

Teacher involvement in developing exam papers

Student focus groups and parent interviews



March 2018

Ofqual/18/6355/4

Contents

| | | |
|---------|---|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 3 |
| 2 | Method..... | 3 |
| 2.1 | Participants..... | 3 |
| 2.2 | Procedures | 3 |
| 3 | Findings | 4 |
| 3.1 | Awareness..... | 4 |
| 3.2 | Appropriateness of teachers as exam writers..... | 4 |
| 3.3 | Impact on individuals in the exam system | 6 |
| 3.3.1 | Negative impacts | 6 |
| 3.3.1.1 | Distraction from learning..... | 6 |
| 3.3.1.2 | Effects on integrity. | 7 |
| 3.3.1.3 | Disadvantages caused by others receiving disclosure. | 7 |
| 3.3.2 | Positive impact and related limitations..... | 8 |
| 3.3.2.1 | Exam success. | 8 |
| 3.4 | Confidence in the exam system | 8 |
| 3.4.1 | Evaluation of advantages and disadvantages..... | 8 |
| 3.4.2 | Overall confidence in the exam system | 9 |
| 4 | Discussion and conclusions | 11 |
| 5 | Appendices | 12 |
| 5.2 | Appendix A – Summary..... | 12 |
| 5.3 | Appendix B – Interview questions | 13 |

1 Introduction

During summer 2017 two teachers involved in writing examinations for Pre-U qualifications (an alternative qualification to A levels) disclosed information about the contents of the exams to their students. Following this, Ofqual published an interim report¹ which reviewed the following:

- the risks and benefits of the long-established practice of some teachers who write or contribute to exam papers also teaching the qualification
- the effectiveness of the safeguards used to reduce the risk of malpractice where a teacher has this dual role

The current report builds upon the interim report and examines the views of students and parents on the involvement of teachers in writing exam papers. Of particular interest are their views on the disclosure of information about exams to students. It should be noted that the purpose of the current report is not to identify cases of malpractice, but simply to gather student and parent opinions on the matter.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

In total, we spoke to 14 students, aged 16 to 18, studying AS/A levels in year 12 and 13 across two schools, a grammar school and an academy school. A convenience sampling approach was used to recruit students to take part, making use of schools local to the Ofqual office which is based in Coventry. From the grammar school, eight students, two were female, took part in the focus group. From the academy school, six students, five were female, took part in the focus group. The students were undertaking study in a range of AS/A level subjects. The school invited the students to take part, and we did not require that the students meet any criteria.

We also spoke to 5 parents of students currently studying for, or who had recently studied for, GCSE or AS/A level qualifications. These parents were not teachers themselves.

Participant anonymity is protected in this report.

2.2 Procedures

¹

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667530/Teacher_involvement_in_developing_exam_papers_and_other_confidential_assessments_-_Interim_report.pdf

All interviews and focus groups were held in mid to late January, 2018. We held two student focus groups, one at each school, and 5 parent interviews. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes. The parent interviews were conducted over the telephone at a mutually convenient time, and lasted between approximately 12 and 25 minutes.

A summary of the issue at hand (Appendix A) was shown to the students at the start of the focus group session. Parents were required to read the summary prior to the telephone interview. An Ofqual researcher used a semi-structured interview method with some predetermined interview questions (Appendix B) to facilitate discussion in both the focus groups and the parent interviews.

3 Findings

Analysis of the focus group and interview discussions revealed views regarding teacher involvement in writing exams and how this impacts confidence in the exams system.

Students and parents identified several different ways in which exam content disclosure might occur. These involved either intentional or unintentional divulgence of exam content, or intentional or unintentional change in emphasis of teaching on topics or questions that are in the exam. Students and parents also highlighted that the students knowing that the teacher was involved with writing the exam would impact upon the student-teacher relationship. For instance, some students may encourage the teacher to disclose exam content. The themes that came out of the discussions with parents and students are therefore set in the context of these types of exam content disclosure.

3.1 Awareness

Awareness of teacher involvement in writing exams was mixed across students and parents. Approximately a third of students and a couple of parents were aware due to the incidents in summer 2017, and a couple of students were aware because they knew of a teacher who was involved in writing the exam papers. The remaining were not aware until taking part in the study.

