

Ofqual call for evidence: Teachers' involvement in developing exam papers October 2017

MEI response

(note: the response was submitted in several parts in response to questions)

MEI is a curriculum development body for mathematics; this response stems from our experience in mathematics.

MEI has worked with teachers to develop qualifications; this has included teacher input into specimen papers both as authors and as revisers. This does not have the risks associated with teachers having sight of live exam papers but this experience has made us realise that teachers have a strong understanding of the appropriate standards for mathematics examinations for all ranges of attainment; this includes understanding what language and contexts can reasonably be understood by the students. The standard and style of mathematics questions is critical for the successful delivery of mathematics examinations; if the papers are either too easy or too difficult then the mark distribution can make grading unreliable due to narrow grade boundaries.

Ofqual's international comparison work (ICOSSA, 2012) included several examples of countries which include teacher assessment as part of examinations and gave the example of the Regents Diploma which "involves teachers from state schools in every stage of the test development process. This includes writing test items, pre-testing, quality controls and standard setting". Looking at requirements for examiners for the SQA and the IBO shows that both organisations require examiners to have experience of teaching at an appropriate level. Any move to prevent teachers from involvement in examination setting in England would lead to risks in terms of reliability of examinations and having a sufficient supply of examiners to ensure delivery.

There have been suggestions in the press that teachers might write papers for specifications which they do not teach – this may sound like a solution which continues to allow teacher involvement while decreasing the risk of disclosure but, in a system where teachers choose specifications, their expertise and, more importantly, their preparedness to take on this extra work is likely to be greater for the specifications which they teach. For smaller subjects, which only have one specification, such a requirement would prevent teacher involvement in examination setting. Moreover, teachers who had set future examination papers for a particular specification would be prevented from seeking employment in schools which taught that specification and would be in a difficult situation if the school which employed them decided to move to a specification for which the teacher had set papers.

We note that some examination systems make use of question banks; this would not be possible for either GCSE or A level Mathematics in view of the complexity of rules regarding assessment objectives and sampling of content.

Ofqual's concern about this matter appears to stem from a very small number of cases reported in the press; care must be taken not to introduce stringent regulations as a reaction to this; the examination system needs input from teachers as well as HE.

The necessary confidentiality for all paper-setting work relies chiefly on the integrity of the persons involved. In any system there will always be opportunities for examiners to gain benefit for themselves or for students from revealing information about examinations. It has always been the case that compromising the security of examinations has led to severe punishment for teachers – often dismissal – and that is a powerful incentive for teachers to maintain the integrity of the system. Part of the responsibility of teachers with knowledge of confidential examination material is to develop an awareness of the restrictions this imposes on some of their contacts with students and colleagues.