The future of exam boards

ARC ASSESSMENT PRACTITIONERS' GROUP

3 NOVEMBER 2023

Context of this session

To **start a conversation** about the challenges we face in exam boards and how to find solutions

To inform a **hot topic discussion** at the ARC conference on 9 November

To shape a **survey of exam board practice**

To shape a **workshop** in the spring where we can:
◦ Explore existing alternative models in more depth
◦ Unpack some of the common challenges
◦ Challenge some of our perceptions about the purpose and value of exam boards

Participation: We will be creating a record of today's workshop contributions to inform the next steps of this project. Details will be stored anonymously. You may request for any of your comments to be removed from the record of the session.

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Structure of this session

Approximate timings:

11:40 Who is here today?

11:45 What do we know about exam boards in the UK?

12:00 How do your boards run?

12:10 Group discussion 1

12:30 Group discussion 2
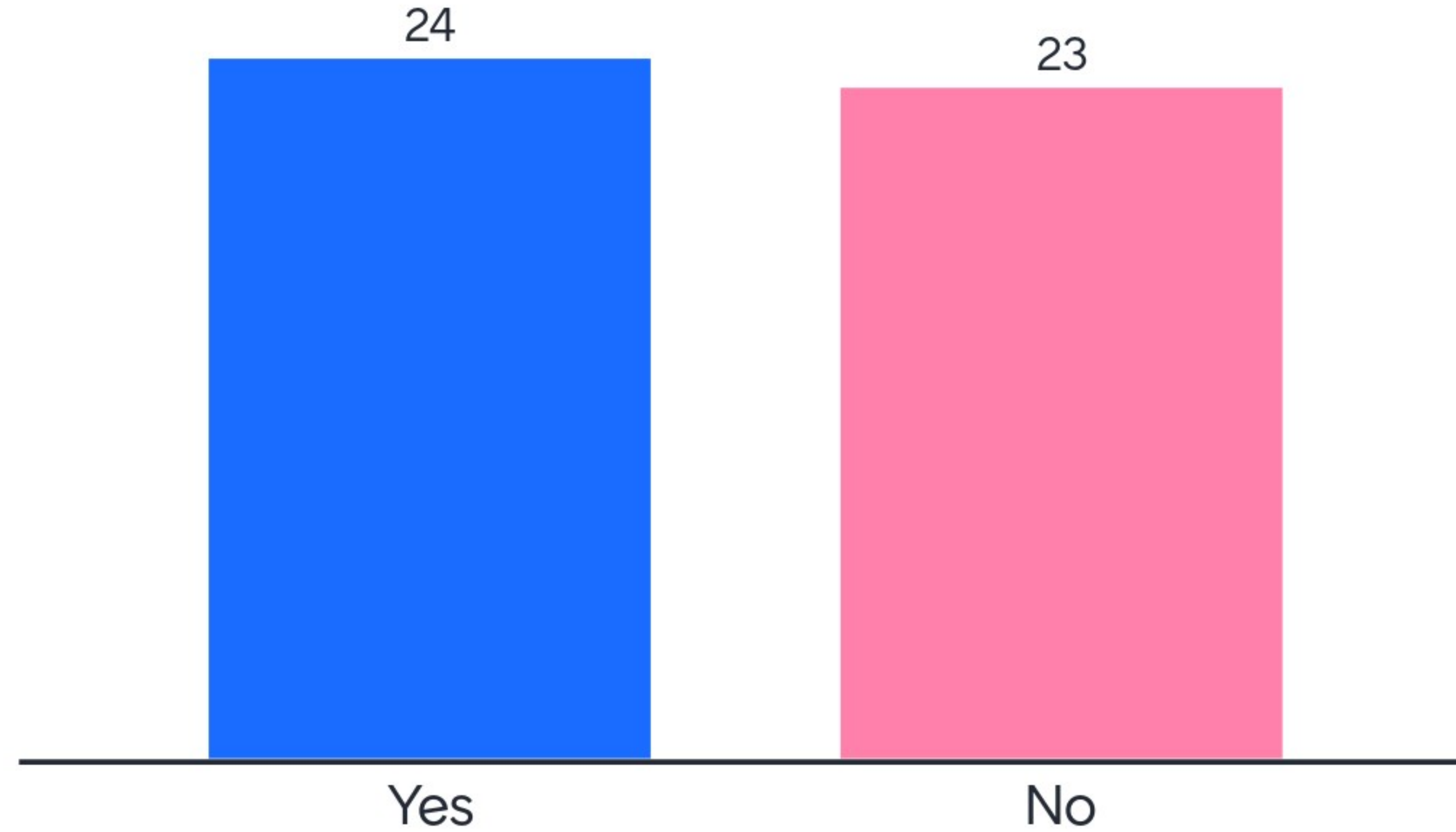
12:50 Next steps, questions and feedback

Who is here today?

www.menti.com
1763 4937

What work do you do in relation to exam boards? (select all that apply)

11 Prepare paperwork

11 Record decisions

44 Advise on regulations

13 Organize logistics

15 Process the outcomes

15 Manage the systems

Describe your exam boards in one word

44 responses

How do exam boards make you feel...

41 responses

structured

disappointed

effective

pressured   tired   excited

nervous

worried

frustrated

despondent   reassured   challenged   weary   stressed   busy

exhausted   overwhelmed

positive   concerned

satisfied
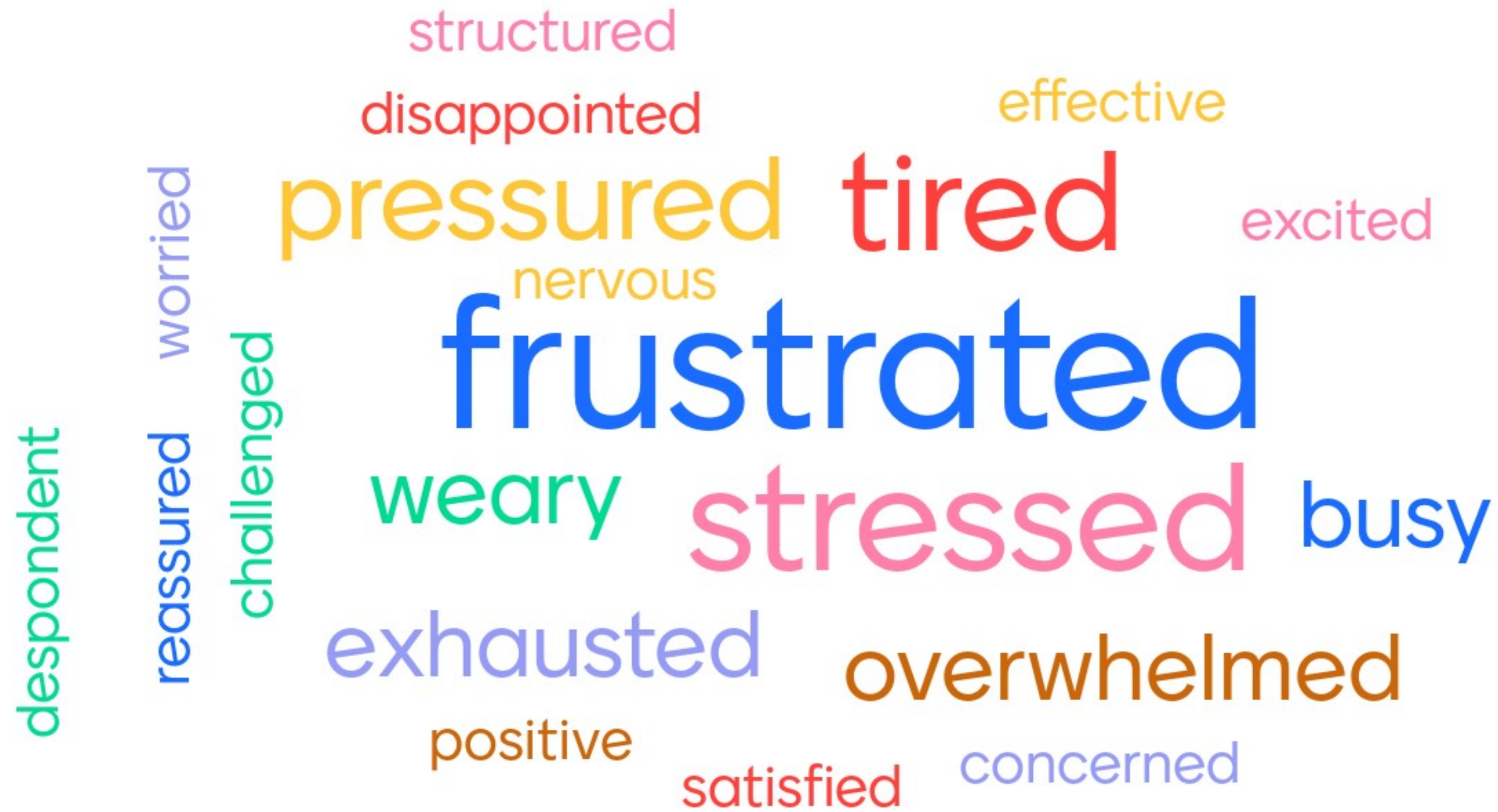
What do we know about Exam Boards in the UK?

Exam Board Decisions

☐ **Exam boards decisions are complex decisions.**

- ◦ Attempts to reduce complexity, by removing some decisions from the exam board process - extenuating circumstances
- ◦ Attempts to reduce complexity, by standardizing decisions – removing discretion, explicit criteria

☐ **The process of making exam board decisions has become more operationally complex.**

Larger student numbers, tighter processing timescales, multiple decision points in a year, and this core activity taking place alongside other core activities such as teaching, new types of provision – partnership and apprenticeships.

☐ **The process of making exam board decisions is becoming more technical.**

Institutions are trying to make better use of their systems; this can introduce new work and new knowledge required to deliver exam boards.

Experiencing Exam Boards

- **There is extensive 'administrative' work required to deliver exam boards that was felt to be invisible.**

  "It's such a big core function of the University, but it's not necessarily given the value it deserves. It's almost like it just happens as a kind of administrative process." (Louise)

- **Delivering exam boards was cited as one of the most challenging parts of administrative manager's roles in assessment.**

  "It's probably ensuring that everything is done for the Boards of Examiners. So, it's probably a capacity/time thing, and having to rely on another people to have met deadlines." (Kirsty)

  "Telling the exam board chairs that they can or can't' do things, or usually that they can't do things that they're wanting to do, something that's against the regulations" (George).

