

2023 Trend Study

# DISTANCE LEARNING TREND STUDY

**Distance learning as a model for success.  
What is important? What are the benefits?**

iu.org in cooperation with:  Fernstudium-Infos.de

**iu**  
INTERNATIONAL  
UNIVERSITY OF  
APPLIED SCIENCES

# “ THE IU INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES DISTANCE LEARNING TREND STUDY... ”



...has become an established feature of the German distance learning scene and is an important source of information, especially for tracking developments over the years and identifying new trends and student needs. I have been delighted to support this with my community for many years and thus contribute to the diversity of the results.”

**Markus Jung**  
Fernstudium-Infos.de

## DEAR READERS,

People’s everyday lives are becoming increasingly fast-paced and complex. And everyone’s situation in life is so different, which is why one thing is becoming more and more important: flexibility. In addition, many have a desire for further development and lifelong learning – both professionally and personally. And for most people, that is precisely the reason for choosing a distance learning programme. It allows you to study with maximum flexibility, to fit into your everyday life.

But isn’t that just taking on an extra burden? Maybe, but according to graduates of distance learning programmes, it’s worth it. Because completing a distance learning course allows you to achieve your own goals – and celebrate professional as well as personal success. And in addition to maximum flexibility, the rapid advances in digital technology are making learning increasingly easier for students. Artificial intelligence (AI) will have a significant impact on the future of digital learning, and provide support in many areas of academic study. The search for information will become even easier. Technical questions can be answered more quickly, and overall the individual learning path will become even more personal.

The 2023 Distance Learning Trend Study also looks at further arguments that are in favour of distance learning, how digitalisation is developing in distance learning and how the behaviour of students has changed in recent years from all perspectives.

Happy reading!

Yours, Holger Sommerfeldt

**Holger Sommerfeldt**  
Rector IU International University of Applied Sciences



# DISTANCE LEARNING IS WORTHWHILE. PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DISTANCE LEARNING?  
WHAT IS IMPORTANT? THE 2023 DISTANCE LEARNING  
TREND STUDY BY IU INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
OF APPLIED SCIENCES (IU) SHOWS THAT DISTANCE  
LEARNING OFFERS MANY ADVANTAGES.  
DESPITE ALL THE PRESSURES.**

**The main reason cited by almost a third of students for taking a distance learning course is to advance in their careers or to change careers. This puts professional development at the top of the list of priorities in the 2023 Distance Learning Trend Study.** But lifelong learning and personal development are also cited as the main reason by more than a fifth of respondents. Fewer than one in seven primarily want to improve their chances on the job market.

**Stressed, overwhelmed, overworked – distance learning triggers negative feelings as well as many positive ones.** Positive emotions such as “satisfied” or “hopeful” have decreased, especially in comparison to the previous 2021 Distance Learning Trend Study. Negative feelings such as stress and overload, on the other hand, are more pronounced. This is partly also due to the multiple demands (e.g. family/job/studies). But despite all the pressures during distance learning, more than 9 out of 10 say that distance learning has been worthwhile for them.

**Employers rarely support their distance learners.** Most people finance their distance learning mainly through their own work. Fewer than one in ten report that their employer is providing or has provided the main funding. But this is not only due to the companies. Almost half of those who generally do not receive support from their employer do not want it either.

**There is considerable interest in artificial intelligence (AI) in academic studies.** Accordingly, many find it important that a university can offer them the use of AI tools. Advantages such as “Easy research”, “Facilitating learning progress”, “Learning support”, and “Organisation of appointments” are frequently mentioned as aspects that (could) make everyday learning easier.

**! THE DISTANCE LEARNING TREND STUDY NOT ONLY SURVEYS THE OPINIONS OF STUDENTS, BUT ALSO THOSE OF GRADUATES, THOSE INTERESTED IN DISTANCE LEARNING AND THOSE WHO HAVE DROPPED OUT. THIS PROVIDES A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF DISTANCE LEARNING.**



“**DISTANCE  
LEARNING OFFERS  
A GREAT DEAL OF  
FREEDOM.**”

You can decide for yourself when, where and how you learn.

However, despite all the independence it gives you, it still requires a high degree of discipline. Because many students complete their distance learning course while working, time management also plays a major role. In spite of all the stress and hardship, the experiences we have had with our students show that the effort is worth it in the end: not only does studying help you improve professionally, it also contributes enormously to your personal development.”

**Dr Carmen Thoma**

COO Distance Learning,  
IU International University of Applied Sciences



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For the sake of simplicity, this presentation of results uses the term “distance learners”. This includes currently enrolled students, graduates, college dropouts and those interested in distance learning.

# FOUR IMPORTANT TAKEAWAYS.

**21.6%**

cite lifelong learning and personal development as the main reason for distance learning.

**LIFELONG LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A STUDY OBJECTIVE.**

**48.5%**

state that they feel or have felt overworked during a distance learning course. 42.9% feel/felt stressed.

**DISTANCE LEARNING IS DEMANDING, BUT IT'S WORTH IT.**

**93.5%**

of respondents who associate negative feelings with studying nevertheless say that it was worth the effort.

**DISTANCE LEARNING IS USUALLY PAID FOR OUT OF STUDENTS' OWN POCKETS.**

**6.7%**

of respondents receive or have received funding for their studies, mainly from their employer.

**42.9%**

find it important that a university offers support through AI. Nevertheless, many respondents are still cautious or do not have a clear opinion on AI.

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IS GRADUALLY CATCHING.**

Due to rounding off, there could be marginal deviations in the results.

## REASONS AND MOTIVATION FOR DISTANCE LEARNING.

# MOVING FORWARD.

### PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCORE HIGHLY.

Career advancement or career change is the main reason for distance learning for almost one third of respondents. This is followed by personal development or lifelong learning (21.6%).

#### What is your main reason for taking up / wanting to take up distance learning?

In %: top 6 answers

#### I would like to...

...move up the career ladder / change career.

31.0

...pursue personal development / lifelong learning.

21.6

...improve my chances on the job market.

13.5

...expand my existing professional knowledge.

7.6

...improve my financial situation (in the medium term).

7.0

...change my profession.

6.0



## A REAL PLUS: PROFESSIONAL AND FINANCIAL IMPROVEMENT

**When respondents want to change careers, the financial aspect comes first.** But the respondents also aspire to a higher position (36.2%) and more responsibility (28.2%). A third would also simply like to achieve “more” in their professional lives.

**The desire for professional fulfilment, i.e. for a job that makes people happy, is also high.**

No less than 26.8% would like to change their career as a result of this. 11.7% would also like to have a second source of income.

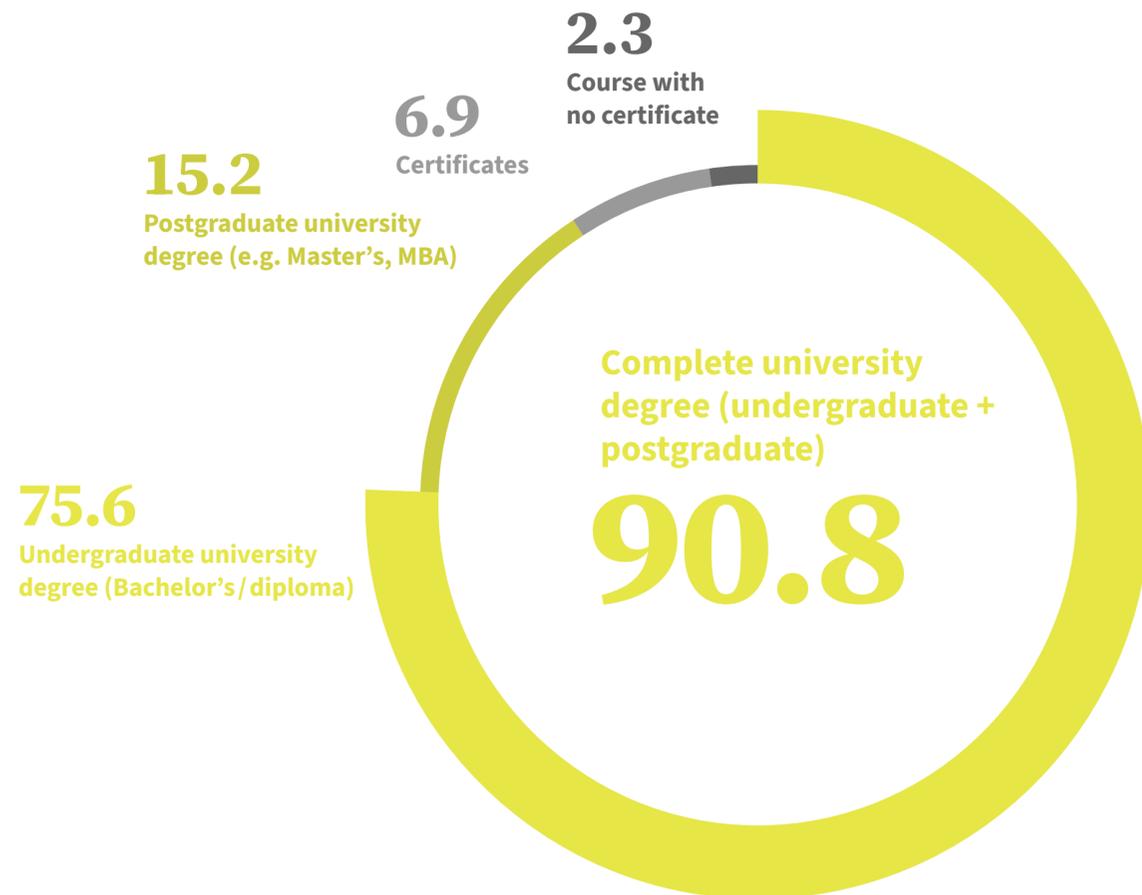
I would like to / wanted to...



**How exactly or why do you want / did you want to change professionally?** In %: only respondents who stated that they wanted to change professionally; top 10 answers

# A UNIVERSITY DEGREE? SHOULD BE POSSIBLE.

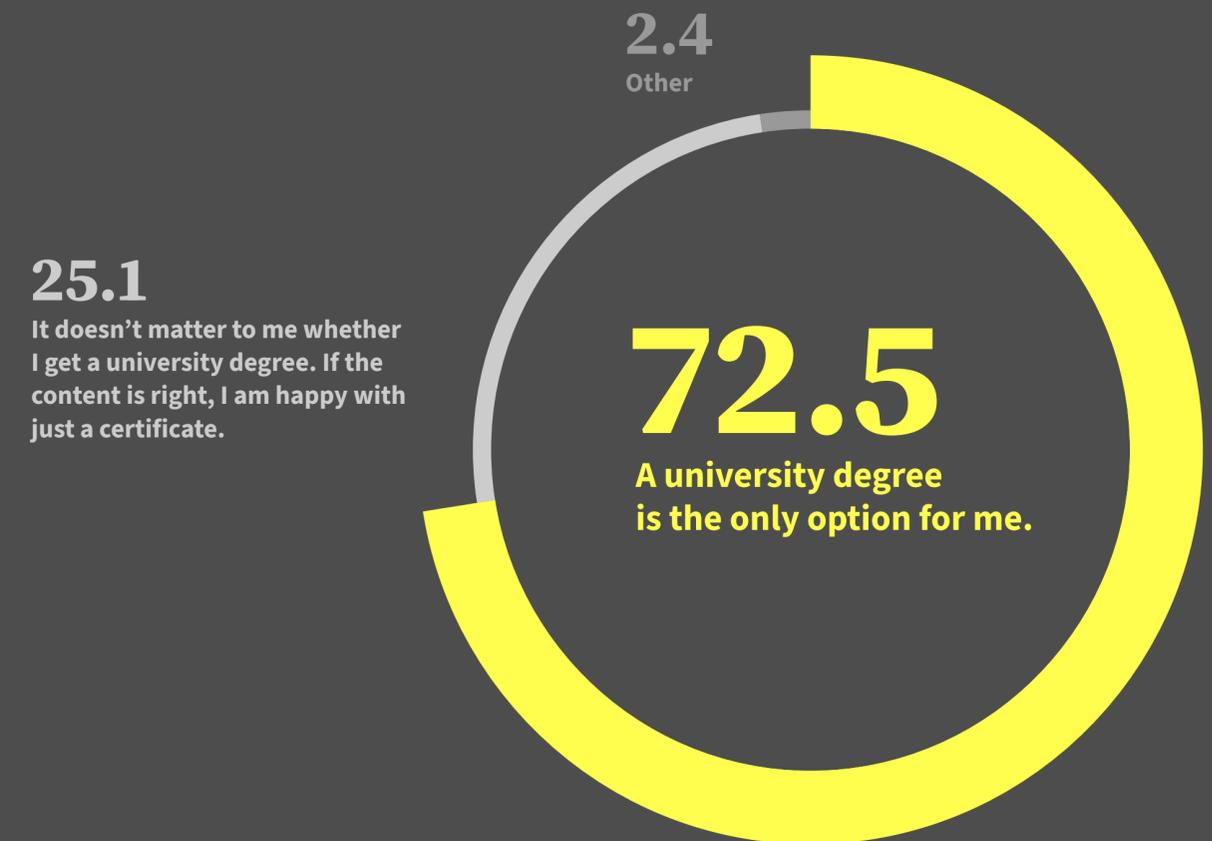
What qualification does / did your distance learning programme work towards or what would it work towards? In %



The 2023 Distance Learning Trend Study once again looks at the question of whether distance learning programmes work towards a university degree. The result is clear: three quarters of respondents would like their distance learning programme to lead to a bachelor's degree or diploma. If you include postgraduate university degrees, this figure is over 90%.

If the course is not working towards a university degree, there are two main reasons for this: firstly, the increased time required; secondly, the fact that a/another university degree is not required.

What do you think about online training courses without a university degree? In %: only respondents who want(ed) to work towards a university degree



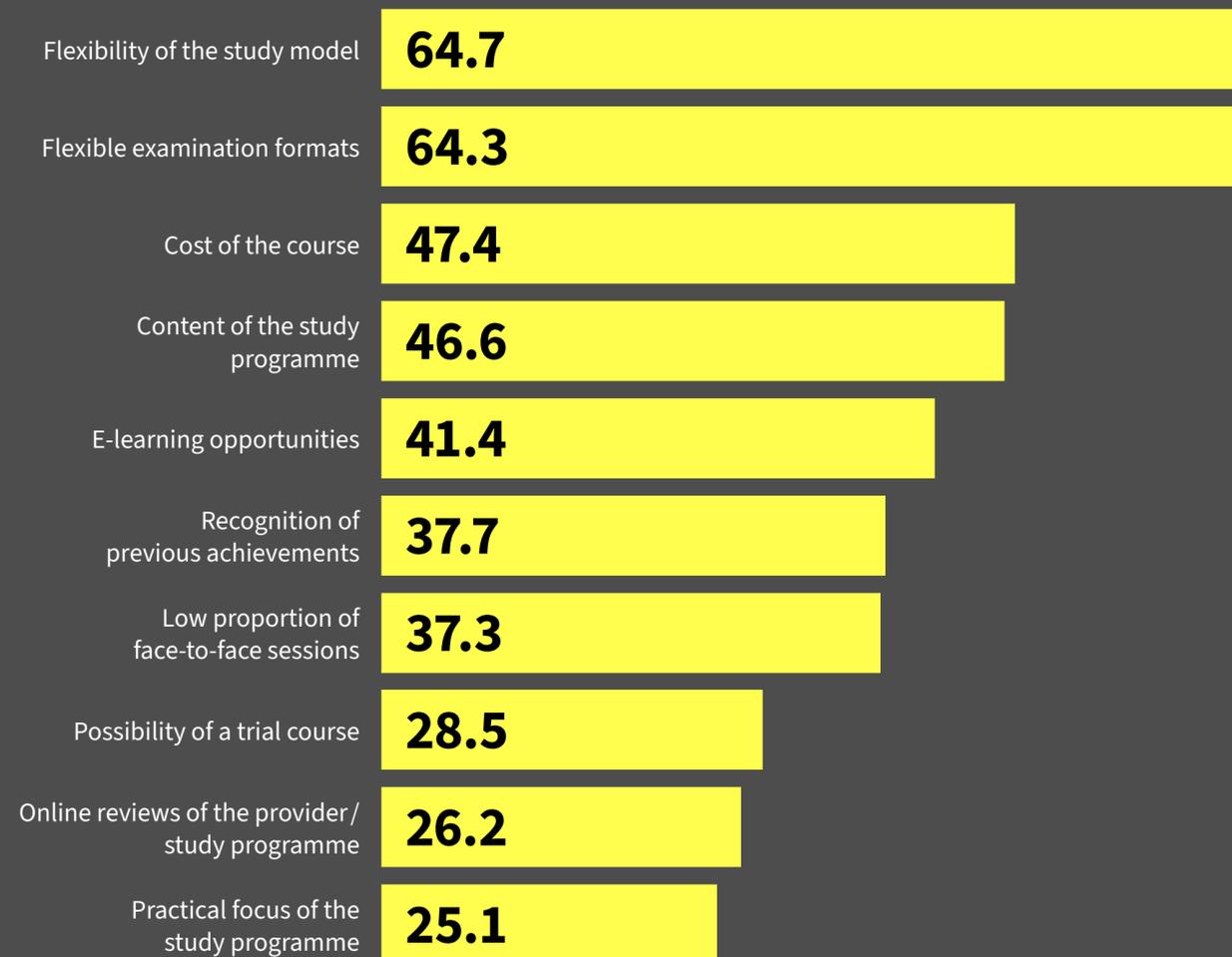
Why are you not interested in or have you not decided to study for a university degree?

In %: only respondents who do/did not want to work towards a university degree; top 3 answers



## FLEXIBILITY IN STUDY COURSES IS IN HIGH DEMAND.

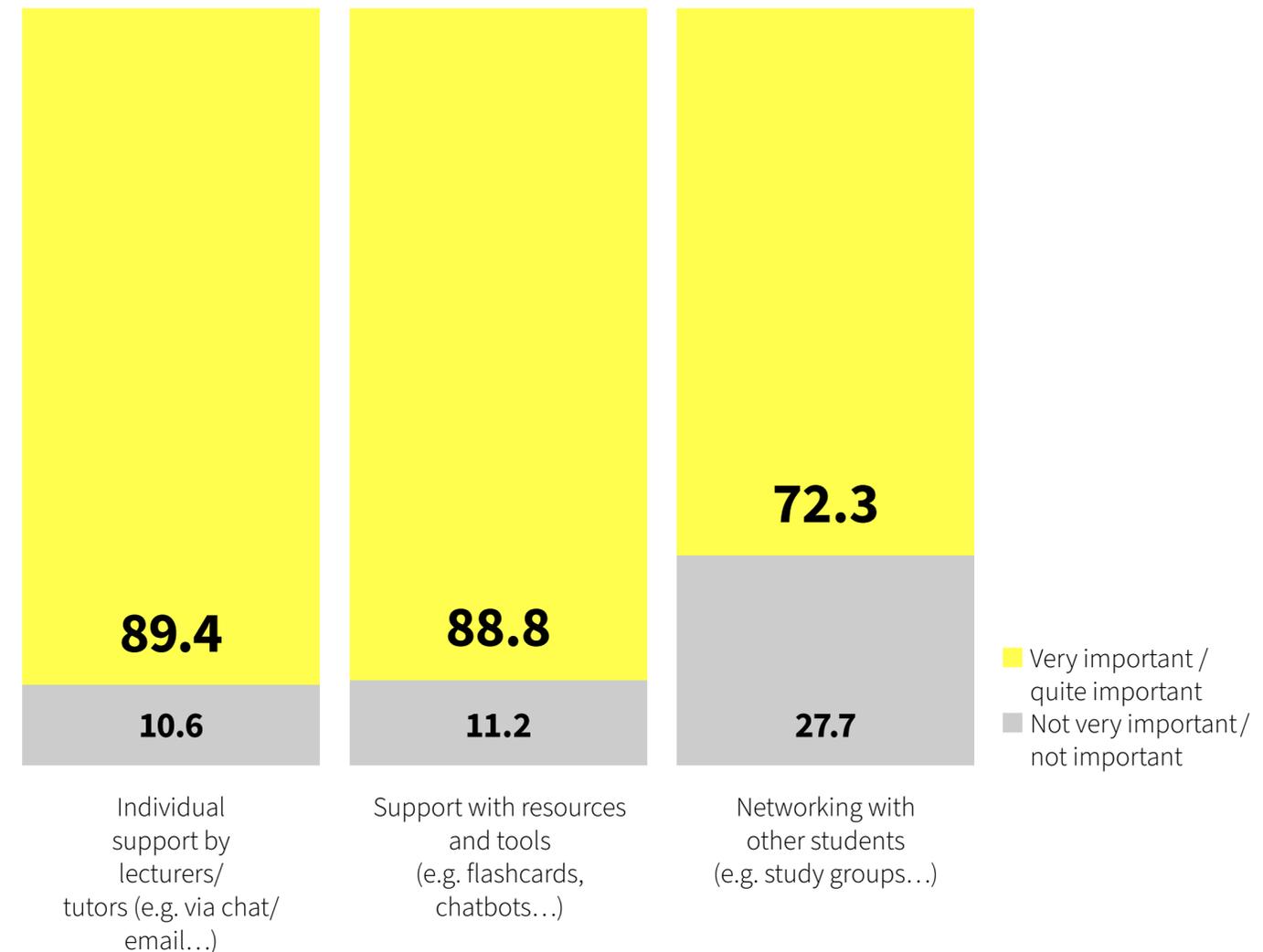
Which of the following aspects were / would be / are important to you when choosing your study programme? In %: top 10 answers



**At over 64%, flexibility is important in the choice of study programme for most respondents.** This applies both to the study model itself (e.g. with part-time options) and to the examination formats (e.g. online examinations). However, the cost of studying (47.4%) and e-learning opportunities (41.4%) are also still relevant. A low proportion of face-to-face sessions is preferred by 37.3% of respondents. A quarter of the respondents also want a high level of practical focus.

## WHAT DO DISTANCE LEARNERS WANT?

How important are / would the following channels be to you in terms of specialist support? In %



**Despite their digital affinity, when it comes to the subject matter, almost 9 out of 10 respondents consider the individual support provided by lecturers / tutors to be important in distance learning.** The same goes for the support provided by special resources and tools for distance learning.

**PREFERRED SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE.**

**RESEARCHING AND FINDING INFORMATION ONLINE.**

**How did you find out about your distance learning programme / your distance learning provider?**

In %: top 6 answers



Search engines

Advertising on social networks / social media marketing

Recommendation by friends, acquaintances, family

Online forums

Online directories of study programmes

Rating portals

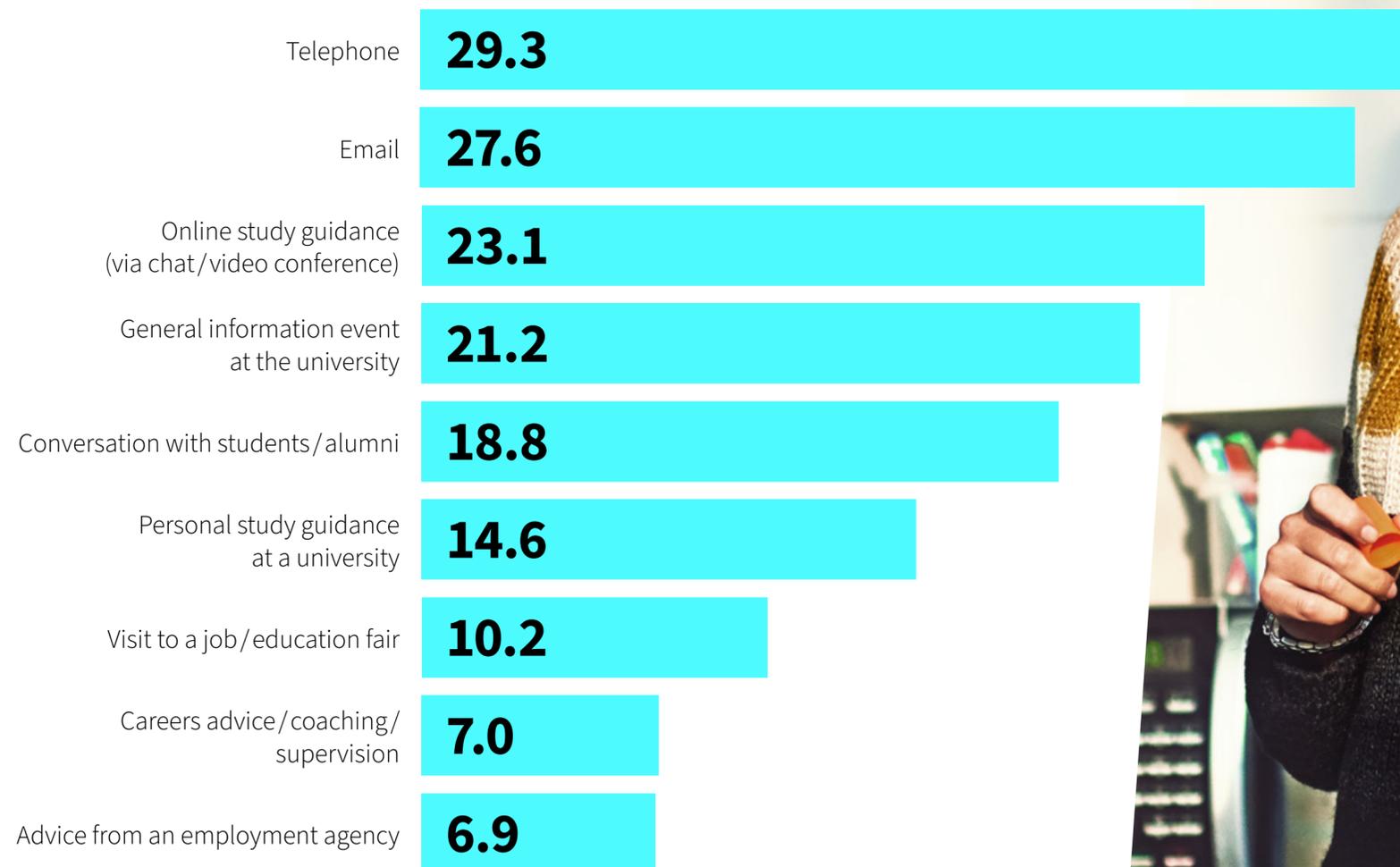
Search engines like Google are the first choice when it comes to finding initial information on distance learning. This is followed by social networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn. And respondents also consciously search for specific information about study programmes on rating portals, in online forums or in online directories. 17.2% are/were

made aware of their study programme or study provider through recommendations from friends, acquaintances or family. Radio, TV or billboard advertising is cited as a source of information by only 1.2% of respondents.

# GUIDANCE IS IMPORTANT. ESPECIALLY BEFORE STARTING A STUDY PROGRAMME.

Guidance services are mainly provided by telephone before the start of the study programme. This is followed by email and online study guidance. General information events organised by universities are still used by 21.2% of respondents. Conversations with students/alumni are an option for 18.8%. By contrast, only 10.2% of respondents would visit an education fair.

**Which of the following guidance services did/would you use before starting your study programme?** In %: top 9 answers



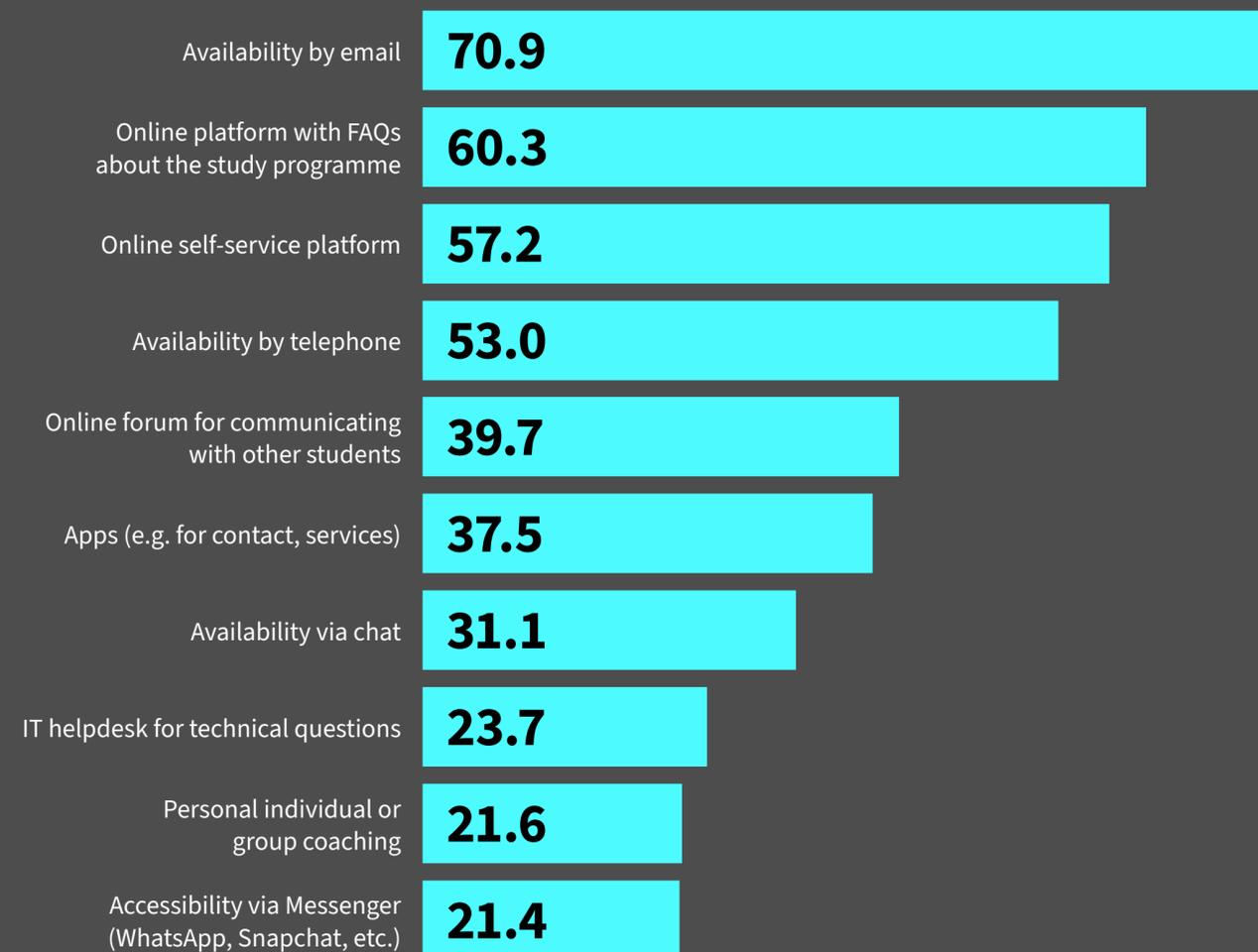
## GOOD SUPPORT IS IMPORTANT. WITH REGARD TO ORGANISATION AS WELL AS SUBJECT MATTER.

In terms of **organisational support**, distance learners place particular value on being reachable by email. But many respondents also want a platform with frequently asked questions about their studies (60.3%) or a self-service platform for certificates or data changes (57.2%). Traditional telephone contact is also relevant for 53.0%.

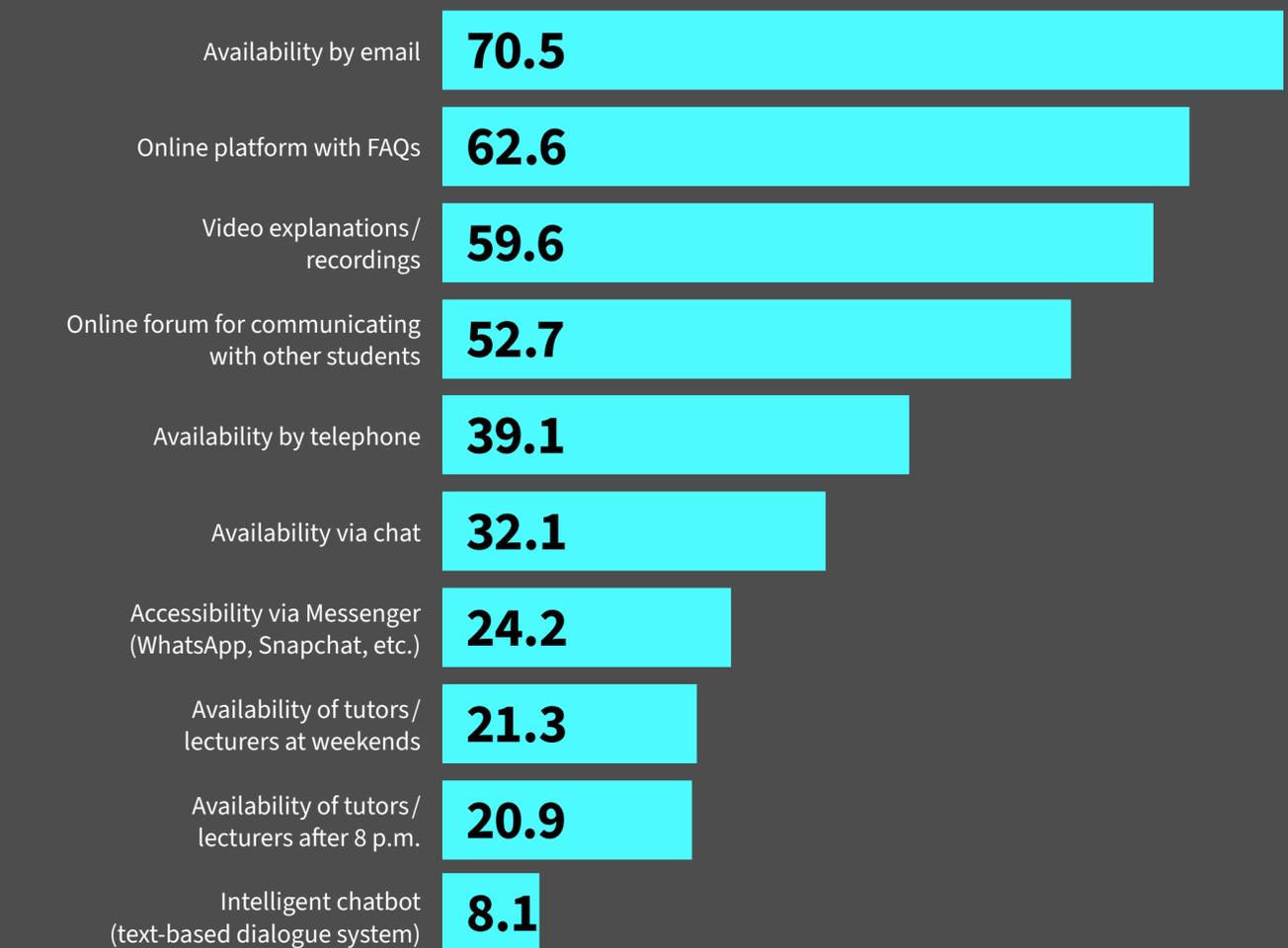
When it comes to **specialist support**, email contact and online platforms with FAQs also come in first and second place respectively. Both video explanations and online forums for interacting with other students are important aspects for more than half of the respondents in each case.

**GOOD TO KNOW: ALSO IN THE CURRENT SURVEY, MOST RESPONDENTS WANT AN ANSWER TO ORGANISATIONAL AND TECHNICAL QUESTIONS WITHIN 24 HOURS.**

Which of the following aspects are/were/would be important to you in terms of **organisational support** for your distance learning programme? In %: top 10 answers



Which of the following aspects are/were/would be important to you in terms of **specialist support** for your distance learning programme? In %



SATISFACTION AND REPUTATION OF DISTANCE LEARNING.

# DISTANCE LEARNING?

# IT MAKES SENSE.

In general, the level of satisfaction among distance learners is high. More than a quarter are very satisfied with their study programme. Over half are mostly satisfied. Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, is very low at 5.2% overall.

How satisfied are/were you with your distance learning programme? In %: students and graduates only



94.7%

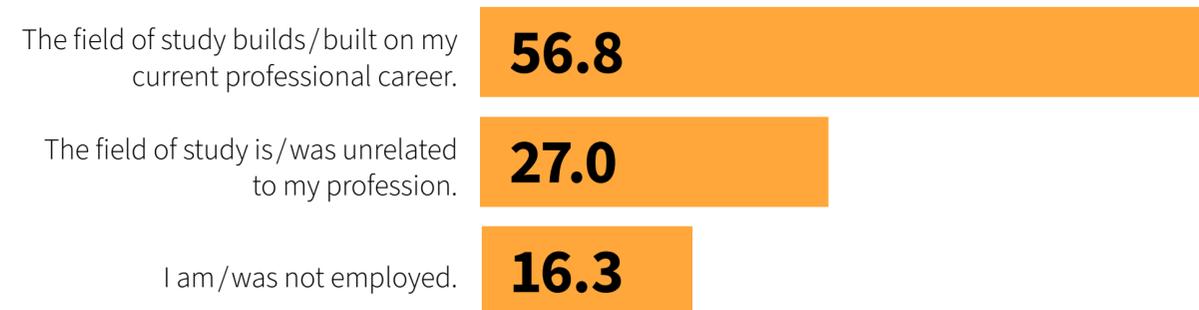
- Fairly dissatisfied (3.5)
- Mostly dissatisfied (1.0)
- Very dissatisfied (0.7)



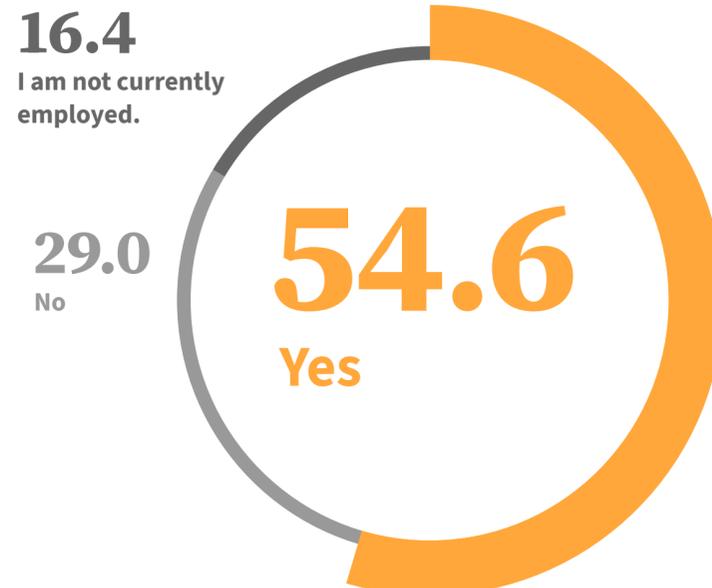
## DISTANCE LEARNING WITH CAREER RELEVANCE.

56.8% of distance learners say that their field of study builds on their current career. 27.0% study a subject unrelated to their profession. More than half of respondents have already been able to apply their acquired knowledge productively in their everyday professional lives.

**In which field are you undertaking/did you undertake your distance learning course?** In %: students, graduates and college dropouts only



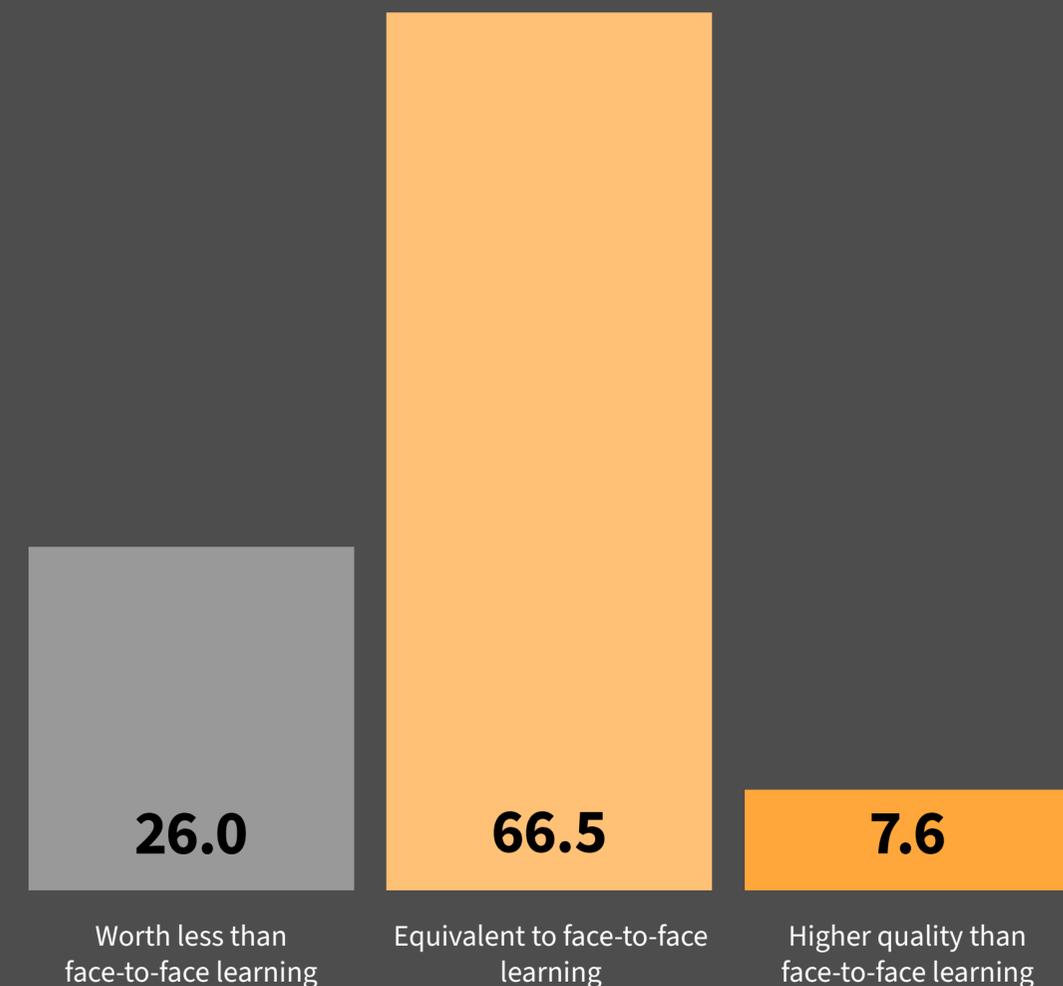
**Have you already been able to apply the knowledge you acquired during the distance learning course productively in your everyday professional life?** In %: students, graduates and college dropouts only



## ON A PAR WITH FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING.

More than two thirds of the respondents believe distance learning is regarded as equivalent by an employer. 7.6% even think that distance learning is of higher quality than face-to-face learning.

**In your opinion/experience, how is distance learning regarded by employers?** In %: students, graduates and college dropouts only



**FINANCING YOUR STUDIES.**

# FROM YOUR OWN POCKET.

Over 60% of distance learners finance their studies out of their own pocket. For some, personal connections also assume the financial responsibility. Employers are cited as the main source by only 6.7%.

**How are/were your studies mainly financed?**

In %: students and graduates only;  
top 4 answers

Through own  
employment

**60.4**

By employer  
**6.7**

By state  
funding (e.g.  
BAföG/grant)  
**5.2**

By family/  
personal connections  
**14.9**



# EMPLOYER SUPPORT IS NOT VERY COMMON.

**More than half of the respondents do not receive any support from their employer.** Only just under 30% are or were mostly supported – in terms of organisation, time or finances. But the respondents are also supported by their company through recognition and development prospects.

Another interesting finding: Almost half of the respondents who did not receive support did not want any. Another 45.6% said support was actively refused by the employer.

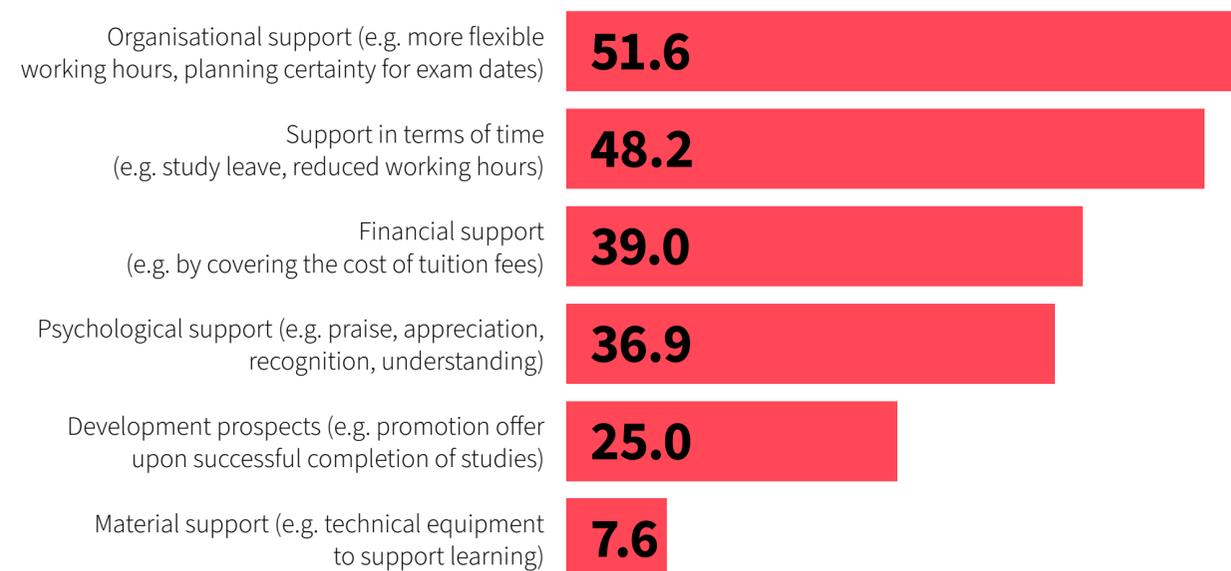
**Does/did your employer support you in your distance learning?** In %: students, graduates and college dropouts only



■ Yes  
■ No  
■ I am not currently employed.

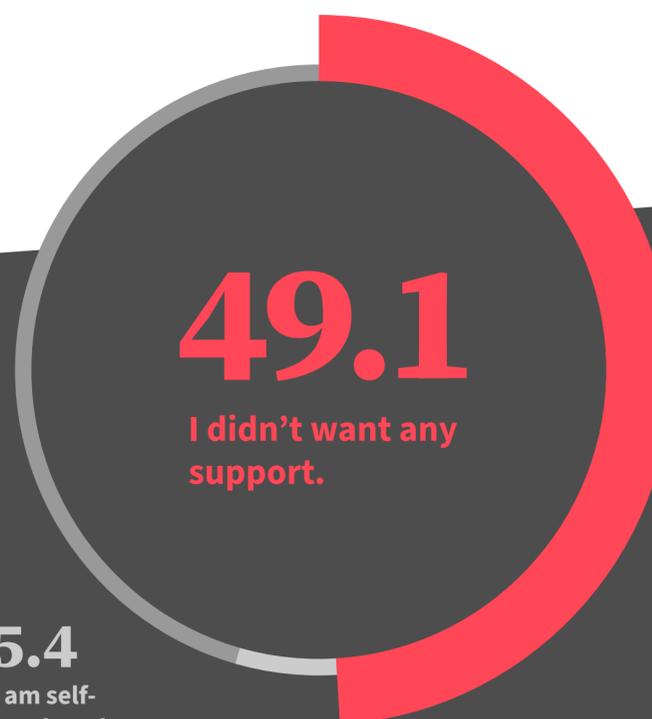
## In what way are/were you supported by your employer?

In %: only students, graduates and college dropouts supported by their employer; top 6 answers



**45.6**  
 My employer refused to support me.

**5.4**  
 I am self-employed.



## Why did you not receive support from your employer?

In %: only students, graduates and college dropouts not supported by their employer



“ **MORE THAN  
HALF ARE NOT  
SUPPORTED BY  
THEIR EMPLOYER IN  
THEIR DISTANCE  
LEARNING.**

For 45.6% of them, this is because the employer refused to provide support. In view of the glaring shortage of skilled workers in Germany, these are alarming figures, especially given that more than half of respondents state that they have already been able to proactively apply the knowledge they acquired during their study programme in their careers. Employers are missing out on a huge amount of potential expertise and, of course, the opportunity to strengthen the motivation and loyalty of their employees.”

**Prof. Dr Holger Sommerfeldt**

Rector IU International University of Applied Sciences

TIME MANAGEMENT AND LEARNING STRUCTURES.

# ONLY A MATTER OF TIME.

WANTED: THE PERFECT  
WORK-LEARN BALANCE.

Full-time study is the option most often (potentially) chosen by distance learners, at 44.3%. In second place is part-time study with a time commitment of 15 to 30 hours a week (35.4%). Around a fifth of distance learners (potentially) choose to study part-time for less than 15 hours a week.

Which study model have you  
chosen/would you choose? In %

20.3

Part-time,  
up to 15 h/week

44.3

Full-time, more  
than 30 h/week

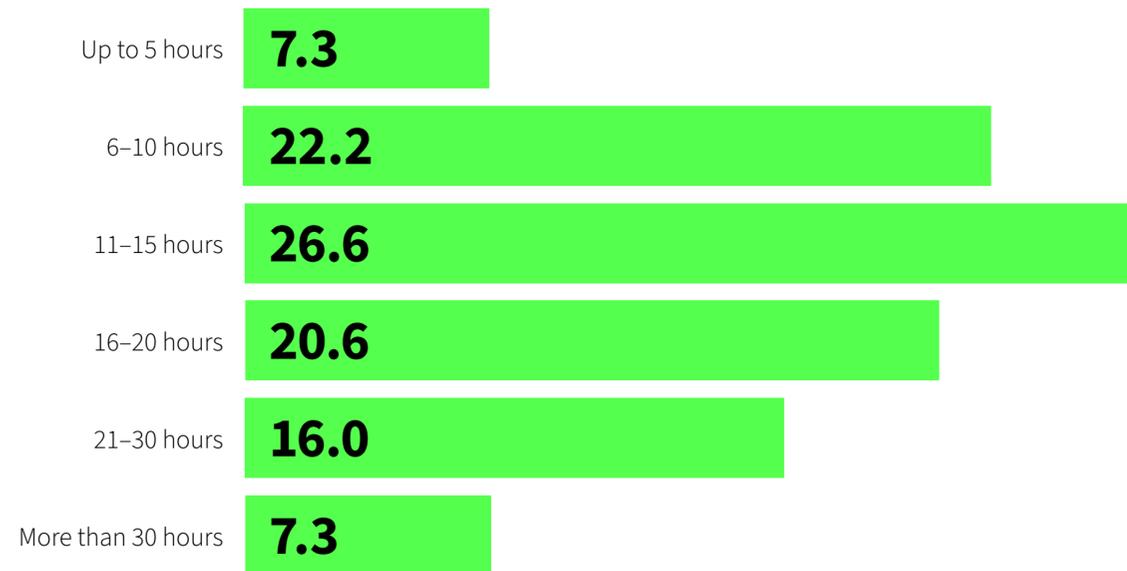
35.4

Part-time,  
15-30 h/week



## THE TREND IS TOWARDS PART-TIME.

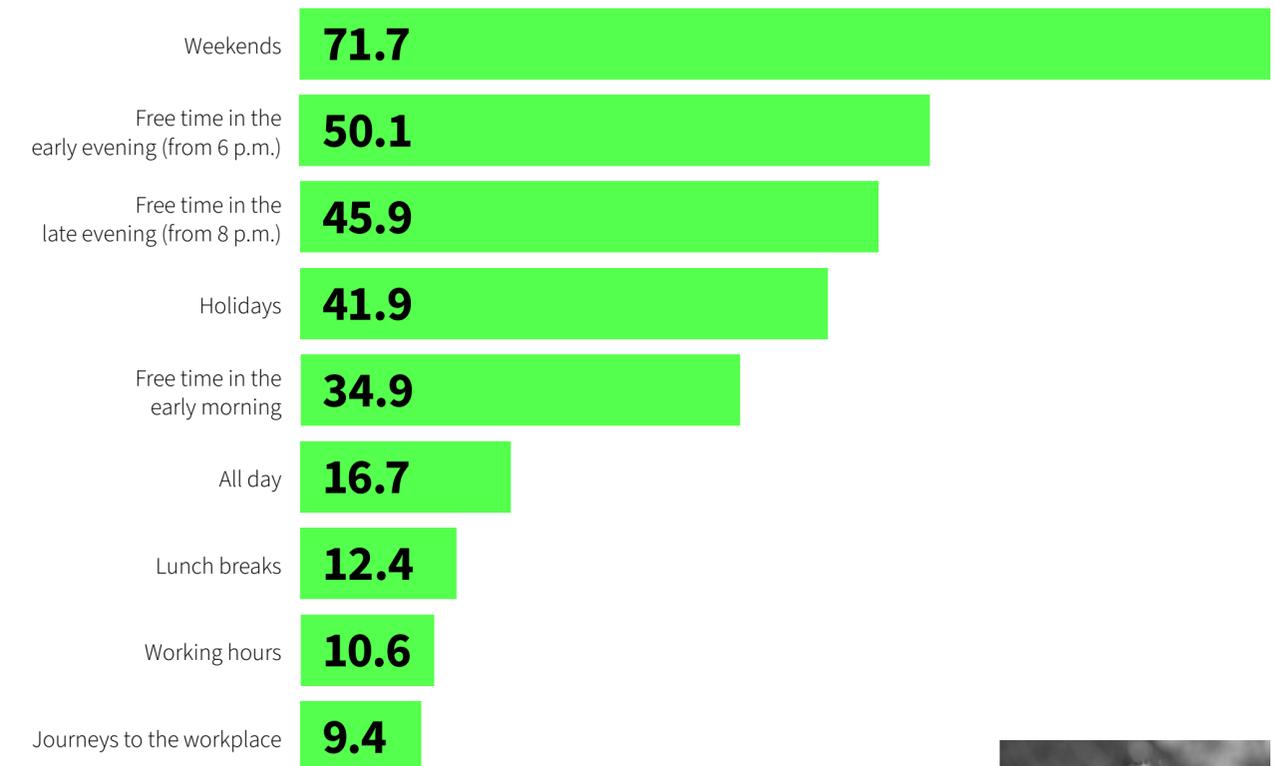
How many hours can you / could you / were you able to devote to distance learning per week? In %



The majority (47.2%) of respondents say they are able to devote about 11 to 20 hours a week to learning. 16.0% of respondents are even able to devote between 21 and 30 hours. In contrast, only 7.3% are able to spend more than 30 hours on learning. Therefore, many only have capacity for part-time study – yet some have still chosen or would choose full-time study.

## “PRIME TIME” AT WEEKENDS AND IN THE EVENING.

Which times can you / could you / were you able to use most for learning? In %



“The time required for distance learning is often underestimated – this creates a discrepancy between the chosen time model and the actual time available. To prevent this and to find a study model that fits the student’s situation, good advice must be gained before starting a study programme.”



Prof. Dr  
Holger Sommerfeldt  
Rector IU International  
University of Applied Sciences

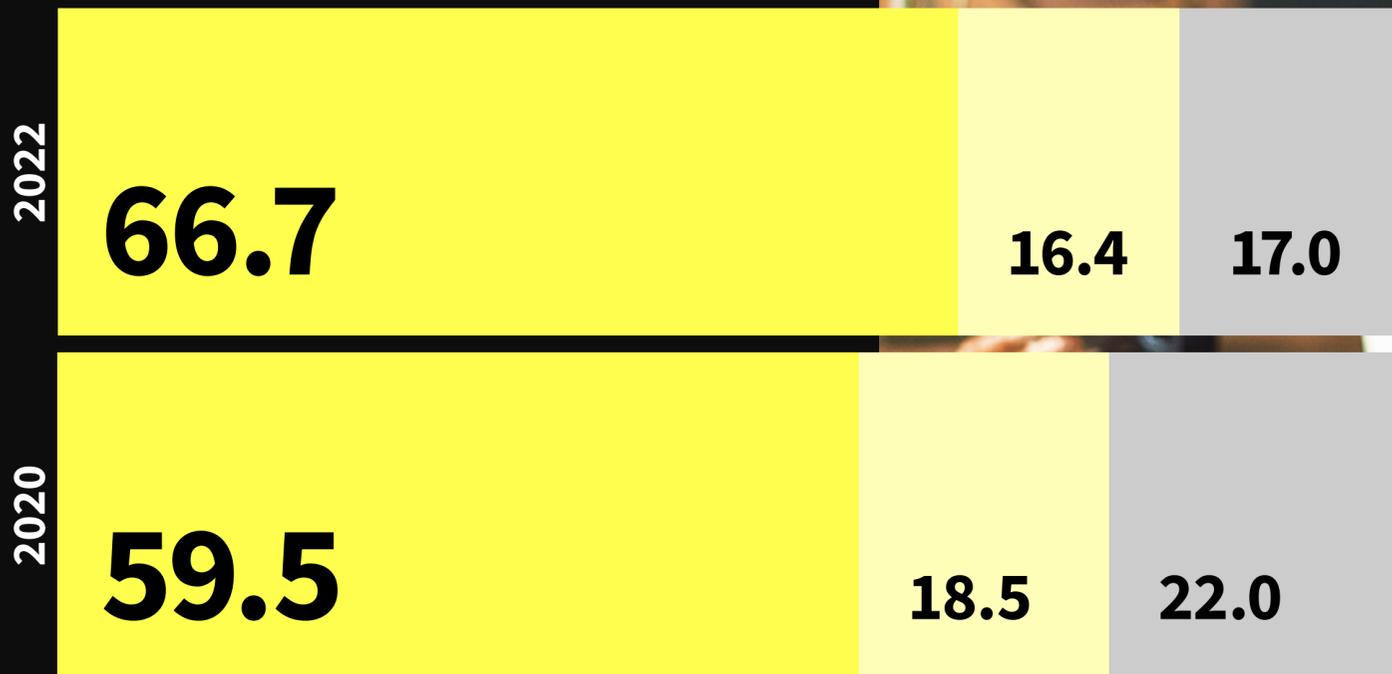
## BENEFITS OF DISTANCE LEARNING.

# A REAL ADVANTAGE.

While in the 2020 survey, 59.5% of graduates\* stated that they were able to make positive changes in their careers as a result of completing a distance learning qualification, this increased by another 7 percentage points in 2022.

**Have you been able to make positive changes in your career as a result of your distance learning qualification?**

In %: graduates only



■ Yes ■ Undecided ■ No

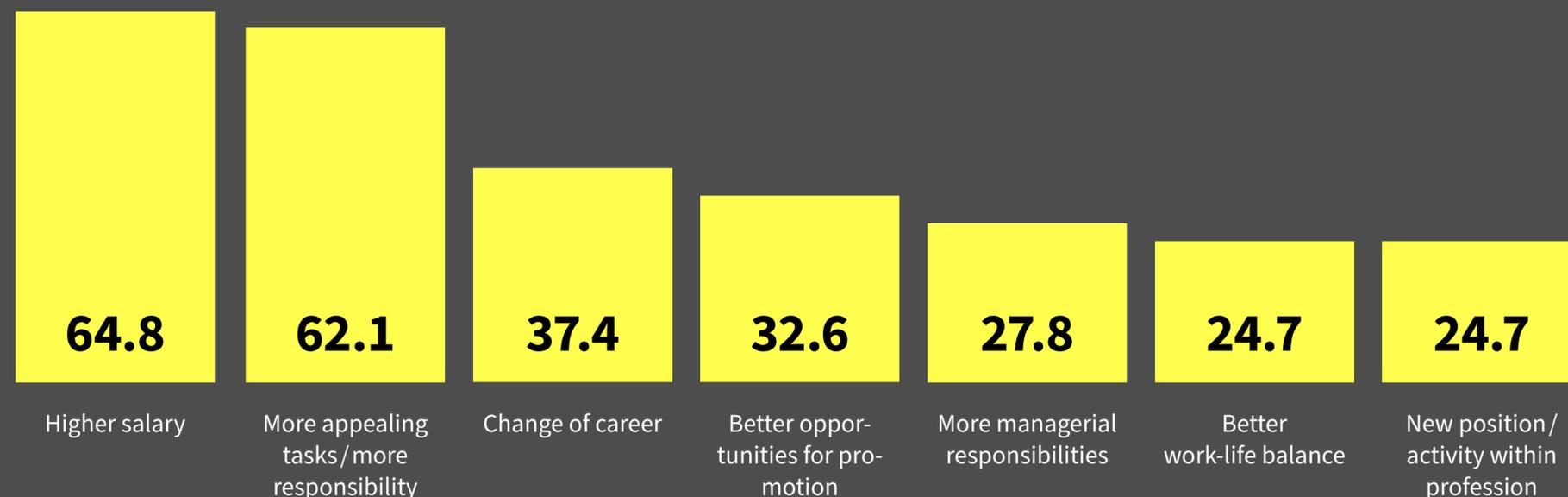
\*2021 Distance Learning Trend Study.  
International University of Applied Sciences, 2021, p. 22



