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Survey of effect of Covid-19 on learners (2020) - Results summary

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Survey of effect of Covid-19 on learners (2020)

Results summary

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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1. Introduction

The aim of the survey was to provide a baseline and improve Welsh Government's understanding of the impact the pandemic has had on learners in Wales. It was aimed at current learners aged 16 or older, in a school sixth form, further education or work-based or adult learning in college or in the community.

The survey was carried out online, using the Smart Survey platform. It opened for responses on 16th November and closed on the 20th December, receiving 6,088 responses. The questionnaire is available upon request; please email KAS– Employability & Skills Research KASEmployabilityandSkillsResearch@gov.wales.

This summary report provides an overview of the survey's results. More detailed analysis will be conducted and presented in a follow up report.

Convenience sampling was used; this does not allow generalisations but can be used to give an indication of how the particular sample responded to the questions in the survey at that time.

Most questions asked respondents' opinion on statements around how the March 2020 lockdown and the subsequent restrictions have affected their learning, and how their learning was going at the time they were completing the survey. Space for comments was provided at the end and invited respondents to provide their views on the survey and/or expand on any of the topics in the survey.

The survey had three main areas of focus: (1) current and pre-Covid-19 learning and learning choices, (2) learning experience and learning online and (3) wellbeing and safety. There was also a short module on respondents' experience of learning through the medium of Welsh and a brief demographics section at the end of the survey.

Two open ended questions were asked in the survey¹. One thousand responses were received in total, after cleaning for duplicates, missing or incomplete entries, there were 630 analysable responses for question 21, and 330 analysable responses for question 30. Thematic analysis was conducted on all analysable responses which identified a number of key themes – presented in order of frequency in table 1 below). These themes are presented throughout this report combined with illustrative quotes.

¹ Q21. Is there anything we haven't asked you so far in this survey that you would like to comment on? Please use the free text box below. Q30. Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. If there is anything about this survey that you would like to comment on, or would you like to explain any of your answers, please use the free text box below.

Table 1: Key themes emerging from thematic analysis of survey open questions presented in order of frequency.

Question 21	Question 30
Theme 1: Mental Health challenges and impacts for learners caused by the disruptions they have faced as a result of Covid-19. (Based on 160 responses)	Theme 1: Survey suggestions (Based on 160 responses)
Theme 2: Lack of information about exams and awarding of grades, disparity between fairness of exams / grades against future education progression. (Based on 135 responses)	Theme 2: Mental health (Based on 38 responses)
Theme 3: Challenges with online working from home. (Based on 122 responses)	Theme 3: Remote learning (Based on 122 responses)
Theme 4: Compliance with regulations on site learning. (Based on 80 responses)	Theme 4: Examinations and learning outcome. (Based on 80 responses)
Theme 5: Concerns with completion of work. (Based on 75 responses)	Theme 5: Government policy (Based on 11 responses)
Theme 6: Change in learning environment desired. (Based on 63 responses)	Theme 6: Concerns about being in college. (Based on 11 responses)
Theme 7: Support from teaching sources / training providers / employers has been noted to have been provided and helpful. (Based on 48 responses)	
Theme 8: Challenges with access to IT & other equipment needed to work from home. Additionally lack of skills with using equipment at home and poor internet connections. (Based on 28 responses)	
Theme 9: Increased confidence and productivity in working from home. (Based on 19 responses)	
Theme 10: Impact of Covid-19 on those who are disabled. (Based on 11 responses)	
Theme 11: Worries about financial issues whilst completing learning. (Based on 9 responses)	
Theme 12: Little / no support from employers. (Based on 7 responses)	

2. Characteristics of survey respondents

The last section of the survey asked several demographics questions, enabling a snapshot of the survey respondent's characteristics to be provided. The questions cannot provide a representative demographic picture of the survey's target audience due to the sampling methodology, however they do enable us to further break down responses by demographic.

Most survey respondents were aged between 16-19 (71%), followed by 20-24 (8%), 25-34 (8%), 45-64 (6%), 35-44 (5%) and 65+ (2%). Sixty-two percent of respondents selected female as their gender, 32% selected male and 2% fell into the other categories provided.² Six percent of respondents said they consider themselves to be from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group.³ Fourteen percent said they considered themselves to be disabled or to have a learning difficulty and 5% opted for the 'prefer not to say' option.

Sixteen percent of respondents said they 'look after, or give any help or support to, anyone because they have long-term physical or mental health conditions, or illnesses, or problems related to old age'. That sixteen percent was also asked whether they were registered with their local authority as a carer; 68% said they weren't and 14% said they were.

Twelve percent of respondents said they had childcare responsibilities as a primary care giver (e.g. parent/guardian) and 88% said they had no such responsibilities.

² November 2020 figures suggest that approximately 70,000 females, 58,000 males and 700 non gender specific students were enrolled in school sixth form and FE. Figures are based on combined figures from School attendance data collection and LLWR.

³ For context, in November 2020 around 20,000 out of 22,500 students enrolled in school sixth forms were white and 93,000 out of 106,000 in FE. Figures are based on School attendance data collection and LLWR records respectively.

3. Pre-Covid-19 and current learning and assessment

The first section of the survey asked about respondents' past and current learning choices, whether their learning choices have changed because of Covid-19, and if so how.

Type of learning

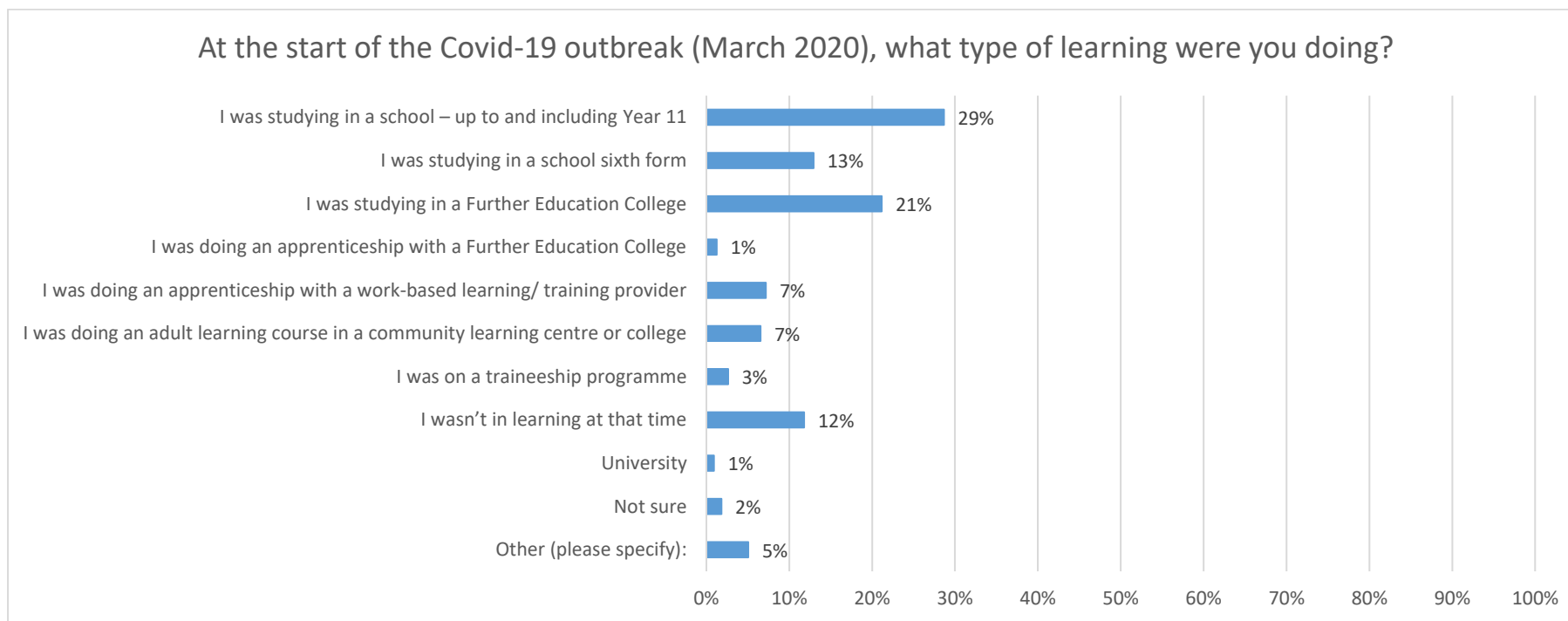


Figure 1. Types of learning at the start of the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 (base: 6062)

At the start of the Covid-19 outbreak (March 2020), most respondents said they were studying either in a school (up to and including Year 11; 29%) or in a further education college (21%). Thirteen percent were studying in school sixth form, 7% undertaking an apprenticeship (with a Further Education College or work based learning provider), 7% were undertaking adult community learning and 3% were on a traineeship programme (see figure 1).

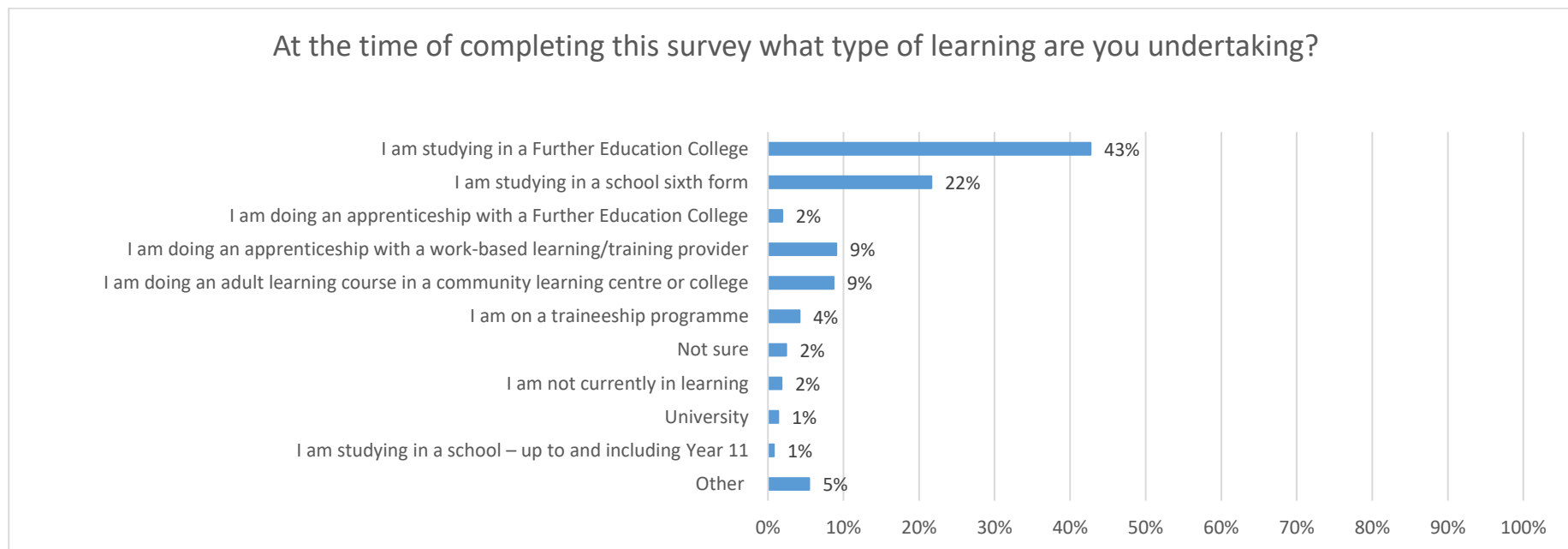


Figure 2. Types of learning being undertaken at the time of completing the survey (base: 6053)

At the time of completing the survey, most respondents were studying in a further education college (43%), followed by school sixth form students (22%). Around 9% were doing an adult learning course in a community learning centre or college and just over 9% were on an apprenticeship with a work-based learning provider and 2% with a Further Education College (FEC). Just over 4% were on a traineeship programme.

From those who specified the nature of their course, 38% said AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and/or A levels and 27% said a vocational course, such as BTEC or City and Guilds. Nine percent said they were on some other adult learning course (base: 4740).

