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The importance of a well-planned, comprehensive pre-exams candidate briefing

In our latest blog, Lisa Longstaff (exams officer at Dunottar School) considers the key areas which an exams officer should focus upon when planning a pre-exams candidate briefing.

It is rewarding for an exams officer, and their centre, to see the benefit that an effective candidate briefing can have on improving candidate behaviour and reducing the risk of malpractice.

You can rest assured that all the information you need to deliver to candidates can be found on [The Exams Office website](#), including useful templates, briefing information, and an animated Instructions for candidates video which covers the information provided by JCQ in their *Information for candidates for written examinations (Instructions for conducting examinations, Appendix 5)*.

Any candidate briefing for external exams which are run according to JCQ regulations, will need to include the information contained within the various [JCQ Information for candidates documents](#) and a focus upon malpractice and possible (indicative) sanctions – this information can be found within [JCQ's Suspected Malpractice: Policies and Procedures](#) publication.

JCQ has produced an infographic entitled [On your exam day](#) which could be included within any information which is provided to candidates in hard copy following the briefing. This infographic helps candidates prepare for their exams by providing information on what can/cannot be brought into the exam room.

It should be remembered that although mock/internal examinations may have provided students with an idea of the environment and conditions they can expect during an examination, this is very likely to be the first time that the current Year 11 and Year 13 students will have sat formal examinations, and listened to their first formal pre-exam briefing. Therefore, emphasise any conditions which will be different from the mock examinations, for example, the role of the invigilator or perhaps any low-level disruptive behaviour which was dealt with internally, but which must be reported to the relevant awarding body if it occurs during a formal timetabled examination.

If you have previously delivered a candidate briefing, you may update this, or create a new version using the resources and information provided by The Exams Office and JCQ resources. It must be remembered that this current cohort of candidates will very likely not have previously seen your presentation, and as long as you include the latest, most up-to-date information and instructions, then adapting a previous presentation will suffice...and save you time. Do not forget that some centre-specific information will also need to be included such as exam starting times, the emergency evacuation procedure, what to do if a candidate is late for an exam and how timetable clashes will be resolved.

The venue where the briefing will be delivered will need some consideration. I use our school theatre/assembly hall as this is also the main exam room. To ensure that all candidates attend, and are focused, I request that the Head of Year and all form tutors are present for the briefing. This is made easier as I deliver the briefing session during a morning assembly session prior to lessons, or during the time allocated for Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE). Form tutors are instructed to note who is absent so that they can ensure anyone missing receives the information as well.

A member of senior leadership – perhaps your line manager? – should also attend the briefing. If you are new to the role, and lack the necessary experience, knowledge and/or confidence to deliver the information to the students, then the expectation is that your line manager leads on the delivery of the briefing. Whether they lead, participate or simply attend the briefing, the presence of members of the senior leadership team emphasises the importance of the information provided to students.

It is good practice to make all the slides and information available on the pupil portal, and to make parents aware that they should also access this information and emphasise the importance of following the regulations to their son/daughter/child under their care. Any pupils who have missed the briefing should be directed to this information.

This year, I will be starting my presentation by showing The Exams Office's *Instructions for candidates* animated video to remind the candidates of this JCQ information – they are familiar with this information as it was also issued to them ahead of the November exam series and mock exams which took place in December. The video also gives me an opportunity to highlight to students the information which will be given by invigilators as part of their announcement prior to **every** exam.

I have updated my existing PowerPoint presentation with new images, updated regulations and the following centre-specific information:

- Start and end dates of the summer exam series for exams taking place in our centre, and information relating to contingency days
- The time by which all candidates should arrive outside the exam room for morning and afternoon examinations
- The rooms which will be used for exam rooms
- Equipment and materials which can/cannot be brought into the exam room. This includes transparent, unlabelled water bottle, clear and see-through pencil cases, etc.
- Seating arrangements. I vary the seating plan according to subjects, tiers and access arrangements
- The information which must be included on the front of their answer booklet(s) and any continuation paper (if used) and when this information must be completed.
- The exams in which support materials, such as periodic tables, formulae sheets or books, will be provided
- The role of the invigilator and the importance of paying attention to the announcement given at the start of the examination
- The actions to take if they are late/ill/absent for their examination – including making sure that they have the school number on their phone
- How specific situations during the examination will be dealt with – for example, supervised rest breaks, toilet breaks, what to do if you need additional paper or other stationery, feel unwell or perhaps need to take medication
- Remind students of the emergency evacuation procedure and that they are still under exam conditions whilst outside of the examination room. I also provide reassurance that the time taken by the evacuation will be added to the end time once we return to the exam room

- The instructions at the end of the exam – for example, the need to stop writing immediately when told to do so by the invigilator, checking that the front of their answer booklet has been completed correctly etc.
- A warning not to engage in acts which may be deemed as malpractice. This will include examples of what constitutes malpractice and indicative sanctions which may be applied by the awarding body for specific instances of malpractice
- A definition of centre supervision, and what candidates are/are not permitted to do when they are supervised during a timetable variation

My PowerPoint presentation also includes images of the JCQ [Warning to Candidates](#) and [Unauthorised items](#) posters, and an explanation of the purpose of each poster and the importance of following the instructions/information given on these posters.

It is good practice to have a register or record of attendance for your briefing. I also ask all students who have attended to complete The Exams Office designed [candidate declaration form](#) to confirm that they have received the relevant exam information – a document which may come in useful if they subsequently engage in malpractice or fail to follow centre specific instructions which they have been given.

The contents of this article were correct at the time of writing (March 2023)