

Review of the safeguards used to prevent disclosure of confidential information about exams by teacher-examiners



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Executive Summary

Interviews were conducted with teacher-examiners who currently wrote, or had recently written, examination questions/assessments to consider:

- the extent to which the benefits of current practice, whereby some question writers and exam paper reviewers are also teachers, outweigh the risks;
- whether the current safeguards associated with this practice are sufficient; and
- if this practice continues, how current safeguards could be strengthened.

There was no consensus among the teacher-examiners interviewed regarding the risks and benefits derived from teaching and writing examination questions/assessments for the same specification. With two exceptions, those who currently taught and wrote for the same specification believed there to be no problem in managing the potential conflict between the two roles; teacher-examiners who taught and wrote for the same specification regarded this as essential in maintaining relevant, high quality examination assessments. The teacher-examiners who taught and wrote for the same specification were also concerned that preventing question setters from teaching the same specification would lead to a recruitment crisis in examination setting.

Teacher-examiners who taught and wrote for different specifications (whether by design or circumstance) believed that a separation of the two roles was the best way to ensure the integrity of the examination process. They did not share their colleagues' view that teaching and writing for the same specification was the only way to ensure high quality assessments; they all believed that the most important factor in ensuring high quality assessments was that those who wrote them were currently teaching the subject at the relevant level, or had very recently done so. This group (and two from the group who taught and wrote for the same specification) did not understand why there were restrictions on the delivery of INSET (defined in this paper as the training of teachers to deliver specifications) for those who wrote for a specification while teaching it was not. (See Appendix 3: General Conditions of Recognition June 2016)

A number of teacher-examiners expressed concern that pressure on teacher-examiners had increased in recent years, especially from senior management within their centres, and that social media added additional pressures. While some of the teacher-examiners who taught and wrote for the same specification expressed the view that the current situation worked well, breaches of confidentiality were rare and no further safeguards were required, that was not the unanimous view of this group. Others shared the more cautious approach of the teacher-examiners who did not teach the same specification and believed that at the very least new guidelines and

monitoring were required to ensure the integrity of the examination system.

From the evidence collected from the interviews, this research concludes that there are unacceptable risks to current practice, which must be addressed. While preventing those teaching a specification from writing examination assessments altogether would improve the level of security, it would undoubtedly cause other problems, especially in the recruitment and retention of question/assessment setters. An alternative approach would be to put in place more rigorous training, monitoring and confidentiality measures and to include heads of examination centres as well as examination boards and teacher-examiners as partners in ensuring the integrity of all aspects of the examination system.

Introduction

Twelve teacher-examiners¹ were interviewed for this research. Interviews were conducted by telephone.

The purpose of the interviews was to capture:

- the teacher-examiners' experiences of performing these dual roles
- any difficulties they have encountered in performing these roles
- any strategies they have deployed to manage any tensions between the roles
- their insights into the effectiveness of the safeguards currently used to prevent the disclosure of confidential information
and
- any proposals they might have to improve current practice.

The teacher-examiners interviewed had written either GCE or GCSE questions/assessments (and in some cases, both) for a range of examination boards; of the twelve teacher-examiners interviewed, three had written or currently wrote assessments for more than one examination board. The length of experience of the teacher-examiners covered a broad range. The least experienced had been writing examination assessments for a year and the most experienced had been writing examination assessments for thirty years. All of those interviewed were experienced teachers and examination markers before they were appointed to write examination assessments.

Of the twelve teacher-examiners interviewed, eight currently taught, or had previously taught, the examination specification for which they wrote assessments and four had never taught the specification for which they wrote assessments.

All of the teacher-examiners were asked the same questions, although the question schedule was flexible to allow exploration of points that arose in each individual interview (see Appendix 1).

¹ See glossary of roles in Appendix 2

The interviews: key themes

How teacher-examiners manage conflict

All of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification emphasised their belief that all teacher-examiners have a high level of integrity. It was stated unanimously by those interviewed (whether teaching the same specification or not) that the confidentiality and professionalism of those who wrote examination assessments ensured that breaches of security were extremely rare.

All of the teacher-examiners who taught their own specification were emphatic that no unfair advantage was derived by their own students. It was frequently stated that any teacher involved in marking examinations had the same advantage in understanding how to prepare candidates, and that all teachers have access to past examination papers.

Most of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification did not believe there was a problem with their own personal teaching style being reflected in the examination assessments they set because of the lengthy review process in development of the final paper, although one teacher-examiner said he thought the papers he wrote did reflect his own particular interests.

All of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification said they were able to keep their teaching and examining absolutely separate. However, there were differences in the ways in which they said they maintained the separation and questioning revealed some contradictions. All of them said they avoided 'question spotting' for examination revision which they would otherwise do if they were not the writers. They said they were meticulous in ensuring that all aspects of the specification were given equal attention; one commented that that any hint would mean candidates all wrote the same answers and so it would be known that they had been given unfair guidance. He believed that teacher-examiners who wrote for the same specification took extra care not to give anything away.

There were some contradictions in the responses of teacher-examiners on how far it was possible to 'forget' the questions that had been set. Most of those who taught the same specification said that they forgot examination questions because they were written so far in advance, but there were exceptions to this view. One teacher-examiner said he did not forget them because saw them so often, and another said he was reminded of the questions he had set when he was sent the mark scheme to check shortly before the examination. One teacher-examiner in this group felt very strongly that a change was required. He believed that it was impossible to 'wipe your mind' of the questions you had set, even though employing strategies such as ensuring every part of the specification was taught and revised thoroughly helped. He was also concerned about others involved in the process, such as revisers (those who take a fresh look at papers from the student perspective), who may also teach

the specification. Several other examiners (including both those who did and did not teach the specification for which they wrote) stated that it was impossible to 'unknow' questions that had been set, in contrast to those who claimed that the time lapse between writing and the exam meant they did forget.

All of the teacher-examiners who did not teach the specification for which they wrote stated that they were more comfortable with this separation. They could be sure that they did not have any conflicts and there could be no doubts about their integrity. They expressed a general view that if you teach and write for the same specification you 'know too much' and this makes it difficult to do the usual 'question spotting' in preparation for examinations. (This was consistent with the assertions of teacher-examiners who taught the same specification who emphasised that they avoided any 'question spotting'.)

One teacher-examiner who did not teach the specification for which he wrote assessments also expressed concern about potential conflict for those who taught their own specification when they were preparing mock examinations.

A few teacher-examiners who taught the same specification also mentioned the restrictions on the delivery of INSET by teacher-examiners (see Appendix 3 General Conditions of Recognition June 2016) and felt this was the wrong decision. They believed teacher-examiners could be trusted both to teach the specification for which they wrote assessments and to deliver INSET. This contrasted with the view expressed by teacher-examiners who did not teach the same specification, who thought if assessment writers were not permitted to deliver INSET, then allowing them to teach the same specification was anomalous.

The risks and benefits of writing and teaching the same specification

While there were exceptions, the responses of the teacher-examiners interviewed were generally divided according to personal experience, with those who both taught and wrote for the same specification emphasising the benefits and those who did not being more inclined to highlight the risks.

There was a high level of dedication and commitment to the quality and integrity of the examination process in all the teacher-examiners interviewed. The teacher-examiners' experiences of teaching and writing generally divided according to their own experience. Those who both taught and wrote for a specification mostly believed that the experience of being a practising teacher for the same specification as that for which they wrote assessments was invaluable and indeed was often viewed as crucial for writing the best possible assessments for all candidates.

Teacher-examiners who taught and wrote for the same specification believed that meant the assessment setter had an absolutely thorough knowledge and understanding of the specification, how it should be delivered and the level at which candidates would respond. Most teacher-examiners who wrote assessments for the

specification they taught thought that it would be potentially confusing and thus more problematic to teach one specification for a subject and write for another. It was felt that the knowledge and understanding of the specification could not be as good. However one teacher-examiner thought teaching the same subject and level would still have some benefits even if writing for a different specification and most thought that the experience of writing questions informed and improved their own teaching. One teacher-examiner said he wanted to write assessments that worked for all candidates and it was much easier to do this if you taught the specification.

Most of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification expressed concern at the prospect of teaching and writing examination questions/assessments being separated. Most of this group believed that teachers would then be unwilling to write exam papers, for the reasons given above. Some also pointed out in some cases there is only one specification across all of the examination boards.

Teacher-examiners who taught a different specification from that for which they wrote, either by circumstance or choice, generally believed that teaching the same subject was important, but teaching the same specification was not essential. All of the teacher-examiners interviewed, in both groups, were in agreement that it was essential that examination questions/assessments were set by practising (or recently retired) teachers who had a firmly grounded understanding of the level at which assessments should be set to be fully accessible to all candidates.

There was an often repeated belief (from both teacher-examiners who taught the same specification and those who did not) that GCE and GCSE examination questions should not be set by university academics or other subject specialists who were not practising teachers at the requisite level, as that would result in inappropriate assessments.

One teacher-examiner who had been teaching and writing examination assessments for many years and had never taught and written for the same specification thought the assessments you set inevitably reflected your own teaching style and that the only way forward was to ensure that no-one wrote and taught the same specification.

Another thought that allowing those who set assessments to teach the same specification was a greater risk to the integrity of the examination than delivering INSET, which was prohibited. This teacher-examiner also thought a teacher's own style would be reflected in the examination assessments s/he wrote and that would advantage their candidates. The same teacher-examiner (who admitted to an excellent memory) said it was impossible to forget questions that had been set.

Teacher-examiners who did not teach the specification for which they wrote shared the belief that personal ways of thinking and styles of teaching were inevitably reflected in the examination questions they wrote (not a view shared by those who taught the specification for which they wrote.) They also believed that even if questions were not remembered, then topics were.

There was absolute consensus among those who did not teach and write for the same specification that it was not necessary to write and teach the same specification. It was frequently stated that the most important thing was subject expertise and teaching at the same level. It was also often stated that there were generic benefits to being involved in the examination process that did not depend upon teaching and writing for the same specification.

External pressures on teacher-examiners

Most of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification said that senior management, colleagues and students knew that they wrote examination assessments, but that this did not present a problem. This expertise gave confidence in their teaching and was valued in centres. The belief was expressed that pressure to get good results was always great, especially in the independent sector, so that writing assessments added no greater pressure. There were, however, a few notable exceptions to this view, with two of the teacher-examiners in this group expressing serious concerns about the conflicts they experienced and the pressure that could be brought to bear by senior management in their centres.

A few of the teacher-examiners who taught the same specification deliberately did not share with students the fact that they wrote for the specification they taught, although all of them said that their students were aware that they marked for the specification. The teacher-examiners who also wrote textbooks said that once their students were aware of that, they were also inevitably aware that their teacher wrote examination assessments.

One teacher-examiner who wrote and taught the same specification said it was better if it was not widely known in a centre that a teacher wrote examination assessments. If students did not know it helped to maintain integrity. Another teacher-examiner said she had been subjected to considerable pressure by her head. She said she was asked why, in light of the fact she spent so much time out of school in her role as an examination question setter, all of her students were not achieving the highest grades. She also said that other colleagues in the same centre who wrote examination assessments had been treated in the same way. A number of teacher-examiners cited pressure from heads because of league tables, or in independent schools pressure from fee-paying parents. There was a view expressed by several teacher-examiners that pressure had increased in the last ten years.

Several teacher-examiners cited social media as increasing pressure and risk and contributing to the need for change.

Guidance teacher-examiners receive from examination boards

While many teacher-examiners expressed an appreciation of the steps examination boards took to ensure confidentiality and security, this was not experienced consistently. Most teacher-examiners cited the online examination paper submission

systems as examples of good practice, but there was inconsistency in how they reported practices in other areas, such as the collection of declarations of interests specific to writing assessments, training and general guidance.

All teacher-examiners said that they signed declarations of interest when they were marking centres where they taught or had another interest, but there was some uncertainty (not specific to any particular examination board) of whether a separate declaration was signed for setting examination assessments.

Most teacher-examiners who both wrote and taught the same specification thought the examination boards did enough, but a few thought there should be more training and more appraisals of writers where potential conflicts of interest could be discussed and addressed. Several teacher-examiners thought that there should be engagement between the examination board and the writers' centres too.

What more did teacher-examiners think could be done?

Some of the teacher-examiners who did not teach the same specification (and two teacher-examiners who did) expressed the view that doing nothing in the present climate was not an option, although there was no consensus on the way forward. The discrepancy between the prohibition on INSET and the open approach to teaching and writing for the same specification was cited again here. One teacher-examiner described teaching and writing examination assessments for the same specification as 'the bigger elephant in the room' and he expressed the view that there was an inconsistency here that must be addressed. Several teacher-examiners thought that closer links between heads of centres and examination boards would improve security and integrity. Others thought that examination boards should commission several examination papers at a time to create a 'bank' of papers. The examination board would then be responsible for the selection of papers for each examination series and the teacher-examiner would not know which paper would be used.

Primary areas of concern

In summary, from the evidence gathered in the interviews, this research has the following areas of concern:

Confidentiality

There were reported inconsistencies in the levels of confidentiality in examination paper and mark scheme processing. Most exam boards had secure online submission procedures which denied teacher-examiners access to examination questions/assessments once they were written and approved, but one examiner cited the example of being sent a mark scheme close to the examination which effectively 'reminded' him of what he had set. It is not known how widespread this practice may be across other subjects and examination boards.

Monitoring

There was lack of clarity in the level of monitoring conflicts of interest. While there was clear evidence that examination boards collected information from markers about centres in which they had an interest, there was no evidence that such information was routinely collected for question/assessment writers. A few teacher-examiners thought that they signed separate declarations of interest for their writing and marking roles, but were not sure. Most teacher-examiners were uncertain about what they had signed and it was therefore difficult to establish the policies and procedures of individual examination boards. There was certainly no evidence of any agreed procedure across examination boards for recording who was teaching and writing for the same specification.

Training

There was no reported written guidance documentation or specific training by examination boards in assisting teacher-examiners with managing any conflict between their teaching and assessment setting roles.

Support

It was reported that one examination board conducted appraisals for principal examiners/question setters, in which managing potential conflict could be addressed, but this did not appear to be the case for all examination boards. Face-to-face contact between examination board officers and teacher-examiners was reported as rare.

External pressure

Expectations for good results within a centre, especially from senior management, but also potentially from colleagues, students and parents which may place undue pressure on teacher-examiners. This is difficult to identify and quantify.

Anomalies between INSET and question/assessment writing

There is an inconsistency that is difficult to reconcile between the separation of INSET and question setting and teaching and question setting.

Conflicts that cannot be qualified

The difficulty in measuring how far writing examination assessments and teaching the same specification can effectively be separate activities for a teacher-examiner, or if his/her students are inevitably advantaged.

Summary of proposals of this research

In summary, one could conclude that to improve the security of examinations, the safest course of action would be to prevent any teacher-examiner teaching and writing assessments for the same specification. However, it is the opinion of this research that such a change could not be implemented in the short or even medium term without considerable risk. It is not known how many question/assessment setters currently teach the same specification, but certainly they could not immediately be replaced. Moreover, even in the long term, this may prove an unacceptable option because of the constraints it would place upon those involved. It may prove a disincentive to potential question/assessment setters who currently teach the specification; it may be problematic within a centre in limiting specification choice; if a teacher moved to a different school and in cases where there is only one specification for a subject.

However, the current situation is not sustainable. If prohibiting teacher-examiners from teaching the same specification is too problematic, it is the conclusion of this research that the following proposals should be considered:

- training and supporting guidance documentation to be provided by examination boards for all question/assessment setters and additional guidance for teacher-examiners teaching the same specification
- examination boards to keep documented records of centres where teacher-examiners teach
- post-awarding statistical monitoring of teacher-examiners' centres.
- multiple commissioning of question papers to enable the establishment of question paper banks
- contracts between examination boards and heads of centre where there are teacher-examiners, to promote a shared responsibility for confidentiality

These proposals would not deliver the same absolute safeguard as a mandatory separation of teaching and writing for the same specification, but they would address many of the issues raised. They would not eliminate all risk, but they would put in place a consistent guidance and monitoring strategy where currently none exists and would provide stronger safeguards for all stakeholders.