Qualifications and changes to learning

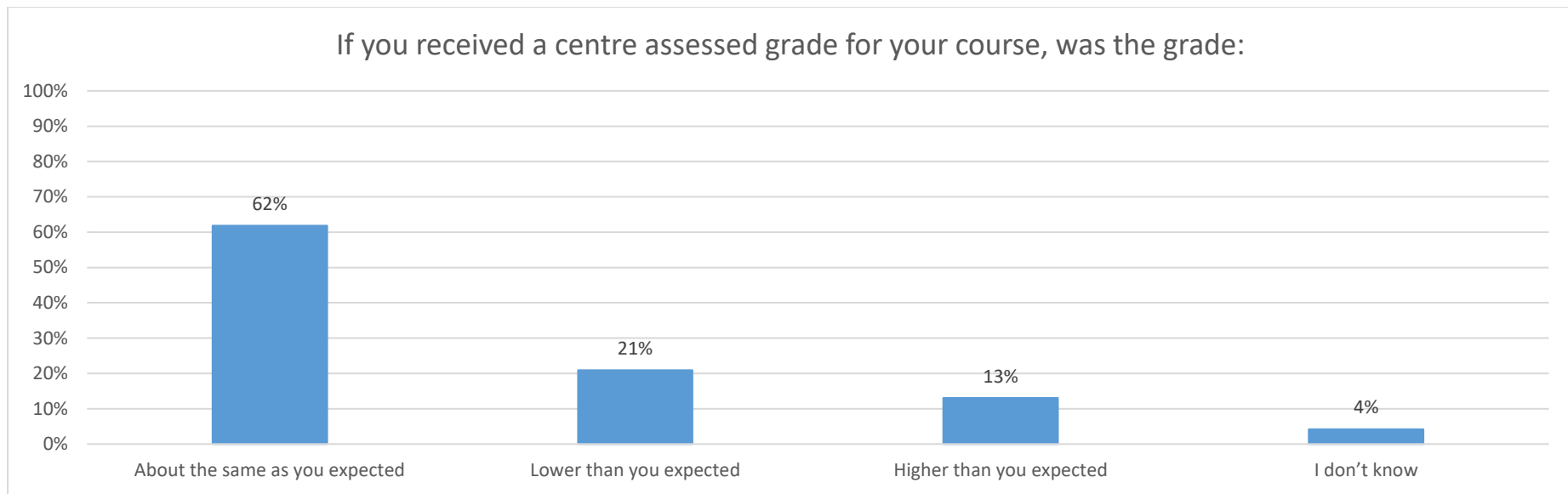


Figure 3. Qualifications and changes to learning- outcomes of centre assessed grading (base: 3158)

Almost half of the respondents who were undertaking learning before the Covid-19 outbreak said they achieved their expected qualification (48%), 12% said they achieved their expected qualification but not with the grades they were expecting and 9% said

they did not achieve their expected grade. More than half of respondents said they got a centre assessed grade⁴ for their course (53%; base: 5944) and 62% of those said that the grade was about the same as expected, 21% reported that their grade was lower than expected and 13% that their grade was higher than expected.

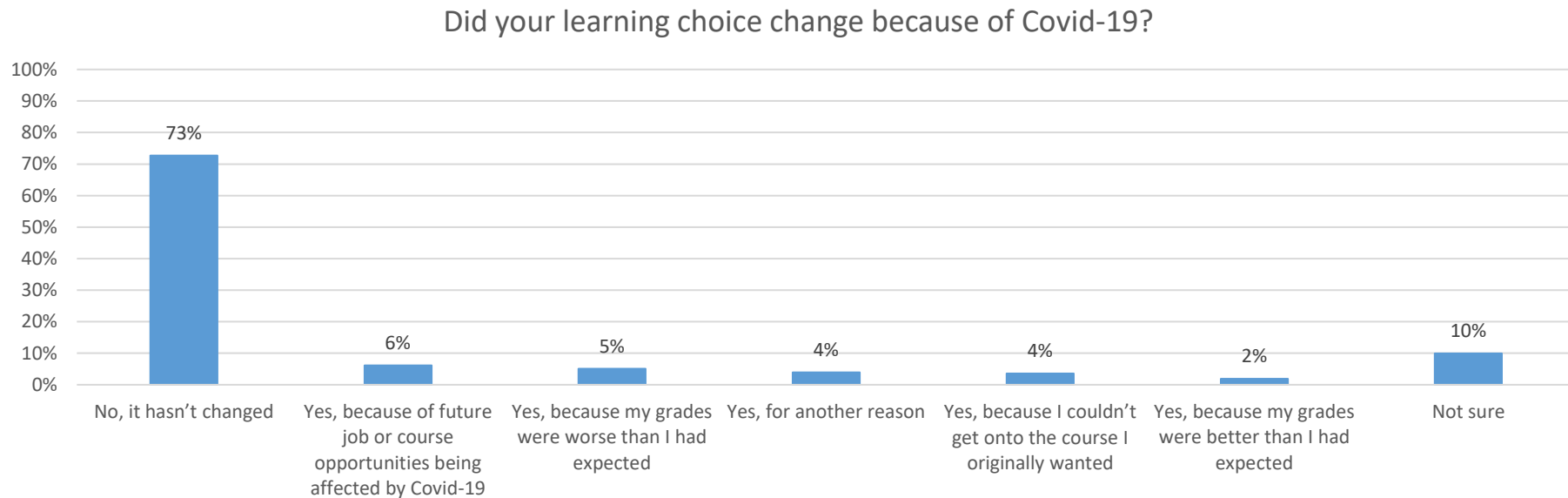


Figure 4. Changes in learning choice because of Covid-19 (base: 5997)

Most respondents in the sample said their learning choice did not change because of Covid-19 (73%). About 5% said it changed because their grades were worse than expected and 4% because they could not get onto the course they originally wanted, 10% were unsure. Around 250 respondents gave their own reasons for changing their learning choice reflecting on changes in personal preferences, individual circumstances and physical restrictions.

⁴ Currently referred to as the Centre-Determined Grade model, see [Written Statement: Update on General Qualifications in 2021](#) for more information.

The survey was open for responses when the Minister for Education in Wales stated the intention that exams would be cancelled due to the significant disruption already experienced by learners. A written statement was made on January 2020 confirming the move to a centre-determined grade model for the 2021/22 exam year in Wales. Consequently although the survey did not specifically ask about 2021/22 exams, the analysis of open comments revealed confusion and anxiety around the cancellation of exams and the desire for more information about how the system would work. Some respondents queried the fairness of the system (getting the 'right' grades), and a perceived disparity between A level and BTEC courses in terms of workloads and how grades are assessed. Respondents also indicated finding it difficult to be able to make decisions about future career / education progression due to not knowing about how the exams would work and without being able to visit universities.

“Confusion over the latest cancellation of exams. We’re in the dark as to what is expected of us and when”.

“I feel as students like myself have no idea what is going on with our final grades since exams have been cancelled this year. It is my first year in college, it's stressful as it is. Personally I am struggling with the workload that we are now being given to compensate for our exams. We also don't know what will happen in our second year, whether it will remain the same or not, I think what worries me the most is not knowing anything about my near future”.

Apprenticeships and Traineeships

Ninety percent of those to whom the question applied (i.e. undertaking apprenticeships) said they were not furloughed at the time of completing the survey. When asked if they were able to attend their traineeship work placement, 40% said they were able to do so all of the time, 18% some of the time and 11% not at all. Approximately 27% indicated that they hadn't been assigned to a work placement as part of their traineeship.