## MORE MONEY AND AN ATTRACTIVE JOB.

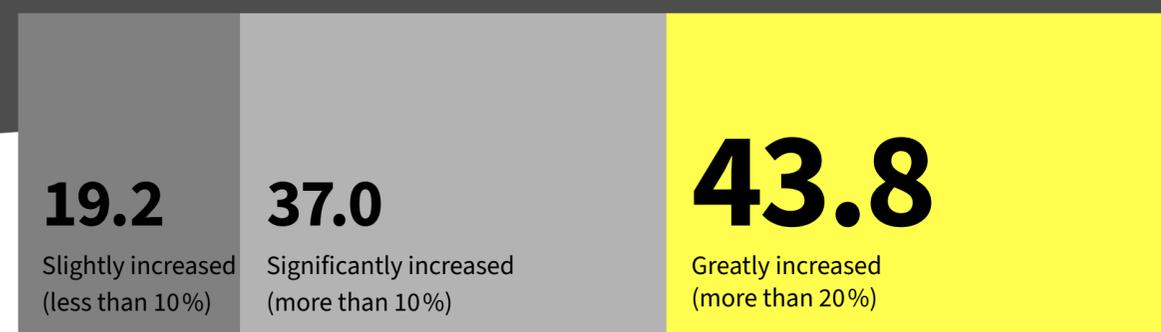
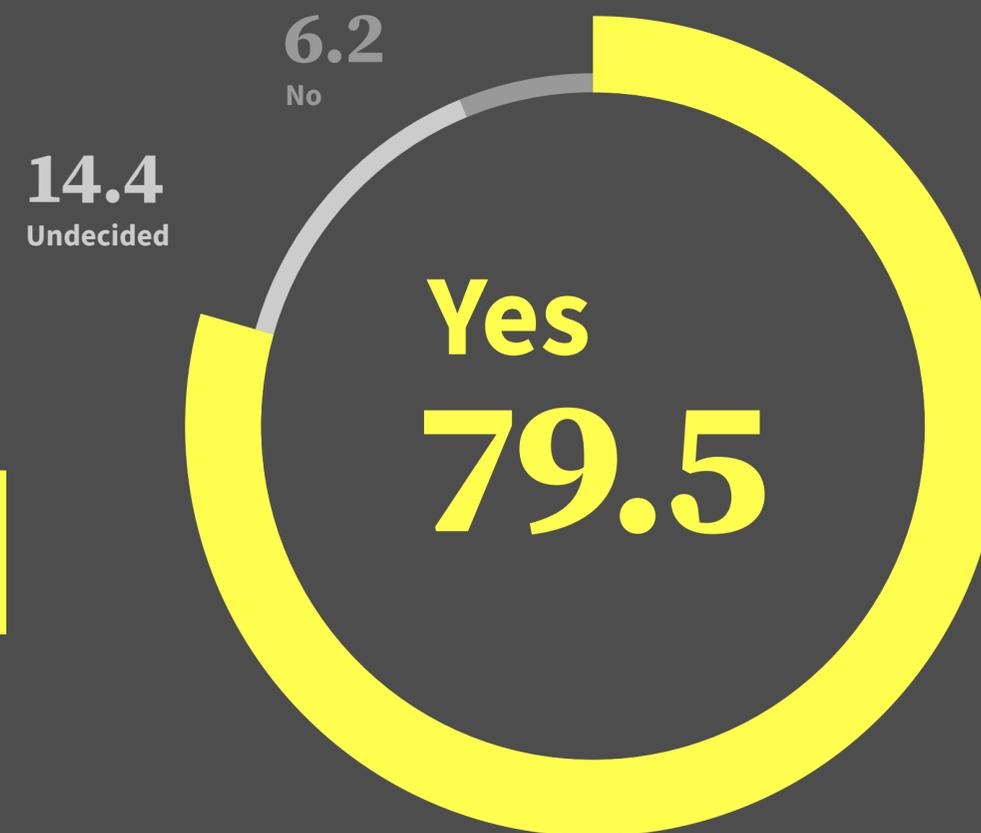
### How has your professional position changed positively?

In %: only graduates with positive changes in their career; top 7 answers



### In your view, has your distance learning programme been financially worthwhile?

In %: only graduates whose salary has increased



Positive career changes after distance learning are primarily a higher salary (64.8%) and more appealing tasks or more responsibility (62.1%). Just under a quarter also said they achieved a better work-life balance as a result.

### To what extent has your distance learning course had an impact on your income?

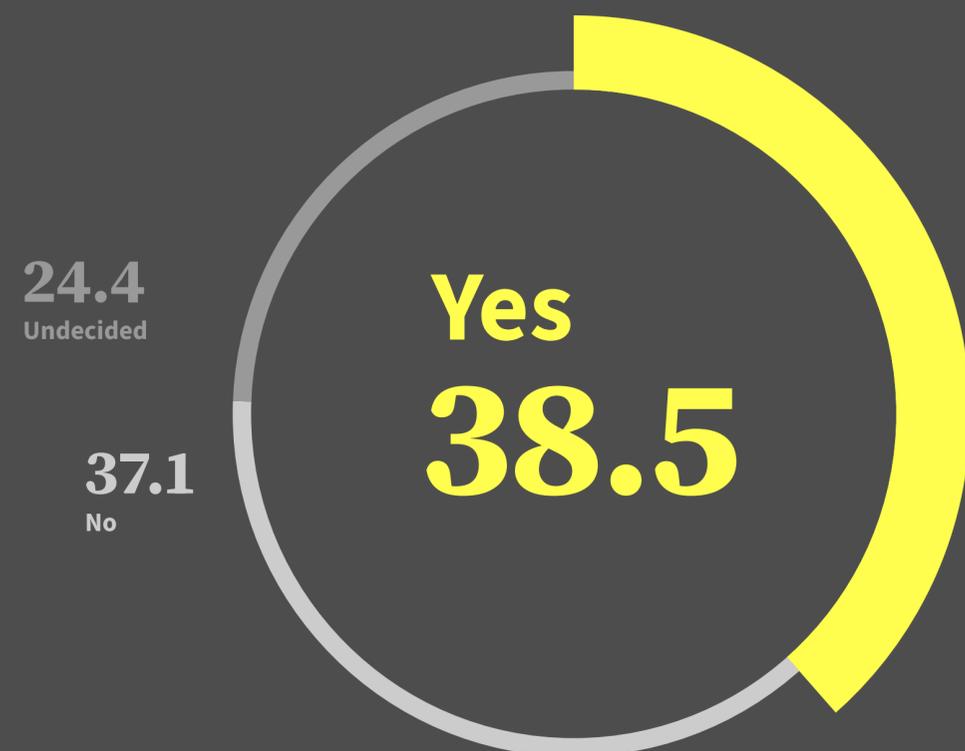
In %: only graduates whose salary has increased

has increased

## POSITIVE IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING. A PLUS FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE, TOO.

Studying is not only worthwhile financially or career-wise, but for 38.5% of respondents it also has a positive effect on their personal life. More than 70% of the respondents who answered “Yes” say that their self-confidence was strengthened by distance learning and that it was an intellectual enrichment. Social recognition has also increased for 48.9%.

**Has your personal life changed positively as a result of your distance learning qualification?** In %: graduates only



**To what extent has your personal life changed positively as a result of your distance learning qualification?** In %: only graduates with a positive change in their personal lives; top 4 answers

**70.2** Higher self-confidence

**70.2** Intellectual enrichment

**51.9** Better balance and joie de vivre

**48.9** Social recognition

“Studying is not always associated with pleasure, and can also be stressful. Professional and family obligations often play a major role, especially in distance learning. Education providers should support students on their educational path, especially in times of crisis, through flexible options, innovative solutions and individual assistance. If this can be done, it also puts the joy back into learning.”



**Dr Carmen Thoma**  
COO Distance Learning,  
IU International University of Applied Sciences

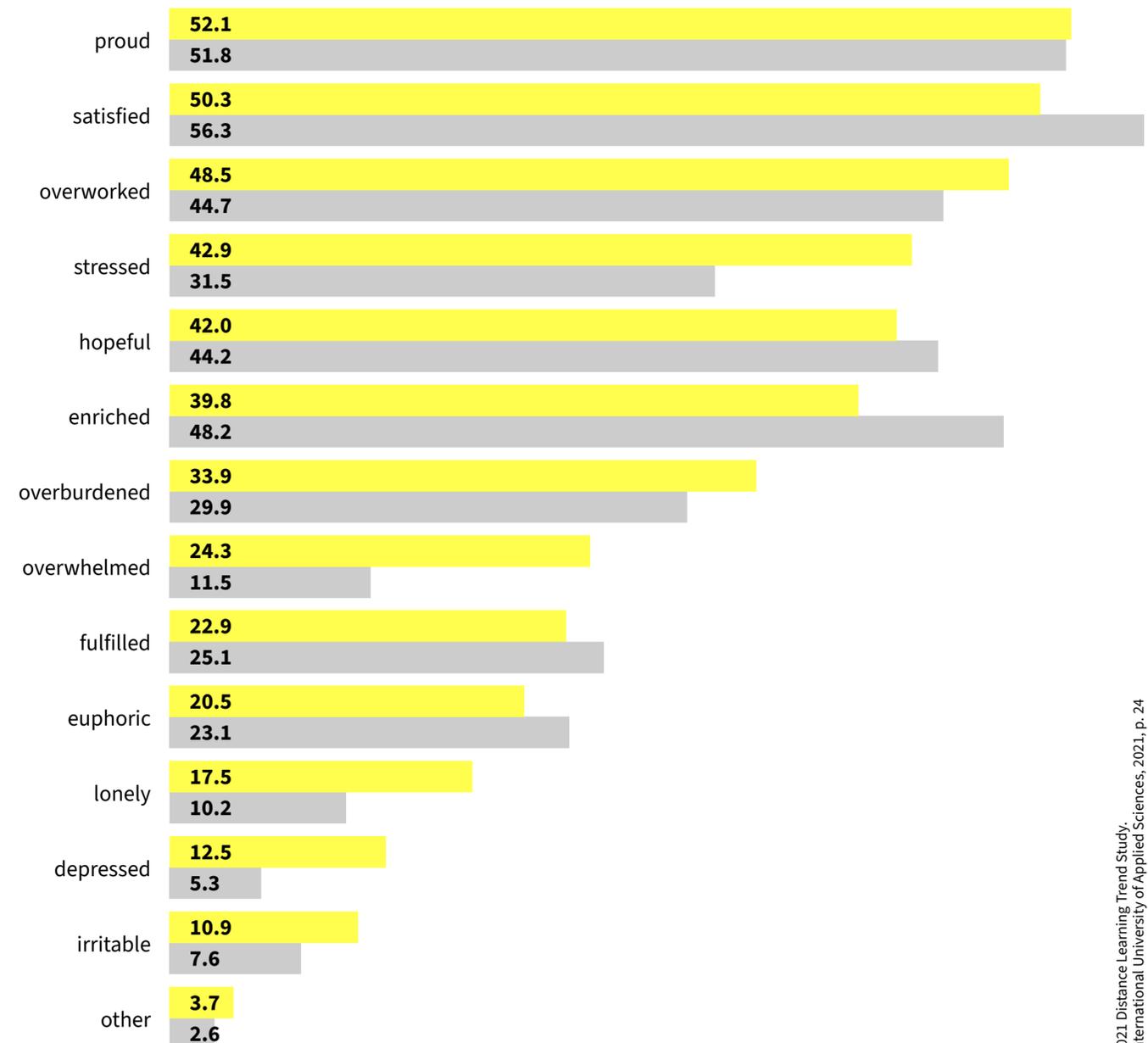
## PRIDE AND STRESS ARE CLOSELY LINKED.

