



**DOCTORAL
STUDENT
UNION** MALMÖ

Report on the impact of the Corona pandemic for Doctoral students at Malmö University

2021-03-30

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Introduction

To understand how the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has affected doctoral candidates at Malmö University, and in order to continue to guard the quality of the doctoral education and the working conditions of PhD students at Malmö University, the Doctoral Student Union conducted a survey that was sent out to all currently active PhD students at Mau on 24/11 2020. Based on that survey, this report will pinpoint some of the issues that the DSU finds most important to monitor further. The full questions and responses can be found at the end of the document in the section 'Figures'.

The major issues related to the pandemic that the DSU sees as a result of the survey are: indications of negative effects on the overall quality of doctoral education at Malmö University, indications of increased stress and mental health issues and negative effects of delays on the PhD student body. As many as 71% of the respondents report that they have experienced symptoms of decreased mental health during the pandemic. Students report mental health issues, loneliness, stress and uncertainty. For PhD students, a group already at high risk of developing mental health issues and burnout, this is worrying. Further reported issues that need to be addressed are issues concerning the quality of doctoral education such as the lack of access to utilities and research environments, cancelled postgraduate courses and conferences, but also effects on the PhD student body from the switch to working primarily from home.

The goal of the report is threefold. First, it is meant to inform the ways in which the DSU can continue to support the doctoral candidates' rights to a high-quality doctoral education and healthy work environment. Secondly, the report also aims to add information on the nature of intangible delays to inform ongoing discussions about these delays. Finally, the report aims to show our doctoral colleagues that they are not alone in experiencing the effects of the pandemic.

Background

The survey was sent out to all (ca. 270) active doctoral students at the University in November 2020. The poll resulted in a total of 62 responses. This should be contextualized with the fact that the Doctoral Student Union had 85 paying members at the time of the survey. We as a doctoral student union represent all PhD students at Malmö University, but the number of paying members of the DSU might be an indication of what level of involvement is to be expected from the PhD student body. The share of respondents from each faculty compared with the total PhD student body per faculty differs, our numbers can unfortunately not make this justice since the total number of PhD students per faculty varies.

Based on the background questions, we can also see that how far the PhD students have progressed in their doctoral education might have affected their motivation to respond to the survey. 80.6% of the respondents stated that they had completed between 20% and 80% (fig 2) of their doctoral education and there were few answers from students that were at the very end or the beginning of their research education.

Quality of research education under pressure

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the survey is that the quality of doctoral education is under pressure in different ways. Surprisingly, one of the most significant challenges seems to lie in a perceived deterioration of supervisory support. When it comes to access to supervision, 43% of the respondents indicate a negative impact or strong negative impact (figure 16). With regards to the quality of the supervision, 42% of the respondents indicate a negative (35.5%) or a strongly negative (6.5%) impact from the pandemic (figure 17).

In each of the questions, half of the respondents indicate neither positive nor negative impact. None of the respondents indicated any positive impact.

The numbers are understandable from the perspective that supervisors themselves are likely also under increased stress and added working load from suboptimal conditions at this moment in time. In addition, the supervisors have an increasing workload in their responsibilities as supervisors, guiding their PhD students in documenting delays, replanning research, but also being the PhD students' closest research network. Rather than arguing for pushing our supervisory colleagues and mentors past their capabilities, we strongly suggest that the university needs to find ways to support supervisors in this situation. This would include both collegial and formal support, as well as making sure that the supervisors have enough funds to put in the extra work that might be needed in order to encounter the challenges of the pandemic.

When asked how respondents expect the corona pandemic to impact the quality of their research, a combination of issues best summarized as 'the loss of research environment' stands out. For example, half of the respondents indicate either that they are receiving less feedback from peers, or, that the ability to stay in touch with the scientific network has suffered (figure 13). When asked to describe the way the pandemic has impacted their research education, a third of the respondents indicate lack of access to facilities, half have had to cancel visits to other universities and almost two thirds have been faced with cancelled or postponed conferences (figure 12).

The lack of a research environment impacts the quality of the education, but in the long run also hinders the possibilities to build networks and establish relationships that might be beneficial for future career development. Whilst this lack of network can be temporarily tolerated, we would like to remind the reader that, in terms of duration, the pandemic measures already cover 25% of the assigned time of a Swedish doctoral education.

Health issues

Already prior to the pandemic, Doctoral students have been shown to be at higher risk for developing mental health issues and stress related illnesses that lead to sick leave, which in turn increases the risk for long term sick leave or dropping out (Doktorandspegeln). This issue has previously been addressed by Mau doctoral students in an open letter sent to the Malmö University management. A national survey of the impact of the Corona pandemic on PhD students made by the SFS-DK during the spring of 2020 showed that the PhD students during the current pandemic have experienced a deterioration in their mental health and an increase in stress levels (SFS-DK report, 2020-08). In SFS-DK's survey, PhD students expressed that they are worried they will not finish on time, that they will be unable to produce the research needed for graduation and that they find themselves isolated.

These findings are in line with the responses in the survey performed at Malmö University. What is most concerning for DSU Malmö are the number of responses that indicate negative effects on the doctoral students' mental health, 71% of the respondents report that they have experienced symptoms of decreased mental health during the pandemic (figure 19). There is also a strong indication that a lot of PhD students find it more difficult to manage work-life balance, as 67.7% of the respondents report a negative or a strong negative impact on their work- life balance (figure 18). This can be compared to only 16.1% of the respondents that report a positive or a strong positive impact on work life balance.

Based on the answers in the survey, we consider the results that indicate decreased mental health to be an effect of several different aspects combined: a lack of support given to PhD students, not being able to work within a scientific environment/community, the induced stress from delays and insecurity about possible prolongations. In this context we want to add that in our responses, as many as 30% of the respondents report that they have not received any information from the university about the possibilities to apply for prolongation and in addition approximately 60% of the respondents are either negative to, or unsure of, whether the information given is useful (figures 7, 8). We in the DSU know that information *has* been given out. The guidelines for special grounds for the extension of doctoral studentship due to COVID-19 (Ref. no. UTB

2020/412) was e-mailed to doctoral students after this survey was performed, on 2021-01-29, however the DSU suggests that the document needs to be made easily available on a central webpage together with all other information specifically aimed at the doctoral students regarding the pandemic. Due to how the previous information appears to have been received we consider the spread of information, and communication with PhD students to be a very important area to continue to follow up from the University's side. Especially since the insecurity of how to handle the current situation most likely constitutes additional stress and mental health issues to an already difficult situation.

In an open answer question the respondents were asked to expand on experienced mental health issues related to the corona pandemic. The quotes below are examples of issues communicated in the responses, all other comments can be found in the appendix. There was an emphasis on feelings of depression, anxiety, increased stress and issues concerning isolation and the lack of belonging.

“Loneliness and lack of belonging”

“a killing loneliness”

“I've been wondering why I'm doing research at all, not really seeing the point”.

“Frequent anxiety attacks”

“Not that it has become mental issues, but feeling lonely and out of my context”

“mild depression, fatigue”

“Loneliness and heightened social anxiety”

“More tired and more stressed”

Free text question for additional issues not addressed by the survey

As a way to pick up on issues that we might not have been aware of beforehand, we posed a free text question at the end of the survey where the respondents had the opportunity to expand on

issues they found not to have been sufficiently covered in the survey. The quotes below are some of the issues communicated in the responses (all responses can be found in the appendix). The emphasis in the answers was on insecurities about delays and the negative effects from working from home. Working from home is perceived as problematic regarding issues with an improper work environment at home, the lack of a research community and the aspect of isolation. The issues with delays are also multifaceted, both stress for those who know that they will be delayed but also insecurities and questions about the University's assessments of delays. The following comments on perceived issues related to the pandemic were left by doctoral students in free text within the open question:

Delays:

"Uncertainty about prolongation"

"Delayed clinical study is the major impact"

"General confusing communication with doctoral students. Why is there not one place where doctoral students can access information about, most importantly, extensions? Also, how do we know that the process of decisions on extensions will be transparent?"

"For me it is frustrating that the "softer" values seem to not be taken into account in the prolongation process"

Lack of community:

"As a new PhD student it has been pretty hard to enter a community only via Zoom, it has been difficult to get to know people and as a consequence"

"As PhD students we typically do not have as many meetings with other staff, which means that I have felt very "out of the loop" of what is going on"

"Working from home has hindered me from being in a research environment, miss having "scientific" discussions"

Physical workspace:

"I don't have an appropriate workspace at home"

"Physical neck and arm pains caused by the lack of proper office furniture and equipment at home. I can't afford it, and I don't have room for it at home"

“People with children. It is hard to work/focus on working and have a good working flow when children need to stay at home more than expected due to mild symptoms”

Tangible and intangible delays

As shown in the survey, 68.1% of the responding doctoral students estimate that they will be delayed to some extent, (figure 10). This is to be compared to only 14.5% of the respondents that report that they will not be delayed at all. In a recent report made by the SFS doctoral committee (SFS-DK, 2021) they stress that almost a year has now passed where there has been a lack of access to research environments, lack of information combined with overall increased stress and isolation. Their suggestions are two folded, first make sure to give prolongations to those delayed, but also, to take measures in order to avoid an accumulation of further delays.

Some of the delays that affect doctoral students can be directly related to easily documented causes, such as cancelled or postponed conferences, doctoral courses, field work, or lack of access to necessary research facilities. In addition, 66.1 % of the respondents report that they will have to make changes to their research projects, out of which 22.6% report that they will have to make significant changes (figure 11). These factors are pretty straightforward and are most likely easy to document in an ISP. There are however additional factors that can cause delays that are not as easy to quantify, and those are what we call *intangible delays*. Some of the intangible delays that this survey managed to show concerns difficulties working from home (reported by 58.1% of respondents, figure 12), and that teaching takes up more time than prior to the pandemic (reported by 46.8% of the respondents, figure 12). 41.9% of the respondents mention that the quality of their doctoral education has been negatively impacted. (figure 16) One third (32.3%) has had collaboration with external partners being hindered (figure12). Not to forget the open answer questions that heavily stress the loss of a research community, added stress and isolation, and improper work environments.

Most doctoral students both teach and do their own research. The lack of being in touch with a research community or decreased supervision may also cause the research process to take more

time. The bottom line is that the research education and the doctoral students research projects are affected by all aspects of the PhD students' work. Regardless of whether the tasks taking up more time are related to teaching or due to lack of resources doing research, any extra time taken will eventually come out of the doctoral students' research projects. This adds stress to the doctoral students and a very real risk of both lowering the quality of research output and the risk of increasing the number of PhD students that will not complete their research projects in time or even finish at all.

All these small delays caused by not having access to sufficient workspaces, lack of research network, added stress, added workload to replan, reschedule and record delays in detail, add up. These delays have severe consequences due to their accumulative nature, but they are to their nature difficult to document in an ISP and even more difficult to prove in regards to possible prolongations. At the same time doctoral students are required to motivate and account for the specifics of all delays which in reality may be very difficult to prove let alone account for.

In many ways doctoral students face the same struggles of interruptions, delays and stress caused by the pandemic as other researchers and teachers. The crucial difference however is that as a doctoral student your time is limited, our contracts will end and we need to produce our research now.

Suggested measures

Information:

- The University needs to continue to monitor how the guidelines on documenting delays work.
- The University should provide more thorough information on how intangible delays can be addressed. Both from a preventative point of view but also from the perspective of how to document and include them in an application for prolongation.

- All information should be made easily accessible and available, in both in English and Swedish. The need for a central source with updated links and information for PhD students is supported in the survey from SFS-DK (Delays of doctoral education due to the corona pandemic 2021-03) and SFS and ST (Hur mår doktoranden, 2021-03).

Support for preventing negative stress:

- The University should consider possible actions for preventing the development of negative stress in doctoral students due to the pandemic, such as increased efforts to maintain research environments and providing workshops on how to better structure the day when working from home.

Prolongations:

- The University needs to address how to make sure that the process of assessing prolongations will be fair and equal.
- We suggest that the university allocates central funds explicitly for prolongation of contracts of doctoral students affected by delays due to the pandemic. All doctoral students should have equal access to prolongation and not be dependent on their department's respective research budget.
- Doctoral students' increased teaching burden due to the pandemic should be documented in the ISP and compensated for just as other delays.

Supervision

- The increased responsibilities of the supervisors should be acknowledged and compensated for. The University should also consider providing support to help supervisors in their important role of guiding their PhD students with issues concerning the pandemic and its effect.

