

e-EQE 2021 – survey summary

Table of contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Introduction.....	3
2.1. Background: context and challenge	3
2.2. EQE 2021	4
2.3. Preparation of candidates	5
3. Assessment of the e-EQE 2021.....	6
3.1. Satisfaction with having the opportunity to sit the EQE	6
3.2. Previous experience and preparation.....	6
3.3. Time constraints	8
3.4. Infrastructure	9
3.5. Service assessment.....	9
4. General advantages of online examinations as indicated by survey participants	10
5. Changes	11

1. Executive summary

A record number of participants took the European qualifying examination (EQE) on 1-5 March 2021, when, in line with the EPO's digital transformation, and with the Covid-19 pandemic accelerating this process, the exam was held digitally for the first time.

In order to better understand our users' needs and to improve forthcoming editions, we asked 3 733 candidates to share their experiences of sitting the exam in two different surveys: one directly after the exam, running from 5 to 10 March, and a second conducted from 19 to 31 March. This report sets out the main outcomes of the two surveys and includes a compilation of comments received from individual candidates.

Overall, candidates were pleased to be able to sit the exam digitally despite having little experience of taking exams online. Both the advantages of holding the examination online and proposals for further improvement were addressed in the surveys and in participants' feedback, and will be taken into account in our efforts to further improve the EQE.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background: context and challenge

Context

- The EQE 2020 was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. The ongoing health crisis made it impossible to hold the EQE in person in 2021.
- In 2021, the largest number of candidates ever - nearly 3 800 – enrolled for the exam, with a backlog of nearly 2 000 from the previous year. Cancelling the EQE for a second year would have resulted in 5 500 candidates in the queue for 2022.
- Prior to 2021, the EQE consisted of handwritten examinations, and digital searches, copy & paste, etc. were not allowed. Thousands of handwritten answer papers had to be scanned twice for marking purposes, and the system meant that many candidates had to travel, with heavy materials such as annotated books and legal texts.

Challenge

- In June 2020, a process was started to set up the e-EQE for March 2021. Among other aspects:
 - A decision on whether this was possible at all had to be taken.
 - If yes, the system had to be chosen and further developed to meet the EQE features and invigilation standards.
 - Security features had to be tightened and adapted to the 2020 papers, which had already been drafted.
 - The possibility of adapting some papers had to be reviewed and decided on.

- Alternative solutions had to be identified in case holding the e-EQE was not possible.
- It had to be possible for candidates to be able to test the system well in advance of the examination.

2.2. EQE 2021

EQE 2021

- The EPO set up what is probably one of the most complete online examinations ever:
 - 3 733 enrolled candidates
 - Five exams split over 17 flows
 - 130 exam pages in each of the three official EPO languages
 - 24 hours of examination over five days
 - 80 online invigilators and a deployment force of 15 members for first- and second-level support
 - 400 people involved in drafting the papers and marking the answers
 - secure examination environment
 - audio and image invigilation
 - bidirectional invigilator/candidate communication channel



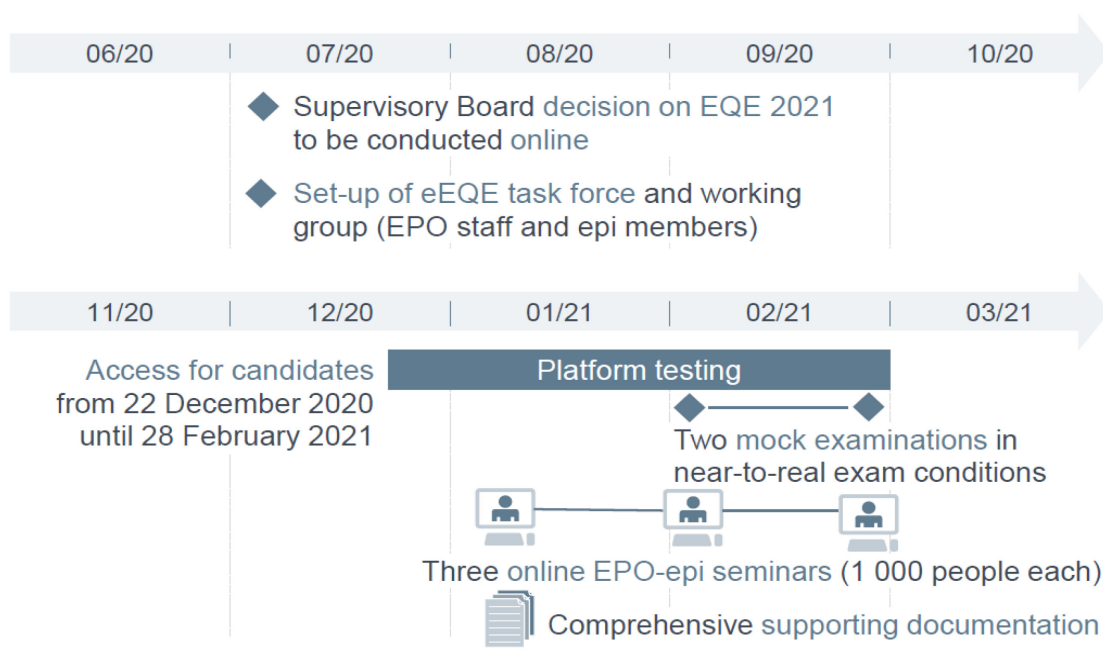
- A delay in delivering the English and French versions of the paper in one of the 17 flows (paper D.1.1) caused some confusion. The Examination Board reacted and assured candidates that they would not be affected by the delay.
- Everyone made a great effort to adjust to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, starting with the vast majority of candidates. Still, nearly 350 candidates did not test the system in advance. Three mock exams were offered.

2.3. Preparation of candidates

Following cancellation of the EQE 2020, and in view of the growing uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 situation, the Supervisory Board decided in July that the EQE 2021 would be conducted online. An e-EQE task force was set up, along with a working group consisting of EPO staff and epi members to oversee and support progress.

Several steps were taken, and documents created to prepare and assist candidates in the transition to the e-EQE, including:

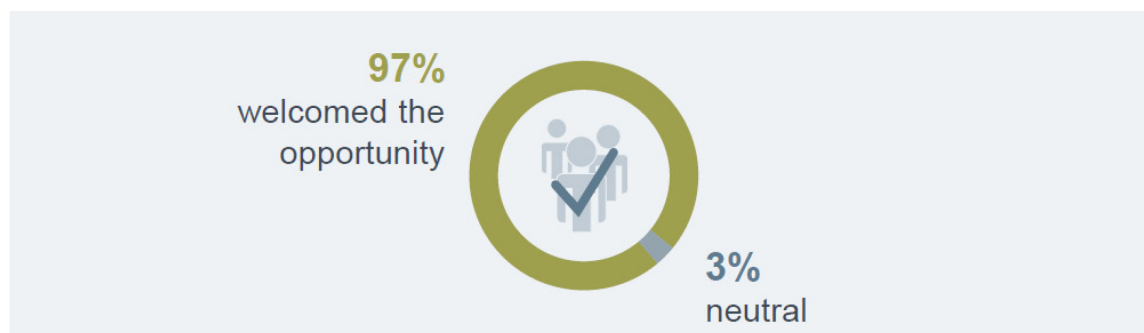
- Enabling the platform to be tested between 22 December 2020 and 28 February 2021. Candidates were able to familiarise themselves with the examination environment without time constraints or other restrictions. Most participants tested the system in February.
- Conducting two mock examinations under near-real exam conditions in early and late February 2021.
- Providing supporting documentation, including
 - a comprehensive dedicated e-EQE web page with extensive FAQs
 - instructions for candidates
 - a user guide
 - a document with the requirements for the e-EQE
 - a tutorial on using the system
 - a document with tips for candidates
 - a step-by-step guide to the e-EQE
 - a data protection statement
 - a code of conduct
- Conducting three online EPO/epi seminars, each with a capacity of 1 000 participants
- Providing answers to 30 FAQs



3. Assessment of the e-EQE 2021¹

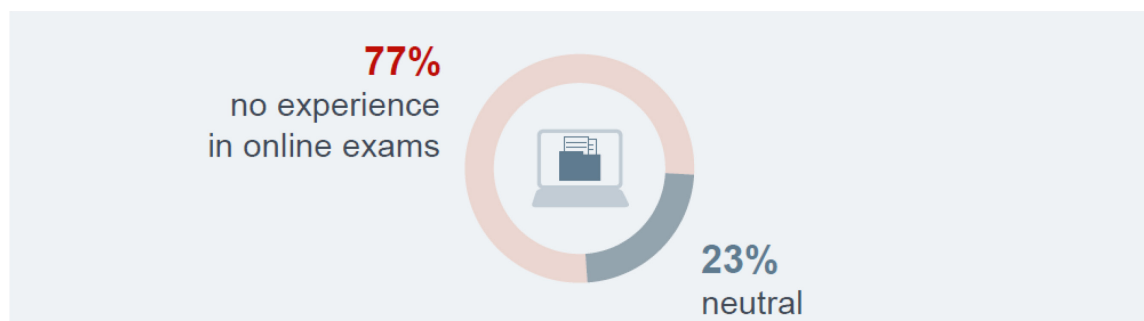
3.1. Satisfaction with having the opportunity to sit the EQE

97% of the 1 455 candidates who participated in the survey welcomed the opportunity to take the EQE in 2021.²



3.2. Previous experience and preparation

77% of the 1 455 candidates who participated in the survey had no experience in taking online exams.³



70.2% of respondents who expressed an opinion noted that their lack of experience in taking online examinations made the e-EQE 2021 more stressful,⁴ while 80% of survey participants felt that training should include training on digital tools.⁵

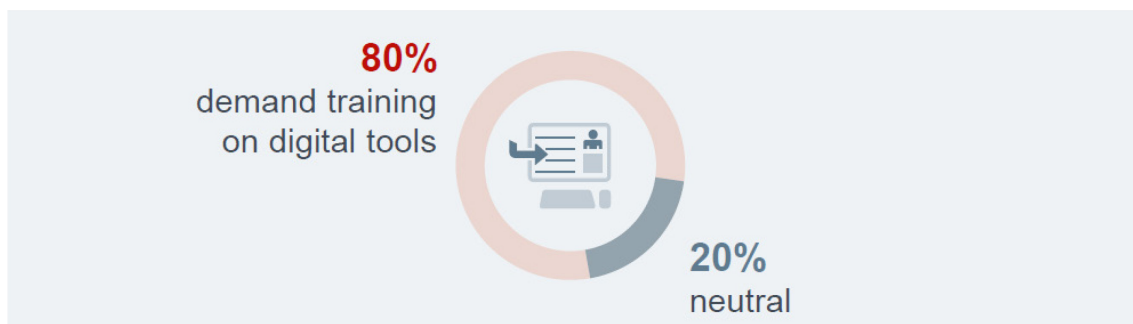
¹ The statistics are based on two surveys, the first running from 5 to 10 March 2021 and involving 1 456 candidates and the second running from 19 to 31 March and involving 1 081 candidates.

² Question 3 of survey 1.

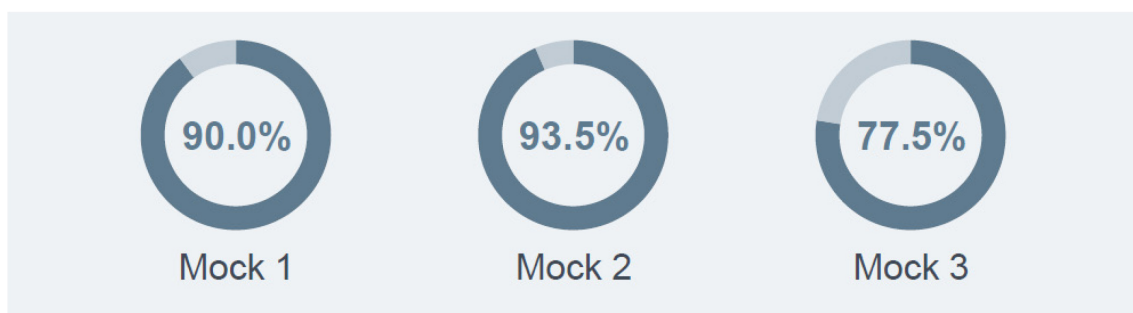
³ Question 10 of survey 1.

⁴ Question 39 of survey 2: 576 found it more stressful, 261 neither more nor less stressful and 244 less stressful.

⁵ Question 13 of survey 1.



Regarding preparation and training, three mock examinations were set up between December and February 2021. An average of 87% of survey participants enrolled in one of the two mock examinations held in February that were conducted under near-real exam conditions.⁶



84% of respondents who participated in the second mock examination rated it from “fair” to “very good”, while 15.4% rated it as “poor” or “very poor”.⁷

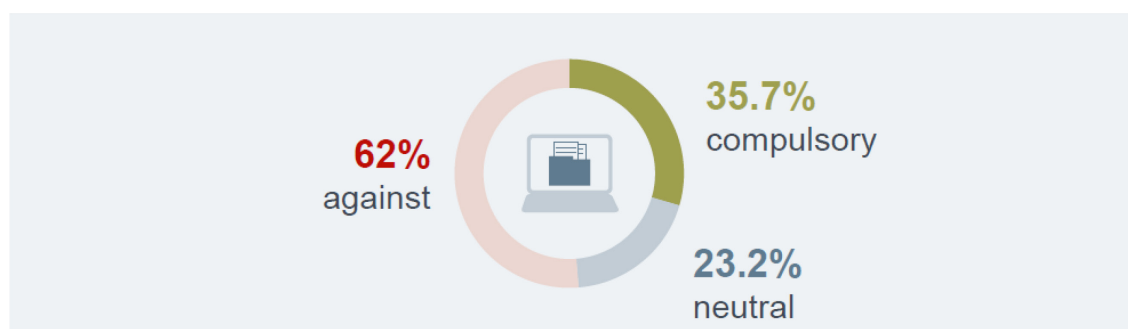


In this last respect, just under 350 participants did not test the system at all prior to the actual examination. Candidates were asked whether participating in a mock e-EQE should be a requirement for taking the e-EQE. 35.7% of respondents felt that participation in a mock examination should be a requirement for taking the EQE; 23.2% were neutral in this respect, while 62% indicated that they would be opposed to any such requirement.⁸

⁶ Question 12 of survey 1: mock 1 – 90%, mock 2 – 93.5% and mock 3 – 77.5%.

⁷ See question 9 of survey 2 – the percentage was determined after subtracting the number of participants who indicated that the question was not applicable to them.

⁸ Question 40 of survey 2: 319 in favour, 208 neutral and 554 against.



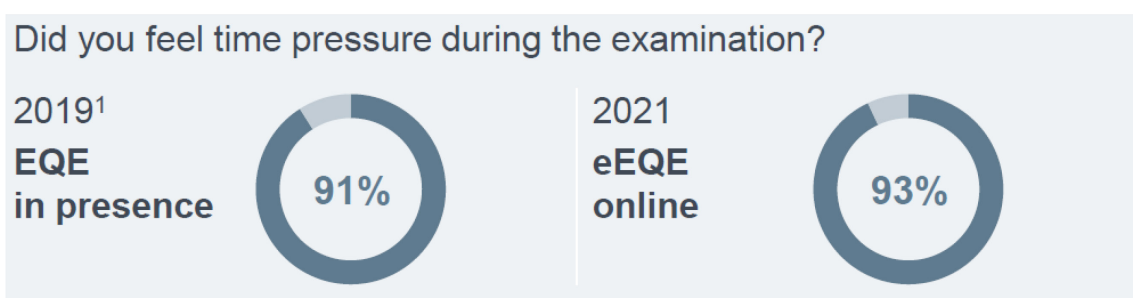
3.3. Time constraints

93% of respondents indicated that they felt time pressure during the examination⁹ and 79% felt that having more time would have enabled them to perform better.¹⁰ This did not apply to the breaks, which were considered adequate by 57% and inadequate by 39% of survey participants,¹¹ but rather to the time allotted for the papers.¹²

Candidates expressed that time was for:

	too much	enough	borderline	not enough	by far not enough	n/a
Pre Exam	0.4%	7.5%	6.7%	2.9%	1.0%	81.6%
Paper A	0.9%	22.8%	21.6%	12.7%	3.8%	38.2%
Paper B		1.9%	5.6%	14.7%	44.4%	33.5%
Paper C	0.3%	3.2%	11.1%	18.8%	29.4%	37.2%
Paper D	0.3%	10.5%	26.2%	20.7%	7.8%	34.5%

Not having enough time is a common complaint in many examinations. EQE candidates in previous years have also noted difficulties with the time management aspect. For instance, in 2019, 91% of the 655 candidates who responded to the survey indicated that they felt time pressure during the examination.¹³



⁹ Question 27 of survey 2.

¹⁰ Question 29 of survey 2.

¹¹ Question 38 of survey 2.

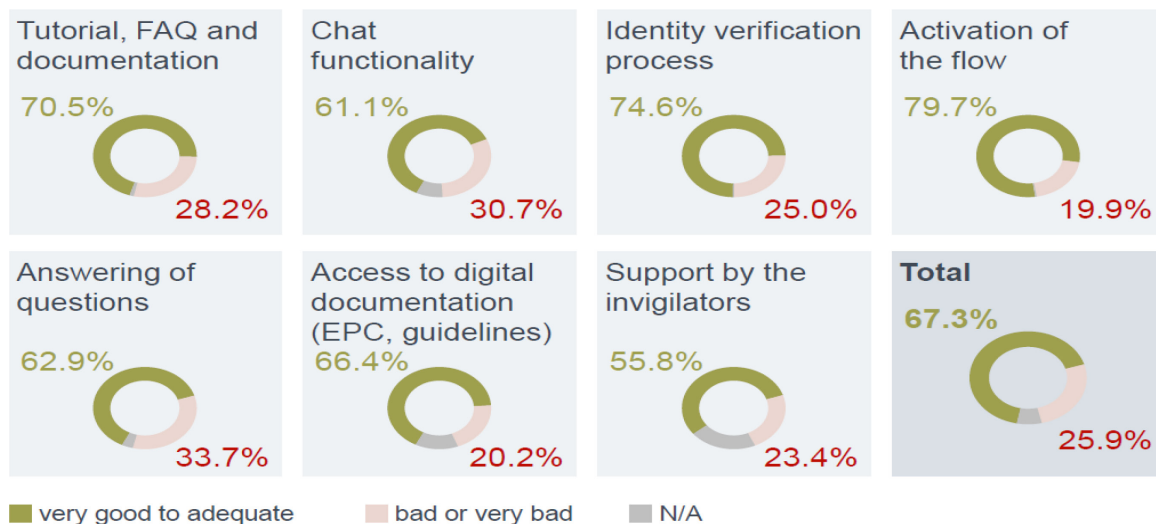
¹² Question 28 of survey 2.

¹³ EPO, *Survey. European qualifying examination*, 2019, p. 152.

Even if time pressure is a feature of the EQE – and there is no noticeable difference between the responses to the same question in 2019 and 2021 – training and familiarisation with the online format would improve candidates' experience.

3.4. Infrastructure

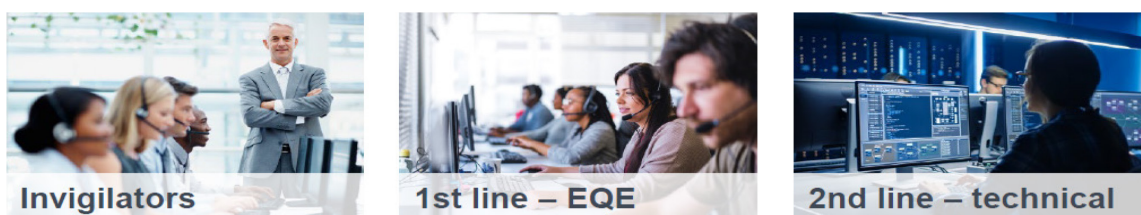
As far as the infrastructure is concerned:



