

## **How the SEC Deals with Error in Examination Papers**

The SEC arranges for examinations in 106 subjects each year. Different modes of assessment are involved in these examinations, including written papers, practical examinations, oral and aural examinations, and various forms of coursework. The SEC produces 506 examination papers and other test instruments each year. Most written and practical examination papers are produced in both English and Irish. Where required, modified and Braille versions of examination papers are also produced. In addition, the SEC prepares a full set of Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate contingency (ie back-up) papers. Delivering the State Examinations involves the production of approximately 4 million individual examination papers annually, equating to some 47.7 million A4 pages.

One of the key objectives of the SEC is the provision of an examinations system of the highest possible quality. The aspiration of any examining body, including the SEC, is to preside over a system that is completely error free. However, it is recognised in examining circles internationally that this will always be an aspiration rather than a completely achievable goal because of the confidentiality, security and scale of operation involved in national examination systems. Despite the procedures the SEC has in place to enhance reliability and to minimise error in advance of papers going to press, it is an unfortunate fact that errors can and do occur on examination papers from time to time. This is always a source of great regret to the SEC. Consequently, the SEC, like all examination and assessment organisations, has robust structures in place to deal with errors in their test instruments when they occur.

### **Dealing with error in examination papers**

The SEC has a range of strategies in place for dealing with errors in examination papers. **At all times, the interests of candidates are paramount in deciding on the most appropriate course of action.** Such decisions are made by senior management in the SEC and depend on the nature and extent of the error.

#### **1. Errors detected after printing but before the examination**

In addition to all of the formal checks and reviews that occur before an examination paper is printed, the SEC has a further formal process in place for scrutinising examination papers after they have been printed. In order to address issues identified through this scrutiny process, the SEC produces a *List of Corrections*, which is the standard mechanism used by examining boards for alerting candidates to issues requiring correction that have not been detected during the proofing process prior to printing the examination papers. The *List of Corrections* is issued to all examination Superintendents who are instructed to read out any relevant corrections before the

start of each examination so that candidates can make the necessary correction on their examination paper.

In some instances, such as when an issue is likely to impact adversely on candidates and where a correction would be too complex, the examination paper may be reprinted.

In other instances, where the issue will not impact on candidate answering and where a correction is likely to cause confusion, a decision is made not to include a correction

## **2. Errors that come to light during or after the examination**

Notwithstanding the quality assurance measures described earlier, it is nonetheless possible that an error will come to light on an examination paper during or after the sitting of the examination. Such errors are usually brought to the attention of the SEC by schools, candidates, parents or the media, either during or shortly after the examination.

**In such situations the SEC adheres to the core principle that candidates should not be disadvantaged as a result of an error on a question paper or any other failing on the part of the SEC or its agents.**

Procedures for dealing with reports of errors brought to the attention of the SEC during or after the examination are summarised as follows

- If the examination is still ongoing, school personnel or superintendents that contact the SEC are instructed to advise candidates to proceed with the examination as is.
- The report of the error is brought to the attention of the Chief Examiner who is asked to verify whether or not an error has occurred.
- Where an error is confirmed, the first and immediate priority for the SEC is to assess the potential impact of the error and take whatever steps are necessary, through the marking process, so that all candidates who may have been affected are not disadvantaged as a result of the error.
- In fairness to all candidates, care must also be taken to ensure that the marking strategies adopted for dealing with error do not inadvertently unfairly advantage any candidates.

### **Strategies for Dealing with Error**

The strategies for dealing with error include the following:

- assessing the impact of error on candidates' answering
- formulating the marking scheme to take account of the error and its impact on candidates
- approval of the marking strategy by senior management and the State Examinations Commissioners
- applying the marking scheme to candidates' scripts
- monitoring the effectiveness of the application of the marking scheme to ensure that any impact is appropriately dealt with and that all candidates are treated fairly
- providing for reviewing the application of the strategy to an individual candidate's work as part of the appeal process

In instances where some but not all candidates have been affected by an error the following strategies may also apply:

- developing criteria to assist examiners to identify affected scripts
- scrutiny of all affected scripts by a senior member of the examining team to monitor the effectiveness of the identification criteria and marking strategy;
- recording of detailed item by item outcomes of the affected scripts for comparison with similar information on various comparator groups.
- statistical analysis of the outcomes of the affected candidates against those of a comparator group.

Throughout the marking process, the impact of the error and effectiveness of the strategy for dealing with it is closely monitored and reported on by the Chief Examiner to senior management. Such marking strategies are also approved and reported on to the State Examinations Commissioners.

In the interest of equity, openness and transparency, any adjustment to the marking scheme or strategies put in place will form part of the published marking scheme. At Leaving Certificate level, scripts are, as always, made available for viewing following the issue of provisional results and a robust multi-step appeal process is in place to rectify any inaccuracies or injustices which may have arisen at any stage of the initial or subsequent marking.

### **System Review**

Each year, following on from the marking process, the SEC undertakes a review of its existing operating systems with a view to ongoing improvement. Issues, such as errors on examination papers, are dealt with through this review process. By taking this approach the SEC aims to provide a comprehensive review which enables the organisation to focus on both the robustness of its processes at a structural/systems level, including any corrective action required, as well as the thoroughness and effectiveness of its staff in delivering the final product, with a view to system improvement and minimising the possibility of a recurrence of an error.