



YOUR DSA SUPPORT AND COVID-19 - STUDENT AND PROVIDER SURVEY FINAL REPORT – 12TH MAY 2020

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Background

The Coronavirus pandemic has led to upheaval and disruption across higher education. Students have faced academic uncertainty around accessing their learning, changed assessments, graduation or progression into the next year, and how the future 'new normal' will feel at university. Lockdown and restrictions have impacted student's accommodation and home life; the suitability of their study environment; their physical and mental health; financial and work demands, their relationships and support links, and many will have caring responsibilities for children or family. For vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, the Covid-19 effects could be more serious, with the adjustments introduced for most students perhaps not working as effectively for them.

As a result of the Government Covid-19 restrictions on campus activity, face-to-face teaching, and then the lockdown rules, the delivery of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) one-to-one support was quickly moved to remote online support.

The Association of Non-Medical Help Providers (The Association) undertook the student survey in response to a question posed by the Department for Education (DfE)* received on the 15th April 2020. The interest expressed was specifically around how the Covid-19 situation was impacting Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) support and the efficacy and take-up of 'remote' online DSA support. In addition, the Association was interested in gathering feedback on the academic progress and wellbeing of disabled students in receipt of DSA, and feedback from Non-Medical Help (NMH) providers of their experience of DSA delivery through the Covid-19 period.

The Association considered that the impacts of Covid-19 on disabled students were very much current, which led to the rapid development and release of the survey, seeking feedback with minimal delay.

Due to the volume of the responses received (n=3614), the complex challenges and academic hardship expressed, the Association have produced this report as quickly as possible. The results have been made available to the Disabled Students Stakeholders Group, the Office for Students, Student Finance England, the Department for Education*, and other professional bodies representing professionals and students within the higher education disabled student sector.

***Please note that these surveys were not commissioned by the Department for Education.**

Method

The Association developed an online student survey using the SurveyMonkey platform and an NMH Provider online survey using Google Drive (Different platforms were utilised to enable our management committee to collate both sets of responses in a short timeframe.). The student survey comprised of 8 structured questions and a further unstructured question which allowed respondents to comment further. It was made clear that the survey was anonymous, and invited respondents to contact their DSA provider or funding body if they had specific queries. The NMH Provider survey consisted of 4 unstructured questions.

Both surveys (with the student survey link within a suggested student 'invitation' email) were sent to Association of NMH Provider members and also shared by PATOSS, ADSHE, NADP, UMHAN and BATA* with their members on Thursday 23rd April. On Thursday 30th April this was then expanded to include a wider audience of NMH providers taken from the NMH Search platform. In total it is estimated that over 300 NMH providers were approached and asked to send the survey request and survey link to their students. The Association did not seek to record which NMH providers or professional bodies distributed the survey to their students. The surveys were open for 14 days closing on 7th May at 18.00.

*PATOSS Professional Association of Teachers of students with specific learning difficulties, ADSHE Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education, NADP National Association of Disability Practitioners, UMHAN University of Mental Health Advisors Network and BATA British Assistive Technology Association.

The Association acknowledges that due to the desire to undertake the survey quickly, the methodology did not necessarily follow standard research techniques.

The Association invited NMH providers, to comment on the following:

1. What are your general observations of NMH support and training through this Covid-19 period?
2. What are your observations, and feedback from your support workers on remote online support for your students?
3. What percentage of your normal or expected support level are you currently delivering?
4. What additional challenges are your students experiencing through this period?

Analysis of the NMH Provider survey was done manually by nominated members of the Association's management committee.

The responses to question 1 of the NMH Provider survey show that a significant number of the NMH Providers completing the survey interpreted 'training' not as Assistive Technology Training but as Continual Professional Development (CPD) and training on platforms for remote delivery. This has generated useful feedback in terms of providers / workers feedback that they have had lots of guidance from employers and professional bodies but have not been offered or accessed training on remote working. Respondents were positive about the resources being shared by their professional bodies.

The Association invited students to respond and comment on the following questions:

1. Please indicate your type or types of DSA support.
2. What is the year of your study?
3. My DSA learning support is important for me at this time.
4. Because of the changes to my academic work, online teaching, and assessments, the Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my studies.
5. I feel I require additional DSA support through this period due to the changes to my academic studies.
6. The Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my wellbeing.
7. Remote online DSA support is effective for me.
8. During the Covid-19 crisis please indicate any other factors that are impacting your studies:
 - a. Access to academic resources; library; workshops; studios etc.
 - b. Access to teaching
 - c. Access to course materials
 - d. Access to university or college support services
 - e. Childcare responsibilities
 - f. Paid work requirements
 - g. None of these.
9. Please make any other comments.

Note: Questions 3 to 7 asked students to respond on a scale: Strongly agree – Agree – Neither agree nor disagree – Disagree – Strongly disagree.

Analysis of the student survey was undertaken using SurveyMonkey. The responses to Question 9 (n=504), an optional question, were categorized and tagged with these topic headings:

- ✓ Comment on DSA Support
- ✓ Uni Studies/Support
- ✓ Home & Family
- ✓ Technology Comment
- ✓ Mental Health Issue
- ✓ Remote Support Comment
- ✓ Other Comments
- ✓ Identifying Comment
- ✓ Covid-19 & Disability

It was noted that many comments included feedback on more than one category and were therefore tagged accordingly. Comments that identified the DSA provider and/or the higher education institution, and/or an individual are not included in the report (n=34).

Student Survey – Results Summary

- A total of 3614 responses were received at the survey closing date (7th May 2020, 18:00).
- Question 1: The respondents represent students receiving a spread of DSA support roles:

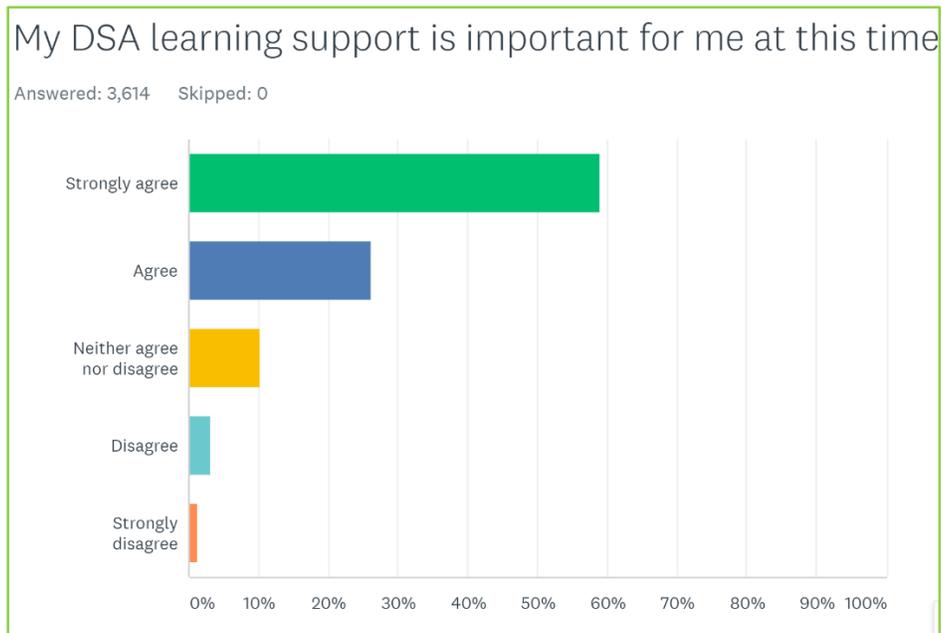
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Study Skills	57.7%	2,086
▼ Mentor	55.8%	2,015
▼ Assistive Technology Training	42.6%	1,541
▼ Communication Support	5.9%	213
▼ Other	11.3%	407
Total Respondents: 3,614		

Note: Some respondents will be receiving 2 or more types of DSA support.

- Question 2: The respondents represent a spread across academic year of study:

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Final Year	23.7%	858
▼ 1st	34.1%	1,232
▼ 2nd	28.2%	1,018
▼ 3rd	10.0%	360
▼ 4th	3.0%	108
▼ 5th	1.1%	38
TOTAL		3,614

- Students responded to the Question 3 statement:



“My mentor has been vital to my mental health through this unprecedented time, without this help and support I couldn’t possibly go on!” (Student Response)

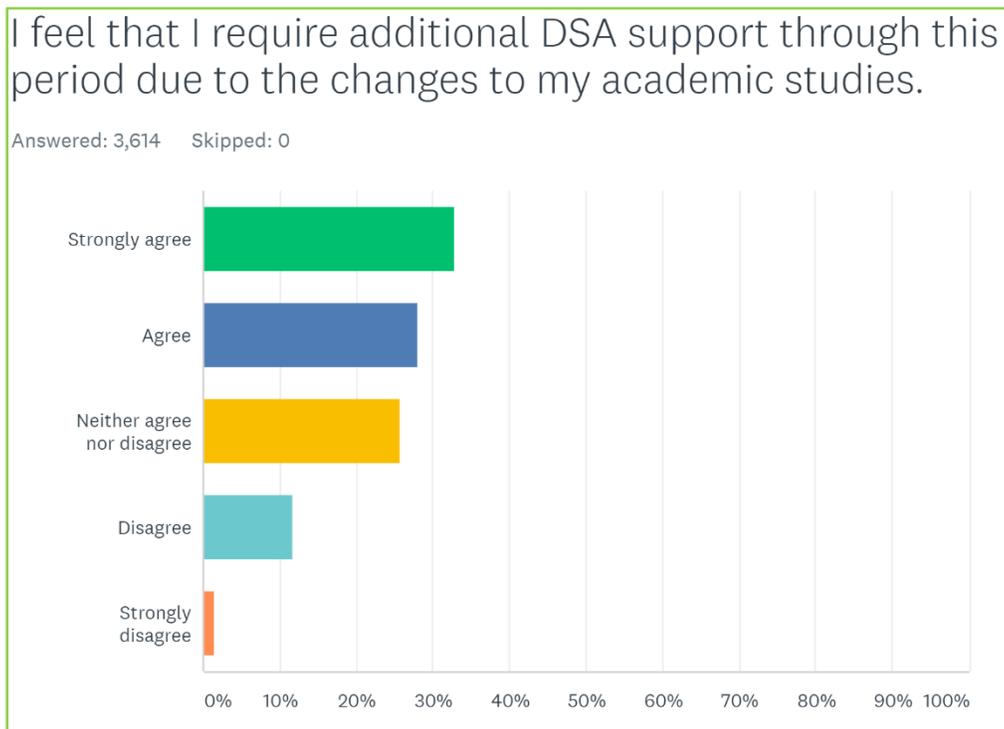
- Student responses to the Question 4 statement:

Because of the changes to my academic work, online teaching, and assessments, the Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my studies.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	50.4% 1,820
Agree	30.9% 1,115
Neither agree nor disagree	12.6% 455
Disagree	5.0% 182
Strongly disagree	1.2% 42
TOTAL	3,614

“COVID-19 and lockdown have affected every aspect of my university work, home life and mental and physical health. It has caused many, many problems and barriers for me and many others.”

- Student responses to the Question 5 statement:

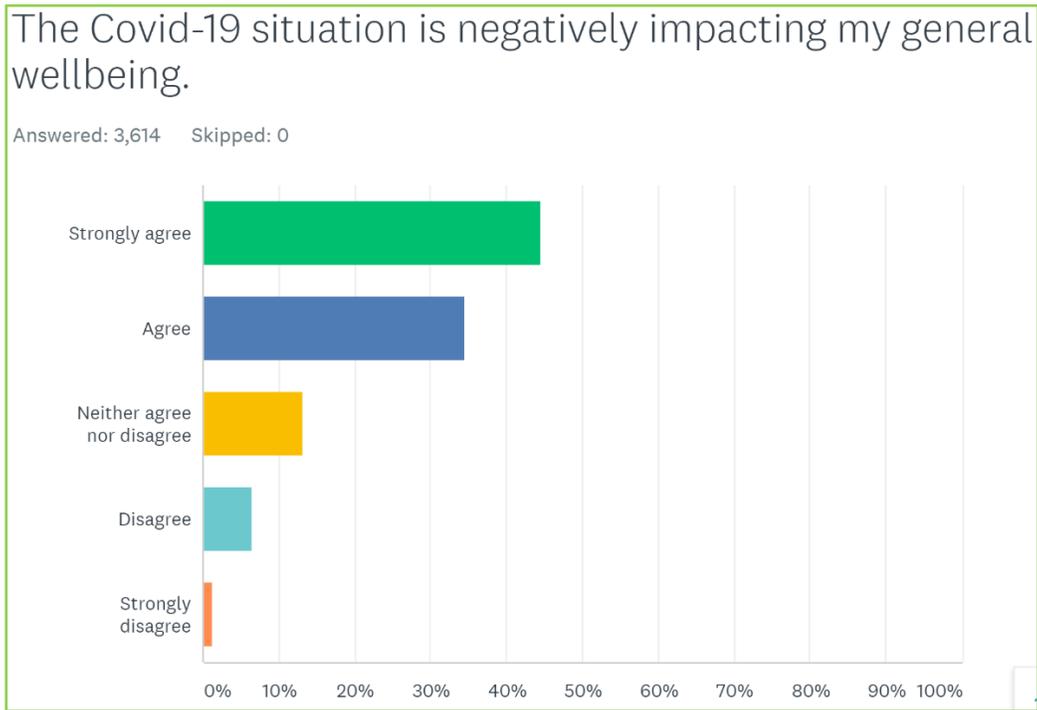


“Without my Mentoring I would of given up on this academic year due to Covid-19 and never gone back to university.”

