

# The future of exam boards

## External Examiner Role

This fact sheet sets out key insights from the project about the role of the external examiner. Data is primarily drawn from a survey circulated in August 2023, which received responses from 67 higher education institutions.

### Types of External Examiners and their role

In the survey, we provided the following definition of different types of external examiners, built from the QAA Principles on external examining.

- **Subject experts**, assigned to one or more modules, and may be assigned to a specific course or award level.
- **Chief/Principal Subject experts**, who may have a cross-faculty responsibility to oversee multiple pathways.
- **Institutional external examiners**, who are not appointed for disciplinary subject expertise, but for other specialist areas, such as digital learning, assessment, quality assurance.

We asked institutions to confirm the type(s) of external examiners they had in place during the 2023/24 academic year, and the activities they contributed to. Tables 1-6 set out the survey responses. All institutions had at least one type of external examiner, and in many institutions, more than one type of external examiner performs the same type of activity.

**Table 1: Types of external examiners**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	65	97%
Chief principal subject experts	23	34%
Institutional examiners	29	43%

**Table 2: Types of external examiners that review student work and the feedback given on work**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	65	97%
Chief principal subject experts	14	21%
Institutional examiners	3	4%

**Table 3: Types of external examiner that review grade distribution**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	61	91%
Chief principal subject experts	18	27%
Institutional examiners	13	19%
N/A	3	3%

**Table 4: Types of external examiner that attend exam boards**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	57	85%
Chief principal subject experts	23	34%
Institutional examiners	20	30%

**Table 5: Types of external examiner that contributes to decisions on complex student cases or assessment irregularities**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	47	70%
Chief principal subject experts	19	28%
Institutional examiners	17	13%
N/A	9	13%

**Table 6: Types of external examiner that contributes to complex institutional decisions (e.g. exceptional regulations, policy changes)**

External examiner type	Count of Institutions	Percentage
Subject experts	17	25%
Chief principal subject experts	7	10%
Institutional examiners	22	33%
N/A	19	28%

## Institutional external examiners

A significant number of institutions (30) indicated that they had an institutional external examiner, although the role of that examiner varied. Institutional external examiners were appointed in each of the three exam board structures: structured for function, structured for a single delegated authority, structure for oversight, which can be seen in Table 7. [See the Exam Board Structures Fact Sheet for more information on the different structures].

**Table 7: Distribution of external examiner types by exam board structure**

Exam Board Structure	Number of Institutions	Number with an Institutional External Examiner	Number with a Chief Subject external and subject externals	Number with only subject expert externals
Structured for function	32	18	11	9
Structured for a single delegated authority	24	6	7	13
Structured for oversight	11	6	5	2
<b>Total</b>	67	30	23	24

NOTE: Three institutions reported that they have both an institutional external examiner and a Chief Subject external. Some survey respondents provided additional comments about their external examiner types, which provided insight into the institutional examiner role, which can be characterised in two main ways.

### **1. Institutional progression and award external examiners**

These institutional external examiners attended the progression & award exam boards, and their role is typically to confirm that decisions are appropriate, correct, fair, in line with the regulations and consistent. They may also contribute to decisions about complex student cases.

There were some overlaps in responses between the interpretation of this role as an institution examiner versus a chief subject external; we inferred from the responses that where an institutional examiner was appointed to provide assurance for progression & awards that:

- Institutional external examiners are assigned to an exam board that does not necessarily correlate with the examiner's subject discipline; and/or
- Institutional external examiners are not required to be academics.

### **2. Institutional-level advice or assurance**

These institutional external examiners had an institution-wide view or remit. The following additional comments were made by these institutions:

- The Principal External Examiner has responsibility for assurance of overall institutional standards and assessment regimes
- The institutional Chief External Examiner is a new role and will provide external scrutiny of our assessment processes, quality assurance enhancement advice and inputs on our annual analysis of degree classifications and student outcomes.
- Our institutional examiners are called 'external advisers'.
- Institutional Examiner - attends virtual Boards and meetings for central assessment boards.
- At institutional level, external observers review the board recommendations, attend boards and contribute to discussion/approval of institution-wide decisions affecting regulations (e.g. MAB or Covid variations)
- A University External Examiner appointed by the Academic Board will attend a University Exam Board

## **The future role(s) of external examiners in exam boards?**

We asked institutions whether they had made changes to the engagement of external examiners in exam boards since 2020, and if they were considering changes in the future.

### **Changes since 2020**

Seven institutions had made changes since 2020, either:

- **Increasing** external engagement to make the invitation of externals routine and consistent across the institution;
- **Reducing** external engagement, for example taking a risk-based sampling approach;
- **Refocusing** external engagement, for example not requiring subject externals to attend exam boards, or introducing University-level examiners.

This mixed picture reflects the diversity in current exam board practices, regulations, and the extent of consistency in details of exam board management within an institution.

## **Future changes**

Fourteen institutions were considering changes for the future, which are reflected in these questions:

- Is there a need for institutional external examiners?
- Where can externals best add value?
- Can external involvement in 'time-bound processes' be reduced or removed?
- Is exam board attendance required?
- When is external examiner contribution best timed in the academic cycle?

The role of the external examiner as a member of the exam board was frequently questioned throughout the project in practitioner workshops, reflecting views that external expertise added most value to the assurance and enhancement of academic quality and standards in the key activities that take place *before an exam board* or *after an exam board*.

## **Emerging alternative approaches**

From project workshops, and changes in practice since the survey data was gathered, the following alternative approaches are emerging:

- Separation of subject matter expertise from assurance of awards (in institutions operating an exam board structured for function)
- Repositioning external examiners to external advisers (University of Chester)
- Sampling approaches to attending progression & award boards (Kingston University)
- Moving external examiner confirmation of standards to after the exam board (University of Wolverhampton)
- Taking a risk-based approach to external examining (Queens Belfast)
- Removing the requirement for external examiner attendance at exam boards (University of Bristol).

## **Key takeaways: external examiners**

1. In 2023/24 external examiners were appointed in all 67 institutions that completed the survey.
2. In 2023/24 there was mixed practice in the role of the external examiner, covering subject expertise, chief external examiner roles and institutional assurance; and a mixed use of the interpretation of an 'institutional external examiner'.
3. There is a notable trend that more institutions are reconsidering the role of the external examiner, with some examples of alternative approaches, particularly finding value in repositioning external engagement from time-bound processes.
4. No institutions appear to have removed externality entirely from their process of confirming student outcomes.
5. Practice is likely to have already moved on in this aspect since the survey, and more recent and detailed exploration of external examiner roles would be beneficial.

