

March 2020 blog

This month's blog is written by Lisa Longstaff, exams officer at Dunottar School, who details some of the main areas when preparing your exam room(s).

I always start my room planning with a walk around the school during the Autumn Term with our Head of Maintenance to look at our facilities and whether they will meet our exam requirements. We have a spreadsheet showing room numbers, broken clocks, additional furniture requirements etc. to help us focus on any issues and, if necessary, address them.

It is important to note that this year we have a Bank Holiday on Friday 8th May so rooms will need setting up on the Thursday 7th unless you plan to work over the weekend!

The JCQ state in ICE 11.4 that *'Any room in which an examination is held must provide candidates with appropriate conditions for taking the examination'*

It is vital to first pay attention to the heating, lighting, ventilation for each room to be used. I recall one year when it was so cold at the start of exams in mid-May that the school boiler had to be fired up again! Likewise, we can have a 'heatwave' during the exams series. It is useful to have a few portable heaters and cooling fans available so that all eventualities are covered.

Noise is another factor. Some background noise may be expected – and accepted - to some degree in your centre, but this must be managed in and around your exam rooms. All pupils must be briefed about the need for respectful silence in exam areas, although good signage will minimise noise as well. I have the tall roll-up signs from TEO Education for inside and will be ordering the swing frames signs for outside use.

Ease of access is vital too, particularly if you have candidates or staff that need to use a ramp, and appropriate nearby toilets. It is also useful to have a backup plan for any candidates who are unable at short notice to use designated exam rooms, including anyone suspected of suffering a contagious/infectious disease.

Wall displays will need to be removed or covered as they could be helpful to students and the JCQ Inspector will be noting anything of this nature. JCQ state in 11.6 that *'Display material (such as maps, diagrams, wall charts and projected images) which might be helpful to candidates must not be visible in the examination room.'*

With regards to layout of desks and chairs, *'The minimum distance in all directions from centre to centre of candidates' chairs must be 1.25metres'* according to JCQ 11.10. Check measurements so you know how many will fit in exam style. Don't forget to allow for additional desk/table area for exams staff to set out papers. This needs to be adequate so that within the room papers do not get mixed up when there are tiers involved such as with some core subjects. All candidates must face the same direction and there must be a seating plan for each exam, with any changes noted, and access arrangements identified.

Most of the points mentioned here are found on the [JCQ Checklist for invigilators](#) which *'must be issued to invigilators as part of their preparation and training'*. This will encourage extra vigilance throughout the exam series.

Whilst exams invigilators should be moving around the room, for longer exams it is helpful for them to have an occasional seat perhaps, which can be used by invigilators as long as the invigilator/student ratio is maintained. Although you may add a higher stool to help any invigilators who have a disability and need to rest occasionally, please ensure that they are aware that this stool must only be used if the invigilator/student is maintained. It is key that invigilators can view all candidates clearly at all times.

Clocks must be reliable and visible. The regulations state that every candidate needs to be able to see the clock clearly from wherever they are seated. In a larger space several clocks may be needed plus a larger one at the front. I am about to purchase a digital one from [The Exams Office](#) for our new assembly hall, and have opted to have a tripod so that it is more versatile, rather than just wall-mounted.

Other options include projecting exam details and a clock onto a screen. As I always opt for a backup plan, I would always ensure there is a white board with the same information on, this also allows for extra notes to be added or amendments if there are delays/interruptions/emergencies etc.

Remember that many candidates are not easily parted from their mobile phones – a fact recognised by Ofqual as a serious issue. So, how do you ensure that all mobile phones are collected? This year, our students are placing theirs, switched off, in boxes labelled for each room, before they enter the exam room. These boxes will then go to secure location for students to collect phones later.

You will also need to consider how your invigilators will summon help from within the exam room. The options include using their phone – which must be switched to silent - school-owned mobile phone similarly switched to silent, or walkie-talkies. If using phones do check that there is a sufficient signal within the exam room, I once had to walk around the main room until I got a signal, this is not the ideal situation if there is an emergency in the exam room.

If you have a large number of candidates it may be a good idea to have a member of staff outside the main hall/rooms to escort candidates to the toilets or remove them from the room for whatever reason. Ensure that this individual has not had overall responsibility for the subject department and/or preparing the candidates for the examination(s). You may provide a chair for them as they could have a long wait!

You will need to ensure you have enough signs printed for each exam room, I always have a couple of spares of the following:

- Mobile phone warning (outside room)
- Candidate warning (outside room)
- Fire evacuation notice (inside room)

Remember that all candidates must have their details visibly displayed on their desks for ID purposes. You should also ensure that any stationery, exam materials, seating plans, incident logs/books etc. are readily available. All these items should remain in the exam storage room when not in use, and that invigilators are informed that they must clear the exam rooms and all exam materials, including spare stationery and unused papers, at the end of the exam and return this to the Exams Officer.

Finally, do not permit any other activities take place in the exam room once it is a designated exam room, such as internal school tests/mock exams, revision or coaching sessions. Formal exam

conditions must be maintained once in place and as soon as the room starts to be prepared for exams no other activity is allowed.

There is a lot of attention to detail required in this role but, once we are well-prepared for all eventualities, the successful daily operation of exams is the reward!