4. Learning experiences and learning online

This section asked about respondents' learning experience since the Covid-19 outbreak, including their experiences of learning online, using the Welsh language and learning at home.⁵

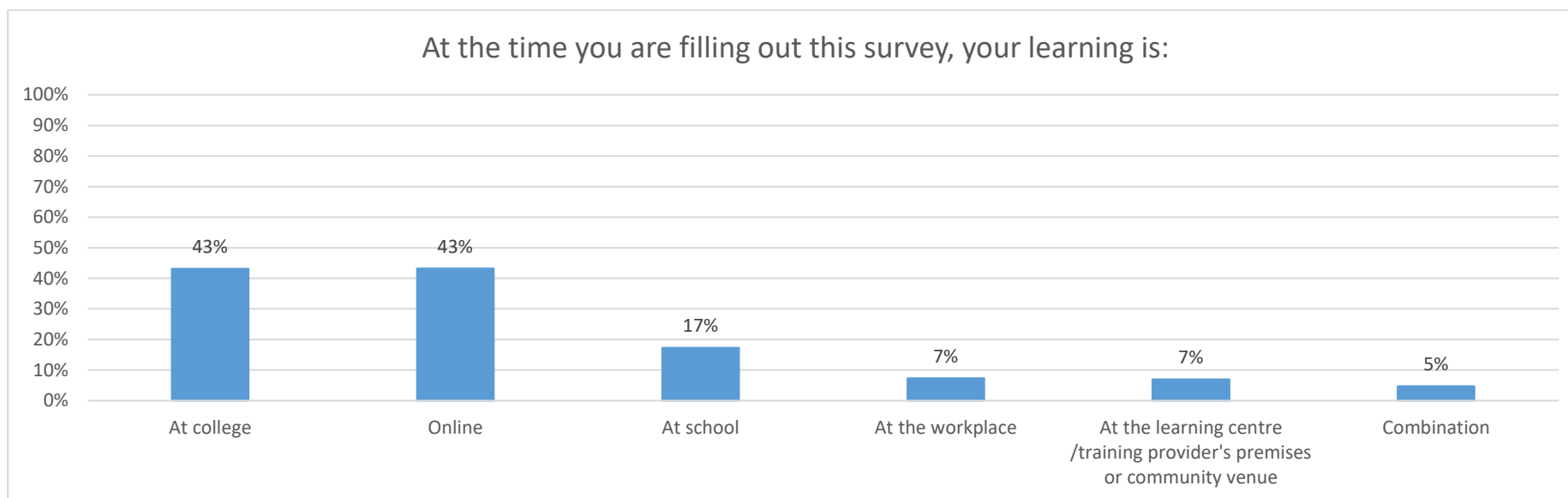


Figure 5. Place of learning at the time of filling out the survey (base: 5667)

At the time of completing the survey, most respondents said their learning was online (43%), at college (43%), at school (17%) or a combination of the options provided⁶ (5%).

⁵ In this context, we used the term 'learning provider' to refer to school sixth form, college, training provider or community-based venue where respondents were studying. The term 'learning course' meant a course or qualification they might be undertaking as part of the learning they are doing in school, college, with a training provider or in the community.

⁶ Question allowed multiple response.

Experiences of learning online

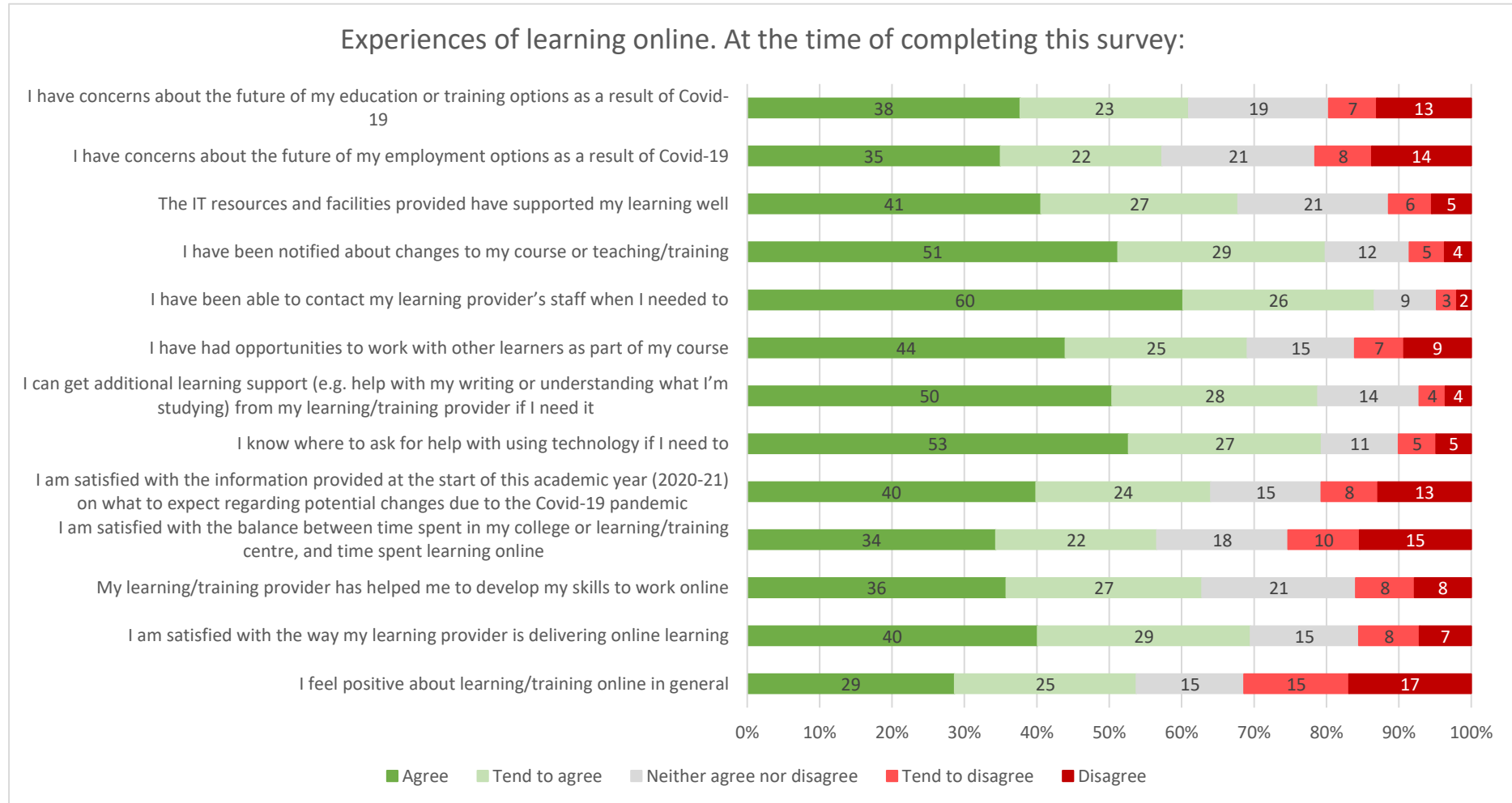


Figure 6. Experiences of learning online at the time of completing the survey (base top to bottom: 5348, 5254, 5323, 5479, 5524, 5333, 5355, 5534, 5543, 5212, 5461, 5504, 5578)