Appendix 1

Teacher-examiner interview questions

Semi structured interview intended to explore how teachers who write the assessments which they teach manage the inherent conflict of interest. This is not a rigid schedule and the interviewer should feel free to probe interesting points, adapt questioning and so on.

Assure the interviewee that all their comments will be treated in confidence and reported in such a way as to protect their anonymity.

- How long have you been writing assessments/exam questions?
- Do you teach the specification for which you write assessments?
 - If yes:
- How long have you been teaching the writing assessments in the same specification?
- Do you think that the assessments you write inevitably reflect your style of teaching?
 - If yes:
- In what ways do you think that could benefit your students?
- Do you or have you ever experienced a conflict as a result of being in the position of knowing examination questions?
- Do your students know that you write the assessments that they will be examined in at the end of the course?
 - If yes – does this make a difference in class?
 - If no – is this a deliberate choice?
- How aware or conscious are you of the particular exam questions due to be sat at the end of the year? Are you aware of them or can you effectively 'forget' them?
- Is that fact that you write assessments regarded as an advantage in your school/college?
 - If yes – why do you think that is?
- Do you feel that writing assessments adds any additional pressure on you (from head of department/senior management) to achieve good results?
- Do your colleagues in the same teaching department/teaching the same course know that you write assessments?
 - If yes – does this make a difference to anything?
 - If no – is this a deliberate choice?
- What sorts of things do you do to manage or reduce the conflict?
- How well do you feel it works?
- What safeguards does the exam board have in place to help you manage the conflict of interest?
- Have the exam board given you any guidance on how to manage the conflict?

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- Do they work? Could the exam board do more?
- Are there benefits to setting the assessments for the same specification that you teach?
- Would you prefer not to teach the specification for which you write assessments?
 - *If no to original question:*
- Is that because you were concerned that you would be conflicted?
- Have you always been in this position? Or have you ever set examination questions/ assessments for courses you have taught?
 - *[If yes – ask relevant questions from section A (in past tense) ; then continue with following questions.]*
- Are there downsides to not teaching the specification for which you write assessments?
- Would you prefer to teach the specification for which you write assessments?
 - *All:*
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

Appendix 2

Glossary of titles of roles used in this research

Teacher-examiner

A practising (or recently retired) teacher who also sets examination questions/assessments.

Principal Examiner

The examiner responsible for the standardising of marking for an examination paper (usually, but not always, also sets examination question/assessments)

Marker

An examiner who marks the question paper but has no role in setting questions

Reviser

Subject teacher who provides written comments on early drafts of question papers and provisional mark schemes

Appendix 3

From: General Conditions of Recognition June 2016

P64:

Condition G4 Maintaining confidentiality of assessment materials, including the conduct of specified training events

G4.1 Where confidentiality in–

(a) the contents of assessment materials, or

(b) information about the assessment, is required in order to ensure that a qualification which an awarding organisation makes available, or proposes to make available, reflects an accurate measure of attainment, the awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that such confidentiality is maintained.

G4.2 In particular, an awarding organisation –

(a) must take all reasonable steps to ensure that such confidentiality is maintained where it (or any person connected or previously connected to it) provides training or training materials in relation to such a qualification,

(b) must not provide or endorse any prohibited training, and

(c) must take all reasonable steps to ensure that any person connected or previously connected to it does not provide or endorse any prohibited training.

G4.3 For the purposes of this condition, ‘prohibited training’ is training –

(a) provided to Teachers in relation to such a qualification,

(b) at which a number of persons are present (whether physically or remotely by means of simultaneous electronic communication),

(c) where any one of those persons holds information in relation to the content of assessment materials or information about the assessment for that qualification, and

(d) where disclosure of the information to Teachers would breach such confidentiality.

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