

# **Inquiry into Examination Errors**

## **Evidence of the Association of School and College Leaders**

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents 15,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider this from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Qualification Regulator's Inquiry into Examination Errors (Ofqual 2011). Errors in this year's examinations have given considerable cause for concern to school and colleges leaders on behalf of their students and their institutions.
- 3 Most of our members did not discover that there were errors in papers until after the examinations had taken place and they were informed by exam officers and heads of department. Whilst ASCL understands (and supported) the rationale behind the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) instruction that teaching staff should not be present in the examination room, the change to non-teaching invigilators has meant that errors are not spotted as quickly as they would have been previously when subject teachers used to go into the exam room to look at the paper. Even if students believe that there is an error they do not always have the confidence to query this, especially with an invigilator whom they may not know. Non-teaching invigilators naturally assume that the papers are correct, and even if they are suspicious will usually not have the subject knowledge necessary to be sure that there is an error.
- 4 When errors were spotted early in an examination our exam officers did not find it easy to contact the awarding organisations (AOs) and to speak to someone who understood or could deal with the issue. It was therefore unclear what action if any should be taken and what advice given to students. Our members have therefore since been concerned that centres reacted in different ways, depending on whether they were able to speak to someone in authority at the AO. Some students were apparently given extra time, others were instructed to leave certain questions while those in centres unaware of the errors continued to attempt impossible questions.
- 5 Some students were extremely upset following the discovery of the errors, especially those for whom a university place depended on achieving high grades. The AOs were efficient in informing centres of the steps they would take in relation to the questions containing errors but that did not necessarily take account of the impact of an error in one question on students' performance more generally. Conscientious students, not realising there was an error, worked away at the question, spending longer on it than they should have and this could well have affected their overall performance.
- 6 Although ASCL received a number of comments from members expressing their dismay about the errors during the exam period, we have not received any indication from them following the issue of results to indicate that students were awarded grades significantly different from those expected in greater than usual numbers. We assume therefore that AOs have made a good job of compensating for the errors and ensuring that students have been appropriately graded.

- 7 However, there will be students who would have passed a boundary and received a higher grade had these errors not been made, and for some this difference will have real; consequences. And this does not excuse the unacceptable level of error in this year's papers. Our members were disappointed since it had appeared that the administration of exams had been becoming more efficient and more customer-focussed over recent years. The cost of exams forms a significant part of school and college expenditure and our members expect that they will receive good service in return.
- 8 This summer exam officers were told that they should apply for special consideration for all candidates who might have been adversely affected by the errors. This is a costly and time consuming process and exam officers felt that they were being penalised for errors made by AO officers. It was also difficult to do this for many A level students who had left by the time this advice was received.
- 9 AOs clearly need to re-examine their processes in the light of these errors and ensure that the setting and checking of exams become more professional and reliable. We understand that it is still the case for some subjects that a single senior examiner sets the entire paper alone. If this is the case then surely this practice should be re-examined and consideration given to having banks of questions which have been developed by a team of trained personnel and pre-tested. Consideration should also be given to the qualifications and training required for senior examiners who are responsible for setting papers for general qualifications and devising mark schemes.
- 10 I hope that this is of value to your inquiry; ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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