AUWU Workforce Australia and Points-Based Activation System Survey

Quantitative Analysis

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In June 2022 the Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU) put out a survey – the Workforce Australia and Points-Based Activation System Survey (WA-PBAS) – to people engaged in the JobActive system as part of their unemployment benefits mutual obligations. This report details a quantitative analysis of Questions 2, 3, and 4 of that survey.

The code used for this analysis can be found at:

`https://github.com/Tess-LaCoil/WorkforceAusSurvey`

1 Survey Design

The WA-PBAS survey was delivered through a webform using the survey service Typeform. The survey instrument consists of five questions:

Q1. Consent for data sharing.

Q2. Information about the respondent's interaction with Workforce Australia.

Q3. A ranked choice of 12 issues by priority constructed from enquiries AUWU has fielded about Workforce Australia.

Q4. A 5-point impact scale for the same 12 issues with slight re-phrasing of the statements.

Q5. An open comment box.

The groups in Q2 regarding how the respondent will be in contact with Workforce Australia and Employment Services are:

A: I have been placed with the same provider I had in JobActive after the transition to Workforce Australia

B: I will be transferred from my old JobActive provider to a new Workforce Australia provider.

C: I had a JobActive provider, but I have been placed in Workforce Australia's online services.

D: I am newly enrolled in Employment Services and have been assigned a provider in Workforce Australia's "enhanced" in-person services.

E: I am newly enrolled in Employment Services and have been placed in Workforce Australia's online services.

F: I have not received this information yet.

G: I will not be in the Workforce Australia program.

H: Other (textbox available).

Respondents answering with G were not offered the other questions to complete, while responses which did not provide a text answer along with H were also excluded.

In Q3 statements with a higher priority were given smaller numerical values, 1 for top priority, 12 for least importance.

The scale for question 4 was:

0:	No impact
1:	Mild inconvenience
2:	Some negative impact
3:	Severe negative impact
Unsure:	Respondent unable to identify the impact.

In the data processing step 'Unsure' answers were re-coded with the numerical value -1. For analysis of the severity of impact as a numerical value the 'Unsure' responses were excluded from the data.

The statements for Q3 and Q4, a short title, and the sub-question number assigned to each statement are given in Table 1.

In comparing the numerical values assigned to responses in Q3 and Q4 it is important to keep in mind that the ordering is different, with smaller values in Q3 representing more importance, and larger values in Q4 representing greater impact.

2   Sampling

The survey was conducted as a convenience sample. Participants were contacted by AUWU through social media (Twitter, Facebook) and the AUWU mailing list. Word-of-mouth may have also brought people in to the survey sample. As such, it is possible that the respondents to this survey represent people who have had a more negative experience of the JobActive system which has pushed them towards contact with the AUWU.

A very important structural feature to the sample is that as the survey is completed online it is less accessible to those who have unreliable internet, and inaccessible to those without

any internet. As such, those most impacted by lack of access to internet infrastructure will not be represented in this survey.

There were 447 responses to the survey, 96 of which did not complete Q3 or Q4. Of these 4 were in group H which had the option to continue with the survey if they offered a text response, and the other 92 were group G who were exited from the survey. After non-responses were excluded $n = 351$ responses were left for analysis.

3 Analysis Methodology

Due to time constraints it was not possible to do a thorough analysis of the relationship between the group identified in Q2 and the responses to Q3 and Q4. A breakdown of the percentage of responses in each group for Q2 is provided.

For Q3, I provide charts to demonstrate the distribution of rankings for each response and the mean rank of the responses as summary statistic ([Bargagliotti et al., 2021]). As the sample size is large, it is reasonable to expect that the mean for an individual statement is approximately normally distributed by the Central Limit Theorem. To identify whether there is a statistically significant difference between at least two of the responses I use the test of marginals ([Anderson, 1959]), and provided both the test result and the marginal distribution data in Table 2. As the ranks from the same response are not independent this is preferred to a one-way ANOVA.

In the analysis of Q4 I present stacked percentage column charts to indicate the composition of responses, and histograms of the impact severity which exclude the 'Unsure' answers as further visual aid. The median severity is used as a summary statistic for this data as the histograms indicate skewed distributions, with the 'Unsure' responses not counted towards the median impact. It is less useful to apply the Central limit theorem in the case of Q3 as there are only 4 possible response values. The number and percentage of 'Unsure' responses to each question is also provided as it is useful to interpret whether the Workforce Australia system has been effectively communicated.

4 Results

As cross-question inference was not performed, results are separated into questions. Table 4 provides some statistics for Q3 and Q4 with reference to the statements in Table 1.

4.1 Q2: Interaction with Workforce Australia

Q2 gave an overview of how the respondents interacted with Workforce Australia. Table 5 gives statistics for the number and percentage in each. Some 194 respondents (43.4%) in group F indicated that they had not received information on how they would be interacting with Workforce Australia after the transition to that system. Of the people newly enrolled in Employment Services (D and E), all 8 had been placed into the online services stream, alongside the 12 people in group C. The 85 people in group B who indicated they would be moving to a different provider may be a result of providers shutting down during the transfer to Workforce Australia.

3

4.2 Q3: Priority of Concerns

As Figure 1 indicates, there are varying distributions of ranks for the different statements in Q3. A lower mean priority means that the respondents consider the statement to be less important. The most prominent concern was government automation, closely followed by concerns about the points-based activation system, being penalised due to difficulties with the online system, and being excluded from the consultation process that went into the Workforce Australia transition.

The results of the test for marginals were a test statistic

$$\frac{(12-1)Q^2}{12} = 6243.02,$$

which is asymptotically χ^2-distributed with $(12-1)^2 = 121$ degrees of freedom. The associated 1-sided p-value was less than 2×10^{-16}, so we reject the null hypothesis of uniform marginal distributions at any standard α threshold. As such, we have evidence that there are differences in typical rank between at least two of the statements. While this is not a very strong statement, and pair-wise comparisons were not done due to time constraints to let us identify where the differences are, we can surmise that government automation is much more of a concern for the respondents than their new provider of whether they are going into the online or in-person system.

The statements in Q3 are grouped into 4 themes as detailed in Table 1. The mean overall ranks were 4.52 for trust in government, 6.84 for the points and payments statements, 7.63 for the online system, and 9.63 for placement decisions. Concern about policy decisions and communication problems stands out with the high priority given to statements related to trust in government, while respondents are less concerned for the specifics of how they interact with the system.

4.3 Q4: Anticipated Impact

The overwhelming outcome of Q4 is that respondents typically anticipate severe negative outcomes from the transition to Workforce Australia. Table 3 gives the frequencies and percentages of responses to each issue. Of the responses, 91.2% had at least one statement given a 3, with the mean number of 3s per response at 6.3. Figures 2 give the distribution of the number of 3s per respondent. A further 4.4%, for a total of 96.6%, had at least one 2 or 3, with Figure 3 showing the distribution of these. In reverse, we see that 3.4% of respondents do not anticipate any impact beyond mild inconvenience. Half of the respondents – 52.7% – indicated that they were unsure about the impact of at least one statement. Figure 4 show the number of 'Unsure' responses per respondent.

To get a handle on the composition of responses for individual questions, I utilised stacked percentage bar charts. Figure 9 gives the results for all questions, and it is clear that the anticipated severe impact was over 70% for several.

Figure 5 gives the results for the statements associated with the points system. Most respondents anticipate severe negative impact from the transition to PBAS, and relatively few are unsure about the likely effects.

In Figure 6 we can see that while reliable internet is a concern for more than 25%, it is the system and its propensity to impose financial penalty due to technical difficulties which

is of most concern among these questions. The absence of digital support is also of great concern to half of the respondents, with a further 20% seeing some negative impact from lack of support infrastructure.

Figure 7 indicates that fear of government automation dominates the responses, with more than 70% of respondents anticipating severe negative impact as a result, and 92.3% anticipating some or severe negative impact as a result. The lack of information which appears as uncertainty in other questions can also be seen here in the 87.2% of respondents who anticipate some or severe negative impact as a result of the lack of communication. Exclusion from consultation is not quite as concerning as the other two in this section, but more than 40% anticipating a severe impact should not be dismissed.

The results for statements regarding placement decisions are in Figure 8. Uncertainty is the defining feature here, though among those who are not unsure, digital preference being respected is a concern. As Table 4 indicates, nearly 40% of responses were unsure about whether their new provider would be inconvenient, and a further 34% were unsure whether their preference for online or in-person services was ignored, indicating that they are not properly informed about how they will interact with the Workforce Australia system.

Figure 10 shows histograms of the impact level for each statement with the unsure responses removed. These are ordered by the median response and make it easy to identify that for the majority, 8 of the 12 with median 3, severe impact is anticipated by most participants.

5 Limitations

The convenience sample means that the responses may be more inclined to negative experience with and perception of the welfare system. Likewise, the structure of the survey itself leaves limited opportunity for positive statements as it is focused on concerns and negative impact. There may be other sources of information which indicate that some people have a positive experience with Workforce Australia and the PBAS, however it is quite clear that a great many people are deeply concerned about it.

Time constraints have limited the statistical inference that this report details. There are likely relationships between responses that have not been explored, including those between the group identified in Q2 and responses in Q3 and Q4, as well as relationships between the chosen priority for a given statement in Q3, and the anticipated severity of impact for the same in Q4. The broad descriptive analysis which indicates that respondents either expect a substantial negative impact on their lives or are very uncertain remains sound for the population of participants.

References

[Anderson, 1959] Anderson, R. (1959). Use of contingency tables in the analysis of consumer preference studies. *Biometrics*, 15(4):582–590.

[Bargagliotti et al., 2021] Bargagliotti, A. E., Martonosi, S. E., Orrison, M. E., Johnson, A. H., and Fefer, S. A. (2021). Using ranked survey data in education research: Methods and applications. *Journal of School Psychology*, 85:17–36.

No.	Title	Statement	Grouping
1	Exclusion from consultation	The government did not consult me about the development of this new program	Trust in government
2	Government automation fears	The government uses automated decision-making about my life	Trust in government
3	Reliable internet access	Compliance with the system requires reliable internet	Navigating the online system
4	Lack of communication	I haven't been properly informed about the changes and how the new system will work	Trust in government
5	New provider inconvenient	My provider is closing down and I have been referred to a new provider that is too far away or otherwise inconvenient	Placement decisions
6	Previous activities insufficient	The same activities which previously satisfied my mutual obligations will not amount to 100 points	Points and payments
7	Uncertain target fairness	I won't be able to have my points target fairly reduced to account for my life circumstances	Points and payments
8	Digital preference ignored	I would prefer digital services but I have been referred to a provider instead	Placement decisions
9	System induced penalties	Being penalised with lost payments because of difficulties with using the online system	Navigating the online system
10	Digital support lacking	It will be difficult to get support from the Digital Contact Centre	Navigating the online system
11	Missed points debt	Having to complete a missed month of points in addition to my next month's points in order to regain my payment	Points and payments
12	Gaining 100 points	I won't be able to gain 100 points each month	Points and payments

Table 1: Numbered statements for Questions 3 and 4.

