

THE FUTURE OF EXAM BOARDS

Preliminary insights from the exam board survey
data

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Project Overview

- Funded as a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project
- Running for 18-22 months – March 2024-December 2025
- Project initiated and led by University of Bristol (Dr Charlotte Verney) and Kingston University (Michaela Pittom)
- Project partners:
 - University of Leeds (Rachel Morritt / Louise Powell)
 - University of Sunderland (Joanne Wake)
 - Cardiff Metropolitan University (Tracey Horton)
 - University of Law (Gillian Davis)
 - Academic Registrars on Steering Group: Jo Coward (University of Bedfordshire), Mark Thompson (London School of Economics)
- Three phases: surveying practice, case summaries, workshops

Phase 1: Surveying practice

Why?

- To build an evidence-base of existing sector practice in exam boards to inform resources and guidance

How?

- Online survey open from 6 August to 7 October 2024
 - Part 1: Features of exam board practices
 - Part 2: Changes to exam board practices
 - Part 3: Institutional characteristics

Response

- 61 institutional responses to date from a range of institutional mission groups and sizes
- Planning to re-open survey

Preliminary insights

Very early stages of analysis – preliminary insights based on questions that were not free text

Play back initial insights and signal where we will explore further

Models

Function

Training

Regulation
complexity

What's
working well

What's
working less
well

Changes to
exam boards

Lessons from
exam board
change

Emerging models of exam boards

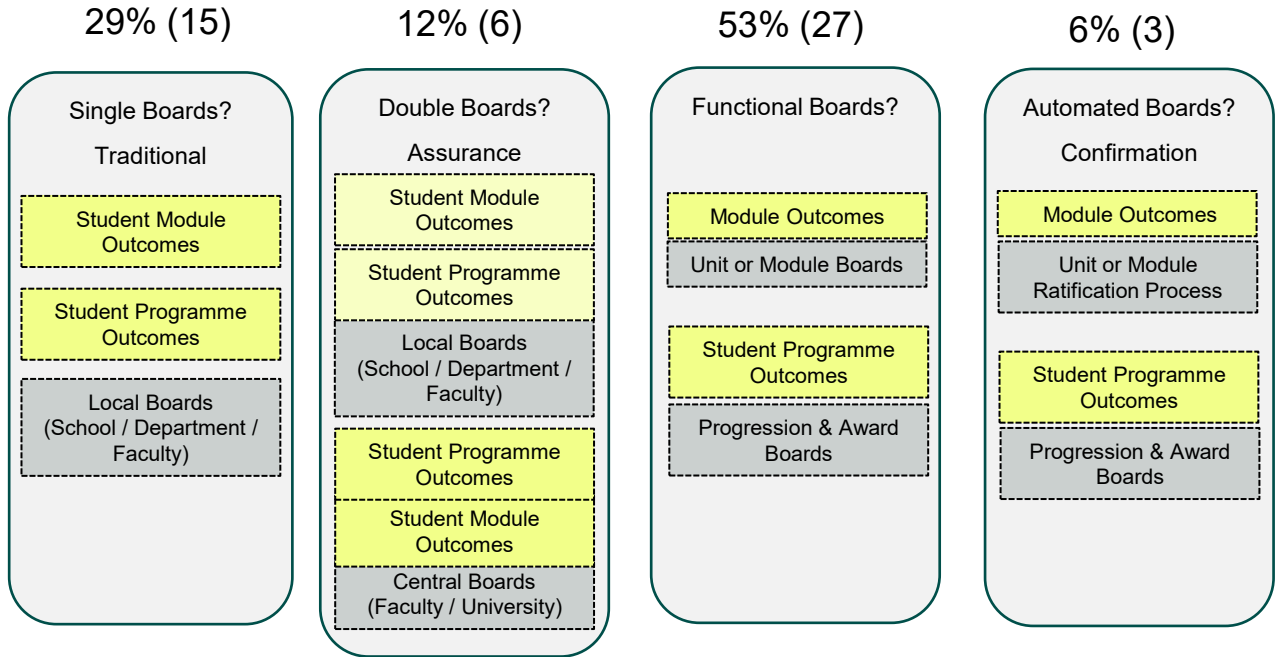


Figure: Potential Exam Board Models in the UK, created by Charlotte Verney (2024)

