

Running an efficient exam centre

The role of the exams officer

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Introduction

This section will help exams officers to manage their tough and demanding roles better. It also gives advice on gaining greater recognition and securing a higher profile within the centre.

There are four main sections:

- building communications with staff and colleagues
- securing time and resources
- administration
- career development.

There is no doubt that collaboration between senior leaders and exams officers can drive professionalism and reduce the burden for everyone involved in the exam process.

Running an efficient exam centre – The role of the senior leadership team explains how the active contribution of senior leaders can really enhance their centre's exams office performance.

Building communications with staff and colleagues

This section deals with the process of familiarising yourself with all those whose role impacts on the exams office.

Getting started:

- induction.

Growing your network:

- support for exams officers
- professional bodies
- developing contacts both within and outside the centre.

Forging links with staff:

- establishing clear lines of communication
- knowing where responsibilities lie
- developing close working relationships with special education needs coordinators (SENCOs) and additional learning support (ALS) managers.

Centre roles and responsibilities:

- A helpful table giving typical definitions of roles and responsibilities for those involved in the exam process.

Getting started

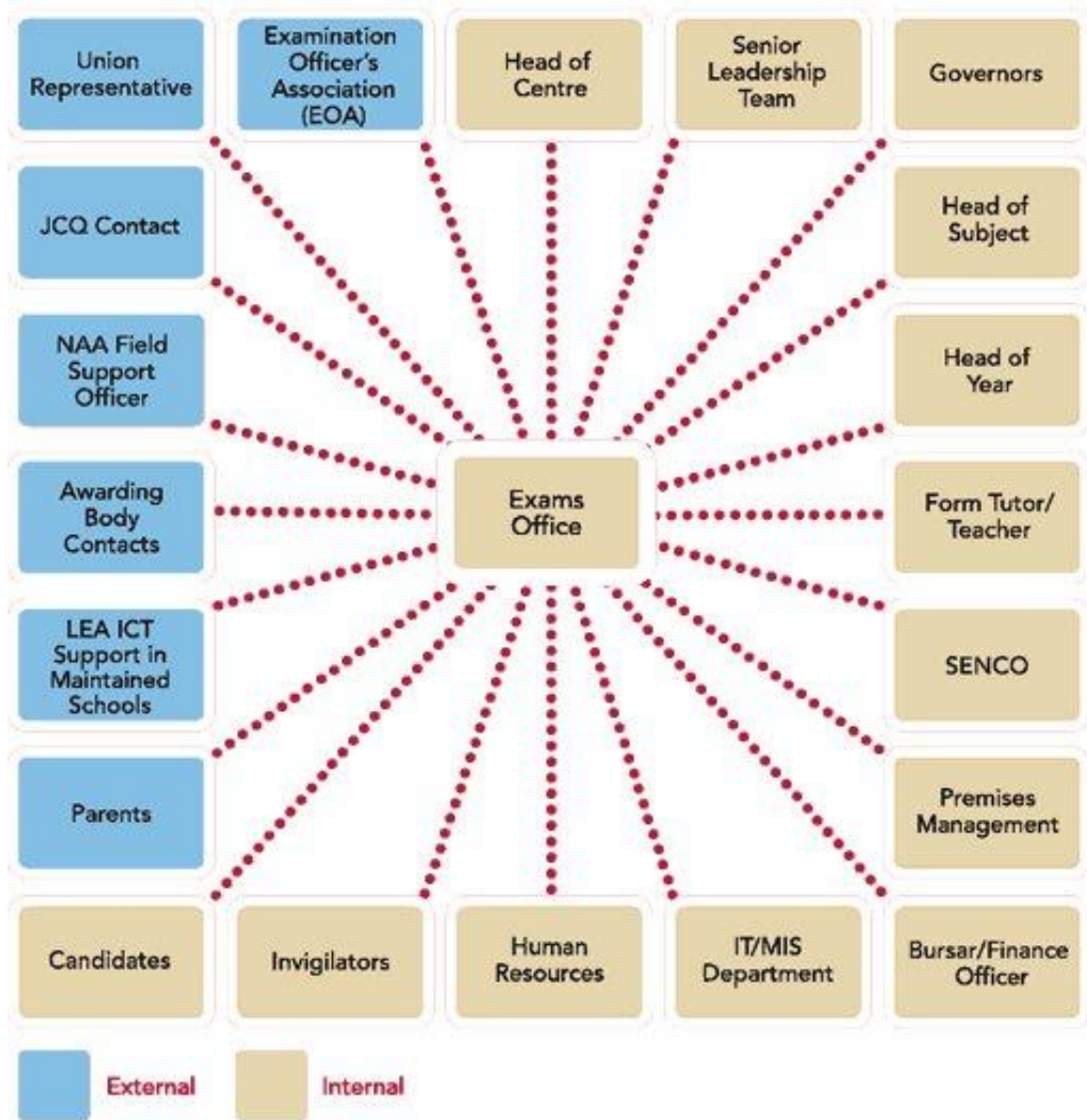
Your centre's formal induction programme is the ideal starting point in building clear communications channels with all staff with roles that impact on the exams office (see the diagram below).

Whether you are new to the post or an established practitioner, use this programme for introductions to heads of department and faculty, senior leadership and special needs and IT staff. Familiarise yourself with what they do and where they fit into the exam picture.

Good practice

- **Make sure you participate in your centre's induction programme.** Your programme leader should know your colleagues, arrange introductions and be able to explain how your centre works.
- **Meet all relevant staff** and know who your awarding body contacts are.
- **Read any guide notes** compiled for you by the previous exams officer or administrator.
- **If there is something you do not understand, ask.** The role is complex and you cannot learn it all instantly.

Exams officer communication channels



Growing your network

Regular dialogue with those around you – both colleagues and leadership – will help you stay in control and fulfil your role efficiently and well.

Even though yours may seem a lonely occupation at times, you are not on your own. Support is available from your line manager, official organisations like QCDA, the awarding bodies, the Examination Officers' Association, local authority remodelling advisers and from other exams officers.

Good practice

- **Know your line manager.** Arrange regular briefing meetings on exam procedures to voice any needs or concerns and to ask for help if necessary. Use this contact to raise issues at policy level and, when appropriate, suggest you join working groups or team meetings with the directors of studies, heads of years or departments.
- **Make contact with your regional QCDA centre support officer.** There is a team of 40 experienced centre support officers available to support exams officers and centres across the country. Your centre support officer is there to provide you with one-to-one support and advice on general exam issues.
- **Draw up a list of key contacts at the awarding bodies.** They are always happy to help with specific advice in relation to their exam procedures:
 - AQA has a team of regional officers across the UK who can provide you with support and guidance through centre visits and exams officers' network group meetings
 - Edexcel has six regional offices and also provides regional professional development training
 - OCR offers advice and support through six regional offices
 - WJEC
 - CCEA.

- **Join a professional body:**
 - the Examination Officers' Association (EOA) supports exam staff working in centres and its website has a forum where questions and discussion points can be posted for feedback from other members
 - the Association of Colleges (AOC) represents the interests of those working in further education colleges in England and Wales.
- **Meet local colleagues from other centres** to share good practice solutions. Use email and online forums to keep in touch.

Forging links with staff

For the smooth running of the exam cycle, you should establish clear lines of communication with all those involved. Make the most of all your working relationships by drawing together information from senior leadership, heads of department, teaching and support staff, as well as special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), bursars, awarding bodies, candidates, parents, guardians and carers.

As exams officer, you need to be absolutely clear where responsibilities lie, so get to know as many of these people as you can and develop means of communicating effectively with them.

As a guide to who does what at a typical centre, see centre roles and responsibilities.

Good practice

- **Build a partnership with senior leadership.** Communicate regularly to get agreement and manage breakdowns in information flows.
- **Manage and treat external invigilators** as you would your own internal centre staff. See 'Invigilation' for more details.
- **Develop close working relationships** with your SENCO or additional learning support (ALS) manager. Click the link below to download a document that contains essential information about working with your SENCO/ALS manager to ensure that appropriate access arrangements are made for candidates sitting external exams at your centre.
- **Identify staff with responsibility for exams** within every department.

