

The future of exam boards

Exam Board Purpose and Function

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

Five core purposes

Five core purposes were identified from thematic analysis of descriptive responses to the survey question “from your perspective, what is the purpose of exam boards at your institution?”

1. Confirming student outcomes

The common feature of exam boards across the sector, is the confirmation of student outcomes: overall outcomes, progression, award, resit eligibility, marks and grades.

2. Assuring due process

Exam boards have a key role in assuring due process; this was represented in references to quality assurance, consistency, ratification, and adhering to regulations.

3. Assuring standards

For some, the exam board meeting is where academic standards are assured – above ensuring due process. This involves a broader review of student achievement as a cohort and comparison of student cohort achievement against previous years and/or sector norms. Where this did not take place within exam boards, it was part of pre-board processes, and/or post-board activities.

4. Resolving issues

For a small number, exam boards have a role in resolving issues, particularly around academic integrity and student mitigations. For many, this activity has been removed from the exam board function into other processes.

5. Future planning

For a minority, the exam boards support the future planning in the delivery of the programme, through consultation with external examiners. For many, this activity has been removed from the time-bound exam board activity, and takes place later in the year through other processes.

Word cloud from survey data

The following image was created from text responses about the purpose of exam boards:



The act of confirming student outcomes

The key act of exam boards was the confirmation of student outcomes. We asked institutions to explain the level of active discussion that occurred for different types of student outcomes, set out in Table 1.

Table 1: The act of exam boards in confirming student outcomes

Decision	Active discussion	Formal ratification	For information	Other
Reassessment opportunities	52.5%	37.8%	4.9%	4.9%
Student progression	42.6%	44.3%	8.2%	4.9%
Student award classification	41.0%	47.5%	8.2%	3.2%
Compensation or condonement	41.0%	44.3%	1.6%	13.1%
The award of credit	39.3%	44.3%	11.5%	4.9%
Final marks for modules	37.8%	41.0%	16.4%	4.9%
Student award title (exit award)	36.15%	42.6%	13.1%	8.2%
Final marks for individual assessments	29.5%	45.9%	18.0%	6.5%

For information - where a decision has been made elsewhere and is visible to the exam board purely for information – was not widely used.

Formal ratification - confirming an outcome that has been scrutinized and/or discussed elsewhere. This was widespread for a range of outcomes including progression, award, compensation, award titles, module marks, assessment marks. This suggests that a significant volume of work is taking place outside of exam boards to scrutinize and discuss the detail of outcomes, as part of *pre-board processes* [see later section].

Active discussion - having discussions about individual students in order to make a decision. This was most frequent for confirming reassessment opportunities and driven by two factors:

- Regulations about eligibility, particularly whether eligibility is rules-based or discretionary, how factors like exceptional circumstances impact reassessment opportunities, and the overall complexity of regulations on reassessment;
- Systems development to automate regulations.

Additional observations

Pre-board processes: The concept of a pre-board was common as 44 institutions routinely hold pre-boards. 18 institutions sometimes hold pre-boards and regulations often permit a local (school/faculty) decision over whether they take place. Pre-boards are typically:

- Internal meetings between the Chair/Deputy Chair, Professional Services, and Programme Directors (or equivalent);
- A forum to review complex student cases;
- An additional forum to review and confirm marks, discuss exam incidents, complete quality assurance checks, agree provisional outcomes.

Only 5 institutions said they did not hold pre-boards at all; however, these institutions did have clear 'checking' processes in place, either carried out by the Chair, assessment teams, academic areas, or operated an exam board structure with multiple stages. A small number of institutions had made changes to introduce pre-boards.

Interim boards: Numerous institutions referred to 'interim boards'. For some, these were held for a sub-set of students and for particular decisions, such as setting reassessment for programmes that fell outside the normal calendar.

Communicating outcomes to students: Nearly all institutions communicate provisional marks to students before an exam board.

Key takeaways: exam board purpose and function

1. The common purpose of exam boards is the confirmation of student outcomes.
2. Assuring due process and academic standards are essential, but part of the holistic process to confirm student outcomes and not always part of the role of an exam board meeting itself.
3. Pre-boards are an important element of how current exam board practices are delivered.
4. Exam boards are typically a space where *formal ratification* takes place, with some *active discussion* for specific types of decision.



This document was produced as part of the Collaborative Enhancement Project, the Future of Exam Boards, funded by the Quality Assurance Agency.
