

Review of the safeguards used to prevent disclosure of confidential information about exams by teacher-examiners

Response from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL has members in more than 90 per cent of secondary schools and colleges of all types, responsible for the education of more than four million young people. This places the association in a unique position to consider the bill from the viewpoint of the leaders of secondary schools and of colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL believes that the involvement of practising teachers in the drafting, production and moderation of exam questions and papers results in significant benefits to the education system in England and the quality of assessment in particular. These particular benefits cannot be achieved by relying solely on senior examiners who are not practising teachers. However we believe that Ofqual, along with awarding organisations should continually review the safeguards used and seek to enhance them on a regular basis where possible.
- 3 ASCL acknowledges that there are risks inherent in the process and strongly believes that all steps should be taken to minimise and manage these risks. However the significant benefits of involving teachers in the design and production of assessment materials must be balanced against the risks of any malpractice taking place.
- 4 It should be noted that examples of such malpractice are extremely rare and invariably isolated incidents.
- 5 ASCL recognises the need for professional input into the design and production of all external examination papers in order to ensure both validity and quality of assessment.
- 6 The purpose of an examination is to differentiate students by attainment. ASCL supports the role teachers as examiners have in designing, along with other educational and assessment professionals, for example from Higher Education, assessment items which are aimed to differentiate across the ability range.
- 7 Senior examiners will work to ensure the facility of the paper corresponds with the ability profile of the cohort being assessed. Teachers, with a detailed understanding of the specification as well as the classroom and how young people will respond to specific questions, are vital in this process as they possess day-to-day knowledge of students' capabilities.
- 8 This applies to external assessments at all levels e.g. 16-18 year olds for 'A' level. 14-16 year olds for GCSE.
- 9 Teacher-examiners have the relevant deep subject knowledge, through daily immersion in teaching it and as a result possess a greater understanding of the range of abilities of all students and what will therefore stretch and challenge different types

of students. They are in a strong position to understand, and adapt for, the nuances of SEND, EAL and are very aware of cultural bias and how to adjust for it.

- 10 A successful mark scheme is also key to ensuring an assessment is valid. Teachers have an appreciation of the range and variation of likely student responses, they understand over time what works, what is likely to be misunderstood and what is likely to be open to interpretation; as a result they are instrumental in designing an appropriate and inclusive mark scheme to match the ability profile of the cohort.
- 11 Practising teachers possess a much clearer understanding of how the specification can be taught to students with different levels of ability, in the context of a two-year programme and limited teaching time. They are familiar with the range of assessment styles used in schools and colleges and can support the development of high quality assessments. Practising teachers understand how students respond to questions and why they may fail to respond to particular types of questions if the language is inaccessible. As we move to more un-tiered papers as part of GCSE reform, this consideration of appropriate conceptual vocabulary for different students is even more important.
- 12 Teachers as examiners make a significant contribution to the wider teaching profession as many will progress to become senior examiners and remain in the profession. In this way, they are able to build up expertise over time and help develop the subject and its' future assessment. They provide both stability and a channel for subject-led development.
- 13 ASCL believes that steps should be taken regularly to review the overall framework of safeguards associated with this process. At the outset of recruitment, awarding organisations should ensure that potential examiners are clearly informed as to what constitutes breaches of confidentiality and they are aware of the severe sanctions that would be applied should there be any breach. These sanctions should be consistently applied across all awarding organisations.
- 14 Assessment materials must be secure at all times and the regulator should be in a position to monitor this.
- 15 ASCL does not support the publication of the names of practising teachers who are involved in the setting of questions. We understand there is already a succession planning issue and arguably there is a bigger risk to the system through publishing the names of examiners which would inevitably dis-incentivise teachers as examiners through concerns of being targeted and even possible personal danger.
- 16 Safeguards could be enhanced through the reintroduction of meetings for examiners to encourage greater collegiality and shared values. The opportunities presented by high quality face to face training could reinforce the consequences for individuals if there are breaches of trust.
- 17 The Examiner Capacity working group has prioritised the availability of career progression routes for examiners and this recognition of the valuable contribution teacher-examiners make, must continue as the whole examination system is dependent on this pipeline.
- 18 ASCL also recognises that this issue has system-wide repercussions for the profession and is keen to work with Ofqual, JCQ and all awarding organisations to develop a shared understanding and commitment in ensuring ethical and principled school and college leadership plays a major part in promoting and reinforcing integrity.

- 19 If there is a suspicion of malpractice on the part of a practising teacher involved in this confidential process, there must be the opportunity to raise concerns about potential malpractice, anonymously if required. The practice to deal with this could be similar to whistleblowing.
- 20 The attainment of students who are taught by practising teachers who act as questions setters must also be monitored closely in order to detect any irregularities.
- 21 The use of a question bank with a limited life shelf of up to two years or the production of a rolling series of complete papers could mitigate the likelihood of risk involved. Although there would still be a requirement for a senior examiner to ensure that the final paper constructed was balanced appropriately to meet the assessment objectives and syllabus content.
- 22 Examination papers are set well in advance; the final checking by senior examiners is usually about 6 weeks prior to the examination. This could be completed by someone not directly involved in preparing students for that particular examination series. In this way, this would protect the students and teachers themselves who are often determined not to advantage their students in any way.
- 23 ASCL remains concerned about the cost and workload implications of reforms brought in mainly for reasons of media interest and public perception. We would not want more responsibility to fall on Heads of Centres than there is already in the system.

Conclusion

- 24 ASCL believes that the input of teachers is uniquely valuable in this process; the current system is built on the professional integrity of teachers which has been a cornerstone of the teaching profession for a very long time. We would want to maintain this whilst continuing to promote good practice and taking the opportunity to strengthen and reinforce the range of checks and balances in place to preserve this integrity.
- 25 ASCL hopes that these comments are helpful and is willing to be consulted further on this matter.

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