- **Produce a comprehensive flow chart of who does what.** Publish it and circulate it to all colleagues involved in the exam cycle so they all know what is expected and what everyone else is doing. This will reduce the time wasted in unnecessarily doubling up work and effort.
- **Create a centre-specific exams calendar.**
- **Set up an exam area on your intranet site** if appropriate at your centre and use it to publish an exams calendar, changes to entry figures and any other key information. Involve staff in keeping it up to date. Also, distribute the updates in hard copy and post these on notice boards.
- **Arrange regular team meetings** with staff and senior leadership to keep everyone informed.
- **Work with tutors and pastoral advisers** on the most effective means of communicating information to candidates.
- **Make reasonable time allowances for teaching staff to respond.** Obtain copies of the master timetable so you know when they are teaching and not always able to respond to information requests as soon as you would like.
- **Devise a reliable method for communicating urgent information** at short notice to those who need it. You may need to use several methods at once to convey an urgent message – even sending it by hand.
- **Seek feedback from colleagues** on which communication methods work well. Welcome suggestions for improvement.

Centre roles and responsibilities

The following tables provide typical definitions of roles and responsibilities for the smooth running of your exam centre. Use them as a starting point to create a version that explains the functioning of exams at your centre and that highlights where responsibilities lie.

- exams officer/exams office
- exams officer's line manager

- head of centre
- senior leadership team
- head of subject
- head of year 10, 11,12, 13 and tutor
- SENCO (special educational needs coordinator)
- all teaching staff
- careers adviser
- facilities/caretaker
- IT support
- governor
- candidate
- senior invigilator
- invigilator.

Exams officer/exams office responsibilities

- Builds an annual calendar for exams and builds in proactive opportunities for communications with the SLT, heads of subject, tutors and heads of years, candidates and parents.
- Maintains the calendar and communicates regularly with all staff concerning imminent deadlines and events.
- Maintains a candidate-centred internal tracking system for entries, access arrangements, coursework, estimated grades, special consideration, results, cash-ins and declines, including, where necessary, signatures for audit purposes, log books for responses and spreadsheets for candidate data.
- Collates and communicates estimated entries for exams.

- Communicates the exam timetable to the SLT and all staff.
- Collates and communicates entries to awarding bodies using agreed data formats.
- Collates and communicates requests and decisions for access arrangements.
- Prints consolidated statements of entry from the MIS system and reviews against the awarding body summary of entries.
- Creates a detailed exam timetable for each exam season.
- Manages exam timetable clashes.
- Plans for extra resources needed (equipment, scribes, invigilation) for access arrangements.
- Plans for overnight supervision of timetable-affected candidates when necessary.
- Creates a personalised exam timetable for each candidate.
- Identifies and negotiates accommodation needs.
- Recruits, trains and deploys invigilators (may not apply at all centres).
- Ensures the invigilation structure is sound in each room.
- Creates seating plans for facilities/caretaker.
- Arranges for seating plans to be audited and signed for.
- Collates and communicates estimated grades.
- Collates and communicates plans for, and outputs from, orals and practicals.
- Receives, checks, collates and stores securely all exam papers.
- Creates customised exam timetables by room to ensure correct papers are distributed to correct candidates with correct time allowances.
- Collects all completed scripts and stores securely until despatched to examiners.
- Collates and requests appropriate special considerations.

- Recruits a team to support on results day minus 1 and on results day.
- Downloads and collates exam results.
- Checks with results received in the post.
- Clarifies immediately any missing or ambiguous data.
- Creates individual results envelopes.
- Collates and tracks post-results service requests – script photocopies, results enquiries, appeals/re-marks.
- Provides basic analysis of results to the SLT.
- Collates declines and late cash-ins.
- Collates and distributes certificates.
- Reviews training and other development opportunities with the line manager.
- Reviews and reports on all exam processes – what works well and what doesn't?

Exams officer's line manager responsibilities

- Manages exams officer on a day-to-day basis.
- Recruits and manages the induction of the exams officer.
- Ensures exams are on the SLT agenda and creates space for the exams officer to present.
- Supports the exams officer in defining roles and responsibilities across the centre.
- Works with the exams officer to define appropriate reporting and reviewing needs.
- Reviews cases for expenditure.
- Acts as a point of escalation.
- Supports career development of the exams officer.
- Undertakes succession planning to ensure continuity of exam support.

Head of centre responsibilities

- Is the public face of the centre.
- Manages exams effectively.
- Positions exam success as a 'whole centre' team effort.
- Advises on appeals and re-marks.
- Deals with grievances.

Senior leadership team responsibilities

- Defines exam policy and changes.
- Agrees any incremental funding.

Head of subject responsibilities

- Selects qualifications, specifications and options.
- Reviews any implications for funding and other consequences with the exams officer.
- Collates entries, estimated grades and coursework to agreed deadlines.
- Advises candidates on retakes, cash-ins and declines.

Head of year 10, 11, 12, 13 and tutor responsibilities

- Reviews with the exams officer all communications to candidates and parents.
- Creates opportunities for the exams officer to communicate with candidates and parents.

Special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) responsibilities

- Supports candidates in decisions concerning exam selection.
- Oversees the day-to-day operation of the centre's special educational needs (SEN) policy.
- Liaises with and advises fellow teachers.
- Manages the SEN team of teachers.

- Coordinates provision for pupils with SEN.
- Oversees the records on all pupils with SEN.
- Liaises with parents of pupils with SEN.
- Contributes to the in-service training of staff.
- Liaises with external agencies.
- Liaises with the headteacher.
- Reports to governors.
- Manages the annual reviews of statemented pupils.

All teaching staff responsibilities

- Must be aware of the centre's exam policy, exam/practical/coursework regulations and exam deadlines.
- Advise candidates in decisions concerning levels, retakes and cash-ins.

Careers adviser responsibilities

- Supports candidates in exam decisions relating to employment and university.
- Supports candidates in alternative university choices on results day.

Facilities/caretaker responsibilities

- Ensures exam accommodation is laid out to the exams officer's specification.

IT support responsibilities

- Ensures the exams officer's computer equipment is well maintained.
- Ensures functionality of the exams officer's exam software is maintained and where possible upgraded.

Governor responsibilities

- Decides (with the headteacher and the local authority if appropriate) the aims and policies of the school, and how standards of education can be improved.
- Decides the conduct of the school and how it should be run generally.

- Helps to draw up (with the headteacher and staff) the school development plan.
- Decides how to spend the school's budget.
- Makes sure the national curriculum is taught.
- Makes sure that all pupils with SEN are provided for.
- Selects the headteacher.
- Appoints, promotes, supports and disciplines other staff in consultation with the headteacher.
- Acts as a link between the local community and the school.
- Draws up an action plan after an Ofsted inspection and monitors how the plan is put into practice.
- Publishes annually a school prospectus for parents.
- Ensures that candidates are entered at the appropriate time for public exams.
- Controls the use of school premises outside school hours.

Candidate responsibilities

- Selects course subjects.
- Abides by the regulations.

Senior invigilator responsibilities

- Supervises exams and ensures that the guidelines and regulations for the integrity and security of the exam papers and procedures are followed.
- Works with the exams officer to build a rota of invigilators, including all contact details and an escalation/drop-out plan.

Invigilator responsibilities

- Ensures candidates obey the regulations of an exam room as laid out in the exam guidelines.
- Maintains security and confidentiality.

- Assists in the setting up of exam rooms.
- Ensures all candidates receive appropriate exam question papers and answer paper.
- Must be aware of any needs that candidates may have during an exam.
- Ensures answer scripts are collected in candidate number order and are supervised as required until they are delivered to the registry.
- Records attendance on the official exam registers.
- Ensures no inappropriate items are brought into the exam hall, such as personal stereos, revision notes or other paperwork, unless told otherwise.
- Ensures all candidates are aware of the pre-exam start information and of any erratum notice that may affect them.
- Ensures there is no talking or disruption for the candidates once an exam has begun.
- Ensures all candidates are seated before opening the question papers.

Securing time and resources

This section gives helpful advice on time management, exams office set-up and making sure the exams office is included in the centre's management information systems (MIS) strategy.

Planning and organisation:

- planning and managing schedules
- liaising with line managers
- using support staff.

Office space and equipment:

- the exams office working environment
- communicating exams office requirements to senior leadership.

Secure storage:

- example of an ideal exams office
- JCQ security requirements.

Centre software:

- making the most of exams office software
- commercial software packages.

Planning and organisation

The pressures on the exams office can be considerable at key points during the exam cycle, particularly when the exams officer is covering more than one role.

Time management is an essential skill, so you should plan and manage your schedule carefully. Use time well and you will be able to function effectively.

Depending on the size of your centre, you may need dedicated support staff during busy periods – so liaise with your line manager for help to be on hand when you need it.

Remember – the exams office needs to run effectively at all times, so don't struggle on alone.

Good practice

- **Some general principles of good time management:**
 - develop a personal sense of time
 - identify long-term goals
 - make medium-term plans
 - make use of a daily to-do list
 - make the best use of the time you work most efficiently
 - organise office work
 - manage meetings
 - delegate effectively
 - make use of committed time
 - manage your health; you work less efficiently when run down
 - tackle difficult or awkward jobs at the beginning of the day
 - keep meetings brief and focus on actions and agreements
 - anticipate deadlines and do as much preparation as possible.
- **Plan ahead and record what you need to do, and when, on a calendar.**
Estimate how much time you will need for each task, allowing enough contingency to avoid last-minute rushes.
- **Delegate to your support team** (assistants, invigilators, secretaries) to make best use of each member's skill set.

- **Allow time for candidate tracking.** Further education colleges catering exclusively for 16+ exams face a greater burden in identifying candidates, collating access arrangements and managing finances.

Secure storage of question papers

Question papers must be stored in a safe or cabinet in a securely locked room conforming to the requirements below (secure storage). This room must be in a fixed building, preferably with no windows and on an upper floor.

Requirements include some of the following:

- strong safe
- security cabinet
- metal cabinet with locking bar, bolted to wall or floor
- two or three key holders only
- secure room in fixed building, so not a Portakabin or similar, preferably on an upper floor with no windows
- walls, ceiling and floor of strong, solid construction
- solid door (a hollow panel door would require extra reinforcement)
- strong secure hinges
- security lock, such as a five-lever mortice lock
- two or three key holders only.

For a suitable alternative for a centre with large numbers of question papers to store, you will need:

- solid door with added metal reinforcement; (metal security screen may be used in front of door, i.e. roll-down shutter)
- heavy duty hinges
- five-lever mortice lock or similar

- no direct access from a corridor
- two or three key holders only.

Advice: where question papers are stored in a room with external windows, bars should be fitted or the room alarmed. If the room has a glass panel in or above the door, e.g. for health and safety reasons, the glass should be toughened safety glass. Where the volume of question papers is too great for secure storage in one room, you should use additional rooms within the centre which also meet the requirements for secure storage.

Most commercial software packages dealing with centre and college administration and management provide support for the exam function. They include:

- SIMS.net (www.capitaes.co.uk)
- QLS (www.distinction-systems.co.uk)
- Eclipse Learner Management and Administration System
- Facility CMIS (www.sercoapps.com)
- Civica (www.civica.co.uk)
- ebs (www.tribalgroup.com)
- Engage by Double First (www.doublefirst.com)
- Gold (www.pearsonphoenix.com)
- Integris (www.rm.com)
- PASS (www.wcbs.co.uk).

Centre software

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) (www.becta.org.uk) is a source of impartial advice on centre management systems.

Whichever system you have for exam functions, it should be linked to your centre management database for making, amending and tracking entries, and producing reports and timetables.

Good practice

- **Seek advice from other exams officers** when choosing the best software for your needs.
- **Ensure you are fully trained, and completely confident**, in the use of your chosen software package. Be aware of upgrades.
- **Link your exams office software to your centre management database.**
- **Compile a basic IT guidelines manual** to document your own IT procedures.
- **Keep a handy record** of all your software helpdesk contacts.
- **Maintained schools** should make use of their local authority's ICT support function.
- **Make sure reliable IT support** is available on site, just in case.

Administration

This section explores how the administrative function of the centre can support the work of the exams office.

Connecting with administrative services:

- making sure the exams officer is in touch at all times
- providing accessible exam information and data.

Contingency and succession planning:

- protecting against systems failure
- handing over.

Connecting with administrative services

You should ensure that the administrative functions of your centre support the work of the exams office.

Within the centre this includes the MIS from which you need effective and efficient processes for inputting, checking and amending student data, and producing accurate linked exam information such as exam entry records and timetables.

Administration is not solely to do with systems, however. People support needs to be in place too, on a day-to-day basis and particularly during busy exam periods.

Good practice

- Reception and switchboard staff should know where and how to forward your post, telephone calls and emails. Messages need to reach you rapidly. A walkie-talkie may be a good investment for staying in touch.
- All mail addressed to you should be marked 'for the attention of the exams officer'. Make sure all mail with a five-figure national centre number (NCN) goes straight to the exams office.
- Print your internal forms on different coloured paper so that they are easily identifiable. Involve exams office staff in evaluating the centre's administrative systems.