3.2 Appropriateness of teachers as exam writers

Overall, students and parents believed that teachers were best placed to write the exam, and this was preferred over alternative options, such as ex-teachers or university lecturers writing for the exams instead. It was believed that teachers were most suitable to write the exams as they have a better understanding and awareness of the specification, and how the students would interpret questions and give responses.

Grammar school student

I feel more confident, the fact that the teachers know the spec so intimately and have been teaching the same thing for years, I feel quite comfortable with the fact that they are writing the exams.

Academy school student

I think it really makes sense. I can't really see who else would write them as well because they know better than anyone how students respond, because they are working with them all the time, and the content of what should be tested, better than someone that's not involved with students.

Parent

I think it is a good idea. It's beneficial for the students, [for teachers] to reflect their knowledge, understanding and ability [in the exam questions].

Although students and parents believed that it was appropriate for teachers to be involved with writing exams, it was believed by about three quarters of those involved in the study that teachers involved with writing the exams would be highly likely to at least unintentionally amend their teaching in line with topics in the exam. A few students believed that the teacher would explicitly disclose exam content, or intentionally focus teaching for the exam.

Grammar school student

Whether they mean to or not, they may not weight everything they teach equally.

Academy school student

It's a natural instinct, and they might subconsciously do something that would give the students an unfair advantage.

Academy school student

[Teachers who write exams] know what's in the exam, and if they're teaching something that's not on the exam they might not spend as much time on it.

However, not all students and parents felt this way, with a few stating that they did trust teachers to act professionally and confidentially, and believed they were unlikely

to disclose exam content to the students or emphasise teaching on topics included in the exam (see 'Overall confidence in the exam system', below).

3.3 Impact on individuals in the exam system

Participants discussed the impact of teachers being involved in writing exams on those involved in the exam system. They identified impacts on students and teachers, for which several lines of impact were identified.

3.3.1 Negative impacts

3.3.1.1 Distraction from learning.

Further to the belief that teachers might restrict teaching to elements that are in the exam, a couple of parents and a few students identified that disclosure or emphasis of teaching on exam content may take away from teaching the breadth of the subject.

Grammar school student

I don't think exams are about doing really well in that exam, it's about having broad subject knowledge by the end of the course, and knowing a lot about it... I think if [teachers involved in writing exams] try and read into it the whole time, [they] might concentrate on one bit, and even if you performed superficially well on one exam and get lucky that's not showing good subject knowledge overall.

Parent

We would want to teach the students to play fair, and that they need to work hard to succeed. It is also important for the students to learn the whole curriculum, not just train for the exam.

A few students also suggested that knowing a teacher was involved in writing the exam might result in a disadvantageous learning environment. For instance, students stated they would likely infer all teaching as disclosure of exam content, which might be stress inducing.

Grammar school student

...If you do have a teacher who has written the paper, you'll be thinking 'ah do you think this means it will be on the exam'.

Academy school student

If I knew my teacher was writing exam papers it would really stress me out.

3.3.1.2 Effects on integrity.

About a quarter of students indicated that they would not welcome disclosure stating that receiving information about the content of the exam, or receiving teaching emphasising topics on the exam, would make them feel dishonest and belittle their own ability. These students also stated that if they received better marks or grades as a result of teacher disclosure or emphasised teaching this would not reflect their true academic ability. This led to fear that their inability to work at the standard expected of their achieved exam grade would be revealed in a later job or further studies at university.

Academy school student

I'd feel like I've cheated myself and that I shouldn't have got the grade I did get.

Grammar school student

Students who do cheat would be disadvantaged later on. Because possibly they get great grades that don't necessarily [reflect on their ability] ... so they might go on to things that are better than them.

3.3.1.3 Disadvantages caused by others receiving disclosure.

A few students also considered the possibility that students achieving higher grades as a result of disclosure of exam content might displace students who did not receive disclosed exam content. For example, they felt they might miss out on a grade or a place at university because they are competing with other students who have benefitted from this type of malpractice.

Academy school student

That person [who received information about the content of the exam] took your place, say [if] you were the last person in one grade and they pushed you out.

Academy school student

You could tell me what the question on the paper is going to be. Someone in [another school], they're not going to know that. Then I could get in [to university] over them because I've got [better grades].

3.3.2 Positive impact and related limitations

3.3.2.1 Exam success.

A few students and parents believed that having a teacher involved with the exam would likely result in better exam grades through either intentional or unintentional explicit disclosure of content or emphasised teaching. The students, in general, expressed that they felt a lot of pressure to achieve certain grades in order for them to successfully enter higher education in their preferred subjects and institutions, leading some students to welcome having a teacher involved with the exam.

