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## **Working together to research and improve operational practice: insights from a sector-wide collaborative project exploring exam boards**

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### **Research Domains**

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

### **Abstract**

This paper shares insights from designing and delivering a sector-wide collaborative research project to collectively problem solve challenges faced by UK Higher Education Institutions in managing exam boards. The “Future of Exam Boards” project, funded by the Quality Assurance Agency, aimed to develop an evidence base of exam board practice in the UK higher education sector, propose enhancements to exam board delivery and create a community of knowledge-sharing. It was collaborative by design, informed by a sector-wide practitioner association and a smaller steering group, and generating data through collaborative practice-sharing and problem-solving spaces. The project formally concludes in December 2025. This paper will share insights into the benefits of engaging with an established sector community, the value of creating intentional practice-sharing spaces, and learnings to inform future research into operational practices in higher education.

### **Full paper**

#### Introduction

In the UK, exam boards are held within higher education institutions (HEIs) to formally agree the outcomes of students’ assessments, modules, progression to the next year or their award. The operation of exam boards is inherently complex, as an intersection of academic decision-making, administrative and technical processes. Furthermore, these operations have become increasingly complex over time as HEI’s have diversified their academic provision, increased student numbers and utilised technology more (Verney, 2022). Operating exam boards requires the collective efforts of various parts of the university workforce, which is often not recognised within HEIs, and there is a lack of sector guidance or published good practice. In this regard, the operation of exam boards represents organisational and sector blind spots; such blind spots, Rhoades (2010) argues, constrain our ability to really understand our institutions and how to improve them. This

project drew on the knowledge and experience of professional services staff from across the sector to begin to remove our blind spots in the operation of exam boards so that we can collectively improve our practice.

### Approach

This project aimed to develop an evidence base of exam board practice in the UK higher education sector, and create a community of knowledge-sharing through running a sector-wide survey with the Academic Registrar's Council (ARC), facilitating insight workshops with interested stakeholder groups, and sharing innovative practice. Initial insights shared in this paper have been developed through project team reflections and discussions to date. These will be revisited, expanded and/or refined through structured reflection of the project team and feedback from workshops during the autumn.

### Insights (May 2025)

#### *Benefits of engagement and collaboration with an established sector-wide community*

There has been overwhelming support and enthusiasm for this project from the ARC community, to use structured and collaborative research to better understand and improve their practice. Our invitation for 5-6 collaborative partners to join our steering group resulted in expressions of interest from over 30 higher education institutions, and the survey received responses from 63 HEIs. The project had several unavoidable timeline set-backs, but having an engaged community meant that we had a clear route to provide regular updates on the progress of the project, initial insights, and used those as opportunities to gain feedback on the project as it evolved.

#### *Value of intentional practice-sharing spaces*

Insight workshops facilitated by the project were designed to be interactive, and tailored to the audience, typically generating data and artefacts through menti-meter and flipcharts. What was common from all workshops, whether held with senior leaders, academics, or specialist practitioners, was the value of providing an intentional space to talk about operational practice. It highlighted differences between HEIs, that there is not a one-size-fits all solution to delivering operations, but, discussions opened the window of possible alternative ways of working. Furthermore, it was clear to the workshop facilitators that for some participants, the workshop offered a space for the often unheard voices of the university workforce, and for some, provided actionable next steps that they could put into practice at their own institution.

#### *Learnings for research into operational practice in future*

Our survey aimed to understand both current operational practice, and how HEIs were approaching change, which was difficult in an area that lacks shared terminology, and

resulted in a lengthy survey for HEIs. In future, baselining current practice first, before experiences of change might be more effective.

As the shape of exam boards was a live issue at many HEIs, it was a challenge for the project to analyse and share insights quickly enough for the community to benefit. Keeping our outputs flexible, meant we could adapt these during the project, splitting them into smaller outputs that could be prioritised based on the community needs.

We also encountered practical and philosophical challenges, particularly for contractual arrangements and ethical approval; were we delivering a consultancy project or academic research? were we only producing practice-focused outputs or academic publications? Navigating these challenges required clarity of intention, and confidence to challenge traditional conceptions of what constitutes research.

### Conclusion & Next steps

We have found huge value in working collaboratively with a sector community to investigate operational practice, particularly through providing intentional space for practice-sharing. Moreover, it has reinforced the need to examine organisational blind spots, such as complex operations, through research, to identify areas for institutional improvement. As the project concludes in December 2025, at the conference, we will expand on this paper from the later stages of the project and make recommendations for delivering future collaborative research into university operations.