- **Ambiguous administrative remit**

Do exam boards have an identity crisis?

- Has the purpose of an exam board changed?

- Are we clear as a sector why we have them?

- Who holds the knowledge required to make exam board decisions?

- Have we been tinkering with a system that needs a full re-design?

There is a need to re-evaluate and re-confirm the purpose of an exam board, the knowledge required, who holds or needs to hold that knowledge, and then design appropriate processes and systems needed to support it.

Examination boards (Guiding principles 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10)

Degree-awarding bodies operate, or oversee the operation of, examination boards (or equivalent bodies) to make judgements and decisions on which the award of credit and qualifications is ultimately based. The powers, authority and accountability of the board are clearly specified and understood by members of the board.

Regulations and procedures make explicit the degree-awarding body's requirements for:

- membership of internal and external examiners and other staff, and attendance at meetings
- the quorum of the meeting and how inquoracy will be dealt with
- chair's action provision, its limitations, and the recording and reporting of such decisions
- the exercise of discretion by boards.

Provision is made to enable conflicts of interest (such as personal interests or relationships with students) to be identified and addressed.

Boards of examiners apply fairly and consistently regulations for progression within, and transfer between, courses and for the award of credits and qualifications. Regulations will make clear:

- how assessment results will be used to determine the award and classification of a qualification
- how assessment results will be used in terms of progression, whether or not it is possible for a student to progress to the next stage of the award with one or more failed modules outstanding
- any pre-requisite or co-requisite requirements
- the number of reassessment opportunities permitted
- whether or not any limit is placed on the maximum marks which can be achieved in a reassessment.

A record is kept of decisions and of the factors taken into account in the exercise of discretion by the board. Regulations make explicit how applications from students with extenuating circumstances are dealt with, including whether or not new assessment attempts are allowed and assessment elements disregarded.

UK Quality Code for Higher Education Advice and Guidance: Assessment
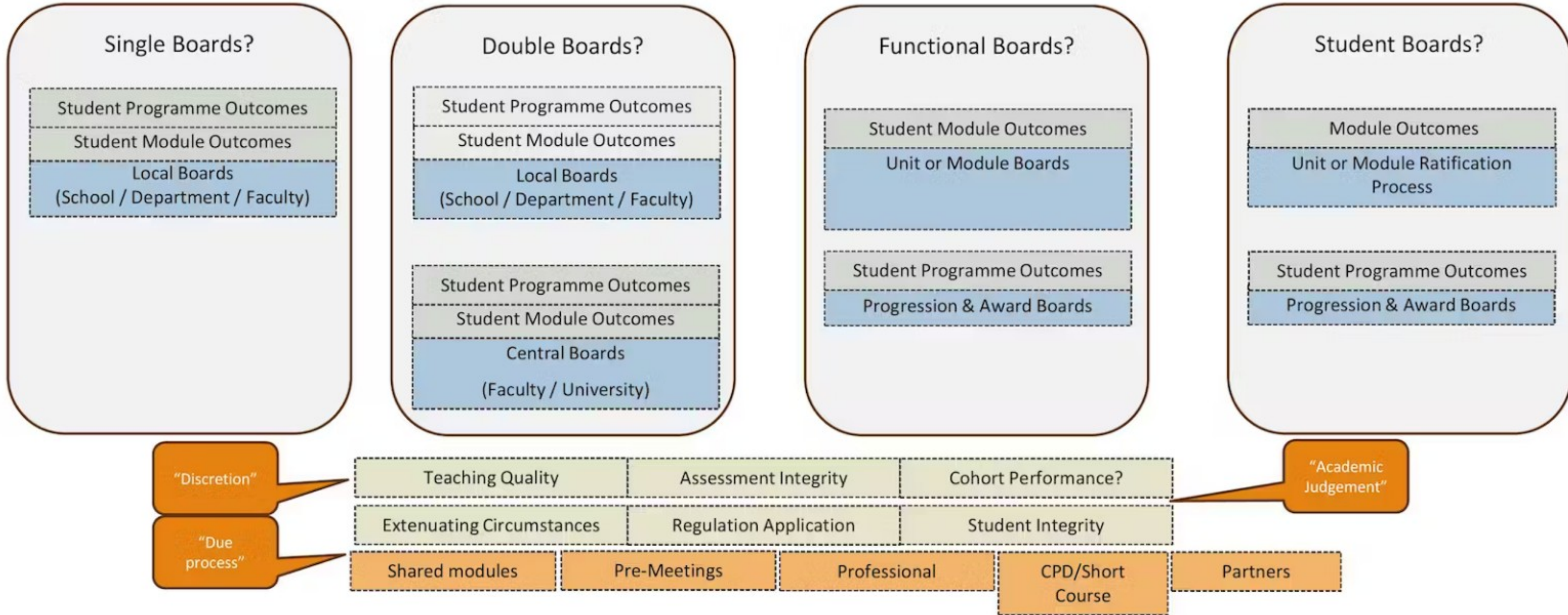