

## **A summary of our involvement in the summer 2020 awarding process and looking ahead to the 2020/2021 academic year**

**The Exams Office** has a responsibility to provide transparency for its members and to keep them informed of the actions taken in relation to its interactions with stakeholders. Below is a summary of our actions in relation to the summer 2020 awarding process and our proposals for the 2020/21 academic year.

### **Summer 2020 awarding**

Once the announcement was made on 18 March that exams scheduled for summer 2020 would not take place, it was inevitable that the authorities would be faced with some very difficult decisions. The challenge facing the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual would be to ensure that candidates received grades which reflected their ability whilst maintaining the integrity of the examination system.

As a membership organisation, **The Exams Office** has a duty to its member centres to confirm its role in the decision-making process since 18 March.

### Advice

Despite our expertise in the management, administration and conducting of examinations and assessments, at no point prior to the decision to cancel examinations was **The Exams Office** consulted by the DfE or Ofqual.

As speculation mounted in the educational media over the staging of examinations during May and June, we wrote to Ofqual on 5 March with a suggested contingency plan which included:

- A strategy to stage examinations in May and June in line with social distancing requirements
- An offer to make our online **Invigilator Training and Assessment Module** available to all staff members in order to ensure that the necessary number of invigilators were trained and available to invigilate during May and June. This offer was made as we anticipated a shortage of invigilators as a significant number were likely to be classed as being within the 'vulnerable group' and may be required to self-isolate
- An offer to make our recently launched **New Exams Officer Induction and Assessment Module** available to all staff members to train and assess a member of centre staff to cover the role of exams officer in the event of an incumbent exams officer being unavailable to manage and administer examinations

This offer of support was repeated to the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) on 13 March.

Despite investing to increase the capacity on our server to meet the increased demand from users having free access to our training and assessment modules, on 19 March our offer was declined by the JCQ. We did not receive a reply from Ofqual, although perhaps this is understandable due to the events taking place at the time.

We offered our services in order to support the taking of some/all examinations during May/June. We felt that even if GCSE Maths and English examinations were staged, this would at the very least provide some reliable data for the current cohort on which further grades could be based. Also, and as it transpired, if schools/colleges were closed, or partially open, to non-examination students, there would be adequate room to sit examinations in line with social distancing requirements.

#### Stakeholder liaison and strategy

Beginning on 27 March, **The Exams Office** was invited to attend regular online meetings arranged and chaired by Ofqual. Other stakeholders present included the major education-based trades unions and associations. A further eleven online meetings were held up to mid-August during which consultations and their outcomes, and key messages were highlighted and discussed.

Our strategy during these online meetings was to offer expertise in the areas which were relevant to the exams officer role, and to provide feedback from our members – as we did in relation to the submission of centre assessment grades (22 May), and the possible delay in forwarding grade information to centres ahead of GCSE results day (18 August).

**The Exams Office** also ensured that exams officers were considered throughout the process, as proved when we wrote to Ofqual on 26 May urging them to include/mention the role played by exams officers in their communications – a request which was repeated during a phone call.

On several occasions, Ofqual consulted **The Exams Office** to acquire information in specific areas, such as the management and administration of vocational qualifications, Head of centre responsibilities and introduced us to the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) to encourage more collaborative working during 2020/21 and beyond.

In some areas, where there was a lack of information, for example, sharing centre assessment grades and rankings, **The Exams Office** took the lead and sought advice from organisations such as the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). This advice was then interpreted and published as guidance to members via a series of articles which were updated on five occasions over a four-week period. We also launched an 'Updates' page on 20 March which was made openly available to all users (not just members), and proved highly popular, as the central point to acquire links to the latest information from all key stakeholders.

Where we identified issues or had concerns with government strategy/advice and guidance, we contacted the DfE to highlight our concerns. For example, on 15 August, the DfE received three separate emails from **The Exams Office** to identify possible issues with the proposal to offer alternative sites and access to invigilators via its *Exam Support Service*, contingency measures to mitigate against similar issues during 2020/21, and inviting them to utilise our expertise moving forward.

Finally, with regard to our liaison with the awarding bodies, there was regular and very positive communication with the major awarding bodies (AQA, OCR, Pearson & WJEC) and their representatives. **The Exams Office** are fully aware, and recognise, the efforts made by the awarding bodies and their staff in supporting the awarding process, particularly their response to very late decisions and changes around GCE and GCSE results days.

### **Exams during the 2020/2021 academic year**

Like many stakeholders, we are anxious that a strategy is discussed and agreed regarding the staging of examinations during the 2020/2021 academic year. We want to see contingency plans in place which meet the needs of students, but which also address the impact on exams officers. We accept that the 2020/2021 academic year may be even more challenging than the events of recent months. We also accept that such a unique situation will require all centre staff to be flexible, and to go 'above and beyond' to ensure that the impact upon the current cohort is minimised. However, we also accept the additional workload and wellbeing of exams officers to be considered and addressed wherever possible.

**The Exams Office** has spoken with awarding body colleagues to highlight the following suggested strategy for examinations staged over the next 12 months:

1. Require subject staff to submit estimated grades as early as possible at the start of the new academic year so there is an indication of teacher expectations for students at a given point during the qualification. This may be repeated at another point during the academic year
2. Require centres to conduct at least one mock examination series under formal examination conditions. The head of governors, head of centre and the exams officer would confirm compliance in areas including the storage of question papers, taking examinations under JCQ regulations, and an examination which mirrors the duration of a final written timetabled examination in that subject. Questions would be set or advised by the relevant awarding body (this suggestion was developed in September 2019 to reduce malpractice in the exam room, and was shared with Ofqual via email on 9 April 2020)
3. Update Internal Appeals Procedures to confirm how mock exam scripts have been marked, moderated/standardised
4. Ensure that all centres have a strategy in place to deliver GCSE and GCE Maths and English examinations, at the very least, during the summer 2021 exam series
5. To confirm the process in the event of a local lockdown

We have arranged a meeting with the JCQ in the coming weeks to discuss the above and the plans in place to ensure that the impact upon exams officers during the 2020/21 academic year is minimised through thorough and advanced planning.

We have also asked the DfE to engage with us to ensure that not only are the views of the exams officer community represented, but also so that we can offer solutions to problems which may arise in the coming months.

Meanwhile, **The Exams Office** has continued to press ahead with the formation of the National Association of Examinations Officers (NAEO). This organisation will work alongside **The Exams Office** to ensure that the views of the exams officer community are represented, and that exams officers are supported in their role so they continue to deliver and support solutions in the management, administration and conducting of examinations within their centre.