

Insights into the diversity of 'distance' doctoral cohorts

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CIHE Speaker Series, University of Toronto, 28 February 2023

Follow our project hashtag on Twitter at: [#DistanceDoctorates](https://twitter.com/DistanceDoctorates)

Today's talk

- Where are we speaking from - our experiences
- What is 'distance' doctoral education?
- Introducing our #DistanceDoctorates project
- Understanding today's distance doctoral students.
- How do distance modes connect to EDI considerations?
- Introducing some early impressions from the data
- Ways to connect with us





Our experiences



Katrina

- Distance doctoral experience:
 - 5 years (-1) part time
 - 2 hemispheres
 - 4 jobs
 - 3 years working full-time
 - 2 years working part-time
 - 6 homes
 - 1 baby

Jamie

- Distance doctoral experience:
 - Studied via distance during PhD in country (NZ) and overseas (Thailand).
 - Variation of candidature - FT, PT, LoA.
 - At times - full-time parental care role.
 - At times - full-time academic work.
 - 7 house moves!

What is “distance” doctoral education?

- The possibilities of distance doctoral education have been discussed in the HE literature for at least 25 years - viewed within wider trend of expansion of graduate education
 - E.g. Candela et al. (2009); Cumming (2010); Evans et al. (2004)
- Distance education [generally] defined as: “***students ... who follow the programme from their own location and do not attend the university, or do so only for minimal periods of time***” (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004, p. 127)
- BUT the nature of “distance education” has changed so dramatically over the last 2 decades that the term “distance” itself can be problematic!
 - E.g. Candela et al., (2009); Wisker et al. (2004)

What is “distance” doctoral education? (cont.)

- ***Traditionally: Distance as “postal/correspondence” study from afar***
 - Arguably less pedagogically rich than in-person study
 - Practical limitations around time and cost associated with information transfer & opportunities for synchronous interaction (postage, toll/charge calls ...)
 - Reduced enactment of modern learning theories e.g. social constructivism, situated learning/communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1990)
- ***Digital developments***
 - Email, Zoom, Skype, online teaching platforms, cloud computing, collaborative documents
 - Time and cost restrictions reduced, although significant digital divides/inequities persist (Levine et al., 2021)
 - Doctoral candidates may work online from same city or across hemispheres; may study fully “by distance” or work in hybrid ways; supervisors may also enact these flexibilities
- ***The COVID pandemic***
 - Forced moves to remote working for many - lockdowns, isolation, & campus closures (Levine et al., 2021; Vasiliadou, 2020; Wang & DeLaquil, 2020)
 - On-campus communities and affordances potentially replaced with ones accessible from home (Levine et al., 2021), arguably reducing pull to return to campus post-lockdown
 - Disrupting assumptions that physical presence was necessary, normal, or “best”

“Distance” doctoral researchers: An equity lens

- Distance doctoral education ought to be considered through an equity lens because *distance modes create possible pathways into research careers for those who may otherwise risk exclusion*.
- Contextualised by growing efforts to extend widening participation agendas to the doctoral level and national Research and Development (R&D) sector strategies (e.g. in the UK) which have identified a clear need to increase researcher workforce diversity (BEIS, 2021).
- Previous studies have identified how distance study can act as a ‘bridge’
 - Working professionals (Butcher & Sieminski, 2009)
 - Those with caring responsibilities (Burford & Hook, 2019; Meno, 2013)
 - Students travelling away from campus/home setting to conduct fieldwork
 - Those located where there is no doctoral education provision, and unable/unwilling to relocate (Candela et al., 2009; Fuller et al., 2014)
 - Those in lockdown/quarantine circumstances (short-term) or in hospitals/healthcare settings (Levine et al., 2021)
- While distance modes clearly present an important bridge to enable research education, it is important to look not only at access but also at inequalities in doctoral experience, retention, and success.
- **That’s where our wider #DistanceDoctorates project comes in!**

Our ongoing work in this area

- A **website** with resources for distance doc students:
<https://doctoralresearchbydistance.wordpress.com/>
- A **Facebook community group** to connect distance doctoral researchers in a range of disciplines, contexts, and circumstances all around the world
- **Research study** focusing on the barriers, opportunities, strategies, and successes related to doctoral research by distance
- **Book project:**
*Doctoral research by distance:
Navigating off-campus, online, hybrid,
and cross-national doctoral study*



Doctoral Research by Distance

Private group · 806 members

+ Invite



Our 'Distance Doctorates' research study

- In 2022, we launched an international online survey to capture perspectives of those who recently completed/currently undertaking, doc research by distance.
- Study included those who may be officially enrolled “by distance”, also sought to capture the experiences of also a wider range of people engaging in off-campus, online, flexible, hybrid, and cross-national modes of study.
- Participants must be enrolled in, or have recently completed, a doctorate (if already completed, graduation date no earlier than 2015)
- Must be over 18 years of age
- Survey distributed over list-servs, on social media via personal contacts.
- N=521 respondents from 42 countries; diverse fields of study



Dr Tseen Khoo
@tseenster

Are you a PhD researcher doing your degree at a distance?

We're interested in your exps and motivations! Survey - approx 30mins to do: bit.ly/DRDsurvey

Project by [@krmcchesney](#) [@jjaburford](#) [@FrickLiezal](#) and me.

Please RT and share! [#AcademicTwitter](#)
[#DistanceDoctorates](#)

SURVEY: ARE YOU A PHD RESEARCHER WHO IS STUDYING OR HAS STUDIED AT A DISTANCE?

We are an international group of researchers interested in learning about your experience of being a doctoral student studying at a distance

bit.ly/DRDsurvey

ELIGIBILITY

- Current PhD researcher at a distance
- Previous PhD researcher at a distance (completion date 2015 onwards)
- Any location / any discipline

6:32 AM · Jul 19, 2022

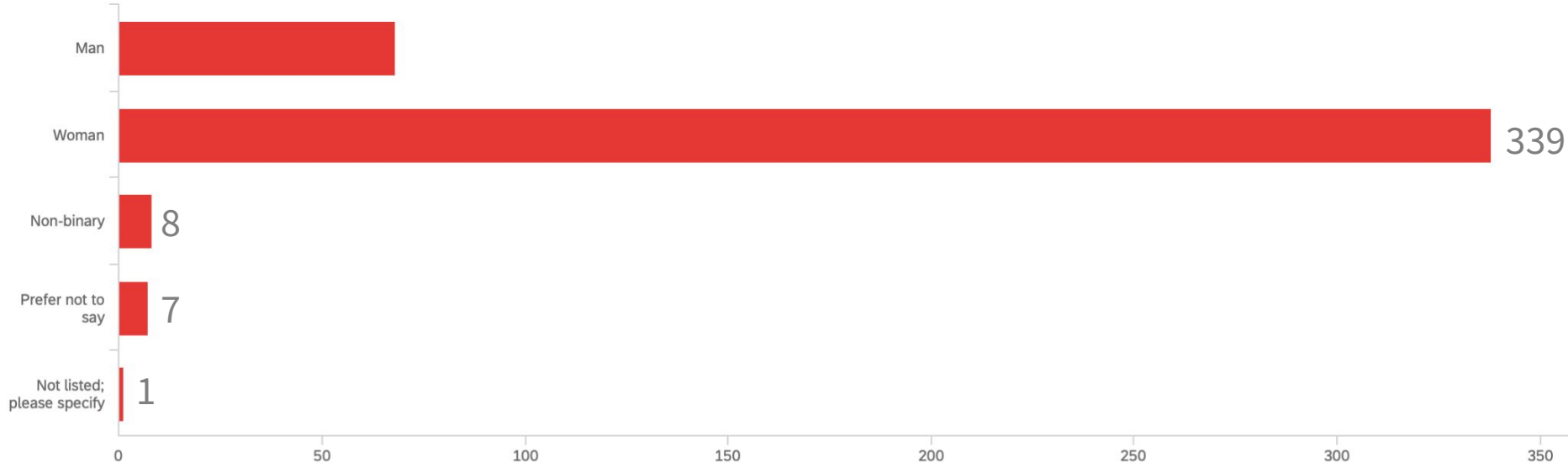
42 Retweets 5 Quote Tweets 21 Likes

Early thoughts from our data...

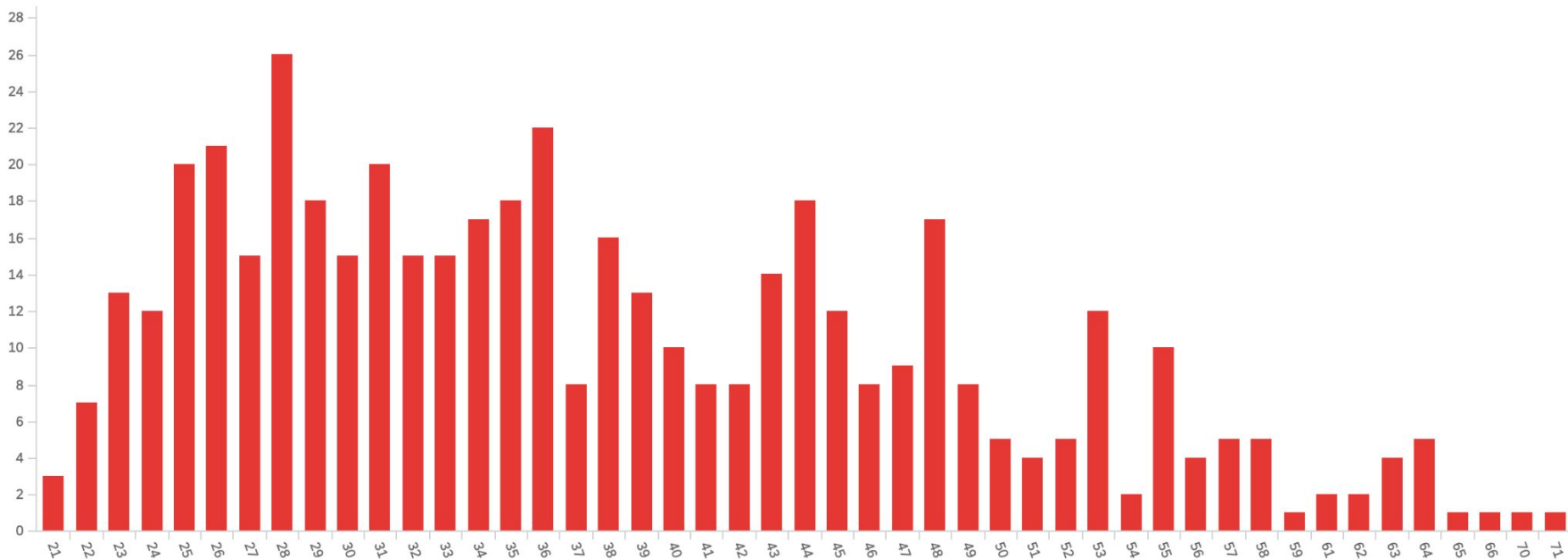
What it tells us about:

- Distance students' backgrounds
 - Gender, Age, National, Disciplinary & Institutional affiliations, Enrollment status
- Life circumstances during enrolment
- Motivations for studying via distance
 - Reasons for enrolling for a doctorate, Reasons for enrolling via distance
- Experiences of distance supervision
- Researcher development experiences
- How the COVID-19 pandemic affected their doctoral journey
- Early thoughts from qualitative questions.

Respondent backgrounds: Gender identity

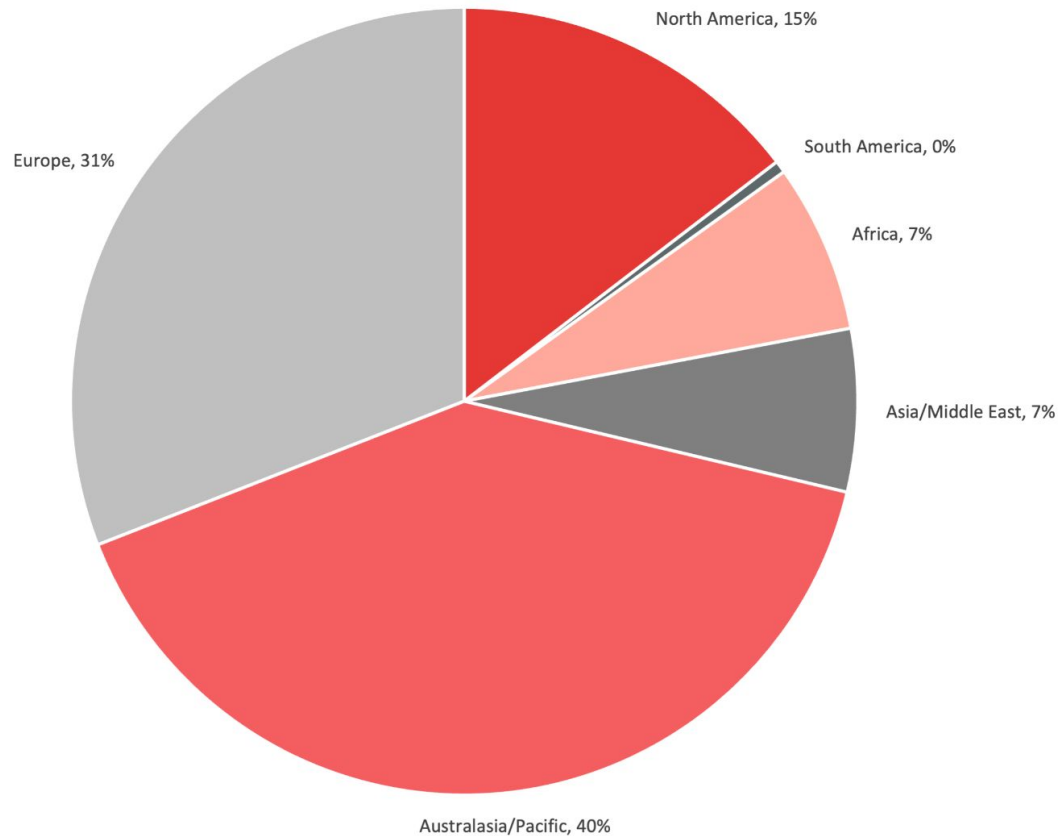


Respondent backgrounds: Age

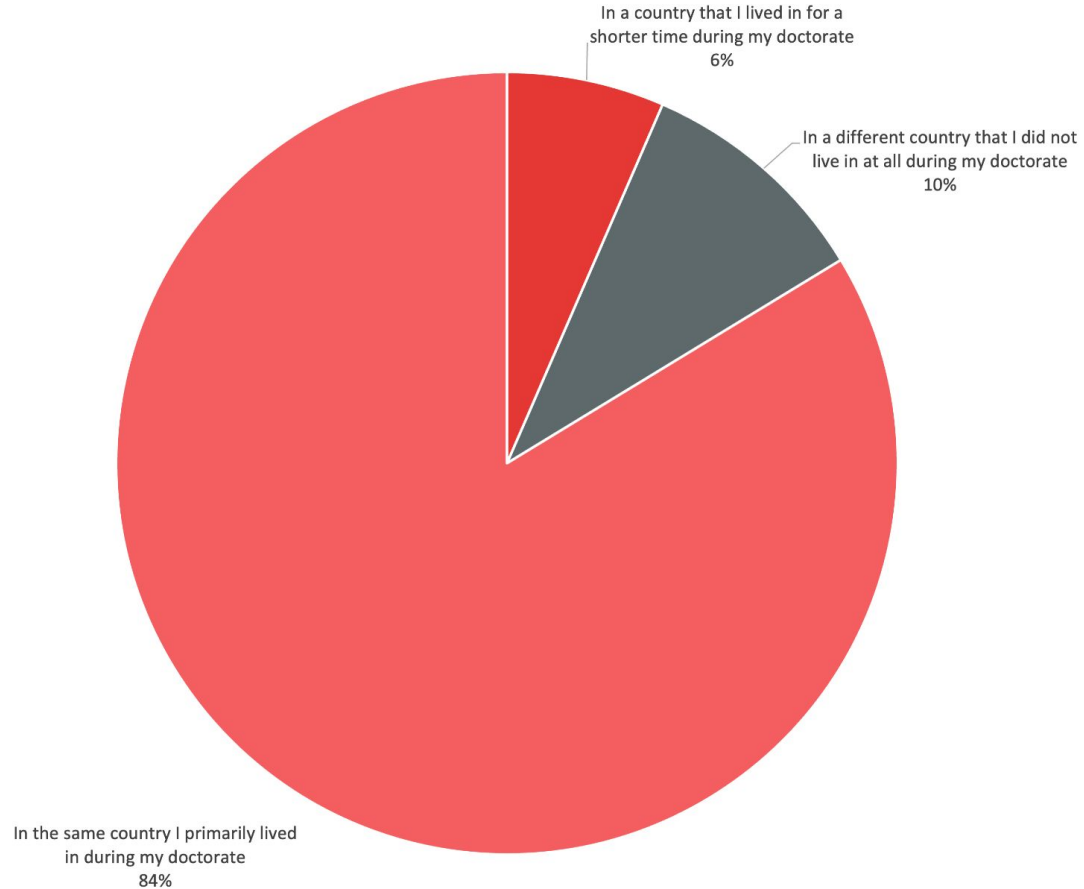


Respondent backgrounds: Country of residence

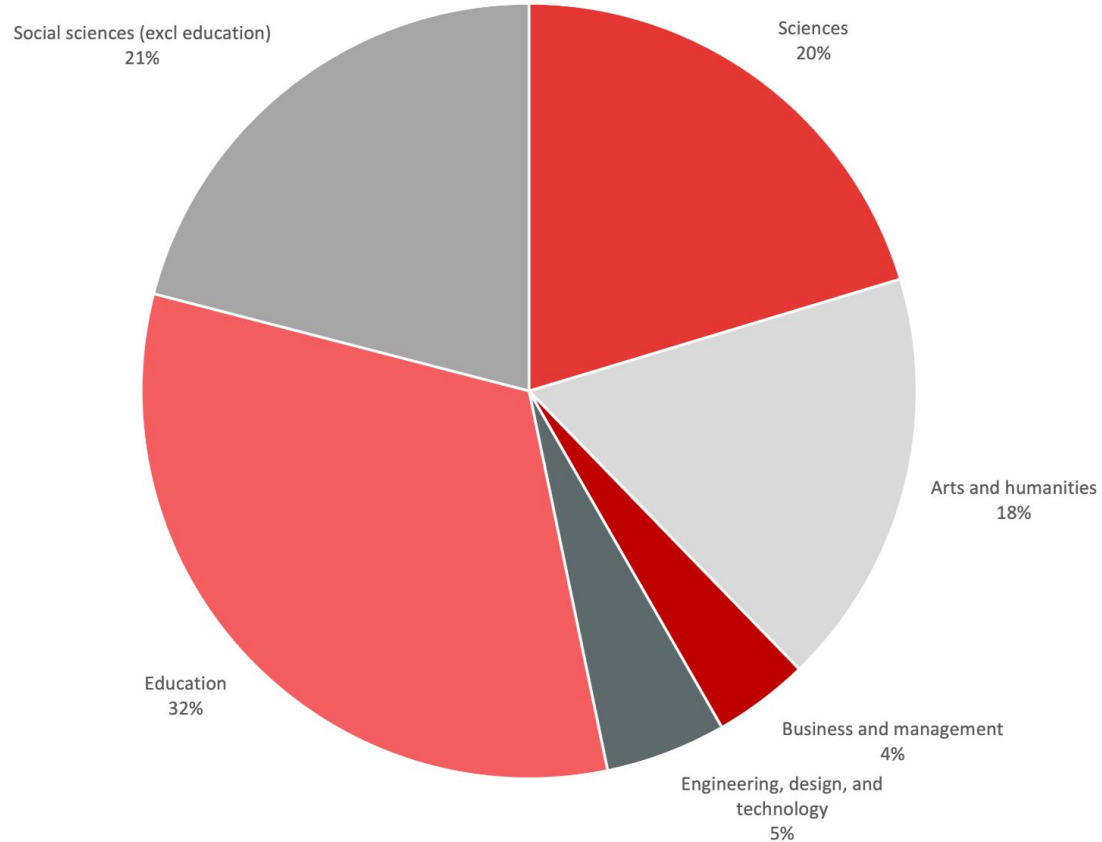
Total:
42 countries



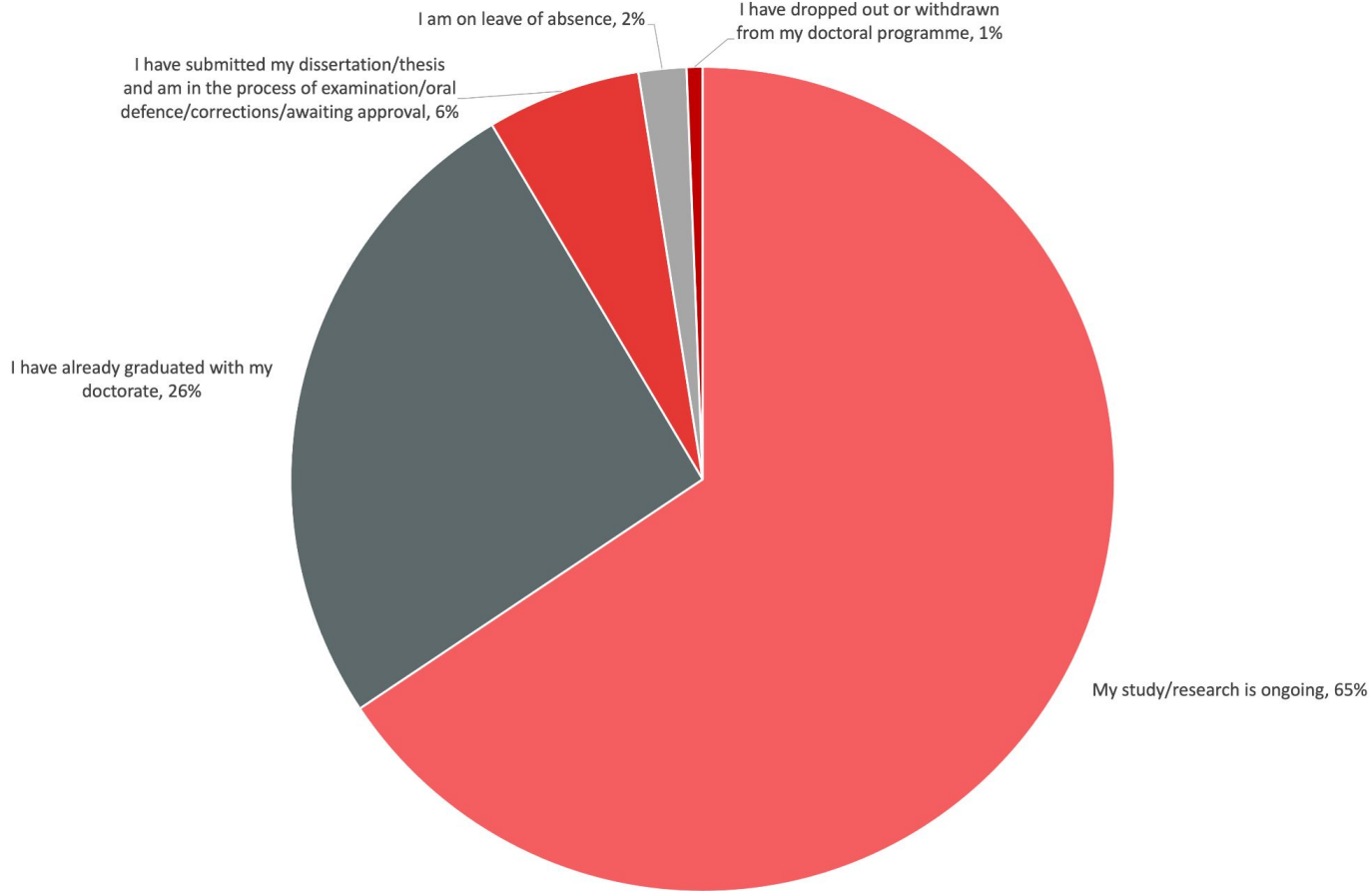
Respondent backgrounds: University vs country of residence



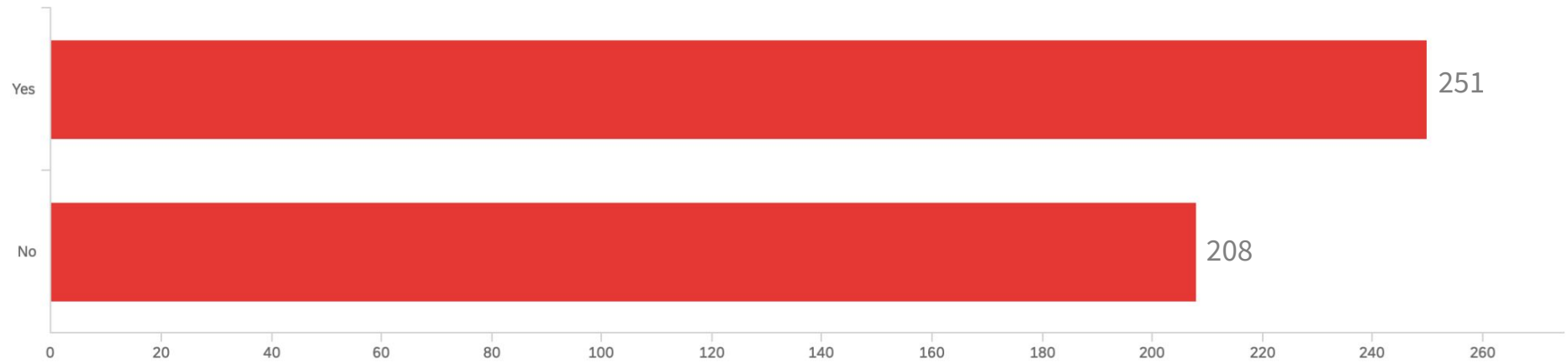
Respondent backgrounds: Disciplinary affiliation



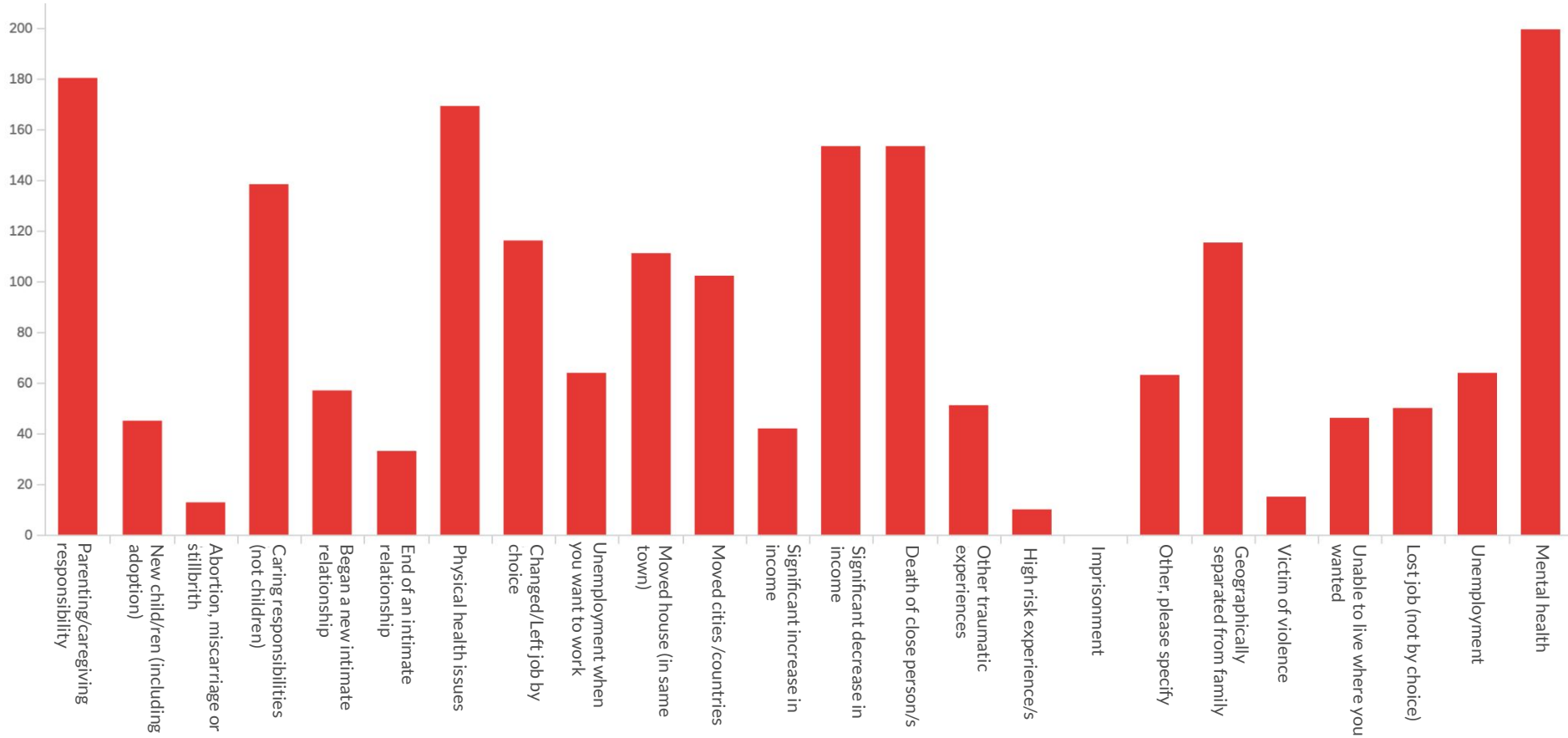
Respondent backgrounds: Current enrollment status



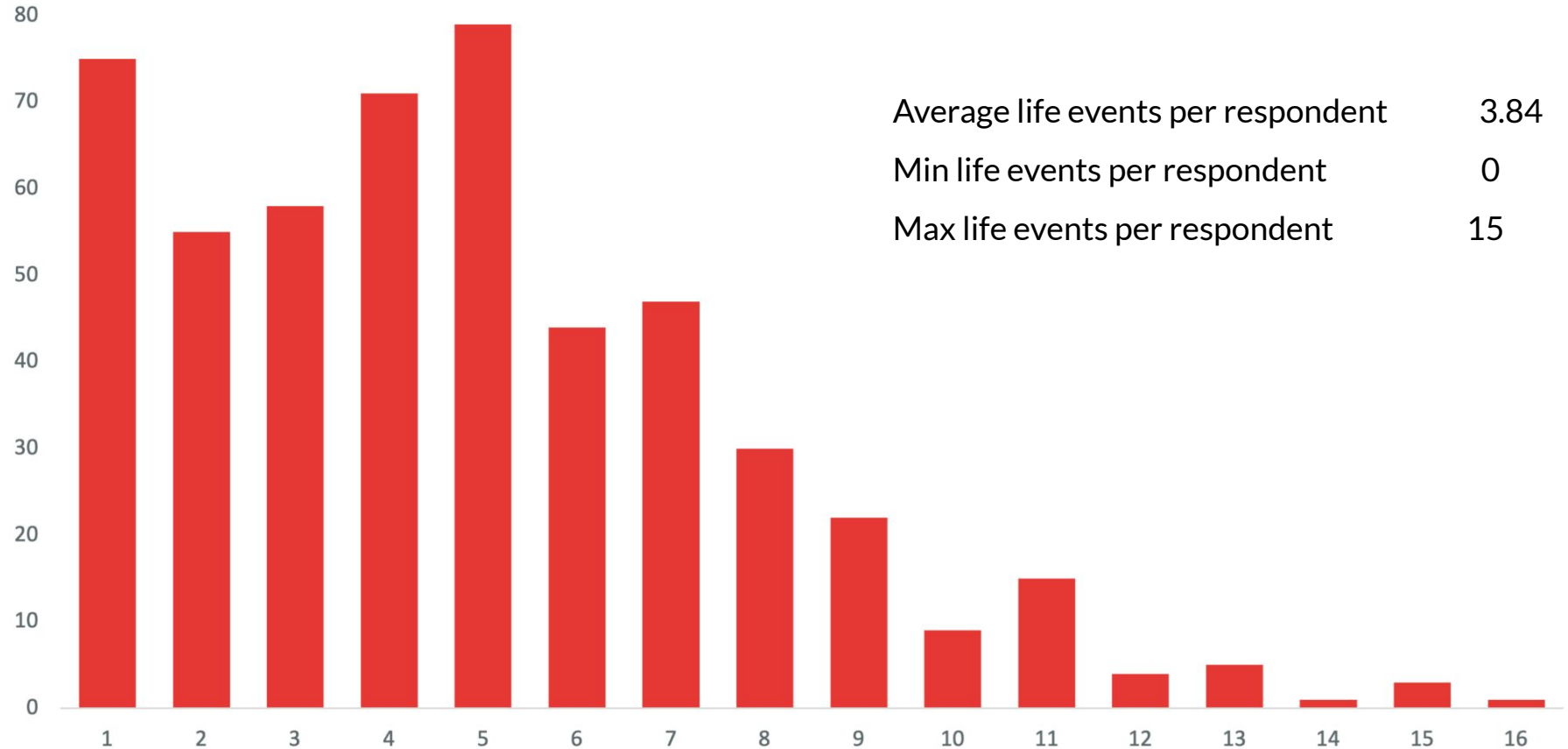
Doctorate as the first time studying by distance



Life experiences during doctorate



Life experiences during doctorate



Life experiences during doctorate (n=519)

[My] daughter (mother of a 1 year old) hospitalised interstate during COVID so we couldn't visit. She was in a medical ward for 7 weeks and was diagnosed with a lifelong condition (treatable but life altering).

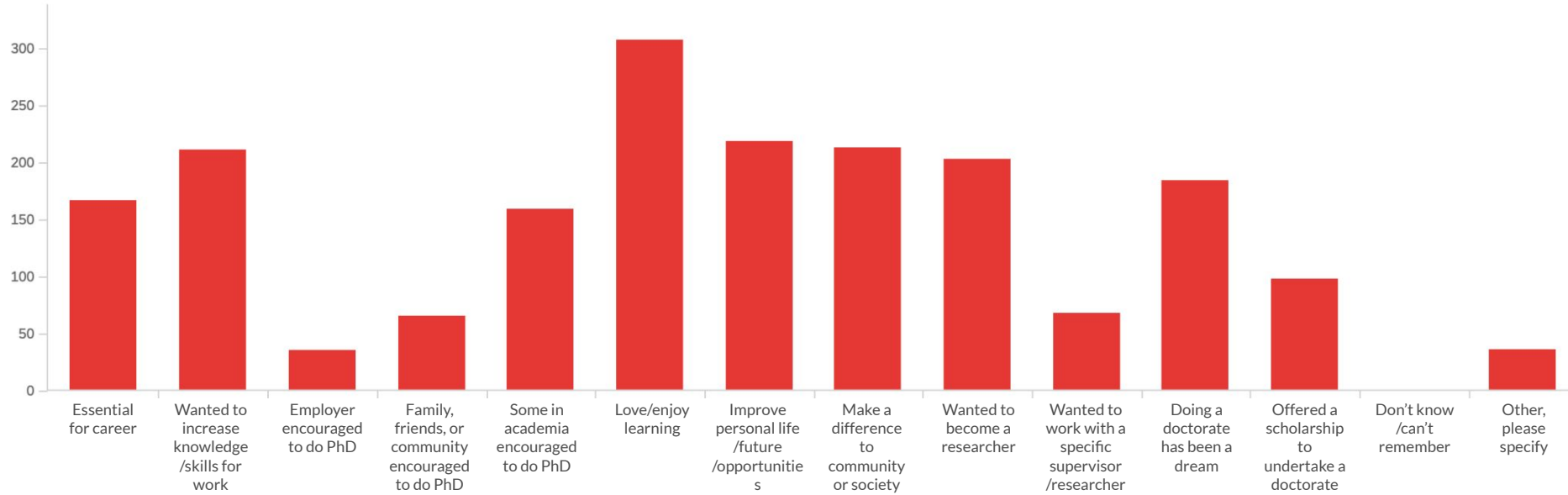
Another daughter experienced severe pre-natal anxiety and depression, and again I couldn't be with her. Postnatal was also difficult for her and the baby had several health issues.

Both my elderly parents have been in and out of hospital, sometimes staying in for periods of up to 5 weeks. My father broke his neck, he still works a farm, and he could not drive, so my sister and I had to take turns in living with them to drive them to medical appointments, and generally help them.

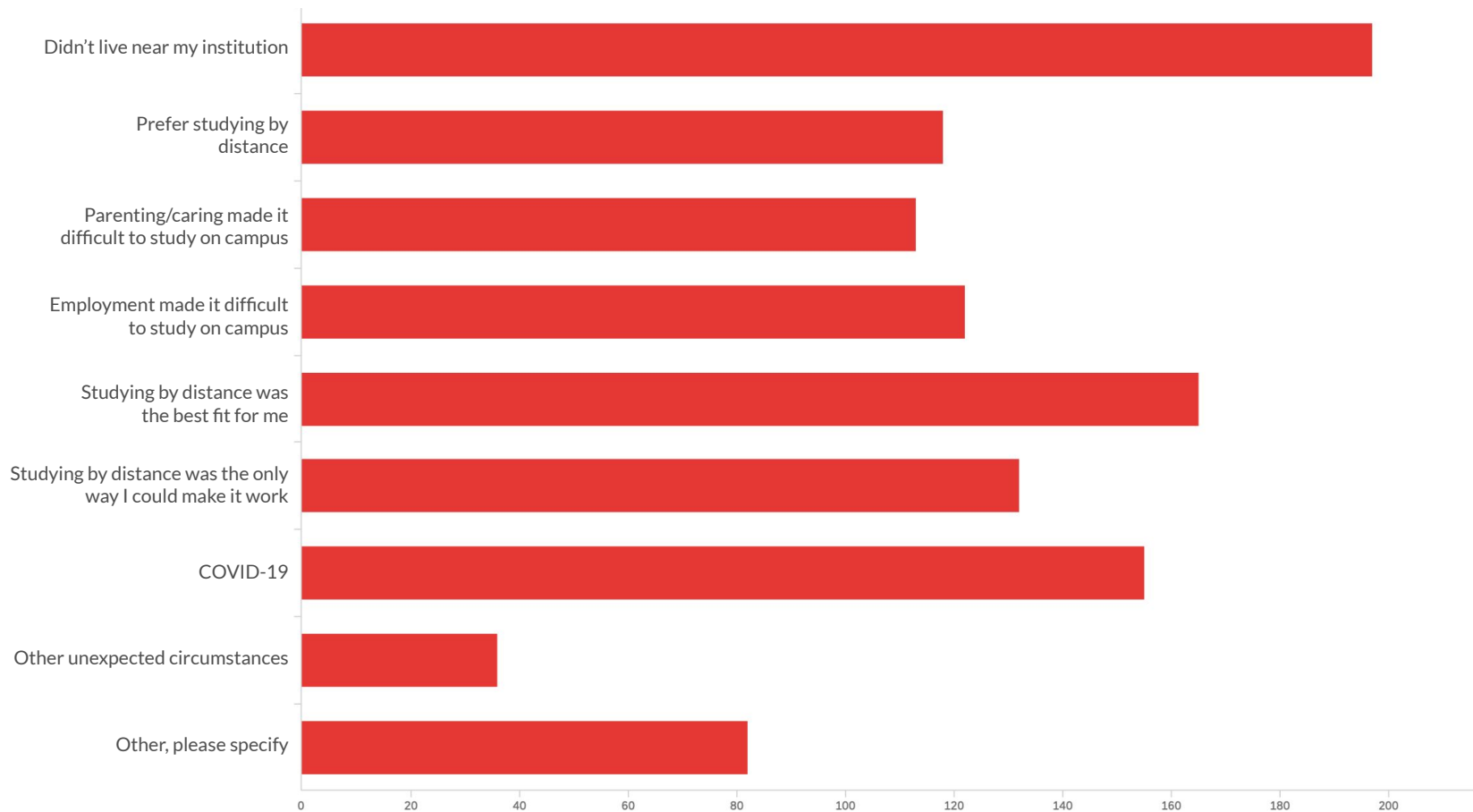
Finally, just over a month ago ... my house was flooded up to about 50cm's of water that stayed that high for about a week. I lost almost everything, books, documents, all the furniture, flooring, curtains, the floor fell through in the bathroom, I lost everything outside the house, in the sheds, the back yard, the carport, the caravan, all the furnishings and any appliance that was not on a bench.

I am still unable to visit my home, I had to move into my adult son's spare room. He saved a few books and photo's. He managed to salvage the two books that primed my idea for my research, so that's great. But I have been financially ruined due to not having flood insurance. Don't judge. I was on a single parent pension for many years, and the insurance for my area jumped after a flood event in the early 2000's, it went from \$1000pa to \$7000pa. No way a pensioner could afford that.

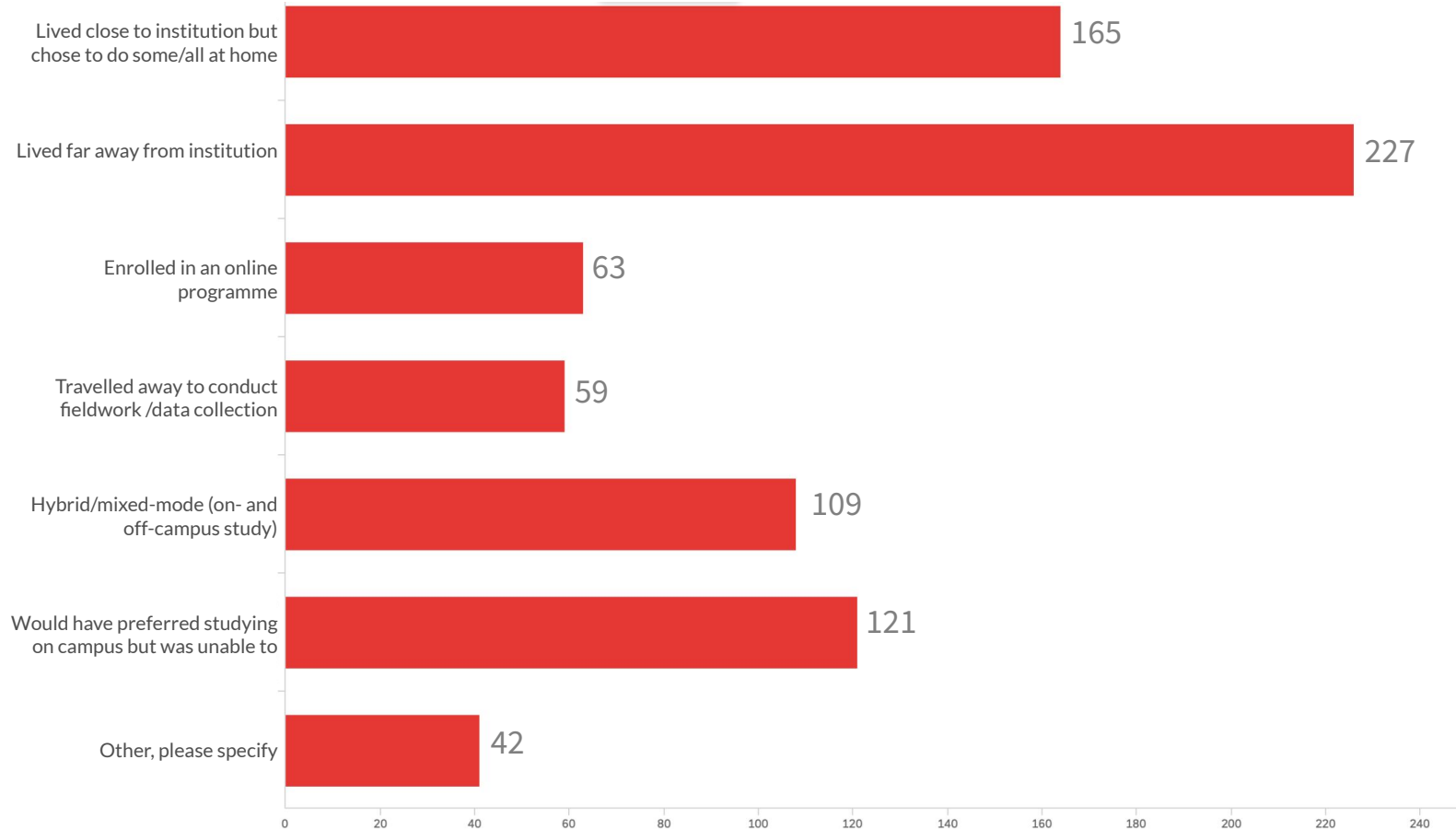
Reason/s for undertaking doctorate



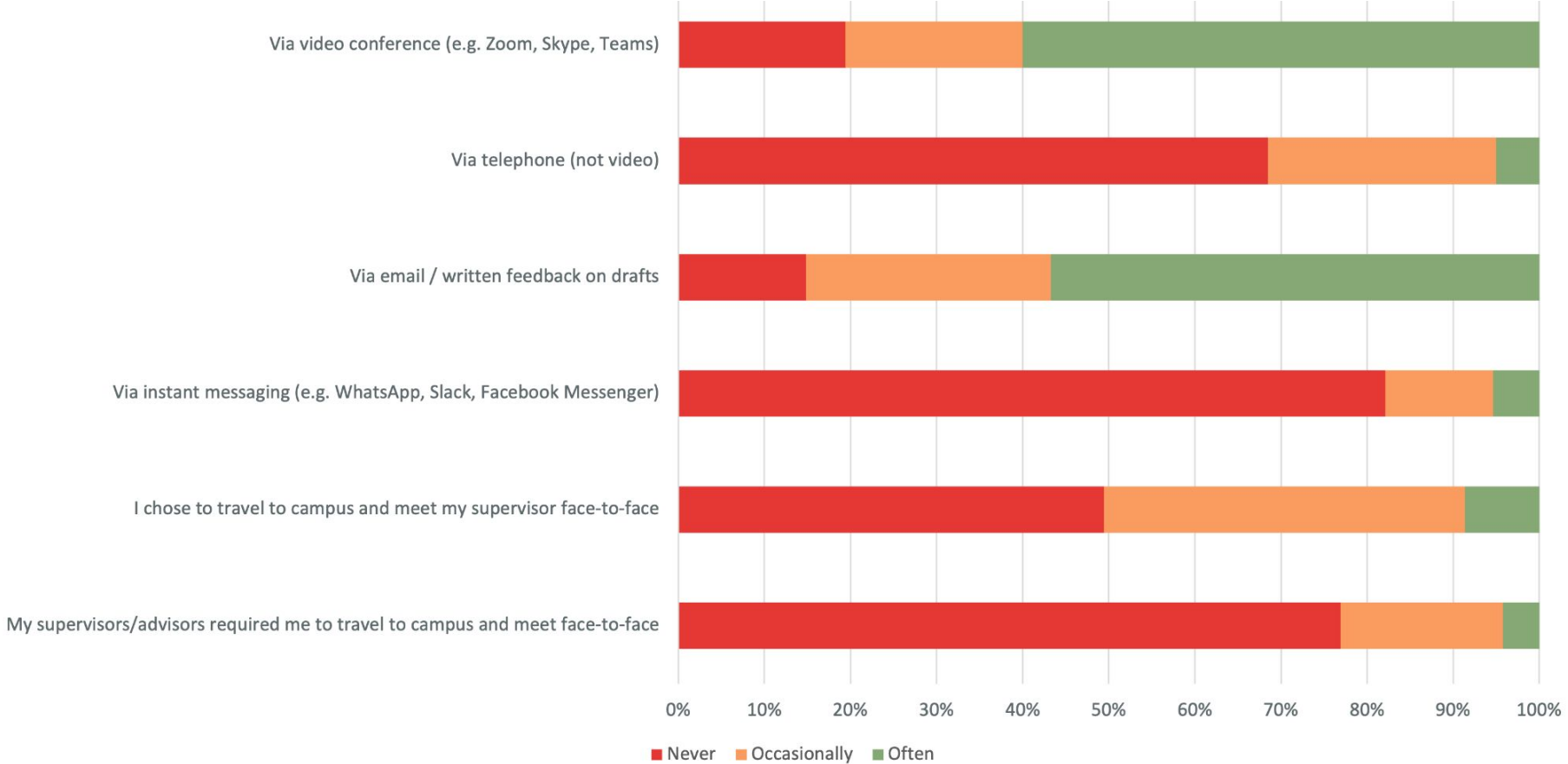
Reason/s for doctorate by distance



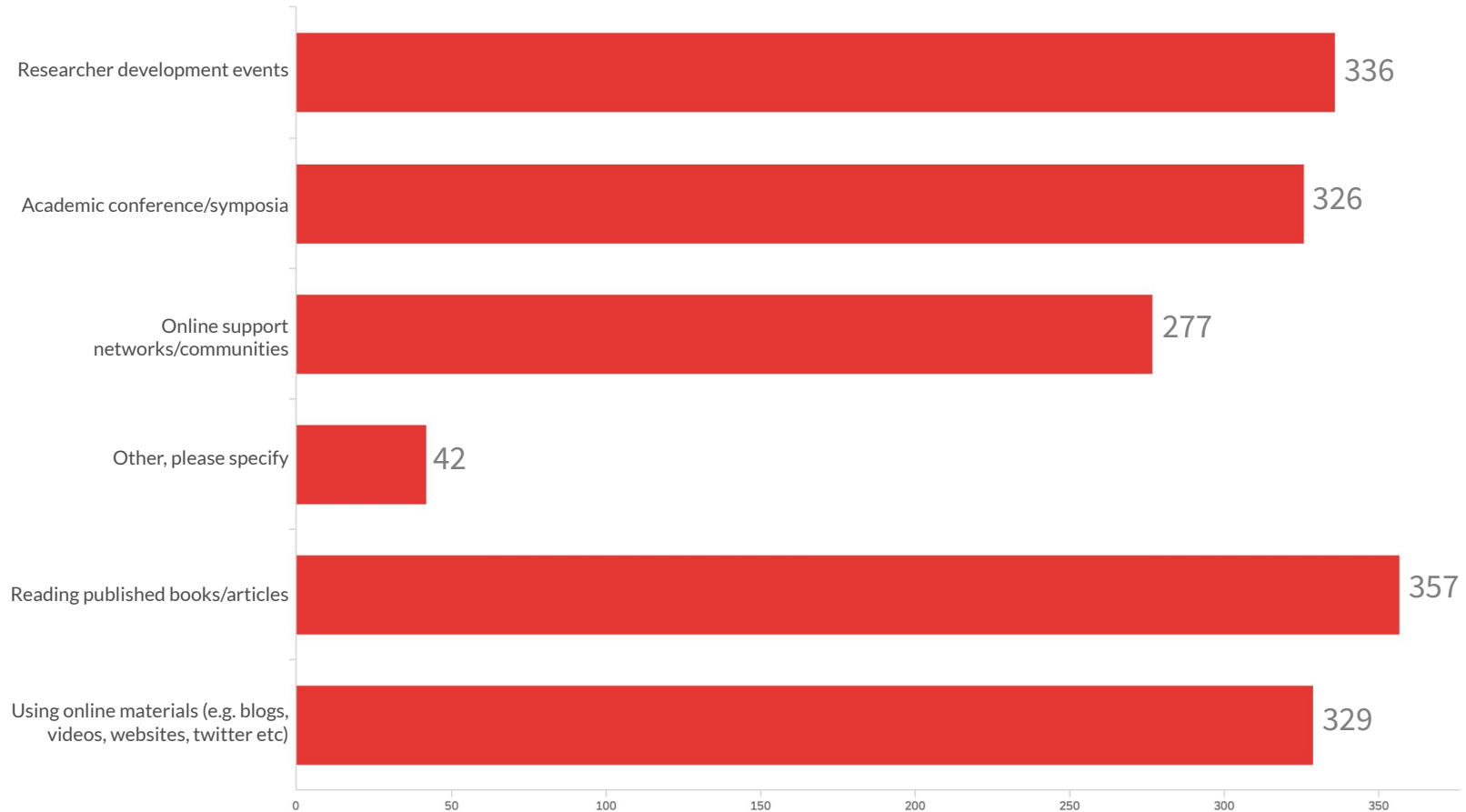
Experiences of distance



Supervision experiences

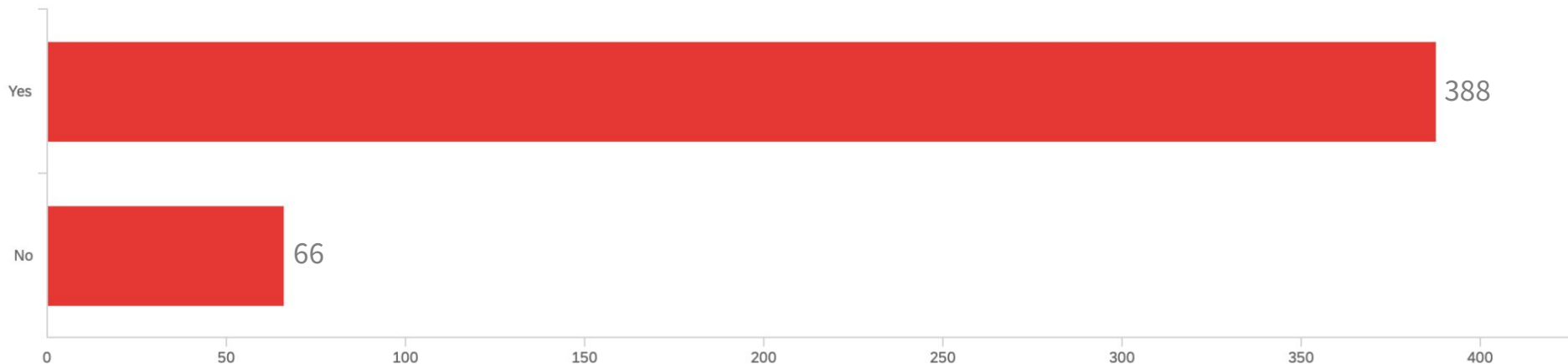


Engagement in support/learning activities

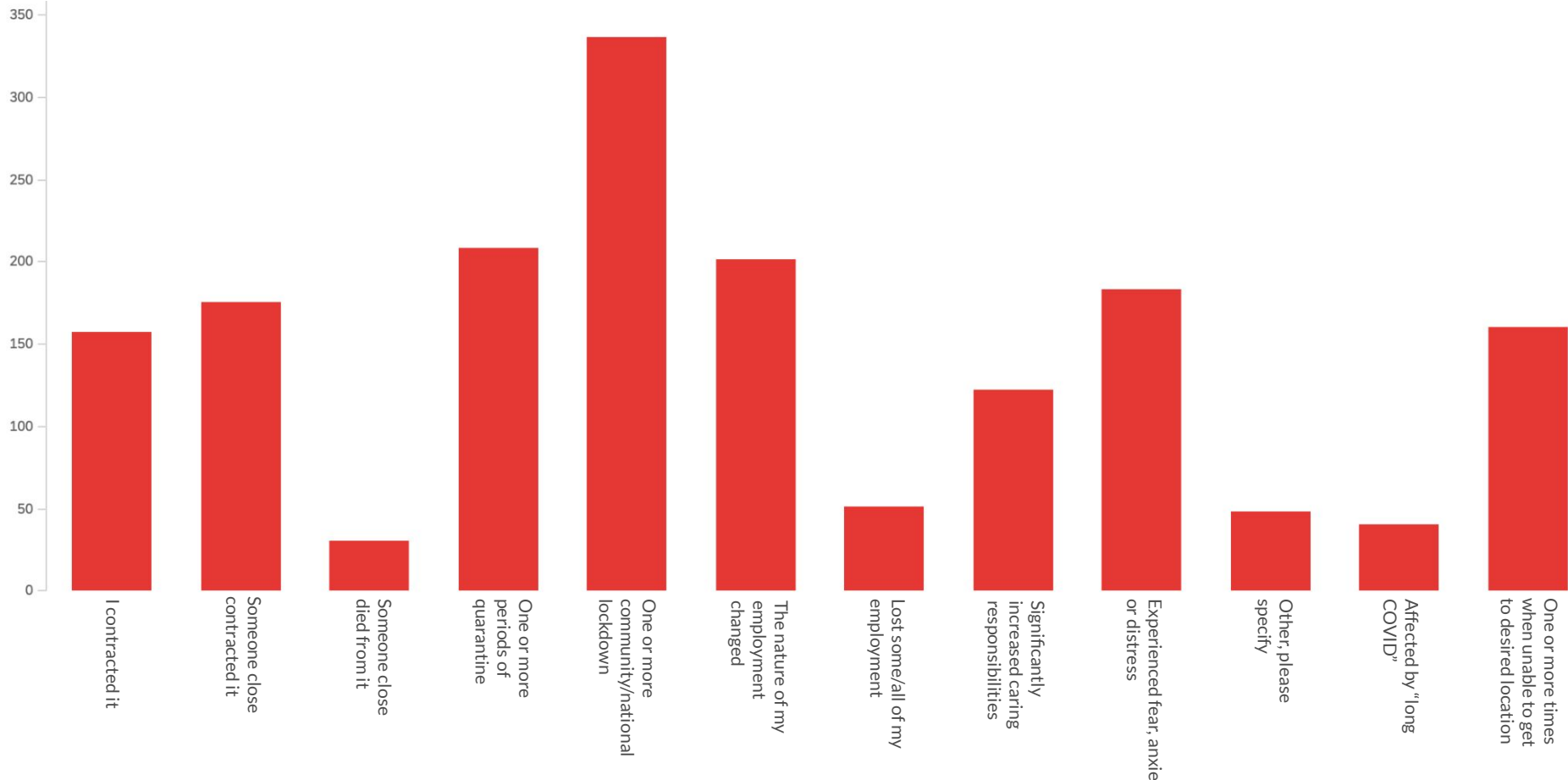


Undertaking doctorate during COVID-19 pandemic

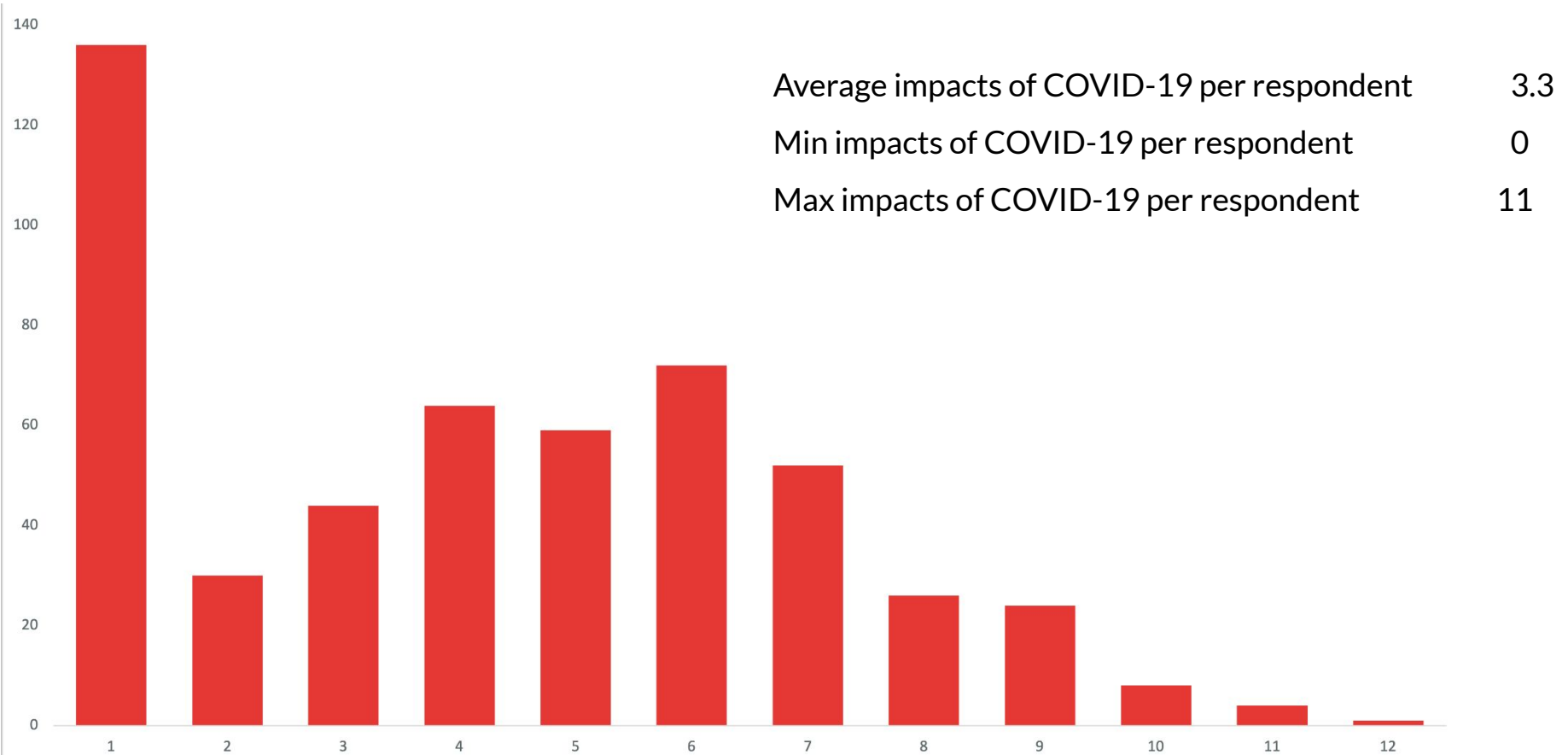
KM



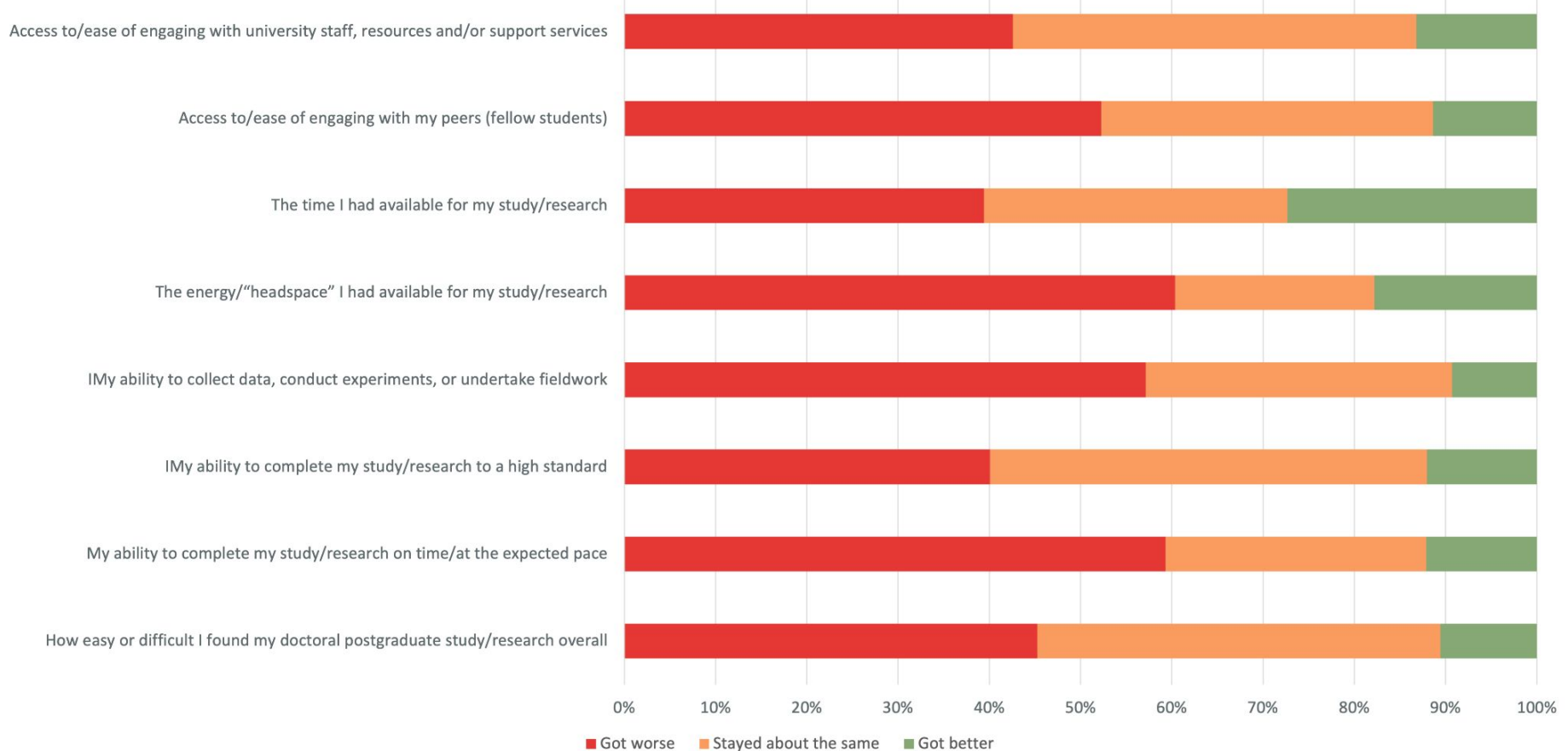
COVID-19 impact on life



COVID-19 impact on life



COVID-19 impact on doctorate



Some early qualitative impressions: Barriers

- Timezones of researcher development sessions
- No opportunity for synchronous induction/orientation
- Financial barriers (e.g. needing to stay in FT employment)
- Stress and mental health
- Lack of clear institutional policy about whether distance study is allowed and appropriate provisions for students at a distance
 - Hidden doctoral students
- Time management
 - Can't get as easily swept up in the rhythm of things on campus
 - Never switching off – always 'on'
- Limited interaction with doctoral peers
- Not knowing how to access resources at a distance
 - Technology, library
- Communication with supervisors
 - Lack of timely response (out of sight out of mind?)
 - Students can't just 'pop in' leading to more formality

“Biggest barrier is nobody to talk to, to bounce ideas around, nut out new ways of thinking. That keeps the motivation through inspiration. I'm doing an EdD and I'm still in touch with the students who were my participants, I do it for them. They want me to finish it. Otherwise I'd have quit ages ago”

Some early qualitative impressions: Strategies

- Being proactive in orientation/induction to learn systems early and how to ‘read the university’ at a distance
- Clear divisions between home time and work time (including thought about spatial arrangements)
 - Renegotiating responsibilities at home and at work
 - Reducing work time, compressed hours, ring fencing PhD time.
- Community and connection
 - Writing groups
 - Outside of institution if needed
 - Reaching out to research mentors

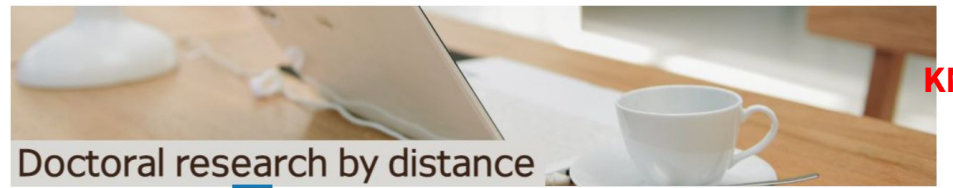
Some early qualitative impressions: Successes

- Typical academic milestones:
 - confirmation, submission, defence, graduation, publications, employment + own learning/growth
- Juggling/multitasking/balance
 - “I feel like I have been able to juggle all aspects of my life rather successfully. Caring for my kids and family, maintaining the house, working casually and getting my PhD done. It’s not always easy, and I often worry I am doing everything poorly when I stretch myself so thin but I am achieving all my goals.”
 - “Able to juggle full time PhD studies with full time work as a manager thanks to supportive employers and my ability to plan my PhD around this”
- Health & wellbeing
 - “Increased walking opportunities during the day, increased opportunity to cook healthy food as am at home, increased satisfaction with progress as I can work when I work best, and can listen to my body when I need to take a rest etc.”
- Access to doctoral study
 - “If online PhD was not an option there was no way I could do a PhD.”
 - “I don’t think I could have done it any other way. That I have finished is my success and only possible because I could be left alone to work at home.”

Key messages

1. ***Distance pathways for doctoral research should no longer be positioned as ‘second best’, or as an anomaly.***
 - a. May be a deliberate choice due to circumstances, personality, preference
 - b. May be the only way a student can engage in doctoral education
 - c. Can be rich, enabling, empowering, and successful
 - d. Should be planned for institutionally
 - e. Need to ensure equitable, quality experience for all students
 - f. Likely to continue to rise in popularity as technology and flexible work models expand
2. ***To support this shift in discourse and practice, we need to:***
 - a. Question what ‘distance’ means, now and into the future.
 - b. Understand who distance doctoral researchers are, and their unique experiences
 - c. Establish bespoke provision for distance learners as a unique community AND mainstreaming / inclusion of distance students across services offered to the wider doctoral cohort.
 - d. Raise visibility of distance cohorts and pathways, with positive and diverse representations.

What happens next?



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- We'll use the data collected to:
 - Inform academic publications and presentations about doctoral research by distance
 - Inform resources, tools, training, blog posts and other supports for distance doctoral researchers, supervisors, and institutions
 - Advocate for the large (and growing!) cohort of doctoral students not studying on-campus regularly and the possibilities of distance doctoral research
- Advice book in preparation - publication early 2024
- Follow updates on Twitter (#DistanceDoctorates & team) or our website:
<http://doctoralresearchbydistance.wordpress.com>

THANK YOU – LET'S TALK!



Selected references

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