Signed by the 2021 board of the Malmö Doctoral Student Union:

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Further reading

SFS Doctoral Committee's report: Consequences for Doctoral students due to the corona pandemic. August 2020

<https://sfs.se/new-report-consequences-for-doctoral-students-due-to-the-corona-pandemic/>

SFS Doctoral Committee's report: Delays of doctoral education due to the corona pandemic. March 2021

<https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SFS-Delays-of-doctoral-education-due-to-the-corona-pandemic-2021-03-08.pdf>

Doktorand Spegeln: A national survey from 2016 by UKÄ about doctoral student's situation

<https://www.uka.se/download/18.67d7db0e1598fa32b7fadbc6/1487841858377/rapport-2016-12-08-doktorandspegeln-doktoranders-studiesituation.pdf>

“Hur mår doktoranden” a survey from 2012 by ST and SFS.

<https://st.org/medlemskap/doktorand/doktoranders-villkor>

“Hur mår doktoranden” a report made by ST and SFS-DK, 2021 (based on a survey from 2020).

<https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rapport-hur-ma%CC%8Ar-doktoranden.pdf>

About doctoral student's mental health: An article in Universitetsläraren.

<https://universitetslararen.se/2019/11/21/doktorandernas-valfard-en-fraga-om-hallbarhet/>

“We are not working from home, we're at home during a crisis trying to work”

<https://www.doktorandkaren.se/2020/04/the-doctoral-student-union-endorses-the-open-letter-to-extend-phd-contracts/>

Figures

Free text answers:

The only changes made are spelling errors and information that might lead to identifying the responder.

Do you wish to clarify how the information [regarding the pandemic] received was helpful or not?

Total: 16 responses

1. Bra att veta att möjligheten finns.
2. We have been advised to record the disruptions and work time lost due to the pandemic but there has been no commitment to an extension of the contract.
3. I received information but there seem to be very unclear on how to actual get an extension and for how long. In other words, if it's about only getting a week in the end of your PhD, then I think the extension is of little help because the pandemic has left traces during a very long time.
4. The information has been very unclear, and it took a long time to figure out that doctoral students who have research projects that cannot be conducted during a pandemic should rethink their research and even change methods, instead of just waiting for things to get better. Even if this became obvious after a while it was not clearly communicated. Also, supervisors, examiners and prefects have been giving different information, not knowing information or have stressed different aspects of information, and for me it is still unclear who I should listen to.
5. It is a question of how The extension Will be managed in the future, so today I don't know IF I Will get an extension or not.
6. Very vague information from the University side.
7. I think, the information was too vague. It is not clear the eligibility conditions for extension and what counts as delay.
8. It was said there will be no extension.
9. It seems to be a long and hard process where we have to justify why we would need more time and I feel that they would reject many reasons.
10. no

11. That it was important to register any delays in the ISP

12. It was not very helpful since it leaves it up to the individual to pursue an extension. I believe every Ph.D. more or less needs an extension; in my case, I can only work from home some weekdays between 9-16.00 and 21.30 - X.

13. Very unclear how decisions regarding extension of contracts will be made, when, and why we can only apply for this towards the end of our PhDs (causing more uncertainty). Also subject to discretion as it will be on a case-by-case basis, whereas everyone has been affected by this situation, although to varying degrees.

14. I do not think it is helpful to simply be informed that we can apply for an extension at the end of our studies. Questions and insecurities arise as to "when is that exactly?" "Should I plan my work as if it will be prolonged or not?" "Should I change my plans in terms of how much and when I do fieldwork and not?" etc., etc. These uncertainties in turn creates extra stress that worsens PhDs working environment.

15. it is nice to know that something is going on but probably the compensation will be poor in relation to what has been delayed and slowed down.

16. I do not remember, but I think only the DSU shared this information

**Have you experienced other symptoms of issues related to your mental health?
Please explain briefly.**

Total: 20 responses

1. Isolering. Nedstämdhet.

2. An increase in levels of anxiety and depression, a pre-existing condition re-triggered and intensified due to the pandemic

3. Loneliness and lack of belonging

4. a killing loneliness

5. I feel sad and alone in zoom because people don't give you any eye contact, looking elsewhere or seem super bored.

6. I've been wondering why I'm doing research at all, not really seeing the point.

7. I have been having strong anxiety attacks including severe stress induced stomach problems, which ruined my quality of life.
8. Yes because of personal trauma (not related to Covid)
9. It can be lonely working from home
10. Feel like you're not doing enough work but also stressed about going into work, being on public transport, etc.
11. Frequent anxiety attacks
12. No
13. Not that it has become mental issues, but feeling lonely and out of my context
14. difficulty sleeping, as well as blurry vision due to screen time, my eye sight has been negatively and strongly affected
15. mild depression, fatigue
16. Loneliness and heightened social anxiety
17. Chest pain, anxiety, insecurity
18. NA
19. More tired and more stressed
20. Actually, I think only difficulty focusing temporarily. In my case, I think that Covid-19 has impacted my work-life balance similar to how it has affected other fields, nothing specific to being a PhD student.

Did you experience any other issues that were not covered in this survey, but you wish to bring to our attention? Please elaborate here.

Total: 14 responses

- 1-2. Uncertainty about prolongation (two respondents gave this answer)
- 3-4. Delayed clinical study is the major impact (two respondents gave this answer)
5. As a new PhD student it has been pretty hard to enter a community only via Zoom, it has been difficult to get to know people and as a consequence I've had trouble picking supervisors.

6. As PhD students we typically do not have as many meetings with other staff, which means that I have felt very "out of the loop" of what is going on at the faculty/institution and unconnected. While there have been coffee meetings scheduled over zoom, it is more of a possibility for social connection.

7. General confusing communication with doctoral students. Why is there not one place where doctoral students can access information about, most importantly, extensions? Also, how do we know that the process of decisions on extensions will be transparent?

8. I don't have an appropriate workspace at home, and have gotten back issues during this time

9. In summer/early autumn 2021 I'm supposed to collect data in [xxxxx] setting. [xxxxx] has stated that no new studies are allowed due to Covid-19. I don't know how this will affect me yet but possibly will I have to redesign my thesis and/or apply for a new ethical approval and try to recruit participant outside of the [xxxx].

10. For me it is frustrating that the "softer" values seem to not be taken into account in the prolongation process. The mere existence of the pandemic puts pressure and stress on all PhDs I presume, which definitely affects one's ability to concentrate. The transition period to home/digital work has to do with one's own writing process too, not only with teaching. Physically I do not have access to good chairs/screens etc., which should also be taken into account.

11. Loneliness!

12. Physical neck and arm pains caused by the lack of proper office furniture and equipment at home. I can't afford it, and I don't have room for it at home.

13. People with children. It is hard to work/focus on working and have a good working flow when children need to stay at home more than expected due to mild symptoms.

14. Working from home has hindered me from being in a research environment, miss having "scientific" discussions.

Graphs

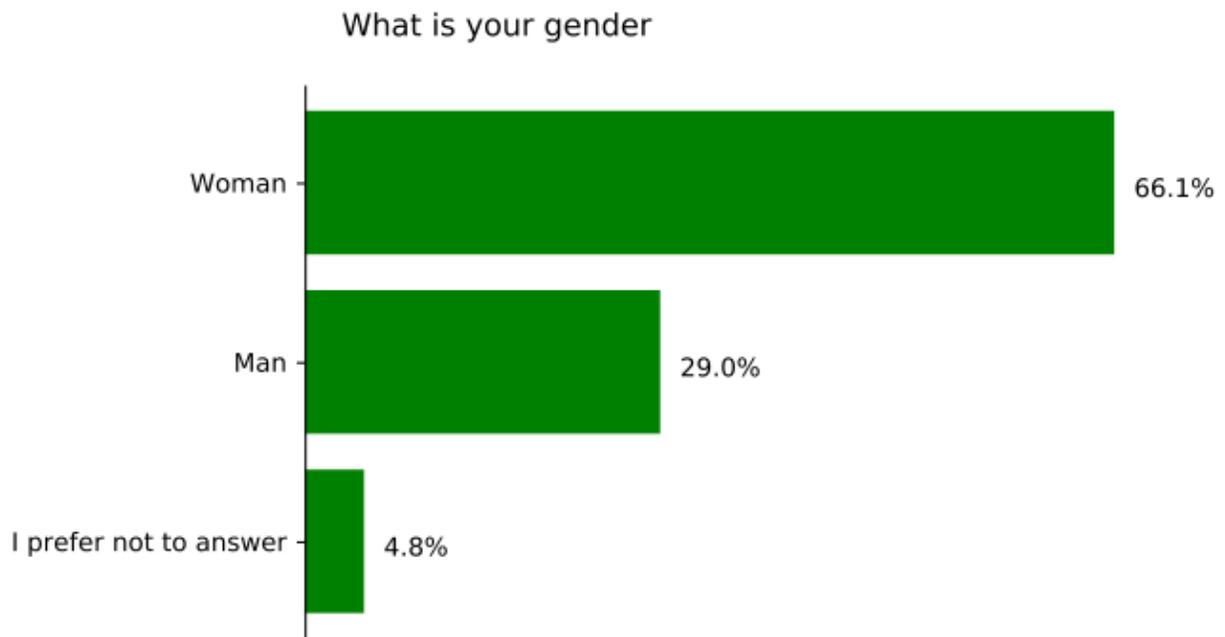


Figure 1

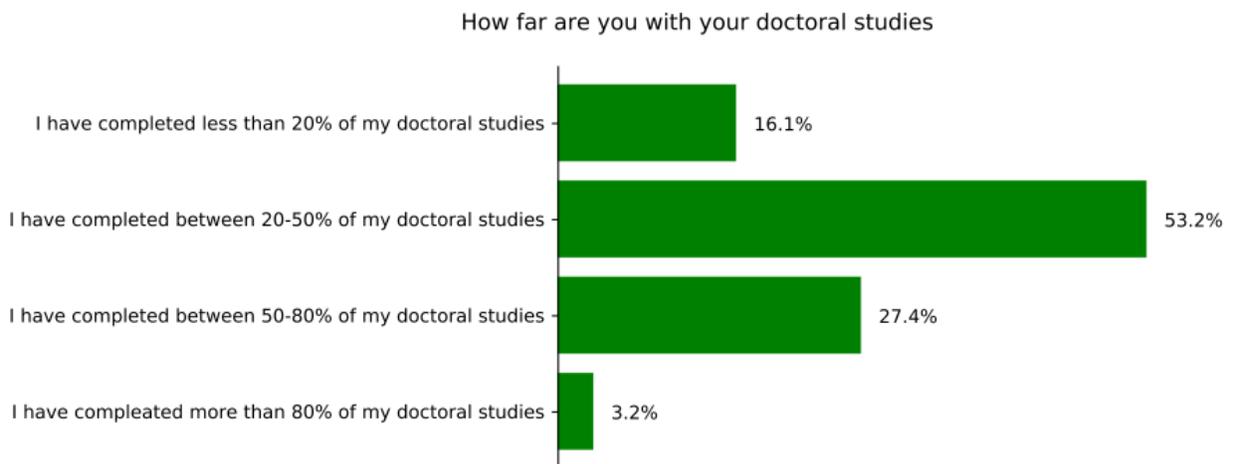


Figure 2



Figure 3

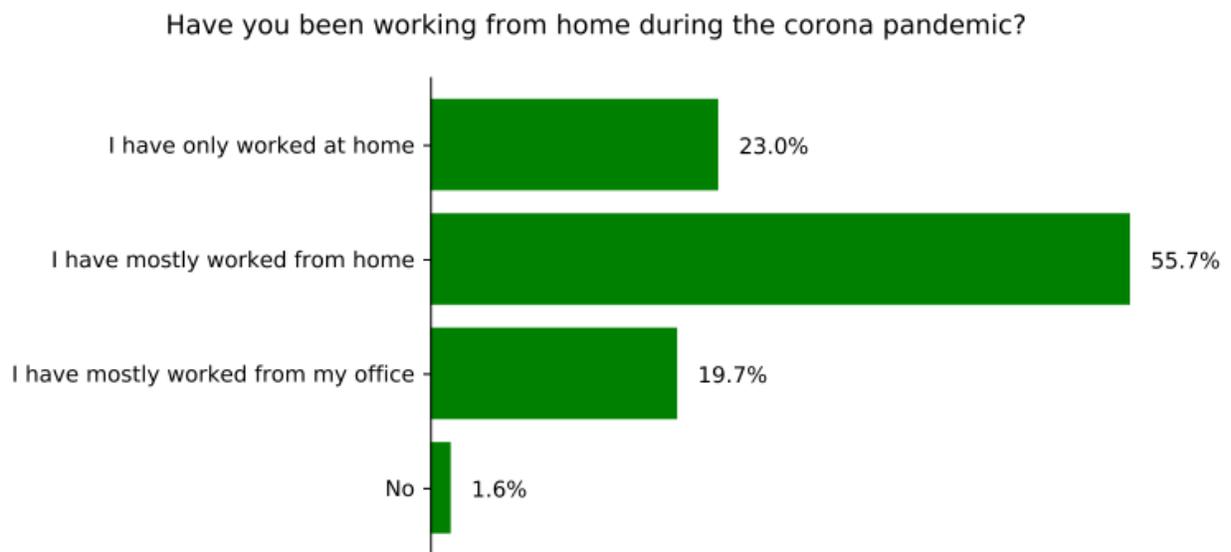


Figure 4

Has the current situation caused you to consider not finishing your doctoral studies?

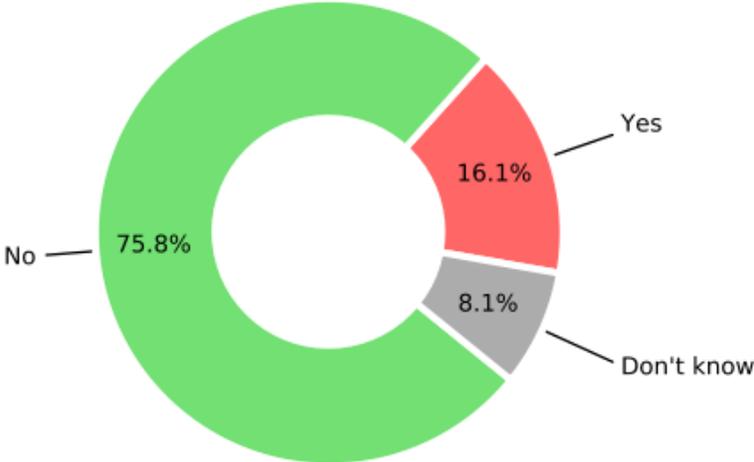


Figure 5

Has the current situation caused you to consider pursuing a career outside academia?

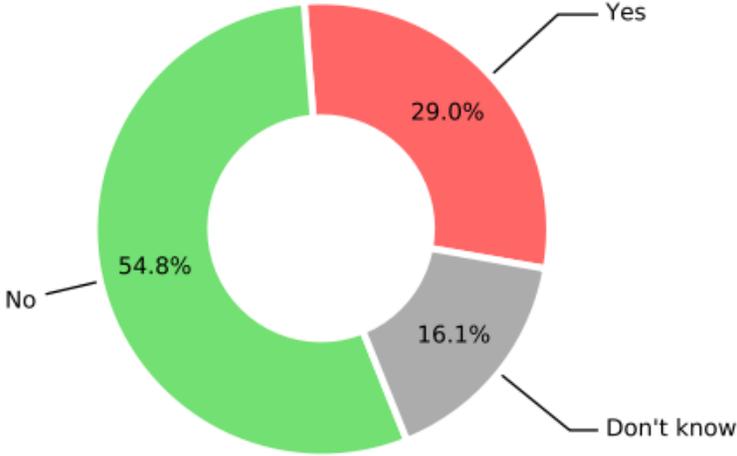


Figure 6

Did your university communicate information about possibilities to apply for an extension of your financing due to the corona pandemic?

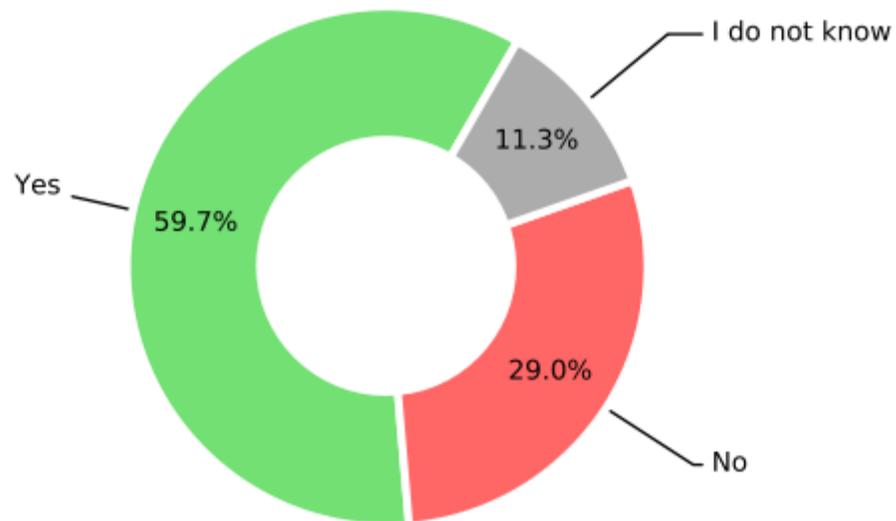


Figure 7

In case you have received information about the possibilities for an extension, has this information been helpful?



Figure 8

In case you need an extension due to the corona pandemic do you have funding available ?

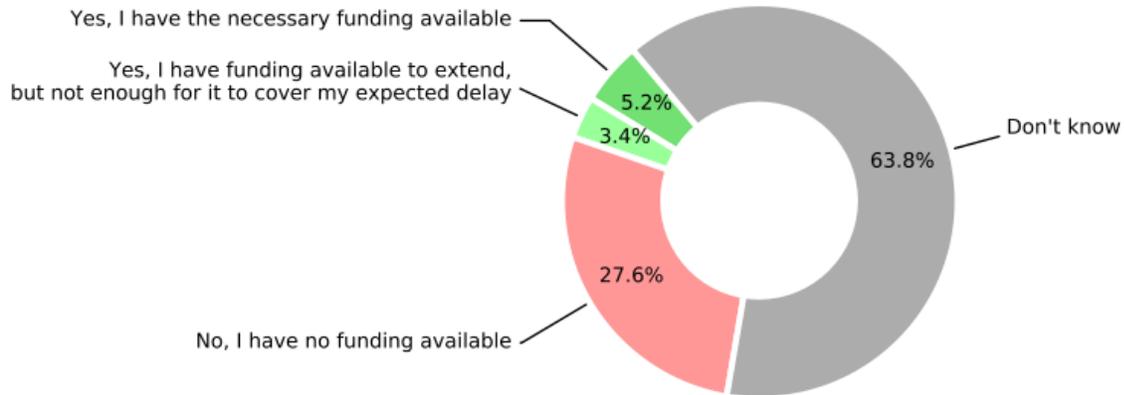


Figure 9

If you were to return to normal work tomorrow - how much would your project be delayed?

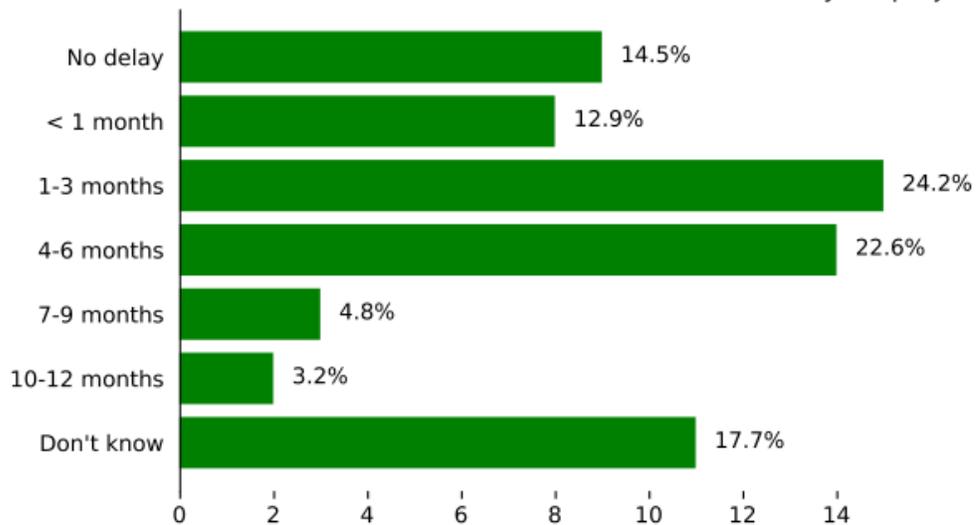


Figure 10

Do you expect to have to make changes to your research project due to the corona pandemic?

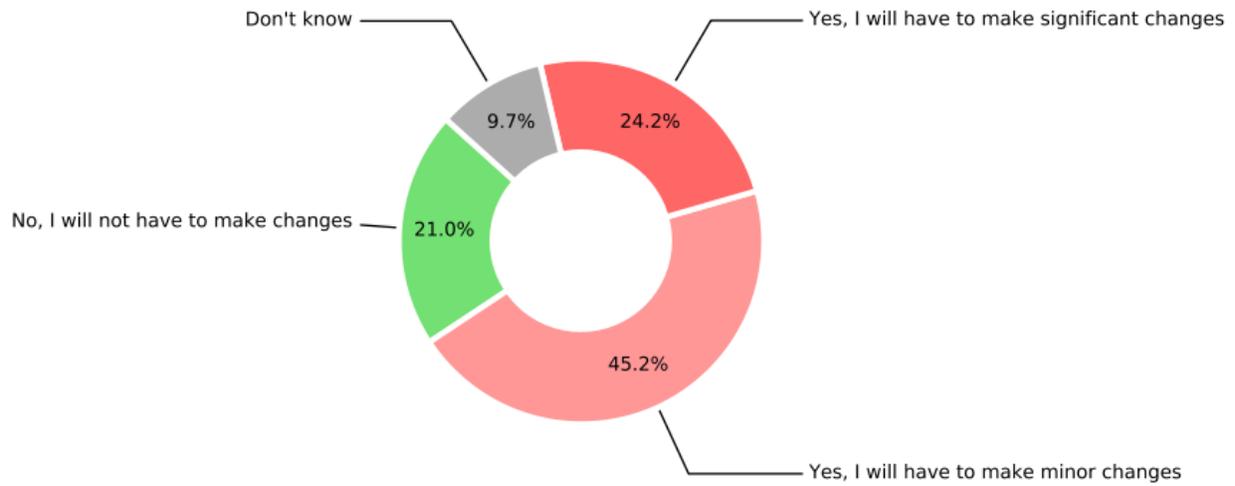


Figure 11

In which ways has the corona pandemic impacted your doctoral studies?
You can pick multiple options.

