

Examinations in a wide range of languages – how can we close the gap?

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Approximately 30,000 students take a qualification in a 'community' or heritage language every year. The majority are entered as private candidates, either in the school that they attend during the week (but where they do not receive tuition in that language) or in other examination centres. The cancellation of summer 2020 exams highlighted that this cohort may be yet again systematically disadvantaged in gaining these qualifications in 2021.

It is vitally important to counter the myth that 'community' language candidates are advantaged and that these qualifications are less important/too easy. The majority of language candidates are studying in their own time, have been attending supplementary classes in community settings for 3-5 years, and, even if they do have some regular home exposure to the language (which is by no means always the case) it is often not the standard form in which they are taking exams (e.g. Bangladeshi heritage learners exposed to Sylheti at home, Afghan heritage learners exposed to Dari at home., Cypriot learners are exposed to Cypriot Greek and Cypriot Turkish as opposed to Standard Greek and Standard Turkish) Many are also 2nd, 3rd even 4th generation, are learning the language as part of their heritage and have very little exposure to it outside their supplementary school. For many others the impetus to learn comes from their faith rather than as a language ever spoken by their family (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit)

Supplementary schools receive no statutory funding. Classes are mainly funded by parents and community fundraising committed to resourcing the additional preparation of candidates for exams with the support of parents and community.

Improving communication and provision of shared training for teachers has the potential to lead to a significant increase in the cohort taking languages less-taught in British schools, thereby increasing income and reducing cost for the awarding bodies (and, as noted by Baroness Coussins below, contributing to EBacc). I mean shared training, both directly from Exam boards and from OFQUAL, for community-led supplementary schools alongside schools/approved examination centres.

By the end of March 2020, it became clear that pupils would not be taking any exams over the summer term. NRCSE started receiving emails and phone calls from concerned teachers of 'community' languages. Collating the information from 28 settings (25 individual settings and 3 consortia Polish, Greek and Turkish) we had information regarding 1,755 GCSE entrants and 650 A-level entrants in 14 languages.

Having studied in out-of-school settings for 5 – 7 years, were these pupils going to lose the opportunity to gain GCSEs, and even A levels?

With the support of Baroness Jean Coussins, Philip Harding-Esch and our trustee, Vicky Gough, we lobbied Parliament on behalf of the sector. NRCSE presented the data to Baroness Coussins, who chairs the All Party Political Group for Languages (APPG); she argued vigorously on behalf of 'community' language learners.

On 30 April, JCQ issued guidance on validation of evidence by centres for producing Centre Assessed Grading

'However, there will be some students for whom heads of centre do not have access to the full range of evidence available for the majority of their students. This may apply, for example:

- *where a student has transferred from one centre to another part way through a course;*
- *where a student has returned to a centre in order to resit an examination;*
- *where a student with ongoing health issues has undertaken some of their studies outside of the school environment;*
- *where a student of a subject which is not routinely offered by the centre has been provided with specialist external support; or*
- *where a student has undertaken some or all of their studies independently, including home-educated students.'*

On 5 May, OFQUAL announced:

*“The majority of respondents agreed that we should not restrict eligibility to a calculated grade by age or year group. Most of those who responded in favour of the proposal broadly argued that if younger students were not able to receive a grade they would be disadvantaged because their school would not continue to teach them the subject. Some argued specifically that disabled students and students with special educational needs who were planning to spread their GCSE entries over a number of years would be particularly disadvantaged if they were unable to receive a calculated grade this summer. **We also received arguments that students who had planned to take exams in community languages would be disadvantaged if we restricted eligibility by age or year group because these students often take their GCSEs in these languages at a younger age. It would be disruptive to their plans if they could not receive a grade this summer.**”*

“Having considered the responses to the consultation we have decided that students of any age and in any year group who had been entered to take exams this summer will be able to receive a calculated grade on the same basis as other students this summer ...’

One of the exam boards, AQA, wrote - **If the school [a.k.a. examination centre] making the entry has access to relevant evidence e.g. from a supplementary school or Saturday school and is happy to authenticate the evidence that is available from that source, then the school can award a centre assessment grade.**

NRCSE wrote to 600+ community-led settings delivering language tuition to clarify that: unless supplementary schools are existing registered examination centres they should write convincingly to the exam officer at the pupils’ mainstream schools (or other examination centre) with assessment grades that the school might submit. NRCSE organised a webinar in May to provide guidance on how to support students to be included in the centre assessment grade submissions from the examination centres where they are registered. With expert advice from Nuriye Mertcan of the Turkish Language, Culture and Education Consortium, Vice Principal at Dukes Academy and Shala White and Parvaneh Delavari of Rustam School over 50 language teachers from across England were given guidance and template letters.

But for many students it was too late.

Over the following three weeks we received many desperate messages from community settings and teachers telling us that their assessment was not being accepted by the examination centre and pupils were being withdrawn from the exams with little information, as to when or whether they would be able to take the exams in the Autumn.

In the first week of May parents were receiving letters informing them of the withdrawal of their child from community language exams for which they were entered as a private candidate. One school gave this reason :

Heads of Centre should only submit centre assessment grades and rank order information where they are confident that they and their staff have seen sufficient evidence of the student’s achievement to make an objective judgement and to make the required declaration set out in the Ofqual information. They must have the same level of confidence in their judgement as they do for other students at their centre and ensure compliance with the Ofqual information

As an externally tutored student, we would be unable to assign a rank order to your child for this exam as we do not teach the subject and are unable to confidently vouch for evidence.

And another:

‘You have opted to take a GCSE exam in the Summer 2020 series in one of the Less Taught Languages. Unfortunately, it is not possible for me, as Head of Centre, to guarantee that grades awarded by a variety of teachers and tutors who are not involved in the school’s internal standardization process, can be validated. It is not possible to standardize and rank students from disparate sources.

I write to inform you that it is my intention to withdraw (your child) from the Persian exam in the Summer 2020 series.'

By September it had become clear that there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of entrants for 'community' languages. While some of this might be attributable to the changes in language curricula and some could relate to the 'Brexit effect' with families starting to return to Europe, it seems clear that a significant number of entrants were withdrawn in May 2020.

Examination Board statistics collated and analysed by Teresa Tinsley show a 21% drop in entrants for 'less-taught' languages at A-level and a 28% drop in GCSEs; compared to a 3% increase in French, Spanish and German.

<http://www.alcantaracomms.com/coronavirus-and-languages-gcses-2020/>

GCSE	2019	2020	Difference
French	130831	132036	1%
Spanish	102242	109594	7%
German	42791	42348	-1%
Total French, German and Spanish	275864	283978	3%
Polish	5704	2941	-48%
Italian	5331	3459	-35%
Arabic	4203	3034	-28%
Chinese	3201	2891	-10%
Urdu	3679	3212	-13%
Portuguese	2280	1538	-23%
Russian	2133	1499	-30%
Turkish	1656	1295	-22%
Panjabi	865	708	-18%
Japanese	698	610	-13%
Bengali	570	462	-19%
Gujarati	508	343	-22%
Modern Hebrew	378	510	35%
Modern Greek	589	459	-22%
Persian	388	215	-45%
Total 'other' languages	32183	23076	-28%
Total all languages	308047	307154	0%
All subjects	5547447	5692464	3%

As Baroness Coussins wrote:

'This situation has really shown how few mainstream schools have any contact with the supplementary schools and this is a factor in how few students have been able to secure a calculated grade. Mainstream schools' MFL departments really ought to know what their students are studying at the supplementary schools especially as this (a) influences the performance of these students in their other subjects in the mainstream school; and (b) their grade in their community language exam, if they take this exam at the mainstream school as a private candidate, benefits the school's overall statistics (especially EBacc).

NRCSE will continue to advocate on behalf of supplementary schools and work in partnership with the APPG for MFL, Speak to the Future, the Association for Language Learning, the British Academy, the British Council and all those working to ensure that ALL languages spoken and learned in Britain are equally valued and the hard work of community-led settings and their pupils afforded recognition and respect.

You can read of the innovative work going on in the community-led sector in Pascale's article in Languages Today 37.

