

Patent Examination Board 2024 Examination Session

Candidate Survey Report, December 2024

Summary

This report consolidates candidate feedback for the Patent Examinations Board (PEB) Qualifying Examinations from 147 survey respondents.

Generally the exams seemed to run more smoothly in 2024, following a trend of continual improvement since online exams were introduced in 2020.

- 78% of respondents found the PEBX system easy to use, and 84% of respondents gave an overall rating of “good” or “very good” for the Zoom invigilation.
- Satisfaction with ProctorExam was slightly lower in 2024, with 65% of respondents giving an overall rating of “good” or “very good”, and 11% of respondents saying ProctorExam was poor.
- Issues raised around exam arrangements include some technical problems including delays in logging in, lack of pop up notifications, disturbances in the Zoom invigilation, and slow responses from invigilators. However, there were significantly fewer comments and reported technical issues than in previous years.
- Though some candidates expressed a strong preference for returning to in-person exams, overall 82% of survey respondents would like to keep the exam online either from home or their workplace.

There was a similar upward trend of satisfaction with the exam content and marking, with the majority very satisfied:

- Between 81% and 92% of candidates felt that the FC papers gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge (to a moderate or great extent) though some candidates commented that FC1 tested knowledge that was too niche, and they requested that it test a wider range of knowledge.
- FC3 had particularly high satisfaction in 2024, with 53% of candidates saying it gave them a “great deal” of opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.
- Satisfaction was higher for FD3 and FD4 than last year with 64% and 46% of respondents respectively saying that it gave them “a lot” or a “great deal” of opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding, up from around a third in 2023.
- Candidates feel the Final Diploma papers are still too time pressured. Only 28% of survey respondents felt they had enough time to complete the FD4 paper ranging up to just over half of participants (57%) saying they had enough time for the FD2 paper.
- Confidence that the process leads to fair outcomes increased in 2024. Of those respondents familiar with the document “How Qualifying Exams are marked”, 20% were very confident that the process leads to fair outcomes (same as last year). 73% had some confidence (up from 63%), and 7% had little or no confidence (down from 20%). The main concerns about exam content raised in the comments focused on the amount of material to be covered in the time, the amount of memorisation and relevance to real life practice, and fairness/flexibility of marking schemes to recognise

answers that would represent good advice in real life practice, but far fewer comments than in previous years.

New concerns not mentioned significantly in previous years were issues with formatting for the FD4 paper and also “tricky” questions that felt like a trap, mentioned by several candidates, for example:

“Stop trying to re-invent the wheel and add tricks in the exam paper, particularly for FD4 (secret/unclear novelty prior art etc). The exam is hard and stressful enough. Doing this detracts from the main skill being examined.”

Several candidates commended the existing and proposed improvements to the exams: “Welcome the changes already implemented, and those proposed for 2025”, and also PEB’s commitment to ensuring a level playing field for diverse candidates: “I commend the PEB for being ahead of the curve in relation to their provisions in terms of reasonable adjustments and appreciate the commitment to an equitable examination experience accounting for the diversity of the candidates sitting the exams.”

One candidate noted the need for clear communication about future changes and the need for a smooth transition:

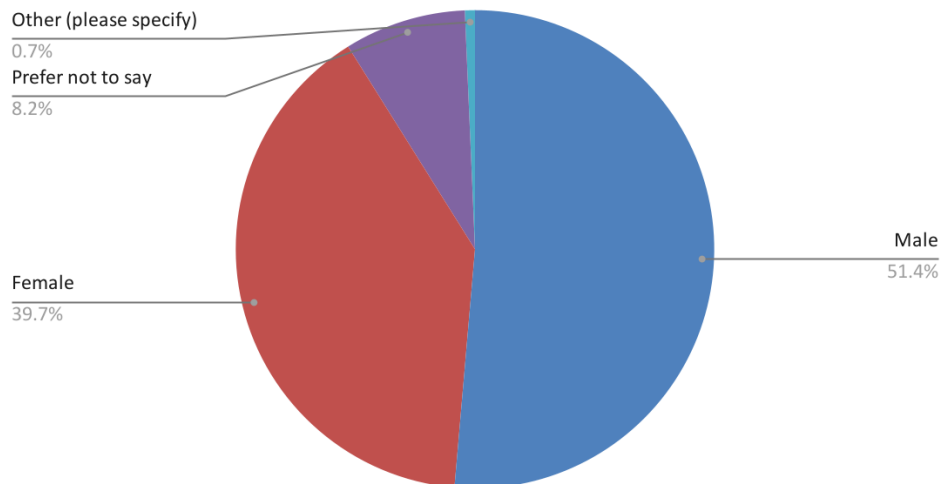
“The unexpected changes to FD examinations could have been communicated better, in more detail, and the changes could have been better planned. The announcement that all the examinations will be revised and changed in 1 year does not encourage confidence that the changes will result in fair examination in 2025. One would expect such changes to be several years in the making and, since the format of past examination papers will no longer match, multiple example papers and model answers would be appropriate to help candidates prepare for differences in the style of examination question and marking scheme. The document “How Qualifying Examinations are marked” should be updated and made available well in advance of the 2025 examination period to reflect any changes that may result from changes in the examination papers.”

Section 1: Profile of respondents

1. Personal characteristics

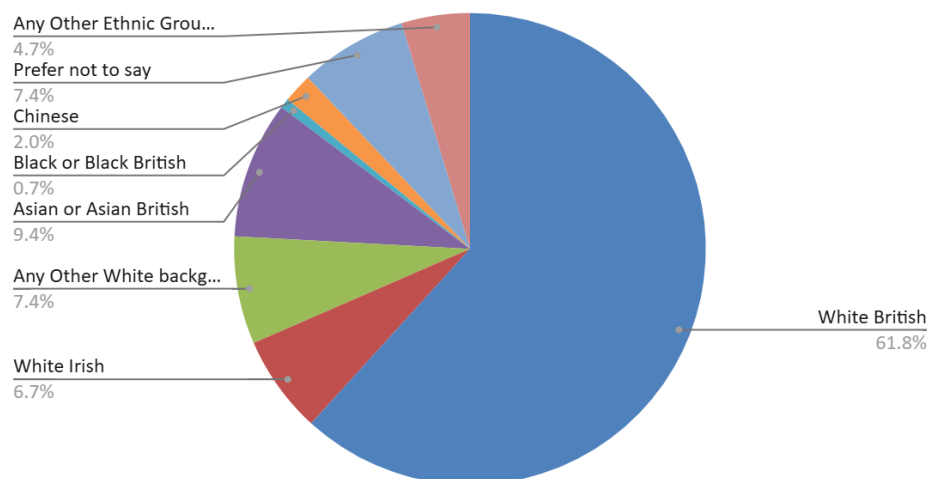
Participation in the PEB Qualifying Examinations was slightly less balanced than last year (on the basis of survey respondents), with 51% male and 40% female, with 8% preferring not to say and 0.7% selecting 'other'.

What is your gender?



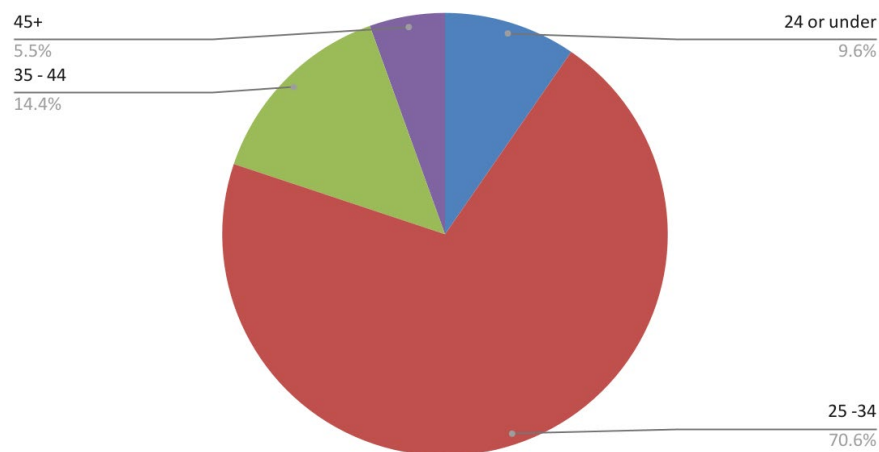
Survey respondents were predominantly White (British or other) (77%), with Asian or Asian British the second most selected option (9%) apart from 'prefer not to say' (7.4%). English was the first language for 87% of candidates, broadly similar to previous years.

What is your ethnic origin?



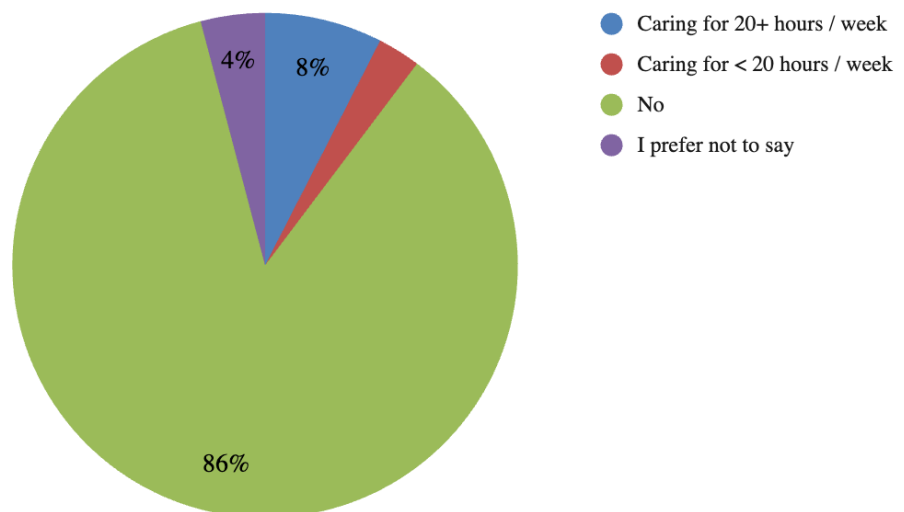
The majority of candidates are aged 25 - 34 (71%) similar to previous years.

What is your age group?



6% of respondents said they have a disability and 6% prefer not to say. 8% of respondents care for someone for more than 20 hours a week, and 3% have a caring responsibility of less than 20 hours a week.

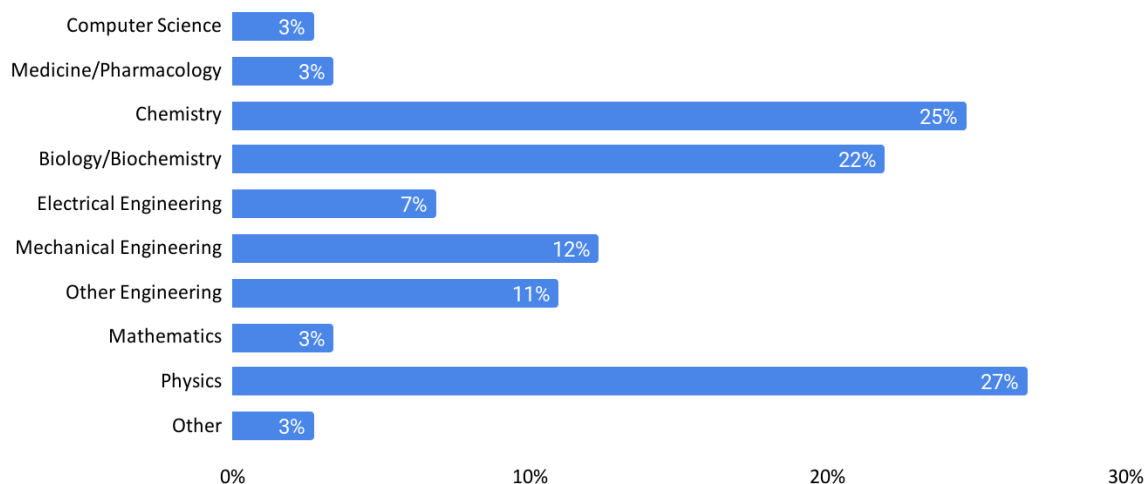
Do you have caring responsibilities?



2. Academic Background

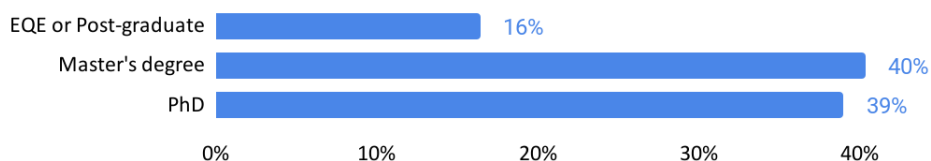
Most respondents had a background in Physics (27%), Chemistry (25%), Biology (22%). Engineering (Electrical, Mechanical and other) comprised 30% of respondents, broadly similar to previous years.

What is your academic background?



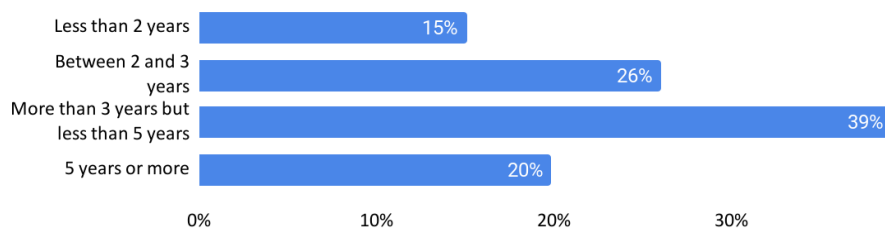
Most respondents had a PhD (39%) and a further half had a Master's Degree (40%) or EQE / Post-graduate qualification (16%).

What is your highest level qualification?



This year's candidates were slightly less experienced than the 2023 cohort, with 20% with more than 5 years experience (compared with 28% in 2023) and 39% with 3 - 5 years experience.

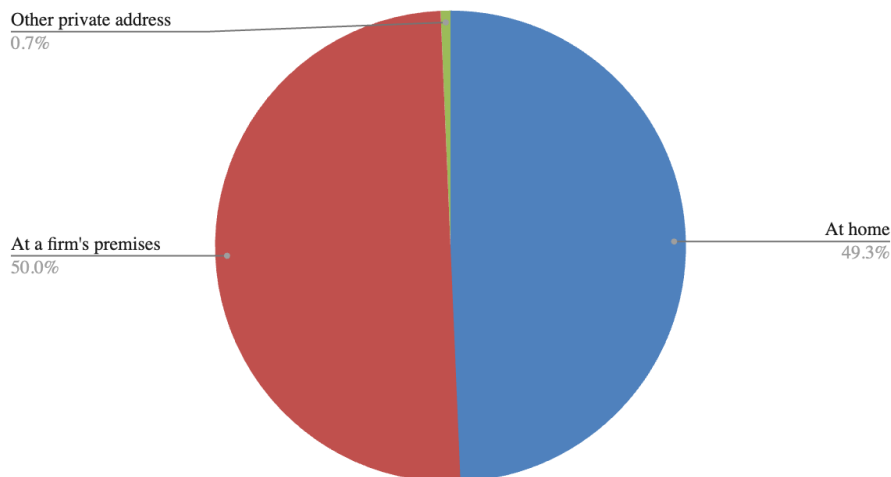
How long have you been working in the patent profession?



3. Exam location

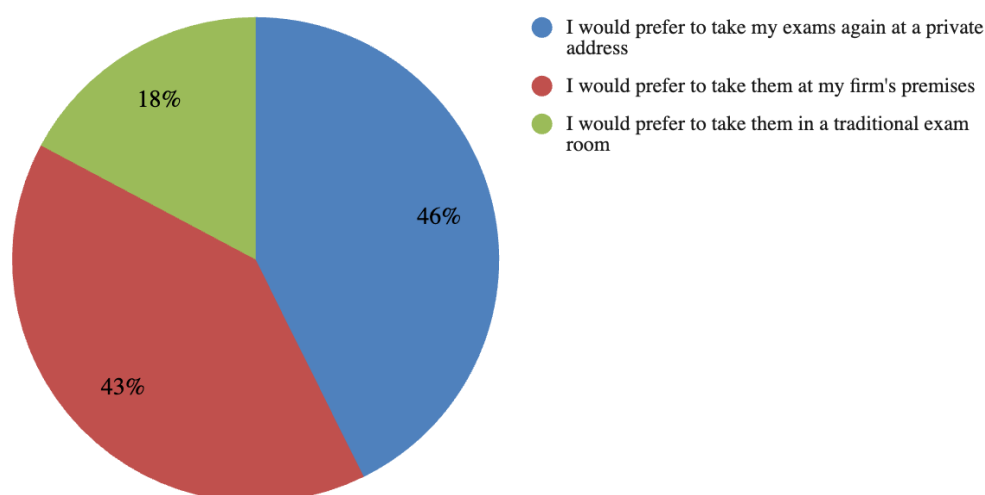
More candidates this year took their exams at their office than in 2023 (50% compared with 38% last year), with a broadly equal split between candidates taking exams at home or at their office.

Where did you take your examination(s)?



Reflecting the broadly equal split above, 46% of survey respondents would prefer to take exams at home / private address and 43% at a workplace. 18% said they would prefer to take the exams in a traditional exam room and three candidates made comments to this effect.

If you take PEB examinations in the future, where would you want to take them?



Some candidates mentioned the difficulty of finding a conducive place to work, especially during a school half term, but overall there were fewer comments about the difficulty of complying with the technical requirements for taking the exam online, than in previous years.

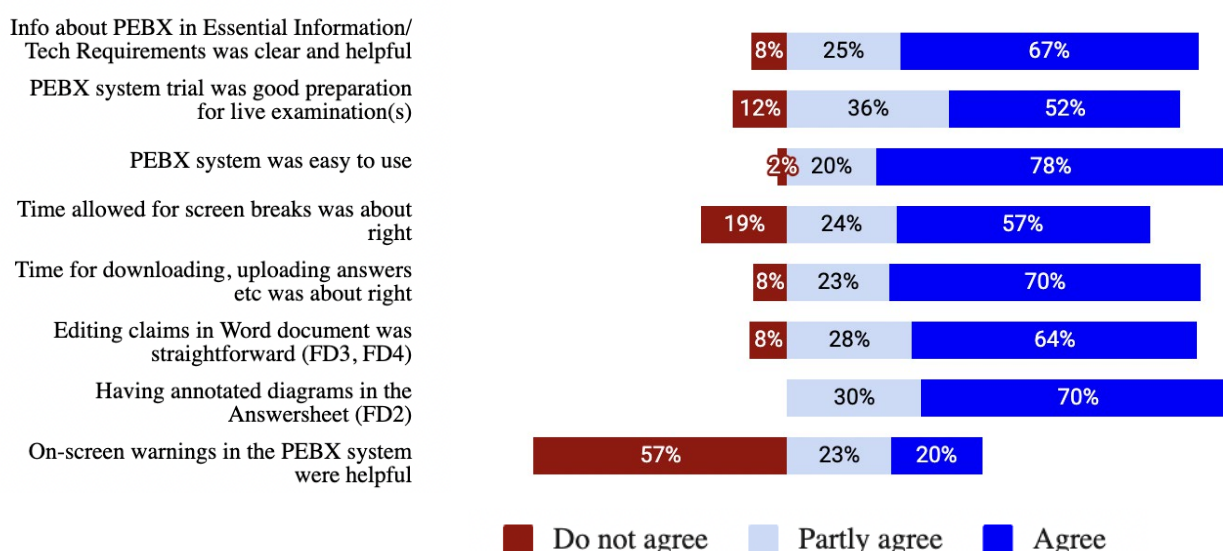
Section 2: Feedback on the examination process

4. Views on the PEBX online examination system

Candidates were asked to evaluate the PEBX online examination system, and satisfaction was generally high, with over 90% of respondents agreeing or partly agreeing that the system was easy to use and time was sufficient. There was significant improvement with the trial system, where 88% candidates partly or fully agreed that it was good preparation for the live exam (up from 48% in 2023). All of the survey respondents were satisfied with the tool for amending diagrams, (where in 2023, 59% said they were not easy to use / helpful), and some candidates commented that this was a welcome improvement to the exam.

19% of respondents disagreed that the time for screen breaks was about right. Some candidates said that the break was unclear, and suggested an enforced break between Part A and B of the FD1 paper for food / rest.

Please evaluate the PEBX online system



As in previous years, there was low satisfaction with the on screen warnings, with 57% of survey respondents saying they were not helpful. Several candidates made comments in the open questions saying that the on screen warnings did not work for them.

Several candidates raised concerns about technical difficulties which impacted their exam experience including delays in joining the exam due to difficulties logging in to PEBX and the lack of pop up notifications.

Some candidates also raised concerns about whether there are sufficient safeguards against cheating, for example:

“I don’t understand how you can ensure people aren’t cheating. For example, what is to stop somebody having a whole suite of legal tests on their clipboard before the exam, and then

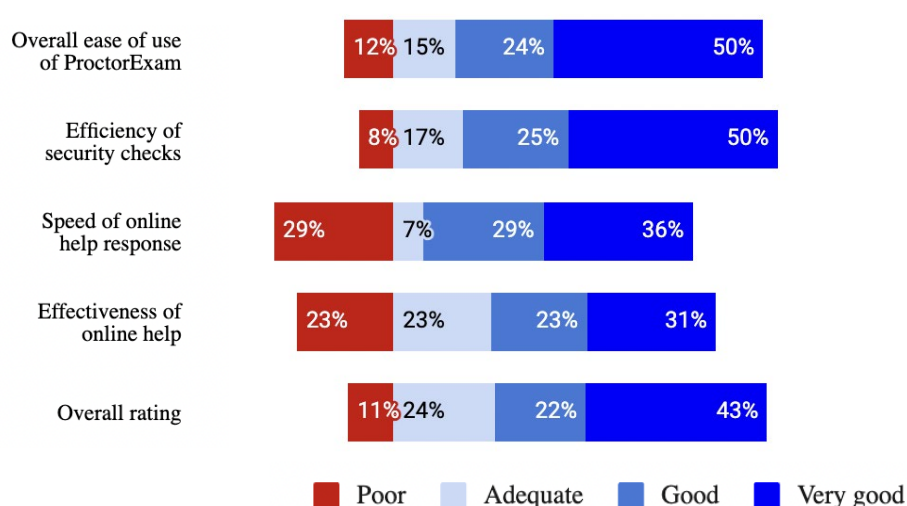
<Ctrl> 'Z' into the answer paper. I feel disadvantaged because I don't cheat. It all feels less secure than traditional methods."

5. Views on the ProctorExam system

Satisfaction with ProctorExam was lower than in 2023, with the proportion saying it was "very good" the same as last year, but those saying it was "good" down to 22% (from 34%). Overall 11% of respondents said ProctorExam was "poor".

Satisfaction was lowest for the speed and effectiveness of online help, as in 2023.

Please rate the ProctorExam system



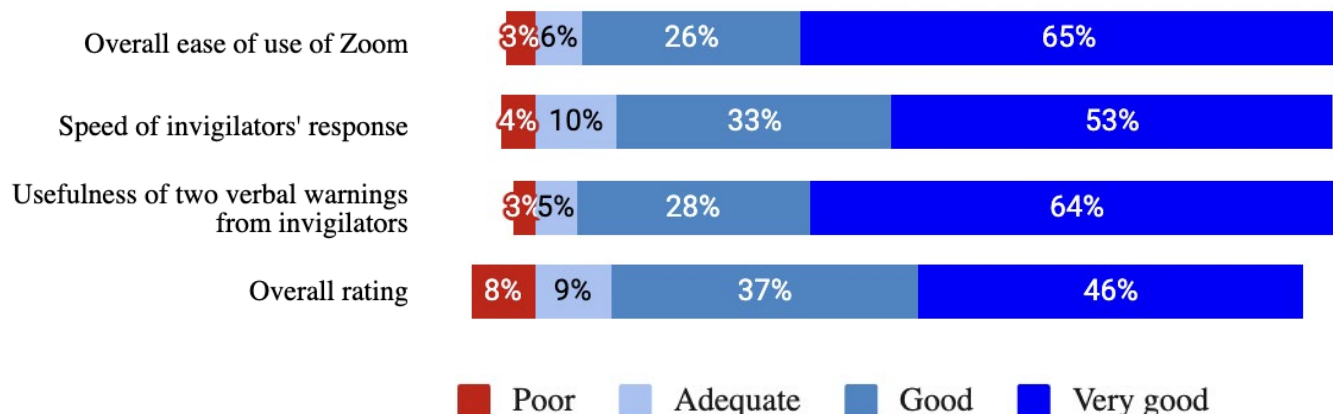
One candidate commented:

"In my opinion ProctorExam should not be used. The software is unreliable and poorly made. Both myself and my colleagues completed the trial exam yet on the day had multiple IT personnel working to help us get the software running and couldn't. Despite attempting to start the software at 9.30 neither of us were logged on until 10:20/30 purely due to ProctorExam not acknowledging that it had been downloaded, even after following all of the technical support steps provided by PEB and completing the trial exam. ProctorExam is notoriously poor and unreliable, you only need look at the reviews for the chrome extension and the overall rating of 1.7 out of 5. I strongly urge PEB to look at different software for invigilation in the future to avoid the unnecessary stress and disadvantage caused by this software which creates issues that are out of control of the candidate."

6. Views on the Zoom invigilation

83% of respondents gave an overall rating of "very good" or "good" for the Zoom invigilation, similar to results from 2023. Overall the majority (65%) found Zoom very easy to use, and more than half (53%) found the speed invigilators' response times very good. 8% of respondents said that the Zoom invigilation was "poor".

Please rate the Zoom invigilation



Issues raised by candidates include:

- Zoom messages not being seen or answered by invigilators
- Noise disturbance from an invigilator
- Lack of privacy to other candidates (one candidate was ill on the day)
- Lack of checks to prevent cheating

An issue raised by several candidates was getting the right balance of allowing candidates into the Zoom room with enough time to prepare but not too long so that it is stressful:

“Plan for less time in zoom calls before exam, 30 min in a call, doing nothing is very stressful.”

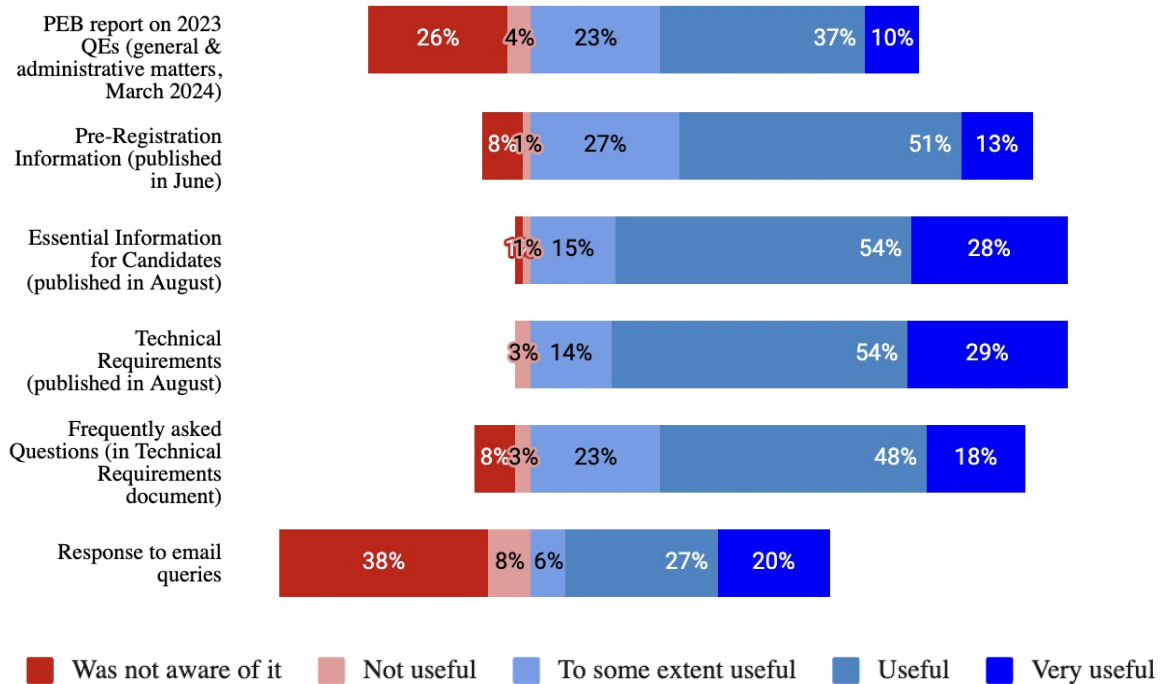
“Zoom could have been executed a lot better. For one exam I was let in very close to the exam start time, despite requesting to be joined 15mins beforehand, which was stressful. I was also kicked out of the Zoom meeting midway, fortunately I was able to log back in easily, but it is a stress which can be very much done without during an exam.”

