

## ARTICLE

**Accessing the secure room and secure storage facility**

Jugjit Chima, CEO of the **National Association of Examinations Officers**, considers a range of good practice measures which centres could implement in managing access to the secure room to maintain the integrity and security of examination materials.

During the recent training events delivered by The Exams Office, a significant number of questions and queries from exams officers have focused upon the regulations concerning access to the secure room and secure storage facility.

With the last summer exam series taking place in 2019, and a recent update from JCQ in their *Instructions for conducting examinations* regulations in relation to the secure room, it is perhaps unsurprising that many exams officers are seeking clarity on who can access the secure room, the process for allowing access, and what can/cannot be stored in the secure room and secure storage facility.

If anecdotal information received by **The Exams Office** is an indication of the situation, then it is perfectly understandable as to why there may be a greater focus placed upon the use of the secure room within centres in the lead up to the summer 2022 exams series. There have been reports of the secure room being used for staff meetings, as an area to congregate at break times, the addition of desks from which non-exams staff are administering their duties and pressure from senior leaders to utilise the space for storing a range of non-examination related centre materials. Of course, these may be isolated incidents, but one breach of security is one too many when it comes to the handling and storage of confidential examination materials.

As well as a perceived relaxation in the regulations at centre level, we must also consider the number of new exams officers who have been appointed since summer 2019 and whether they are fully aware of the regulations concerning the use of the secure room and secure storage facility. It is also likely that less experienced exams officers will be more susceptible to influence and pressure to use the secure room facilities for purposes which they are not intended.

The JCQ regulations, as stated in section 3 of the [Instructions for conducting examinations](#) publication, are clear over the use, purpose and access to the secure room and secure storage facility. These include:

Secure room

- This must solely be used for the purpose of administering secure examination materials and must only contain exam-related material
- Mock examinations and internal school tests may be stored in the secure room but must always be kept separately from 'live' awarding body material and be clearly identified
- Access restricted to two to six key holders only, each of whom must fully understand their responsibilities as a key holder to the secure storage facility
- Access must be restricted, and staff named and approved by the head of centre must be accompanied by a keyholder at all times
- There must be at least two keys rather than one key accessed by two or more members of staff
- Centres must not keep a spare set of keys anywhere they can be accessed by members of staff who are not involved in exam administration. This includes in a cabinet or safe.

## ARTICLE

- Keys must either be kept on the key holder's person or in a coded key safe which is only accessible to the designated key holders

Secure storage facility

- This must only contain current and 'live' confidential material – this includes question papers in any format, including modified papers, advance materials (e.g. pre-release material), assessment material downloaded from an awarding body secure site and awarding body provided exam stationery (e.g. candidate answer booklets, additional answer sheets, graph paper, formula booklets). Please note, although it is good practice to store examination stationery in the secure storage facility, it is not mandatory, and therefore it must be stored in the secure room as a minimum level of security
- Past examination question papers, internal school tests and mock examinations must not be kept in the centre's secure storage facility
- Scripts awaiting packaging and/or dispatch to the awarding body/examiner must be retained in the secure storage facility

In recent years, JCQ regulations have changed to allow for a greater number of key holders to access the secure room and secure storage facility – an increase to a maximum of 6 key holders, from a pre-2020 level of 4 key holders. However, with this comes a need to ensure that the nominated key holders have been given access for the appropriate reasons and that they are clear over their responsibilities. To support this, the National Centre Number Register (NCNR) annual update requires centres to list the names and positions of those granted key holder access to the secure room.

To add further rigour to the process, **The Exams Office** has produced a template – the [Secure room/secure storage facility keyholder and access log](#) - which goes beyond the requirements of the NCNR by asking for additional information including (please note this document is optional):

- Confirmation of key holder access for **one or both** of the secure room and the secure storage facility (as it is not necessarily a requirement for all key holders to the secure room to have access to the secure storage facility)
- Names and job titles/roles of key holders
- Signature of key holders to confirm that they are aware of the JCQ regulations regarding the secure room/secure storage facility and their responsibilities
- Names, roles and signatures of those providing and confirming approval for access to key holders (e.g. head of centre, exams officer etc.)
- Names of non-key holder staff requiring access to the secure room and confirmation of approval provided by the head of centre (although the regulations do not require centres to list those staff named and approved by the head of centre to access the secure room to complete a specific task (e.g. change a light bulb) when accompanied by a keyholder)

The advice and suggested good practice from **The Exams Office** regarding a centre's secure storage is to follow these five steps:

- Consider and agree which members of staff require access to the secure room/secure storage facility – undertake this review on an annual basis

## ARTICLE

- If any members of staff are included as a key holder and they are not involved in exam administration, be very clear over the reason(s)/purpose for them being nominated as a key holder
- If a key holder is nominated as they may be required to perform very occasional maintenance tasks within the secure room (e.g. changing lightbulbs, undertaking portable appliance testing (PAT)), consider their inclusion within the 'key holder list' and discuss if they should be added as 'staff named and approved by the head of centre who will be accompanied by a keyholder at all times' if they need to access the secure room
- Not all key holders to the secure room may also need access to the secure storage facility, so be clear over who needs access to one and/or both of these areas
- Once key holders are nominated, ensure that they are aware of the relevant regulations and their responsibilities. This will be supported by completing **The Exams Office** *Secure room/secure storage facility keyholder and access log*

As we return (hopefully) to a summer exams series in 2022, one of the challenges for many exams officers and centres will be to familiarise themselves with the rules and regulations. This includes the areas in which where examination materials are stored. Failure to do so threatens the security of the examination and would further undermine the integrity of the examination process – and that is the last thing that anyone wants after the experiences of the last 18/24 months.