19 October 2017

Rt Hon The Lord Storey CBE
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0HL

Dear Lord Storey,

Parliamentary Question HL1328

Your Parliamentary Question (PQ HL1328) has been passed to Ofqual for response. A copy of this reply will be placed in the House Libraries.

The public must be able to have confidence in qualifications and students need to be confident the examination system is fair for all. Some 2,200 GCSE, AS and A level papers were set this year, and, as in previous years, incidents of leaks were very rare, but we recognise the damage that any one leak can have on public confidence.

As the statutory regulator for qualifications and assessments, Ofqual has a public confidence objective as well as an objective to maintain standards in qualifications. We regulate the exam boards and awarding organisations, which must comply with our rules - our Conditions of Recognition. These rules include safeguards which exam boards must put in place to stop confidential exam materials being disclosed.

This summer the media widely reported two incidents in which teachers who were examiners for the Pre-U qualification (a qualification taken by students in some schools as an alternative to A levels) were alleged to have disclosed confidential exam information to their students. The exam boards are responsible for the writing, protection and security of examination materials. They employ or contract with the subject experts who write their exam papers. Some of these experts teach the qualification for which they are developing exams.

We are considering whether the current practice, whereby some question writers and exam paper reviewers are also teachers, is appropriate, and its relative risks and benefits. We are also considering the sufficiency of the current safeguards associated with this practice. We will publish a progress report on our review before the end of the year. We opened a call for evidence to inform our review on 28 September.

1 It is important to note that many teachers mark exams. Markers do not have access to exam papers or questions before the exams are sat. Exam boards use different terminology to describe the roles of the people who write or check questions/exam papers before they are taken.
There was one serious leak of A level examinations this year. This was in Pearson’s A level mathematics, when copies of questions and/or exam papers were offered for sale on-line in the early hours of the exam day. We have worked closely with Pearson since the allegations came to light. Pearson replaced some questions for a small number of schools and colleges at which some students were suspected of having seen exam papers shortly before the exam. They subsequently carried out detailed analyses to identify students who had seen confidential materials. A number of students were disqualified as a result – they did not receive the qualification. The matter remains the subject of a police investigation and a number of arrests have been made.

We and the exam boards closely monitor social media for any signs that papers have been leaked. We also recognise the potential cyber-security risks to exams and our role in reducing such risks. We take malpractice seriously, and the action taken against those who leak information will depend on the circumstances. The exam boards can stop students from receiving their qualifications, and the Secretary of State can prohibit teachers from teaching. Criminal investigation might also be pursued, as we have seen this year. We can also sanction an exam board that does not comply with our requirements on reducing the risk of malpractice, investigating allegations of malpractice and taking action against those who are found to have committed malpractice.

I hope you are reassured by our actions and those available to others in the system to detect, counter and remedy malpractice in the examinations system.

Yours sincerely,

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator