A photograph of a classroom with several students in red sweaters sitting at desks, focused on their work. A teacher is visible in the background. The image is partially obscured by a white text box and teal design elements.

# Modified Exam Papers: Collaborative paths to accessible, fair and inclusive examinations

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At Pearson, we're always looking for ways to improve our qualifications, services, and support for schools and colleges, making our qualifications and assessments accessible to all students. From the first half of 2022 to the end of 2024, we investigated the access and use of modified exam papers since 2016. Read our Modified Exam Papers Project (MPP) findings to discover how you and your students can benefit and make a real difference in the future of modified exam papers.

## 1. What are modified exam papers?

Modified exam papers are papers with reasonable adjustments designed to support students with various learning needs during high-stakes exams. Pearson offers a variety of sizes and formats to suit different candidate needs, including:

- Interactive Electronic Question Papers (also named Interactive PDFs): for use with electronic readers, or word processors
- 18pt Bold Font on A4 paper
- 24pt Bold Font on A4 paper
- 24pt Bold Font on A3 paper
- 36pt Bold Font on A3 paper

- Tactile Diagrams and Physical Mathematics Models (3D models)
- Subtitles on video clips
- Unified English Braille (Grade 1 – uncontracted)
- Unified English Braille (Grade 2 – contracted)

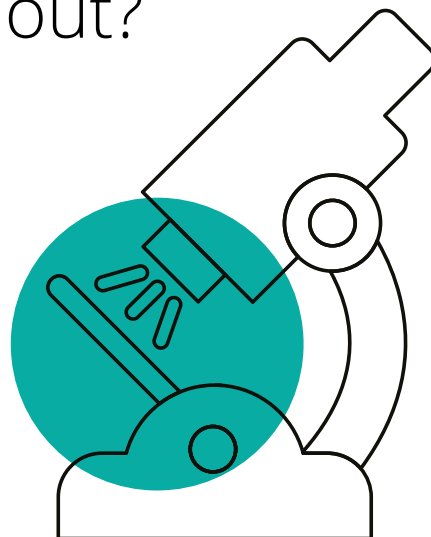
All large print papers are supplied in Arial Bold font with 1.5 line spacing.

Take a look at our **past papers in modified formats.** ►

## 2. What did we aim to find out?

This research aimed to answer two questions:

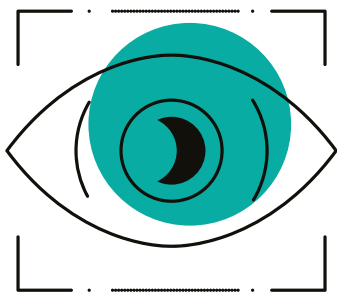
- How are modified papers accessed and used by UK secondary schools and students?
- How are students engaging with different types of modified papers, including modified large prints and interactive PDFs?



### 3. What did we learn from this research?

Based on the 2022 Pearson Exams Officers' Survey, we found at the school level that:

- **37%** of surveyed Exams Officers reported a lack of confidence in responding to student inquiries about modifications and their optimal use after COVID-19.
- There are differences between modified papers that are created in schools and the final version in the live exam, such as paper size and photo quality.
- Exams Officers reported different styles of modified papers used by different exam boards and requested more standardisation.
- Exams Officers reported that centres requested more standardisation in the methods for ordering modified exam papers for different qualifications.



Based on the Pearson Student Survey (2022-2023), student interviews (2022-2024) and direct observations of mock exams (2024), we found at the student level that:

- **63%** of surveyed vision-impaired and blind students reported issues accessing graphics. Students find tactile diagrams and physical mathematical models highly beneficial for accessing graphical questions. Providing practice templates, offering various font choices for label sizes, and providing clear descriptions can enhance this experience.
- A lack of practice with past modified exam papers and assistive technologies (e.g., 3D shapes) leads to an inconsistent experience for students from classroom to mock to final exam.
- Using colour in diagrams can improve legibility for some students.
- **100%** of interviewed vision-impaired and blind students indicated that Physical Mathematics Models (3D shapes) can improve their reduced stereopsis.
- Interactive PDFs' listen and type functions have been reported as revolutionary, notably easing student anxiety about time constraints and handwriting legibility.