Organisation of exam boards

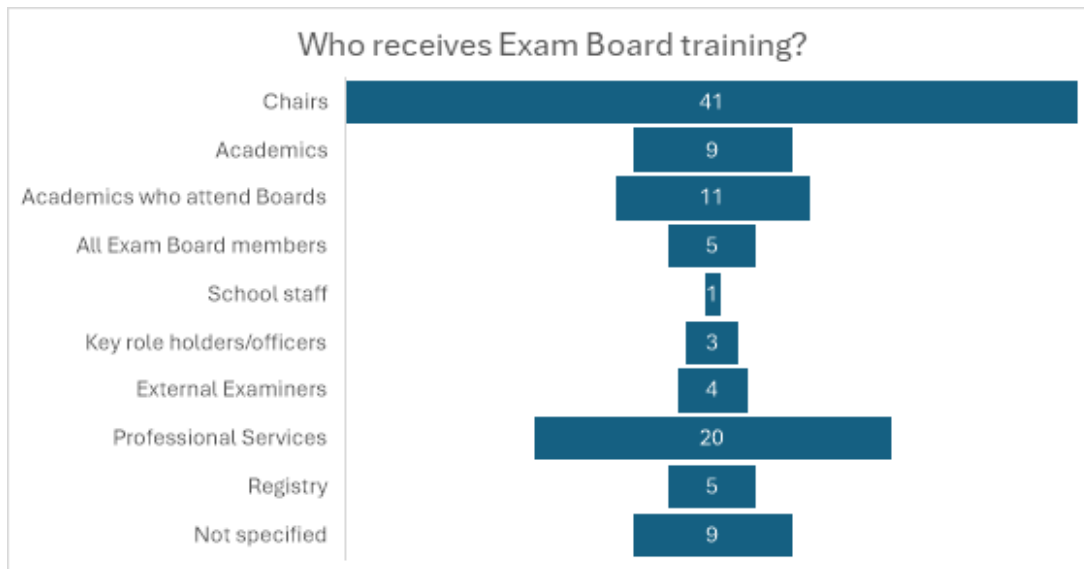
- Majority of boards held online and/or hybrid, 30% (18) are holding in person meetings.
- Boards taking place at multiple levels. 20 responses noted university level boards.
- 36% (22) holding 200+ boards per academic year
- Heavy reliance on External Examiner reports to review effectiveness of boards and associated processes.

Active discussion in exam boards

Decision	Active discussion	Formal ratification	For information	Other (C/E response)
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%

Training

- Only 19 commented on whether training was mandatory or not
- Of the 42 who commented on regularity, over half (25) deliver training annually
- Many institutions provided more than one types of training – would need a more targeted follow up

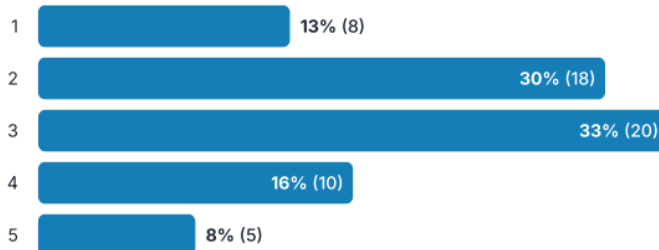


Regulation complexity & systems

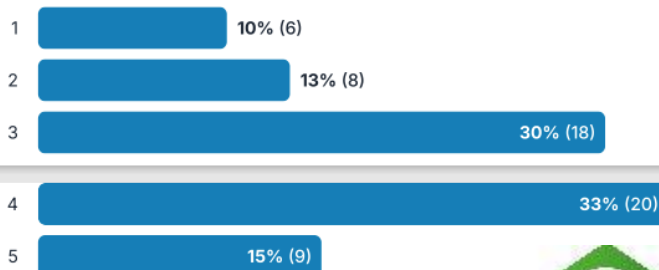
34. 19.B On a scale of 1-5, how would you describe the following:

Responses: 61

The level of complexity and discretion in your regulations? (1 not very complex or little discretion, 5 very complex and a lot of discretion)



Your current use of systems to apply regulations? (1 not much system automation, 5 high level of system automation)



Regulation complexity & systems

- 9 institutions reported they have the highest level of system automation – 7 of these suggested they had low regulation complexity
- 6 institutions reported they have the lowest level of system automation – inconclusive
- Small data set to draw much from on this question alone

Prompts further questions

→ How have people interpreted levels of regulation complexity and system automation?

→ Analysis of responses to other questions may help us articulate these concepts better for future

What's working and what's not

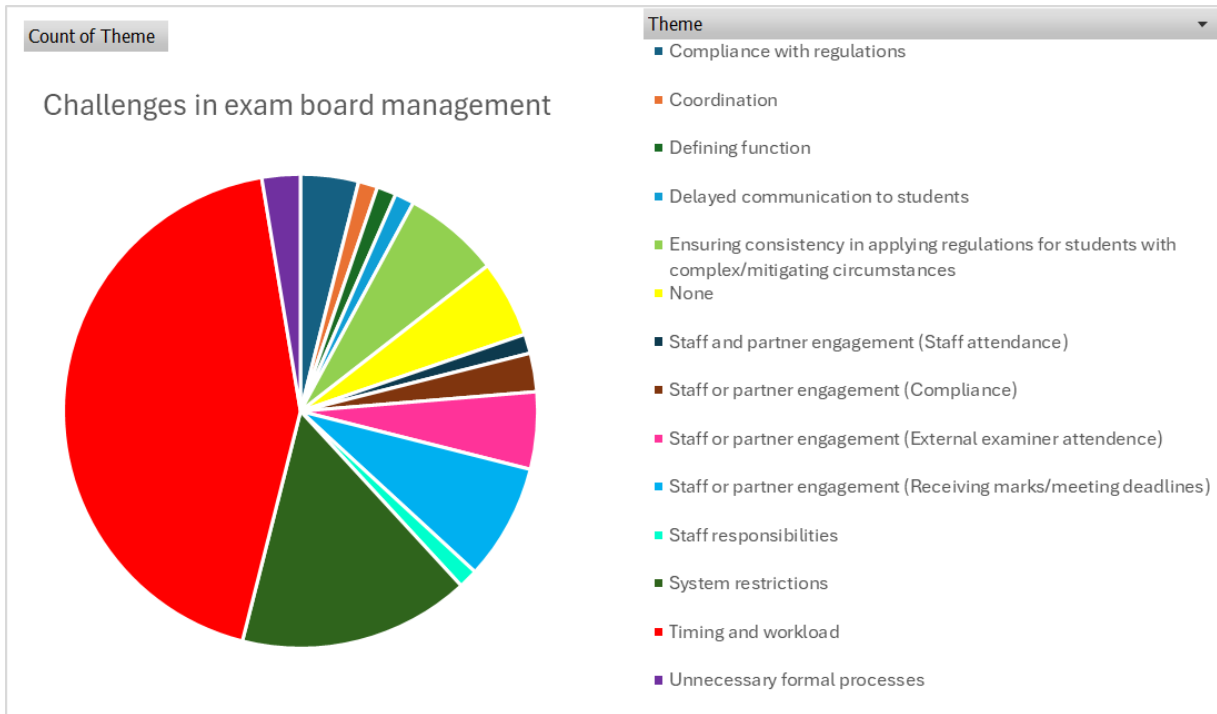
Aspects of exam board practice that work well

- 48% (29) Administration support
- 41% (25) External Examiners
- 36% (22) format of boards- online/ in person/ hybrid

Aspects of exam board practice that could work better or be improved:

- 54% (33) system configuration
- 36% (22) data or reports for exam boards
- 34% (21) current exam board model (single tier, multiple tier etc)

Challenges with managing exam boards - themes



Changes to exam boards

Institutional change since 2020

- **Exc. Circs. – 37%**
- **Regulations – 31%**
- **Timing – 25%**
- Systems – 19%
- Reassessment – 16%
- Model – 10%
- External – 8%
- Partner boards – 2%

Institutional change currently considering or delivering

- **Model – 31%**
- **Systems – 29%**
- **Timing – 23%**
- Regulations – 21%
- Reassessment – 20%
- External – 18%
- Partner boards – 18%
- Exc. Circs – 18%

Institutional change since 2020 AND considering further

- Timing – 16%
- Model – 5%
- External – 3%
- Reassessment – 2%

Lessons from delivering exam board change

Planning

- extensive, early, clear timescales

Design:

- consistency, definitions, impact analysis

Delivery:

- high-workload, test end-to-end, communicate clearly, extensive training, IT support, log issues & loopholes

Culture

- Large-scale complex, academic buy-in, institutional resistance to change

Impact

- Online boards positive, removing bureaucracy does not necessarily change the outcome, keep reviewing practice

From the room & padlet

ARC Annual Conference, 5 November 2024

Most interesting insights:

- Data on active discussion at exam boards
- Different models of delivery, particularly automating ratification and removing boards
- Roles of external examiners
- Timing of exam boards
- A struggle for all
- That some have returned to in-person exam boards
- Where exam boards add value

Questions:

- Did awarding gaps feature in the survey or in exam board discussions?
- What value are external examiners adding to exam boards?
- More details on the different models operating?
- Can we have a common language around exam board practice?
- How many people attend boards? Do we just need a computer?
- Where discussion is happening, what is it that is being discussed?
- Is exam board delivery being compromised by traditional timings of graduation?
- Is there a case study of single tier boards with enhanced automation?

Next steps

Survey re-open so that we can map more of the sector

Institutional summaries of exam board practice and innovation – from Spring 2025

Practice-sharing workshops to explore themes, challenges, and what the future could look like – from Spring 2025

Keep an eye on the QAA project webpage: [The future of exam boards \(qaa.ac.uk\)](https://www.qaa.ac.uk)

Follow Charlotte & Michaela on LinkedIn for updates

Get in touch with Charlotte or Michaela if there are areas of exam board practice that you think we should be covering in the project:

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