

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Direct Investigation System for Development of Question Papers in Public Examinations

Introduction

The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (“HKEAA”) conducts various public examinations, including the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (“HKCEE”) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (“HKALE”).

2. In 2008, we received numerous complaints about errors in some papers for HKCEE and HKALE. The Ombudsman, therefore, initiated this direct investigation into HKEAA’s mechanism for developing question papers.

Organisation of HKEAA

3. HKEAA is governed by a Council, with the Secretariat running the day-to-day operations. Full-time Managers-Assessment Development (“M-ADs”) are responsible for ensuring that question papers are free of errors and ambiguities. Part-time service providers, mainly experienced teachers, perform the following roles:

Chief Examiner	to be in charge of the production of a question paper, with focus on its orientation, coverage and standard.
Moderator	to assist the Chief Examiner in checking and moderating the question paper, particularly its orientation, coverage and standard.
Setter	to prepare the draft question paper.
Assessor	to work through the question paper to ensure that the questions are workable and free of errors.
Proofreader	to proofread the question paper.
Assistant Examiner	to assist and support the Chief Examiner during the marking process.
Marker	to assess candidates’ answers and assign marks to them.

Procedures and Practices

Development of Question Papers

4. Question papers are developed in two stages:
 - (a) **Stage One** (setting and moderation of questions)

to ensure that the questions meet the objectives of the syllabus, particularly in focus, coverage and level of difficulty.
 - (b) **Stage Two** (checking and proofreading)

to ensure appropriateness of the questions and instructions, particularly in accuracy and clarity; and comprises language polishing, working through the questions and nine rounds of proofreading.
5. To prevent conflict of roles, HKEAA has laid down the following guidelines:
 - Setters should not be Moderators.
 - Assessors should not be members of the Moderation Committee.
 - Proofreaders should preferably be drawn from outside the Moderation Committee.

Development of Marking Schemes

6. Developing a marking scheme comprises three steps:
 - (a) A **draft marking scheme** is prepared in conjunction with the draft question paper.
 - (b) After the examination, the Chief Examiners mark some **sample scripts** and then agree on marking principles and standards, revising the draft marking scheme where appropriate.
 - (c) The **revised marking scheme** is distributed to all Markers at a Markers' Meeting, and may be **further revised** on the basis of discussions.

Review of Examinations

7. Every year after HKCEE and HKALE, Subject Committees review the examination papers, the marking process and candidates' performance. An Examination Report and Question Papers ("ERQP") for each subject covering the question paper, the marking scheme and the Chief Examiner's comments on candidates' performance in general is published.

Handling of Complaints

8. Section A2 of HKEAA's complaints handling guidelines provides that **all** examination-related complaints are dealt with by the Standing Committee ("SC"), an internal meeting chaired by the Secretary General or his Deputy, while section B6 mentions the handling of **non-SC** cases, implying that there are complaints not dealt with by SC, in contradiction to section A2.

9. Handling of such non-SC cases is based on "workplace agreement", i.e. an informal understanding among officers.

Case Studies

10. We have examined three 2008 HKCEE and HKALE question papers found to have significant errors, for an understanding of the process of paper development. Details of the cases are in **Chapter 4** of the report.

Our Observations

11. Under the leadership of the Chairman, HKEAA has commendably devoted considerable efforts to instilling in staff a culture of receptiveness, transparency and continuous improvement. However, the cases studied signify the existence still of serious deficiencies in some processes and the need for improvement.

12. **Key Responsibilities Not Clearly Defined.** The errors in the question papers had all resulted from amendments made by the respective M-ADs, which went unnoticed in subsequent checking and proofreading. The key role of the M-AD in ensuring that the question paper is free of error and ambiguity is not clearly stated in any of the manuals, guidelines and record forms put to us. From our interviews with the examination personnel, we note that not all of them are clear about this important responsibility of the M-AD.

13. **Conflicting Roles of Key Personnel.** HKEAA has guidelines on avoidance of conflicting roles of the personnel involved in question development. However, in one of the cases studied, the M-AD responsible for moderating and proofreading the question paper was allowed to set the question as well. While this might not be against the letter of HKEAA's guidelines, it was most certainly against their spirit and intent.

14. **Ineffective Proofreading Process.** HKEAA has elaborate procedures and guidelines for checking and proofreading. However, as shown in the cases studied, even such an elaborate process had time and again failed to identify quite obvious errors.

15. We question the need for so many rounds of proofreading. This multiple process might lull the proofreaders into a false sense of security and even encourage reliance on the proofreader next in line.

16. Moreover, HKEAA guidelines and checklists contain much on minutiae, e.g. whether the correct page numbers have been inserted and whether the layout fits the A4/A5 frame, but relatively little on principles, e.g. whether the draft instructions are clear and whether the draft questions are at the right level.

17. For more efficient and effective staff deployment, proofreading should be kept to the minimum necessary. Moreover, different proofreaders should focus on different dimensions of the question paper: for example, the Chief Examiner to concentrate on professional matters (such as orientation, coverage and standard); and the M-AD on accuracy and wording (i.e. spotting error and ambiguity).

18. **Inadequate Documentation of Key Records.** All the amendments had been made by the M-ADs on soft copy with no official record being kept. Proper documentation is important for tracing and checking the process of question development.

19. **Complacency about Errors.** Two of the cases related to mistakes from a lack of care on the part of the personnel involved in the question development process. From our interviews with them, we note that some consider careless mistakes unavoidable. Given the importance of the examinations, their far-reaching effect on the future of candidates and implications for HKEAA's credibility, such complacent and defeatist attitude is totally unacceptable.

20. Such carelessness could well have been bred by reliance on the "safety net" of revising marking schemes to accommodate errors or imperfections in the questions. Maintaining flexibility in the marking scheme is meant to allow any unusual but equally valid answers to be duly recognised, not to camouflage errors.

21. **Reluctance to Acknowledge and Failure to Rectify Errors.** We are disappointed that in one of the cases, HKEAA did not rectify an ambiguous question in the ERQP, thus continuing to mislead teachers and students.

22. The complacency about errors in question papers and reluctance to rectify them in the ERQP suggest problems of mindset among some staff members. We consider more external feedback and monitoring useful.

23. **Inadequate Guidelines for Handling Complaints.** We find that HKEAA's complaints handling guidelines give ambivalent advice on the handling of non-SC complaints, so that staff have to rely heavily on unwritten "workplace agreement".

24. Furthermore, the guidelines are detailed on procedures but vague on principles.

25. **Inadequate Remedial Measures.** HKEAA has been prompt in reviewing the 2008 examinations and in drawing up remedial measures. However, those measures have tended to be incident-specific and procedure-oriented, addressing the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problems. This could be one of the reasons why errors have continued to recur despite HKEAA's elaborate procedures for checking and proofreading. We believe that the Council should take a broader and incisive view of matters, to identify the basis of the problems.

Recommendations

26. Against this background, The Ombudsman recommends that HKEAA:

Roles and Responsibilities

- (a) firmly impress upon all personnel the importance of HKEAA as an authority for public examinations with far-reaching and long-range impact on our community;
- (b) clearly spell out the role and responsibilities of the M-AD in manuals, guidelines and records on question development and through staff training;
- (c) re-examine the guidelines on conflicting roles for effective safeguards and quality assurance; and when applying the guidelines, focus on the spirit and intent rather than simply follow the procedures;

Checking and Proofreading

- (d) review the number of tiers for checking and proofreading and instil in the personnel concerned a sense of their importance and a pride in their role;
- (e) as far as practicable, introduce disincentives or even penalty for mistakes and negligence;
- (f) review the checking and proofreading guidelines and checklists to prune details to essentials and highlight principles;
- (g) specify in the proofreading checklists the different dimensions that the different proofreaders should focus on, while reminding them not to lose sight of the question paper as a whole;

Record-keeping

- (h) ensure that key records, including amendments made by M-ADs, are kept;

Revision of Marking Schemes

- (i) in case of errors requiring significant revision of the marking scheme, go through the facts carefully to identify the root cause(s) of the errors, the personnel involved and any room for improvement, with a report to the HKEAA Council to account for the incident;

ERQP

- (j) for questions with errors, rectify them before posting on ERQPs;

External Feedback

- (k) try to generate more external feedback, e.g. by forming stakeholders' liaison groups;

Handling of Complaints

- (l) in revising guidelines on handling of complaints, focus on the principles and key issues in the decision-making process; and

Future Review

- (m) have its systems, procedures and staff mindset further reviewed by the Council from a broader perspective and in greater depth.

Office of The Ombudsman

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