

December 2017

Planning for submitting entries is well underway...

It is around this time of year that many of us hear that all too familiar questions from some (less informed) colleagues - "What do you do now?" What I think they mean is - "Last summer is a distant memory and it's a while until next summer, so what work have you got to do in the autumn and winter months? However, our wry smile in response to this question reveals the truth - we have plenty to do at this time of the year, and there is never a minute to spare.

In my centre, at the beginning of November we conducted a small number of CAIE IGCSE First Language English exams plus a small number of GCSE Maths re-sit exams for our Year 12 students who did not quite achieve a grade 4 or 5 in summer 2017. Hopefully they will have managed to raise the bar that little bit extra and will have achieved the required grade when they get their results in January 2018. We have also hosted a handful of students sitting Oxbridge admissions tests and even with small entry numbers these tests require significant work as the regulations for Cambridge Assessments are different, from the JCQ ICE regulations. It certainly keeps me on my toes, making sure I have done everything correctly.

Another major job for November has been receiving and checking the GCSE and A level certificates for the summer 2017 exams. At our school each student's results are put in a labelled envelope along with a cover note warning students of the cost of replacing lost certificates and an overview of results for our school. The GCSE Presentation Evening takes place towards the end of November, and for the first time we are planning to hold our A level Presentation Evening in January, rather than December, in the hope that more students are still home from university and will be able to attend. Even though it is not contained within my job description I really like to go and help at the Presentation Evenings; I feel that they mark the end of the exam cycle and that I have played a part in supporting our candidates...and the wine and nibbles are a bonus too!

We will be running internal Year 11 and 13 mock exams at the end of November / beginning of December so, having drawn up the master timetables, I have been busy creating seating plans and booking invigilators, scribes, readers and appropriate rooms. This is when you realise the importance of forging good relationships with everyone in school - from site staff to SLT.

We follow the JCQ ICE regulations for all our formal mock exams so our students become familiar with the way exams are conducted and, hopefully, the 'real exams' are not quite so daunting for them. Our SENCO will also use any extra information revealed during mocks to add to the picture of need for students needing exam access arrangements.

Although it is not my decision when the internal exams take place, personally I like the fact that they are finished well before the end of the Christmas term. This gives me ample time to download the basedata for next summer (available from the exam board websites now) and import it into my MIS system.

My plan for the final week or so of December is to create entry mark sheets for all the exam entries that I think we will be making next summer. I collect information on syllabuses, entry codes and approximate numbers of entries from Head of Subject each July using *The Exams Office's* '[Information gathering form template](#)'. From this I collate the information into two spreadsheets for GCSE and A level exams so that it is available for creating mark sheets, and for making predicted or estimated entries. This information is also used to populate my [annual qualifications plan template](#) which I downloaded from *The Exams Office* website. I provide a copy to our Data Manager to help her with census returns, luckily we have an exams officer and a separate data manager, but for census returns I am called upon to assist with matching qualifications to courses in our MIS.

Call me old fashioned, but I like to send out paper copies of the entries mark sheets! Each Head of subject receives a covering letter explaining, in detail, what I need them to do – this includes checking entry codes are correct and that the students listed should have entries made. I will be distributing these just before we break up for Christmas. I also provide clear instructions on how staff should inform me of any corrections to the information they have previously provided and I set return deadlines which give me ample time to import this data into my MIS – and to ensure that it is accurate.

Once the entries have been made via my MIS I ask teaching staff, students and parents to check the entries and personal details (legal names and dates of birth), and sign to confirm agreement. Once again, I set a strict deadline, usually near the end of January. This deadline allows me time to 'chase' students who have not returned signed statements of entry before February half term; the final exam board deadline is usually during half term so I don't work to the 21 February deadline. The extra 'checks and balances' I have in place may create additional work for me but it helps to eliminate mistakes and reduce my stress levels! I usually offer a prize for the first form in each year group to have collected a full set, and I was very proud to reveal the sweets from my blue '*The Exams Office*' folding bag last year! I attend form registration sessions with replacement documents – the students most certainly understand the importance of supplying me with the necessary and correct information. I have been known to text parents to acquire their assistance in getting the relevant information from their son/daughter to me on time. I admit that all of this means that I am regularly stopped on the corridor to be handed a creased sheet of paper - but I get the information I need!

In previous years, I have printed out blank mark sheets and then waited for information from teachers before I made the entries on my MIS. However, last year, after over 10 years in the role, I experimented with creating mark sheets for each subject and printing

off a paper copy for completion by staff. This enabled me to make and save the entries which I thought would be correct. This served a number of purposes – firstly, it streamlined the entries process in that I did not have to analyse each mark sheet up to make entries; secondly, to aid ‘contingency planning’, in the event of my absence at a key point of the exam entry stage, it would be less of a burden for SLT or the data manager to ensure entries were submitted to the exam boards; and finally when I received confirmed entries from Heads of Subject I only have to make minor adjustments to the entries files before submission.

Another focus for me at this time of year is ensuring that I am up-to-date with the information that needs to be made available to candidates before they start their exams. I have made sure that all the latest JCQ notices to candidates have been put on the school website and I am making arrangements to speak to Year 10 to 13 students in assemblies, and texting their parents, to highlight the information available. I am also updating the leaflet containing all the necessary exam information which is sent to all candidates. This year, I need to add information regarding the candidates’ rights to request a review of centre assessed work before marks are submitted to the exam boards, information on post-results services, and when SLT will be available immediately after results days. It may seem rather early to distribute this information but not only do we want to ensure that our candidates are aware of any exam changes, but we want to give them the opportunity to ask questions if they are unsure of any of Ofqual/JCQ’s regulations.

Hopefully I will have all this done in time, so that on the last day of term I can go and join the students enjoying the school panto performed by staff. No doubt there will be plenty of “Oh yes he did, Oh no he didn’t” and “She’s behind you” and the Deputy Head and Head of Technology will probably be reprising their roles as ugly sisters/dames.

Wishing you a peaceful Christmas and a successful New Year...