Prior to the exam, it was explained that some corporate environments might include security features that could affect the performance of the system. Candidates were asked to test the system in advance and where necessary to ask their IT department to disable those features. The alternative option to avoid any risk was to take the exam in another environment, e.g. from home on a different computer. When candidates who took the exam in a corporate environment were asked whether they experienced problems due to corporate firewalls and security features, 34.6% of respondents indicated they believed this could have been the cause, while 65.3% of participants indicated it was not.¹⁴ The support group noted that the many individual issues experienced during the exam were reported by candidates who took the exam in a corporate environment or who had not taken the mock examinations.

3.5. Service assessment

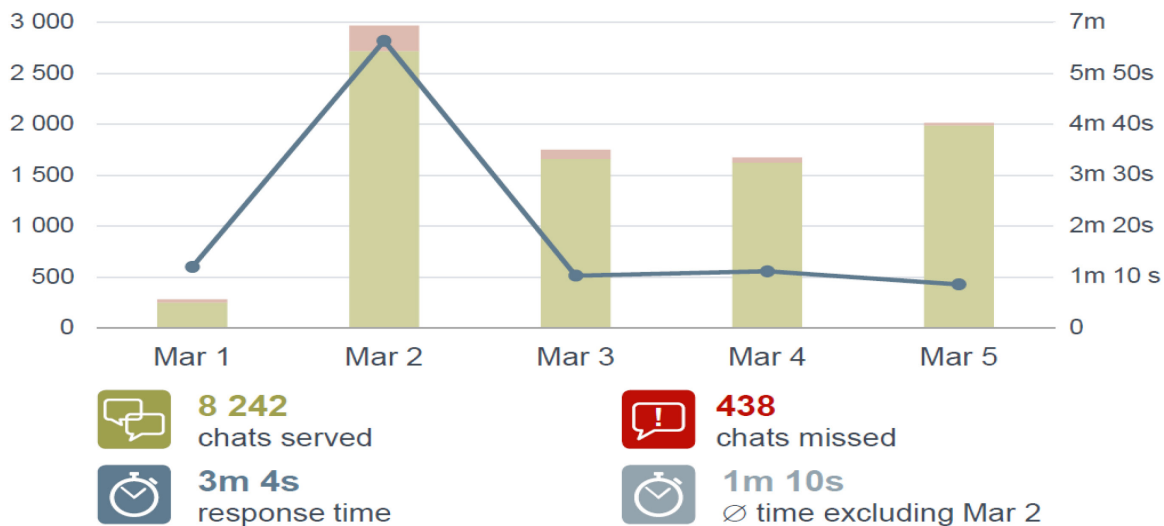
The EPO set up a bidirectional communication channel to address candidates' situations and to establish contact whenever suspicious situations arose. Three lines of support were set up:



¹⁴ Question 41 of survey 2.

During the EQE examination period, 8 242 chats were handled:

- The average response time throughout the week was three minutes and four seconds.
- Statistics clearly show the impact of flow D1.1 on 2 March 2021. That day, the response time for chats reached six minutes. Prior to the e-EQE, a response within 15 minutes had been guaranteed. On the other four days of the examination, the average response time was 61 seconds.



In parallel to those chats, 380 phone calls were also dealt with.

When asked about chat waiting time, 62.5% of respondents indicated that waiting for more than two minutes was not acceptable, and 51% said that 90 seconds was the maximum acceptable.¹⁵

4. General advantages of online examinations as indicated by survey participants

Survey participants were also asked for their personal assessment of online examinations in general terms and in terms of the potential advantages: the comfort of sitting the papers a place of one's choice, being able to use a computer to type the answers, saving travel time, saving travel costs, limiting health risks, avoiding issues with travel logistics (e.g. strikes, weather) and enabling a better balance between family and work.

¹⁵ Question 42 of survey 2.