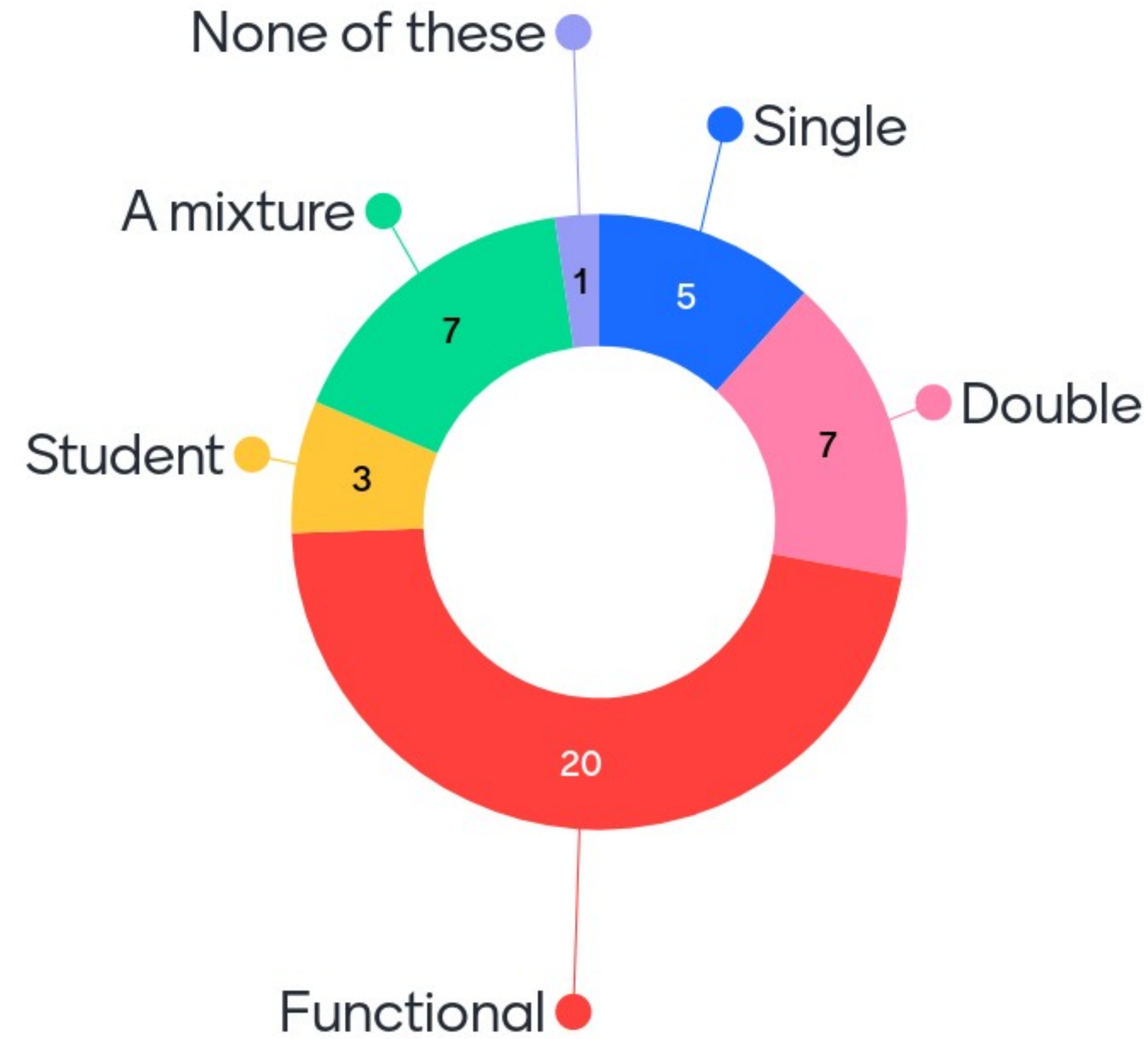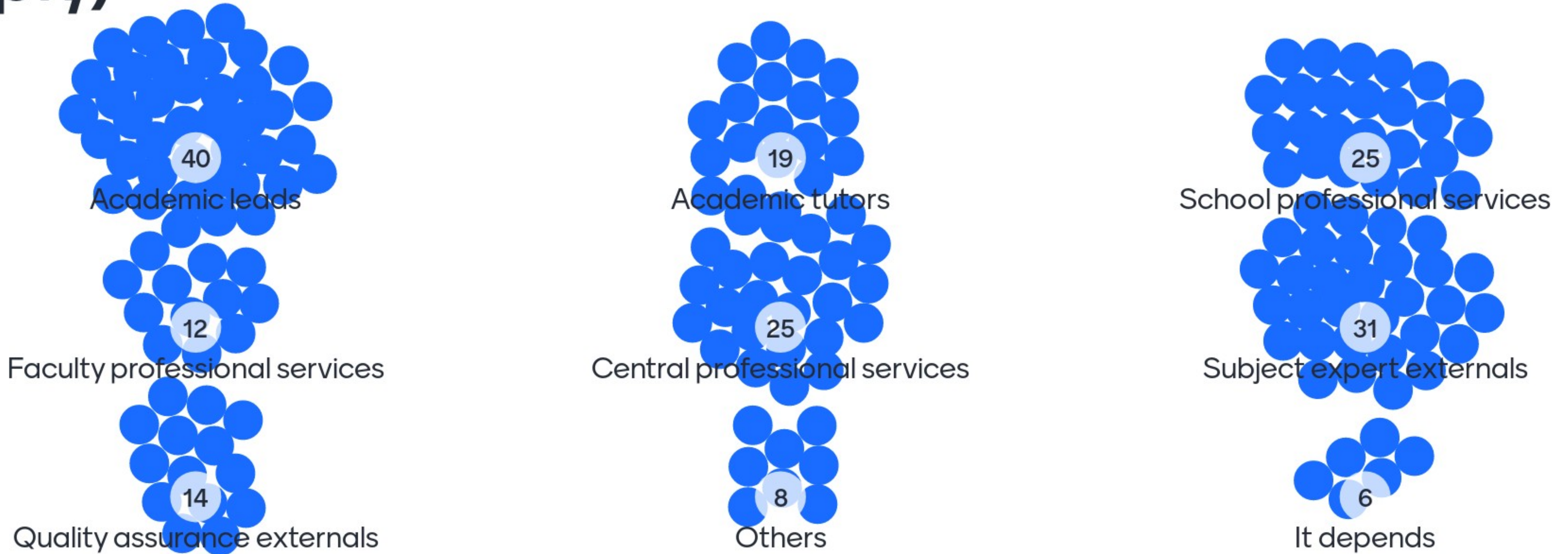
Some UK models of exam boards

