

YOUR TRUSTED GUIDE TO DISTANCE LEARNING EXAMS

Exams Handbook



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SUPPORTING YOUR JOURNEY TO EXAM SUCCESS

For over 60 years, the National Extension College (NEC), has supported students from diverse backgrounds to achieve their ambitions through flexible, inclusive, and high-quality distance learning.

This handbook provides information for students and families - especially those new to taking exams as a private candidate. It guides you through every aspect of the exams journey and explains how NEC:

- supports you in selecting the right qualifications
- works closely with our trusted network of exam centres across the UK and internationally
- make exams more accessible for learners with additional needs.

Whether you're preparing for GCSEs, IGCSEs, or A levels, this is your step-by-step companion to entering exams with confidence.



1. WHY CHOOSE NEC FOR EXAMS?

Unlike many distance learning providers, NEC offers a full exams service designed specifically for private candidates. We are not simply a course provider; we are your partner in achieving qualification success. Our dedicated exams team understands the challenges of booking exams as a private candidate, and we take on much of the administrative burden for you. From liaising with centres to applying for access arrangements, managing practicals, and ensuring your non-exam assessments are compliant - NEC does it all.

We have developed long-standing relationships with a network of approved exam centres across the UK, including specialist centres for science practicals and oral assessments. Our students benefit from clear guidance, supportive systems, and the reassurance that everything is handled by a team with decades of experience. As a not-for-profit organisation, our fees reflect only the cost of delivering these essential services.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE EXAM TIMELINE

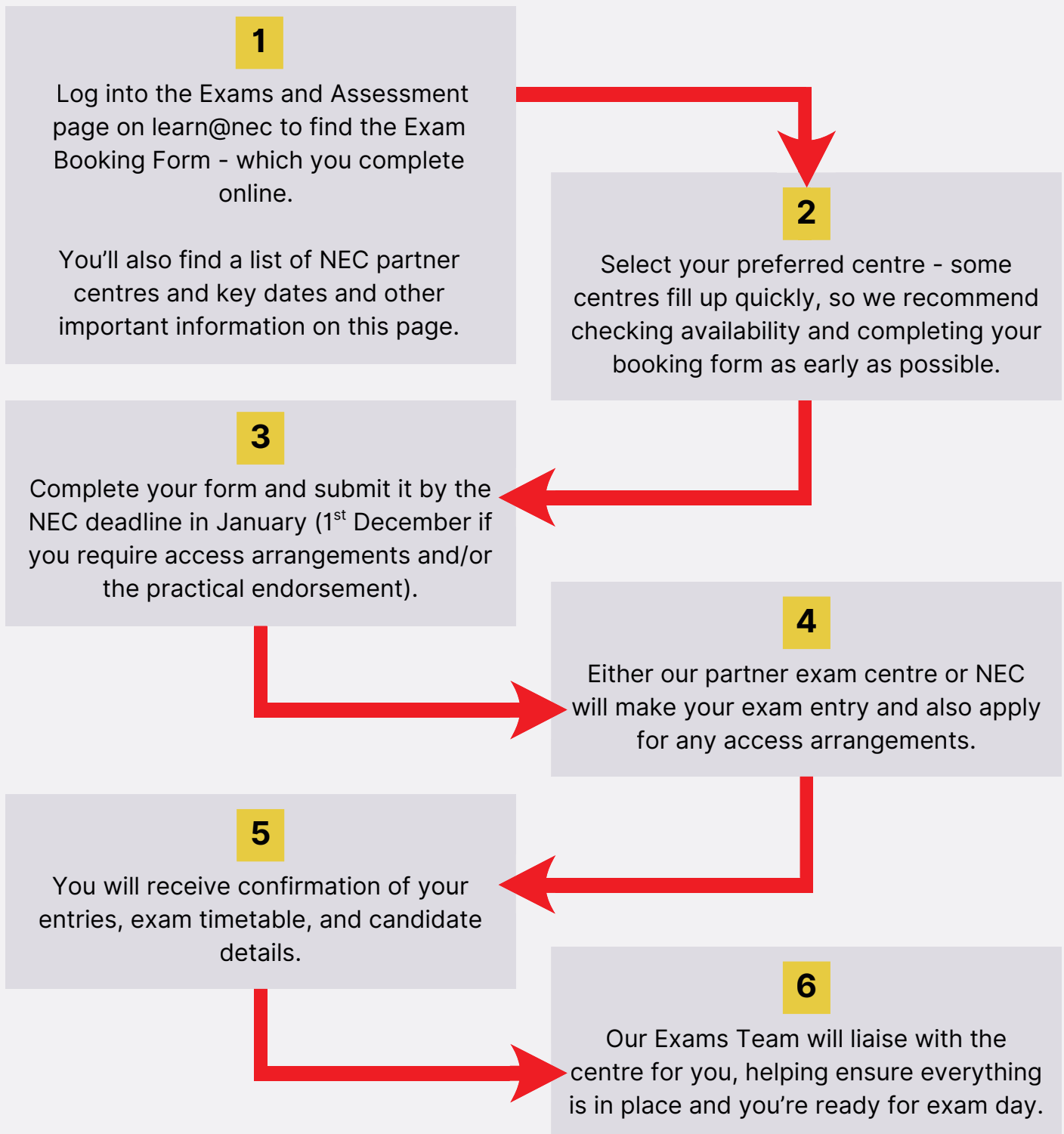
Planning is vital when studying at a distance. The exam year begins as early as the previous summer, with many students notifying us of any access arrangement needs before their course is underway. Non-Examination Assessments (NEAs) such as coursework, spoken language and practical endorsements and orals, have specific schedules that require early preparation.

