

# **The future of exam boards – what next?**

**3 November 2025**

## **Project Team**

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# QAA Project overview

## Funded QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project (March 24 – Dec 25)

University of Bristol, Kingston University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, University of Leeds, University of Sunderland, London School of Economics, University of Bedfordshire

### Goals

- Develop evidence base around exam board practice in the UK
- Create spaces for practice and knowledge-sharing
- Showcase innovative approaches to exam boards
- Collaboratively problem-solve – what is stopping us improving this space? How can we collectively work towards something 'better'?

### Elements

Three core elements:

1. surveying practice (survey with responses from 67 institutions);
2. case summaries (aiming for 10 to be published)
3. workshops (to generate insights, share practice and create discussions)

# Goals today

- Take stock of what we know now - share some highlights from the project
- Explore how to deliver change in this space
  - Primarily within our institutions
  - Within the sector

## **Your participation today is also part of this project and data generation**

- Our own notes from comments and discussion today
- Anonymous MSForm at the end of the session

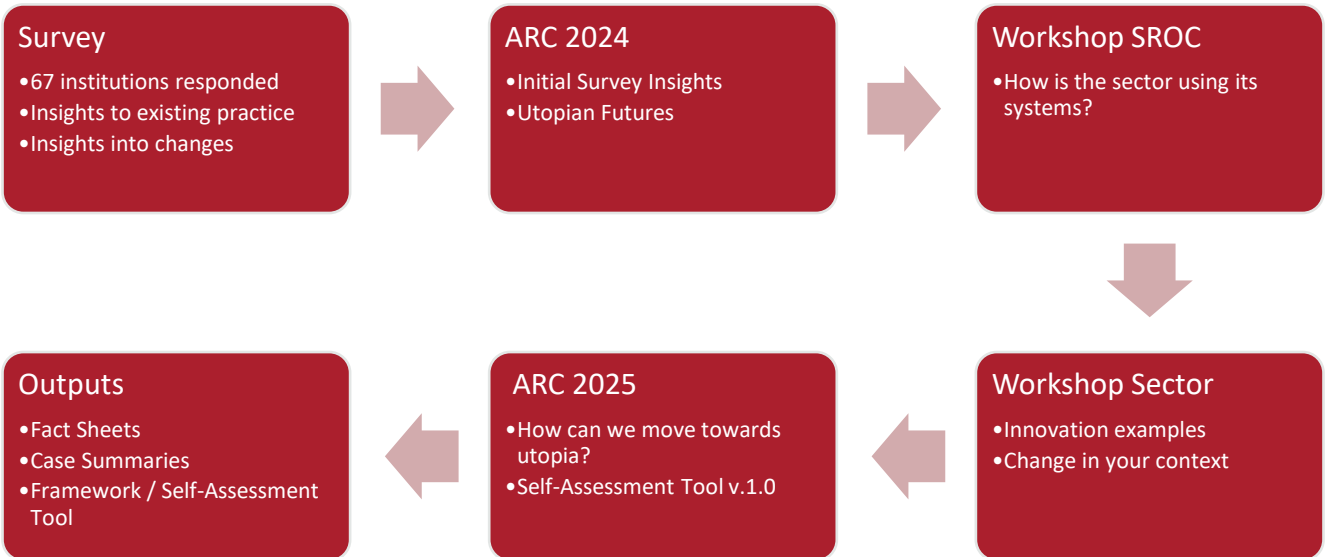
## **Consent**

By taking part in the workshop, you give consent for the data you have provided to be used as part of the project. You may request for specific comments or notes to be excluded from the data immediately after the workshop. Please read the participant information sheet.