## 4. What have we done so far?

### (1). Research publications:

We adopted a student-centred approach and published a collection of five case studies to explore the experiences of learners with diverse learning needs using modified exam papers and assistive technologies. These case studies provide valuable insights into specific challenges and opportunities they encountered but may not represent all students.

Pearson, as the UK's largest exam board, offered recommendations within each case study to support a more inclusive and accessible exam environment.

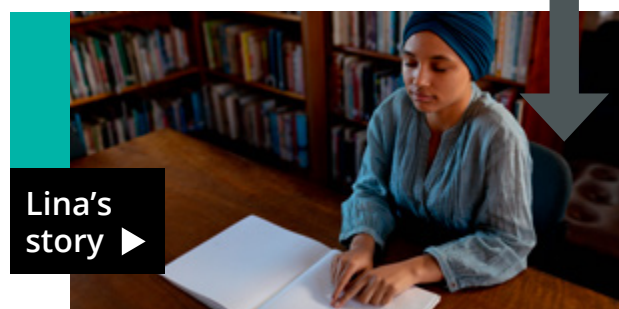
Read more about the **MPP case studies**. ►

Access case studies relating to students who used **modified large prints**.

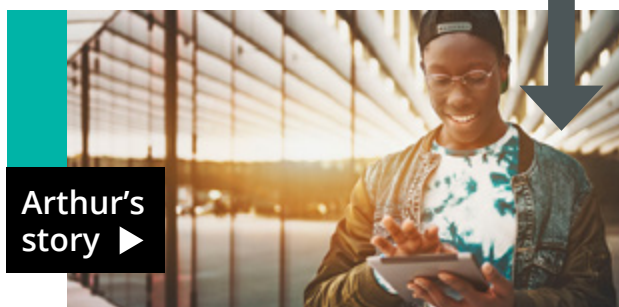


Katherine's story ►

Access case studies relating to students who used **braille papers**.



Lina's story ►

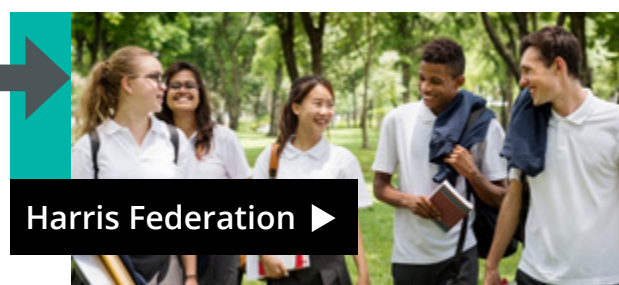


Arthur's story ►



Simon's story ►

Access case studies relating to students who used Interactive PDFs at **Harris Federation**



Harris Federation ►



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## (2). Service improvement:

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In 2022, **Pearson released bite-size Exams Officers Training modules** that:

- provide a general refresher about modified papers.
- demonstrate the ordering process of different qualifications step by step.
- explain the difference between noninteractive and interactive PDFs.

By April 2024, 1,813 UK and 880 International schools had completed the training.

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## (3). Empowering users with an updated **web page** featuring essential knowledge on Modifications.

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## (4). We launched the first Modified Exam Papers Awareness Campaign via multimedia approaches in the UK.

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- Shared our case studies with over 17,000 contacts across all subjects.
- Emails and newsletters – including our qualifications bulletin, Subject Advisor newsletters, parents and carers newsletter.
- Social media – X, LinkedIn, Facebook.



## 5. What do these findings mean for Pearson and the wider sector?

We will use students' and teachers' direct experience to help shape and improve the accessibility and inclusivity of current and future GCSE exam papers.



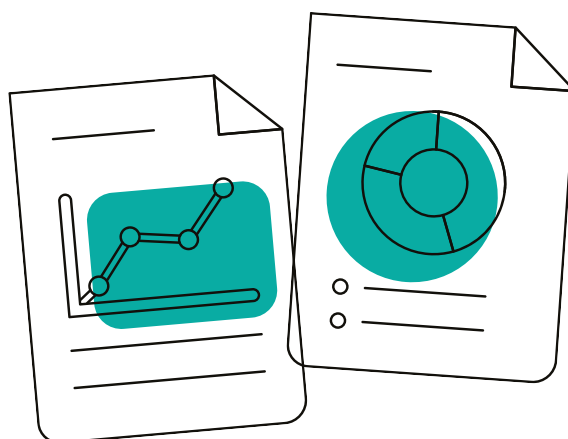
## 6. What further research is needed?

The main limitation of this research is its small sample size, which limits the generalisability of the findings.

During the data collection in the UK between 2022 to 2024, we found that students with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) are the most challenging group to approach. Therefore, this multi-year research programme progressed with support from both internal colleagues across multiple teams and external organisations, including RNIB, LOOK UK, and NASEN.

Specifically, students with hearing impairments were not included in the data collection due to the challenge of recruiting schools.

Future research should cover this group, and the existing research tools (interview protocol, student behaviours observational form) developed in this study can be adapted and replicated to collect data for this group of learners.



## 7. What are Pearson's next steps on this?

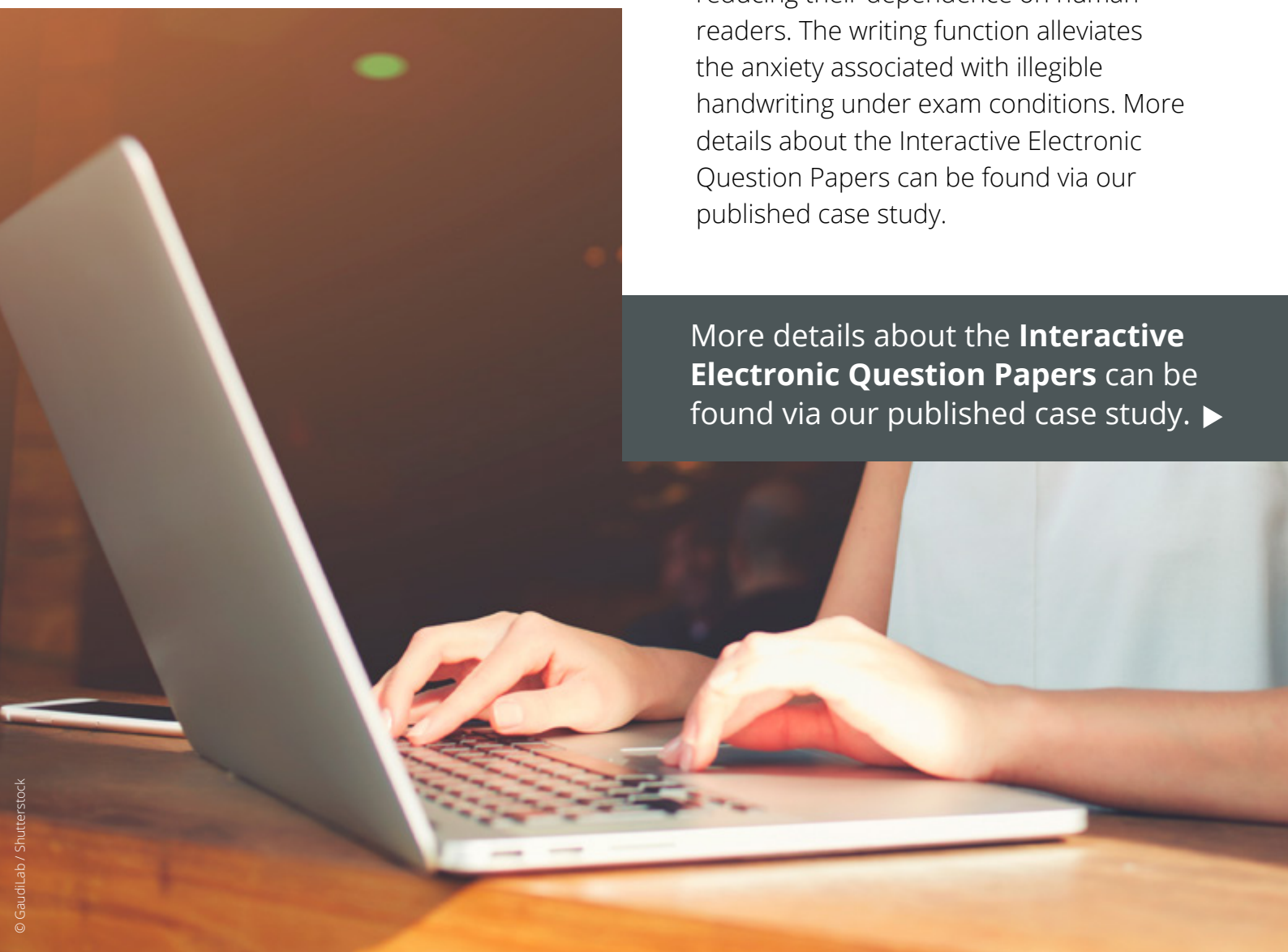
Pearson will release a video to introduce and broaden awareness of using Interactive Electronic Question Papers (also named Interactive PDFs) in 2025 to support schools and students in better understanding this modification and how best they can benefit from using it.