How would you best describe your exam board model?

Who attends your exam boards? (select all that apply)

40 — Academic leads

12 — Faculty professional services

14 — Quality assurance externals

19 — Academic tutors

25 — Central professional services

8 — Others

25 — School professional services

31 — Subject expert externals

6 — It depends
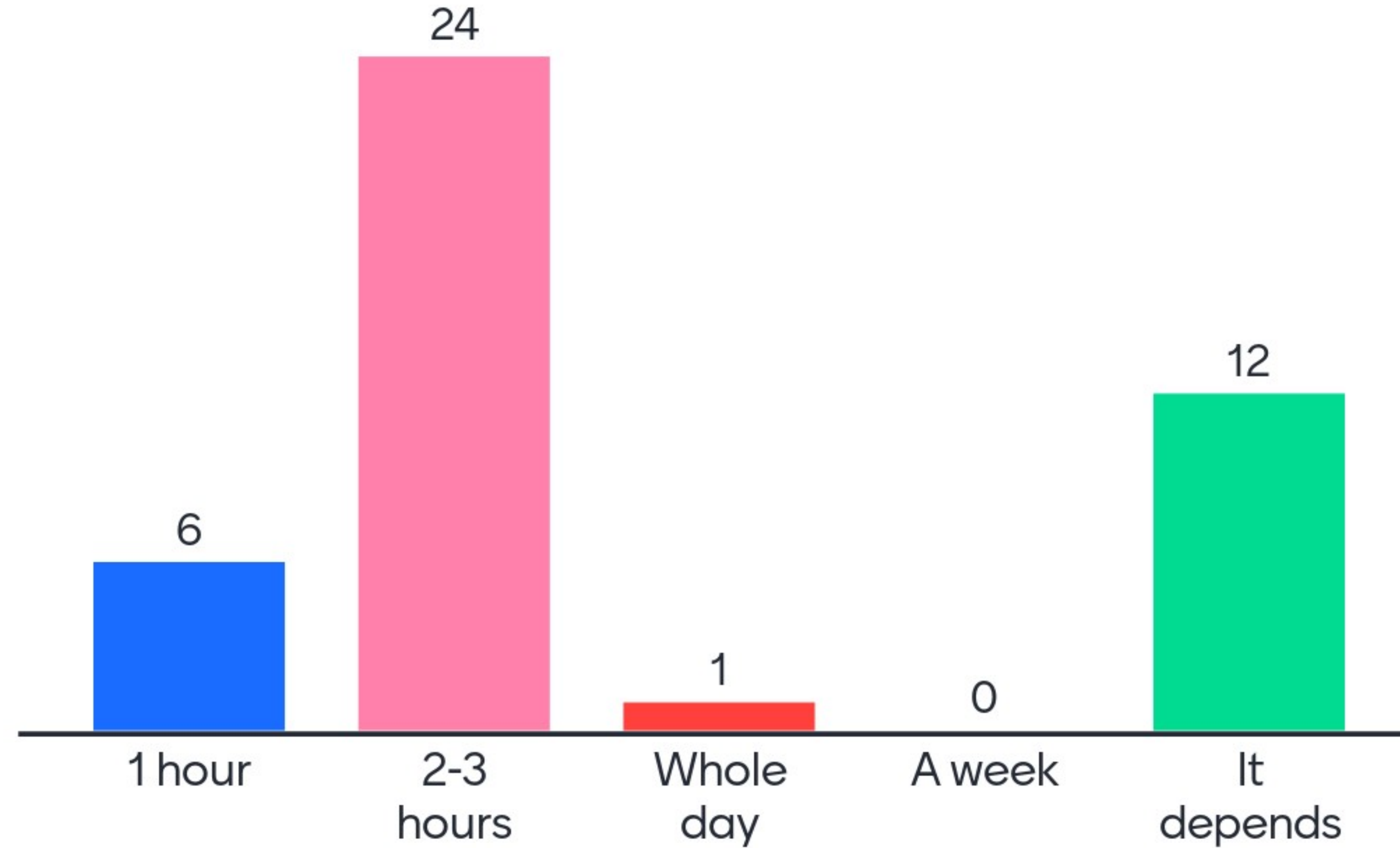
How often are you exam boards?