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# **TAKING STOCK – WHAT DO WE KNOW NOW?**

# Since we saw you last



# What do we now know about current practice?

- **The sector is diverse** in institutional size, shape, culture – this is reflected in exam board practice
- **Three core exam board structures:**
  - **Module Boards/ Progression & Award Boards (MABs/PABs)** – 32 HEIs
  - **Single “Exam Board” Authority** – 24 HEIs
  - **Oversight layers** – 11 HEIs
- **\*Examples of each across mission groups and size\***
- **Five core purposes of exam boards:** confirming student outcomes, assuring due process, assuring standards, resolving issues, future planning (not all shared across sector)
- **Ratifying decisions** takes up a lot of time in meetings rather than active discussion
- **Systems used** to support activities that take place before, during and after

# Evolutions and Innovations: what are institutions changing?

## Timing of boards

- Timeliness of boards – not necessarily about having fewer boards\*\*

## Internal membership

- Smaller, including QA roles, reflecting new academic leadership roles

## External involvement

- Increasing engagement, changing focus, reducing engagement
- Holistic rethink, reducing engagement in time-bound processes\*\*

## Regulation simplification

- Desire to standardise, simplify and make clearer to students
- In some places adding more rules (and complexity)

## System automation

- Overwhelming *desire* to use systems better
- Different starting points, institutional factors, drivers

## Structure of exam boards

- Replacing module boards with clear processes
- Increasing consistency, especially with partners\*\*

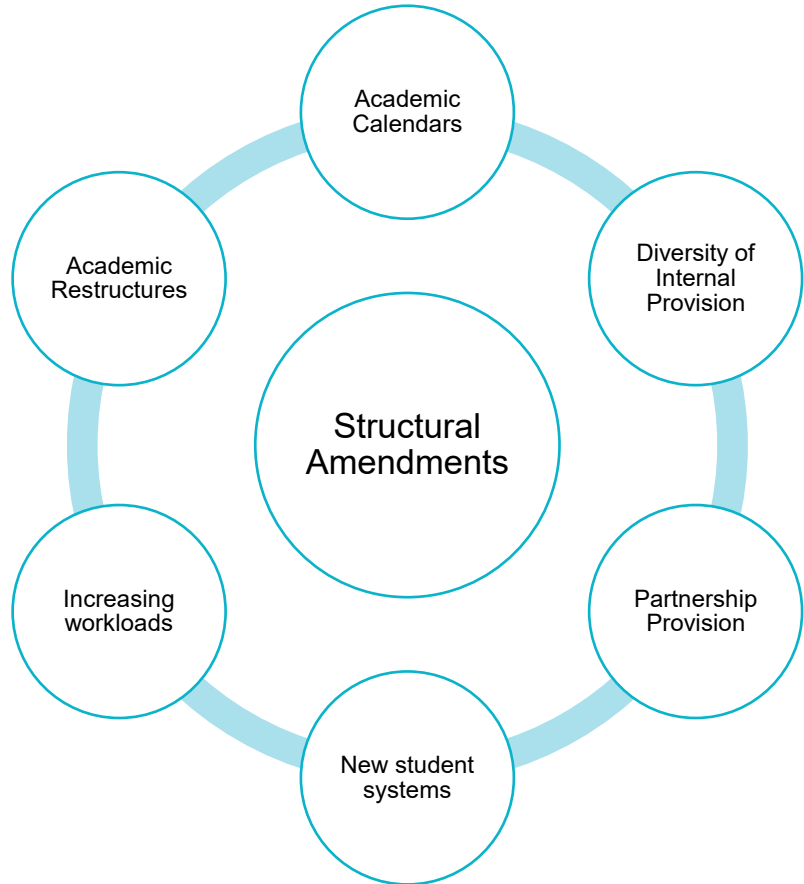
## Purpose

- Holistic review – do we need them? And if so, what for?\*\*

# What is driving change?

## Reactive change / taking opportunities

- Timing
- Frequency
- Membership
- Structure



## Taking opportunities for change

### University of Leeds

#### Improving effectiveness within existing regulations

##### Starting point:

Assessment Boards (modules), Progression & Award Boards

##### Review of effectiveness (23/24) – taking stock after the pandemic, all boards observed against a set of pre-defined criteria, no intervention in meetings

##### Changes introduced without regulatory change – template agendas, module leader role clarified, introducing pre-boards, introduce training for Chairs