Interactive Electronic Question Papers, exclusive to Pearson, have been available for learners with different learning needs since 2015. They mirror standard exam papers and are designed to be accessed on computers, allowing students to type or listen to the content, thus catering to a variety of learning needs.

According to Pearson's 2022 survey of 134 exam officers and our direct mock exam observation at UK schools in February and March 2024, the primary users of Interactive PDFs are students with dyslexia, autism, colour blindness, and those without SEND but struggling with handwriting anxiety.

Both the exams officers survey and our 2023 pilot study highlighted that features like the writing and listening functions significantly boost students' confidence and independence during exams. For instance, the listening function enables SEND students to repeatedly hear the questions, giving them more agency and reducing their dependence on human readers. The writing function alleviates the anxiety associated with illegible handwriting under exam conditions. More details about the Interactive Electronic Question Papers can be found via our published case study.

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## 8. Who has supported this research?

We would like to acknowledge the important contribution towards the work in this case study from schools, and our young student experts, in particular their quality support in the Modified Exam Papers Research Project 2022-2024.

These individuals include:

Benjamin Redmond, Grace Grima (QSR Efficacy & Research) for their invaluable comments, feedback and professional support during the case study.

Louise Denman (NCT) and Rachel Laking (Modified Formats Team) for their role in highlighting the significance of conducting this research project and for providing recommendations based on the unique scenarios of students as presented in the case study.

Emily Lyons, Gemma Hughes, Joanna Biggers, and Lesley Roberts (Communications & Engagement Team) for their noteworthy contributions and support in shaping the MPP awareness campaign plan. Their meticulous review and editing of the case studies have been fully appreciated.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, this multi-year research programme has received massive support from colleagues spanning various teams within Pearson. We wish to take the opportunity to extend our heartfelt thanks to them.

Jennifer Wallin (UK's Sales PSQ Field Team) for her support to engage us in discussions with Harris Federation senior school leaders, exams officers, history consultants, and the SENDco, allowing us to explore how students access and utilise Interactive PDFs effectively.

Milon Harman, Zeenat Niazi (Quals Delivery), Ellen Barrow (ELL), Emma Crampton (QD Assessment Design) and Irene Custodio (QD Assessment Design) for their expertise in supporting this research by reviewing the observation forms, contributing to the research questions, and collecting observational data.

Sam Hone (UK Schools Marketing) for her contribution to the Modified Paper Campaign and collaboration with the Communications & Engagement and RNIB PR teams to promote our case studies. This collaboration aims to enable more families and schools to benefit from these individual stories.

