

Exam contingency planning – Covering the absence of your exams officer

JCQ regulations require a head of centre/senior leadership team to have a contingency plan in place to mitigate the impact of a series of events. JCQ regulations (see *Instructions for conducting examinations* publication, section 15.3) state:

All centres must have a written examination contingency plan which covers all aspects of examination administration. This will allow members of the senior leadership team to act immediately in the event of an emergency or where the head of centre, examinations officer or SENCo is absent at a critical stage of the examination cycle. The examination contingency plan should reinforce procedures in the event of the centre being unavailable for examinations owing to an unforeseen emergency.

All relevant centre staff must be familiar with the examination contingency plan.

Consideration should be given as to how these arrangements will be communicated to candidates, parents and staff should disruption to examinations occur.

In our [March exams article](#) we addressed one of these events – the unavailability of a centre during an examination period and results day(s) due to an unforeseen emergency. In this article we consider the impact of the absence of the exams officer at critical stages of the exam cycle and how this can be mitigated with the implementation of robust contingency measures.

Key tasks within the exam cycle

To devise an effective contingency plan to mitigate the absence of an exams officer, we need to identify the key tasks which are undertaken within the exam cycle.

An exams officer is involved in critical exam-related tasks throughout the academic year and exam cycle – not just during an exam series. Therefore, contingency measures will need to address activity beyond an exam series and the subsequent results day(s).

The exam cycle

The ‘exam cycle’ outlines the five stages within the exams management and administration process that needs to be undertaken for each exam series:

- Planning
- Entries
- Pre-exams

- Exam Time
- Results and Post-Results

Key tasks

Within each stage, an exams officer undertakes a series of critical tasks to deadlines set by the JCQ and its awarding bodies, including:

Planning:

- Creating an annual exams and qualifications plan to identify the key dates, deadlines and qualifications taken in the centre
- Identifying key dates/deadlines
- Devising/updating exams-related policies
- Recruiting invigilators
- Sharing JCQ information with candidates, parents/carers and centre staff
- Preparing for the JCQ inspection(s), including readiness, question paper integrity, access arrangements and/or change of address/secure storage inspections
- The receipt, secure movement and secure storage of question papers and confidential materials
- Identifying access arrangements candidates and training facilitators
- The submission of access arrangements applications to deadline

Entries:

- Information gathering from teaching staff
- Checking entry/candidate details
- The submission of entry information to awarding bodies to deadline

Pre-exams:

- Timetabling
- Rooming
- Seating plans
- Training invigilators

Exam Time:

- Managing each exam day/session, including:
 - Removing and checking question papers from secure storage
- Preparing for the JCQ centre/general inspection

Results:

- Restricted release of results

- Disseminating results to candidates

Post-Results:

- Processing post-results enquiries to deadlines
- Receiving/disseminating information from awarding bodies
- Mention certificates ??

An effective contingency plan will need to ensure that the above tasks are addressed immediately and completed accurately and efficiently, and where required, to the appropriate JCQ/awarding body deadline.

Appropriate contingency measures

Before considering appropriate contingency measures to address the tasks listed above, three points should be noted:

- The contingency measures which a centre deploys should be based upon their particular circumstances, therefore, some of the suggestions provided in this article may not be appropriate to your centre
- The scale of the exams officer role – and therefore the contingency measures which you will need to consider – varies based upon the number of students and qualifications taken within your centre. For example, an exams officer within a college environment will be involved in the administration of a wide range of vocational and general qualifications, whilst an exams officer in an 11-18 centre will, very likely, deal with a greater number of students and qualifications than an exams officer in an 11-16 centre
- As good practice, the NAO strongly advises centres to adopt more than one contingency measure

1. Appoint, and train, an assistant

Consider a member of staff who may have capacity, and/or shows a willingness to undertake another role within your centre, to be trained to act as an assistant who can step into the exams officer role when required.

This individual should, at the very least, complete the [new exams officer induction and assessment module](#) and attend [new to role exams officer training](#) to ensure that they have a good, and up-to-date, working knowledge of examination system.

This individual can also then be utilised to support the exams officer during busy periods.

2. Maintain accurate information/documentation

Ask your exams officer to:

- Maintain a diary of their exams year. This could be a hard copy diary, but ideally, it should be an electronic version which can be accessed by a senior leader when the exams officer is absent. The online (user) calendar in The Exams Office Hub has been designed for this purpose.

Senior leaders should ask their exams officer to add tasks which have been undertaken either on a daily or weekly basis, with suggestions/comments/good practice hints and tips added. This will enable the individual who is acting as the contingency measure to be aware of upcoming tasks, meet appropriate deadlines, and take/avoid actions as advised by the exams officer.