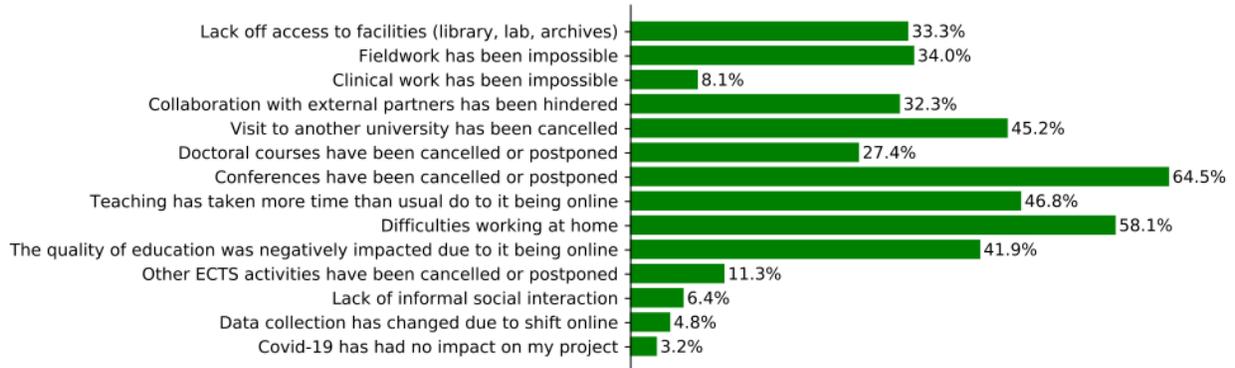


Figure 12

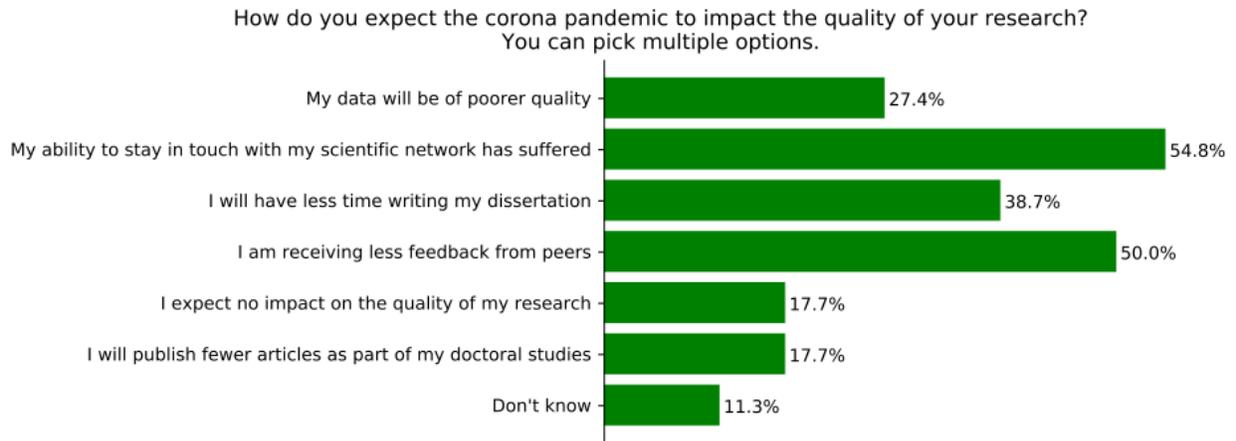


Figure 13

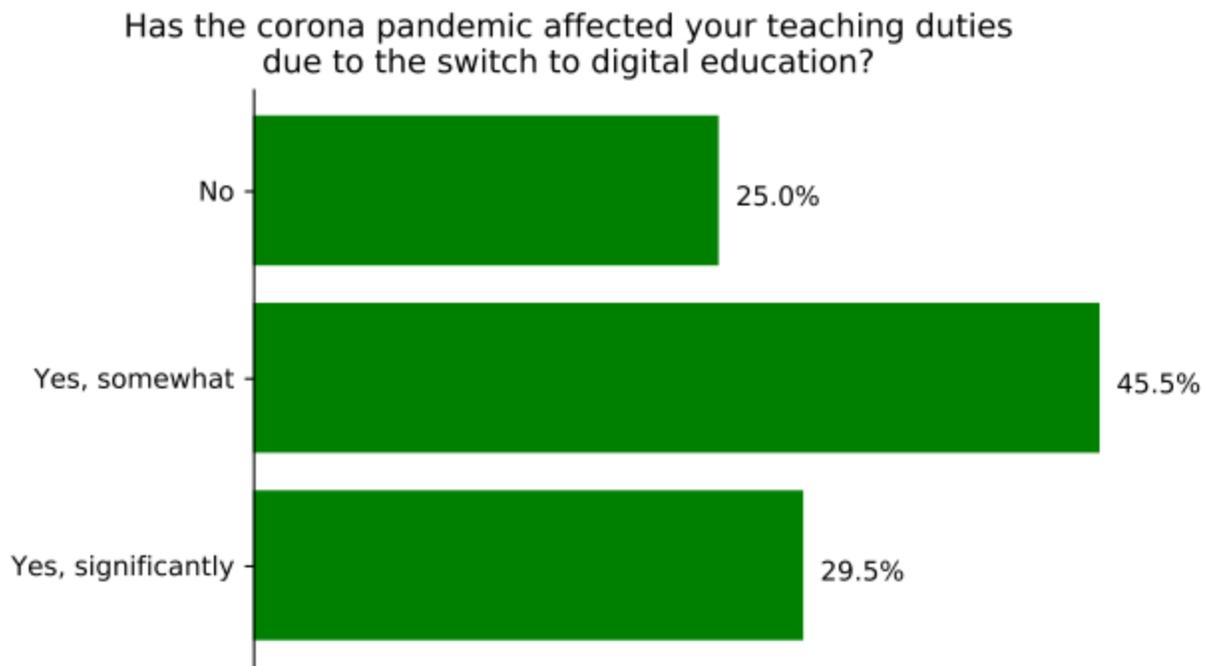


Figure 14

Are you / will you receive overtime for the extra work required due to this switch?

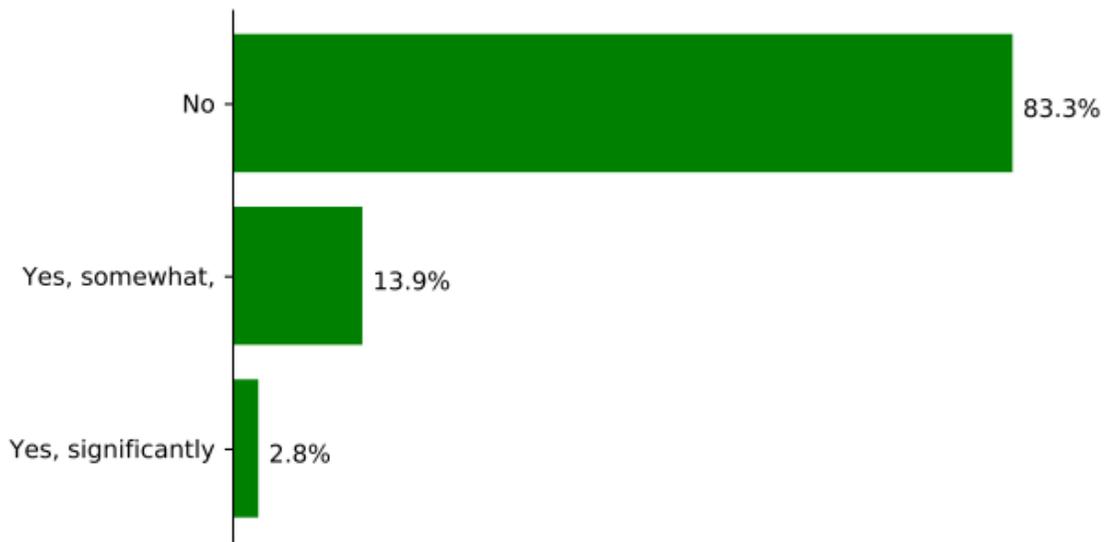


Figure 15

To what extent has the corona pandemic outbreak impacted your access to supervision?

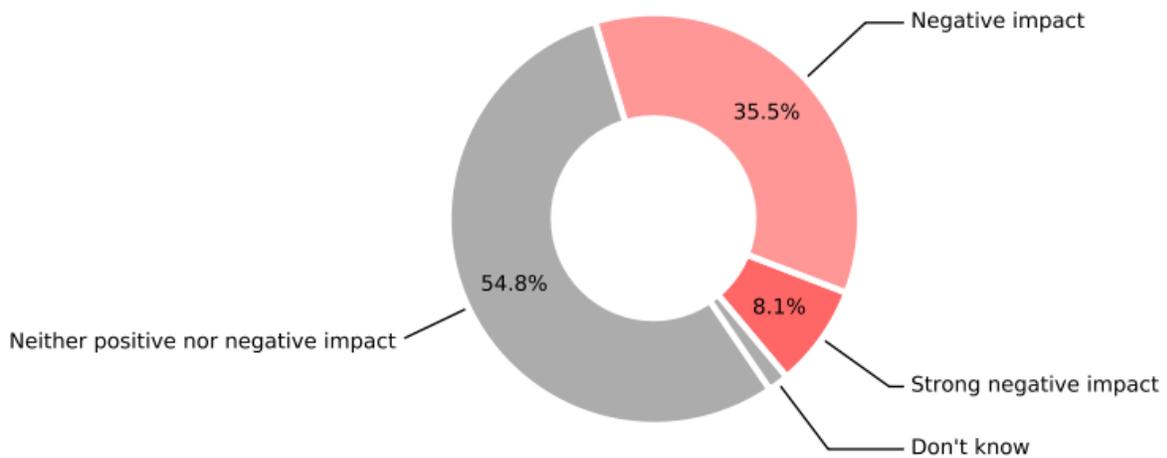


Figure 16

To what extent has the corona pandemic impacted the quality of your supervision?

