SUPPORTING PRIVATE CANDIDATES DURING COVID-19

UCAS good practice considerations
On 18 March, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, announced that schools in England would be closing, and that summer examinations were cancelled. Instead, students undertaking GCSEs, A levels and selected vocational qualifications in 2020 would receive a ‘calculated grade’ based on available evidence and the professional judgement of their school. Similar approaches have been followed across the rest of the UK, although slight variances exist in methodologies.

Ofqual has issued a number of statements and consultations regarding the awarding process in 2020. Importantly, they have provided assurance that grade distributions will be broadly similar to previous years (as have CCEA, Qualification Wales and SQA). This has given some reassurance to universities and colleges, particularly those that deliver courses under strict number control arrangements, such as medicine.

At the same time as announcing the cancellation of this summer’s exams, Gavin Williamson revealed that there would be an Autumn examination series for students who are unable to receive a calculated grade, or wish to sit an examination in order to achieve an alternative grade (with students being able to carry forward the grade that is most beneficial to them). The intention is for this to be a broad examination series across all subjects.

Results are expected by the end of 2020.

All students who were due to sit exams in summer 2020 have been significantly impacted by the actions taken around the pandemic, but concerns around private candidates in particular soon emerged. Due to the need for schools and colleges to have a sustained relationship with a student in order to confidently issue a calculated grade and ranking, challenges exist in issuing such predictions for students who are not being actively taught at the centre where they planned to take exams.

Ofqual has issued guidance for centres in England on the alternative sources of evidence a school or college might consider where it does not have sufficient evidence about a student’s attainment to submit a centre assessment grade and rank order information. They have also issued guidance on how private candidates can transfer to an alternative centre, such as one that has experience in working with private candidates. However, there will still be circumstances where students are not able to be issued a calculated grade, which will be problematic if these qualifications form part of the offer made to a student.

Further information regarding private candidates across the UK can be found here:

- Ofqual
- Qualifications Wales
- CCEA
- SQA
WHO ARE PRIVATE CANDIDATES?

It is important to note that there is no single identity for a private candidate, and a theme of these good practice considerations will be looking at the individual circumstances of the applicant and the reasons they are a private candidate.

It is also worth noting that not all of a student’s education may be ‘private’. In many instances, students may be sitting qualifications both within and outside a formal school setting.

Common circumstances for students being private candidates include:

> **A student that is resitting an examination:** Students may resit examinations for a range of reasons. These include due to personal circumstances (such as illness or bereavement) that resulted in the student not being able to perform to the best of their ability, a desire to achieve a higher grade, or a change in direction for the student where alternative subjects or qualifications are required. In some cases students may be retaking exams in addition to undertaking a full programme of study in school, for example if a resit opportunity is not offered by their current school or college. In some cases students may otherwise have completed post-16 education but are resitting one or more of their qualifications.

> **A student sitting an examination outside of their normal school context:** Students may sit examinations outside their normal school context for a range of reasons. This commonly occurs where the school or college a student attends does not offer a specific subject the student wishes to study. This could include an A level which is not commonly offered, a creative or performing arts subject or a native language.

> **Mature students:** Students who have completed their school education but do not have the qualifications to get into university or college sometimes return to study independently. They may be self-teaching, or using one of the distance learning companies or colleges which provide the teaching but require the candidate to make their own examination arrangements, in which case they become private candidates at registered centres.

> **The student is not comfortable in a school environment:** The education sector is becoming increasingly alert to the importance of student mental health. Conditions such as anxiety or depression may result in a student not regularly attending their school or college, and instead studying in a different environment. Furthermore, where the student has had negative experiences in a school environment (such as being bullied), they may need to study in a different environment in order to maintain their mental health and/or achieve their full potential.

> **Special educational needs:** Some students will have specific educational needs that a local school or college is unable to meet, resulting in the student studying in a different context.

> **Traditional home-schooled students:** Some students are taught at home for a range of reasons, often relating to parental preference.
This survey found:

- Very few providers have a policy in place specifically for private candidates. However, many institutions will have a policy in place to support the specific personas identified above. Equally, many institutions will have policies in place around accredited or recognised prior learning.

- Applicants presented qualifications at both Level/SCQF Level 5, and Level 3/SCQF Level 6.

- Where assessment arrangements have been determined, these tend to be interviews, institution set assessment or equivalency tests, or through increased focused on contextual factors.

- Most institutions see a very low number of private candidates apply to them each cycle. Most commonly, institutions receive between 10 and 50 applicants per cycle, although it should be noted that private candidates are challenging to identify due to the multiple ways that they can be classified as such.
The following features of an application may indicate that an applicant is a private candidate:

- If an applicant has not spent the usual number of years in a formal education setting
- If an applicant has not spent the standard amount of time at their exam centre that would normally be required to study for the qualification(s) they are taking
- If an applicant is not currently in school or college despite being of the normal age to be in full-time education
- If an applicant’s qualification profile shows that they have taken or are taking qualifications at different centres within the same academic year
- If an applicant’s qualification profile shows an unusual mixture of qualifications, particularly if some of those qualifications are not commonly seen by admissions staff

Where some of these indicators are present but it is not certain that the applicant is a private candidate, further investigation may be needed. The personal statement and reference will often explain any non-standard features of an applicant’s educational profile. Applicants will sometimes contact admissions officers directly if they are presenting an educational profile which does not have clear equivalencies set out on Search or providers’ websites, so it is worth checking records of correspondence to help build up a full picture of these applicants’ circumstances.
Below are a series of considerations that universities and colleges should make when assessing the suitability of a private candidate who is unable to meet the terms of their offer due to not being allocated a calculated grade.

> **Why is the student a private candidate?**

Universities and colleges should take every reasonable step to understand the circumstances and proportion of the applicant’s study that has been private, to ensure that private candidates are not disadvantaged compared to the rest of the applicant cohort.

> **What is the course that the student has applied to, and how relevant are the qualifications that the student is unable to achieve?**

If the qualifications being examined by private candidature are not essential to ensuring the applicant is prepared for the course in question, universities and colleges should consider whether it is possible to admit the applicant on the evidence of other aspects of their qualification.

A key factor here is whether the course you are delivering offers accreditation or qualification by a Professional, Statutory or Regulatory body (PSRB), and whether a specific qualification or grade is required to achieve this at Level 2 or Level 3 (or equivalent). Whilst a university or college may be able to accept a student, the student may be unable to satisfy a PSRB requirement. Where this is the case, the position should be clearly articulated to the student, along with the options available to them.

> **Does the applicant hold any existing qualifications that could be considered to meet your requirements?**

If an applicant has already demonstrated a suitable level of academic ability through their other qualifications, can they be considered for admission even if their inability to get a calculated grade means that their whole qualification profile is not of the size a university or college would normally demand?

CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES IN 2020 IN RELATION TO PRIVATE CANDIDATES

The challenges in relation to private candidates in 2020 were unexpected and unique, therefore fresh considerations may be needed regarding the assessment of these students and how to determine if they are suitable for entry to a specific course.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a pandemic.
Are there other forms of assessment you could undertake? Depending on the skills or knowledge being sought, can a college or university assess the candidate independently to determine their suitability for admission?

Do your current policies for Accreditation or Recognition of Prior Learning support the assessment of the candidate? If the applicant’s conditions were based on the qualification(s) for which they are a private candidate rather than any other qualifications they hold, could they be reconsidered on the basis of those other qualifications?

Do your mitigating circumstances policies support the assessment of the candidate? The cancellation of exams and provision of alternative arrangements for awarding grades are unprecedented and have left private candidates in a uniquely difficult position through no fault of their own. Consideration should be given to using mitigating circumstances policies to take this into account where possible.

Are there alternative pathways that could be offered to the student? If there are alternative courses or pathways for which the applicant is already qualified, or alternative routes into the course they originally applied for, these could be used to admit private candidates. In such cases as these it should be clear to the candidate whether and how they could be transferred onto their original course in the future.

Transition and study support: If you are able to satisfactorily assess a candidate, it is important that you review whether any transition or study support may be required to help the student succeed once placed. For example, these students may not have experienced a formal education setting for an extended period (beyond the timeframe experienced by the 2020 entry cohort impacted by COVID-19). Universities and colleges should look to understand the circumstances of the individual that has led to them being defined as a private candidate, and offer study or transition support accordingly.

Communicating the decision: Clear and concise communication to private candidates is vital. It is likely that there will be private candidates that you are unable to assess in a way that would satisfy your entry criteria. In these instances, universities and colleges should make clear the rationale behind this, but also outline the options available for a student, such as sitting an examination in the future or the validity of an offer for the following cycle, and further support that can be offered to that student.