

Why Examination Invigilation doesn't work...

This article considers the importance of the provision of a robust examination invigilation service, the reasons why invigilation can fail to deliver (both to the examining organization and to candidates) and discusses some of the approaches that can be taken to address these in order to ensure success.

1. Understanding Invigilation

The efficient and appropriate management of examinations is essentially a key 'student service'. Having received excellent teaching and student support from their academic institution/examining body, candidates have every right to expect that their examinations will be managed by professional staff who will deliver an experience which is consistent, fair and upholds the regulations and procedures which have underpinned their studies. Unfortunately in some cases the experiences of examination candidates can fall far short of this.

The foundation of a high quality examination management service begins with a thorough understanding of the importance of professional invigilation and the nature of what is required in order to achieve this. Without this understanding within the examining organization it will be difficult to encourage, and indeed require, the demonstration of such understanding by invigilation staff themselves.

Good invigilation normally requires the demonstration of the following attributes:

- Attention to detail
- The ability to maintain concentration for long periods when nothing may (appear to) be happening
- The ability to react quickly, and appropriately, when something does occur
- Consistency of practice and objectivity
- Confidence – balanced with the understanding of when and where to seek assistance
- Teamwork

And as with other areas of professional life an appropriate appreciation of the issues relating to equality and diversity is essential, not least when delivering consistency of practice and objectivity.

2. The (potential) consequences – what can go wrong?

The consequences of poor examination management can range at best, from being inconvenient or unfortunate, to being at worst, serious in nature both for the candidates involved and the academic institution or examining body.

Poor invigilation may mean that the examining environment is chaotic and examinations do not start on time and/or follow agreed procedures. It can also result in significant levels of inconsistency – both between invigilators within the same examination team (particularly if poorly supervised), and between examinations. All of these consequences can in turn result in an environment which is unsettling for candidates and is unlikely to assist them in achieving their potential. Academic institutions and professional bodies are unlikely to welcome candidates ending their studies with this type of ‘student experience’, particularly in a competitive environment where publicity (positive and negative) is largely driven word of mouth via the speed of social media. Dissatisfaction that was once confined to a quick chat with friends in the local bar is now both global and persistent.

The more serious consequences of poor invigilation can include a lack of adherence to regulations and procedures (which in the case of professional body examinations may also include legal requirements), and instances of mal-practice (types of which can be increasingly sophisticated in nature) going undetected and/or unreported. All of these can have serious repercussions for the examining organizations involved.

If mal-practice goes undetected/unreported by invigilators not only will one or more candidates have attained their ‘achievement’ by unfair and/or illegal means, but the activity concerned will not necessarily have gone undetected by other candidates, and even if it has, candidates involved in such fraud have been known to subsequently publicize their own exploits. Aside from the adverse publicity resulting from such a situation, it is feasible that other candidates (aware of the fraud) could potentially launch an appeal against the examining organization on the grounds that examinations have not been conducted according to regulations. Such appeals do not tend to enhance either organizational reputation, or confidence in the examination system.

3. Factors Influencing Success

There are three principle areas which directly influence the extent to which an invigilation service will work well; people, processes and training. Addressing these issues will significantly increase the possibility that candidates will experience a high quality service ensuring that regulations and policies are up-held, and instances of mal-practice and other breaches of regulations are both eliminated/reduced and dealt with appropriately if/when they do occur.

3.1 People

3.1.1 Who ?

For some time it has been common practice across examining organizations within the UK higher and professional education sectors, to recruit external contract staff as both Assistant and Senior Invigilators (Supervisors). It is normally no longer the case that academic or

teaching staff are expected to spend several hours invigilating their subject examination and the candidates that they have taught. Teaching staff may undertake a small amount of invigilation for ad hoc tests such as Summer School examinations, but there is no longer generally an expectation that they will routinely undertake large amounts of invigilation on a regular basis. In any event such an approach would have been unlikely to be practical for professional body examinations, which frequently take place at regional or national examination centres some distance from where candidates may have been taught, and/or where teaching may have been distance or employer-based.