More than half of respondents are proud of what they have achieved and are satisfied with it. However, compared to the 2020 survey\*, stress, strain and overload have also increased significantly. Negative feelings were fundamentally more pronounced in 2022 than they were in 2020.

### How do/did you feel during your distance learning?

In %: students, graduates and college dropouts only

■ 2022 ■ 2020

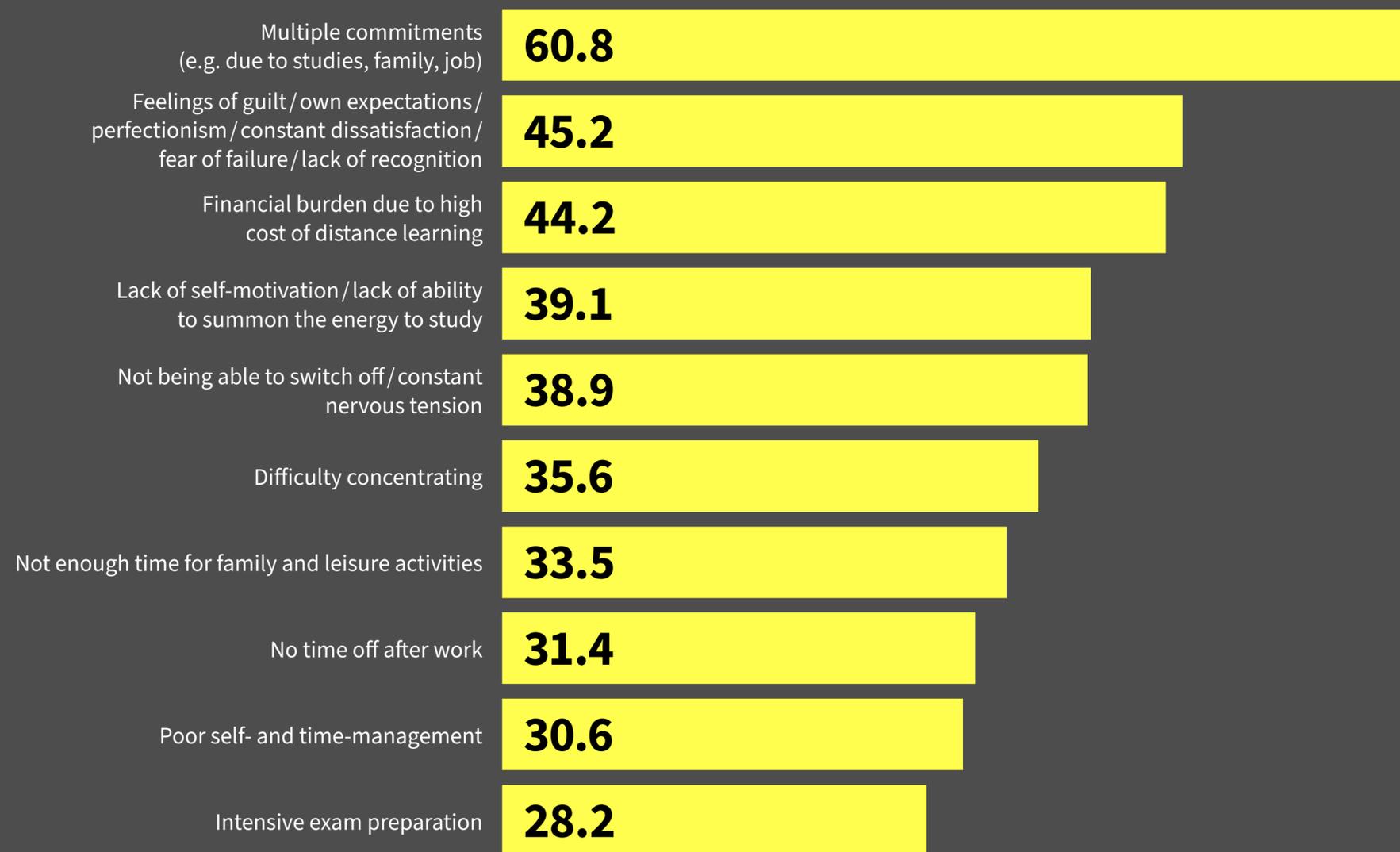


## STUDYING DESPITE CHILDREN AND CAREER? IT'S NOT EASY.

Most of the respondents (60.8%) find it difficult to balance family, work and studies. Their own expectations and fear of failure also play a major role, followed by the financial burden and a lack of motivation to learn.

### Which aspects of your distance learning course did you find particularly stressful?

In %: only students, graduates and college dropouts who associate negative feelings with their studies; top 10 answers



## DISTANCE LEARNING PAYS OFF.

Despite multiple commitments, negative feelings and other stresses, 93.5% of distance learners say it was worth the stress.



**Do you think the stress of distance learning is / was worth it?** In %: only students, graduates and college dropouts who associate negative feelings with their studies

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

# THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL LEARNING.

Which format do you/would you prefer for your distance learning course? In %: top 7 answers



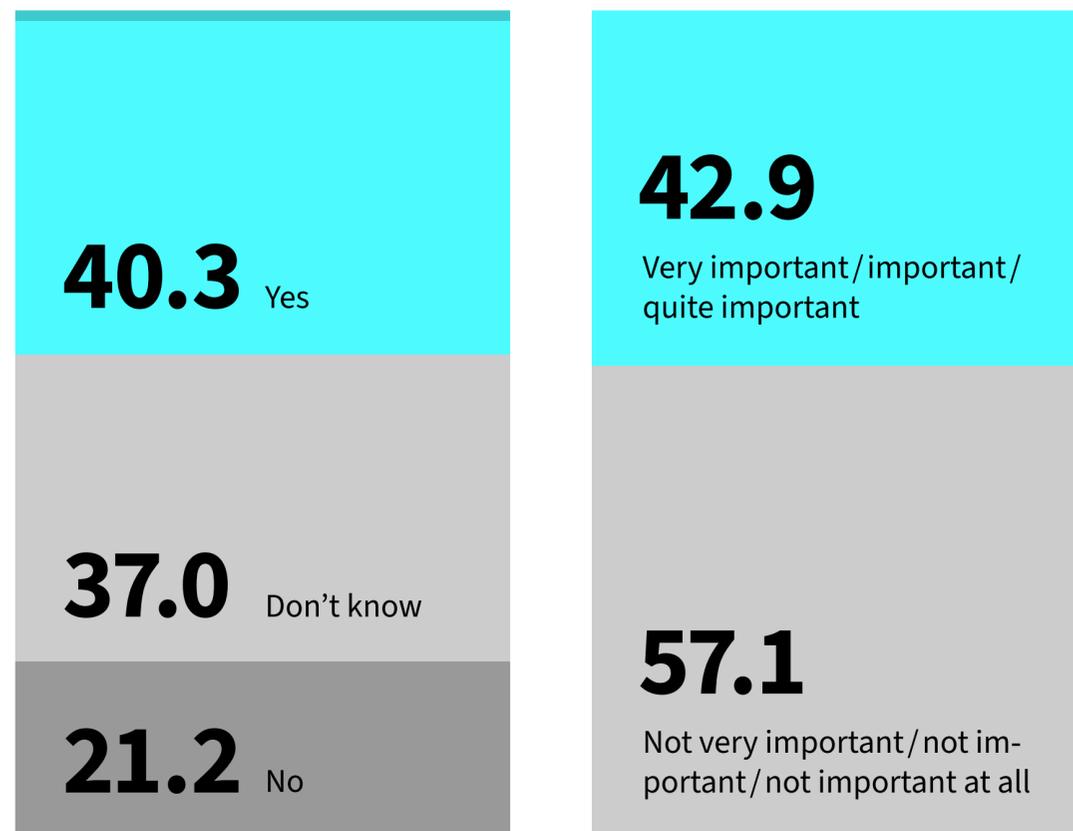
**63.9%** prefer distance learning with online sessions, but without face-to-face sessions.

Education is becoming increasingly digital. More and more students are also looking for digital options in distance learning. Almost half of the respondents prefer a distance learning programme without face-to-face sessions with a purely online offering on demand – i.e. maximum flexibility. This is followed by distance learning that specifies fixed times.

# AI – ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. ALSO RELEVANT FOR STUDYING.

The current study shows that artificial intelligence in academic studies has not yet really caught on among respondents. Only 1.5% already use AI in their studies. Many are still unsure. Nevertheless, 42.9% of respondents generally have a positive attitude towards the support provided by AI tools.

**1.5** Yes, I already use AI in my studies.



Are you generally interested in using artificial intelligence in your studies? In %

How important is it to you that a university offers support through artificial intelligence? In %



Many students are not even aware of the potential AI offers for learning. AI works adaptively, adjusting to the needs and learning standards of the user: for example, it points out certain passages in digital lecture notes or asks about the user's level of knowledge. This allows students to concentrate on the essentials."

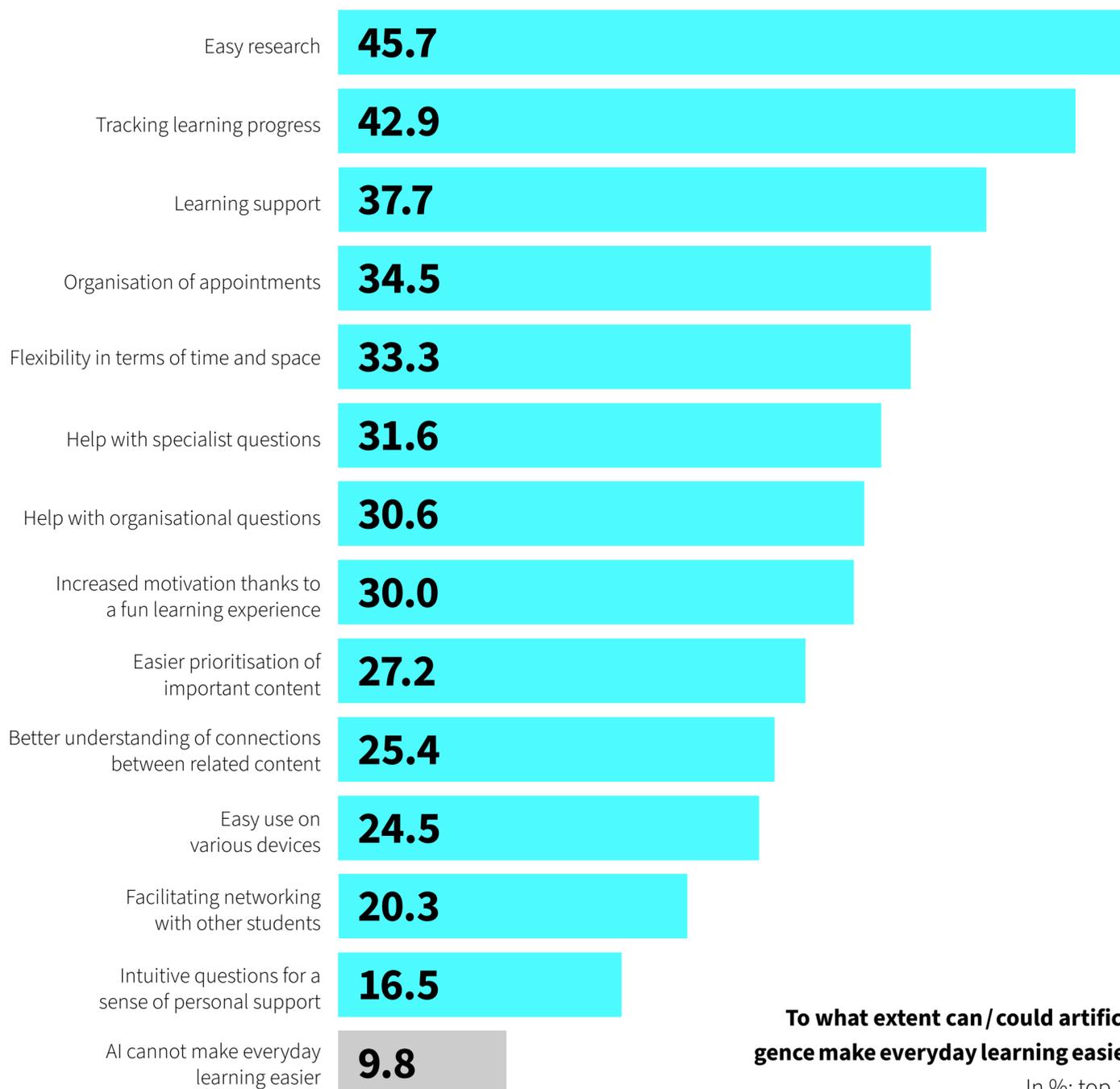


**Prof. Dr. Thomas Zöller**

Professor of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence & Head of the "Data Science" programme at IU International University of Applied Sciences

# INTELLIGENT SUPPORT. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

More than 42% of the respondents state that the use of AI tools could actually make everyday learning simpler through easier research and better tracking of their learning progress. Nevertheless, many are still sceptical about AI. Above all, the fear that they will have less human interaction is an issue for 47.1% of respondents.