“The mentoring and study skills is how I'm able to keep on track at the minute, I can't stress just how important they are. Thank you for providing these services!”

“Mental health has become a massive challenge for me and 1 hour a week with my provider is just not enough”

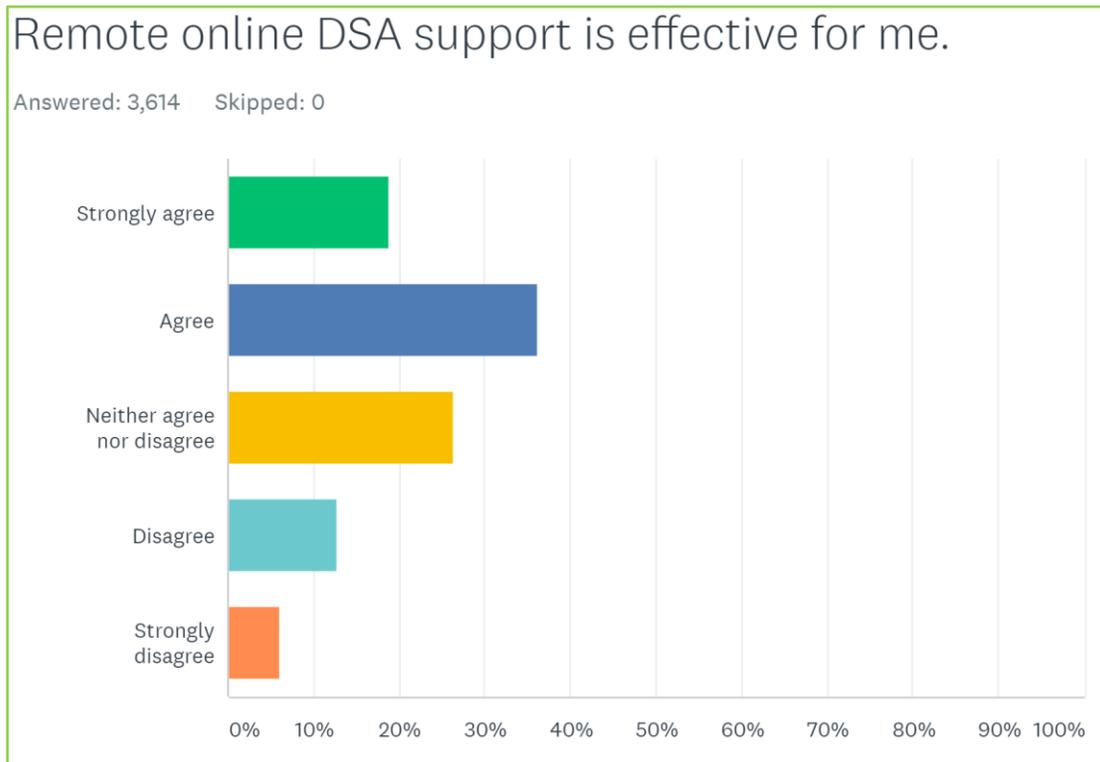
- Student responses to the Question 6 statement:



“I find it hard to reach out. I curl up within myself. The help is there but I cannot reach it. Too terrified to get it.”

“There are many external factors due to the covid situation that are affecting my mental health/ wellbeing and disrupting my ability to focus on college work”

- Student responses to the Question 7 statement:



“I need support to carry out and complete my studies, although I find online support very difficult due to concentration, focusing etc it is better than no support so I am grateful for it.”

“Internet problems it’s hard to hear the other person which is greatly impacting on my learning. For example we could do an hour and finish work now it takes up to 3 hour slots which is frustrating.”

- Student responses to the Question 8 statement*:

During the Covid-19 crisis please indicate any other factors that are impacting your studies.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Access to academic resources; library, workshops, studios etc.	73.4% 2,637
Access to teaching	57.6% 2,069
Access to course materials	35.7% 1,284
Access to university or college support services	48.4% 1,739
Childcare responsibilities	11.1% 400
Paid work requirements	18.4% 662
None of these	10.6% 382
Total Respondents: 3,595	

* Question 8 allowed respondents to choose one or more responses. Other factors were identified by respondents and described in their responses to Question 9.

- 504 comments were made in response to Question 9:

Category of Response	Number
Comment on DSA Support	231
Uni Studies/Support	131
Covid-19 & Disability	103
Mental Health	79
Remote Support Comment	66
Home and Family	57
Technology Comment	47
Other Comment	42
Identifying Comment	34

Note: Many comments fell into more than one category.

The comments from Question 9 have been displayed according to category and are included later in this report.

NMH Provider – Results Summary

126 Providers completed the survey.

Question 1

What are your general observations of NMH support and training through this Covid-19 period?

Out of 125 qualitative responses to this question:

- **48 (38%) providers give explicit feedback that they have maintained or increased student engagement with NMH Support**

One provider stated “Things seem to have switched over to delivering remote support pretty seamlessly. Tutors and mentors are all working as normal delivering their support to students.”

Whilst another stated “I have observed how well the NMH Support has been managed by the staff to turn the support in to remote sessions. Although staff have been able to offer the session like this in the past, it was seen as something to be used in exceptional circumstances, but I hope that this can now be something that can be used whenever needed or preferred by the student”

- **19 (15%) providers provide explicit feedback that they have seen a decrease in students accessing NMH support with a small group of respondents saying their support services have ceased.**

One provider stated “There has been minimal support due to face to face lectures. We have tried to accommodate remote access but this hasn't always been possible. This is due to Universities not taking up our offer of remote services.”

Whilst another feedback “It has been suspended”.

Question 2

What are your observations, and feedback from your support workers on remote online support for your students?

Out of 123 qualitative responses to this question:

- **12 providers (10%) used the word ‘positive’ to describe remote online support.**

One provider stated: “Very positive, in some cases we are seeing increased engagement, as support is more accessible, due to not having to travel or find appropriate space, or slot in around other commitments.”

Another provider commented: "They are all having a really good experience with remote delivery".

- **59 providers (48%) gave a positive response to the question overall.**

One provider explained: "They've reported student engagement has increased; it is more convenient to arrange support due to the flexibility of remote working. There have been positives reported from both students and NMH workers. Even students who initially were reluctant to use video conferencing (e.g. some autistic students) have found it helps to keep their camera turned off so they can concentrate on watching and listening to the tutor."

Another commented: "The vast majority of support workers are not having any issues and if anything, are finding life easier with not having to travel. Students seem to be happy with receiving their support 'virtually' and only a small number have said they would like to wait until they can be seen face to face, in person again."