Respondents were provided with a number of statements about their experience of learning online at the time of completing the survey. Figure 6 above shows the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with those statements (agree and tend to agree have been combined in reporting throughout the rest of the report). Most of the respondents provided positive responses to all the positively worded statements. The top 3 positive responses were - I have been able to contact my learning provider's staff when I needed to (86%), I know where to ask for help with using technology if I need to (80%) and I have been notified about changes to my course or teaching/training (80%). The lowest positive response was for I feel positive about learning/training online in general (54%).

Over 50% of respondents agreed with the two negatively worded statements - I have concerns about the future of my employment options as a result of Covid-19 (57%) and I have concerns about the future of my education or training options as a result of Covid-19 (61%).

Thematic analysis of open comments revealed a number of challenges to working online / remote working, an overall feeling of dislike for working online and the view that it has a detrimental impact on individuals' mental health. Key themes that emerged include:

- Learning at home often presents distractions which can make it difficult to focus. Learners report feeling lack of motivation to work from home.
- Differences in teaching styles for learners is difficult. Remote learners expressed a preference for 'live' lessons although this makes asking questions or feedback challenging.
- Difficulties expressed with learning styles from some tutors where presentations have been provided only and no live lessons. Learners feel they are teaching themselves with little support.
- For learners studying courses where hands on application is required, they feel they are not getting the course they signed up for, nor learning the skills they will require to complete the course when working from home.
- An inability to study certain subjects at home due to lack of equipment.
- The challenge of self-isolation periods (in-out-in learning).

"I prefer working in class because not only do you have the immediate help of your learning provider but there are less distractions than at home".

"I feel less motivated at home because there are other things I could be doing whereas being in a professional environment motivates me to do work as it's the only thing I can do. Not only this but you can gain materials and resources quickly while in class however you may be limited to what you can do at home as a result of a lack of resources".

Experiences of learning at home

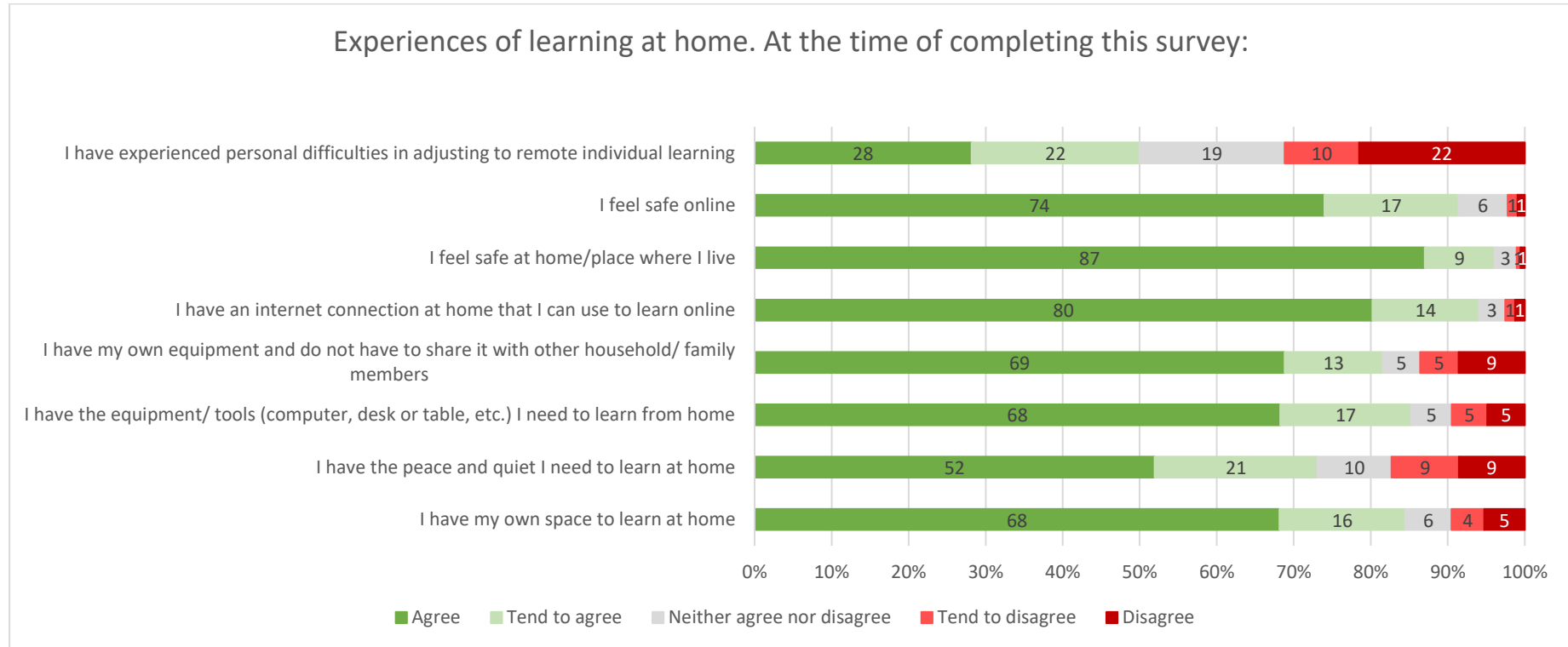


Figure 7: Experiences of learning at home at the time of completing the survey (base top to bottom: 5401, 5591, 5624, 5611, 5583, 5590, 5596, 5618)

Respondents were also asked about the individuals' circumstances around learning from home at the time of completing the survey. The overall picture was positive with over 75% agreement on all but one statement. Ninety six percent of respondents felt safe at home and 91% felt safe online. Seventy one percent said they had the peace and quiet they needed to learn at home.

The exception was for the statement 'I have experienced personal difficulties in adjusting to remote individual learning', where the responses were spread almost proportionally along the scale provided.