**To what extent can/could artificial intelligence make everyday learning easier for you?**

In %: top 14 answers

By using AI, I have less human interaction.  
**47.1**

AI makes everyday learning easier.  
**36.9**

AI saves me a lot of time in everyday learning.  
**33.3**

By having tasks taken away from me, I learn fewer skills.  
**34.2**

I have concerns about data protection.  
**38.7**



**To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding artificial intelligence in academic studies?** In %: only the answers “completely agree” and “somewhat agree” on a scale of 1 to 5

## FACTS ABOUT THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS.

# ABOUT THE STUDY.

Where do you live? In %



In a municipality (less than 10,000 inhabitants)

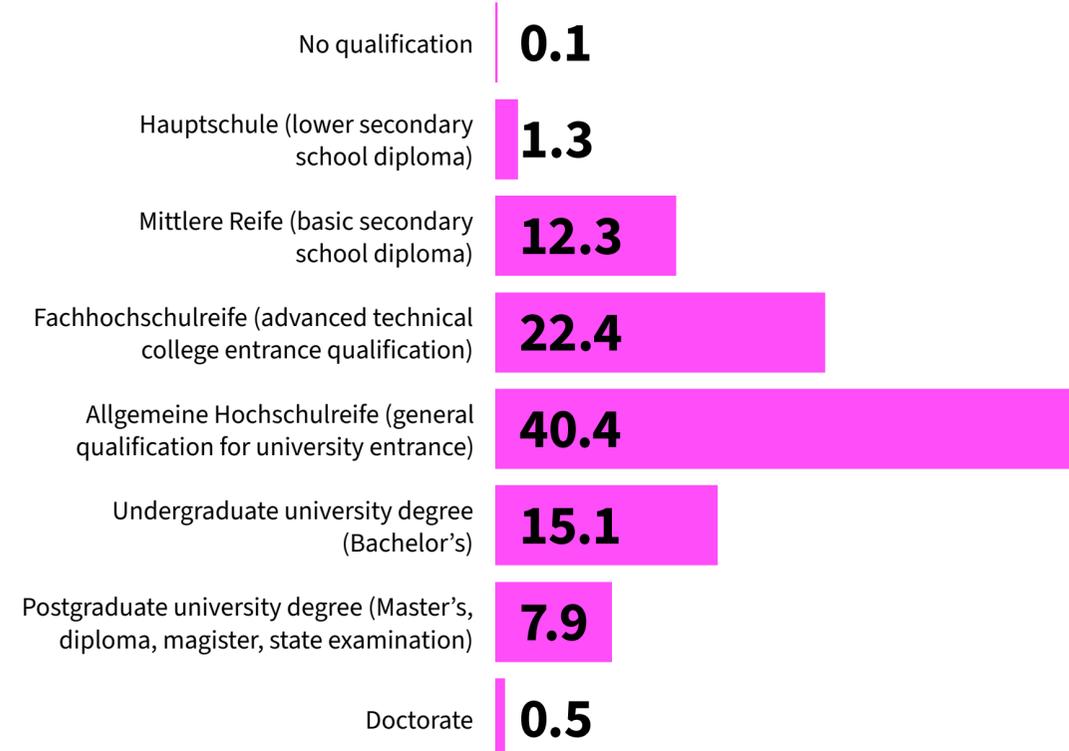


In a small town (10,000–50,000 inhabitants)

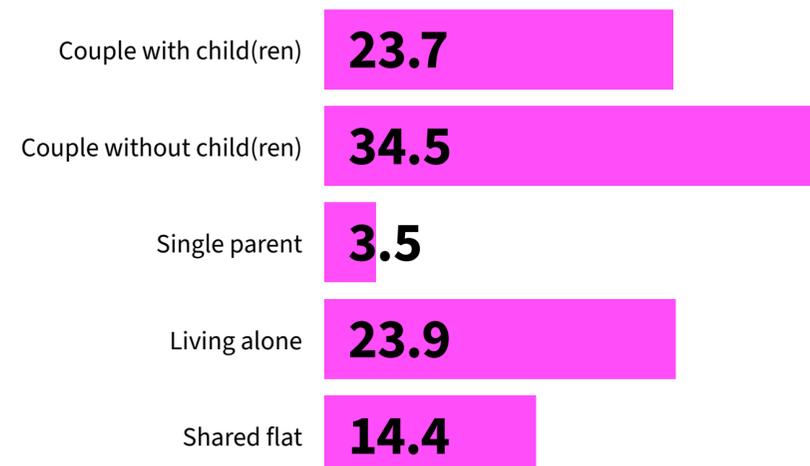


In a medium-sized/large city (more than 50,000 inhabitants)

Please state your highest educational qualification. In %

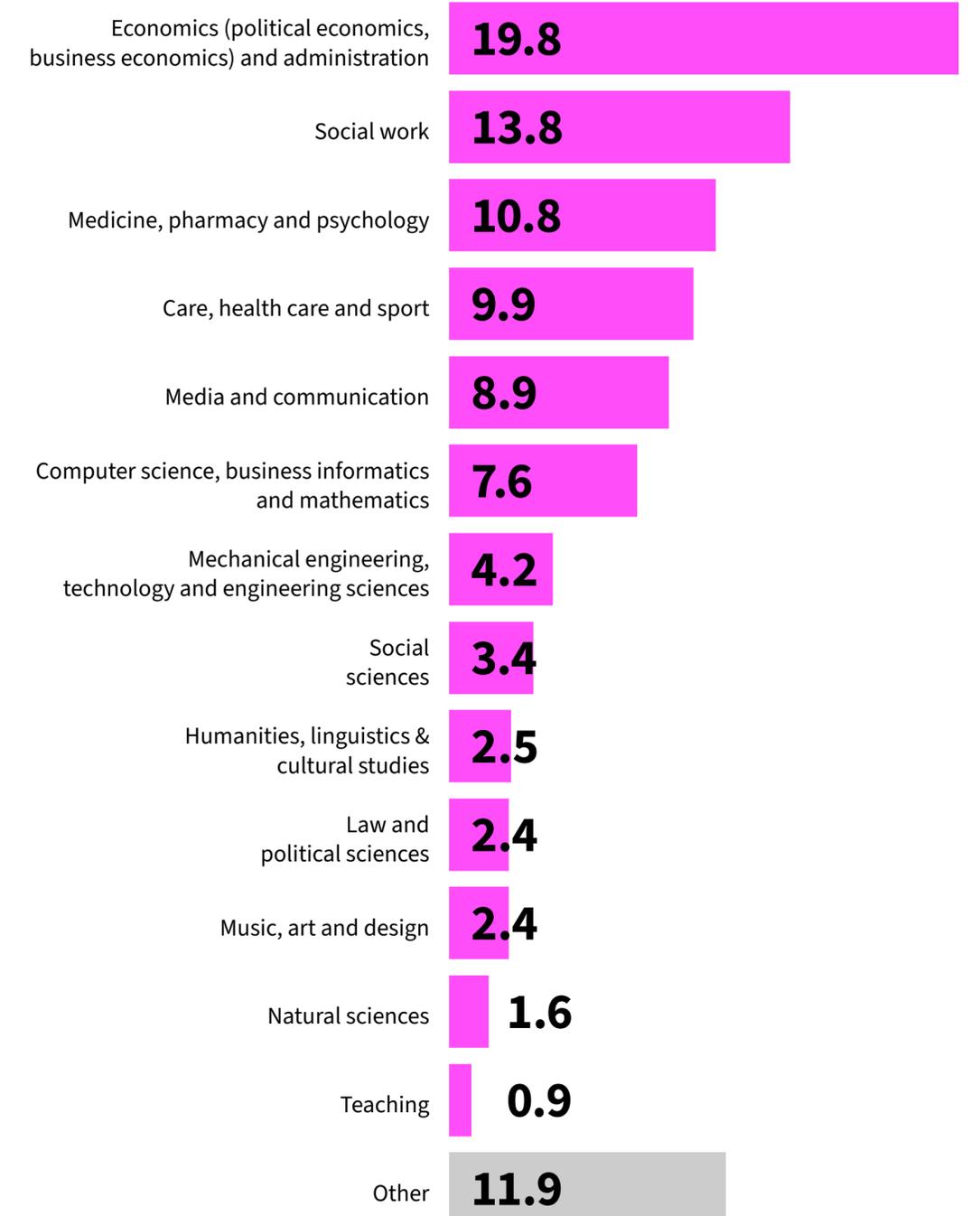


What type of household do you live in? In %



## THE MOST POPULAR STUDY PROGRAMMES: ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL WORK.

What field of study does / did / would your distance learning programme cover? In %

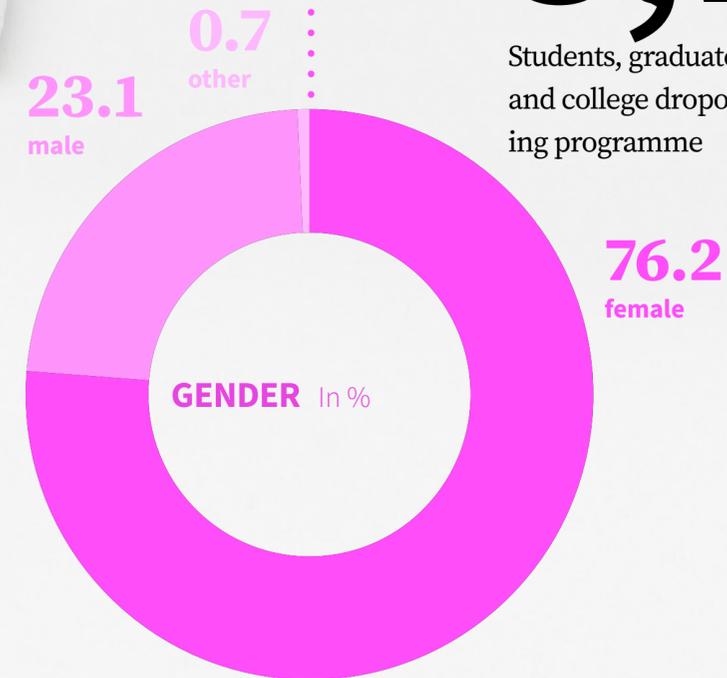


## FACTS ABOUT THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS.

# ABOUT THE STUDY.

# 6,751

Students, graduates, prospective students and college dropouts of a distance learning programme



About 70 % of the participants are currently enrolled in a distance learning programme, about 6 % (= 398 participants) have already successfully completed their distance learning programme, about 2 % have dropped out of a distance learning programme, about 7 % are planning to start a distance learning programme soon, and 14.2 % would consider starting a distance learning programme.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or comments, please contact us at: [research@iu.org](mailto:research@iu.org)

## IMPRINT

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The Ministry of Economics, Science and Digital Society of the State of Thuringia is responsible for the IU International University of Applied Sciences at all study locations in matters relating to higher education law.

**Survey period:**  
10 October – 13 November 2022  
Anonymous survey via Tivian

You can also find us on:

