

NSC EXAMINATIONS MARKING CENTRES VISITS 2021

BACKGROUND

The year 2020 had been a unique year due to COVID 19. The existence of Corona Virus pandemic in South Africa had a serious impact on education. It did not only affect learners' attendance to school because of national lockdown and COVID 19 positive cases, it further impacted on the examinations process for 2020. The Supplementary and Multiple Examination Option (MEO) planned to have been written in June 2020 had to be postponed to November/December 2020 due to national lockdown that affected the month Of June. The merged examinations include Senior Certificate, National Senior certificate, Multiple Examination Opportunity, and adult Education and Training examinations all being written at the end of the year. This led to the normal examinations marking period in December being postponed to January 2021 and being the biggest marking exercise ever.

This marking unfortunately coincided with the resurgence of the COVID 19, where the number of cases in the country reached unprecedented peaks. During the month of December 2020, KwaZulu-Natal lost more than 40 educators due to the pandemic. On the 27th of December, the State President, has announced that the country had been put on LEVEL 3, where no more than 50 people gathering were not allowed. Since there are hundreds of markers in each centre, it was necessary that strict precautions be put in place to prevent our marking centres in becoming super-spreaders of the Corona Virus.

As an oversight structure, The KwaZulu-Natal Legislature Education Portfolio Committee undertook to visit marking centres to oversee that the marking process continues to preserve the integrity of the examinations and ensure that the marking centres do not become super-spreaders of the COVID 19 pandemic. The visits were conducted in two phases. The first phase was prior to the arrival of the markers to ensure the state of readiness of the marking centres. The four centres visited were Durban Girls High, Umlazi ComTech, Esayidi TVET College, and Portsheptone Senior Primary school. The second phase visited the centers when the marking process was already underway. The Portfolio Committee was divided into two Teams. Team One visited Siyamukela High, Sarel Cilliers High, Ladysmith High, and Escourt High, Pietermaritzburg Girls High, Maritzburg College, and Haythorne Secondary schools. Team Two visited AM Moola Secondary, Kokstad High, Empangeni High, Inanda Seminary, Umfolozi TVET. Issues discussed during the visits included, but not limited to, staffing, marking process, infrastructure, accommodation, meals, security, and COVID 19 protocols.

STAFF BREAKDOWN

The staff at the marking centres comprise of centre managers who are in charge of managing the centre. Normally, there are two deputy centre managers, i.e. professional responsible for carrying out administrative duties and welfare responsible for registration and accommodation matters. In 2020, COVID compliance officers were added to the staff to ensure that COVID 19 protocols are followed. During the visits, it was observed that at some centres shared services of compliance officers e.g. Siyamukela and Sarel Cilliers, and Ladysmith and Escourt High. Internal moderators focus on quality of marking, and analytical moderator deals with standardisation of marking process.

The marking team is headed by the chief marker who is also accountable for the marking of scripts. Deputy chief markers are responsible for sampling and moderation of 10% scripts. Senior markers distribute and control the marking of scripts and are

always with the markers during the marking exercise. Markers are responsible for marking of scripts and report about marking.

The administrative staff is managed by the manager by performing all marking administrative duties. The movement of scripts from one point to the other is performed by the script controller. The administrative assistants are responsible for leading Examination Assistants (EAs). The EAs are university students tasked with checking accuracy in marking and recording. Other staff involved the screeners, groundsman, handyman, sanitising deep cleaners, and general staff who were on errands whenever their services were needed.

The catering team ensure that meals adhere to stipulated menu. The security manager trains and manage security personnel, who ensure safety and security of the personnel and property.

There were a few withdrawals in different marking centres from the level of management to general staff members. Some of the reasons for withdrawals included sickness, bereavement, COVID scare, writing supplementary examinations...All those who withdraw prior to the start of the marking process were replaced. There were difficulties in replacing those who had to withdraw when the marking process was already underway. In most of the centres, they reported to have no need to replace during marking as they were coping with the work.

MARKING VENUES

The infrastructure comprised of the marking rooms and administrative rooms. Seating arrangements were to accommodate a maximum of 18 persons per normal room, i.e. fifteen markers and three deputy chief markers. There were instances where there were more than 18 marking staff in one taking advantage of the size of the room. This was discouraged by the delegations. Water and electricity was always available. Some of the marking centres also have electric boreholes as a backup for running water.

There were also backup water tanks and generators should there be water and electricity cuts.

ACCOMMODATION

The schools identified as marking centres have hostels to accommodate the marking staff who could not travel daily. Since the marking took place during the surge of COVID 19 cases, social distancing was observed through accommodating half of the capacity of the hostels. It was reported that there were some challenges with accommodation as the planning took place when the country was on COVID 19 Level 1 and the actual marking took place when the country had been put on COVID 19 alert Level 3. Staff could travel two hundred kilometres to alleviate pressure on accommodation facilities. In some marking centres, outside accommodation was sourced to accommodate more staff. a special budget was preserved for those who would be travelling from nearby private accommodation establishments to cater for their travelling expenses. While most were reported to prefer to stay in school hostels, they were reported to have climatized once they had spent a night at these establishments. There were challenges with the markers who had not booked for accommodation before coming, but they were able to find accommodation.

MEALS

A prescribed menu for meals had been issued by the provincial office with special categories. This was to enable to accommodate individuals from different religious groups and medical conditions. Different tea stations were set and takeaway containers were provided to avoid congestion in the dining halls and plates and cutlery were available as well. Marking centres implemented staggered meal times in compliance with COVID 19 protocols. The sitting arrangements in dining hall were separated to accommodate for social distancing. However, it was reported that some people tended to move chairs close to one another during eating times.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Most of the marking centres utilised the services of in-house security services with some reinforcements like additional staff. the sites were manned by security guards during the day and night. The standard of security varied among the marking centres. There were centres where very strict measures were employed to people coming and out of the marking centre sites. However, there were sites where authorisation was not checked at entry and cars not searched, which could compromise the safety of people and scripts. Each site was linked to the nearest police station should there be security threats that needed the attention of the police services and frequent visits or daily calls by SAPS to check for welfare were reported.

COVID 19 PROTOCOLS

The scourge of COVID-19 with an identified new variant called for very strict measures to prevent infections and spread of the virus in the marking centres. A detailed manual on how marking centres were to prevent the spread was distributed to the centres and trainings were conducted. Each marking centre was allocated a compliance officer to ensure that all COVID 19 protocols are adhered to without fail.

Social distancing

As mention on the above sections, social distancing was to be observed at all times and places. These included the marking rooms, dining halls, and accommodation establishments. It was observed though that some markers used to sit closer to one another during the marking which was discouraged when observed. During the meal breaks it was also normal to see people sitting in groups close to one another and some not wearing masks as required.

Wearing of masks

Wearing of face masks was compulsory. Majority of staff were allowed to bring their own masks and those who did not have were provided by the centres. Wearing of masks was compulsory at all times. However, markers were allowed to take mask breaks during the marking process and when eating.

Regular hand washing

Each marking venue was allocated a hand washing station for regular hand wash. Furthermore, each marker was supplied with a full bottle of sanitiser to use during the marking sessions.

Screening

Screening for COVID-19 was done daily at the gates, hostels, and marking venues. This involved temperature taking and COVID 19 screening questionnaire. The main concern was with screeners not reading through questionnaire responses before allowing individuals in. Honesty in responding to the questionnaire was also observed as some individuals did not disclose symptoms on the questionnaire.

COVID 19 cases and related deaths.

While strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus were put in place, it was saddening that COVID 19 positives were identified in some of the marking centres. It was also regrettable that two markers from two marking centres (Escourt and Inanda Seminary) lost their lives through COVID. In Escourt High Marking centre, about 35 people tested positive. It was observed that the marking centres were reluctant to test individuals with symptoms. In some instances, some could leave the centres due to sickness without the centres having satisfied themselves on the cause of illness.

Health support

All marking centres were linked to local clinics and hospitals should any individual gets sick. The department of health was always a call away to deal with COVID 19 related issues in the marking centres.

LOCAL EMPOWERMENT

- Examination Assistants were local students.
- Security – local companies were preferred should there be no in-house security. Reinforcements in terms of numbers were local people.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

- **Capacity of Compliance Officers-** the role of the compliance officers was very critical in preventing the spread of the virus within the marking centres. It was however observed that some centres were sharing compliance officers. It was desirable that each centre has its own compliance officer. The way certain COVID 19 related cases were handled in some marking centres left much to be desired in terms of the role that could have been played by the compliance officers.
- **Inconsistency on Security measures at various centres-**while security measures were very tight in some centres, there were instances where cars were not searched, security officers not at the gate, and no authorisation documents were checked.
- **Individuals non-adherence to COVID 19 protocols-** there were instances where [people will not observe social distancing and at times not wearing face masks. this happened during meal times.

- **Dishonesty of individuals-** it was observed that some of the individuals who tested positive did not disclose of any symptoms when filling the questionnaire.
- **Screeners over-reliance on thermometer readings-** some of the screeners did not even read the questionnaire but allowed entry based on the temperature reading. This means they could allow entry to persons who have indicated to have COVID 19 symptoms.

CONCLUSION

The process of marking came at a wrong time when the whole country was in panic due to resurgence of COVID 19. While the management of the centres were experienced on managing the marking process, no-one was experience in managing COVID 19 issues. It is true that there were some casualties in few marking centres but health and safety was put first. All marking centres visited were ahead of marking time and the reliability and validity of marking was not compromised.

The report was adopted by the Education Portfolio Committee on the 6th of April 2021



Hon LXH Hlongwa- Madlala
Acting Chairperson

12/04/2021