Thematic analysis of open comments revealed mixed views on preferences for learning remotely as opposed to on site with some observing positive outcomes and increased productivity whilst others feel there are more challenges (as outlined above):

- Some remote learners value the flexibility of working from home, feel more comfortable and safer, and are able to work when they feel ready to.
- Some adult learners reported improving their IT skills through working at home which is helping in other aspects of life.

"I generally prefer online education as I feel I can focus more and I am at my most comfortable. I also struggle with many mental health problems which make it extremely difficult for me to talk to people and leave my house however online classes help me work through those issues as I gain confidence and courage."

There was also praise for the support from teaching staff, learning providers and employers, with tutors having gone the extra mile providing remote learning resources and support.

"The tutor went 'the extra mile' to ensure we had plenty of extra useful and interesting activities, was always available to contact, and boosted our confidence with very positive comments on our work".

Respondents also identified some IT specific challenges with remote working:

- Some learners do not have the ICT equipment to be able to undertake learning effectively.
- Poor / slow internet connections impacts on remote learning abilities.
- Some platforms used by learning providers have not worked well.
- Poor skill level to use ICT equipment means some learners have said they have struggled to take part in the learning remotely.

Self-isolation was also a key theme reported in open responses. Some learners felt that being required to self-isolate / having or having had Covid-19 / working from home reported to have effect on learners' ability and motivation to complete work. Some learners also felt that the impact of isolation periods is not considered by the learning providers and learners are concerned about their ability to complete the set work.

[Experiences of using the Welsh language in learning](#)

Sixty two percent of respondents said they were not Welsh speakers. Twenty-three percent said they were 'Welsh speaker not fluent' and 15% 'fluent Welsh speaker'. Twenty percent of those with some Welsh speaking ability indicated that they were undertaking their course (or part of it) through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

Experiences of using the Welsh language in learning

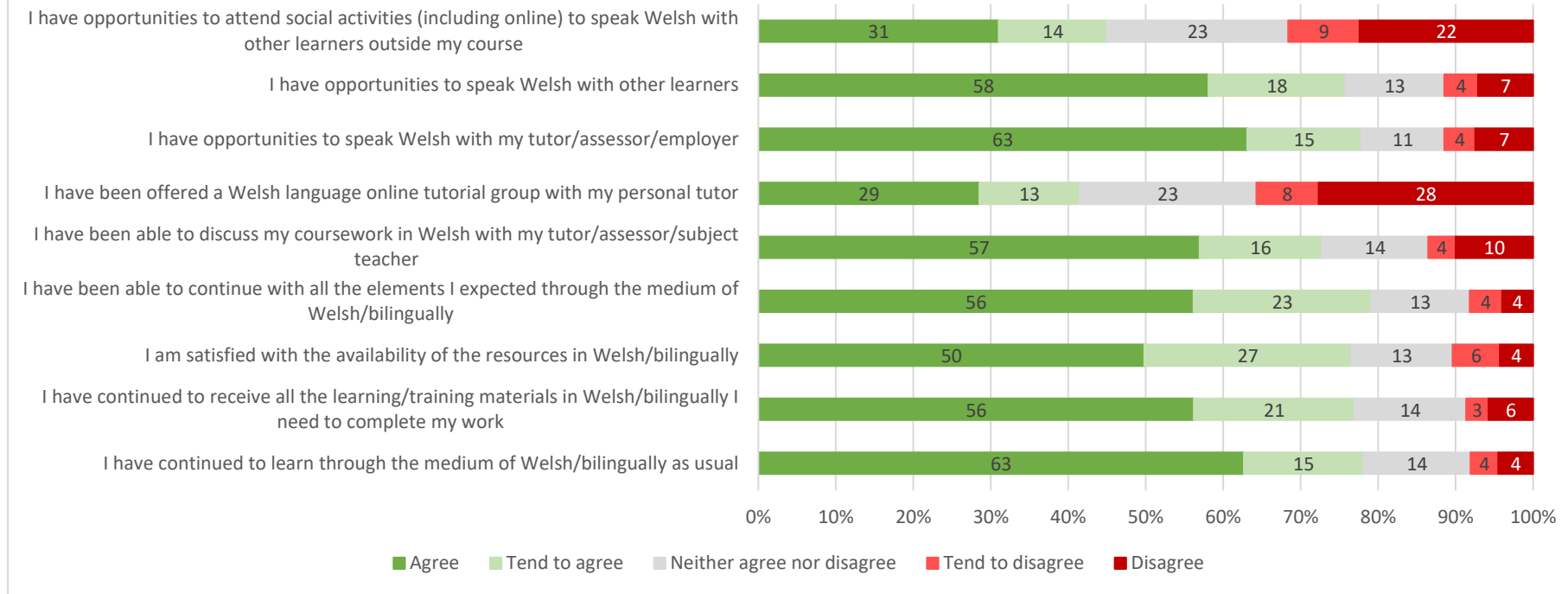


Figure 8. Experiences of using the Welsh language in learning (base top to bottom: 522, 549, 550, 473, 539, 550, 558, 555, 557)

Overall survey respondents were positive about their experiences of learning through the medium of Welsh during the pandemic. Most (79%) continued to learn through the medium of Welsh/bilingually as usual and were satisfied with the availability of Welsh medium resources (77%). Respondents were somewhat more negative about opportunities to attend social activities (including online) to speak Welsh with other learners outside their course (31% disagreed that they had such opportunities).

5. Learning from home during the first national lockdown (March 2020 onwards)

Wellbeing and safety

This part of the survey focused on respondents' wellbeing, feelings and thoughts in relation to their learning experience since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Thinking about the first national lockdown which began in March 2020:

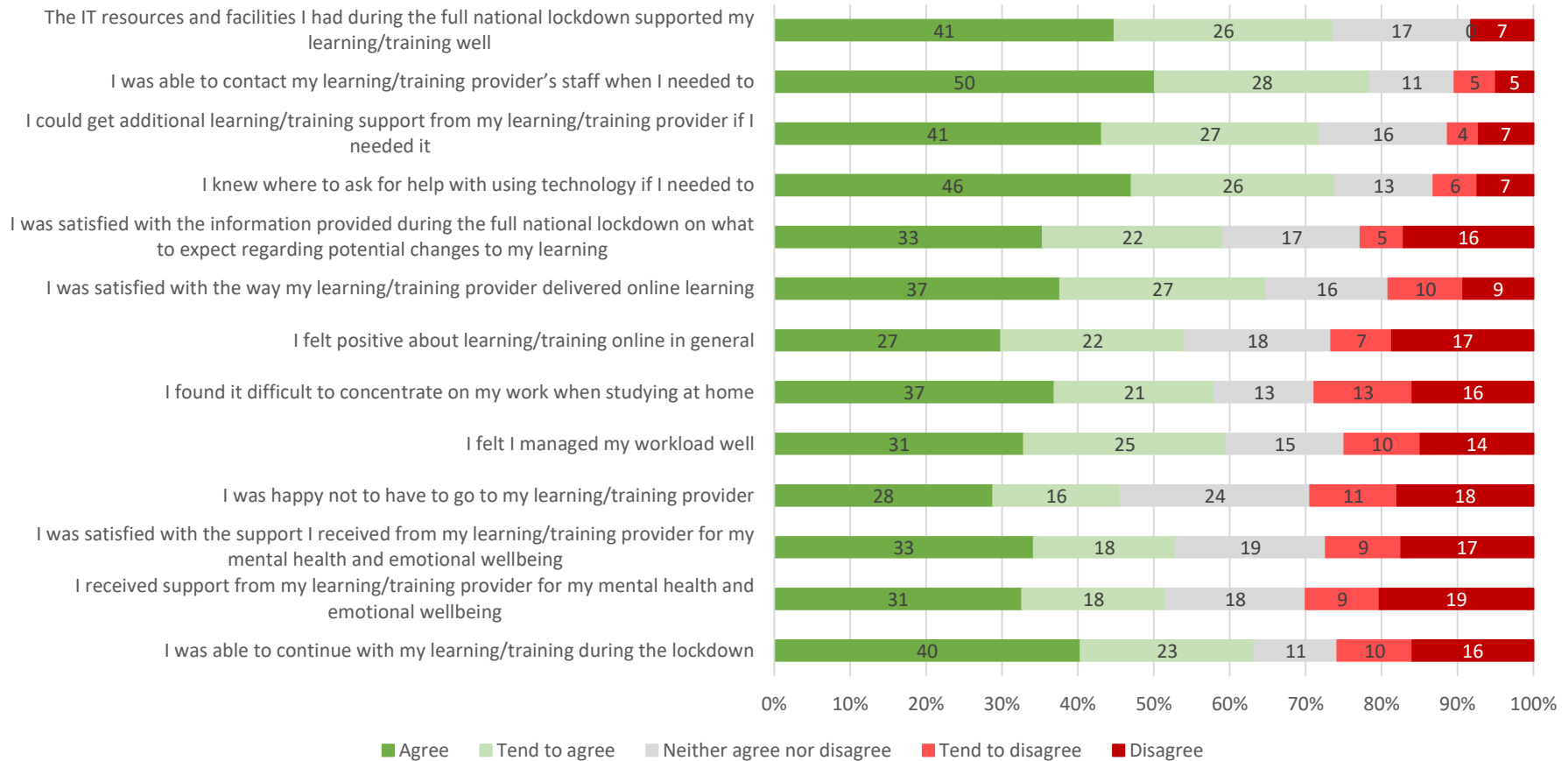


Figure 9. Experiences of learning during the first national lockdown in March 2020 (base top to bottom: 4683, 4863, 4753, 4819, 4920, 4704, 4807, 4731, 4748, 4787, 4602, 2691, 4894)

This question specifically asked for the period 'during first national lockdown beginning in March 2020', which means that it asked for respondents' recollection of events. This should be taken into consideration when reviewing the figures. The majority of survey respondents provided positive responses to all the positively worded statements. The top 3 positive responses were - I was able to contact my learning/training provider's staff when I needed to (78%), I knew where to ask for help with using technology if I needed to (72%) and I could get additional learning/training support from my learning/training provider if I needed it (68%). However agreement tended to be more on the tentative side compared to the response to questions asking about learning at the time of completing the survey.

Fifty eight percent of respondents said that they found it difficult to concentrate on their work when studying at home. Forty nine percent of respondents agreed that they received support from their learning/training provider for their mental health and emotional wellbeing, with 51% agreeing that they were satisfied with the support received.

There was a notably larger neither agree nor disagree response to all questions in this section compared to other questions in the survey. While it is not possible to ascertain the reason for this, a 'neither agree nor disagree' response can indicate that it is not felt to be applicable, the question has not been understood, or there is genuine indecision.

Learning from September 2020

The timeline for this questions asked respondents to reflect on their learning experiences since the beginning of the new academic year in September 2020.

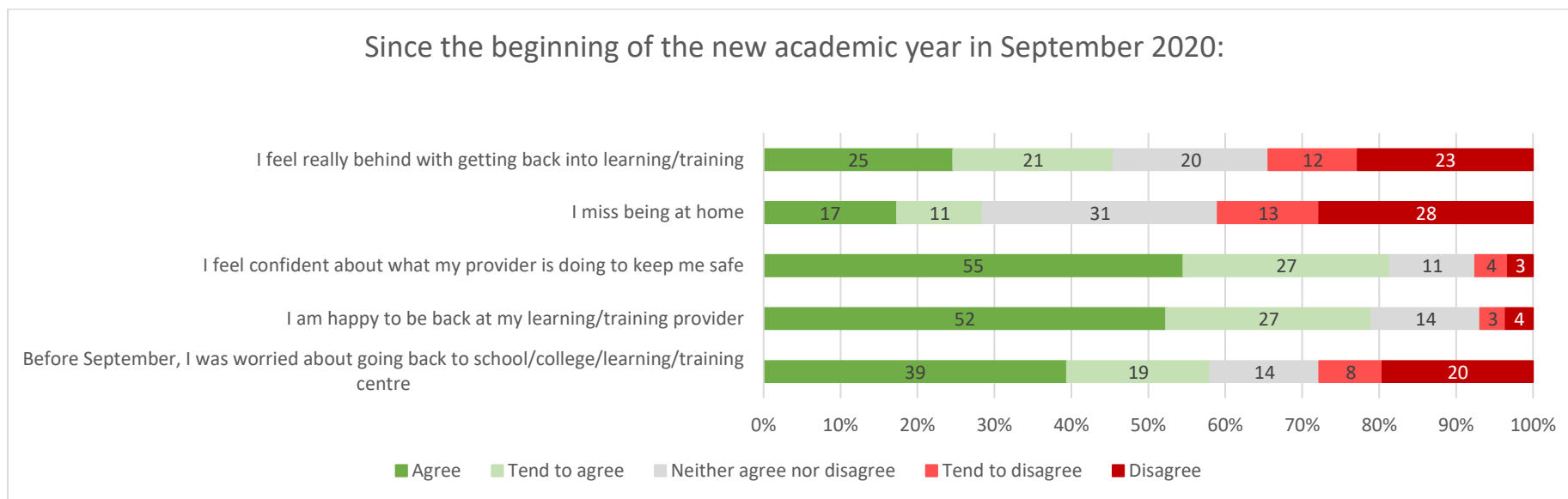


Figure 10. Learning since the beginning of the new academic year in September 2020 (base top to bottom: 5319, 4996, 5427, 5263, 5301)

The majority of respondents indicated that they were happy to return to their learning/training provider (79%) although over half agreed that they were worried about returning to the learning centre before September (58%). Eighty two percent of respondents felt confident about what their provider was doing to keep them safe.