- **13 providers (11%) stated that delivering online support was more tiring, draining or challenging than delivering face-to-face support.**

One provider elaborated by saying, "Remote online support is a second-best substitute for face-to-face learning as it dulls the flexibility and interaction of the live experience. Students are happy to have it as a substitute. It is harder to work for long hours online compared to similar hours face-to-face. It requires more concentration, more energy, more focus and the results of working are not qualitatively as good as 'real life'. I have to work harder to keep people motivated."

Another provider explained: "Greater intensity of specialist mental health mentoring, more burdening, greater risk (and therefore follow up). Vital link between student and university as have the existing relationship established. The team are working very hard, feel more stressed than usual. There is an increase in paperwork. There are less cancellations amongst the students. Therefore, we are providing more supervision. There is also greater fatigue from using video conference for every session - far more draining for sessions."

- **17 providers (14%) referenced technical issues with IT equipment, internet connectivity and video conferencing platforms as an area of difficulty for support workers and students.**

As one provider explained, "Generally technology always presents problems. Internet connections and capacity has become an issue. Student and staff knowledge and technical skills are also an issue."

Another went on to say, "Negative feedback from students about 'in class' support is almost always related to technical issues, e.g. BSL Interpreters not being given access to teaching session, or WIFI too weak to run necessary platforms."

Students who don't have equipment, good WiFi connection, or IT skills, are at a disadvantage as they are less able to access remote NMH and online teaching."

One provider highlighted, “It is difficult to provide online support for visually impaired students, as they are unable to see a screen of a computer and feedback what the computer says if they have a problem. For them to tab around a screen using speech software can be a ‘long winded’ way of working especially if there are software issues, it is much easier for someone to look at a screen and try to fix these issues. This was an issue for one of our clients who had a problem with an add on piece of equipment needed to work with the speech software to help navigation whilst using the laptop, which subsequently decided not to work, thus the student was unable to carry on with her studies without the speech working.”

- **4 providers (3%) commented that remote support increases anxiety levels for their students.**

As one provider explained, “A small number of staff have reported a significant decrease in engagement as a result of the current situation and some students accessing mentoring in particular are finding online support difficult due to not being comfortable with it or not finding a confidential space for example.”

Another said, “Some students have reported anxiety around using online platforms/phone, and have chosen not to access remote support as a result.”

A third provider stated, “We have seen a reluctance to engage with our support and also a reluctance to engage with online teaching. We have also seen a number of students reporting low mood as a result of being in isolation. The feedback regarding interaction with academic staff has been very positive.”

Question 3

What percentage of your normal or expected support level are you currently delivering?

Out of 125 responses to this question, 105 provided a percentage of support with the average being **74% of normal or expected support is currently being delivered.**

This was broken down in the following way:

- 13 providers stated support delivered was between 0-24% of normal levels.
- 04 providers stated support delivered was between 25-49% of normal levels.
- 20 providers stated support delivered was between 50-74% of normal levels.
- 62 providers stated support delivered was between 75-100% of normal levels.
- 06 providers stated support delivered was between 101-200% of normal levels.

One provider commented:

“Individual members of staff proactively engaged with their students, encouraging uptake of remote support. This saw a much higher than usual uptake of DSA hours. Heading towards the Easter break, the trend of engagement levelled to what we would normally expect. Support staff made themselves available to offer NMH sessions to students particularly over Easter as submission deadlines across the board were extended for 2 weeks and the assessment period shifted to online Time Limited Assessments. Other students have been granted a deferral to an August submission through the Exceptional Mitigating Circumstances process. Currently underway are support requests to Needs Assessors for additional NMH hours because of the impact of the changed requirements to their academic studies.”

Question 4

What additional challenges are your students experiencing through this period?

Out of 126 qualitative responses to this question:

- **59 providers (46%) were concerned about the wellbeing of their students citing peer isolation, depression and anxiety as a major challenge**
- **19 providers (15%) said that a decline in mental health was impacting on the motivation of students to engage or complete work**

One provider gave the example: “Raised anxiety, depression, isolation, loneliness. Feeling cut off, scared and worried and hopeless...Re-emergence of symptoms of mental health problems”

A second provider explained: “For students with mental health difficulties in particular, being away from campus and dealing with so much uncertainty has meant that they have struggled to engage with teaching staff and support staff as they are struggling with motivation levels, sleep patterns, eating habits, maintaining a routine, financial difficulties, social isolation”

Another provider added: “..students who have cooccurring conditions such as ASC and MH issues are experiencing additional challenges to engagement.”

- **12 providers (10%) noticed that those whose living situations had changed (moving back from university accommodation to family homes) were struggling with adapting and changes to routine**
- **23 providers (18%) were concerned about the time management of their students**

A provider gave the example: “The overwhelming challenge seems to be around motivation and wellbeing, some students say they don't think they can finish the year.”

One provider explained: “Some are finding it hard to study because they are trying to home-school children, have partners who are key workers or supporting elderly parents while social distancing due to having to care for dependants, or being in disruptive households.”

Another provider cited: “These students feel that it's a big ask for them to continue with their studies and time management strategies are seriously challenged. As a positive example, a student gave his gratitude to his NMH support worker; without the remote support since lockdown, he would have left his course and would be facing a bleak future.”

- **20 providers (16%) highlighted that students are struggling with changes to the types of assessment**
- **14 providers (11%) noted that students were struggling to understand what was expected of them in relation to their work and what would be needed to complete assignments and their degree.**

One provider explained: “Some students are struggling with the change of online lecture and seminar materials. Based on their learning styles, this is increasing anxieties and difficulties with learning and retaining vital information they need for their assignments.”

An additional comment by another provider highlighted these challenges: “Frustration and concern regarding an inability to undertake or to complete modules, such as teaching practice. Fear over having an extra burden of workload to incorporate 'missed' assignments or teaching into next year's curriculum.”

A third provider explained: “Anxieties about their studies and adjusting to online delivery, some are very resistant to this or feel uncomfortable without the physical contact with lecturers and their peers, and the impact of this on their grades.”

- **50 providers (40%) received feedback from students stating that they were having IT issues, especially in relation to internet access, and access to library resources.**
- **9 providers (7%) commented that adapting to all online teaching and resources and remote support was of causing confusion and uncertainty**

A provider gave the example of: “..unreliable WiFi so have to have sessions with audio-only, thereby further increasing demand on concentration & auditory processing, though screen sharing facilities help greatly. One student has no WiFi and is relying on his mobile phone data, thereby severely restricting internet access and necessitating support via document sharing plus phone calls only.”

Another provider raises the challenge of not having access to specialist course-related software: “Impact on motivation and mental health especially some final year students who have lost access to resources critical for the completion of their course / final project e.g. specialist software, access to studios.”

One provider explained: “They miss face-to-face meet-up as the connection is so much closer, building rapport quickly that lays foundations for trust to develop. Experiencing difficulties with accessing work on uni servers, thus preventing progress. IT issues causing huge levels of anxiety and frustration.”

A provider commented: “Students are anxious and feel abandoned as online learning is not a substitute for in-person learning.”

Another provider gave a particular example: “..we see students who are struggling not having access to face to face sessions. For example, many ASC students do not like Skype as a means of communication, they need to be with a support worker in person.

One provider explained: “Unfortunately for deaf people they have had a very frustrating time to be able to communicate with their lecturers directly.”

Discussion on qualitative results of student survey

1. Respondents were generally positive about their DSA support currently, some stating that it is invaluable to the continuation of their academic studies.
 - 1.1. Many students linked DSA support to maintaining their academic progress, accessing their learning, and protecting their mental wellbeing.
 - 1.2. A few respondents expressed some dissatisfaction around access and arrangements for DSA support.
2. Deteriorating mental health was identified and commented on by many students, and some expressed distress and ill health.
3. Respondents choose to add a significant number of comments about their university or college support, the communications, and the accessibility of online teaching and assessment.
4. Challenges relating to home circumstances were frequently mentioned; childcare, other caring responsibilities, privacy, needs for paid work, and access to technology.
5. Many respondents expressed the challenge of Covid-19 alongside their disability.
6. Responses gave a mixed picture on remote support. Although the survey data indicates that over 50% have found it effective, the comments were mostly from those where remote support is less effective or ineffective.
7. Issues around access to assistive technology and internet unreliability were raised by students.
8. Respondents were thankful for the chance to express themselves through the survey.

Discussion on qualitative results of NMH Provider survey

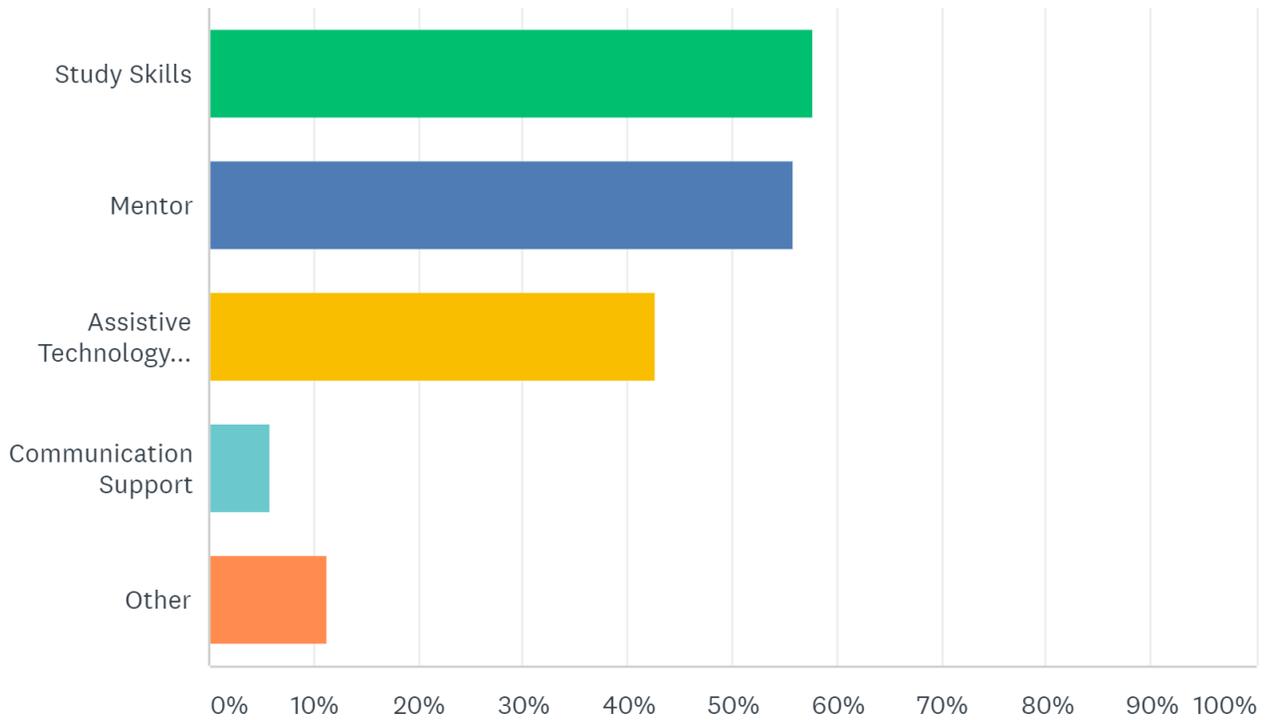
1. For most respondents moving from face to face support to wholly online support in a short time has been a radical change to service delivery, with remote support previously being the exception rather than the norm. Many respondents report a positive, proactive, and pragmatic approach to ensuring NMH services can continue with minimal disruption to their students. 76.1% of normal or expected support is currently being delivered.
2. Several providers have raised concerns specifically around students with mental ill health and autism spectrum conditions being negatively affected by lockdown with students presenting difficulties with managing change, concentration, motivation, and isolation.
3. 63% were concerned about the wellbeing of their students, citing peer isolation, depression and anxiety as a major challenge. In addition 20% said that a decline in mental health was impacting on the motivation of students to engage or complete work.
4. Providers have had to undertake a rapid upskilling in the use of online platforms for remote delivery resulting in additional administration and training. Some respondents have highlighted the difficulties with this.
5. One respondent advised that their institution had now offered lecture capture Covid-19, where previously not available.
6. The responses show that a significant number of the NMH Providers completing the survey interpreted 'training' not as Assistive Technology Training but as Continual Professional Development (CPD) and training on platforms for remote delivery. This has generated useful feedback in terms of providers / workers feedback that they have had lots of guidance from employers and professional bodies but have not been offered or accessed training on remote working. Comments were positive about the resources being shared by their professional bodies.
7. 16 providers mentioned CPD and training in their response to question 1.
8. There is a correlation between negative responses about student engagement and lack of training, support, and experience of utilizing online platforms. This may raise concerns about equity of experience for students accessing support from different providers.

Appendix 1. Full Results of Student Survey

Question 1

Please indicate your type or types of DSA support

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

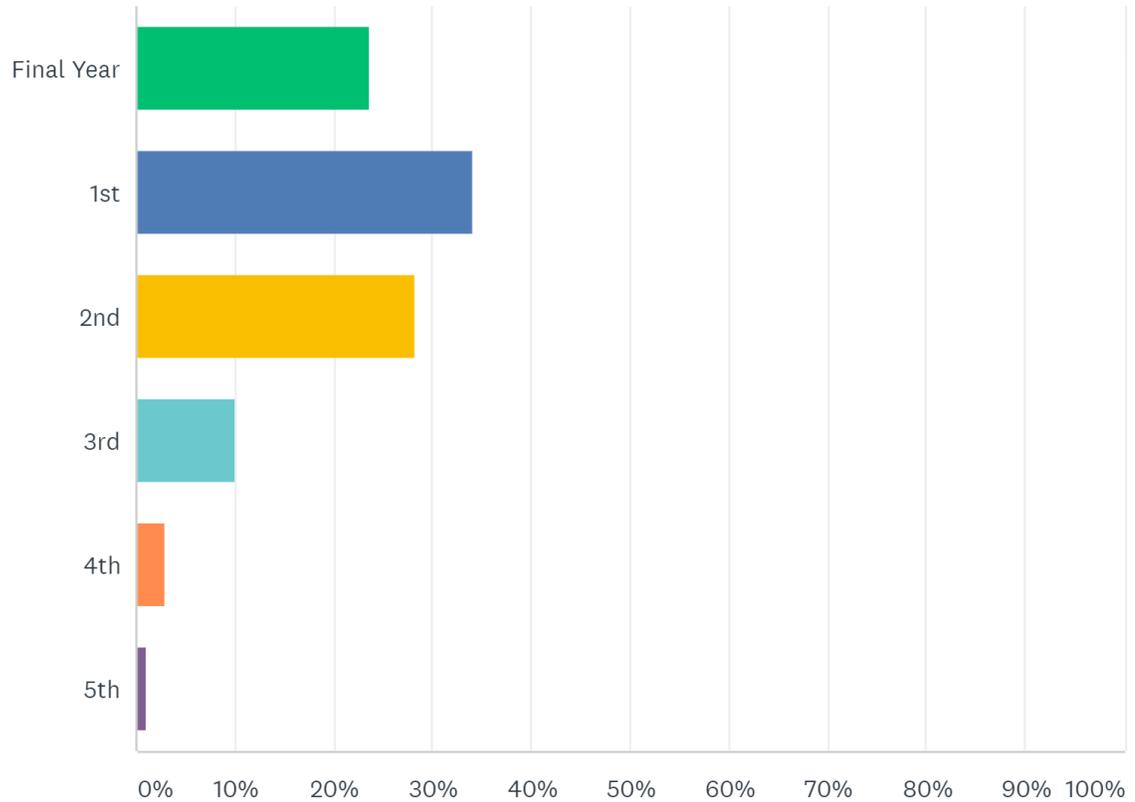


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Study Skills	57.7% 2,086
▼ Mentor	55.8% 2,015
▼ Assistive Technology Training	42.6% 1,541
▼ Communication Support	5.9% 213
▼ Other	11.3% 407
Total Respondents: 3,614	

Question 2

What is the year of your study?

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

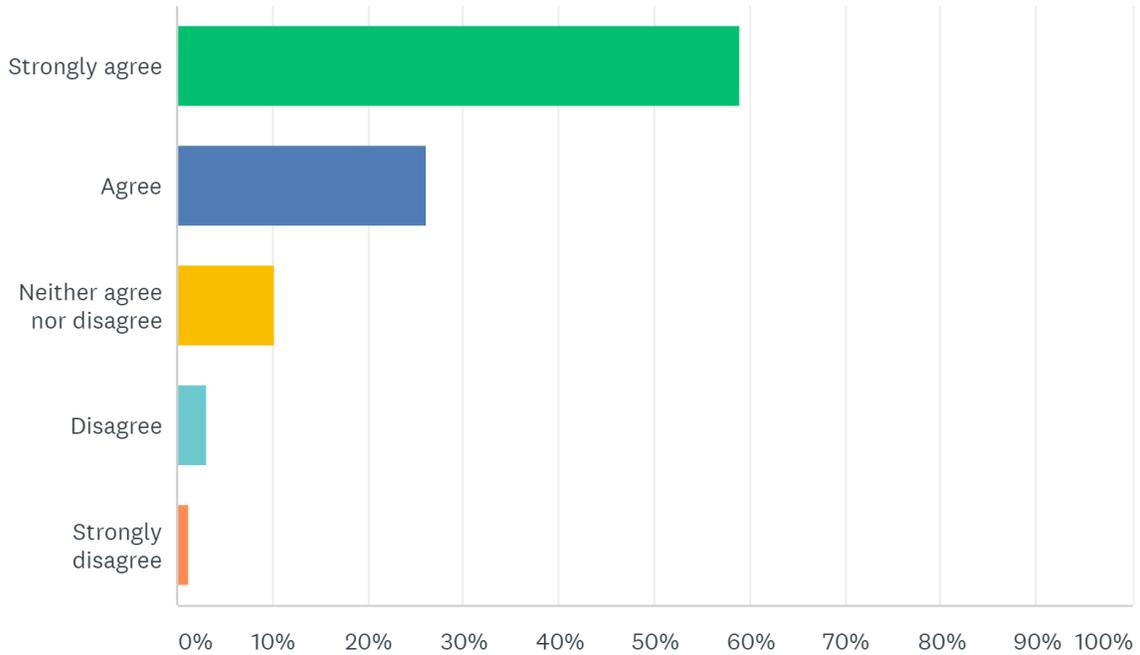


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Final Year	23.7% 858
▼ 1st	34.1% 1,232
▼ 2nd	28.2% 1,018
▼ 3rd	10.0% 360
▼ 4th	3.0% 108
▼ 5th	1.1% 38
TOTAL	3,614

