

The future of exam boards

Convening exam boards

This fact sheet sets out key insights about convening exam boards, as described in the survey responses from 67 higher education institutions at the end of the 2023/24 academic year.

Timing of exam boards

Institutions were asked to identify when they convened exam boards and could select multiple answers.

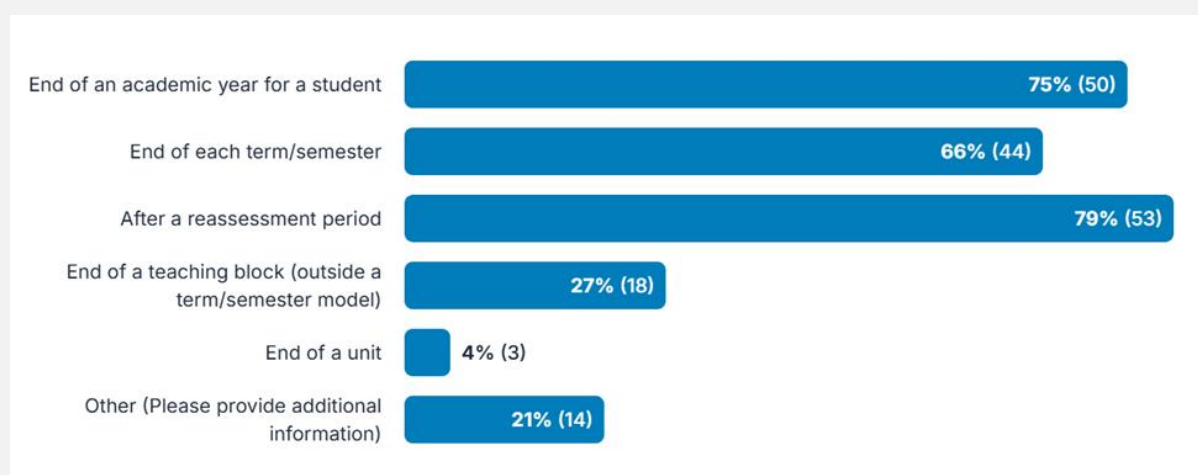


Figure 1: Responses to the question 'when do your exam boards take place?'

The responses to this question suggest that the options were interpreted differently by those completing the survey, and the differences in exam board structures, and academic year structures made it challenging to find significant patterns in the data.

The end of the academic year is a key milestone for exam boards: All institutions convene an exam board *at the end of an academic year for a student* as this is a key milestone to be able to confirm a student's outcome about progression, award or eligibility for reassessment, and *after a reassessment period*. The institutions who did not explicitly identify convening exam boards at these points were convening exam boards after every term or semester, which would naturally fall with the end of an academic year for a student or after a reassessment period.

Factors that affect when exam boards are convened relate to the academic calendar for:

- Postgraduate taught programmes
- Programmes with placements
- Shorter courses such as pre-sessional courses, standalone units

The future of exam boards
Fact sheet: convening exam boards

- Non-standard start dates (e.g. professional programmes, January starts, collaborative programmes)

There is a slight indication from the data that exam boards *structured for function* (which separates out the functions of ratifying module level outcomes and student level outcomes) might more easily support institutions with multiple academic calendars.

Volume of exam boards

Institutions were asked to identify how many exam boards (of any type) were convened in a single academic year.

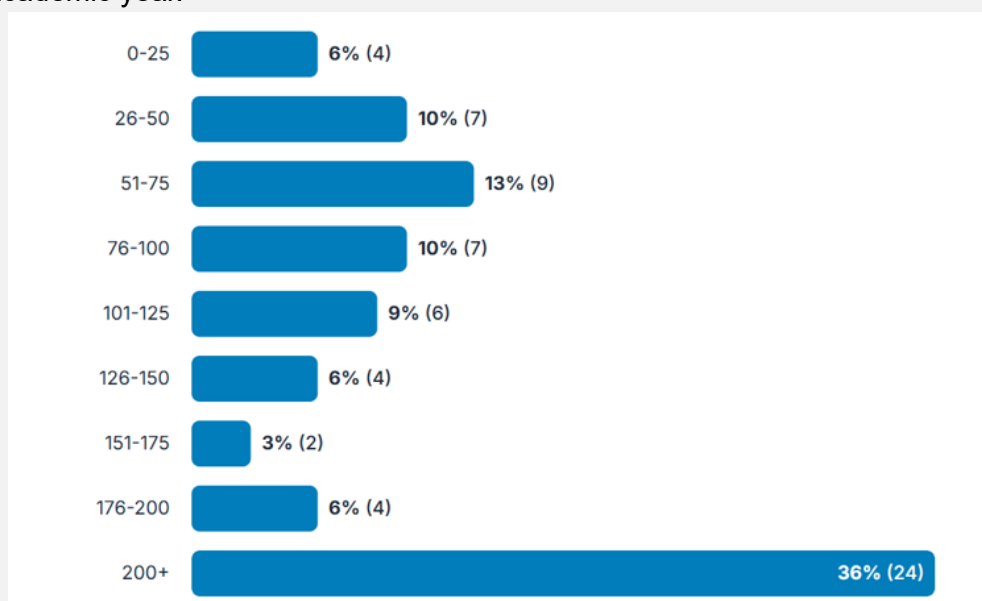


Figure 1: Responses to the question ‘how many exam boards may take place in a single academic year’?

Over one third of institutions that completed the survey are running more than 200 exam boards in a year, and many of these will also be holding pre-boards. This will represent a significant number of hours for the academic and professional services staff involved.

The number of exam boards **did not** correlate with the size of the student population (see Figure 3). There were examples of institutions with some very large student populations (over 25,000) holding less than 100 and less than 50 exam boards. This suggests that some approaches to exam boards allow a much more streamlined delivery.

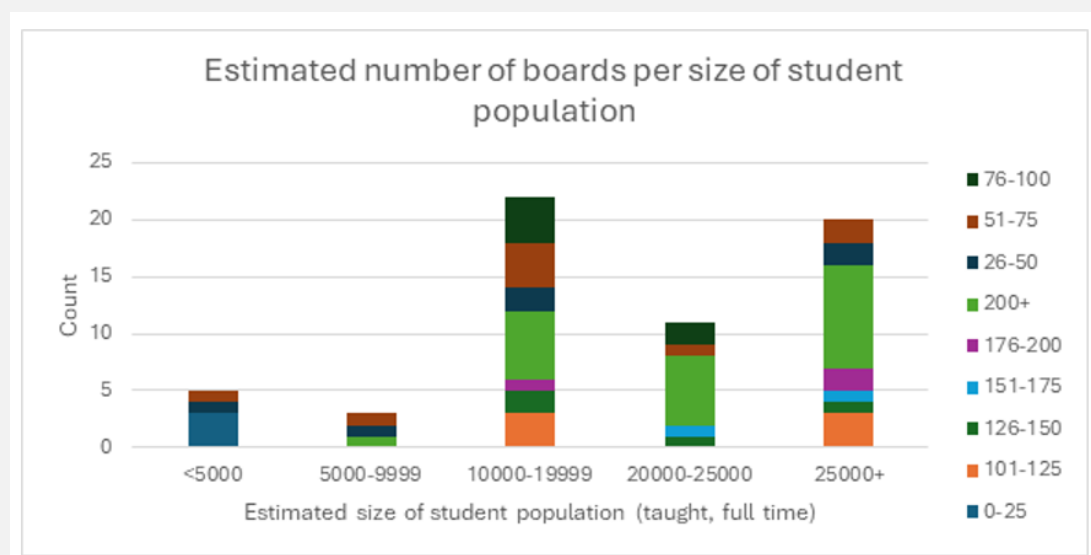


Figure 3: Estimated number of boards per size of student population

Location of exam boards

Nearly all institutions (61) hold exam boards online, and about one third of respondents hold some exam boards as a hybrid of online and in-person. 18 institutions indicated that they hold in-person meetings. No institutions have returned to fully in-person exam boards as the sole location.

While we don't have comparable data from before the Covid-19 pandemic, we also asked institutions to tell us about changes to their exam board practices since 2020, and these indicate the move to online exam boards during the pandemic has influenced the prevalence of online exam boards.

Decisions through Chairs Action or virtual approval routes

We asked whether any decisions are taken without convening an in-person, hybrid or online meeting. Responses to this question sometimes referred to "Chairs Actions" as the name for the process that was enacted in the absence of a formal exam board meeting.

Most institutions (42) take decisions outside of a formal meeting *exceptionally*, however, some (16) do so routinely. A small number (9) indicated that no decisions took place outside a formally convened meeting.

Decisions are taken without convening a formal meeting for a range of reasons:

- **Awaiting data** – which includes delays in marking and/or moderation, student deadline extensions, and awaiting outcomes from suspected academic misconduct.
- **Straightforward corrections** - when an error has been identified
- **Complex student outcomes** - such as outcomes of an appeal or aegrotat awards.
- **Reassessment outcomes** – which are deemed to be routine.
- **Complex cohort outcomes** - Occasionally, for non-standard cohorts or programmes that are being taught-out.

The future of exam boards
Fact sheet: convening exam boards

The mechanics of approving a decision outside a formal meeting sometimes involved external examiner sign-off and a decision log so that these could be reported to later meetings. Some institutions indicated that they had clearly established principles for when a decision could be taken outside an exam board, which is an example of good practice.

Example 1

The Board of Examiners formally empowers the Chair to make a decision, or decisions, on its behalf and this is recorded in the minutes of the meeting. If a Chair's action results in a final award being made or changed, the School must seek approval from the external examiner(s) and a new Recommendation for Awards list must be produced and signed by the Chair of Faculty Education and Student Experience Subcommittee and approved by Senate.

Example 2

For students with reassessments or delayed assessments (where there are no extenuating circumstances), the following principles should be followed at the main Board and don't need to be reviewed at a later Board:

- 1. If the student passes reassessment or delayed assessment and meets the criteria to progress to the next stage of their course/award*
- 2. If the student fails reassessment or delayed assessment and meets the criteria for provisional progression*
- 3. If the student fails reassessment or delayed assessment and does not meet the criteria for provisional progression, they are referred to reassessment, after a period of interruption.*
- 4. If the student fails reassessment and can't continue on the course, the student is withdrawn through academic failure with a recommendation for an exit award (if eligible).*

Key takeaways: convening exam boards

1. Exam boards are held at key points in an academic year, and may be held more frequently where programmes do not follow a traditional academic calendar.
2. Institutions are convening a large number of exam board meetings each year, yet some large institutions have found ways to hold a smaller number.
3. Exam boards are held online or as hybrid meetings.
4. Some decisions are taken outside of formal meetings through Chairs Action, and it is good practice to establish principles for the types of decisions taken outside meetings.



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