Thematic analysis of open comments revealed several other areas of concern related to disability:

- Regulations for onsite disabled learners are challenging - lift openings contravene one way system rules.
- Learners with learning difficulties face additional challenges when working from home.

“One way systems in college make it difficult for disabled people to use facilities as these require going up and down lots of stairs. Our lift opens up into a ‘no mans’ land where, whichever way you go, you contravene the one way system for a short while”.

“Help with additional needs is hard to get and I think more time and effort should be put in (with working remotely).”

Some respondents also expressed financial concerns such as:

- Delay in receiving qualifications on course has impacted learners' ability to earn.
- Cost of purchasing equipment needed to work remotely on top of bills is difficult for learners, some have reported taking out finance to purchase IT equipment required.
- Learners are concerned about work placements / job opportunities in the future.

Mental wellbeing

The survey employed a validated scale to get a snapshot assessment of the mental wellbeing of the sample - a short version of the [Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale](#)⁷ (see Appendix I for information on how the scale is scored). The idea of wellbeing is fairly new, therefore, it is difficult to fully interpret what the scores mean for each individual.

Survey respondents were asked to describe their experiences over the past two weeks as follows: 'Here are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please select the answer that best describes your experience of each over the last two weeks.'

- "I've been feeling optimistic about the future."
- "I've been feeling useful."
- "I've been feeling relaxed."
- "I've been dealing with problems well."
- "I've been thinking clearly."
- "I've been feeling close to other people."
- "I've been able to make up my own mind about things."

When converted using the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale scoring methodology the scores ranged from a minimum score of 7 (lowest wellbeing score) to a maximum score of 35 (highest wellbeing score), therefore higher scores indicate higher positive mental wellbeing.

The mean value of the score for survey respondents was 20. As a reference, the Health Survey for England (2011)⁸ reported a mean score for the same metric of 24, so survey respondents overall scored lower. (Unfortunately, this is the most recent

⁷ The WEMWBS was developed to enable the monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing. Although the scale was not designed to monitor mental wellbeing at an individual level, research (in adults) suggests that it could detect clinically meaningful change.

⁸ [WEMWBS Population Norms in Health Survey for England data 2011](#)

validated published score available from UK level data at the time of writing this report.)

At the time completing the survey, respondents who said they were doing an apprenticeship with a Further Education College, an adult learning course in a community learning centre or college, or an apprenticeship with a work-based learning/training provider, scored on average higher on the wellbeing scale. Those in school sixth form, Further Education College and traineeship programmes were on average on the lower end of the wellbeing scale.

Mean well-being scores were higher for males than females (20.94 and 19.76 respectively). There was some variation in terms of age groups. Those aged 16-24 reported the lowest mean wellbeing scores (19.5), whereas the highest mean wellbeing scores were reported in the 65+ year age group (24.5).

The average wellbeing score for those who considered themselves to be from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group was lower (19.9) compared to those who didn't (20.1). Similarly, those who considered themselves to have a disability or learning difficulty reported on average lower wellbeing scores (19.1) compared to those who didn't (20.4).

The average wellbeing score for those with caring responsibilities was lower (19.7) compared to those who didn't (20.2). However, those with childcare responsibilities reported on average higher wellbeing scores (21) compared to those who didn't (20).

The thematic analysis of open comments revealed considerable concern about mental health and wellbeing. This tended to focus on the impact remote learning has had on individuals' mental health, contributing to stress and anxiety, with lack of motivation to learn also emerging as a key theme. In addition, those who are learning at home may have other responsibilities (caring, home-schooling) which limits their learning time and contributes to stress and anxiety.

Many learners felt that there appeared to be very little consideration of how the pandemic is negatively effecting learners' mental health. Likewise learners felt a lack of support to help them with this- and that there should be more support provided to learners to help with the mental health during these challenging times. Uncertainty about exams was also creating a lot of anxiety for learners.

Some learners felt that the education environment and regulations in place due to Covid-19 created a hostile learning environment which created stress for learners. For those learners who were onsite at the time of completing the survey there were concerns about regulations not being followed, risking exposure to Covid-19 and bringing it home to family. For those learning remotely there were concerns about motivation to work, managing work and home life balances and social isolation.

“I feel as if mental health issues have been pushed aside for everyone but especially learners. It's not been easy and I feel as though we've been forgotten about”.

Some learners have experienced positive outcomes for their mental health, feeling that online classes have helped with their mental health and feeling more confident. There was also evidence of tutors being very supportive and checking in with learners.

This summary report provides an overview of the survey's results. More detailed analysis, including analysis by types of learner and learner characteristics will be conducted and will draw on other sources of evidence such as Estyn's recent thematic reports on mental health and well-being and blended learning⁹.

⁹ [Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing](#): The work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2021).

[Developments in remote and blended learning practice](#): The work of further education, work based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2021).

Appendix 1 – Methodology for scoring the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

The SWEMWBS is scored by first summing the scores for each of the seven items, which are scored from 1 to 5 as follows:

- “None of the time” = 1 point
- “Rarely” = 2 points
- “Some of the time” = 3 points
- “Often” = 4 points
- “All of the time” = 5 points

Each of the response option was coded to reflect above scoring pattern. Note that the scale is positively scored, meaning a higher score suggests higher positive mental wellbeing. The variables were labelled as follows and the descriptive statistics for each are presented in the table below:

- “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future.”
- “I’ve been feeling useful.”
- “I’ve been feeling relaxed.”
- “I’ve been dealing with problems well.”
- “I’ve been thinking clearly.”
- “I’ve been feeling close to other people.”
- “I’ve been able to make up my own mind about things.”

The scale is scored by summing responses to each item. The responses, from 1 to 5, are aggregated to form the Index, which can range from 7 (those who answer ‘None of the time’ on every statement) to 35 (those who answer ‘All of the time’ to all statements). SWEMWBS scores are typically presented as means, medians and as the 10th and 90th centiles. They are not further classified into categories.