### University of Bristol

#### Responding to institutional change initiatives

**Starting point:** School Exam Boards and Faculty Exam Boards ('oversight' structure)

**Institutional changes** – new structure of the academic year (24/25), 6 faculties to 3 (25/26), transformation programme

**Consolidate understanding and ambitions** – positioned as a review of the overall process to confirm outcomes, using data to show duplication and effort, agreeing driving principles

**A phased approach, empowering School Exam Boards** – retaining 'oversight' through data assurance mechanisms and a complex outcomes board

### Arden University

#### Implementing a new student record system

**Starting point:** Subject Assessment Boards (modules), Progression & Award Boards (PABs)

**Opportunities** – to better align with HESA timescales and remove manual effort

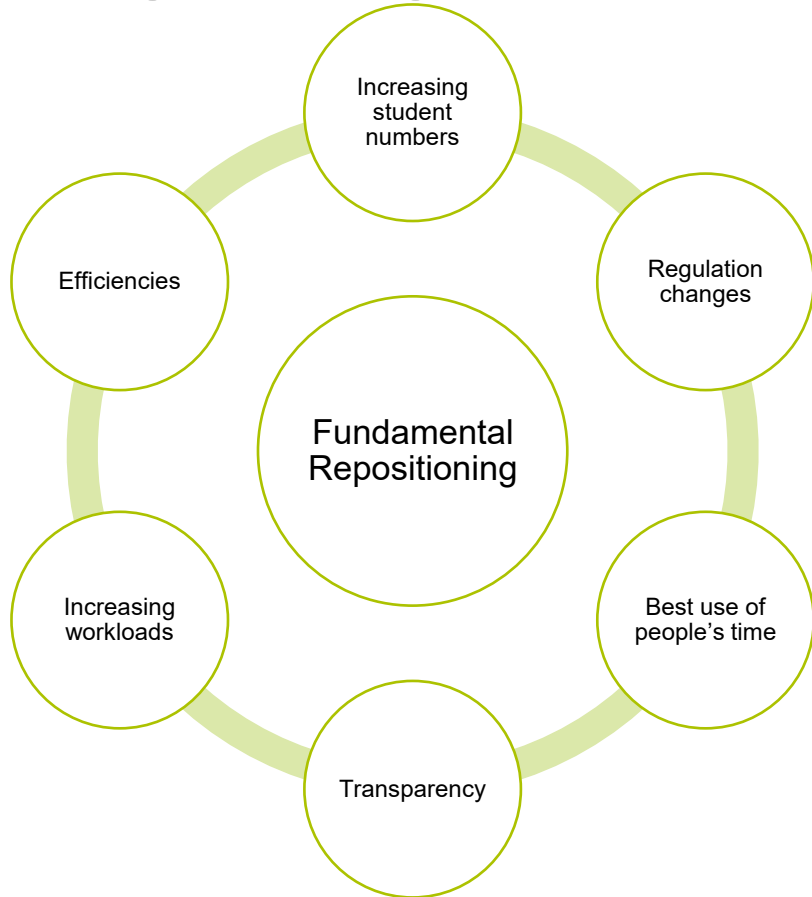
**Changes to improve data accuracy and remove manual effort** – system-generated progression, award and compensation (aimed for 80%), consolidated administrative teams coordinating the activity, shorter window for SABs/PABs, automated communications to students

**Now reviewing the overall approach** – role of the SAB, timings of SAB/PAB, role of external, training on new approach

# What is driving change?

## Proactive change / intentional change to this process

- Purpose
- Regulation simplification
- Regulation Automation
- Process Efficiency
- Membership
- Student experience