Question 3

My DSA learning support is important for me at this time

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

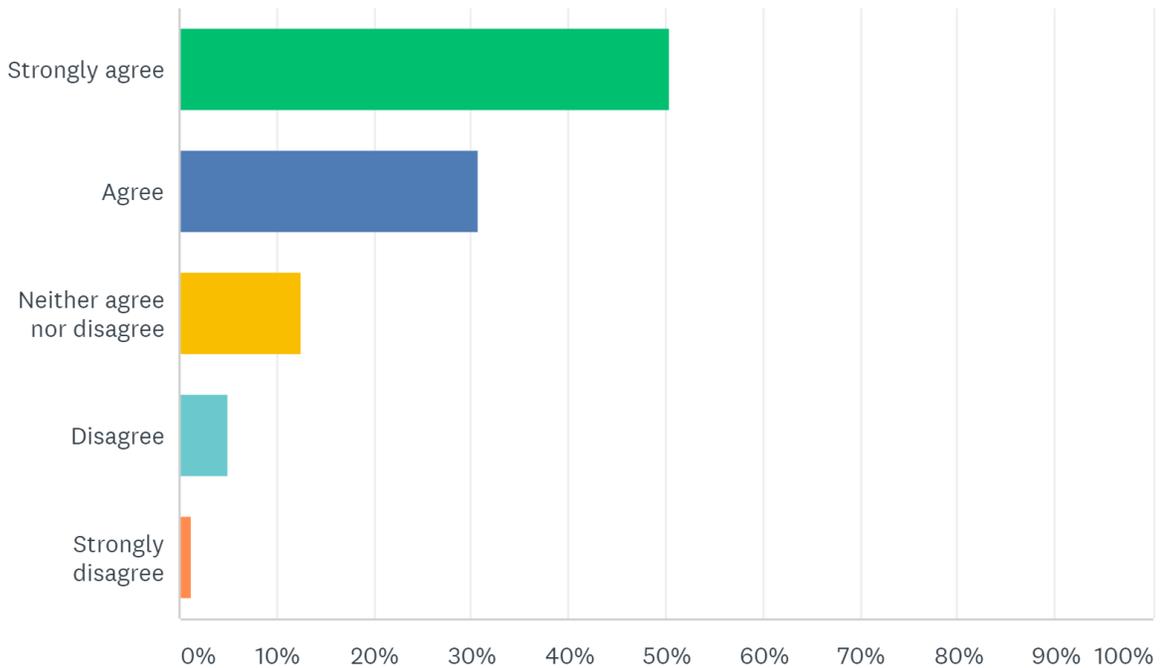


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	59.0% 2,132
Agree	26.2% 948
Neither agree nor disagree	10.3% 374
Disagree	3.2% 115
Strongly disagree	1.2% 45
TOTAL	3,614

Question 4

Because of the changes to my academic work, online teaching, and assessments, the Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my studies

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

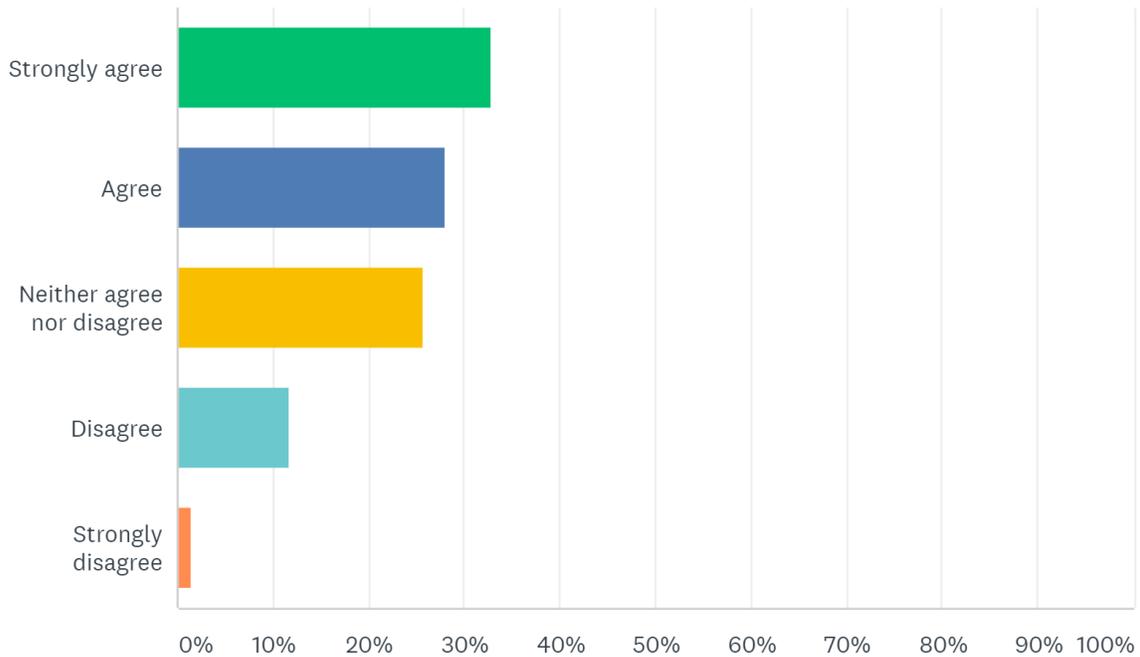


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	50.4% 1,820
Agree	30.9% 1,115
Neither agree nor disagree	12.6% 455
Disagree	5.0% 182
Strongly disagree	1.2% 42
TOTAL	3,614

Question 5

I feel that I require additional DSA support through this period due to the changes to my academic studies.

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

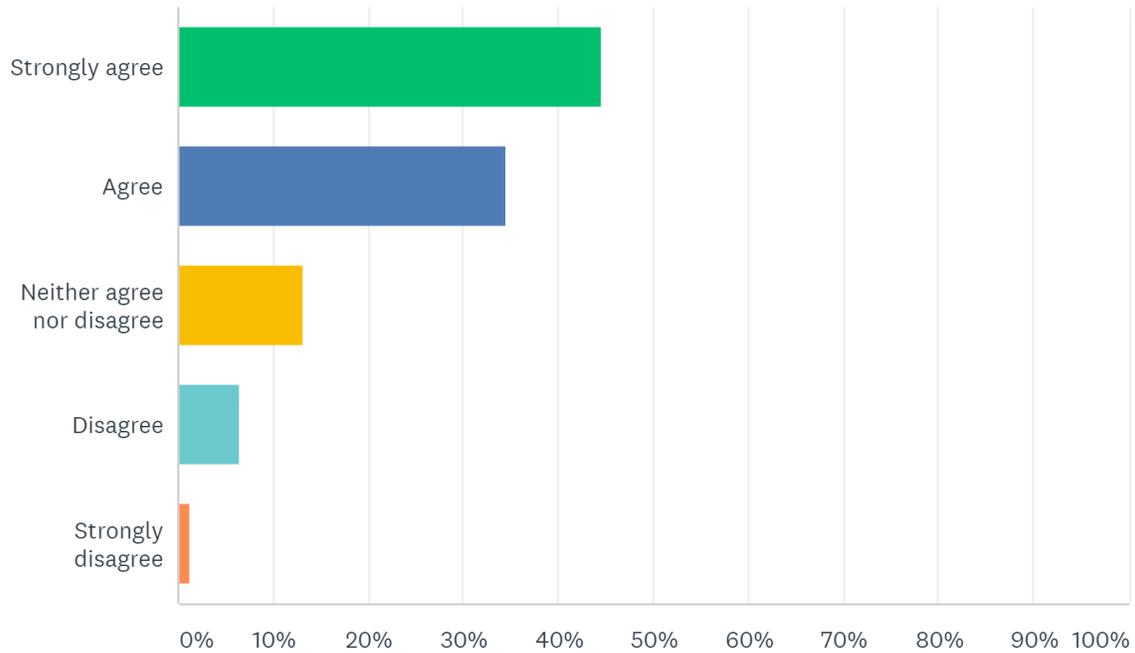


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	32.9% 1,189
Agree	28.1% 1,015
Neither agree nor disagree	25.8% 931
Disagree	11.7% 424
Strongly disagree	1.5% 55
TOTAL	3,614

Question 6

The Covid-19 situation is negatively impacting my general wellbeing.

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

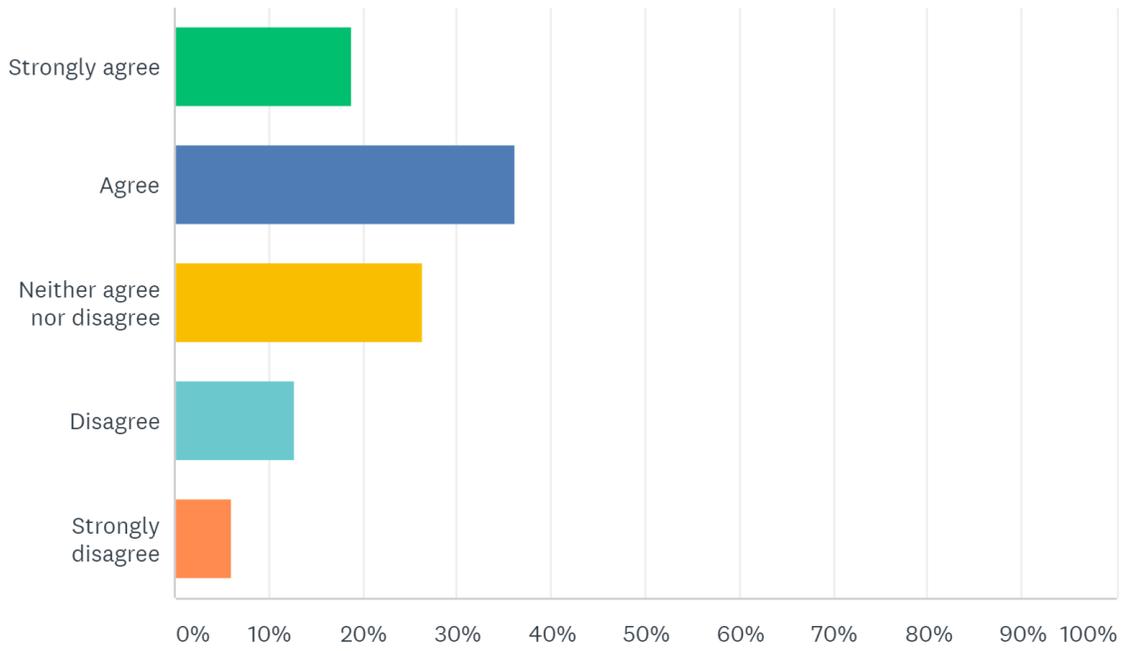


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	44.6% 1,612
Agree	34.6% 1,249
Neither agree nor disagree	13.1% 475
Disagree	6.4% 232
Strongly disagree	1.3% 46
TOTAL	3,614

Question 7

Remote online DSA support is effective for me.

Answered: 3,614 Skipped: 0

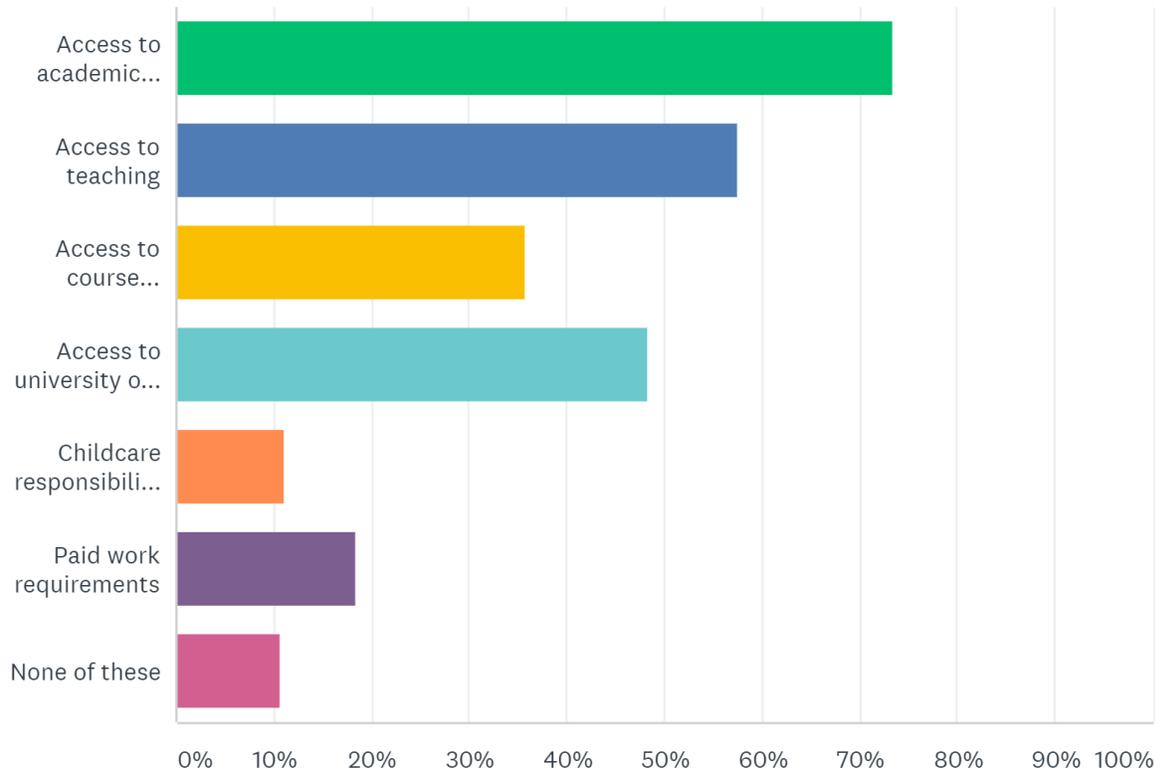


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	18.8% 680
Agree	36.1% 1,306
Neither agree nor disagree	26.3% 949
Disagree	12.7% 458
Strongly disagree	6.1% 221
TOTAL	3,614

Question 8

During the Covid-19 crisis please indicate any other factors that are impacting your studies.

Answered: 3,595 Skipped: 19



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Access to academic resources; library, workshops, studios etc.	73.4%	2,637
▼ Access to teaching	57.6%	2,069
▼ Access to course materials	35.7%	1,284
▼ Access to university or college support services	48.4%	1,739
▼ Childcare responsibilities	11.1%	400
▼ Paid work requirements	18.4%	662
▼ None of these	10.6%	382
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