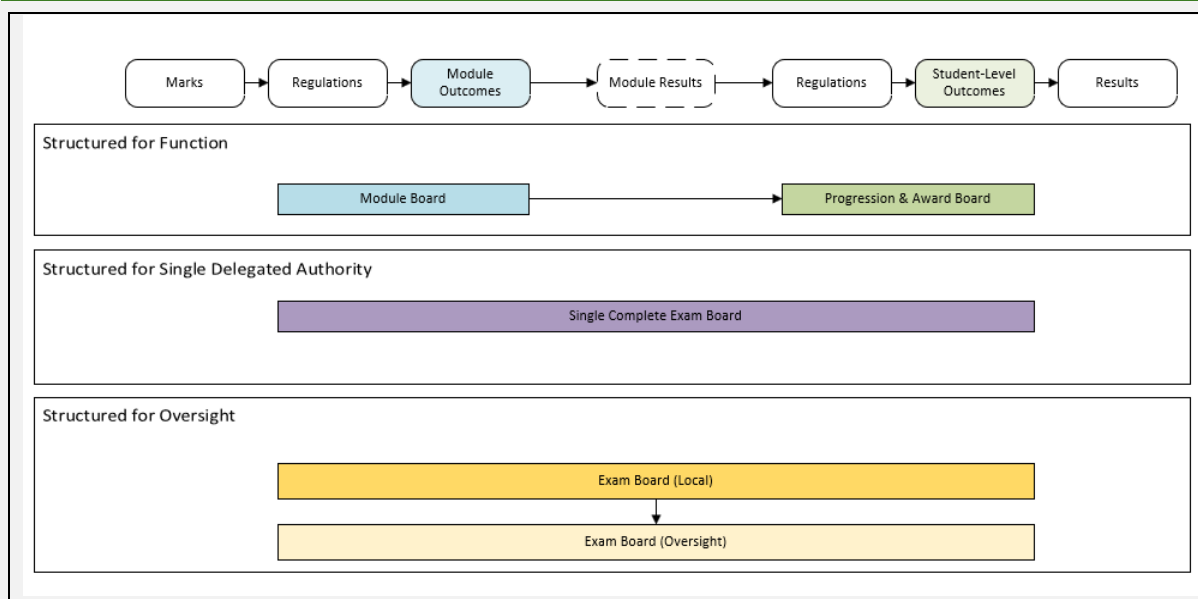


# The future of exam boards

## Exam Board Structures

This fact sheet sets out the three main ways that exam boards were structured across the sector in 2023/24; based on 67 institutional responses to a sector survey.

Figure 1: Visual representation of three exam board structures



### 1. Structured for Function

**Defining Feature:** Separates out the functions of ratifying module level outcomes and student level outcomes.

**Description:** Multiple decision-making bodies convene to take clearly defined and differentiated decisions. Typically, decision-making is distinguished between unit outcomes (Unit or Module Boards), and student-level outcomes (Progression & Award Boards). Module Boards convene during an academic year to finalise/lock unit outcomes, while Progression & Award Boards convene when there is a potential decision to be made for a student/student cohort based on the suite of unit outcomes.

#### Data Insights:

- 32 institutions across all institution sizes and mission groups
- Common terminology uses Subject Board, Assessment Board, Unit Board, Module Board (function 1) and Progression & Award Board (function 2).
- Several institutions have shifted to calling one of these functions a “Panel”.
- Some variations in where decisions about exceptional circumstances, eligibility for reassessment and confirming module outcomes for Semester/Term 1 were made.
- Larger number of examples of innovation and change by using technology to streamline steps, and in some institutions, removing the “board” from one of these functions.

## 2. Structured for a Single Delegated Authority

**Defining Feature:** Ratifying module level outcomes and student level outcomes takes place together, once.

**Description:** A single decision-making body convenes to consider a range of issues and take decisions about both unit outcomes and student-level outcomes. In practice, decisions about unit outcomes may be formally confirming the marking and moderation process is complete and has followed due process. These are typically convened around organisational units, such as departments, schools or faculties.

**Data Insights:**

- 24 institutions across all institution sizes and mission groups (except Cathedrals Group).
- Common terminology used includes: Board of Examiners, Assessment Boards, Progression & Award Boards.

## 3. Structured for Oversight

**Defining Feature:** Ratifying module level outcomes and student level outcomes takes place together, where some outcomes are considered more than once.

**Description:** There are two distinct exam boards convened. Typically, one considers all students and makes recommendations on to a second level where the decisions become finalised. At the second level, students are increasingly discussed by exception.

**Data Insights:**

- 11 institutions; this structure was not used in the smallest HEIs (less than 10,000).
- Terminology varied, and the oversight level was often referred to as an institutional level board “University” “Central”.

## Trends in exam board structures

We looked for connections between the exam board structure and other features of exam board management.

**Timing of exam boards:** There were no noticeable patterns in the selected exam board structure and the timing of exam boards for institutions delivering a term / semester model. There is a slight correlation between the convening of exam boards at the end of a teaching block outside a term/semester model or the end of a unit, and exam boards being structured for function (14 out of 21). This suggests that exam boards structured for function may allow for more flexible start and end dates.

**Reassessment before ratification:** There were seven institutions who permit students to engage with reassessment before their first attempt has been formally ratified as a fail, and three who were piloting this in 2023/24. Reassessment before ratification was being piloted under each type of board structure. There is no data currently to suggest one exam board structure supports this approach to reassessment better than others.

**Institutional exam boards:** 23 institutions reported that they were holding some of their exam boards at University level, alongside at least one other convening level. Only 2 institutions convened exam boards exclusively at University level. Examples were reasonably distributed across all three of the exam board structures, and institutional sizes; the meaning of University level was likely to mean different things in different contexts.

**Consistency of structures:** Broadly, institutions had a consistent structure for delivering exam boards across their institution, yet 16 institutions indicated variation in the structure, for reasons that included:

- Types of provisions: professional, postgraduate, collaborative programmes
- Permitted choice between models available within a single institution, or variation from a baseline expectation
- Variation in how “module boards” operated in practice regarding their content
- Variation in how administrative support was provided
- Multiple IT systems used to support exam boards
- Shifts to local practices over time

## The future of exam board structures?

We asked about changes institutions had made to their structures since 2020, and the changes they were considering in 2024.

**Since 2020:** 8 institutions reported changing their exam board structure since 2020, by:

- Removing module boards (4 institutions), replacing these with either annual monitoring processes, or online ratification
- Changing the purpose of module boards to confirm outcomes (1 institution)
- Merging module and progression boards into a single tier (2 institutions)
- Removing reassessment boards, and replacing them with operating principles agreed at the Summer exam board (1 institution)
- Introducing a pilot of university-level exam boards, in addition to removing module boards (1 institution)

**Future changes:** 24 institutions reported that they were considering changes to their exam board structure. The responses from these 24 institutions have been re-framed as questions that institutions appeared to be asking of their structure:

1. Do we need boards? Can we have sign-off processes instead?
2. If we do need boards, which decisions really need to go to a board?
3. Can workload reduce through smaller meetings, streamlined processes and systems?
4. Can we remove module boards?
5. Can we have fewer stages/levels?
6. Can administration be centralised?
7. Should pre-boards be formalised?

## Key takeaways

1. Exam boards were structured in one of three ways: structure for function, structured for a single delegated authority, structured for oversight.
2. There were not strong correlations between the exam board structure and other features of exam board delivery.
3. Exam boards structured for function were most common, reported more examples of using systems to drive change, and may be an enabler of automation.
4. Many institutions are considering changes to their exam board structure, and the removal of module boards is common.