



## **An overview of writing questions in public examinations**

**Following recent media coverage about alleged conflicts of interests for those who set examination questions and also teach the subject, below is an overview and explanation of the process, which has been in place for many decades.**

**It is important to note that malpractice cases such as those in the media recently are extremely rare. The UK education and examination system relies upon the trust and professionalism of all those who work in it. There are clear and robust rules in place and stringent sanctions should any individual or organisation be found not to be following them.**

1. The exam boards represented by the JCQ<sup>1</sup> are committed to providing a robust, secure, and fair examination system. Operating in a highly regulated industry, they work to the highest standards to ensure integrity at every stage of the process.
2. The UK examination system is large, complex but also recognised across the globe as world class. Each year, over 1.6 million students sit 15.4 examination papers that are marked by over 51,000 teacher examiners and are awarded over 7.5 million grades - all within a 12 week window. Such a system requires the absolute professionalism not only of exam boards, but also of teachers, who are integral to ensuring rigour and fairness.
3. Question papers are devised 12-18 months in advance of them being taken and undergo thorough checks. Exam boards follow strict procedures to ensure that information about live question papers is carefully contained throughout their creation and storage, up until the examinations are taken. Regular inspections take place to ensure this is adhered to.
4. Highly experienced, trained and committed experts (“question setters”) write these questions and are, or have recently been, teachers within that subject. It is important that they have a good understanding of the particular specification being assessed as well as the skills and knowledge of setting questions that can differentiate the varying abilities of students. This is why teachers, with a detailed understanding of the specification as well as the classroom and how 16 – 18 year olds will respond to specific questions, are vital.
5. Approximately five, and in many cases fewer, questions setters know what is in a specific question paper. These examiners are necessary to check the papers for accuracy, robustness and that it meets the requirements of the specification as well as ensuring the questions being asked are accessible and appropriate for the target age group.
6. Each person involved in the process must complete thorough training from the exam boards and declare any Conflicts of Interest, which must be kept current. They also sign and maintain strict confidentiality agreements. The training includes support and guidance on

<sup>1</sup>JCQ is a membership organisation comprising: AQA, CCEA, City & Guilds, OCR, Pearson, SQA, and WJEC. It does not have CIE as a member.

how they should manage any arising conflict if, for example, they are currently teaching. Many hundreds of questions writers are used and cases of them breaking their contracts are extremely rare.

7. The professionalism, integrity, and commitment of these question setters, as with the 50,000 teacher examiners, is an essential part of our system. For example, an examiner would not be allowed to mark papers from their own school or college or any school or college where they have been recently employed or have any form of connection.
8. Because exam boards know the question setters personally and work very closely with them to offer training, support and guidance, it is also possible to identify if and when any breach in security takes place. For example, it is possible to scrutinise performance in a specific subject at a school or college where a question setter teaches. Indeed, teachers themselves want a fair system are often the ones to alert exam boards to potential malpractice.
9. Any suspicion of malpractice is investigated thoroughly, with the ultimate sanction that any individual involved is dismissed from the examinations board, can no longer work for any examination board and is also barred from administering any public examinations.

<sup>1</sup>JCQ is a membership organisation comprising: AQA, CCEA, City & Guilds, OCR, Pearson, SQA, and WJEC. It does not have CIE as a member.