- Update the centre's [Exams Manual](#) so that a senior leader has access to the latest documentation in the following areas:
 - General information – e.g. key dates; awarding body contact details; MIS provider guides/information etc.
 - Key documents – templates/forms, guides, checklists etc as used within your centre each academic term or within the stages of the exam cycle
 - Compliance – records of inspection reports
 - Policies – a repository for exams-related policies/procedures
 - Invigilation – a record of training given to invigilators and copies of certificates
 - Professional Development – a record of professional development activities undertaken/events attended by the exams officer/exams office staff

This will help a senior leader in ensuring that the most appropriate and up-to-date documents are being used, and that this key material is to hand during a JCQ centre inspection.

3. Acquire internal and external support

Internal support

If you are part of an Academy or Trust, explore the possibility of acquiring the support of an experienced exams officer from within the Academy/Trust chain to either support/undertake the role, if their capacity allows, or to mentor/advise/guide the member of staff in your centre who is undertaking the exams officer role as a contingency measure.

External support

It is very likely that your centre has a membership to The Exams Office. Ensure that you have log in details to access the Hub, as it is within this area that you will find a range of key documents which will offer support in the management, administration and conducting of examinations, and as applicable, copies of centre-specific exam-related policies and invigilator training records – these will be required during a JCQ inspection.

You should also have to hand the contact details for the awarding bodies whose qualifications you deliver. In the event of the absence of your exams officer, contact the relevant awarding bodies, explain that you are implementing contingency measures and ensure that the awarding body is contacted as often as required to acquire the correct information/answer any questions you/your temporary exams officer may have.

4. Utilise your invigilators

If you are forced to implement contingency measures due to the absence of your exams officer, then it will be imperative that you utilise existing staff associated with examinations to undertake as many of the exams officer's roles and responsibilities as possible. Above all other staff, this includes invigilators who are pivotal to the successful conducting of examinations.

Ensure that your exams officer maintains an up-to-date list of invigilators and their contact details....and that you have access to this (this could be kept within the Exams Manual, which should be kept in a secure location due to the inclusion of personal information).

Once you are aware of your exams officer's absence, contact all invigilators and arrange a meeting where you confirm their roles and responsibilities during an exam series.

Identify, or appoint, lead invigilator(s) who will be responsible for additional duties including:

- Arranging equipment for each exam room (if this is supplied by your centre)
- Setting up exam rooms
- Acting as the lead invigilator within an exam room

- Collecting, checking, arranging and packing candidates' scripts
- Returning all examination materials to the secure exam room/temporary exams officer

5. The role of the senior leader/line manager

A key contingency measure will be for the senior leader responsible for examinations and/or the exams officer's line manager to act as the co-ordinator to ensure that all tasks are completed.

Due to the scale of the senior leader role within centres, it may be unrealistic for a senior leader/line manager to step into the exams officer role as a contingency measure, but they must ensure that all tasks are completed as required and that the integrity and security of the examination system is maintained within their centre.

This oversight and co-ordination can only be provided if a senior leader/line manager has a good working knowledge of the examination system. In order to acquire this knowledge and understanding, senior leaders/line managers should take the following steps:

- Acquire access to the [Senior Leader/Line Manager Exam Support website](#) (there is no charge for this)
Download the [Checklist for Senior Leaders/Line Managers](#) which should be completed for each exam series
- Attend [training sessions](#) and [conferences](#) on an annual basis to ensure that you are [aware of the latest regulation changes, stakeholder updates](#) and the [key areas/tasks/deadlines associated with the exams officer role](#)

Conclusion

The [2023/2024 Exams Officer survey](#) revealed that adequate contingency planning in the event of the absence of an exams officer during a critical period (e.g entry deadline, during an exam series, results day etc.) does **not** exist in 31% of centres....even though this is a JCQ requirement.

However, as well as meeting JCQ regulations, a robust contingency plan also serves to strengthen the examination process within a centre, helping to maintain and protect the integrity and security of examinations and assessments.

If an exams officer is absent, particularly one who is experienced in the role, it can present serious challenges for senior leaders/line managers. The increased risk of key

tasks not being completed, deadlines not being met, candidates not being entered for their examinations (or being entered for incorrect examinations) and JCQ/awarding body requirements not being met, will put the centre at increased risk of engaging in malpractice.

A successful contingency plan will be one that is:

- Clearly thought out and covers all eventualities
- Planned in good time and involves the current exams officer (as they are best placed to train/support staff who may be acting as part of the contingency measures)
- Involves a number of individuals with roles and responsibilities clearly set out to ensure that all tasks are addressed and not to over-burden one individual...which could produce an additional risk

By investing the necessary time in creating a robust, fit-for-purpose and effective contingency plan, a centre is also addressing another – possibly more significant – issue...that of succession planning. The contingency plan can also ‘double up’ to address the situation of an exams officer leaving their post before a replacement has been found. As the 2023/2024 Exams Officer Survey revealed that 63% of centres do not have any succession planning in place/support for a new exams officer if the current exams officer were to decide to leave their role, perhaps this is another incentive for centres to ensure that a robust contingency plan is in place?