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Planning for, and dealing with, the unexpected during the exam series

In our latest blog, Jugjit Chima highlights how exams officers should deal with seven such scenarios. This advice is also relevant for invigilators who may be the first point of contact in some of the instances detailed in this blog.

As exams officers put final preparations into place for the summer exam series, one area which will need to be considered is contingency planning. This will include planning for events (irregularities) such as candidates arriving late, or with an injury, for an examination, or disruption in the exam room. It is the responsibility of the exams officer to ensure that they are aware of the steps which need to be taken in the event of an unexpected event, and to ensure that these steps are in line with JCQ and awarding body regulations.

1. A candidate requiring an emergency access arrangement(s) at the time of an examination

If a candidate arrives injured, or with a temporary indisposition, for an examination and therefore requires an emergency access arrangement, it is important that the candidate is kept calm, comfortable, and under centre supervision from the required time while appropriate arrangements are put in place (candidates are required to be under centre supervision from 9.30am for exams scheduled in the morning session and 2pm for those scheduled in the afternoon session).

Alongside applying for any access arrangement which requires awarding body approval, the exams officer/SENCo should consider if supervised rest breaks would also be appropriate to ease the candidate's indisposition.

If the candidate has sustained an injury which may require an access arrangement with which the candidate is not conversant (for example, the use of a scribe), consideration should also be given to whether an application for 25% extra time is warranted.

It may be that a separate exam room will need to be allocated and arrangements made for an appropriately trained member of staff to facilitate the access arrangement on a one-to-one basis with the candidate, supported by the deployment of a roving invigilator.

As any application for temporary approval will be made using Access Arrangements Online (AAO), the candidate must sign (where able) a candidate personal data consent form and a data protection confirmation completed by the exams officer/SENCo. These must be kept on file – in paper or electronic format - along with the approval sheet, the supporting evidence (where required), the signed consent form and completed declaration.

If it is suspected that the candidate's injury or temporary indisposition will affect their performance in the examination, invigilators should be asked to record any relevant information/judgement on the exam room incident log. If it is then appropriate to apply for special consideration (Candidates who are present for the assessment but disadvantaged), a supporting evidence statement will need to be provided by a member of the senior leadership team and the candidate informed that an application for special consideration will be processed online and submitted to the awarding body.

2. A candidate arriving for an examination who is clearly unwell or extremely distressed

Again, try to keep the candidate calm, comfortable and, if required, under centre supervision from the required time (see scenario 1 above).

Exams officers should be aware that the candidate may require alternative seating or rooming arrangements, or an access arrangement - such as supervised rest breaks. If the candidate has to be re-seated, for example near the exit or at the back of the room, changes may need to be made to the seating plan.

If the candidate may need to leave the exam room temporarily during the exam, invigilators will need to be briefed so they can provide effective support to the candidate in line with JCQ/awarding body regulations.

If it is suspected that the candidate's condition will affect their performance in the examination, invigilators should be asked to record any relevant information/judgement on the exam room incident log. If appropriate to apply for special consideration (Candidates who are present for the assessment but disadvantaged), follow the required steps (detailed in scenario 1).

3. A candidate is absent from an examination

If a candidate is absent from an examination, exams officers should follow their centre policy to deal with the situation - this may include making every effort to determine the whereabouts of the candidate in an attempt to ensure that the candidate arrives at the centre as quickly as possible. (If an absent candidate subsequently arrives late/very late – refer to scenarios 4/5 below).

When a candidate is confirmed as absent from the exam, the exams officer/invigilator must record the absence on the attendance register. Note that also annotating the seating plan will act as a double check for confirming the absence in case of later query by the awarding body.

If the candidate's absence is authorised, it may then be appropriate for the centre to apply for special consideration (Candidates who are absent from a timetabled component/unit for acceptable reasons). A supporting evidence statement will need to be provided by a member of the senior leadership team and the candidate informed that an application for special consideration will be processed online and submitted to the awarding body.

4. A candidate who arrives late for an examination

Exams officers must be aware of their centre policy for dealing with candidates who may arrive after the start of the examination. They should also be aware of JCQ regulations which state that for exams lasting one hour or more, a candidate is classified as late if they arrive by 10am for a morning exam and by 2.30pm for an afternoon exam.... arrival after this time is classified as a very late arrival (see scenario 5). For exams lasting less than one hour, reference should be made to JCQ's Instructions for conducting examinations, appendix 2.

A candidate who arrives late for an exam may sit the exam at the discretion of the head of centre. If a late arriving candidate is permitted to sit the exam, they must be allowed the full working time for the examination.