NEC keeps students updated via the Exams and Assessment page on learn@nec and offers reminders at key stages, but the general structure of the exam year follows this pattern:

MONTH	ACTION REQUIRED
June onwards	Begin studies and notify NEC of any access needs.
June	Applications open for November and the following summer exams, including those with access arrangements.
August onwards	Start preparing for NEAs and check centre availability.
December	Deadline for exam applications with access arrangements and practical endorsements.
January	Final deadline to submit NEC Exam Entry Form.
February	Final exam entry deadlines by awarding bodies.
March - April	NEA and practical endorsement assessments including oral exams.
May - June	Written exams take place.
August	Results released.

3. HOW TO BOOK YOUR EXAMS WITH NEC

Booking exams as a private candidate can be complex - but not with NEC. Our step-by-step booking service simplifies everything. Once you have chosen your subjects and are ready to enter, you will:



4. EXAM FEES: WHAT YOU'RE PAYING FOR

Exam fees vary by subject, centre, and exam board, and are additional to your course fees. NEC is transparent about costs and we do not profit from exam services - our fees cover only what is necessary to deliver high-quality support. A typical entry includes:

- The awarding body fee (e.g. AQA, Edexcel, OCR).
- An NEC administration fee for managing your entry, access arrangements, and liaison with the centre.
- The exam centre's fee for hosting and invigilating your exam.

Expect to pay approximately:

- £250 per GCSE/IGCSE
- £500 per A level



Available funding

Special Educational Needs: Local authorities may offer support for home-educated students with SEND, especially if the student has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This support can include funding for examinations and other educational resources.

Discretionary Grants: Some councils may provide small grants to assist with educational costs, such as purchasing materials or covering examination fees. These grants are typically discretionary and vary by local authority.

Specific fees for your subjects and centres are always listed on learn@nec.

**READ ABOUT SCIENCE PRACTICAL
ENDORSEMENTS IN SECTION 8.**

5. MAKING EXAMS INCLUSIVE: ACCESS ARRANGEMENTS

NEC is committed to helping every learner succeed. If you have a disability, learning need, medical condition, or temporary injury, you may be entitled to adjustments known as "access arrangements."

These adjustments ensure your exams are fair and reflect your normal way of working. NEC does not profit from arranging this support; we simply pass on any centre fees and cover the necessary administrative work.

Examples include:

- Extra time (typically 25% or 50%).
- A reader, scribe, or prompt (limited availability).
- Use of a word processor.
- Rest breaks or a smaller venue.
- Modified papers (e.g. Braille, enlarged print).

You can find more information about access arrangements, on the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) website.

JCQ OVERVIEW OF EVIDENCE REQUIREMENTS.

To qualify, you will need to submit evidence - such as a medical letter, EHCP, or a diagnostic assessment. NEC guides you through this process and works directly with the centre to ensure your arrangements are in place.

PLEASE NOTE

If you require Access Arrangements, your exam booking **must be submitted by 1st December** to allow time for processing and approval.

We recommend starting the process early to ensure availability.

NEC will keep students and parents informed through the weekly student newsletter and Exams & Assessment forum messages.

These will include key updates and deadlines, so you'll always know what action to take and when.

CASE STUDY: QUINN'S STORY

Quinn, who has both dyslexia and ADHD, enrolled on GCSE English and History. NEC helped them secure access to a reader and supervised rest breaks.

"It made such a difference to feel supported. I was nervous, but NEC handled everything." - Quinn

6. COURSEWORK AND NON-EXAMINATION ASSESSMENTS

Some subjects, like English Literature, History, and Geography, require coursework. These are called Non-Examination Assessments (NEAs).

NEC is a JCQ-approved centre and can fully manage the NEA process:

- Your NEA is guided, authenticated, and marked by NEC tutors
- We track deadlines and ensure compliance with exam board rules
- You don't need to find an external supervisor or submit work independently

Our approach means you're free to focus on producing your best work, while we handle the paperwork and regulations.

Don't forget: Some GCSE subjects have specific requirements beyond written exams.

For example, **GCSE Astronomy** includes an **observational project**, where students must complete and record direct night sky observations or telescope-based activities. This is a formal part of the assessment and must be completed to achieve the qualification.

Always check if your subject includes any **non-exam requirements** like this.

7. SPOKEN LANGUAGE ENDORSEMENTS AND ORALS

Some subjects involve spoken components:

- **GCSE English Language** includes a Spoken Language Endorsement (SLE). NEC assesses this internally with live online assessments.
- **Modern Foreign Languages** require a speaking test. NEC arranges these through selected partner centres and helps you prepare with sample questions and tutor advice.

These components are required for full qualification and are well supported through NEC. Please note there are additional fees for language endorsements and orals.



SPEAKING AND LISTENING PRACTICE

You'll have plenty of opportunities to practise throughout the course - it's embedded in both the online course and the course e-book.



8. A LEVEL PRACTICAL ENDORSEMENTS

If you're studying **A level Biology**, **A level Chemistry** or **A level Physics**, there is a practical endorsement.

NEC has a number of specialist centres - in Birmingham, Bolton, Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle, Norwood School (London), Oxford, Sutton, Taunton and Wembley (London). You can apply for your preferred centre when making your examination entry (see Section 3).

These sessions take place over 3 to 5 days and include:

- full access to equipment and safety-compliant labs
- qualified assessors
- preparation materials via learn@nec.

Practical endorsement

For A levels taken under UK exam boards, the **Practical Endorsement** is a **separate component** for subjects like Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. While the endorsement doesn't contribute to your overall A level grade, it is reported separately on your certificate. Many UK universities, especially for STEM courses, require a "Pass" in the Practical Endorsement as part of their entry criteria. Benefits:

- Many **UK universities (especially for STEM degrees)** require or strongly prefer applicants to have passed the Practical Endorsement.
- It can strengthen your application for courses like **Medicine, Veterinary Science, Engineering, or Natural Sciences**.



Edexcel IAL qualifications assess practical skills through written exams only - there's no separate Practical Endorsement.

While accepted by many international universities, some UK universities may require evidence of practical skills, so always check individual entry requirements.

CASE STUDY: ALEX'S JOURNEY

Alex completed their A level Chemistry practical in Birmingham.

"The centre was so welcoming. NEC had prepared me so well that I knew exactly what to expect. I'm now studying medicine thanks to that experience." - Alex

9. CHOOSING YOUR OWN EXAM CENTRE

You don't have to use an NEC partner centre - though we recommend it to ensure we are able to support you fully. If you prefer to book exams independently, we can still help:

- Your course specification and awarding organisation, along with other important exam information can be found within your online course page.
- You are responsible for all communications with the centre and must ensure that you give them the correct entry information and that they can support you in all elements of the qualification.

If you're booking exams privately, please note:

For subjects with NEA (Non-Exam Assessment) components - such as English, History, Geography, and others - **NEC must act as the entering centre**, even if you are sitting written exams elsewhere.

This is essential to meet awarding body requirements and to ensure your NEA is authenticated and submitted correctly.

You'll still be responsible for liaising with your chosen exam centre for written papers, but NEC will manage the NEA component in full. This requires approval in advance, so please discuss your plans with us as early as possible.

This route may suit experienced learners, but most students benefit from NEC's full service.

Additionally, you may already have a relationship with a school or college that is willing to host your exams. It's a good idea to discuss your needs with them early and ensure you're clear on their deadlines.

10. EXAMS ABROAD: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

NEC supports students all over the world. If you're sitting your exams outside the UK:

- Identify an approved centre - we recommend using [Pearson's Find a Centre tool](#) to locate approved centres that accept private candidates.
- Confirm exam board availability and whether they can support all elements (for example, practical endorsements).
- Liaise with the centre to confirm entries and arrangements.

CASE STUDY: ISLA'S INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Isla lived in Spain and took IGCSEs through NEC. We supported her in finding a centre in Madrid.

"It was seamless. I never felt out of the loop. NEC worked directly with the centre so I could focus on my studies." - Isla

11. THE FINAL COUNTDOWN: PREPARING FOR EXAM DAY

The last few weeks before your exam can feel intense. NEC offers a range of support to help you stay on track and reduce stress:

Wellbeing for Learning webinars: Tackle the areas that may be barriers to your success, focusing on mental health and exam preparation strategies.

Online mock exams: Practice in exam conditions to boost your confidence and identify areas to focus on.

Revision and time-management tips: Get expert advice on how to plan your study time effectively.

Past paper service: Access past papers and receive feedback on your performance to help you prepare.

Live subject masterclasses: Join NEC's live sessions throughout the year for focused learning and expert guidance.



Additionally, our **NEC Pastoral Service** is available to support you through any personal or academic challenges, ensuring you have the resources to succeed.

Use this checklist:

- ✓ Know your candidate number.
- ✓ Pack ID and equipment (e.g., pens, calculator, clear pencil case).
- ✓ Leave electronic devices at home.
- ✓ Arrive 45 minutes early.

If possible, visit your centre beforehand. Familiarity can reduce anxiety and boost confidence.



12. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

The last few weeks before your exam can feel intense. NEC offers a range of support to help you stay on track and reduce stress:

Exam Access Webinar & Accessing Exams - Practicalities

1. Are there specific centres you recommend for private candidates?

We recommend using one of NEC's partner centres, as they are familiar with our students' needs and provide excellent support. However, you are welcome to choose another exam centre, as long as it is accredited to offer the exams you need.

2. What do we do if there are no centres near us?

If you cannot find a nearby exam centre, please reach out to NEC. We may be able to help you locate a suitable centre or assist with arranging an alternative solution.

3. Can students sit exams abroad or while travelling?

Yes, students can sit exams abroad as long as the exam centre is accredited by the relevant awarding body. Please ensure you confirm the arrangements with the centre well in advance. *Please note AQA subjects cannot be taken abroad.*

Subject & Specification Choices

4. Can student's study one exam board and sit the exam with another?

It's generally best for students to study the same exam board for both the course and the exam to ensure consistency. However, if you would like to explore a different exam board for the exam, please contact NEC to discuss your options.

Coursework / NEA / Practical Components

5. How does NEC support the completion of the non-examined assessment (NEA)?

NEC provides expert tutor guidance and manages the formal supervision and authentication of your work to ensure it meets all awarding body standards. We then complete the process by marking and standardising your assessment.

6. Can students complete science practicals at home?

No, Science Practical Endorsements must be completed in a safety-compliant laboratory under the supervision of qualified assessors at one of NEC's specialist centers.

These intensive 3 to 5 day sessions provide the expert assessment and equipment necessary to meet mandatory standards for your qualification and university entry.

7. Can students carry out fieldwork independently at home?

While you will collect data independently, your fieldwork must be overseen and authenticated by NEC to ensure it meets the awarding body's strict integrity standards. NEC provides the framework and formal supervision required to ensure your research is valid for your Non-Exam Assessment (NEA).

8. Are there any subjects we should avoid due to practical/logistical complexity?

Subjects like Science (particularly Biology, Chemistry, and Physics) and Geography can have practical or fieldwork requirements. Please contact NEC for guidance on how to manage these components.

Costs & Support

9. How much do exams cost, and is there any financial help available?

Exam costs vary by subject and exam centre. We can provide an estimate based on your specific choices. Some financial assistance may be available in certain circumstances, so please contact NEC for more details.

10. What are the benefits of using a distance learning provider?

A distance learning provider like NEC offers flexibility in studying at your own pace, access to expert tutors, and comprehensive support throughout the course. You can work from home, receive tailored resources, and get help with exam preparation, all while staying connected to your learning goals.

SEN & Access Arrangements

11. Can my child get extra time or other access arrangements?

Yes, students with special educational needs (SEN) or other relevant conditions may be eligible for access arrangements, including extra time.

12. What evidence do we need to provide for access arrangements?

You will typically need to provide medical or educational evidence, such as an EHCP, assessments from a specialist, or other reports. Please refer to the JCQ website for a full list of required evidence based on the specific access arrangement requested.

Timelines & Planning

13. Can students take exams early or spread them over multiple years?

For standard UK A levels, all written exams and the NEA for a single subject must be completed within the same examination series. However, if you are studying International A levels (IAL), you may have the flexibility to sit individual modules and spread your exams over multiple years.

15. How do I contact the NEC Exams Team?

All students can reach the team directly by emailing exams@nec.ac.uk for support with entries and assessments. If you are an internal student, you can also access dedicated exam resources and updates through the learn@nec portal.

YOUR GOALS, YOUR WAY

From the moment you enrol to when you receive your results
- we're here to support you.

✉ exams@nec.ac.uk

☎ 0800 389 2839

www.nec.ac.uk/exams-and-assessment/



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