- Establish a process for requesting additional administrative support for the exams office if required. For example, caretakers/buildings managers are important in making sure exam rooms are up to scratch and HR may need to recruit and manage invigilators.

Contingency and succession planning

Because your work and the resulting data are vital to the smooth running of exams throughout the academic year, you need to have plans in place to protect against systems failure.

Your contingency plan should set about reducing the risk of disruption in the first instance, and ensure normal services can be resumed should a serious incident occur.

You should also prepare a succession plan that will allow another person to step in if you are unavailable.

Good practice

- **Prepare a 'disaster recovery plan'** in case of systems failure that will get the exams office functioning again as soon as possible.
- **Nominate, with agreement, a member of your exam team** capable enough to provide backup if and when you are unavailable.
- **Keep paperwork, calendars and flow charts up to date.**
- **Collate all contact details of awarding bodies**, special educational needs departments and of integral personnel such as invigilators. Make sure the information is easily accessible.
- **Plan and budget for a handover period** with your line manager if you are leaving the job permanently.
- **Consider preparing a brief handbook** on how to do the job and what processes you have set in place.
Refer to the *Exams office good practice guide, Part 1: The exam cycle*. Include:
 - how qualifications are structured and assessed
 - how to deal with awarding bodies and meet deadlines

- how entries are made
 - how penalties for late entry amendments or withdrawal are administered
 - how arrangements for access, transferred candidates and late arrivals are processed
 - how exam integrity is maintained
 - how results are generated, issued and validated
 - how the results enquiries and appeals procedure works
 - how update information is promptly despatched to all essential staff and candidates.
- **Notify your line manager that you have set contingency plans in place** should you be unavailable at any stage of the exam cycle.

Career development

This section deals with ways in which exams officers can identify opportunities to develop their careers.

Career development and recognition:

- setting personal goals
- reviewing training needs.

Training:

- keeping up to date
- external training opportunities
- allocating time for training.

Career development and recognition

The role of exams officer presents significant opportunities for career development, whether you work full time in the exams office or you combine the post with other duties within your centre.

Working in education is an excellent opportunity to find out about other career avenues in the sector. You should actively seek out training for both yourself and other exams office staff so that, collectively, you continue to function at your best.

Good practice

- **Set yourself goals** to further your career, for example, by undertaking training to plug knowledge gaps or weaknesses.
- **Discuss your personal career development** with your line manager during appraisals. Identify other career opportunities that may interest you in the future.
- **Regularly review** exams office staff's training needs, including IT and computer skills, ensuring they have access to available training.

Training

Everyone in the exams office will benefit from training.

Free one-day and online training courses from QCDA provide practical advice based on first-hand knowledge. They are available nationwide and have been developed in partnership with the awarding bodies and experienced exams officers.

Awarding bodies, such as AQA and OCR, run courses for exams officers and invigilators. AQA courses provide information on new developments and initiatives specific to AQA such as e-AQA. It also offers training for new exams officers, which complements the training provided by QCA and looks specifically at AQA's administrative procedures. Edexcel also runs courses for exams officers from time to time.

You should fully understand the workings of all the awarding bodies so you can inform colleagues of any changes.

Regional, national, face-to-face and online professional development training in all areas of centre management is available from SfE Ltd (Stands for Education). You can formalise your IT skills, too, by attaining the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) or a computer literacy and information technology (CLAIT) qualification. Don't forget to keep in step with the systems, software developments and upgrades used in your exams office to monitor and administer exams. If you are a non-teaching exams officer, you might consider studying for Edexcel's level 4 BTEC Professional Certificate in Planning and Administering External Examinations. See www.edexcel.org.uk – BTEC short courses.

Good practice

- **Attend appropriate exams officer training courses**, both on and off site.
- **Be aware of your centre's training policy** and champion the training needs of all exams office staff.
- **Refer to the awarding body websites** at regular intervals: www.jcq.org.uk, www.aqa.org.uk, www.edexcel.org.uk and www.ocr.org.uk. Check for any procedural or regulatory changes and ensure that you know what has altered since the last exam cycle.
- **Maintain your library of awarding bodies' publications** (handbooks, guides, publication catalogues, fees lists) by throwing away (recycling, where possible) earlier versions as soon as you receive new ones. Keep the latest versions to hand so you know where to find the information you need quickly.

- **Include the latest computer software developments** in your training programme.
- **Aim to put lessons learned into practice** as soon as possible.