Grammar school student

...it could help getting into university.

Grammar school student

There are a lot of people that just want to get the grade.

A couple of parents believed that teacher involvement in writing exams would have a beneficial impact on the teacher and students involved, *only if* any disclosure or emphasis of teaching on exam content directly resulted in better grades for the students. Some parents highlighted that disclosure or emphasised teaching does not automatically result in the students receiving better marks in exams. Rather, the student still has a role in using this information and applying themselves in class, their revision and the exam.

Parent

Teachers can teach to the exam as much as they like, but this doesn't mean the students will perform any better... the ability of the students is best represented in the exam, regardless of teacher involvement.

3.4 Confidence in the exam system

3.4.1 Evaluation of advantages and disadvantages

The majority of students and parents believed that the benefits of having teachers involved in writing the exam for which they are teaching outweighed the risks

associated with disclosure of exam content. In this evaluation, parents and students considered themes already discussed: the appropriateness of teachers being involved with writing exams and the *likelihood* of impact of malpractice on exam success. Both students and parents identified that teachers are best placed to prepare exam content (see above). They also highlighted that this type of malpractice is incredibly rare.

Academy school student

The cases are so few it's not exactly going to make a massive difference [to my own grade].

Grammar school student

There is a very small number of people who do get involved in this malpractice. ... [but] there are so many advantages ... I personally think [teacher involvement in exam writing] is a good thing.

Parent

Certain information is confidential, so these [instances of malpractice] are rare incidences that happen.

Moreover, a couple of parents identified that the likelihood of exam disclosure having a positive impact on the few who might receive it is unlikely. It was thought that even if a teacher did disclose the contents of an exam or emphasise teaching on topics covered in the exam, students would have to attend to the disclosed information, apply this to their revision and in the exam, and achieve a sufficient increase in marks to result in attainment of a higher grade (see above).

While these instances of malpractice were recognised as being rare, both parents and students, however, did not discount the severity of disclosure of exam content, neither for the small number of students who might benefit from it, nor the large negative impact that it could have for those who are disadvantaged by this.

3.4.2 Overall confidence in the exam system

Overall, the parents and, generally, students indicated that their confidence in the exam system is not affected by the knowledge that teachers are involved in writing exams. There is trust in the exam system, belief that those teachers involved in writing exams act professionally and with integrity, and confidence that there are reliable processes in place that remove or detect disclosure.

Academy school student

Teachers don't go into teaching just to cheat their way through it.

Parent

I'm sure teachers have an idea of safeguarding this information.

[Teachers] are responsible to make sure not to disclose to students and colleagues.

Whilst the majority of students had trust in teachers and the exam system, a few students stated that the process whereby teachers are involved with writing exams does concern them, especially when a paper is written solely by one writer. This was fuelled by the belief that students with teachers who have written the exam are likely to achieve a higher grade. This led to worry that this might result in competition for a qualification grade or place at university with students who might have had an unfair advantage.

Academy school students

It's an uncomfortable idea that one teacher is writing a whole paper.

Teachers just shouldn't know if their question is going in the exam or not.

Overall, parents and students, including those who had concerns over the system that teachers are involved with writing exams, accepted that there are straightforward processes that could be put in place to minimise this type of malpractice, namely processes that reduced the knowledge of items included in the exam. For instance, it was suggested that teachers be prohibited to teach the specification for which they have prepared the exam, or that a pool of test items is created from which a sample is used in the exam. Both of these methods limit the teacher's knowledge of exam content, but have limitations².

² These suggestions and related limitations are addressed in the interim report: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667530/Teacher_involvement_in_developing_exam_papers_and_other_confidential_assessments_-_Interim_report.pdf

4 Discussion and conclusions

In this study we gathered students' and parents' views on teacher involvement in exam writing. Although awareness of this issue was mixed, overall, both students and parents believed teachers were best placed to prepare exam content, and this was preferred over alternative options. Participants evaluated the positive and negative impact of teachers as exam paper writers, predominantly evaluating the appropriateness of teacher involvement in exam writing, exam success, and disadvantages to students who had not been disclosed to. Students believed that having a teacher involved in writing the exam would be advantageous for exam success. Parents believed that although there *might* be small mark gains in having a teacher involved in the exam, the likelihood of achieving a higher grade was small³. Moreover, both students and parents accepted that the event of malpractice of this sort is very rare, and affects a minority of students.