7. Usefulness of materials provided by CIPA / PEB

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the information provided to help their exam preparations. As in previous years, most appreciated were the Essential Information for Candidates and the Technical Requirements which 82% and 83% of candidates respectively found useful/very useful. Candidates were least familiar with the PEB report on the 2023 QEs, which 26% of respondents were not aware of.

Satisfaction with response to email enquiries was also in line with the previous year, and of all the support had the highest proportion of respondents saying “not useful” at 8%. Not aware of it” is interpreted as “not applicable”).

Please evaluate the different ways in which PEB communicated with candidates about the online examinations



Several respondents called for the key information to be made more concise and combined in one document if possible, though others asked for more additional details (which make the document longer). Candidates also mentioned that they found it difficult to find the information on the CIPA website. Comments included:

“Would be very helpful if the documents mentioned in Q6 were all emailed to candidates at registration/publication, or if a notification email was sent that there were new documents to be reviewed, particularly given that deadlines are contained in at least one of the documents.”

“Maybe have the essential information and technical information in one document so it is easier for new candidates to make sure they have read all of the information. Could be useful to include Zoom in the trial examination just so it is not a surprise on the day of the exam.”

“I found the technical requirements and essential information a really long document - it was very easy to miss important information. A brief, bullet point summary at the beginning would be useful.”

“Simplify the instructions, 21 pages of technical information is over complicating a very effective system.”

“The information online is not always the easiest to find. The content of the communications is useful, but can be difficult to locate on the website - especially if you are unsure what the terminology (title) is.”

8. Comments on exam software and invigilation arrangements

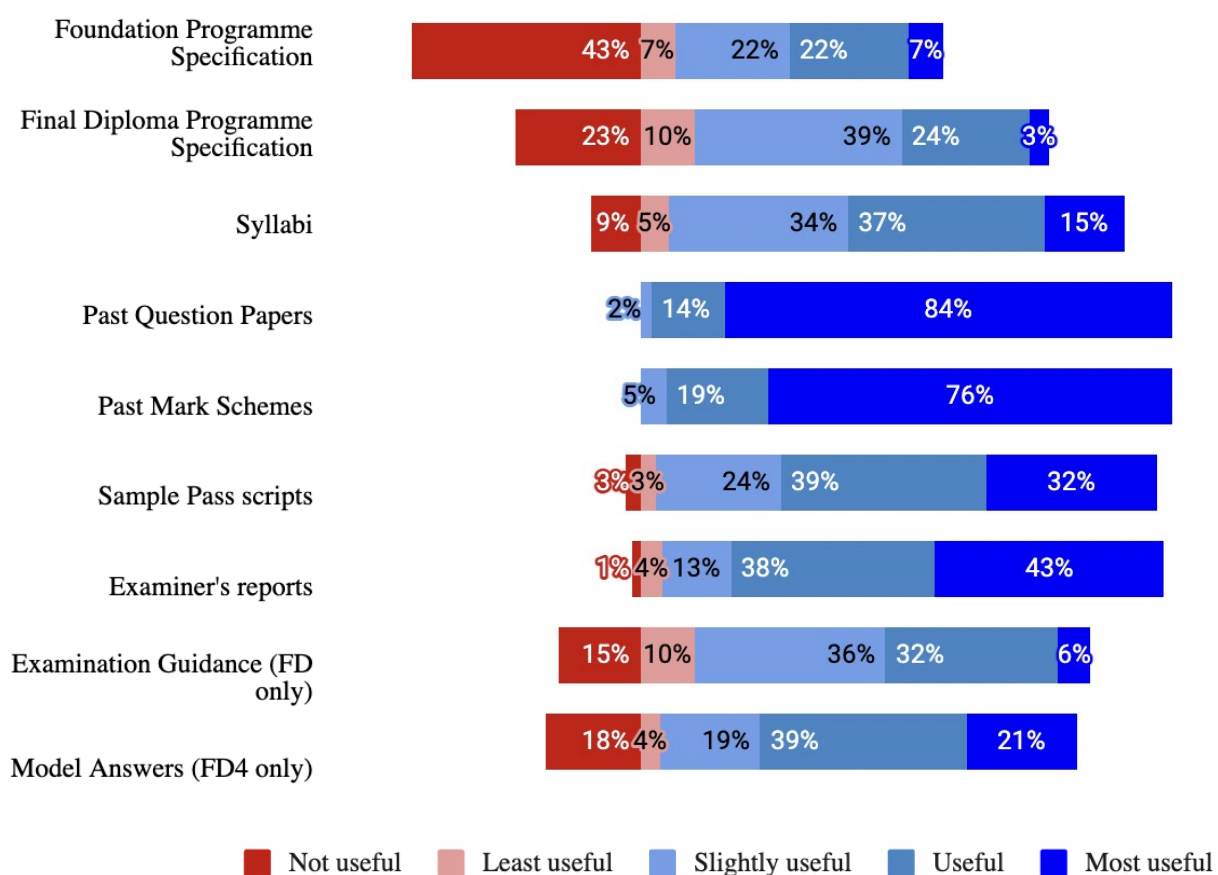
Many candidates were satisfied with the arrangements for online invigilation in 2024. Comments include: “I do not think any improvements are needed - the 2024 examination session seemed to be run very well.”

In summary, the key issues and recommendations related to exam arrangements were:

- Zoom should not be set up so that candidates can see each other
- Noise disturbance from some invigilators
- Messages to invigilators not responded to
- Delay logging in
- On-screen alerts not showing up
- Some crashing / glitching
- Unclear when to log in
- Suggest lockdown browser like EQEs
- Clarify the screen break and make it compulsory
- Create a break for food / rest in between papers
- Concerns about whether there is sufficient control against cheating
- Full mock exam would be helpful, and available at different times
- Make the information documents clearer and shorter
- Organise the information better on the website
- Clearer information about the deadline for the designated contact
- Candidates would appreciate receiving a confirmation email that their paper has uploaded successfully
- Several candidates calling for open book exams, as in previous years
- Allow two screens
- Release results earlier
- More retake opportunities

8. Satisfaction with the published PEB support materials

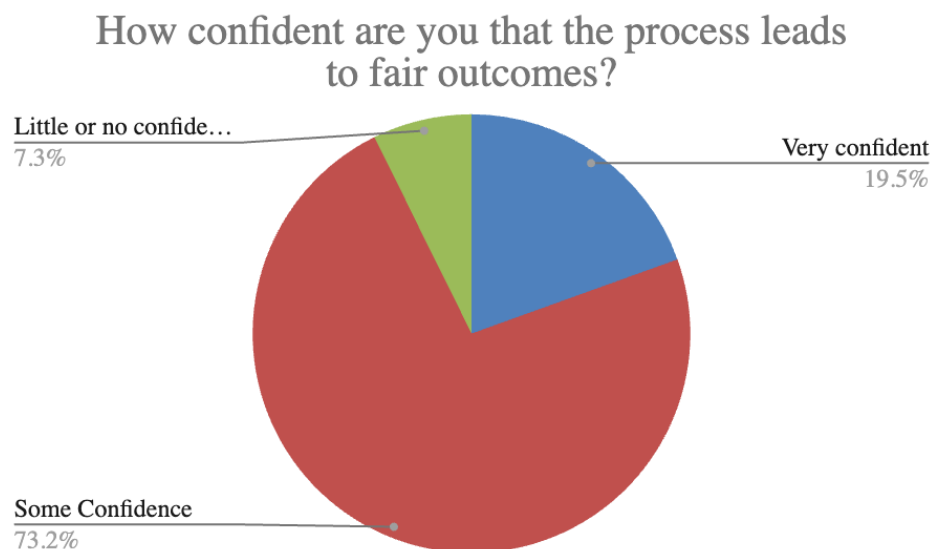
Please rank the usefulness of the published PEB support materials



As in previous years, respondents found the Past Question Papers and Sample Pass scripts the most useful, with 84% and 76% respectively saying they were 'most useful'.

Also as in previous years, the Programme Specifications were ranked lowest: 43% of respondents found the specifications for the Foundation Certificates not useful, and 23% found the Final Diploma specification not useful.

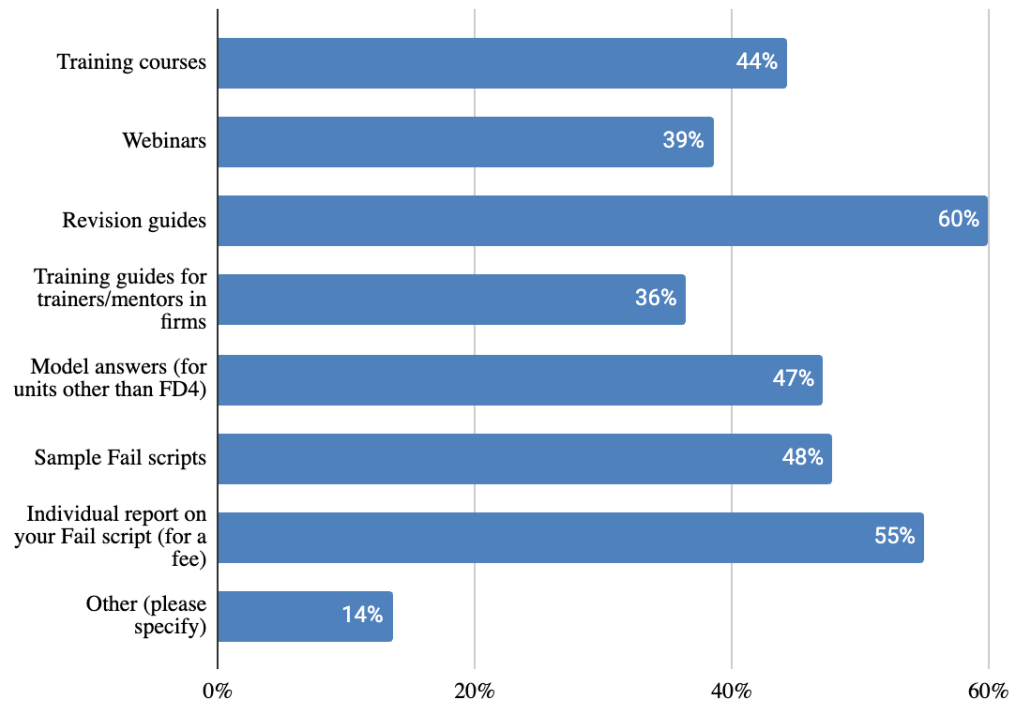
Only 31% of respondents said they were familiar with the document - “How Qualifying Examinations are Marked” (similar to 2023). Confidence that the process leads to fair outcomes increased in 2024 compared with 2023.



Of the third of respondents familiar with the document, 20% were very confident that the process leads to fair outcomes (same as 2023), 73% had some confidence (up from 63% in 2023), and 7% had little or no confidence, down from 20% in 2023.

Candidates were asking about other forms of support they would appreciate in preparing for the exams. Most mentioned were revision guides (60%), individual report on your fail script for a fee (55%) and training courses (44%).

What other support should be available?

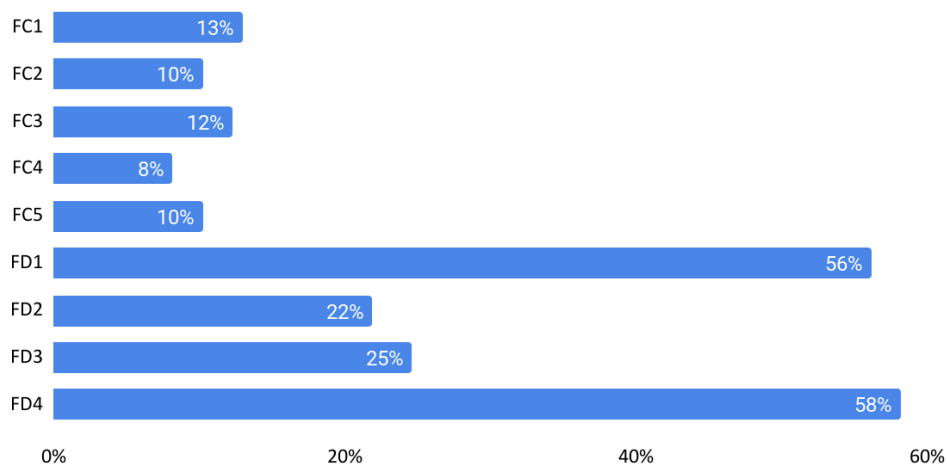


Section 3: Feedback on the exam content

9. Exams taken by survey respondents

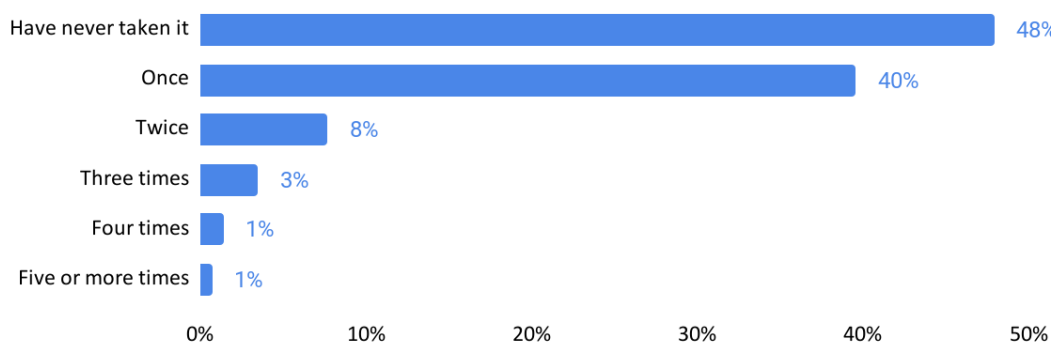
Most respondents (58%) were taking the FD4 exam, and 56% were taking FD4.

Which exams did you take?



8% of respondents were re-taking the FD4 exam for the first time, and in general the number of candidates doing retakes were lower than in previous years.

How many times have you taken the FD4 exam?