## Early Movers – with different starting points

Kingston University	University of Chester	University of Gloucester
<p><b>Online module ratification and institutional external examiners</b></p>	<p><b>University progression &amp; award boards, external quality advisers and module exam boards</b></p>	<p><b>Professional services progression &amp; award panels</b></p>
<p><b>Starting Point:</b> Module Boards, Progression &amp; Award Boards (PABs)</p> <p><b>1. Removal of module boards</b> replaced within online system for internal and external marks assurance in 2022/23</p> <p><b>2a. Refined PABs</b> reducing membership, focused on 'discussible' profiles</p> <p><b>2b.PAB Externals</b> with quality expertise attending all boards</p> <p><b>3. From 2025</b> PAB externals scaled back</p>	<p><b>Starting Point:</b> Module Boards, Progression &amp; Award Boards (PABs)</p> <p><b>1. Refined PABs</b> moved from 50+ department-specific PABs per year, to 12 university-wide PABs (one per month) between 2013/14 and 2017/18 *required removing discretion</p> <p><b>2. Online PABS</b> from 2018/19 moved PABS online</p> <p><b>3a. External quality advisers</b> replacing external examiners and do not attend boards</p> <p><b>3b. Removing module boards</b> planned</p>	<p><b>Starting Point:</b> Module Boards, Progression &amp; Award Boards (PABs)</p> <p><b>1. Replaced PABs with panels</b> – review system-generated decisions (by outcome and school) and check algorithm and data – professional services and senior tutor – reviewing decisions not making them</p> <p><b>2. Automated workflow for post-board changes</b></p> <p><b>3. Develop consistency at module approval level</b> planned</p>

## Rapid and radical change

### University of Sunderland

#### Automating decisions and university boards

**Starting point:** Module Boards and Progression & Award Boards.

**1. Regulation review and automation project** (18 months from 2022), system consultancy, delivered high-proportion of automation but not all

**2. Trial of University PABs (2024)** – discussing exceptions only, over 3000 students, about 1/3 discussed

**3. Trial extended to whole year (2024/2025)** - Faculty provides Chairs, held 14 UPABS, from 14,000 students only 472 profiles discussed, average time of PABs 20 minutes

### Northumbria University

#### A Centralised Review Process

**Starting point:** Programme Assessment Boards (single delegated authority)

**1a. Pilot June-September 2025** – no progression boards at first sit, engagement from all faculties (18 departments),

**1b. Module marks assurance** – clearer process to confirm marks are verified, additional guidance

**2a. 2025/26 delivering institutional level boards for all exception profiles**

**2b. Review of moderation approach and role of external examiners**

# THE ACADEMIC REGISTRAR'S EXAM BOARD UTOPIA

And how do we move  
towards it?

# ARC Utopian Vision

## You told us you wanted:

Timely  
Marking

Robust &  
Integrated  
Systems

Simple  
Regulations

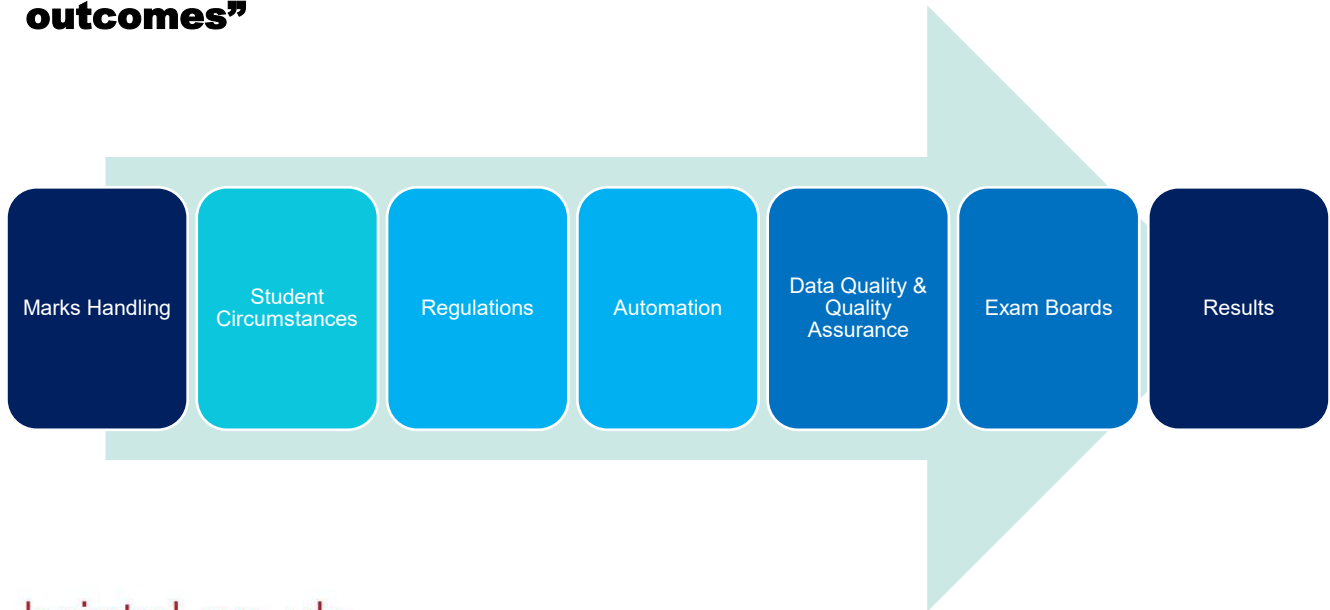
Automated  
Outcomes

Strategic  
External  
Input

# How do we move towards your Utopia?

## Step 1: Reframe the conversation

From “exam boards” to “a process for confirming student outcomes”



# **How do we move towards your Utopia?**

**Step 2: Understand your starting point and where your institution wants to get to**

# Self-assessment tool v.1.1

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
<b>Exam Boards Purpose</b>					
<b>Regulation</b>					
<b>Automation</b>					
<b>Quality Assurance</b>					
<b>Student Circumstances</b>					
<b>Marks Handling &amp; Assurance</b>					

# **How do we move towards your Utopia?**

## **Step 3: What would be needed in your context to move the dial?**

- **Focus on one aspect at a time or rapid repositioning?**
- **What opportunities are there from institutional change initiatives?**
- **Do you think you have an open door in any of these areas?**

# How do we move as a sector?

## 1. Project outputs

### Workshop Outputs

- Presentations and workshop outputs will be shared on the project website

### Information Sheets

- A series of information sheets will be published on the website

### Self-Assessment Tool

- Develop version 2.0 of the tool
- Develop more detailed guidance for each element

### Further Workshops

- SROC 2026
- QAA Events (TBC)

# How do we move as a sector?

## 2. Thoughts from one-day workshop

### Change culture

- Academic culture differences between institutions; is there a need for buy-in or is there an open door to be pushed?
- We can be more radical than first thought
- Reassurance that there is diversity, and no single solution
- Which tasks need completing, and who is best place to do them?
- How can we make the case for change? Can we quantify what work goes on?
- Endless opportunities, but lots of interdependencies, and how do we get prioritized?

### Specifics

- The role of externals
- Marks transfer to VLE – how did people achieve this as some finding it very hard?
- How do we have data assurance without formal boards?
- How do we get accurate and timely marks?
- Exceptional circumstances discussed at a board or not?
- Have we got the right systems to deliver automation?
- “By exception” - are all the exceptions really exceptions?
- Strong and well-trained chair
- How do we remove discretion?

# Reflections from the room (ARC 2025)

- **External examiners** – this is one area where there is the most commonality in where people are currently, and therefore a good area for a sector focus; what do they do and in what spaces
- **Cultural dimension** – add to the self-assessment tool
- **Marks handling** – expansion of the self-assessment tool to reflect complexity of elements, such as multiple systems
- **Academic voice** – success of changes from the academic voice
- **Pros / Cons / implications** – of each element of the framework on the self-assessment tool
- **Module evaluation** – clarify where this happens if board's focus changes
- **Lightening talks** – sharing practical examples of an aspect of change
- **Reassurance** – that change has been successful

# How do we move as a sector?

## 3. Thoughts from the room?

- Future survey for benchmarking?
- Show & Tell events?
- Dedicated space to discuss?
- Developing insights around the elements of the confirming student outcomes process?
- Something else???

The future of exam boards next steps - ARC 2025



# Follow the project

Keep an eye on the QAA project webpage: [The future of exam boards \(qaa.ac.uk\)](http://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 want insight to from our data more urgently:

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