On average, 73% of participants rated the advantages of online examinations from “very important” to “somewhat important”, while 10% rated them as “neutral” and 17% as “not important”.¹⁶

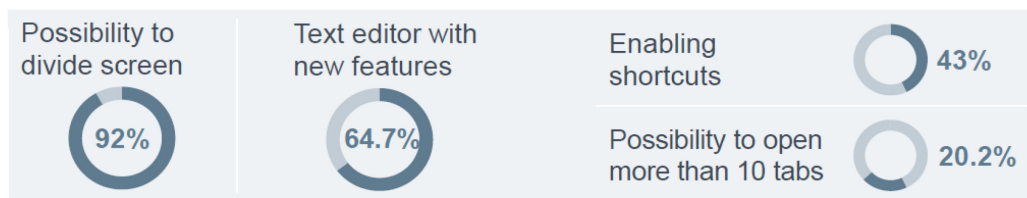
5. Changes

When asked about possible changes, 92% of the candidates who participated in the second survey indicated that they would like to have the option of a split screen so that they could read and compare documents, 64.7% would welcome a text editor with new features, 43% enabling shortcuts and 20.2% the option of opening more than 10 tabs simultaneously.

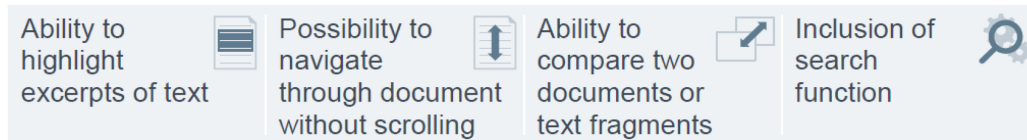
In their feedback, participants mentioned improving the text editor function. The most commonly requested features were, in particular, the possibility to highlight excerpts of text, navigate through a document without having to scroll up or down, compare two documents or text fragments and perform searches.

¹⁶ Full table:

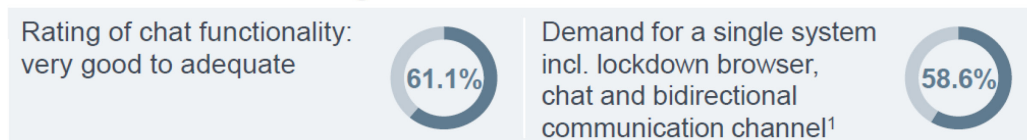
	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Neutral	Non-important
Comfort of taking the papers in the place of my own choice	37.40%	25.30%	13.70%	9.30%	14.10%
Being able to use a computer to type the answers	39.80%	25.50%	14.40%	9.20%	11.20%
Saving travel time	38.00%	20.60%	13.70%	10.00%	17.60%
Saving travel costs	32.60%	17.50%	16.60%	10.60%	22.70%
Limiting health risk	40.40%	18.80%	15.60%	9.50%	15.70%
Avoiding issues with travel logistics (e.g. strikes, weather)	36.70%	19.50%	16.60%	12.00%	15.20%
Better balance between family and work life	24.20%	15.10%	22.10%	12.50%	26.00%
Other	21.60%	4.60%	30.00%	3.20%	40.60%



Most important aspects regarding improvement of text editor:



Communication with invigilators:



61.1% of participants rated the chat functionality from “very good” to “adequate”. A similar percentage, 58.6%, felt that the experience could be improved by integrating the lockdown browser and the chat into a single lockdown system that includes the bidirectional communication channel.¹⁷

Among the features that candidates felt should be improved,¹⁸ the duration of papers (91.7%), the text editor (94.7%) and the format of the papers (92.9%) stand out. Other improvements which candidates were asked to rate were communication with the invigilators, printing, the scheduling of papers and training.

¹⁷ Question 37 of survey 2.

¹⁸ Question 45 of survey 2.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Printing	4.0%	7.2%	31.8%	19.6%	37.4%
Duration	1.5%	3.9%	19.7%	31.3%	43.7%
Communication with invigilators	2.2%	5.2%	41.3%	30.3%	21.0%
Text editor	1.5%	3.8%	24.2%	34.4%	36.1%
Scheduling of papers	3.1%	10.0%	47.7%	20.6%	18.6%
Training	2.5%	9.4%	46.2%	24.7%	17.2%
Format of the papers	1.9%	5.3%	24.0%	25.4%	43.5%