- Each term / semester: 9
- End of year (plus resits): 13
- Monthly: 3
- All the time!: 18
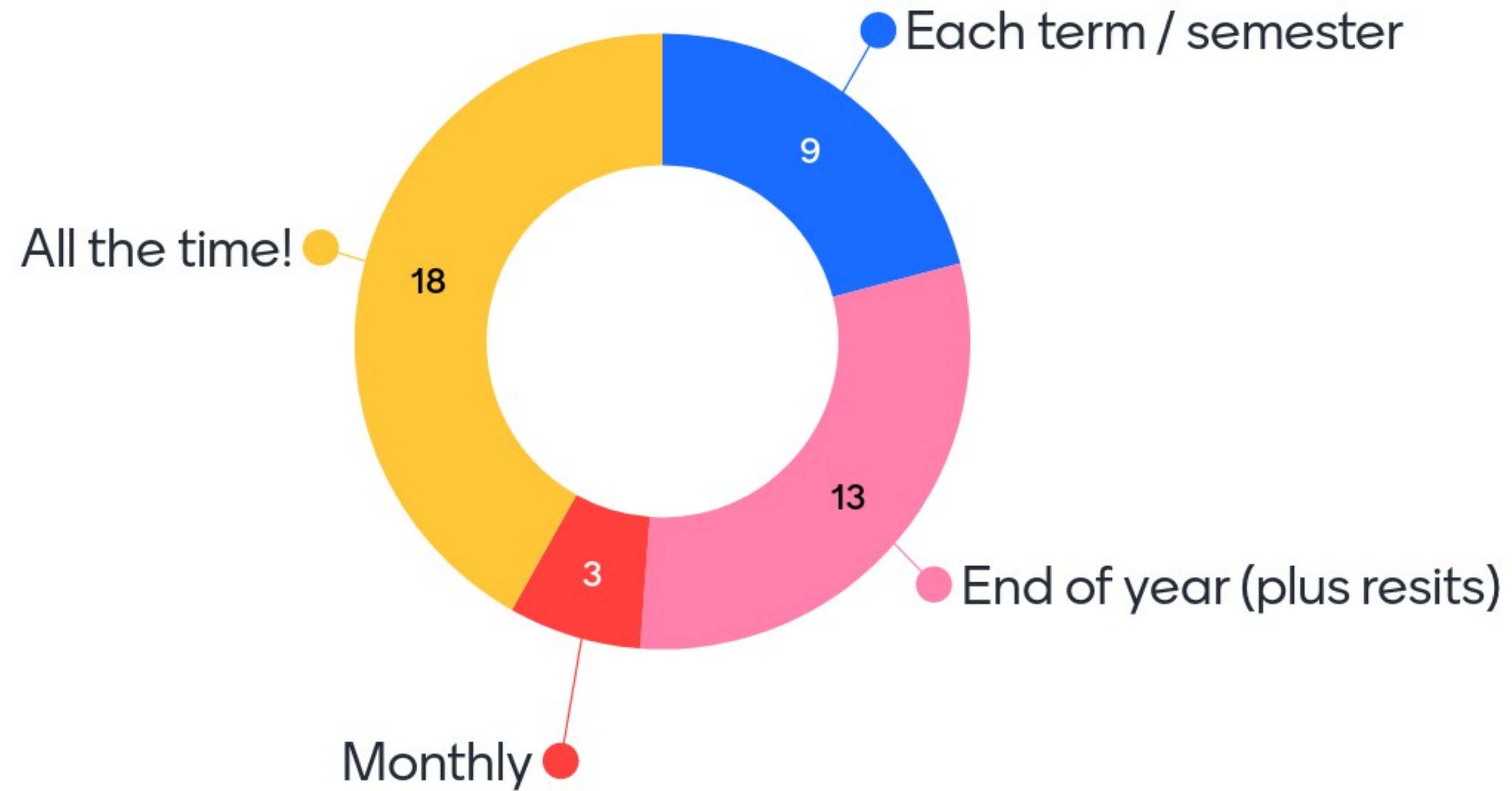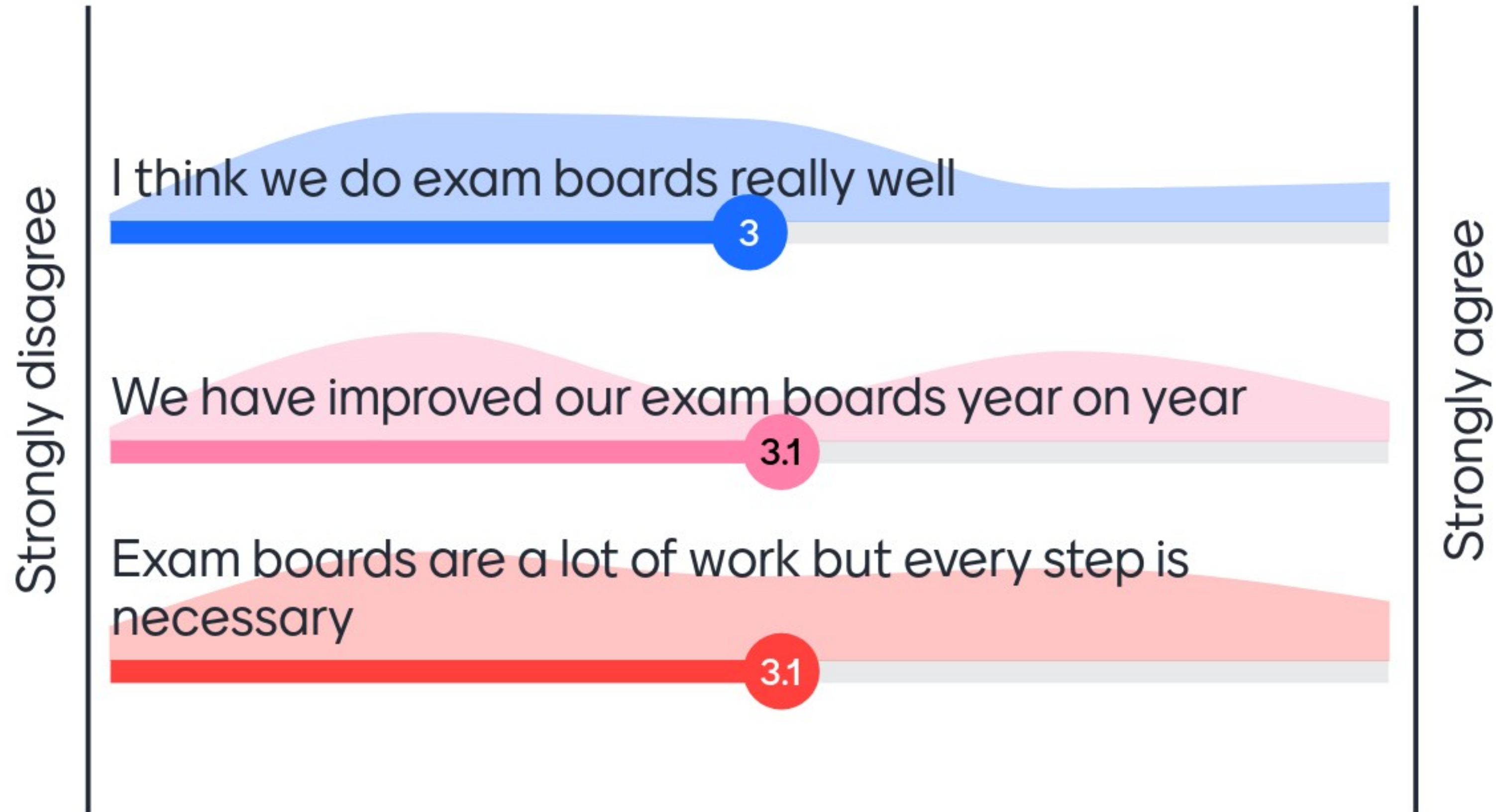
What is your biggest area of risk in exam boards?

43 responses

accurate results on time

errors or late marks   manual processing

manual input of data   grading delays

ee attendance   systems   dq

system   errors   resource

inconsistency   timeliness

volume   errors in data

manual intervention

inconsistent decision mak   data   data quality   human error

knowledge   timescales   sustem error

late return of marks

43
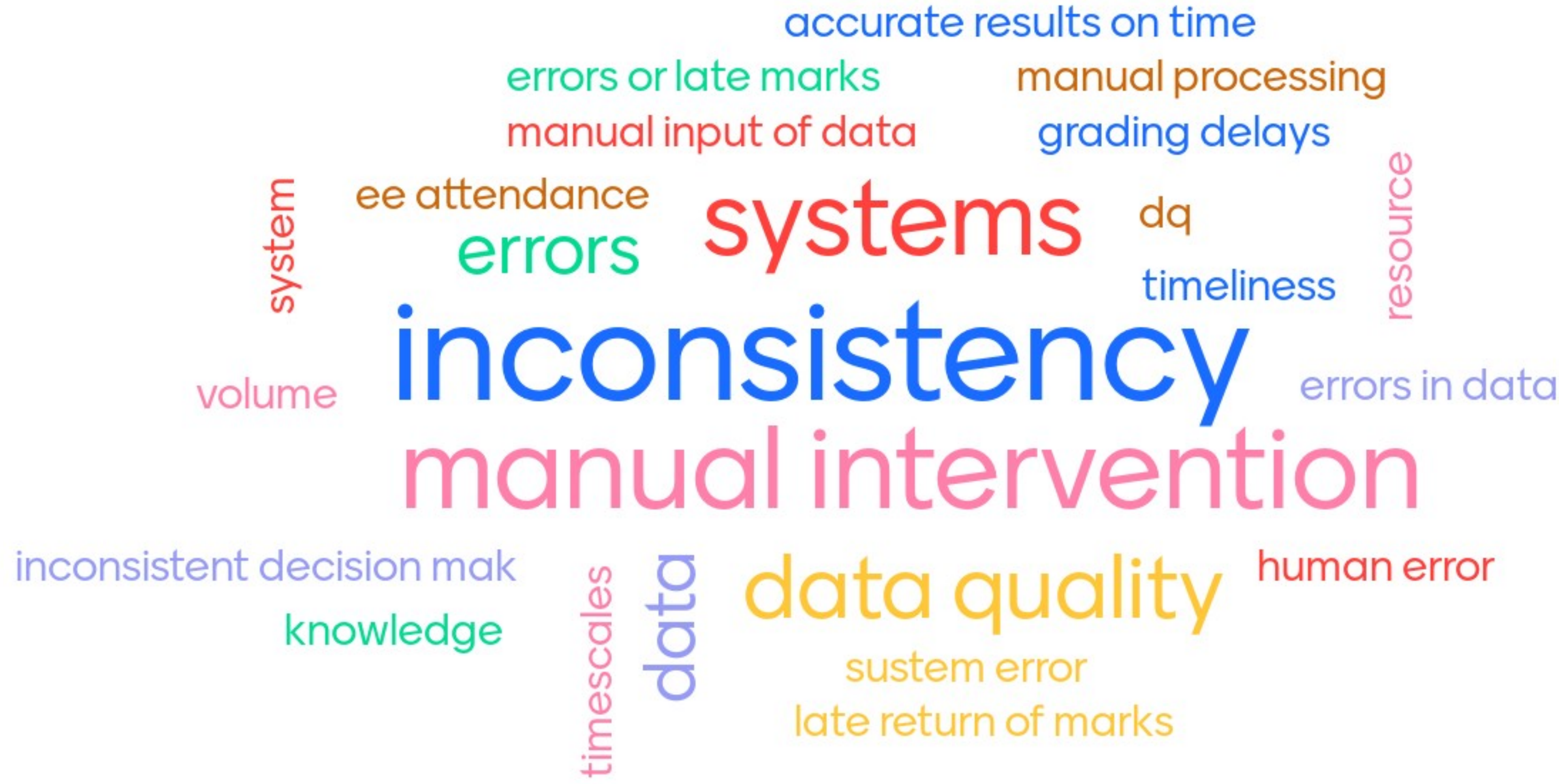
Group Discussions 1

CURRENT EXAM BOARD PRACTICE

What was interesting from your group discussion on current exam board practice?
33 responses

How different practices are across institutions

Know that we are not alone

No longer an academic process

Difference in data reviewed

That some are separating out the quality processes

Hearing about people taking module level decisions out of exam boards.

Similarity of issues

Common issues between institutions

High number of Chair's actions post board is a common and increasing issue

33

What was interesting from your group discussion on current exam board practice?
33 responses

We're not the only basket cases... our baskets may be bigger, but...

similar experiences

Very similar issues experienced, with no clear solutions!

We are all struggling with volume and examiners involvement

Fantastic discussions that really illuminated institutional practice

Shared challenges

It was a nice therapy session as we all appear to have the same challenges

very similar experiences across different institutions

Common issues

What was interesting from your group discussion on current exam board practice?
33 responses

Shared pain! Increase in Chair's actions and things happening outside the meetings.

Module ratification taking place outside of exam boards before they exam boards takes place.

how steeped in tradition everything still is in many respects, but equally far more of a box ticking exercise which begs the question for why this is still the approach

To see how others manage

Differences in practice but common issues

similar processes and same frustrations

How other institutions have the same kind of issues as yours does.

Everyone is in the same boat

timelines are a common issue

33

What was interesting from your group discussion on current exam board practice?

33 responses

Reviewing cohort performance data outside of exam boards

How different practice is - fascinating!

Sounds like processes, checking and challenges are very similar

All having similar issues, not enough time in the AY to fit boards in. No one has a good system solution.

Vast differences in size and type of institutions but reassuring similarity in issues experienced

The varied approaches to solving similar challenges

33

Group Discussions 2

CHANGING EXAM BOARD PRACTICE

What was interesting about your group discussion on changing exam board practices?
24 responses

The idea that exam boards are redundant

Some very positive changes coming out of the pandemic

We all want change

similar situations again

There is a desire to change, but traditions run deep in academia.

Shared views re: improvements to regs and systems needed

The concept that the graduation ceremony is a celebration that does not exclude those who have not got their degree.

Thinking about quorum and how to reduce it but keep it meaningful

We are all questioning the purpose of the Boards

24

What was interesting about your group discussion on changing exam board practices?
24 responses

Everyone doesn't want exam boards anymore as we can't see the point

Positive changes and to see changes we never thought possible happening

We all want to change

Reduction of length and attendance

We really need to distribute work more evenly across the year - what can we strip out?

Strong sense of the professional services being the backbone of effective boards and their student outcomes

How there is a consensus for us all to streamline and improve our processes.

To note that we all have different practices

Review membership

24

What was interesting about your group discussion on changing exam board practices?
24 responses

HEIs breaking down the academic year and approving results by semester rather than yearly so that end of year boards are smaller and in better order (but noting additional resource requirements).

That having gone online, a lot of people are wanting the return to person. Finding different times and ways to offer the social, collaborative spaces that happened around these formal processes

Its not an academic process

Great group of people who were willing to share some very useful nuggets of information (current practise and future possibilities)

Some things we're thinking of changing were already adopted by other people

It's hard to bring it back to pre covid good practice

24

ARC APG - The Future of Exam Boards End of Session

Next steps
Please complete this short feedback form:

https://forms.office.com/e/aVF1g5kBjY