The perceptions of rarity of teacher disclosure of exam content and minimal likelihood of increased attainment as a result were pivotal in evaluating the effect of teacher involvement in exams on confidence in the exam system. Parents, and in general the students too, felt no impact of teacher involvement in exam writing on their confidence in the exam system. Parents and the majority of students expressed trust and confidence in the professionalism of teachers involved in exam writing to not breach confidentiality of the examination documents. However, both teachers and students did not discount the negative impact this might have on, what was perceived to be, a small amount of students disadvantaged by this type of malpractice. Those students who did express concern about teacher involvement in exam writing, however, were comforted by their beliefs that minimising this type of malpractice could be straightforward.

³ The extent to which exam disclosure results in the achievement of a higher grade is not clear and further research would be required to support or refute these beliefs.

5 Appendices

5.2 Appendix A – Summary

For the 2017 summer examinations, around 2,200 exam papers were written. The writing of exam papers requires substantial skill and experience and there are many factors that must be taken into account when writing assessment material. For instance, exam papers:

- need to be of an appropriate level of demand
- need to be accessible to a full ability range that the paper is designed for;
- must use language which is clear and intelligible to students
- must cover but not stray from the curriculum;
- must be able to be completed in the given examination time, and;
- must not be overly predictable such that the whole curriculum is not taught.

Experienced teachers have the detailed subject knowledge and understanding to be able to take all of these factors into consideration and have the insight as to how students are likely to respond to questions. This makes teachers well-placed to write exam papers, and they have traditionally been engaged by exam boards to do so. Exam papers may be written entirely by one individual, or multiple writers may contribute a number of items that form an exam paper.

The exam system clearly benefits from the contributions of teachers as exam paper writers, and there are concerns that the quality of exam papers may decline if teachers were not involved in their production. However, there is the risk that teachers who are involved in writing examinations may either intentionally or unintentionally disclose the contents of upcoming exams to their students.

In summer 2017 there were three incidents in which teachers who were involved with writing exams disclosed details of them to students who went on to take these exams. This is in the context of some 2,200 exam papers written for the summer 2017 examinations. Proven cases of inappropriate disclosure by teachers such as this are rare, with three cases in 2015, 1 case in 2016 and three cases in 2017, but this can be damaging to the integrity of the exam system.

We are interested in your views on the subject of teachers as exam writers. Any instances that you are aware of in which malpractice may have occurred i.e. where a teacher has disclosed the contents of an exam to students, either intentionally or unintentionally, should not be discussed with the researcher. If you are aware of any instances of malpractice and would wish to report it, you can find Ofqual's whistleblowing policy and how to report malpractice using the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofquals-whistleblowing-policy>

5.3 Appendix B – Interview questions

1. Prior to reading the summary were you aware that teachers can be involved in writing exam papers, for instance, have you known anyone involved in this or has your child/you (as students) had direct experience of being taught by a teacher who had written exams?

(Q2 if this is the first time they were aware of it)

2. What are your initial thoughts on finding out that some teachers are involved in writing exam papers

(Q3 if they previously knew)

3. When you first knew that some teachers were involved in writing exam papers, what were your initial thoughts about this?

In the summary we talked about the advantages of teachers' involvement in setting examination questions – that they are best placed to understand the demands of curriculum, assessment tasks, and communicate these in ways which are clear, interesting, and make sense to students.

4. Are there any other advantages we haven't mentioned? How important do you think these advantages are?

We've talked about the disadvantages of teacher's involvement in setting examination questions – disclosure of exam contents to their own students

5. Are there any other disadvantages we haven't mentioned?
6. How would these disadvantages **impact** on the **people** involved in the exam system, such as students, teachers, the school as a whole, examiners, and exam boards who award.
7. Does the involvement of teachers in exam writing affect your confidence in the qualifications system?
8. Do you think the advantages of having teachers as exam writers outweighs the disadvantages? Explain
9. Would you want to be taught/would you want your children to be taught by a teacher who was involved with writing the exam you/they are studying for?

We wish to make our publications widely accessible. Please contact us at publications@ofqual.gov.uk if you have any specific accessibility requirements.



© Crown copyright 2018

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: publications@ofqual.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/ofqual.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346