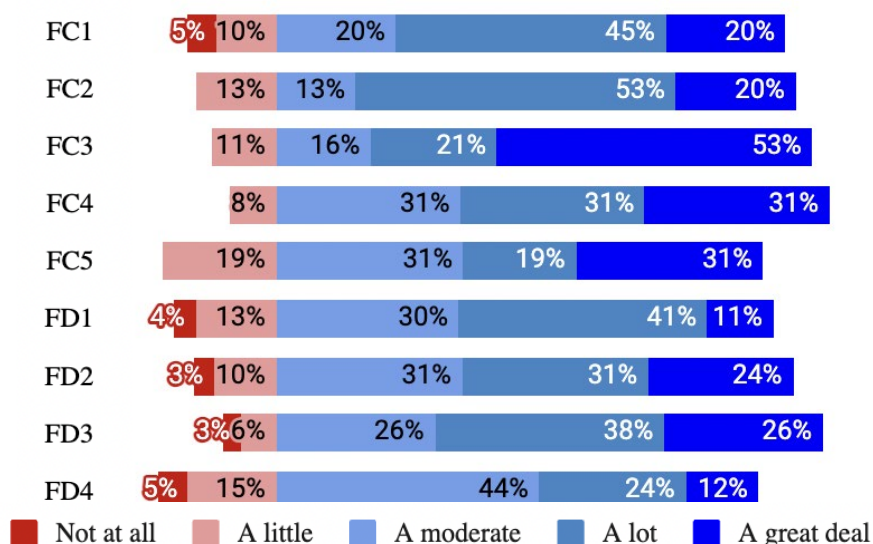


10. Satisfaction with exam content and time allowed

For the Foundation Certificate papers, satisfaction levels were generally high, as in previous years. Between 81% and 92% of candidates felt that the FC papers gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge (to a moderate or great extent). FC3 had particularly high satisfaction in 2024, with 53% of candidates saying it gave them a “great deal” of opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge.

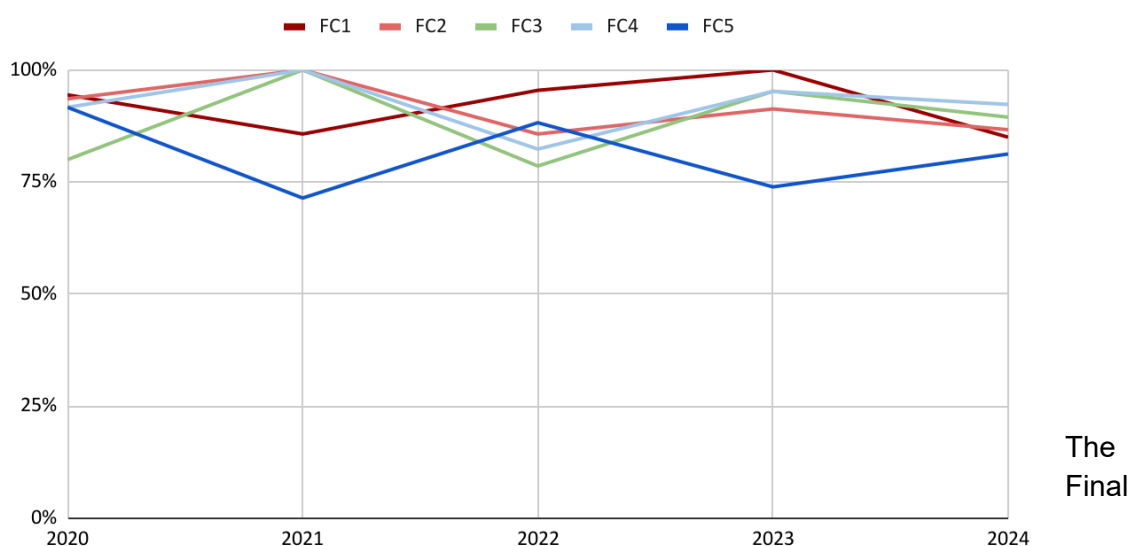
Satisfaction was significantly higher for FD3 and FD4 than in the previous year, where broadly a third of candidates had felt it gave them a good opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, a third felt it gave them a moderate amount, and a third answered “not at all” or “a little”. For the 2024 exams, 46% of candidates were well satisfied with FD4 and 64% with FD3. 20% of candidates said that the FD4 paper only gave them a little or no opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and only 9% said this for FD3.

To what extent do you feel that the paper provided the opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding?



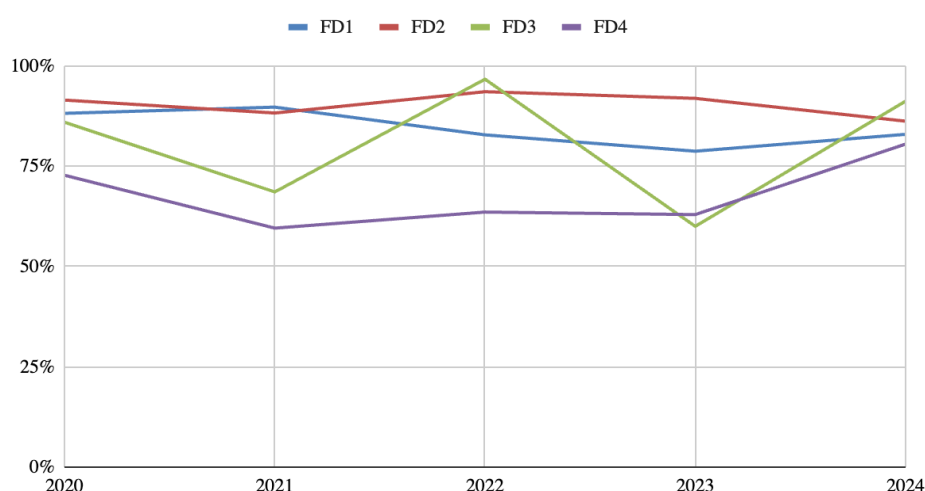
The following charts show the percentage of students saying the exams gave them “a moderate”, “a lot” or “a great deal” of opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding between 2020 and 2024. Overall satisfaction was slightly lower in 2024 compared with 2023, though consistently above 75% for all FC papers.

Satisfaction with Foundation Certificate exams, 2020 - 2024



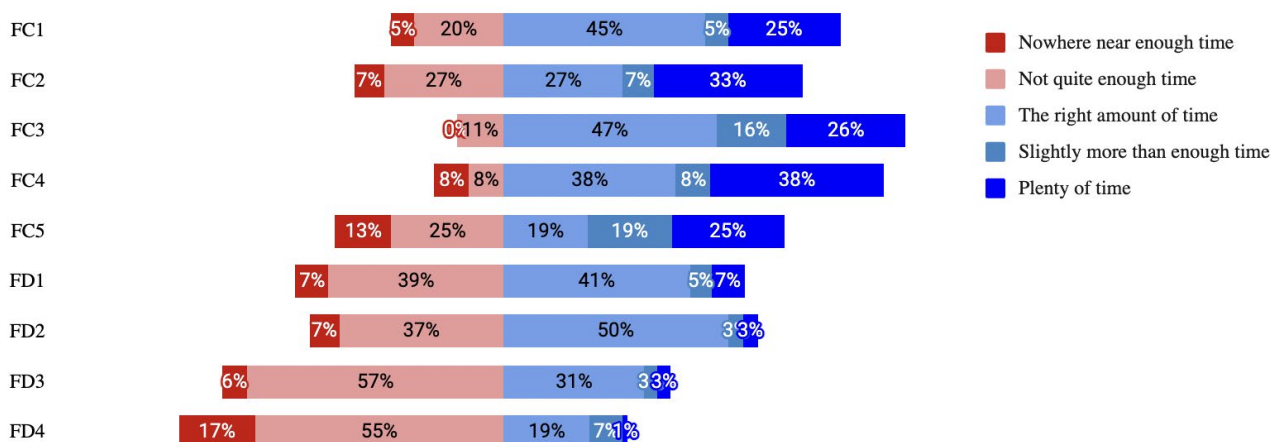
Diploma exams have had lower levels of satisfaction, particularly FD4, though this has shown a trend of rising satisfaction (after dropping in 2021). Satisfaction with the FD3 exam has fluctuated by year.