If the centre policy permits the candidate to enter the exam room and sit the exam (and the candidate has missed the invigilator announcement, etc), the candidate must be informed of the regulations and any other instructions and announcements as given to other candidates – this may include the candidate checking for any unauthorised items in their possession and being told of any erratum notice(s).

Invigilators must mark the candidate as present on the attendance register and ensure that any relevant information is recorded on the exam room incident log (e.g. time of arrival, information/instructions given, etc).

5. A candidate who arrives very late for an examination

A candidate is classified as a very late arrival if they arrive more than one hour after the awarding body's published starting time for an exam which lasts one hour or more (if they arrive after 10am for a morning exam and after 2.30pm for an afternoon exam).

In such instances, exams officers should follow their centre policy for dealing with a very late arrival. If this permits the candidate to sit the exam, the time the candidate came under centre supervision must be recorded and the candidate informed of the regulations and any other instructions and announcements as given to other candidates – this may include the candidate checking for any unauthorised items in their possession and being told of any erratum notice(s). The candidate must also be warned that the awarding body may not accept their script for marking.

If the candidate is permitted to sit the exam, they must be allowed the full time for the exam and marked as present on the attendance register. Relevant information must be recorded on the exam room incident log.

The exams officer must submit Form JCQ/VLA (Report on candidate admitted very late to examination room) using CAP to the awarding body to the required timescale. The report must detail the reason the candidate arrived late (including any details of special arrangements made for the candidate to reach the centre), the actual starting and finishing times of the exam, the time the candidate started the exam and the time the candidate finished the exam.

6. A candidate suspected of or committing actual malpractice in the exam room

Malpractice can take many forms. If this involves disruptive behaviour, ensure that disruption to other candidates is kept to a minimum (this includes disturbance that may be caused by the actions of invigilators).

If a candidate is engaging in disruptive behaviour, they must be told to stop engaging in such behaviour and warned that they may be removed from the exam room. They should also be informed that their actions will be recorded on the exam room incident log and reported to the relevant awarding body.

Depending on the level of disruption, the invigilator may call upon the exams officer to deal with the situation immediately or report this at the end of the exam, whilst also instructing the candidate to remain behind in the exam room. The exams officer must reiterate to the candidate that a suspected malpractice report will be made to the awarding body and warn the candidate of the possible penalty an awarding body may apply (which could include disqualification). The candidate should be allowed the opportunity to provide a written statement. If the candidate does not take up this

opportunity, a record should be noted that although the candidate was given the opportunity to make a statement, they chose not to do so.

Form JCQ/M1 (Report of suspected candidate malpractice) must be completed and submitted to the awarding body and the candidate (and parents/carers where applicable) notified of the allegation/report (preferably in writing) and informed of their rights as the accused individual.

The candidate's script should be dispatched to the examiner in the normal way.

If other candidates have been disadvantaged by the candidate's malpractice, the exams officer may be required to process an application for special consideration for those candidates to the required timescale.

7. A serious disruption in the exam room (including emergency evacuation)

If there is a serious disruption in the examination room, for example a fire alarm, the candidates must be stopped from writing and instructed to close their answer booklets, whilst being reminded that they are still under formal examination conditions.

Invigilators must record the time of the interruption on the exam room incident log, and where appropriate, instigate the centre's emergency evacuation procedure.

As soon as practically possible after the disruption, or on returning to the exam room when safe to do so after an evacuation, the examination(s) must be restarted, allowing the candidates the full remaining working time. The displayed finish time(s) visible to all candidates must be amended.

Invigilators must record any relevant information and actions taken on the exam room incident log, including any judgement on how the disruption or evacuation affected the subsequent performance of candidates.

In extreme situations where the examination(s) cannot be restarted, the exams officer must contact the awarding body for guidance.

If appropriate, the exams officer may be required to process an application for special consideration for all candidates to the required timescale.

Conclusion

Every exams officer hopes that each exam session is completed without incident. However, in reality, this is unlikely and situations – such as those detailed above - may occur which impact upon individual candidates or all candidates within the exam room. In such instances, it is the responsibility of the exams officer and invigilators to be aware of how each situation must be dealt with in line with JCQ or awarding body regulations.

When a situation does occur, it is imperative that the integrity and security of the examination is maintained and that any relevant evidence is recorded on the exam room incident log. If exams officers are unsure of the steps which they must take to deal with a particular situation, they must consult their line manager/senior leader responsible for examinations or contact the relevant awarding body for guidance.

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