Rank

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Q3.1	50 (14.2)	58 (16.5)	34 (9.7)	55 (15.7)	31 (8.8)	30 (8.5)	29 (8.3)	21 (6.0)	19 (5.4)	17 (4.8)	4 (1.1)	3 (0.9)
Q3.2	75 (21.4)	45 (12.8)	65 (18.5)	51 (14.5)	28 (8.0)	40 (11.4)	16 (4.6)	18 (5.1)	8 (2.3)	4 (1.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)
Q3.3	2 (0.6)	6 (1.7)	6 (1.7)	7 (2.0)	33 (9.4)	27 (7.7)	21 (6.0)	34 (9.7)	30 (8.5)	38 (10.8)	41 (11.7)	106 (30.2)
Q3.4	34 (9.7)	42 (12.0)	43 (12.3)	23 (6.6)	35 (10.0)	39 (11.1)	62 (17.7)	38 (10.8)	21 (6.0)	10 (2.8)	2 (0.6)	2 (0.6)
Q3.5	2 (0.6)	3 (0.9)	2 (0.6)	2 (0.6)	5 (1.4)	4 (1.1)	15 (4.3)	60 (17.1)	51 (14.5)	62 (17.7)	82 (23.4)	63 (17.9)
Q3.6	25 (7.1)	27 (7.7)	41 (11.7)	26 (7.4)	39 (11.1)	26 (7.4)	24 (6.8)	34 (9.7)	68 (19.4)	27 (7.7)	13 (3.7)	1 (0.3)
Q3.7	37 (10.5)	37 (10.5)	30 (8.5)	23 (6.6)	33 (9.4)	27 (7.7)	27 (7.7)	29 (8.3)	26 (7.4)	63 (17.9)	17 (4.8)	2 (0.6)
Q3.8	12 (3.4)	4 (1.1)	9 (2.6)	5 (1.4)	9 (2.6)	4 (1.1)	8 (2.3)	14 (4.0)	30 (8.5)	71 (20.2)	130 (37.0)	55 (15.7)
Q3.9	56 (16.0)	58 (16.5)	42 (12.0)	42 (12.0)	32 (9.1)	33 (9.4)	33 (9.4)	24 (6.8)	16 (4.6)	6 (1.7)	7 (2.0)	2 (0.6)
Q3.10	4 (1.1)	7 (2.0)	5 (1.4)	10 (2.8)	13 (3.7)	18 (5.1)	20 (5.7)	22 (6.3)	48 (13.7)	39 (11.1)	52 (14.8)	113 (32.2)
Q3.11	9 (2.6)	15 (4.3)	28 (8.0)	47 (13.4)	45 (12.8)	69 (19.7)	66 (18.8)	37 (10.5)	22 (6.3)	10 (2.8)	1 (0.3)	2 (0.6)
Q3.12	45 (12.8)	49 (14.0)	46 (13.1)	60 (17.1)	48 (13.7)	34 (9.7)	30 (8.5)	20 (5.7)	12 (3.4)	4 (1.1)	2 (0.6)	1 (0.3)

Table 2: Frequency and percentage table for Q3. The values given in parentheses are the percentage responses which gave that question the rank of the column.

| | Rating | | | | |
No.	Unsure	None	Inconvenient	Some	Severe
Q4.1	22 (6.27)	16 (4.56)	45 (12.82)	113 (32.19)	155 (44.16)
Q4.2	8 (2.28)	3 (0.85)	16 (4.56)	67 (19.09)	257 (73.22)
Q4.3	25 (7.12)	86 (24.5)	87 (24.79)	51 (14.53)	102 (29.06)
Q4.4	7 (1.99)	5 (1.42)	33 (9.4)	74 (21.08)	232 (66.1)
Q4.5	137 (39.03)	90 (25.64)	45 (12.82)	30 (8.55)	49 (13.96)
Q4.6	41 (11.68)	14 (3.99)	22 (6.27)	55 (15.67)	219 (62.39)
Q4.7	22 (6.27)	4 (1.14)	32 (9.12)	46 (13.11)	247 (70.37)
Q4.8	120 (34.19)	64 (18.23)	50 (14.25)	51 (14.53)	66 (18.8)
Q4.9	15 (4.27)	14 (3.99)	48 (13.68)	60 (17.09)	214 (60.97)
Q4.10	27 (7.69)	19 (5.41)	51 (14.53)	79 (22.51)	175 (49.86)
Q4.11	24 (6.84)	7 (1.99)	19 (5.41)	49 (13.96)	252 (71.79)
Q4.12	22 (6.27)	10 (2.85)	20 (5.7)	51 (14.53)	248 (70.66)

Table 3: Frequency and percentage table for Q4. The values given in parentheses are the percentages.

No.	Title	Q3 Mean	Q4 Median	Q4 Unsure (%)
1	Exclusion from consultation	4.6	2	22 (6.27)
2	Government automation fears	3.77	3	8 (2.28)
3	Reliable internet access	9.06	1	25 (7.12)
4	Not properly explained	5.19	3	7 (1.99)
5	New provider inconvenient	9.67	1	137 (39.03)
6	Previous activities insufficient	6.08	3	41 (11.68)
7	Uncertain target fairness	6.03	3	22 (6.27)
8	Digital preference ignored	9.61	2	120 (34.19)
9	System induced penalties	4.42	3	15 (4.27)
10	Digital support lacking	9.44	3	27 (7.69)
11	Missed points debt	5.81	3	24 (6.84)
12	Gaining 100 points	4.32	3	22 (6.27)

Table 4: Summary statistics for Questions 3 and 4. The Q4 median excludes 'Unsure' responses.

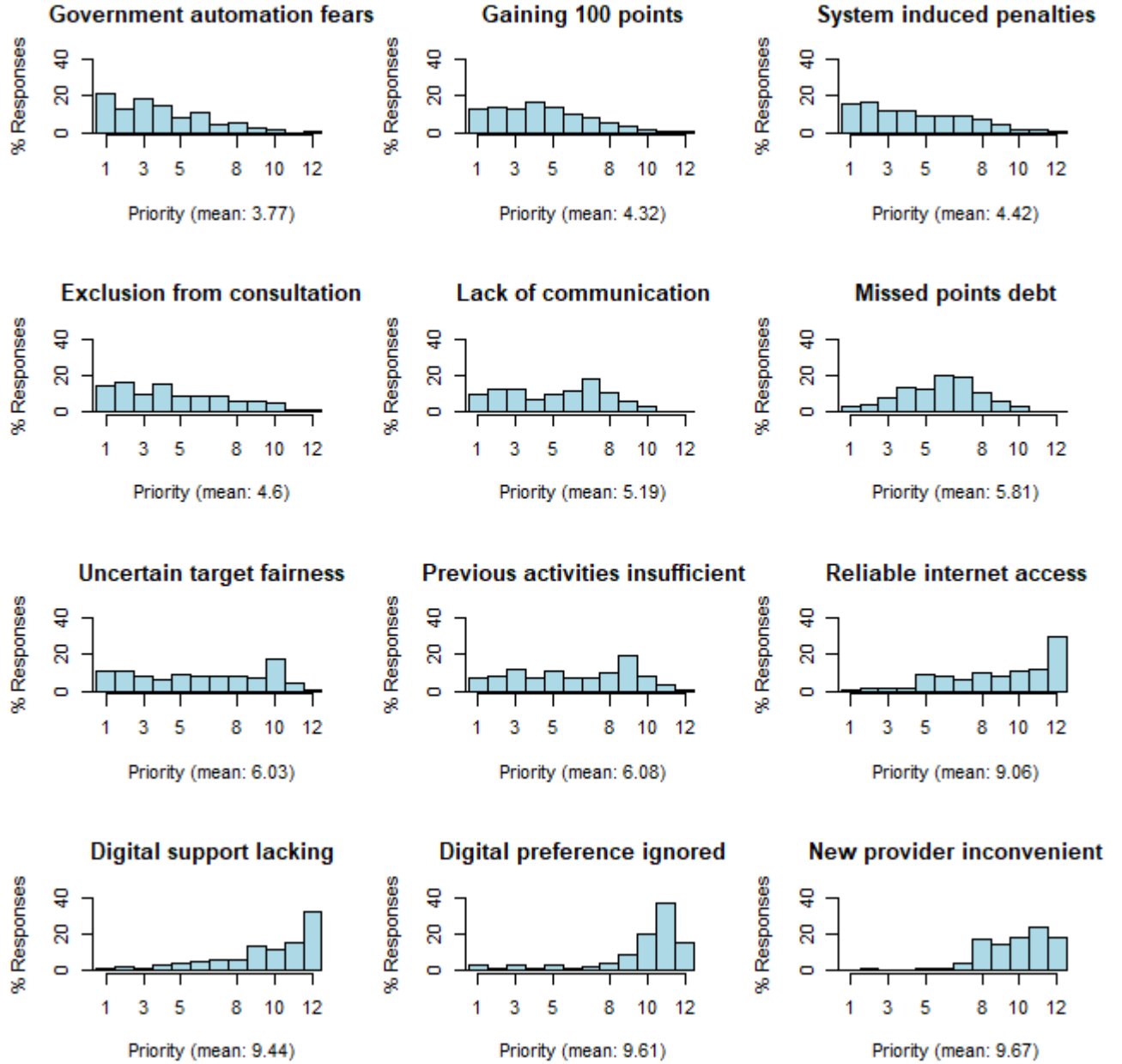| Response	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Count	21	85	12	0	8	194	92	35
Percent	4.7	19.02	2.68	0	1.79	43.40	20.58	7.83

