th May. For candidates with disabilities or special requirements, exams can mean additional stresses. Their situation is fully recognised by the exam boards, who know and understand that some students have extra difficulties to cope with during an exam.

Edexcel - one of the leading examining bodies - has a Special Consideration Department which works to make the examinations process as easy as possible for students, whilst ensuring that standards of marking and assessment of work are maintained across the vast range of public examinations such as GNVQs, NVQs, GCSEs, A/S and A levels, and all of the BTEC qualifications, including the Higher National Certificates and Diplomas.

Special consideration can be granted where "performance is affected by circumstances beyond the control of the candidate". All requests for special consideration have to be submitted by the school or college on behalf of the candidate. The types of difficulties students face range from personal illness, or a bereavement in the months leading to examination, domestic crisis or even minor problems that could affect a student's performance. Allowances can also be made for students where the school or college has had administrative problems surrounding the examinations.

Many students are not aware that they should tell the school if something has happened at home that could affect their performance or that the school can request special consideration just before or immediately after the exam

Tope Gay, Edexcel's Special Consideration Manager, commented: "Although we cannot take approaches from the student or family member direct, schools should advise the board if a student has problems. Exam boards can apply special considerations, but we are dependent on the school telling us of students' circumstances.

"Of course we understand that if a candidate has been very ill, or perhaps lost a close family relative the weeks before an exam, their performance or concentration in the exam may be affected. We can look at their past performance over their course and if their exam

performance does not reflect the standard they have achieved in the past, and when we know the full facts, a decision can be made about whether to apply special consideration."

Allowances given to candidates depend on the severity of their particular circumstances. When there are established conditions such as dyslexia, or students that need special papers because of visual or aural disabilities, special arrangements can be made before the exam is sat.

In summer 2002, 2,772 large print and 287 Braille test papers were produced by Edexcel. There were 626 papers adapted to meet the needs of deaf candidates who were also allocated a communicator to sign questions; some would have additional time to answer the questions. There were 18,918 candidates with physical or learning requirements who needed access to a computer or special arrangements in order to complete the exam. Less than half needed additional time to finish. Also, hearing-impaired candidates whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) were allowed the use of a transcript in subjects where re-phrasing is allowed. In subjects where oral communication is an assessment objective, e.g. English and Modern Foreign Languages, a special arrangement is made to compensate for the missing component.

Papers are marked by the same examiners and a "special consideration" is applied depending on the circumstances of each student.

There is a booklet for schools and colleges that details the regulations and guidance for special arrangements and special consideration for candidates. It is available on www.edexcel.org.uk - under "Services for Centres" or on the Joint Council for General Qualifications website on www.jgcq.org.uk.

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