Aside from the fact that in a resource-challenged environment, it is now widely understood that long periods of invigilation are perhaps not the most appropriate use of time for academic staff, it is also appreciated that the employment of external contract staff is likely to increase the possibility that the service delivered will be both genuinely objective in nature and consistent in practice. This can inevitably be harder to achieve when invigilation is undertaken by individuals who will have taught and know, at least some of the candidates in question.

As a result of both the increase in the employment of external contract invigilators, and wider economic and professional developments, the nature of the 'invigilator workforce' has also changed in recent years. Where once invigilation teams would have been overwhelmingly comprised of retired education staff, it is now common to find that many include significant numbers of freelance professionals, both from within the education sector and from industries that may be naturally 'seasonal' or 'uneven' in their work patterns or opportunities. The growth in higher and professional education (and consequent growth in examining), has enabled many freelance and self-employed individuals to add invigilation as an additional 'string to their bow' in both financial and professional terms, and many of these individuals have considerable levels of invigilation experience.

These changes in the invigilator workforce have resulted in increased diversity – including an increase in the diversity of the skills and experience brought to the role, and opportunities to achieve consistently greater levels of consistency, fairness and professionalism.

3.1.2 Recruitment and Retention

The recruitment, and retention, of good quality staff is key to the success of invigilation. Some examining organizations have chosen to obtain invigilation staff through high street recruitment agencies within which the agency concerned agrees to provide a given number of individuals for a fee, normally based on a proportion of the hourly rate paid. For the examining body this can have the advantage of outsourcing recruitment thereby saving time and enabling a relatively large number of staff to be recruited in a relatively short timescale. However, it can be the case that the staff 'supplied' will not always have previous invigilation experience and/or fully understand and appreciate the nature of what is required. Also this option can be more expensive in the longer term if the staff continue to be employed by the

agency rather than directly by the examining body. Not only will the examining organization be paying an hourly rate which will be significantly above what the staff will actually receive, but staff loyalty (which can be an important factor in developing a strong team over time) is likely to remain with the agency.

Increasingly, academic institutions and examining bodies choose to recruit their own invigilation staff directly. This has a number of advantages. The institution retains more control over the recruitment process and is therefore more likely to recruit staff with an appropriate understanding of what is required. This can be tested at the application (and if used, interview) stage and individuals unable to demonstrate this are unlikely to be recruited. While there may be a higher perceived initial cost to the institution in undertaking its own recruitment this can be offset by both an increase in the quality of staff recruited and some reduction in the hourly cost. The institution may choose to pay their invigilators less per hour than when they were paying the agency, but still be able to offer more than the agency staff were actually receiving, thereby attracting better quality staff with more experience. Direct recruitment also enables the examining organization to grow and develop a group of staff who will work successfully with them year-on-year. This both mitigates the overall cost in the longer term and encourages among invigilation staff a depth of organizational knowledge – and loyalty (particularly if payment and working conditions are reasonable).

3.1.3 Invigilator Roles

It is generally considered appropriate to adopt a system in which a Senior Invigilator or Supervisor manages each examination room or venue. This delivers a clear line of responsibility – both for examination candidates and assistant invigilators for whom the first port of call in the event of any outstanding query or emergency, should be the Senior Invigilator. This type of system can also streamline communication between the examination office and invigilation staff. It does however require that Senior Invigilators clearly demonstrate an appropriate level of experience and skills and above all consistency in practice both within, and across, examinations.

Supervisory responsibilities in this context include:

- Ensuring that regulations and procedures are followed
- Making announcements
- Leading and supervising the invigilation team
- Dealing with all queries that arise – in particular those that are more complex/serious
- Resolving discrepancies
- Completing the register – and any other relevant documentation

Senior Invigilators will normally have substantial previous invigilation experience both with the examining body concerned and others, and be confident in managing people and situations. In the case of large organizations where issues of volume may result in additional complexity,

several years experience may be required before taking on a supervisory role. Senior Invigilators will normally be paid at a higher rate and may receive additional training.

3.2 Processes

The adoption of examination processes which are straight-forward and easy to follow can be key in achieving a good invigilation service.

