Experience and views on education during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has resulted in disruptions to schooling for the vast majority of Australian school children. Universities and other post-secondary education providers have also seen widespread shifts to remote learning, and considerable impacts on school funding. While there have undoubtedly been negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education institutions, students and their families, the crisis has at the same time created an opportunity to reflect on the role of education in a society like Australia's. In this paper we provide a summary of survey data on the experiences of students and their families during the pandemic, as well as attitudes of the entire Australian population to the role of schools and universities. We found 47.8 per cent, or almost one-in-two Australians were very satisfied with their child's educational institution, while 40.2 per cent were somewhat satisfied. Only a small percentage of the population were not satisfied with their child's education, with a slightly higher per cent of adult learners not being satisfied with their own education. Despite this high level of satisfaction, the paper also shows that a large number parents or adult learners were concerned about their own learning or their children's learning.

1 Introduction and overview

COVID-19 has resulted in disruptions to schooling to the vast majority of Australian school children. All states and territories of Australia, with the exception of Northern Territory and Western Australia, closed schools for significant periods of time and in Victoria there were two periods of extended school closures (see Table 1 for a summary of school closures in each jurisdiction).[1] There were also many localised closures that occurred throughout the year due to school or area specific cases. Fortunately as the 2020 Australian school year comes to a close, school students in all states and territories have finished the year with face-to-face teaching.

This is unlike many other countries, which have had to continue with or return to online-only teaching as they experience a very large second, or in some cases third wave of COVID-19 infections and return to lockdown conditions. An OECD review identifies range of impacts of the COVID pandemic on education systems (Schleicher 2020) including: reductions in school funding; restrictions on international student mobility; the loss of instructional time delivered in a school setting; variation in the quality of measures to continue students' learning during school closure; lack of teacher preparedness to support digital learning; and restrictions on vocational education during the COVID-19 lockdown. Australia is no exception with at least some of the impacts being present in 2020.

Grewenig et al. (2020) using data on the time use of school students during the lock down period found that 'school closures had a large negative impact on learning time on average. Overall, students' learning time more than halved from 7.4 hours per day before the closures to 3.6 hours during the closures.' Grewenig et al. (2020) also found that 'reduction in learning time was significantly larger for low-achieving than for high-achieving students.' The effect of school closures is not evenly distributed across the population.

Using data from prior to the pandemic, Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) estimate that 'students in grades 1-12 affected by the closures might expect some 3 percent lower income over their entire lifetimes. For nations, the lower long-term growth related to such losses might yield an average of 1.5 percent lower annual GDP for the remainder of the century.' While the estimates of Hanushek and Woessmann estimates are speculative, they do highlight the potential long-term impacts.

Universities and other post-secondary education providers have also seen widespread shifts to remote learning, although this is not as dramatic as for schools because universities had been providing online teaching for a number of years. The shift to greater use of online teaching has, however, continued for longer in universities than school. Furthermore, higher education providers in Australia are particularly exposed to the losses of revenue from international students with many reporting job losses and the reduction of services, both of which are likely to have further effects on current and future students.

In the United States the effects of the pandemic have differed between universities and students. Aucejo et al. (2020) find based on a survey of students at Arizona State University that 'the pandemic was broadly disruptive to students, while also demonstrating that this disruption was much larger for lower-income students. This second finding seems to be primarily driven by the fact that lower-income students were more likely to have been financially impacted by COVID-19 and were more worried about the direct health risks from the virus.'

While there have undoubtedly been negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education institutions, students and their families, the crisis has at the same time created an opportunity to reflect on the role of education in a society like Australia's. If we are to rebuild from what has been one of the largest shocks experienced in the last century (alongside the two World Wars, the Spanish Flu pandemic, and the Great Depression), then it is important to take into account what the Australian population values and prioritises.

This paper provides a summary of survey data on the experiences of students and their families during the pandemic, as well as attitudes of the entire Australian population to the role of schools and universities. The paper is primarily based on the November 2020 ANUpoll (the 44th waves of data collection on the Life in Australia™ panel) which collected information from 3,029 respondents aged 18 years and over across all eight States/Territories in Australia. All estimates in this paper are based upon weighted data unless otherwise stated. More detail on the data is available in Biddle et al. (2020), as well as from the Australian Data Archive.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we look at the level of satisfaction with early learning and school education in Australia in 2020, as well as the level of concern for a child's learning due to COVID-19. In Section 3 we focus on the level and satisfaction and concern for adult learners. In Section 4 we provide a summary of views on the role of schools and universities in Australia, with Section 5 providing some concluding comments.