Satisfaction with Final Diploma exams, 2020 - 2024



As above, satisfaction with the time available to complete the paper was generally high for the Foundation Certificate papers (ranging from 63% to 89% of candidates saying they had enough time). As in previous years, candidates feel the Final Diploma papers are too time pressured. Only 28% of survey respondents felt they had enough time to complete the FD4 paper ranging up to just over half of participants (57%) who felt there was enough to complete the FD2 paper.

To what extent do you consider you had enough time to finish the paper?



Several candidates commented on the time pressure, including noting that this tests speed rather than fitness to practise: “Too time pressured. Candidates who type fast, read fast and are decisive are far more likely to pass. The exam seems to test more exam preparation than competence in the subject.”

“Some slight direction given for the expected scope of the practical long questions could be helpful. I understand it may be the purpose of the exam to test the candidates ability to interpret situations and determine the appropriate response, but in many cases there are too many decisions and assumptions that can be made. This makes many possible decisions and the answers are full of “if this, then this, or else”. From the marking schemes and past papers, it is unclear whether the examiners want breadth or depth in these answers. I would argue there is not enough time for both.”

11. Comments on the exam content and marking

Comments from survey respondents indicate generally higher levels of satisfaction in 2024 than in previous years, with positive comments about the improvements made to the exams (both those already made, and those proposed for the future). There were significantly fewer concerns about the fairness of mark schemes, relevance of the exams in testing fitness to practice, and bias towards particular academic disciplines.

Positive comments include:

“I commend the PEB for being ahead of the curve in relation to their provisions in terms of reasonable adjustments and appreciate the commitment to an equitable examination experience accounting for the diversity of the candidate sitting the exams.”

“Make format match actual practice more? Agree proposed 2025 changes are an improvement.”

A few comments were made highlighting the burden of the exams:

“18+ hours of finals exams in 4 consecutive days is both mentally and physically exhausting on candidates and is quite an archaic approach. The exams would better be split up over 2 weeks like the EQEs”

“The exams put a huge strain on the mental and physical health of candidates and there should be further consideration of this by the examiners. Having the exams held more than once a year of having at least FD1 as open book with approved texts allowed would ease the burden of the exams.”

Comments on specific exams

FC papers

“The Section A portion of the FC1 paper this year related exclusively to quite niche areas of the law, which I know many candidates found to be frustrating and disheartening, and represented a significant departure from previous years (for example, Section A of the 2022 FC1 paper consisted exclusively of past paper questions, which was the complete opposite this year). I understand and wholeheartedly support the need to test candidates on more niche areas of the law as this is important, but, especially at FC1 level, felt this should have been done alongside some of the more core topics of UK patent law as has been the case in

previous years. At times, this paper felt more like an FD-style of paper, which requires a different revision and preparation approach, and I think many of us felt quite let down as a result.”

FD1 - narrow range of topics felt unfair for candidates

Some were positive about changes to the paper in 2024:

“I think this paper (FD1 2024) was notably different to previous papers. I actually thought it was also much better than any other previous paper I sat in preparation. The designs questions was a bit naughty, but overall I thought the paper was a much fairer test of my knowledge and skill than older papers, where it often feels like half the battle is guessing what the Examiner wants you to write, who is being deliberately, and unfairly, difficult. In this case, I thought the paper was tough, but fair, which is good.”

As in previous years, there were several comments that the exam had too narrow a focus, which is unfair to candidates, that the requirement to memorise large amounts of material disadvantages neurodiverse candidates, and the mark scheme is still too rigid to reward answers that would represent good advice in real life practice.

“Was disappointed that FD1 had no question on employee inventions as these are relevant to real life practise. Mark schemes for FD1 also seem to be narrow, there are definitely points that are valid which are not rewarded with marks. Perhaps there could be more answers that attract marks available for a question (for example, 15 different possible marks available for a 10 mark question so that a candidate has better chance of getting the full 10 marks so long as they say something relevant and useful).”

“In FD1, the format in terms of the mark scheme being determined after the fact should be changed in my opinion. It leads to general uncertainty as to what may attract marks. Having a defined mark sheet prior to marking but taking a pragmatic approach to awarding marks for statements equally as relevant to those included in the mark sheet would at least provide certainty. The current system leads to two possible statements provided in an answer of roughly equal relevance but marks only being attributed to one. The system either has to be one of a predefined marksheet, no marksheet and examiners able to award marks for all sensible and relevant statements, or a mixture of both. However, post defining a rigid marksheet leads to a lack of certainty for the candidate, and to my knowledge is not an approach utilised by any other examining board. Hopefully the changes next year will help.”

FD2

Candidates appreciated the pre-annotated figures. One respondent also remarked: “FD2 and 3 both actually work as practical exams testing skills and knowledge.”

FD3

“Double check dates in the paper. The priority date an application in one of the FC3 questions was incorrect and created confusion.”

“In FD3 the patent was unnecessarily long. There is no need to having to spend that much time reading during an exam, 2/3 pages is sufficient to provide all the information needed.”

“FD3 - tighten up the added matter requirements for the exam, it's too loose right now”

FD4

There were far fewer comments on FD4 than in previous years (just 6 comments on the content) largely concerning there being too much material / too time pressured. Some suggested that reducing the number of claims from 6 to 4 would be sufficient to test knowledge and skill. One candidate remarked:

“FD4 has already been changed for next year, so let's hope it is improved”

Respondents also highlighted formatting issues in relation to the FD4 paper:

“FD4 could have line numbers every line, instead of having to count from the nearest line number and/or annotating pages with line numbers.”

“Please do not use different fonts in the exam paper. Some fonts are more accessible than others, and using less accessible fonts creates an unnecessary barrier to candidates.”

“FD4 could do with a recommended format for infringement and novelty tables. The old spare set of claims, to be sub numbered then referred to as 1.1, 2.2 etc does not work smoothly when working entirely on line. Most candidates I expect create a table in word. But the restriction to A4 portrait makes this difficult. The solution I and at least another used was to add a word section break with a landscape table for claims breakdowns. This then had to be deleted after copying the relevant data to the answer sections. A clear and exam board approved way of doing this task would be useful.”

“Make sure the Word Doc formatting is set as you'd like the answer to be written as this year it was set in times new roman which is not the correct font.”

“When working with claims in word for FD4 and using lists 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc. word was randomly changing the claim numbers. Some autoformat issues I guess in the standard answer sheet.”

12. Summary of specific issues/recommendations highlighted by survey respondents

Significantly fewer recommendations were made this year, following a trend from 2023 where issues previously raised have been largely addressed.

Key recommendations remaining are:

- Make the exams open book to reduce the need for large amounts of memorisation
- Reduce course content to make it possible to complete the exams in the time provided
- Ensure a wide enough range of topics covered so it is not too niche
- Ensure exams are relevant to everyday practice so that it is a fair test of fitness to practise (significantly less concern on this point than in previous years)
- Ensure mark schemes are clear, fair and flexible enough to recognise good answers (again, significant less concern than previous years)
- Spread the exams out over two weeks for a less intensive experience and enforce breaks during the exams so it's clear and fair
- Provide simpler and clearer information for candidates, and ensure any changes are communicated quickly, especially as the exams are reformed for the 2025 session.