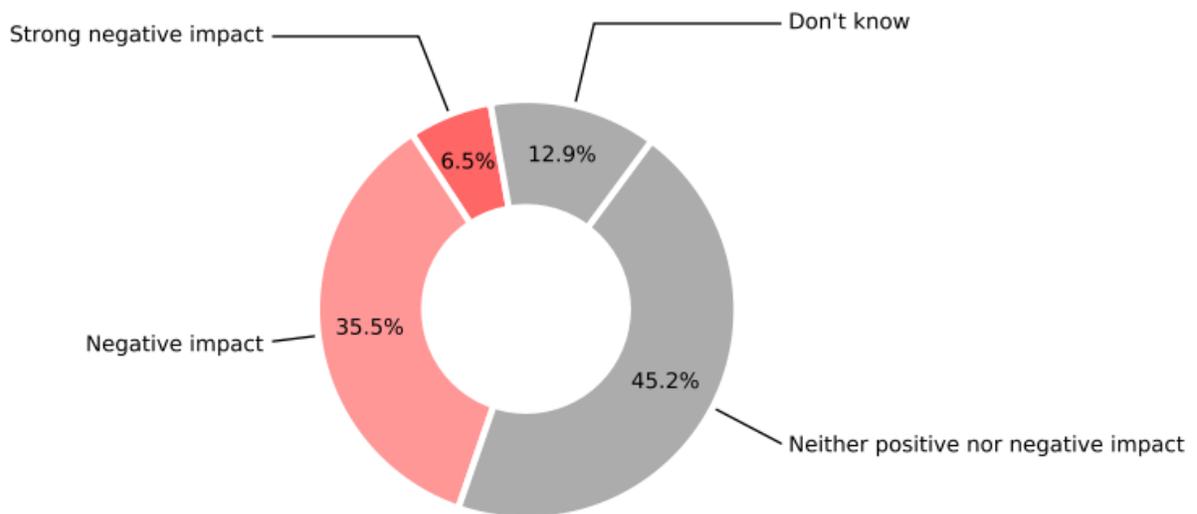


Figure 17

To what extent has the Covid-19 outbreak impacted your work-life balance?

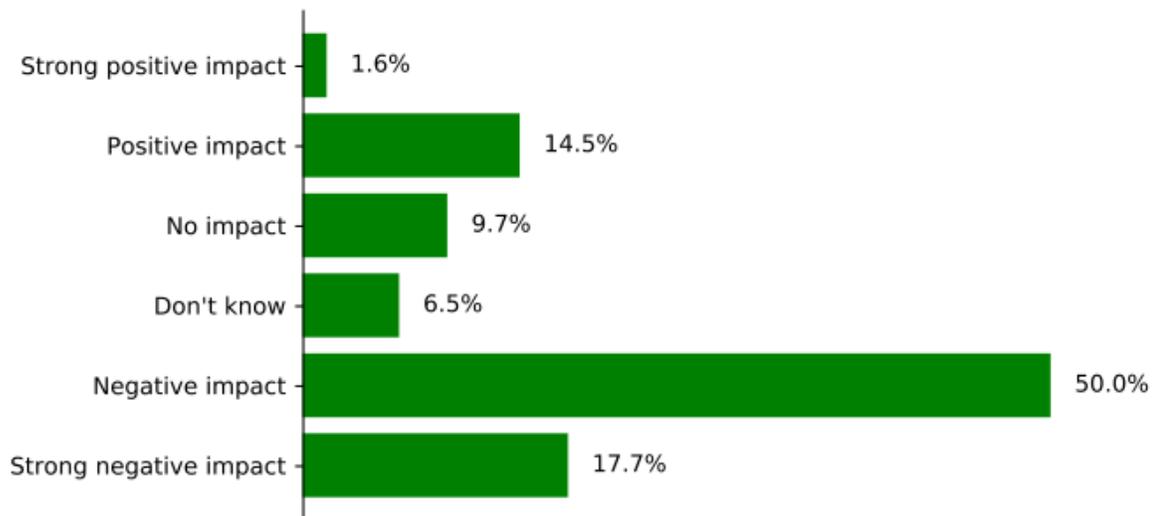


Figure 18

How much do you agree with the following statement?
During the pandemic I have experienced one or more of the following symptoms usually related to stress:
Difficulty sleeping, mood swings, headaches, difficulty focusing, trouble with memory, palpitations.

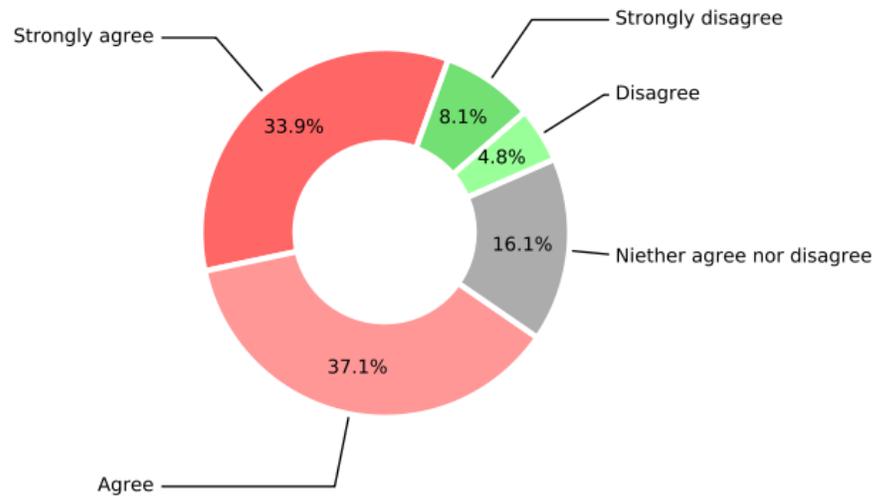


Figure 19