Table 5: Q2 group responses.
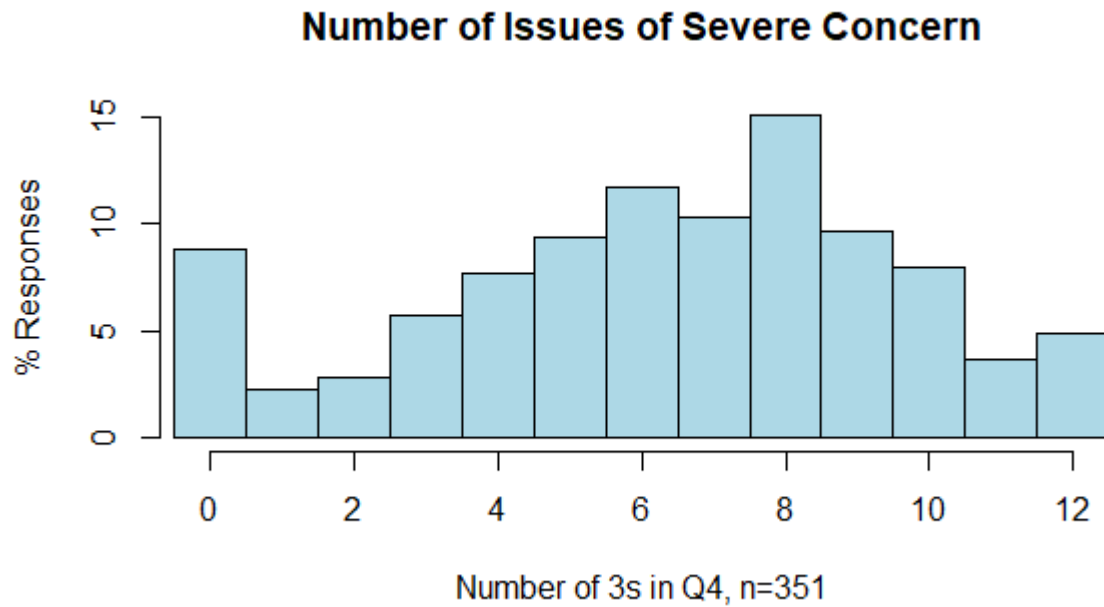

Figure 1: Histograms of responses to Q3.

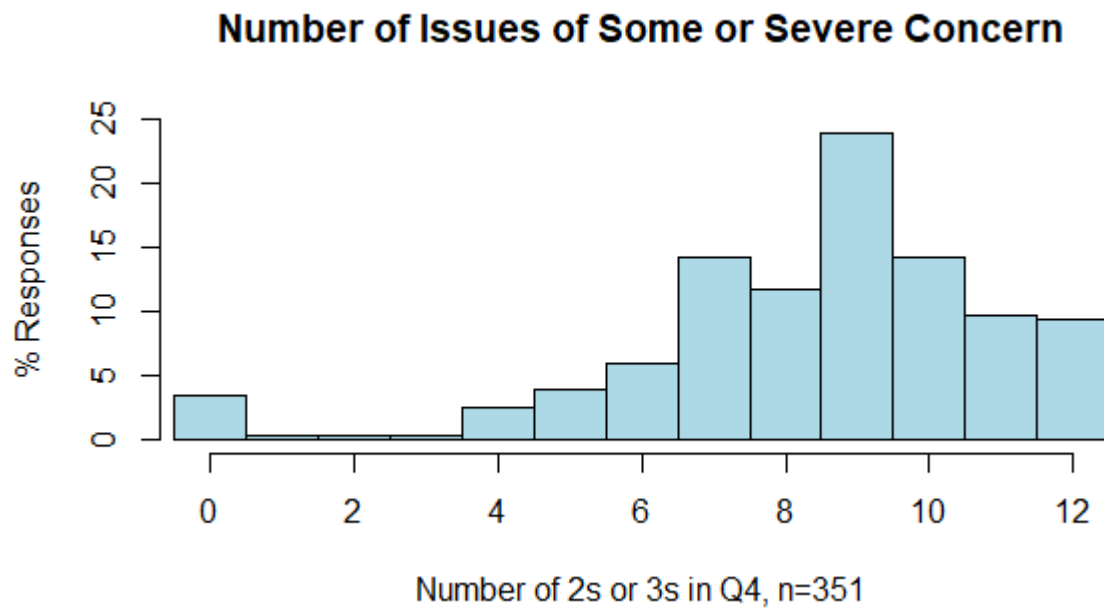Figure 2: Histogram of number of 'Severe' answers to Q4 per response.

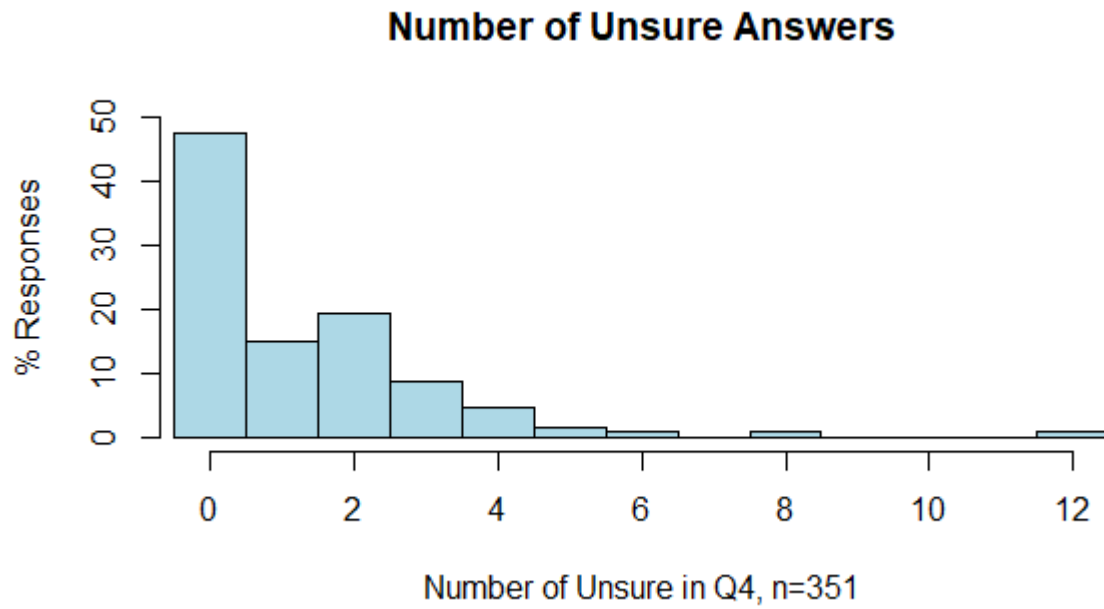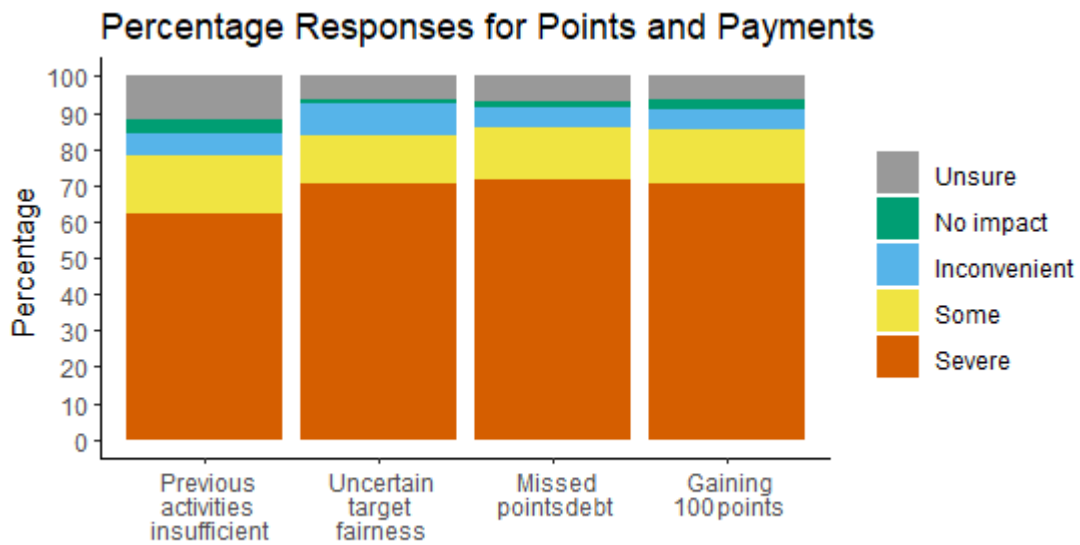Figure 3: Histogram of number of 'Some' or 'Severe' answers to Q4 per response.

Number of Unsure Answers

Figure 4: Histogram of number of 'Unsure' answers to Q4 per response.

Percentage Responses for Points and Payments

Figure 5: Stacked column chart for statements related to the point system.
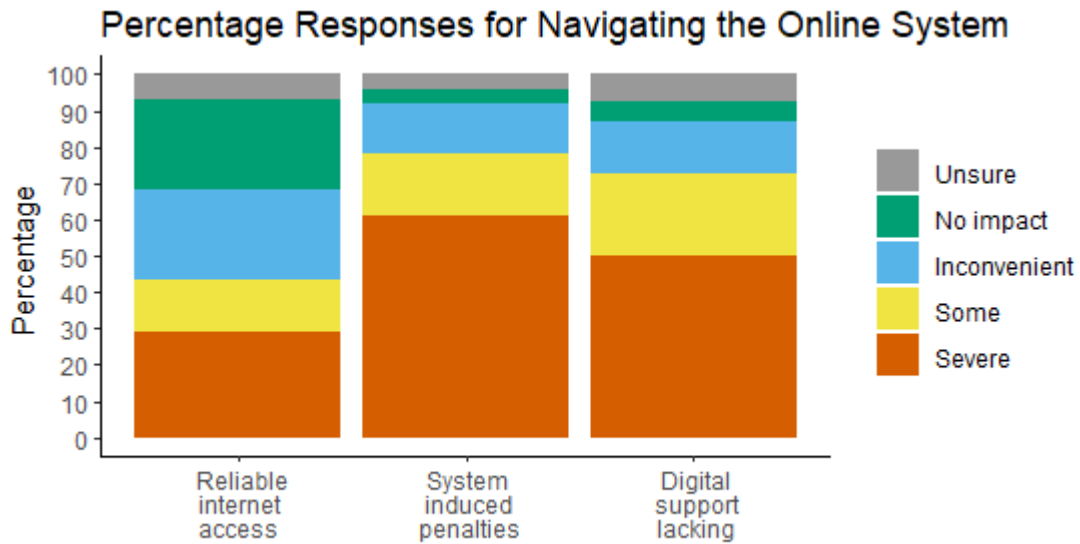
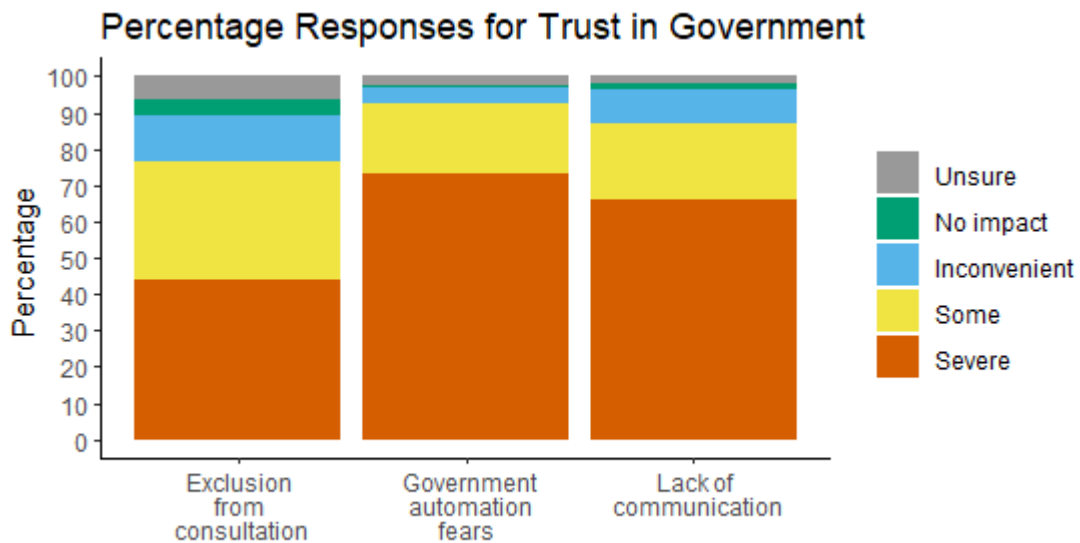Figure 6: Stacked column chart for statements related to the online system.

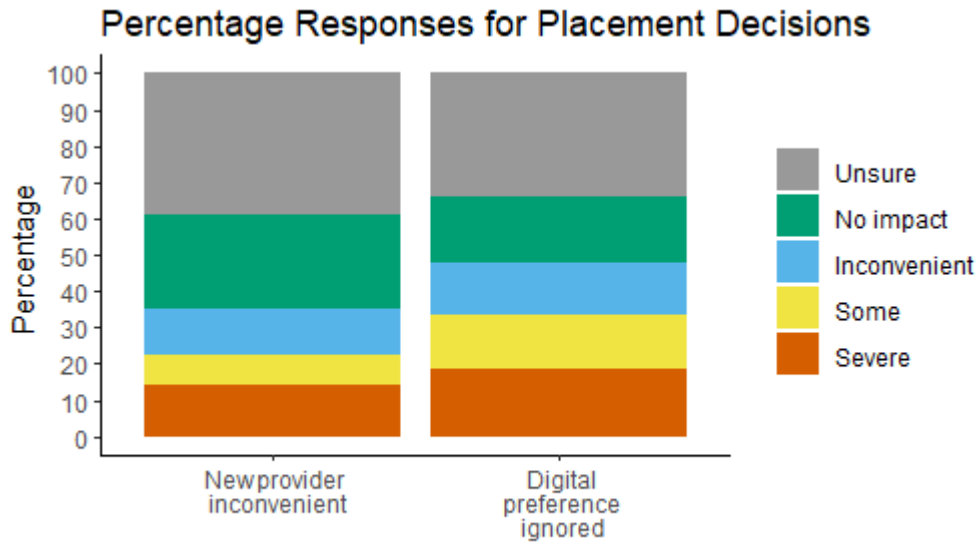Figure 7: Stacked column chart for statements related to government and providers.

Figure 8: Stacked column chart for statements related to placement decisions.
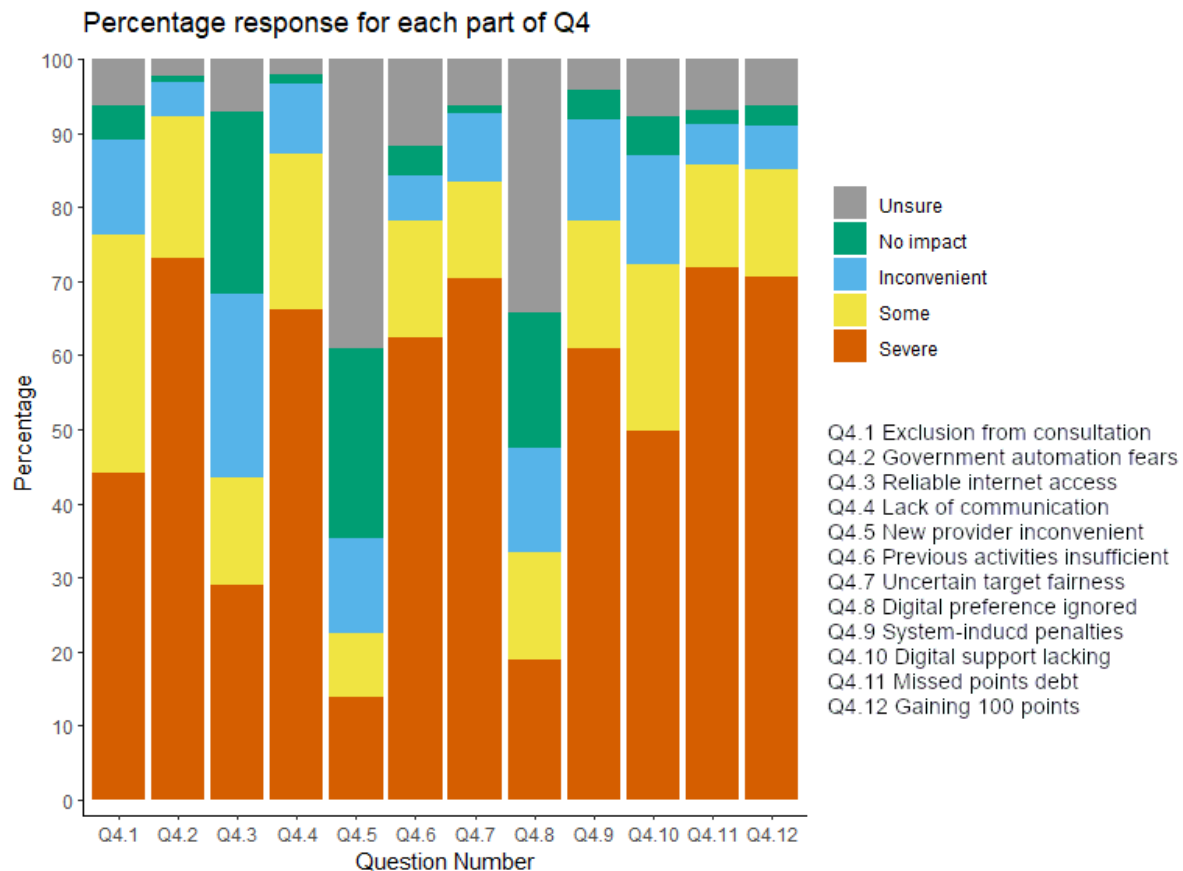

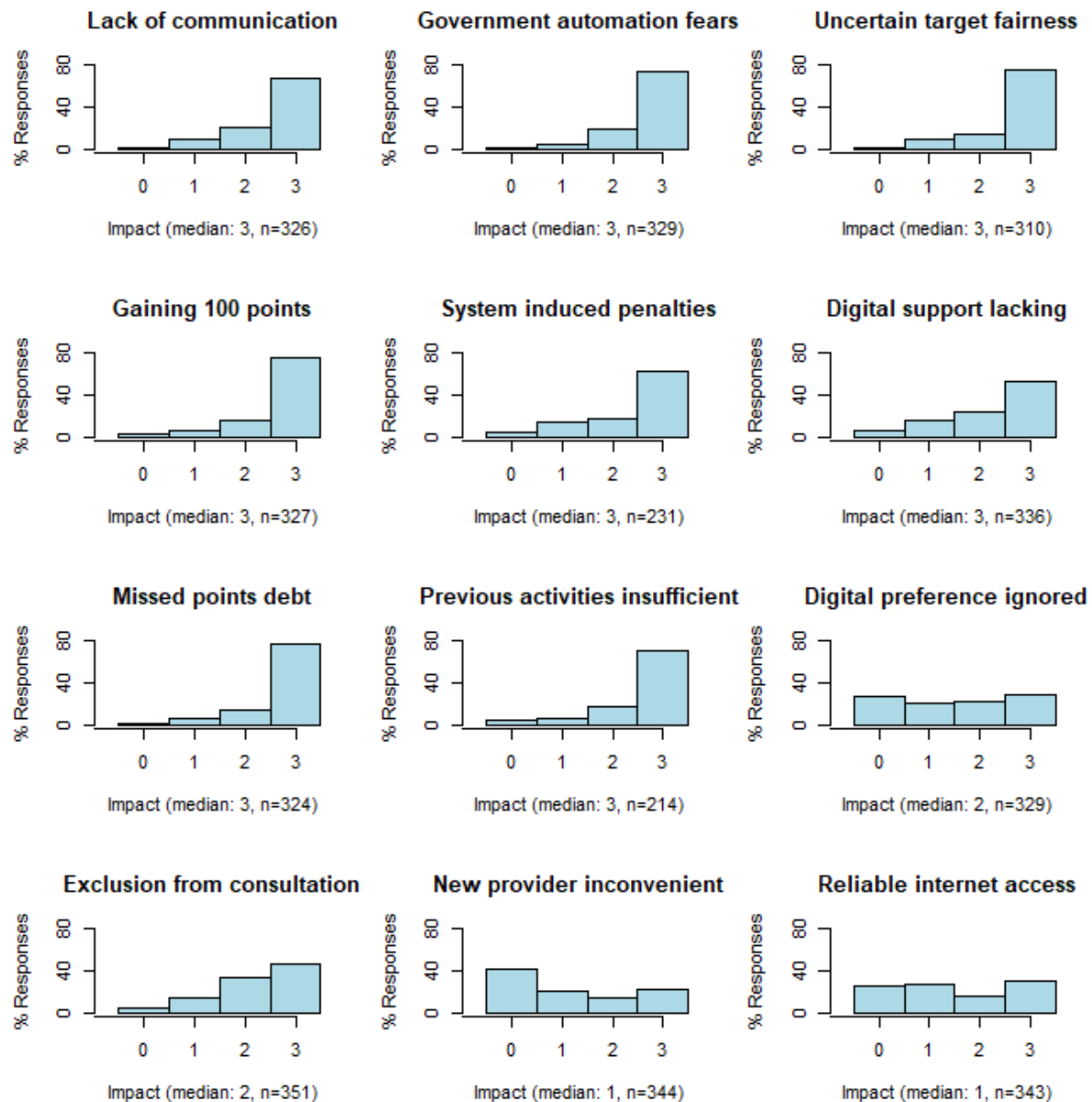Figure 9: Stacked column chart of all parts of Q4.

Figure 10: Histograms of responses to Q3, 'Unsure' responses have been removed.