

Mobile phones in exams: behind the malpractice stats

Hannah Bradley, 11 January 2019 - [A levels and GCSEs](#)

Penalties issued to GCSE and A level students bringing mobile phones into the exam hall [increased by 22% in 2018](#) compared with 2017.

Yet we know that Exams Officers use a range of ways to tell students about this important rule and that breaking it could lose them marks or even stop them certificating in that qualification. So why do students still do it?

Why risk it?

The answer, from research we commissioned, is that students simply don't wish to be without their mobile phones. They are likely to be the most expensive possession of many students and they are concerned about loss or damage. We have also spoken to many Exams Officers (who are [integral to making the exam system run smoothly](#) every year) who say that most students don't intend to use their phones to cheat. Rather, mobiles have become such a fundamental part of modern life that students do not wish to be without them, even for a few hours. Here are some examples of what Exams Officers have told us:

"It is such a normal part of their life they feel bereft and some fear it may be stolen if left outside, but the message from us is clear."

"It is true I think that most students who do bring their phones into the exam room have no intention of using them to cheat or actually switching them on. It is almost like a comfort blanket and they feel anxious when apart from their phones."

"My experience when liaising with the students who are caught with a phone is that they did not intend to cheat. It is either accidental or they just don't think it's an issue because they never intended to use it. They will often justify it by telling me that it wasn't switched on."

Still malpractice

A common theme evident in Exams Officers' views was that students cannot understand how they could be 'caught' if they are not actually using their phones. They do not realise that the simple act of having a mobile on them while taking an exam is a breach of the rules and therefore malpractice, which must be reported to the exam board:

"All the ones I've caught over the years have said they forgot it was in their pocket. They are so used to having a mobile phone, they either forget it's there or don't think it will matter."

The rule is very clear, mobile phones are not allowed in exam halls, regardless of how much battery they have left, if they are in aeroplane mode, switched off or otherwise. The consequences are also clear: marks were lost in 900 cases in 2018, and a loss of aggregation or certification opportunity occurred on 130 occasions.

What can be done?

Exams Officers in schools and colleges and exam boards are working hard to communicate the realities of rule breaches to candidates and identifying ways of addressing any concerns they might have. We hear that some of the most successful methods for keeping phones away from exams are often those recognising the value of them, such as [bag and ticket systems to keep them safe](#).

Clearly those who are best placed to impact on students' fortunes in this area are the students themselves. So, if you're taking exams this summer, please don't be tempted to take your mobile phone into the exam hall. If you have any concerns about your mobile, please talk to your Exams Officer and they will be pleased to help.

And if you are a student or Exams Officer and want more information, the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) released [this video](#) last year and has [posters](#) schools and colleges can use. Ofqual is also producing some films with general guidance around exams that will be available in early spring.

If you would like to talk to Ofqual about any of the issues raised in this blog, please contact us at public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk.