Survey of Final Year Projectwork in UK University Bioscience Departments

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Returns were made by 58 separate departments (36 from pre-1992 and 22 from post-1992 universities)

- Aston University,   School of Life and Health Sciences
- Cambridge University,   Department of Plant Sciences
- Cardiff University,   Cardiff School of Biosciences
- Coventry University,   School of Science and the Environment
- Imperial College London,   Department of Biological Sciences
- Loughborough University,   Department of Human Sciences
- Manchester University,   School of Biological Sciences
- Napier University,   School of Life Sciences
- Northumbria University,   School of Applied Sciences
- Nottingham Trent University,   School of Science
- Nottingham University,   School of Biosciences
- Oxford University,   Department of Biochemistry
- Sheffield University,   Biomedical Sciences
- Staffordshire University,   Department of Biological Sciences
- University of Abertay,   School of Contemporary Sciences
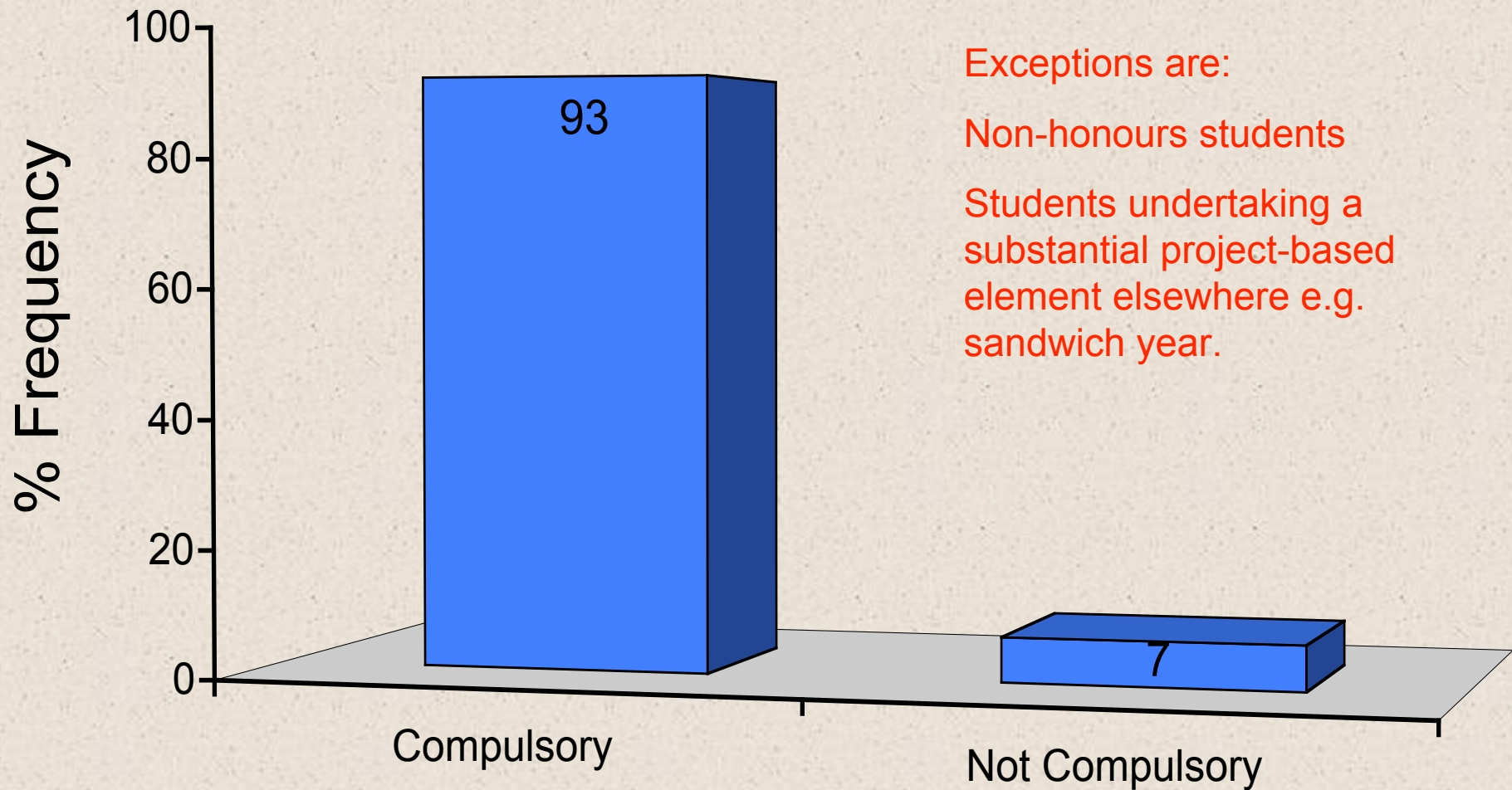
Relative frequency of different types of final year project.
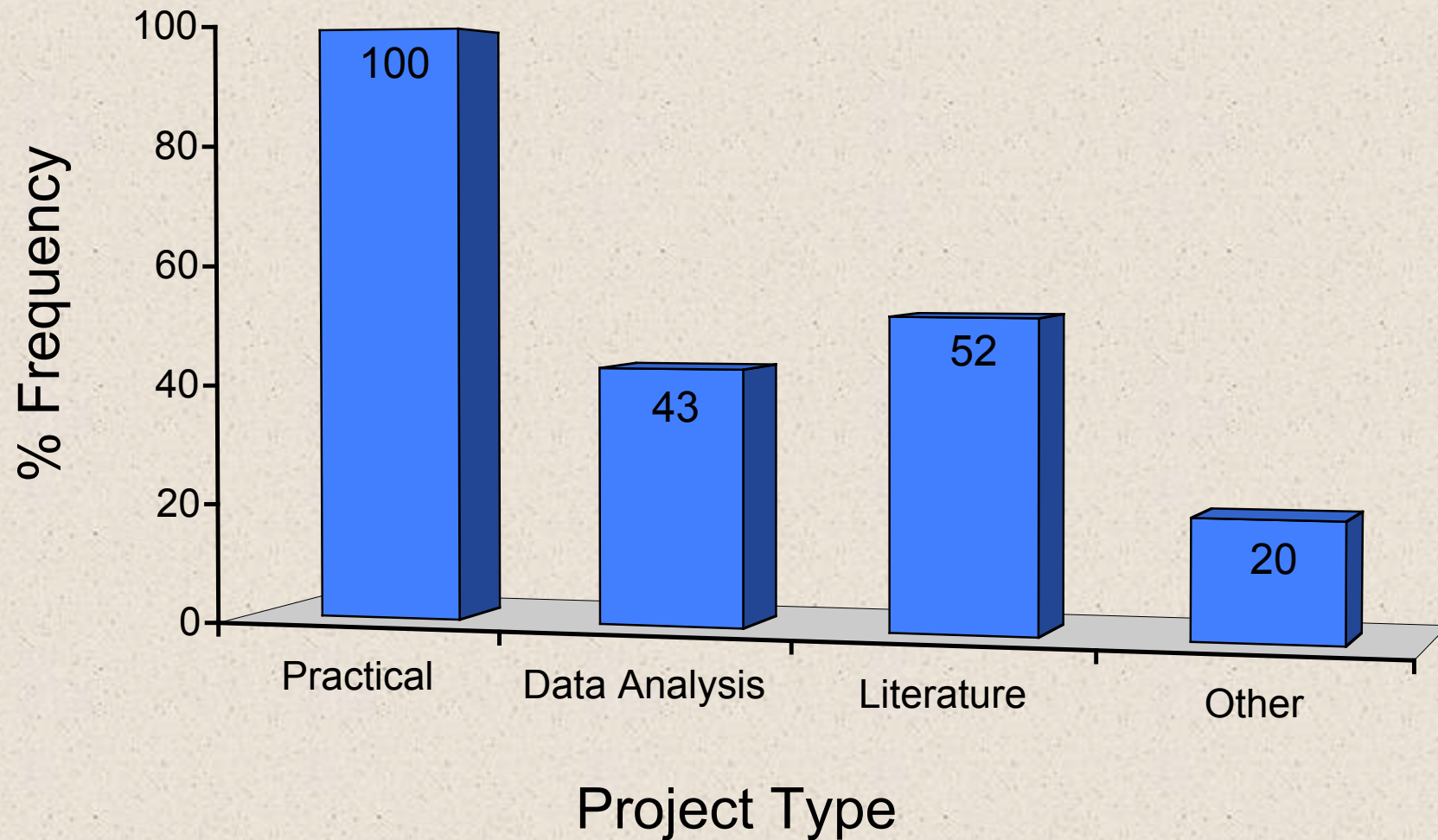
Frequency distribution of the mean number of students supervised per member of staff
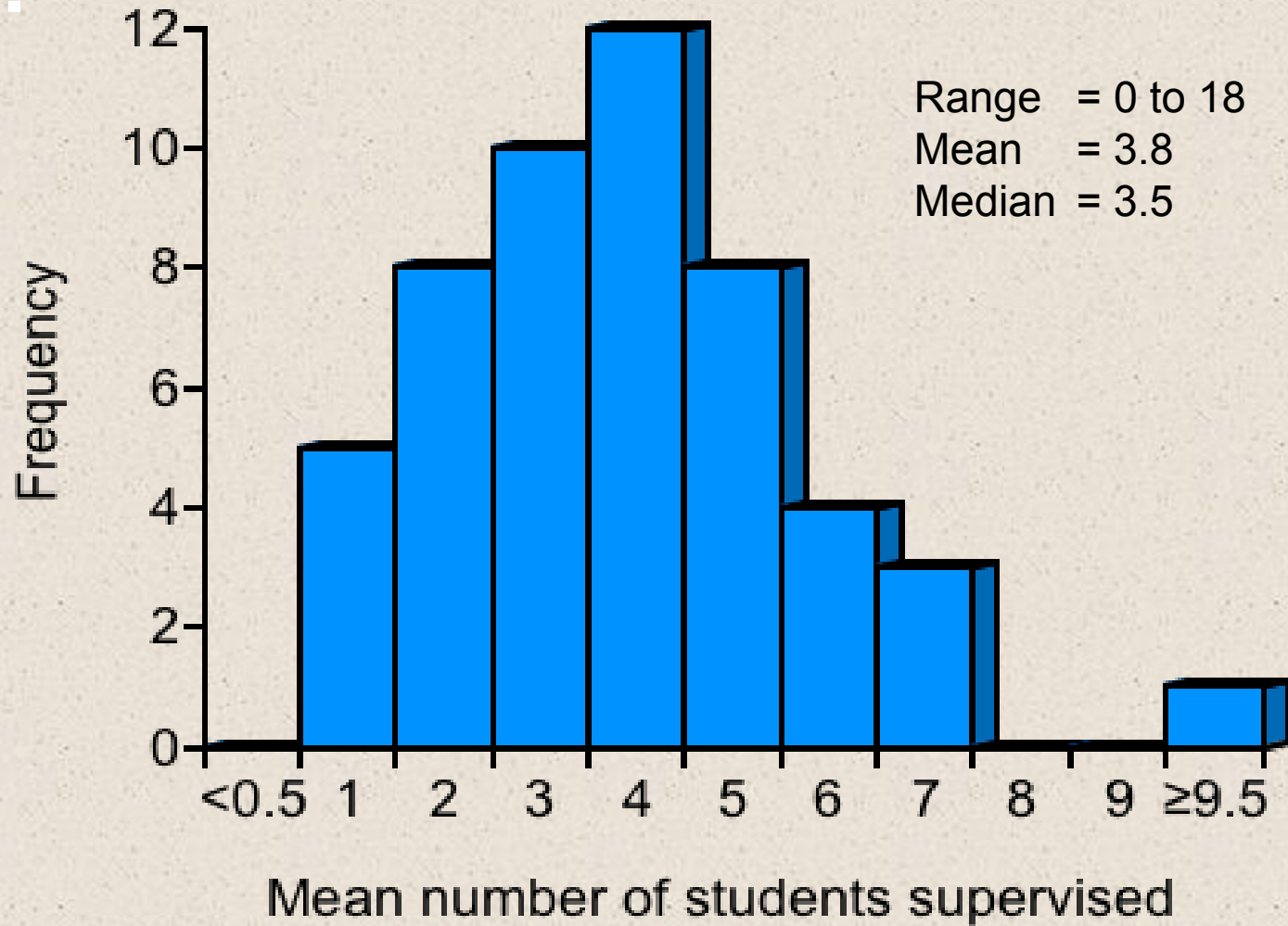
Project Allocation

or

Choosing between Dr. Popular and Prof. Terrifying.

Background to Project Allocation

- 64% of departments allow give students the opportunity to negotiate projects directly with members of staff.

- 83% of departments use some sort of central allocation system for projects.

- 69% produce a list of project titles or descriptions from which students make a choice. Other approaches involve choosing named supervisors and/or general subject areas.

- 51% of departments take previous academic performance into account when allocating projects.

- The other main factor involved when allocating projects is to try and equalise staff workloads.

Main Methods of Project Allocation

- Students submit their own research proposals and on the basis of these are allocated to supervisors.

- Students are given list of topics then shop around and sign up on a first-come, first-served basis.

- Allocation on student choice of project title using past performance as a guide.

- Allocation on student choice of project title using random element.

- Allocation on student choice of research area.

On student and staff involvement in the allocation process:

- "It is important that students see project selection as an active process and can discuss ideas with members of staff, rather than as a relatively passive allocation from a list".

- "It is important that students are involved in the design of their own projects".

- "Staff like to be involved in the allocation process".

- "The "shopping around" approach appears to result in students getting the kind of project they were hoping for".

On first-come, first-served:

- "First-come, first-served involves the active participation of both student and supervisor in project allocation."

- "A 'first-come first-served' allocation means that projects are not allocated to supervisors on academic merit (it is not always the most academic students who sign up the quickest)".

- "First-come, first-served can be a bit arbitrary: it is a matter of luck who finds the supervisor first".

- "We had to abandon a first-come, first-served system due to the level of complaints each year".

On using prior results:

- "using prior results as a basis of allocation further discourages weak students".

- "using prior results for allocating projects was abandoned as success in the project depends upon attributes quite different from those assessed by conventional coursework and examinations. It is not uncommon for students, whose performance in conventional assessments is poor to average, to blossom within a research environment".

- "We did use second year marks to allocate students to the most popular supervisors but the main problem we encountered was that the poorer students were always allocated to the least popular supervisors"

- "It is seen by students as a fair and objective means of allocating projects".

On staff popularity:

- "We asked students to rank their first six choices, but our biggest problem came last year when out of a class of 47, 42 chose the same 3 supervisors as their first 3 choices!"

- "Students usually sign up with lecturers they know well from their first and second year classes, and do not choose some of the more research active staff".

- "Asking students to choose between subject areas rather than specific titles or supervisors eliminates the problem of "I want to do a project with Dr. Popular but I don't want Professor Terrifying".