National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

PEP Insights Research Survey Report

The experiences of Public Engagement Professionals during Covid -19

September 2021

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Introduction

The PEP Insights Research captured a specific moment in time during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aimed to explore the impact of Covid-19 on public engagement professionals and the engagement work of universities in order to inform future decision making, to build effective support for PEPs, to raise awareness of specific issues relating to the PE in HE context, to support culture change, and to negotiate the future together.

This collaborative peer research project used semi structured interviews; focus groups and a survey.

There are three outputs from the research.

The PEP Insights Research Report synthesises the main findings from the research.

The PEP Insights Research Short Report is a summary of the main findings.

This document, which summarises the data from the survey.

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Who took part in the survey?

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There were 128 responses to the survey

- The majority of respondents were based within higher education research institutions. Of those who did not, 7 were freelancers, who had experience working with higher education institutions on their engagement work; and 10 worked for non HE organisations, such as museums, and science centres.
- Respondents included a full range of experience, from those who had been in the role for less that a year, to those who had been a PEP for over 10 years. There were slightly fewer respondents who had been a PEP for less than 3 years.
- The majority of respondents had been at their main organisation or working as a freelancer for 3-5 years, although there was a full range of experiences from less than a year, to over 10 years.
- The majority of respondents identified as female (100); 20 identified as male, 1 identified as non binary, and 3 preferred not to say.

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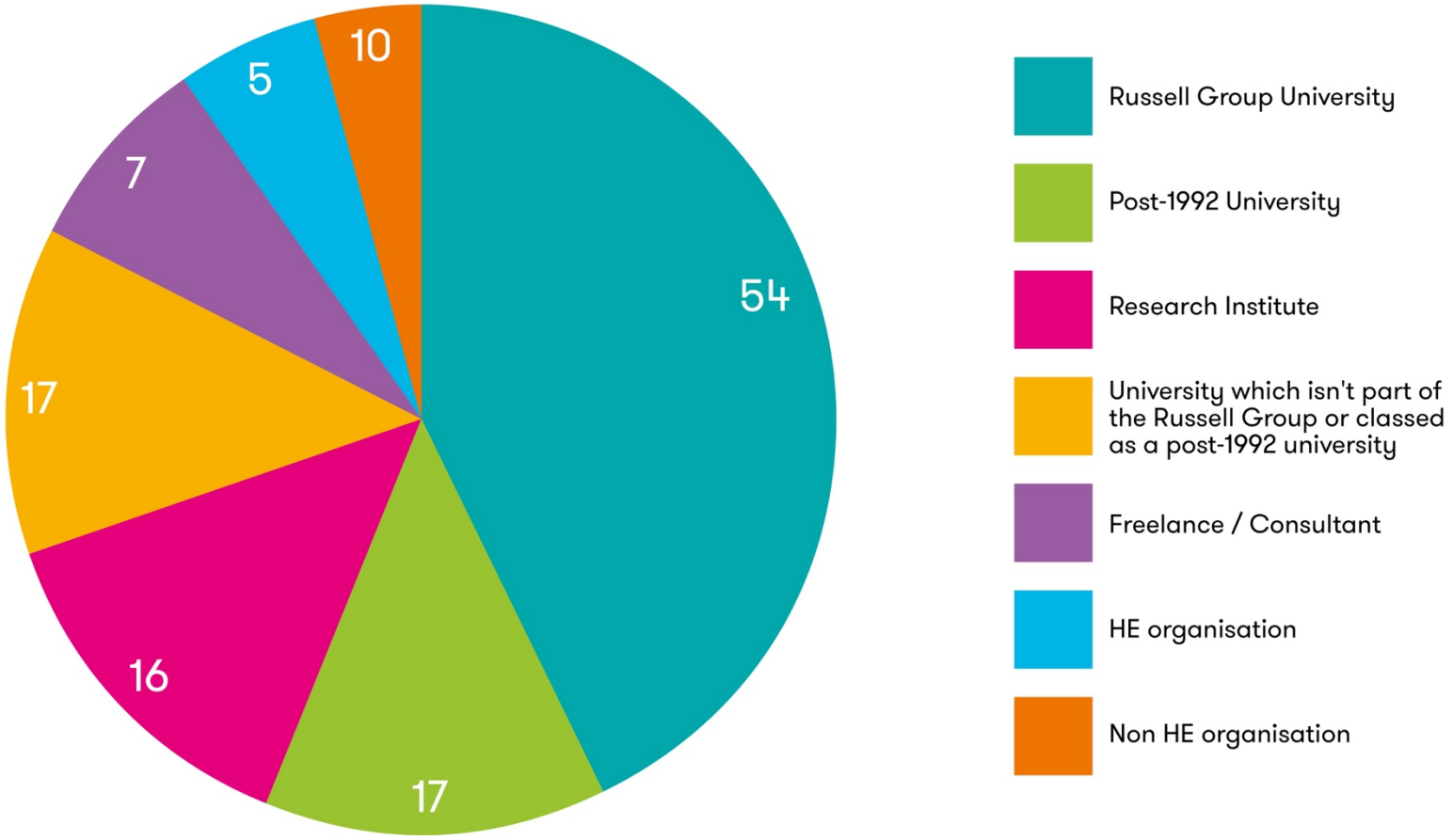
What type of institution do you work for?

128 responses



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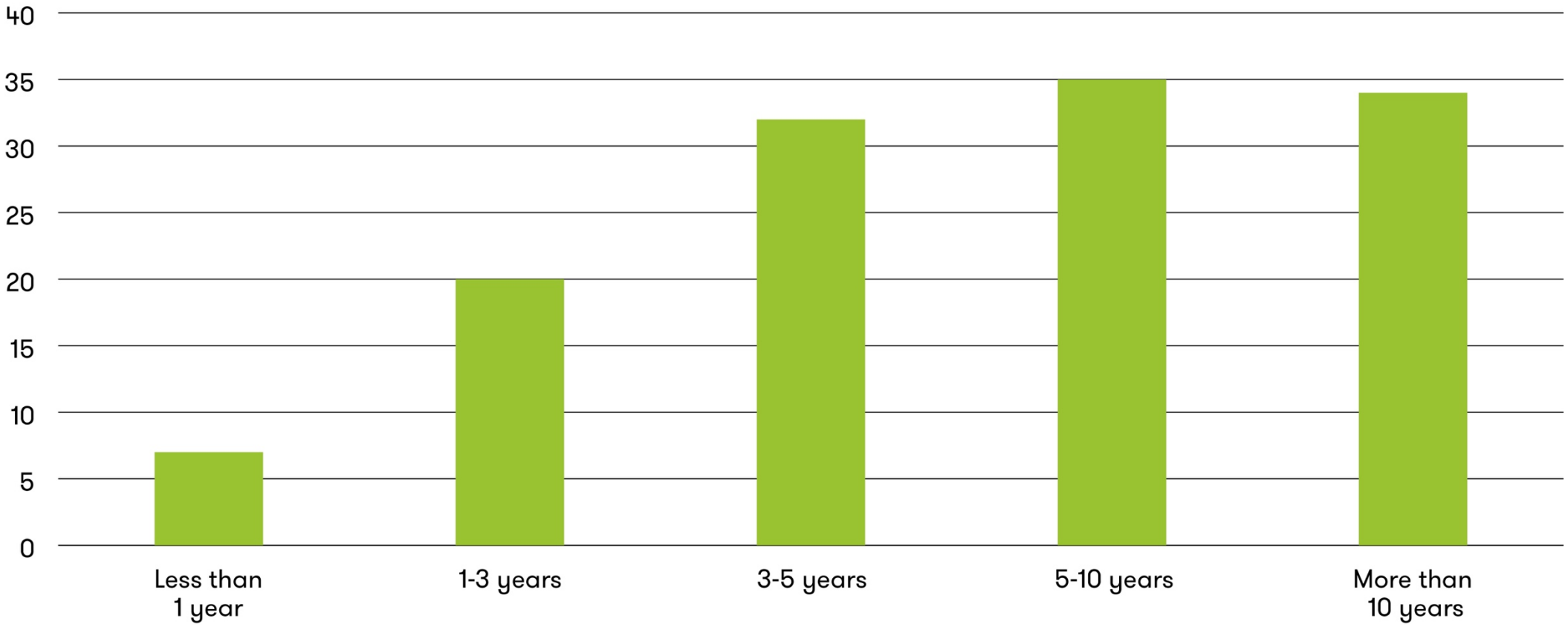
How long have you been a Public Engagement Professional (PEP)?



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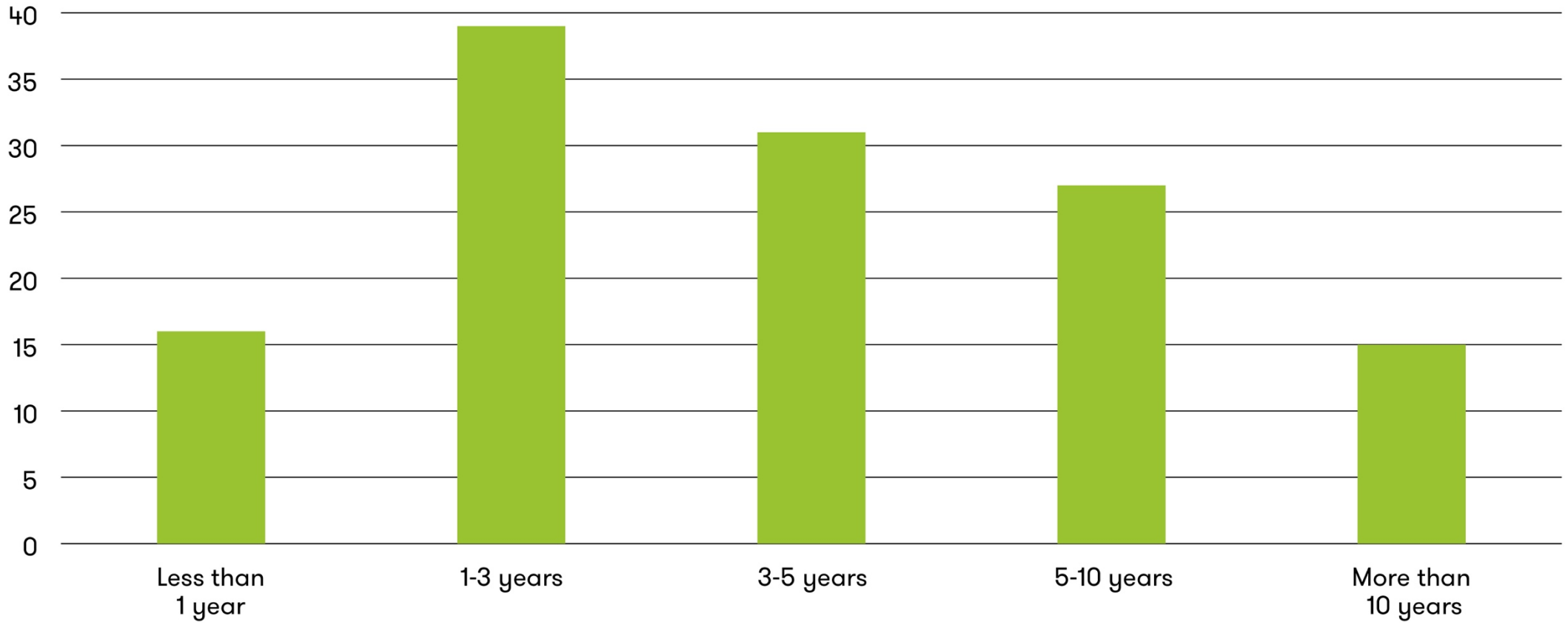
How long have you been a PEP within your current main organisation/ or as a freelancer?



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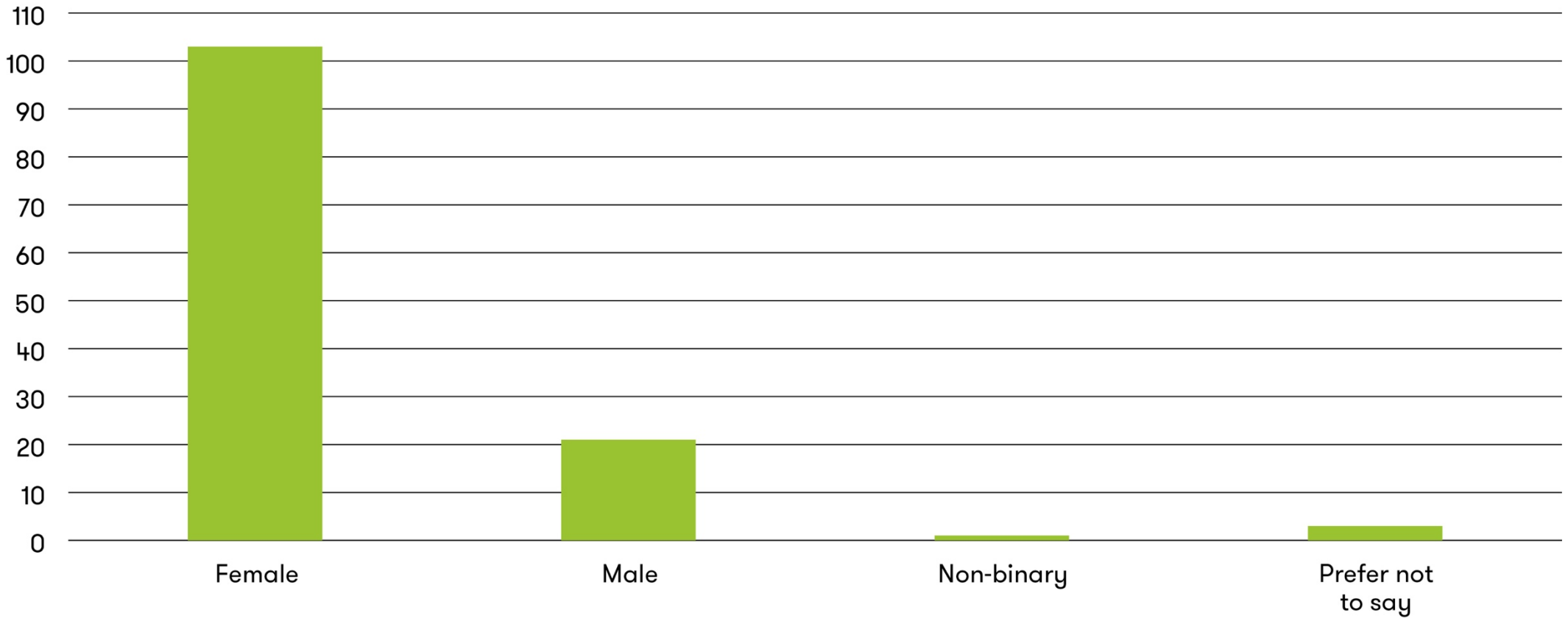
What is your gender?



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Impact of Covid-19 on PEP Professional Practice

Summary of the results

PEP role before UK national lockdown

61 fixed term contracts

57 ongoing contracts

Where people normally operate

60 central or cross-institutional level

41 departmental/ faculty level

19 individual research group

Furlough

14 placed on furlough

How COVID-19 has impacted people's roles

78 positively and negatively affected

31 negatively affected

6 positively affected

Changes in people's main PEP role

115 practice changed

51 objectives changed

How did universities commitment change

67 maintained their commitment

27 decreased their commitment

17 increased their commitment

Competing pressures on time

75 found competing pressures on time has become more of a barrier

128 people participated

101 women **20** men **1** non-binary

7 preferred not to say

Length of time as a Public Engagement Professional (PEP)

21% less than 3 years

25% 3-5 years

54% more than 5 years

Possibilities arising from Covid-19 pandemic

88 felt possibilities have come for their own practice

48 felt possibilities have come for their institution

79 felt possibilities have come for the sector

others felt it was too early to tell

Skills used in response to COVID-19

79 used skills to develop new online engagement

33 used skills to work on activities not related to PE

17 felt their skills were not specifically used

Key areas to prioritise in the PEP sector in the future

103 felt building trust and addressing equality, equity and inclusion to be key

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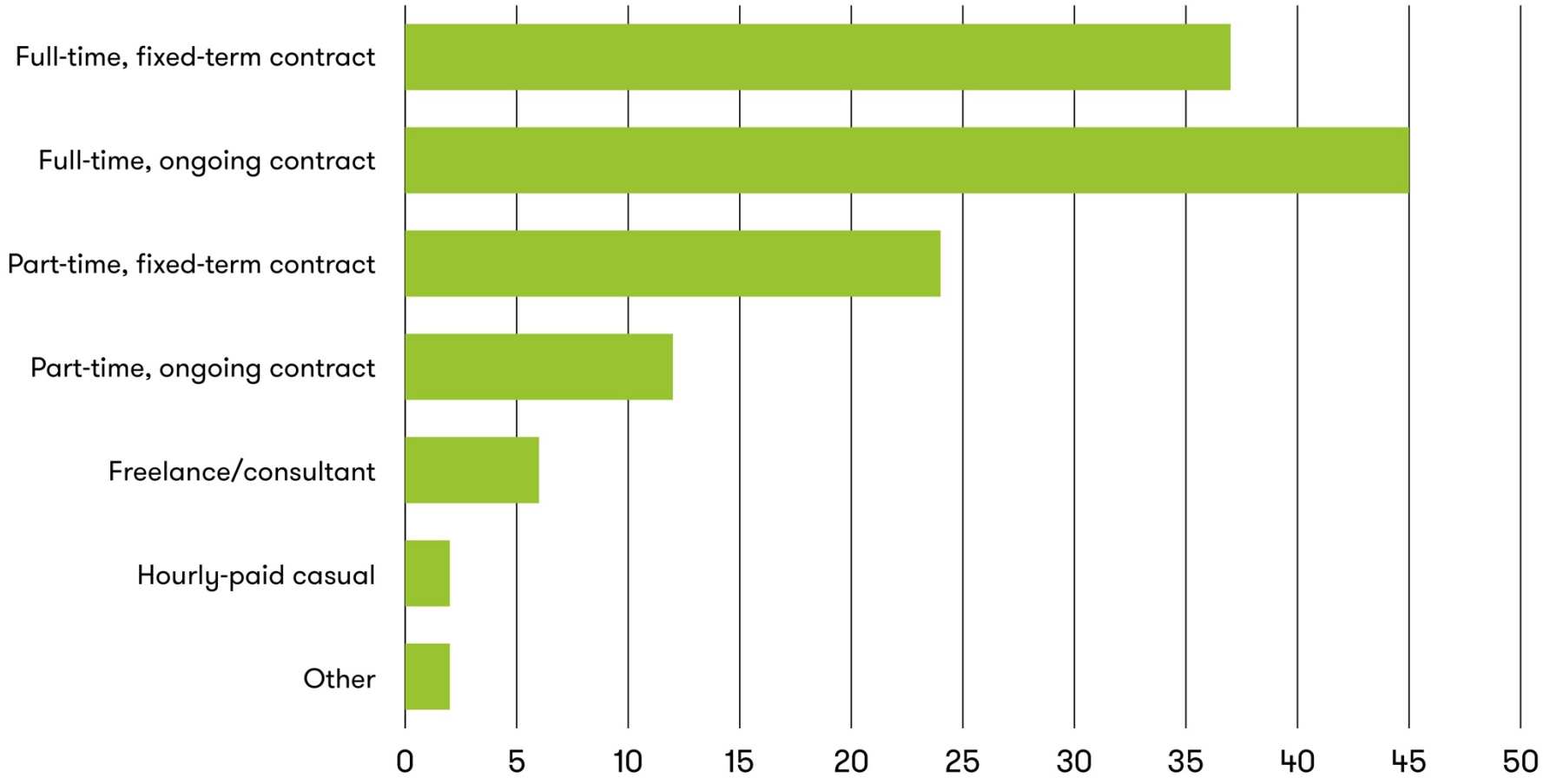
Please tell us about the nature of your employment in your main PEP role before the UK national lockdown, which started on 23 March 2020 (All)



Other (2)

I have 2 0.5FTE roles which add up to a full time role that is open ended but fixed term funding

80%, fixed-term contract

In summary

61 fixed term contracts

57 ongoing contracts

6 freelance

2 hourly paid casual

2 other

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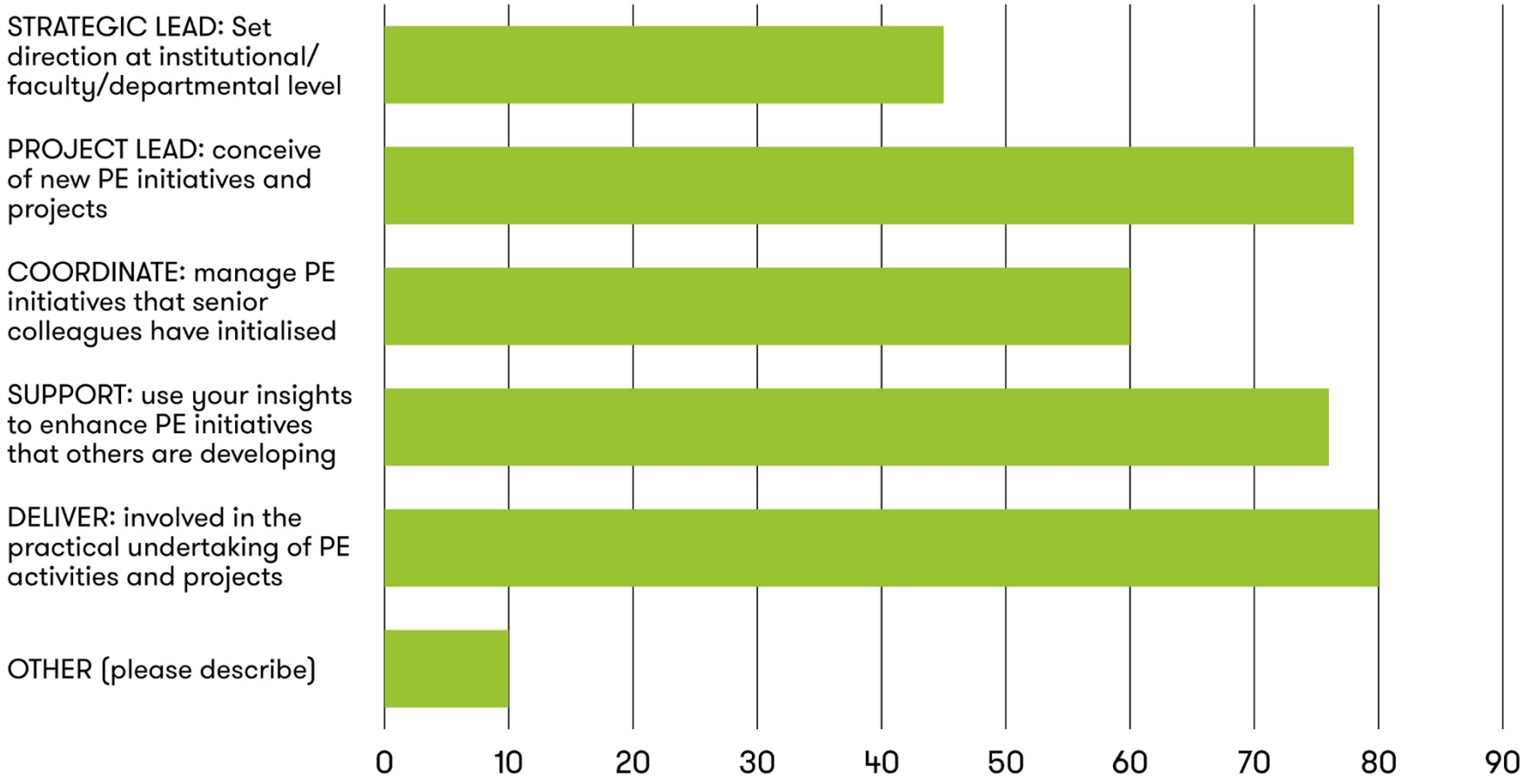
Which of the following describe the purposes of your main PE role?
(Select as many as applicable)



Other (10)

5 responses referred to public engagement training

Other responses included:

- Teaching undergraduate students
- Evaluation
- Facilitation
- Line management
- Supporting grant applications
- Funder

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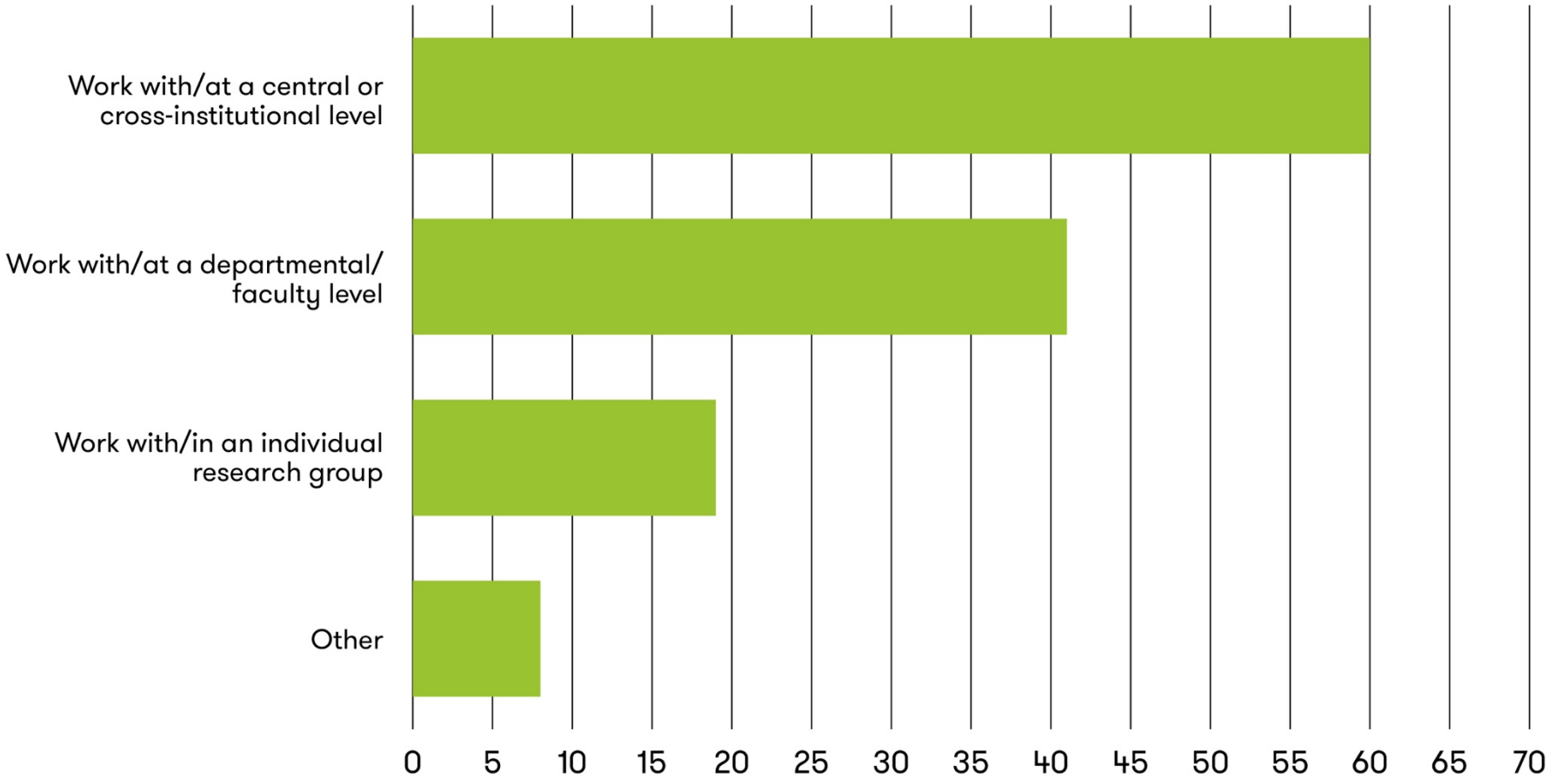
Where do you mainly operate in your organisation/the organisation you work with?



Other (8)

All three (3)

Depends on role (2)

Externally funded research centre (1)

Science publication (1)

Volunteer service (1)

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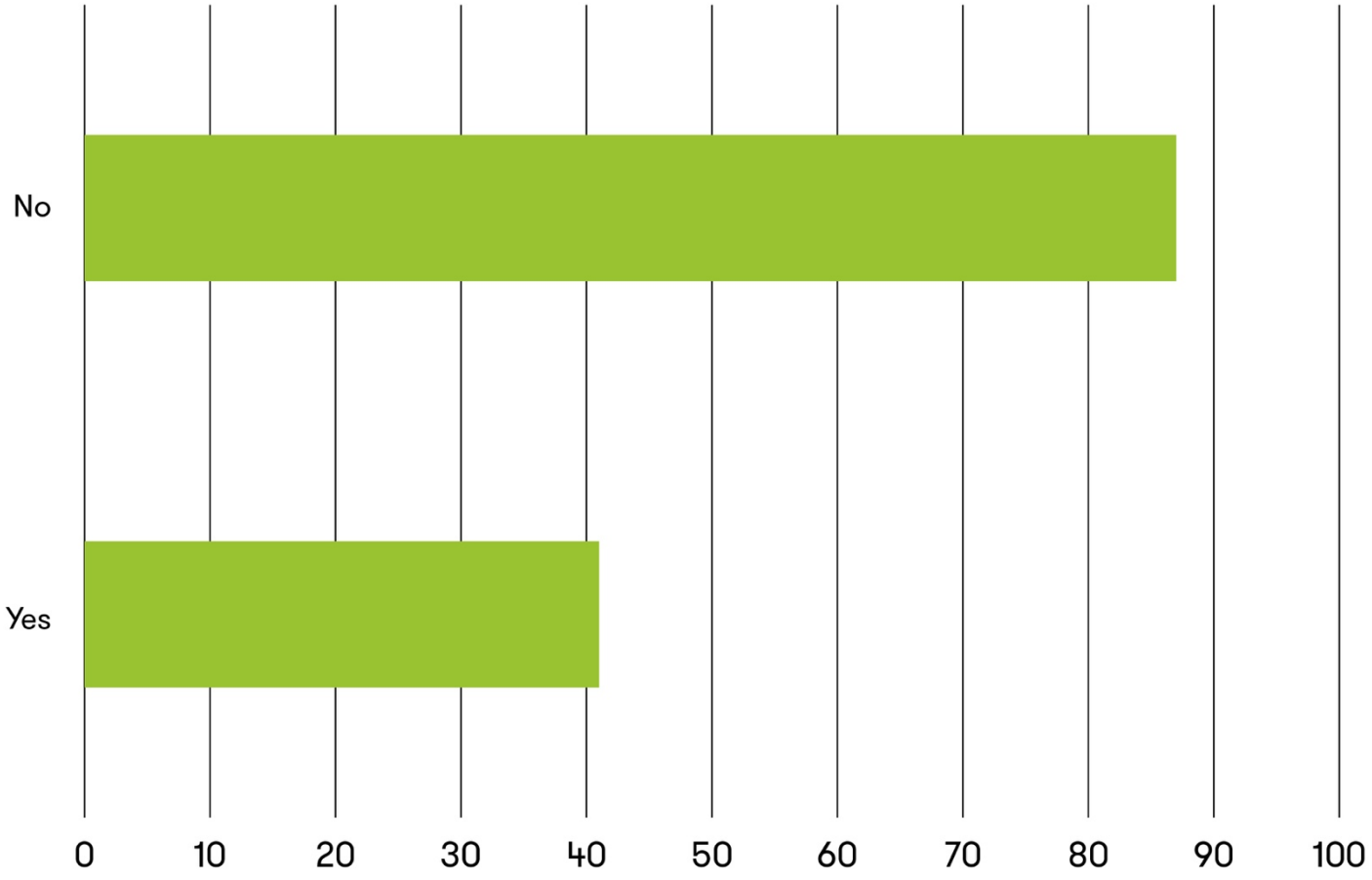
Did you hold your main PEP role alongside any other job roles before 23rd March 2020?



Of the 41 respondents who held other roles:

- Research support (8)
- Freelance (4)
- Teaching (4)
- Other outside HE (4)
- Other inside HE (4)
- Academic researcher (4)
- Senior leader (1)

Others stated

- Full time role (4)
- Changed role (2)
- Unclear (2)

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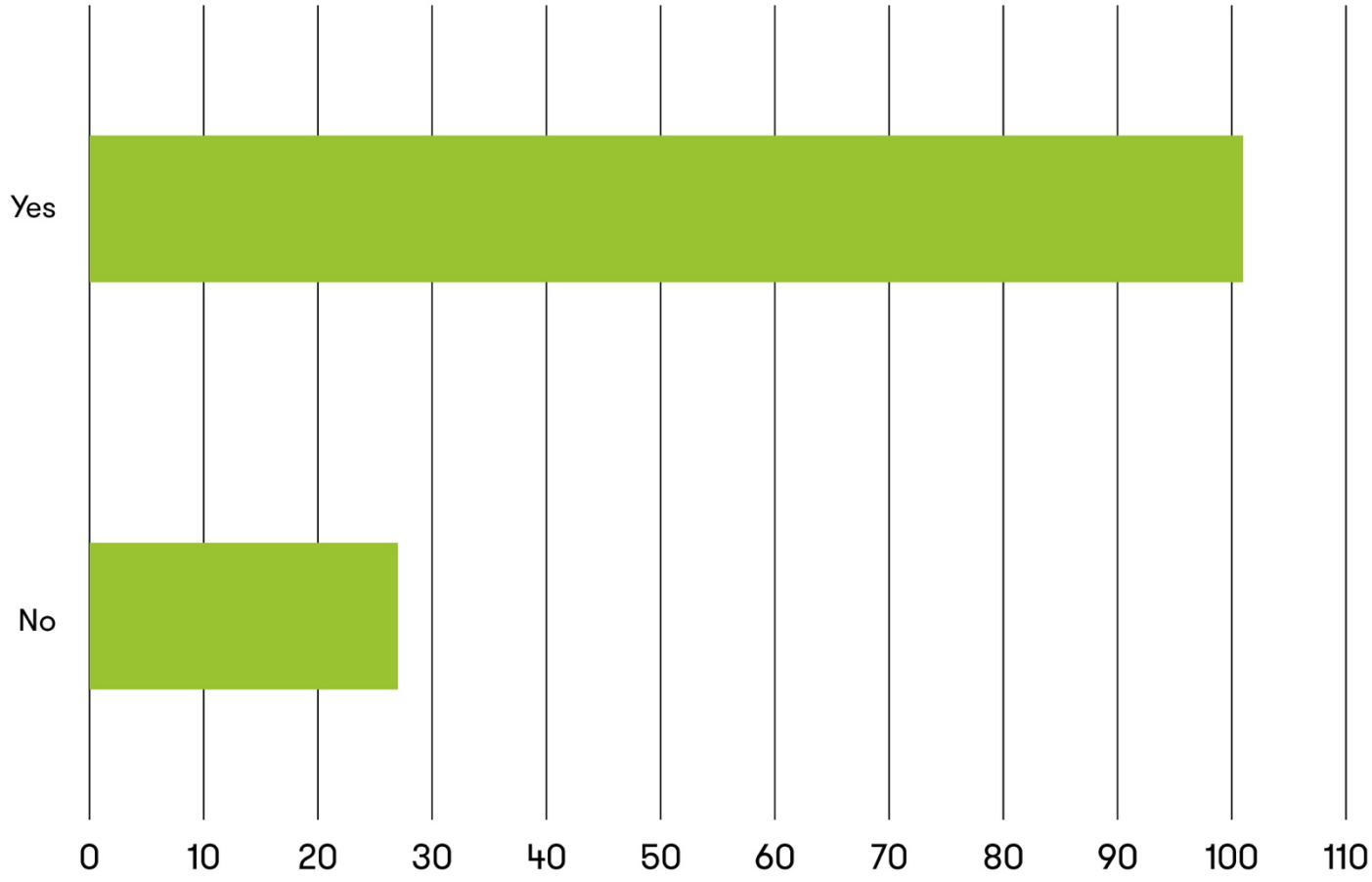
Are you currently in the same main PEP role as you were before the 23rd of March, 2020?



Of the 27 respondents who said No

- New job (12)
- FTC ended (4)
- Redeployed (3)
- Official role changed/ expanded (3)
- PE put on hold (1)
- Moved to full time (1)
- No role (1)
- No answer (2)

Those who said that their role had changed

- Personal choice (9)
- University decision (3)
- Covid-19 related change (5)
- Ill health (1)

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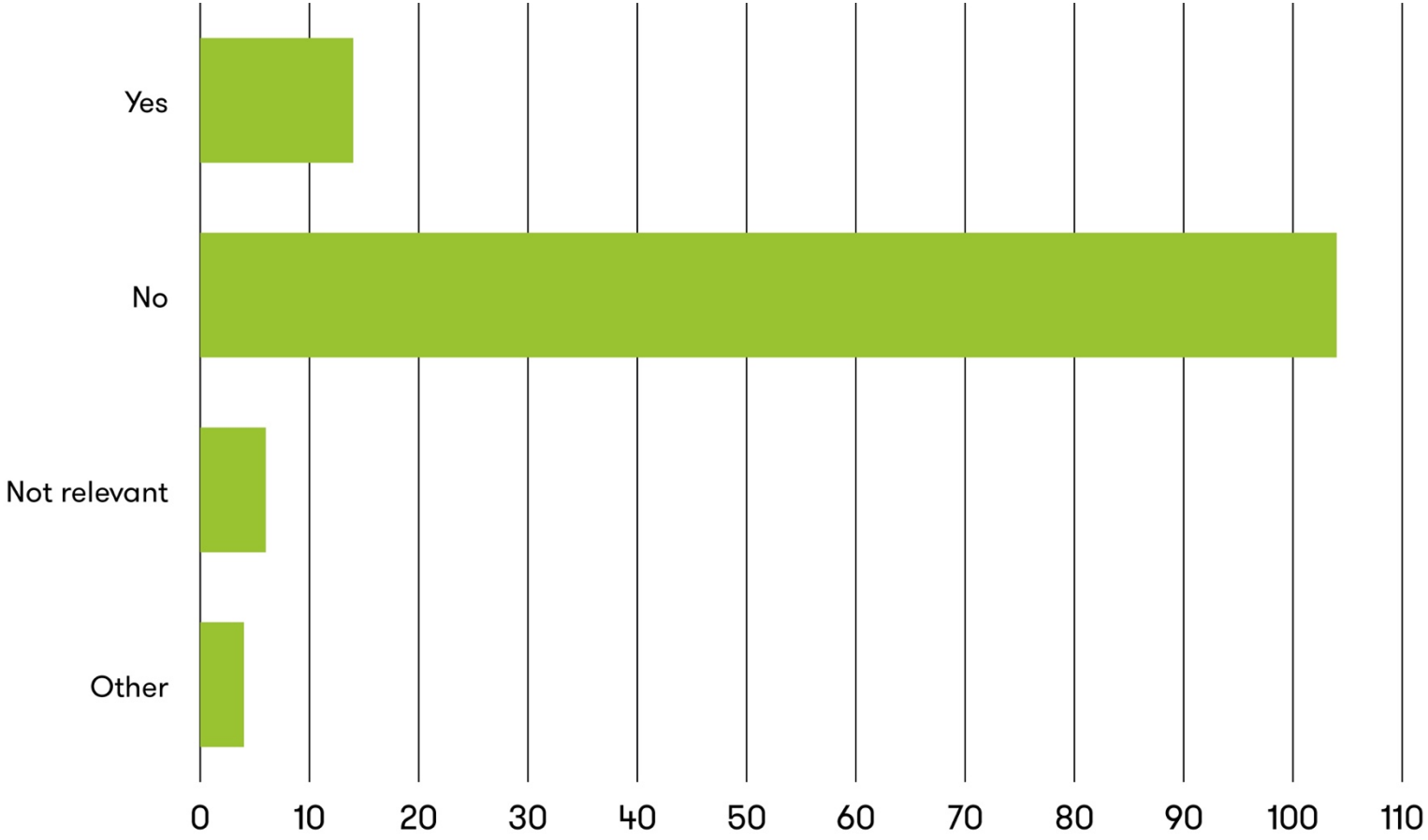
Are you or have you been placed on furlough by your employer as a result of the COVID-19?



Other(4)

Not relevant (6)

Furlough

Of the 14 who had been put on furlough

7 were on furlough for over 3 months

10 were on furlough full time

5 experienced flexible or part time furlough

1 was put on furlough out of consideration for their caring responsibilities

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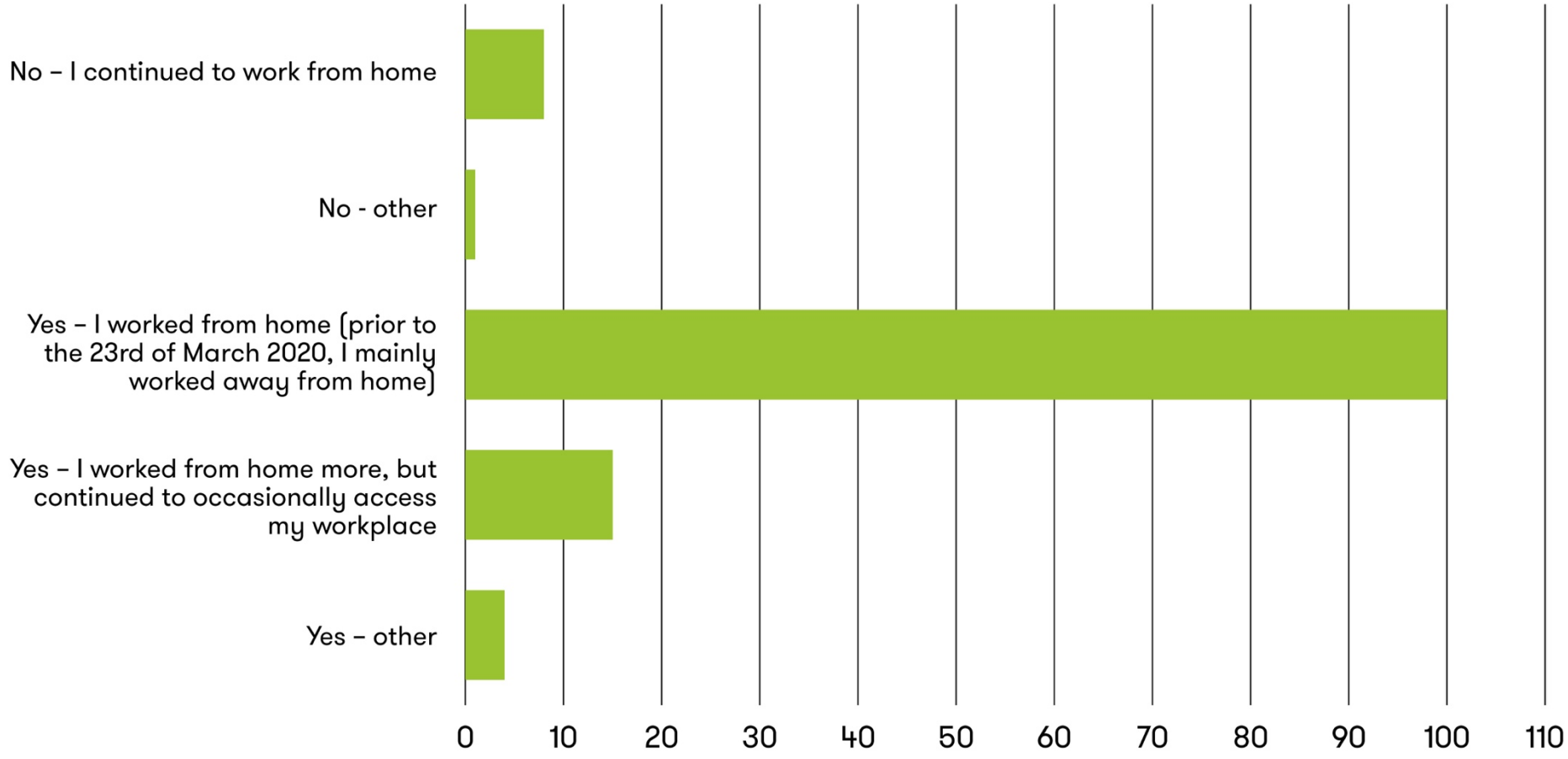
During the the UK national lockdown, which started in 23 March 2020, did the primary location of your workplace change?



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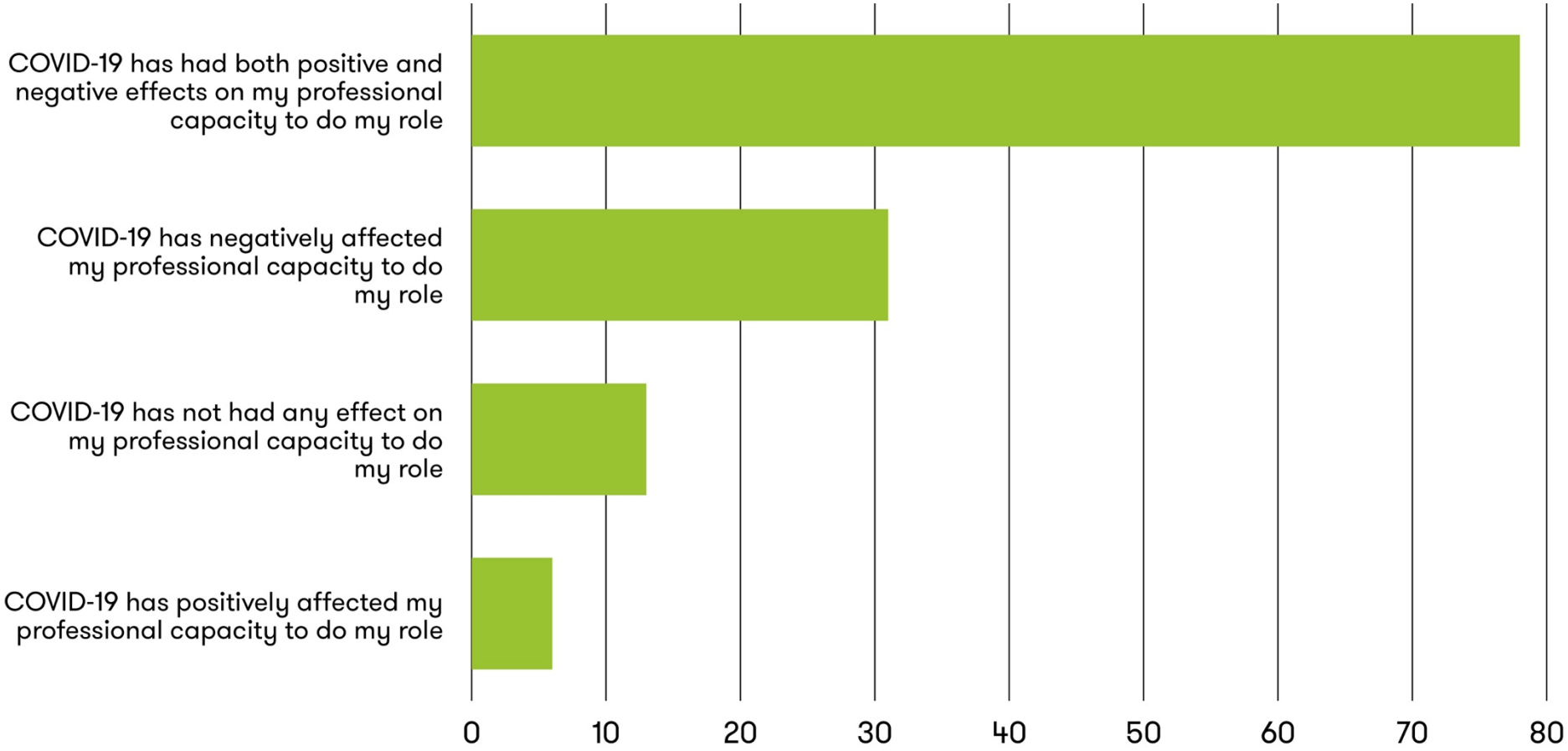
Has the impact of COVID-19 affected your professional capacity to do your role?



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Positive and negative impacts on roles

Positive	Negative
Online access (22)	Limited access online (10) Challenges online (5)
Reach new people online (20)	F2F cancelled (18)
Opportunity to do strategic/ important work (14)	Missing face to face contact internally (15), externally (5) and ad hoc meetings (11)
More productive, more focussed (8)	Professional standard dropped (11)
Access support/ training improved (7)	Lack of support training (5)
More time (15)	More uncertainty as projects cancelled etc. (12)
New skills and experiences (9)	Asked to do non PE work (5)
Opens up new opportunities (3)	Partners negatively affected (10)
Flexibility re working hours etc. (4)	Workload, and working outside of hours (6)
Increased capacity (2)	Reduced capacity (7)
	Family commitments (13)
	Difficult to get researchers to engage (14)
	Working from home (19)
	Anxiety / stress (15)

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Using three words, please describe your feelings about your main PEP role before UK national lockdown on 23rd March 2020

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Using three words, please describe your feelings about your main PEP role before UK national lockdown on 23rd March 2020 – challenging removed

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Using three words, please describe your feelings about your main PEP role before UK national lockdown on 23rd March 2020 – challenging and excited removed

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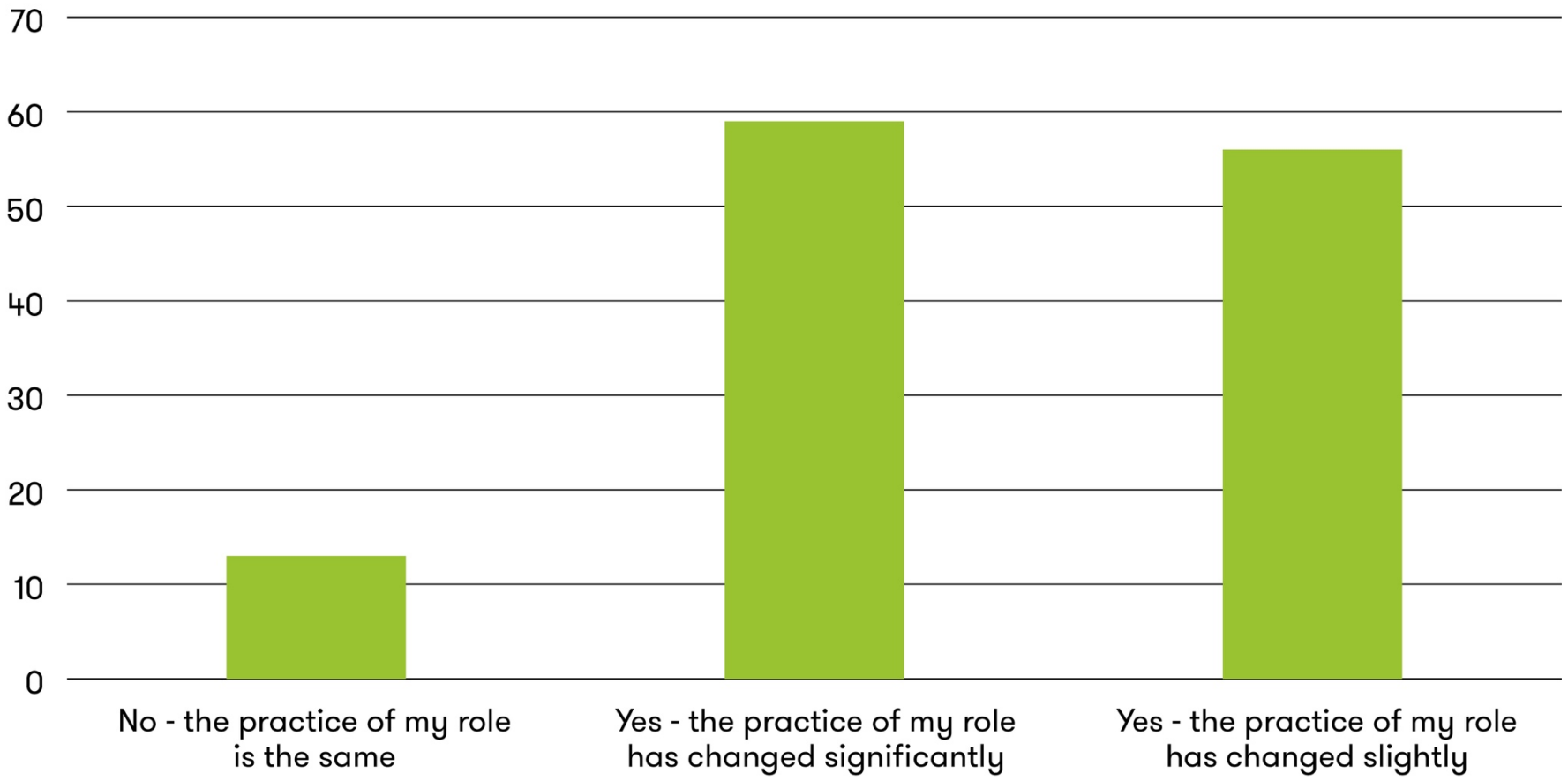
Has the practice of your main PEP role changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



How has your practice changed?

Moved online (59)

PE more challenging online (17)

Focus changed (10)

More time (9)

Challenging to engage researchers (8)

Increased workload (3)

PE stopped (3)

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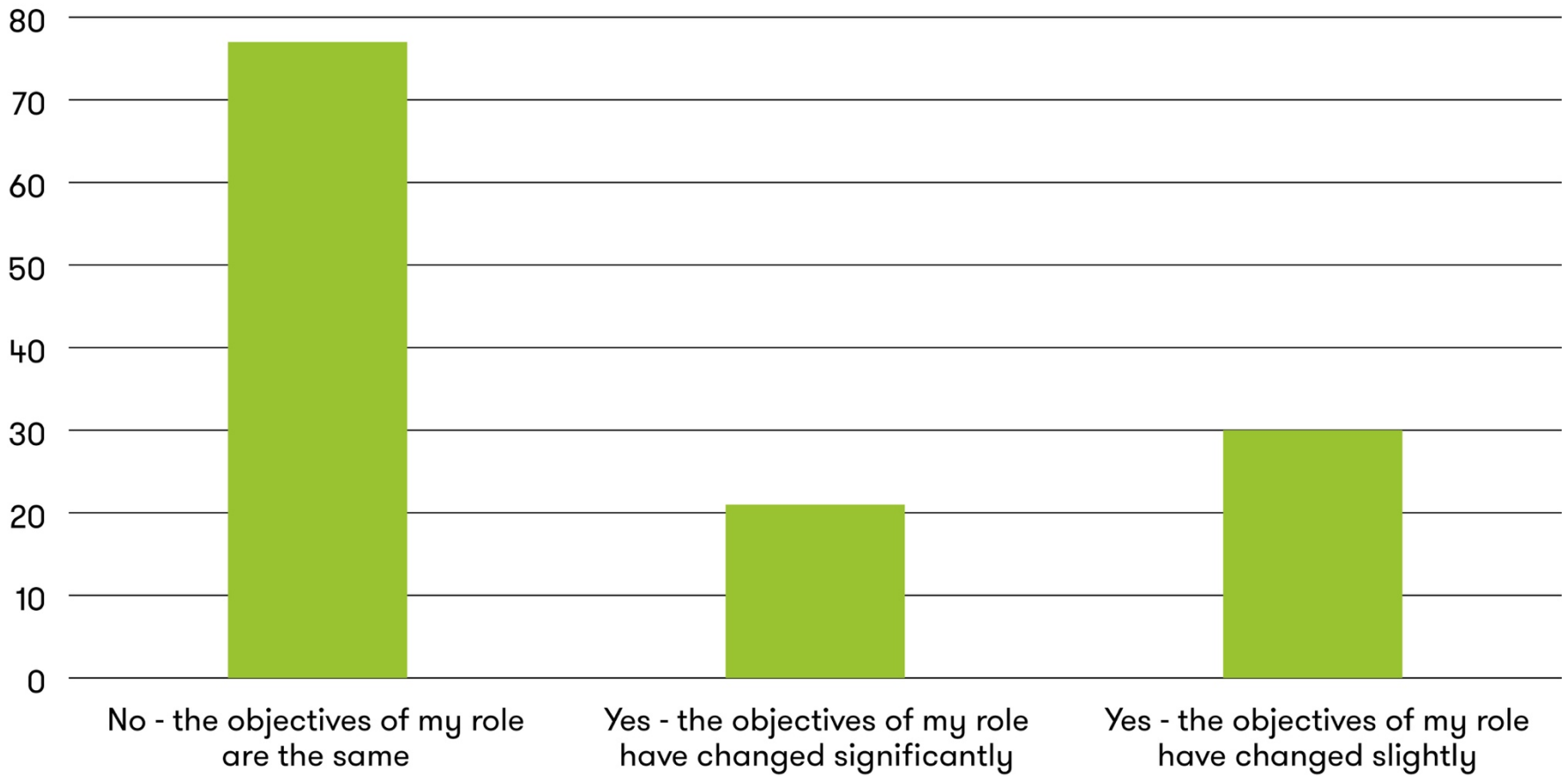
Have the objectives of your main PEP role changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Please summarise how they have changed

Focus of role changed (16)

Moved online (7)

New types of engagement (5)

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Using three words, please describe your feelings about your main PEP role after 23rd March 2020

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Using three words, please describe your feelings about your main PEP role after 23rd March 2020 – challenge removed

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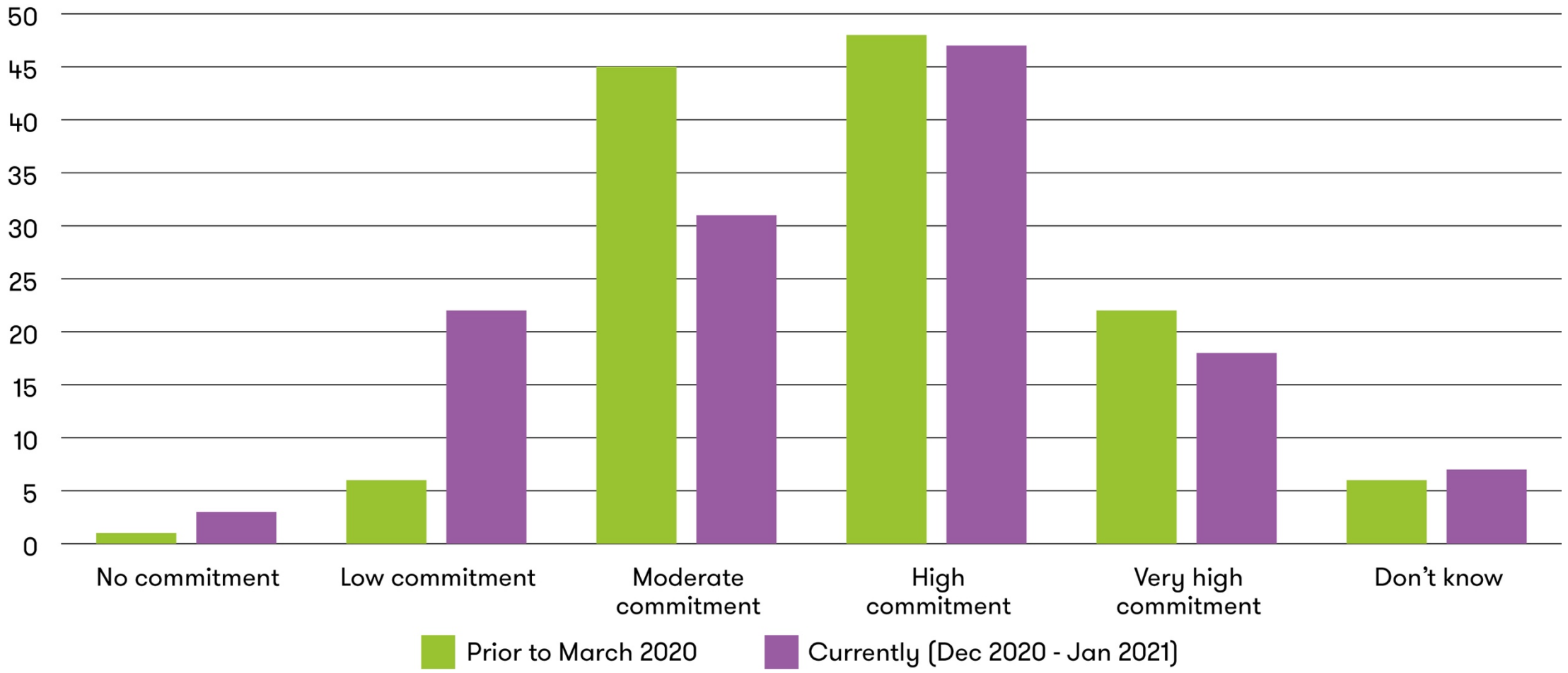
How would you rate your organisation's commitment to PE?



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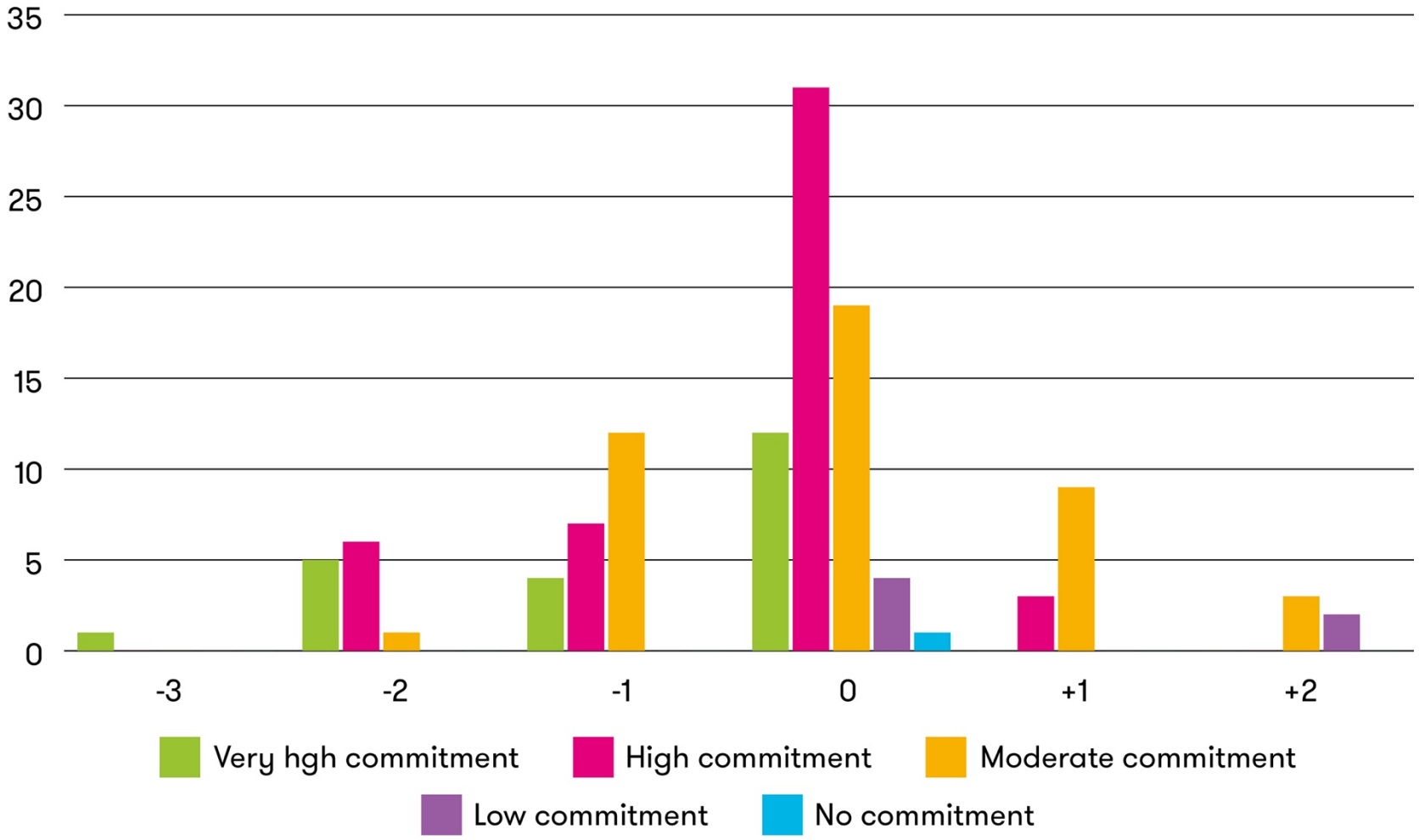
Change in commitment – this graph illustrates how individual's assessment of institutional commitment before COVID-19, and currently changed



Increase in commitment
Commitment to meeting community needs (8)
PE more visible (5)
More money (2)
Increase in commitment not caused by Covid-19 (5)

Same commitment
Changed focus for engagement (7)
Fragmented (4)
Commitment not affected by Covid (1)

Decrease in commitment
No longer prioritised (22)
Commitment but not resourced (8)
Increased constraints (6)
Furlough/ staff redundancies (5)

O: no change
-1: the institutions commitment decreased by '1' on the scale
-2: the institutions commitment decreased by '2' on the scale
-3: the institutions commitment decreased by '3' on the scale
+1: the institutions commitment increase by '1' on the scale
+2: the institutions commitment increase by '2' on the scale

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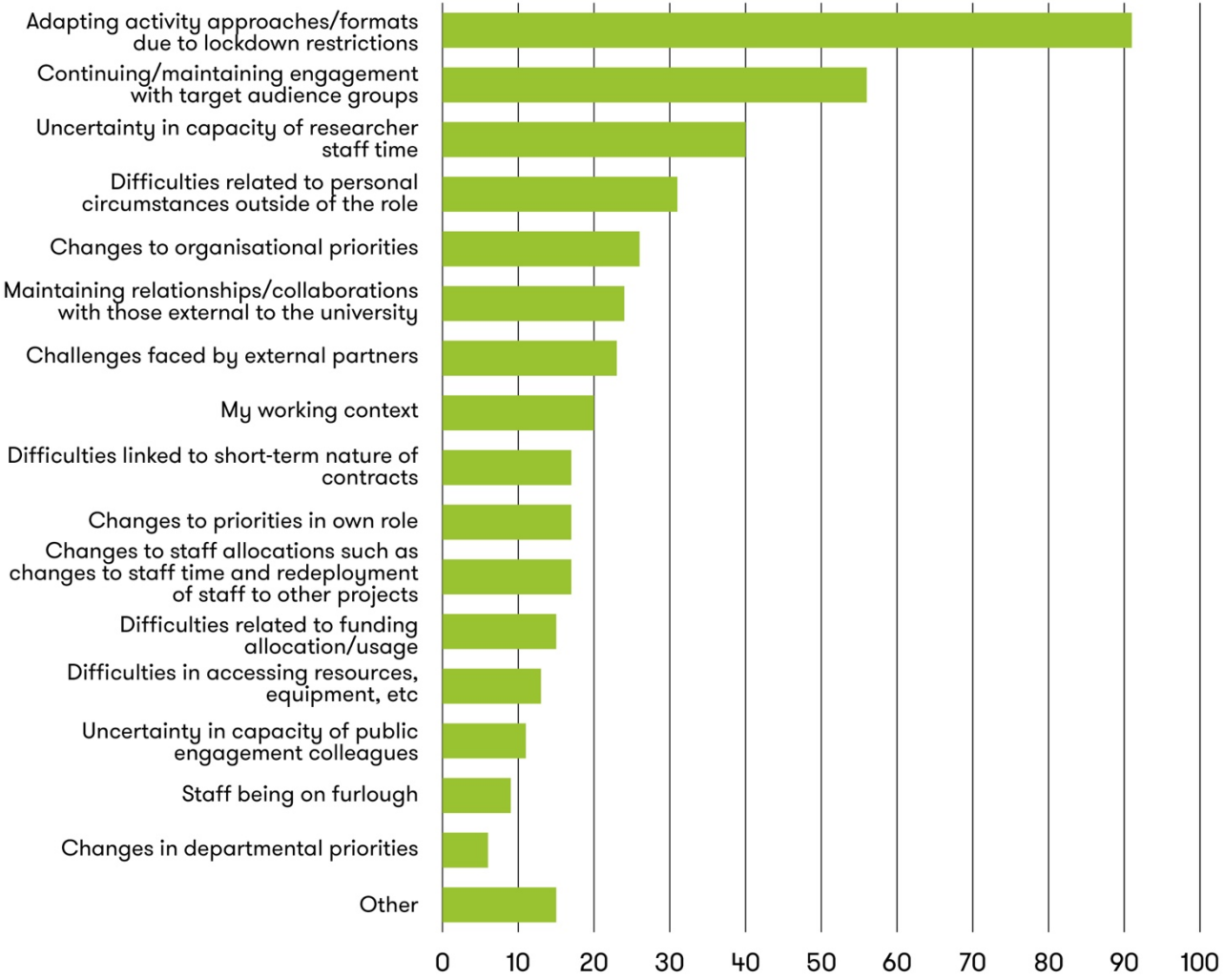
From the following, what do you feel have been the biggest challenges that you have experienced with your PE work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Max. 3 responses)

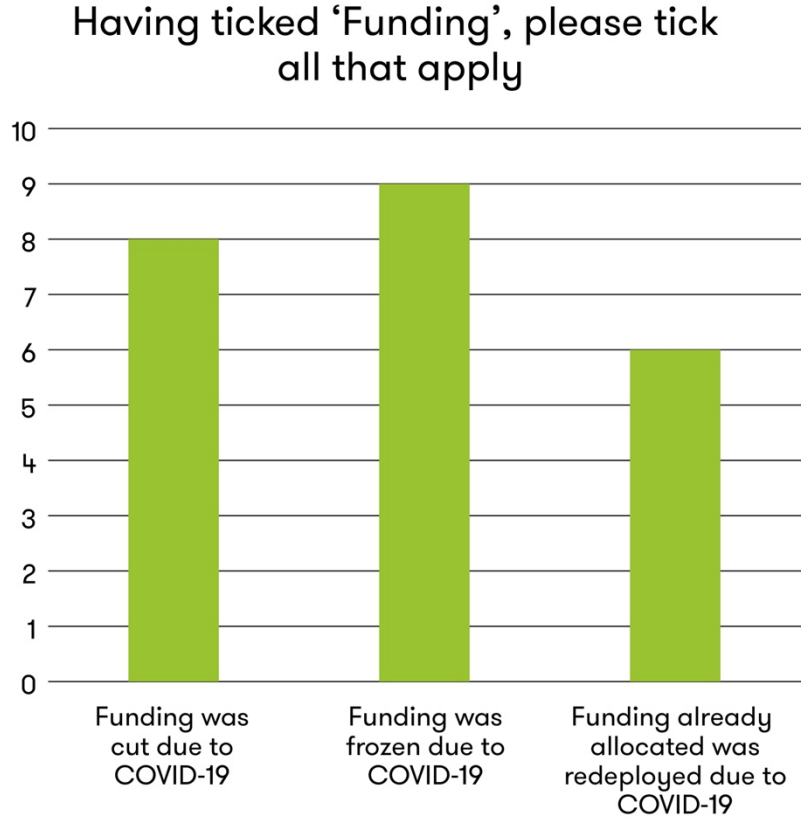


Other included

Links to other staff (4)

Technology (3)

Working with new publics (2)



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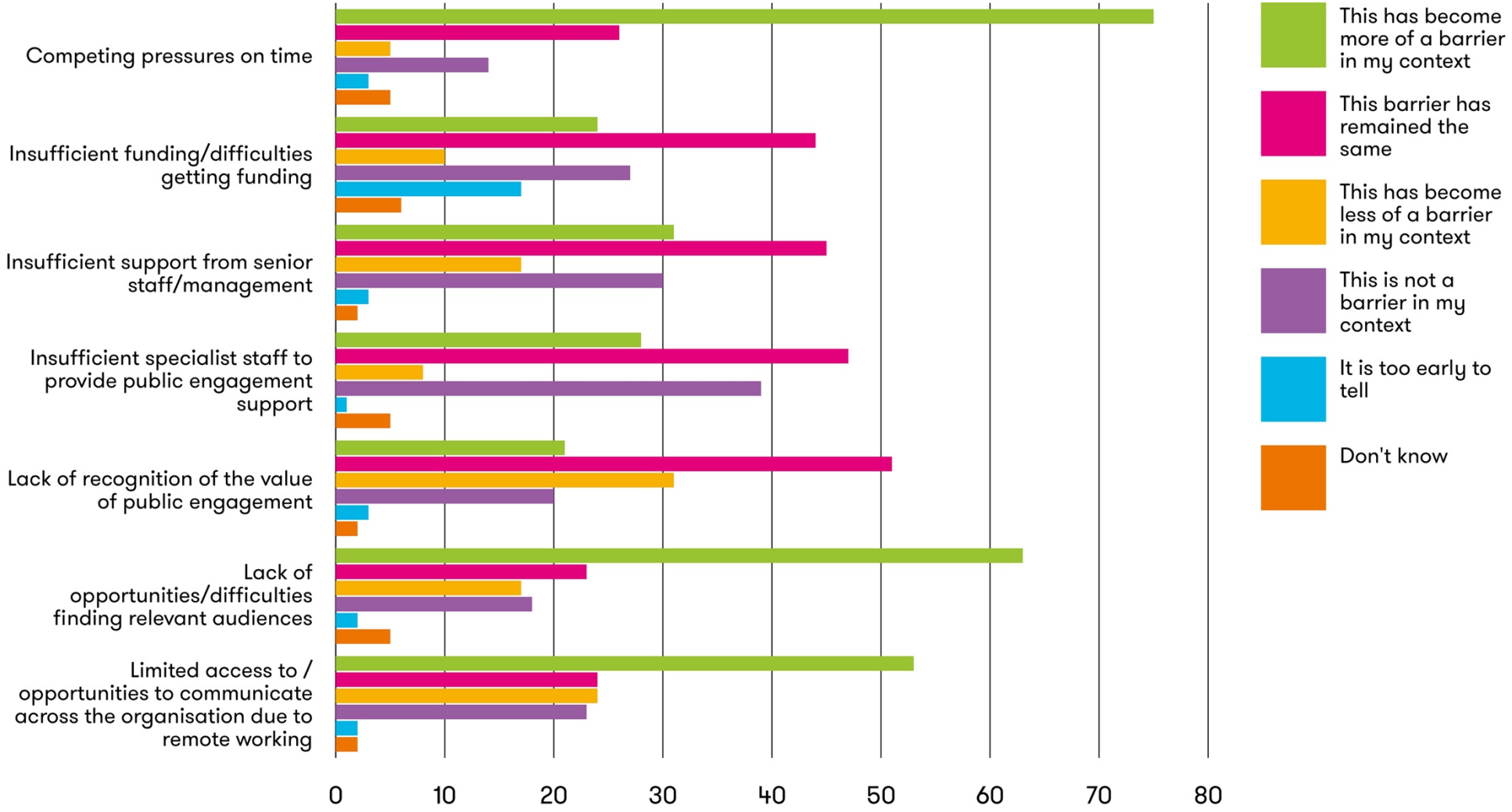
How do you think the barriers to PE within the organisation you work with/for have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



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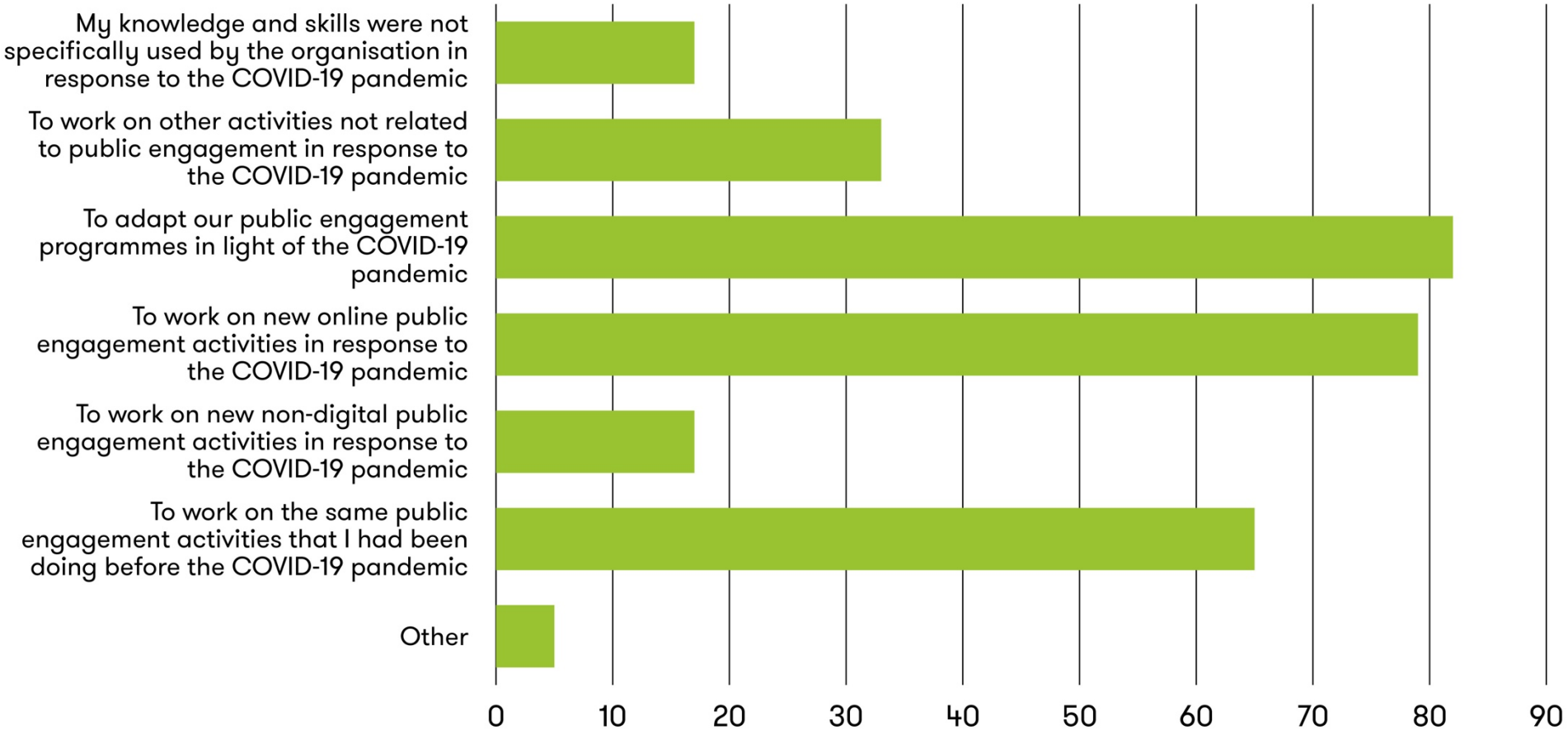
How were your knowledge and skills used by the organisation you work with/for in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? (Select as many as applicable)



Other

Used my skills to launch and run specific Covid-19 grant calls.

My knowledge and skills were used to support researchers carrying out PE projects by redeploying me to another team.

To facilitate finding PPI members for a Covid-19 project.

The other options are N/A. My skills with digital communications were made use of but for knowledge sharing not PE.

My skills were used early on to assist with the above, but then my contract was terminated.

When asked for more information about how skills used:
Online skills redeployed (9) Just as normal (5) Wellbeing (4) EDI (3) Not used (3) Covid-19 support (3)

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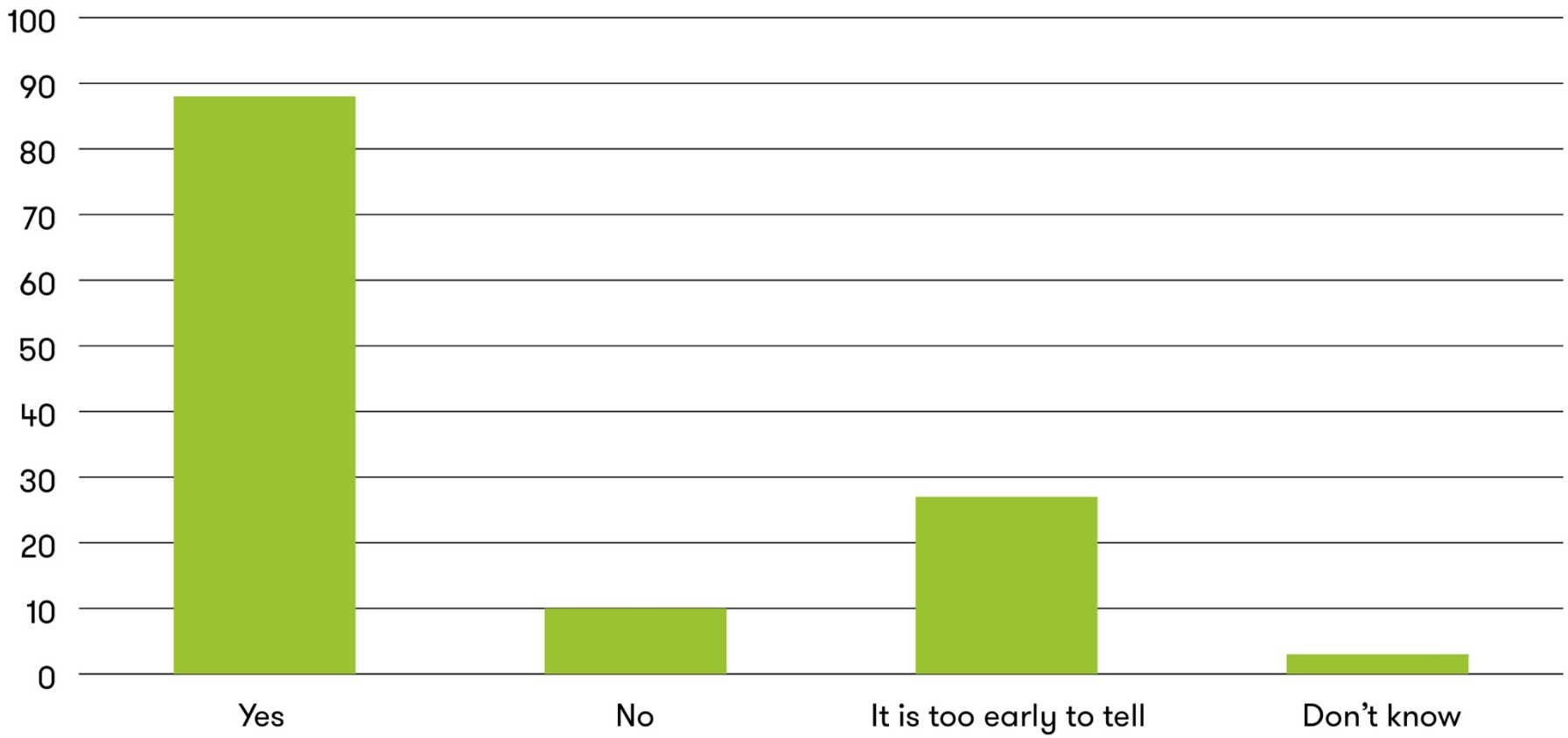
Do you feel that your own experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has opened new possibilities/opportunities for your own PE practice?



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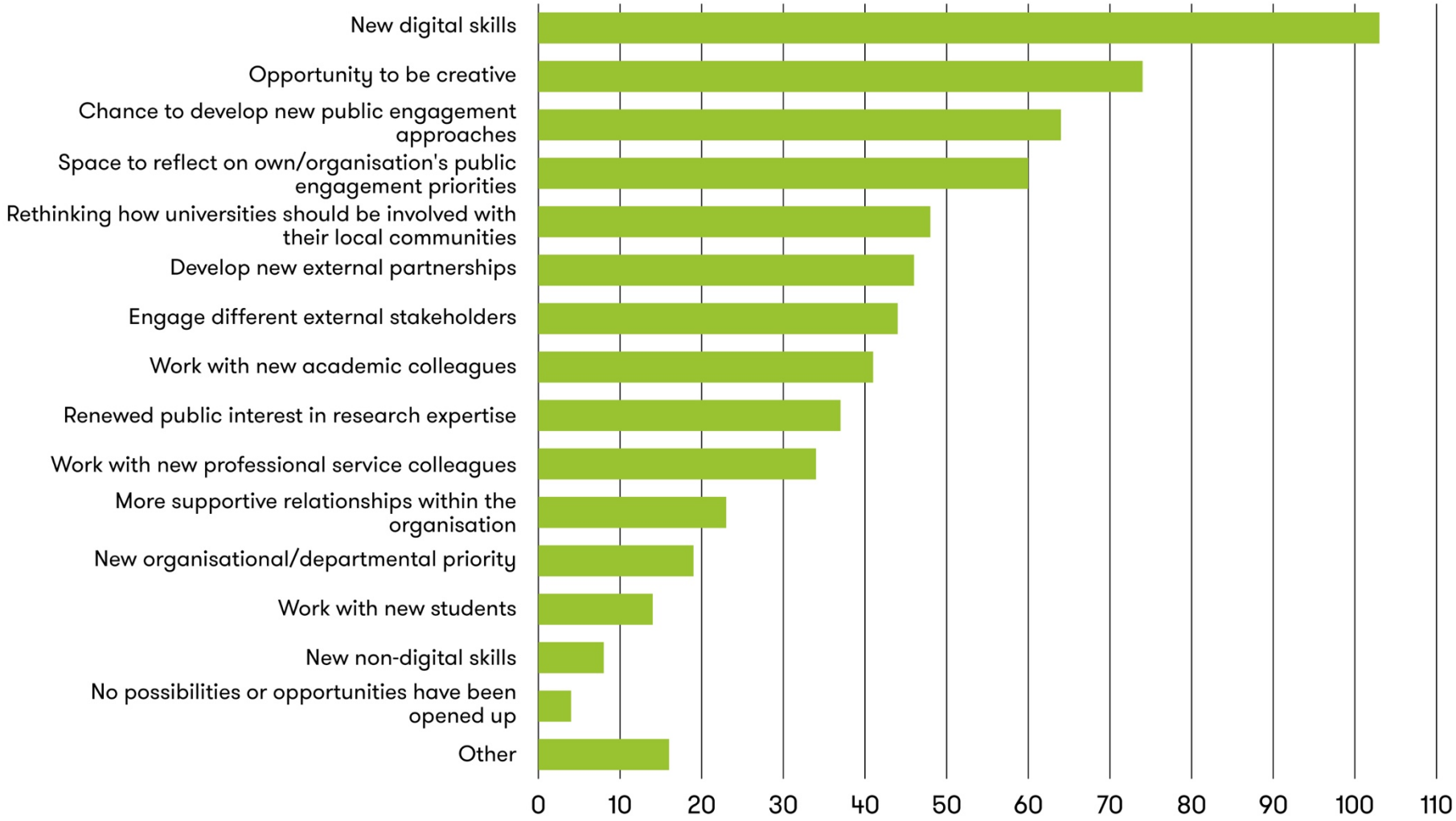
Please describe what possibilities/opportunities you feel the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to your work



Other

Moved from delivery to other areas of work

New audiences

Time to think

Nothing – just coping

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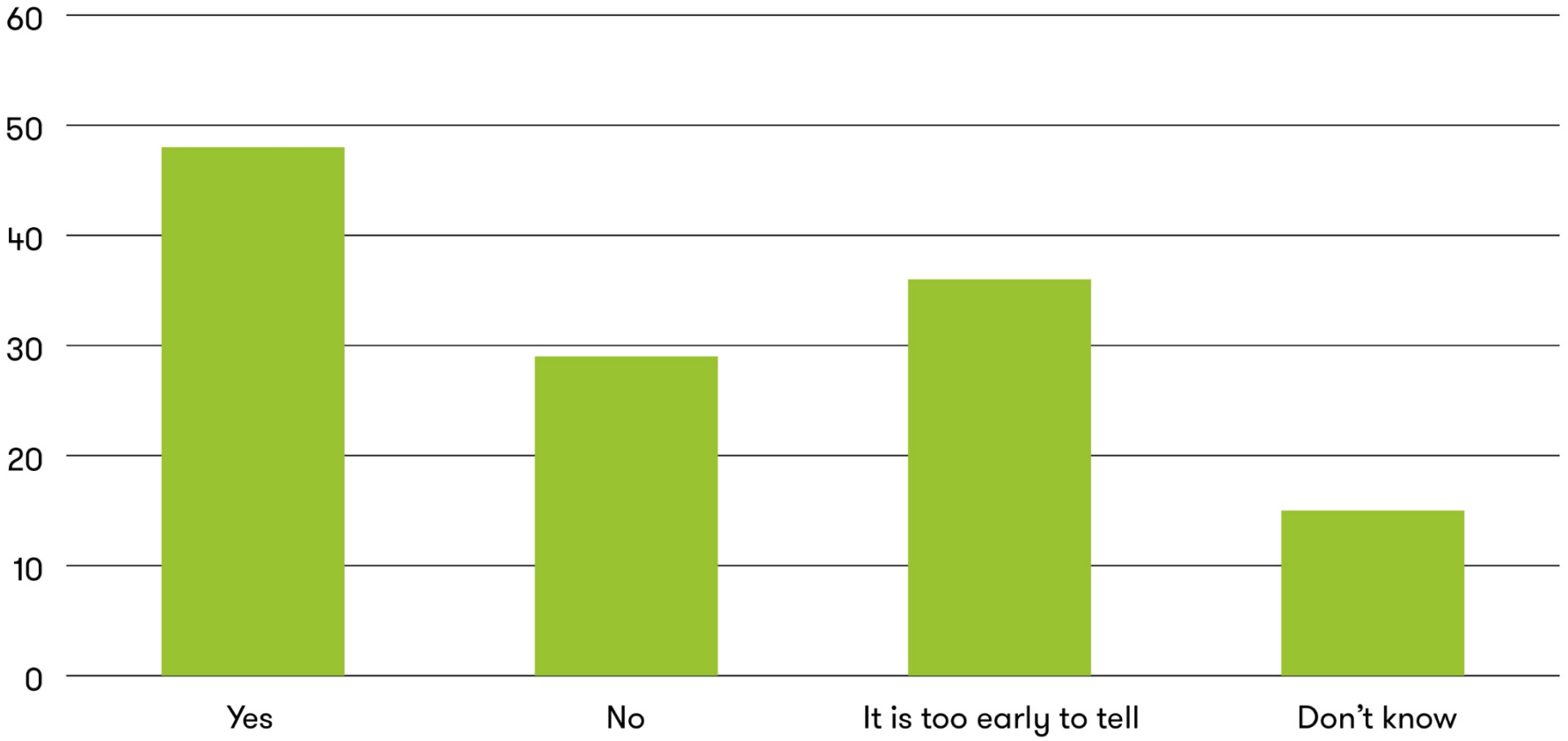
Do you feel that the COVID-19 response of the organisation you work with/for has opened new possibilities/opportunities for PE in your context?



Describe opportunities

Moved online (10)

Increase access for publics(13)

Increased access / visibility internally (7)

Increased importance of PE (6)

New ideas (5)
links to stakeholders/ communities (5)

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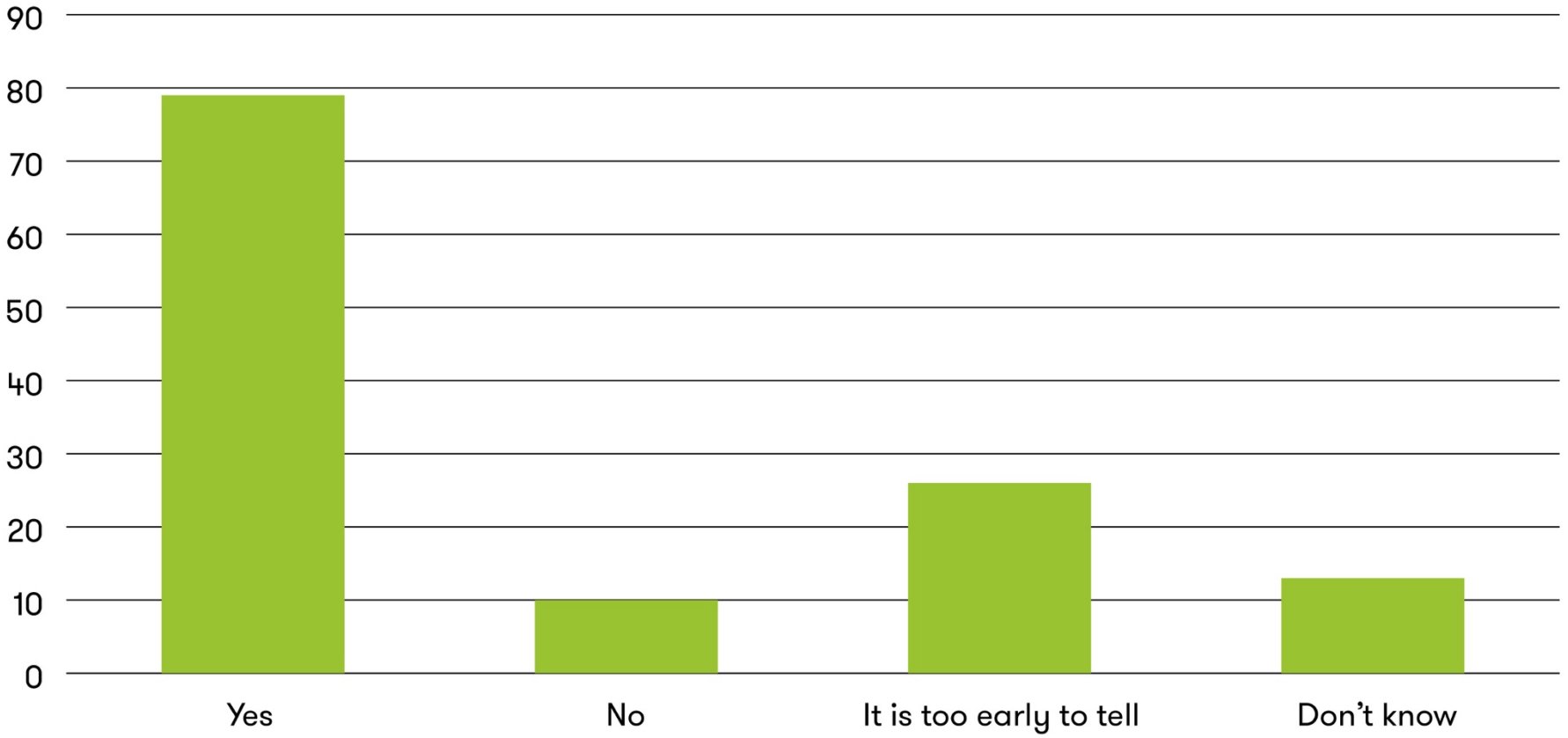
Thinking about the PE sector in the UK as a whole, do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has opened new possibilities/ opportunities?



Describe opportunities

Increased accessibility (36)

Innovation (9) and creativity (4)

Address digital exclusion (8)

Raised profile of public engagement (6)

Time to reflect (6)

PEPs more connected as community (5)

Public more interested in science (5)

New partnerships (4)

Blended approaches to engagement (3)

Local place based engagement (3)

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Using 3 words, what are your hopes for the future of public engagement?

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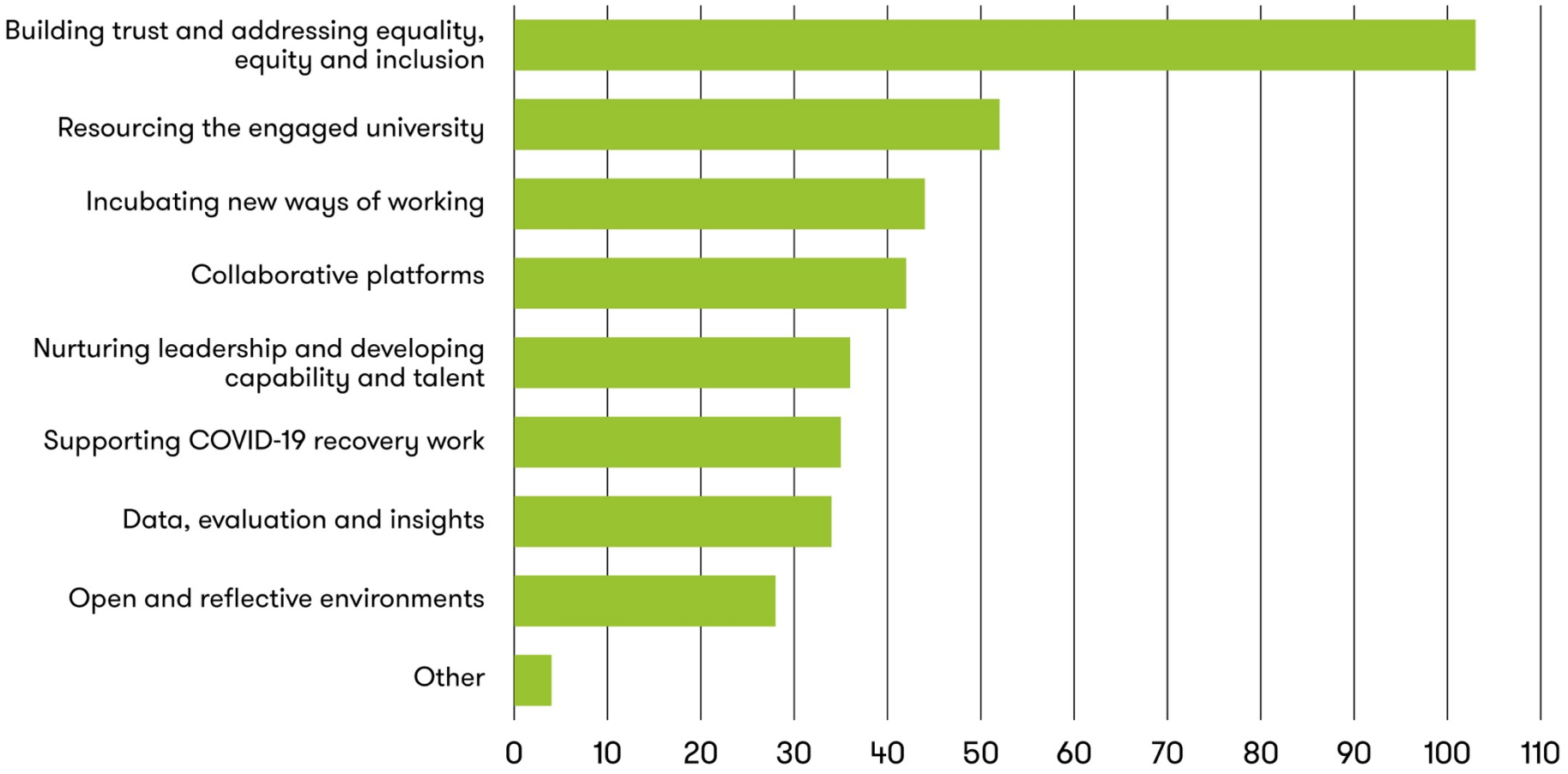
Out of the options outlined above, which do you think are the three key areas where development and support should be prioritised for the future of the PE sector?



Other (4)

Resourcing partners and communities on whom universities rely for PE and community expertise. Advocacy for the highly capable and talented workforce we already have.

Attracting and retaining top scientists from EU and elsewhere to work in UK. We are facing a very severe brain drain.

I don't think these are any different to what we are currently doing, we are just creating more and more labels for them

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Focusing on the categories you have selected above, what are the three things you feel funders, NCCPE and/or other stakeholders could do to support the sector to achieve this vision of the future? (optional)

49 respondents chose to answer this question, and the answers were coded using deductive coding, with each statement coded multiple times, if necessary.

The majority of responses referenced funders:

Clear expectations and accountability (9)

Fund PE staff time (8)

Integrate into grants (8)

Fund engagement sustainably (5)

Research informed by the public (5)

Create new opportunities for collaboration (4)

Address inequality in funding awards (4)

Responses targeted at all three stakeholders included:

Share good practice (8)

Research evidence and evaluation (7)

PEP contracts (5)

Training (5)

Promotions and Awards (4)

Defining engagement (3)

Diversify sector (3)

Develop digital platforms for engagement (3)

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