For example, for most venues candidates will be required to sit at a specifically numbered desk (determined by prior allocation) and it is a common requirement for examination scripts to be collected in desk number order to facilitate cross-checking. For other venues and examinations however this may be unnecessary. Similarly, in some examinations candidates can choose to 'void' their script at the end by striking through and not submitting it, however the vast majority of examinations will require that candidates submit all written (including rough) work and 'voiding' the examination will not be an option. A range of other procedures will also apply to the consumption of food and drink, use of calculators, permitted additional materials and the taking of personal items into the examination venue.

Procedures should respect the requirements of the examining organization and be sufficiently comprehensive to ensure that the regulatory and policy requirements are met - but unnecessary complexity should be avoided.

It is common practice for the Senior Invigilator or Supervisor to complete an Invigilator Report Form. In some cases this may be minimal in nature and primarily require completion of the register (together with annotations on when candidates leave the examination etc). In other cases in particular where examinations are taking place at an external hired venue (where there may be less control over environmental conditions and Senior Invigilators may be required to receive and check examination papers and stationery beforehand) supervisors may be required to complete more detailed paperwork

3.3 Training

Given the potential consequences of poor invigilation described in section two above, a surprising number of examining organizations either do not provide any form of training for their invigilators (in some cases relying on the fact that staff have worked elsewhere and will hopefully have been trained there), or only provide minimal (in-house) interventions designed at best to ascertain whether individuals have read the Invigilator Guidelines sent to them and to highlight one or two key points.

This approach is invariably insufficient to adequately equip individuals to manage examinations successfully and is likely to result in invigilation teams which are insufficiently organized and lack the skills and confidence to respond to the full range of situations that they may encounter.

It is good practice to ensure that all invigilators receive a comprehensive level of training during the first year they work with the examining body (before examinations) and that as and when appropriate refresher training is also delivered. Indeed a number of Universities and other organizations make the completion of training a compulsory requirement before invigilators can be deployed to examination sessions – and also require year-on-year refresher training.

Clear guidance should be given on the responsibilities of invigilators during the examinations and a copy of the examination guidance to students (which can be referred to in the case of queries) should also be supplied. It is often useful to divide processes into those required before the exam starts, at the start, during the examination and at the end. Particular attention should be given to activities/materials that are permitted/prohibited (both on the part of candidates and invigilators) and what to do in the case of suspected mal-practice or an emergency.

Invigilators should be reminded that effective invigilation requires a pro-active approach and that during examinations they should not engage in any activity which will prevent them from focusing on the examination room. Such activities are likely to include: writing (other than what is necessary for the examination), reading, checking mobile phones for emails or messages and texting. Not only will these activities distract the invigilators concerned they will be noticed by other candidates. In Summer 2013 there were several cases of individuals posting on social media platforms, while ‘invigilating’, clearly indicating that they were doing so.

It is also useful if guidance to examination candidates reminds them that invigilators are required to up-hold regulations and follow procedures as part of their work and that they should not be subject to any abuse, aggression or other inappropriate behavior in the course of doing so.

Training may be delivered by the examinations manager (or equivalent). It can however also be cost-effective and a productive long-term investment to commission an external provider to deliver training in-house tailored to the specifications of the examining body/institution. This has a number of advantages. Not least in releasing time for those staff no longer required to deliver the training themselves, but also by enabling invigilators to benefit from a wide range of experience within the sector which is likely to draw upon current experience to demonstrate best practice.

Conclusion

Examination invigilation is a key ‘student service’ which candidates have a right to expect will be delivered to a high standard. Poor invigilation will potentially have serious consequences for both candidates and examining organizations. It is possible to identify the factors directly

influencing the success of this service and to appropriate address these, While this may require (initial) investment it is likely to result in a professional and robust service in which candidates, examining bodies and other stakeholders can have confidence.

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About the Author

Sue Carrette has over fifteen years experience within the field of examination management including; the design and delivery of bespoke training programmes for invigilators, advisory work with examining organizations, and current examination supervision for the University of London and the College of Policing (the professional body for UK policing).

In addition Sue Carrette Consultancy delivers a range of developmental and consultancy services primarily to the higher and professional education sectors. Sue has worked within higher and professional education for over 20 years and has held posts with a variety of universities and related organizations.

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