Table 1 School closures in Australia by jurisdiction

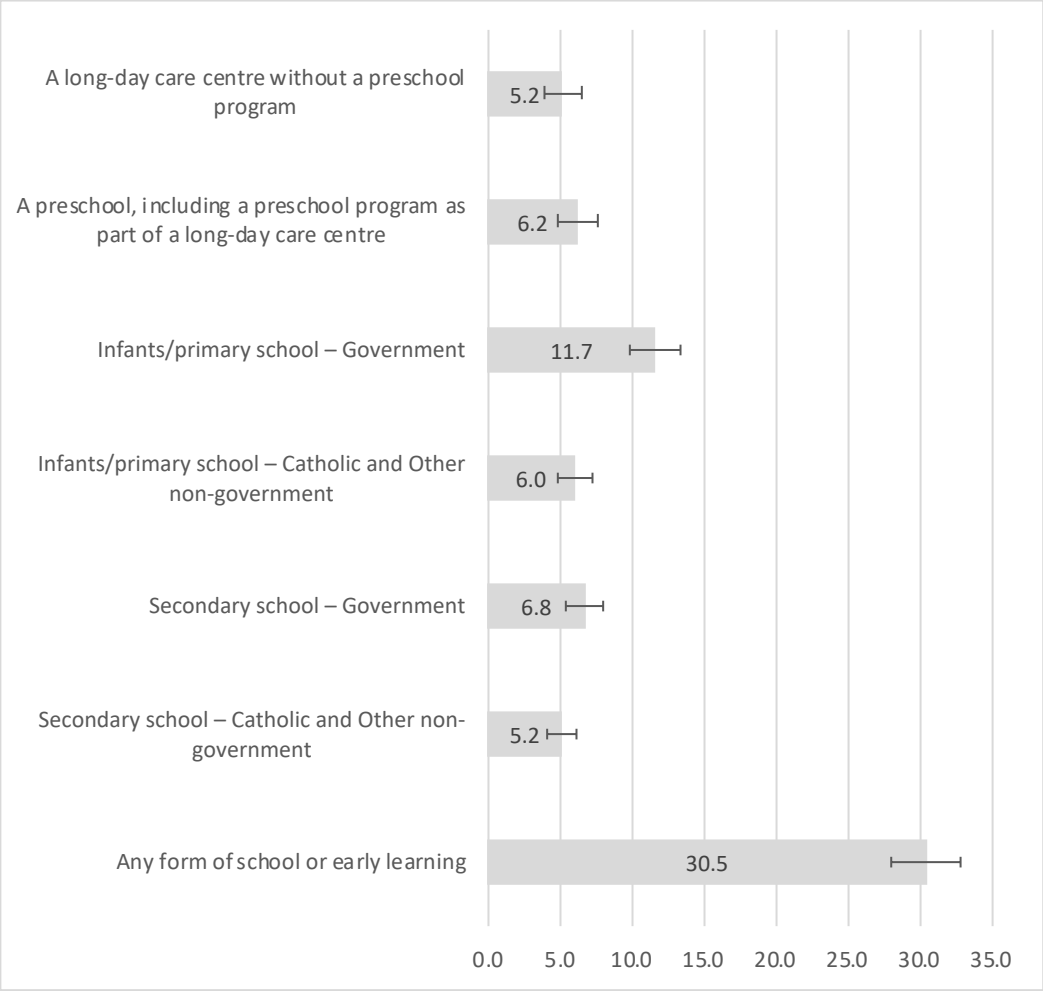
Jurisdiction	Dates	Details	Sources
NSW	24th March-25th May	Schools open, but parents encouraged to keep children home if they can.	https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/new-covid-19-restrictions-begin-as-schools-move-towards-online-learning https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-18/nsw-school-students-to-return-full-time-on-monday/12260252
Vic	24th March-9th June; 5th August – 26th October	Term 1 ended 1 week early. For term 2, schools open to those who need it. Staggered return between 26th May and 9th June. 2nd wave: Schools open for vulnerable children. Staggered return for students from 5th October to 26th with variation in school year and metro/regional.	https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-22/coronavirus-prompts-victorian-shutdown-of-non-essential-services/12078874 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-07/coronavirus-cases-increase-victoria-as-schools-reopen-next-week/12127176 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-26/victorian-schools-open-after-coronavirus-restrictions-ease/12276684 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-09/coronavirus-increase-of-zero-in-victoria-as-school-students-back/12333564 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-02/coronavirus-changes-victorian-schools-and-child-care-explained/12516544 https://education.vic.gov.au/school/Pages/coronavirus-roadmap-schools.aspx https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/roadmap-all-students-return-classroom
Qld	30th March-25th May	Remote learning from home, schools open to children of essential workers. Youngest and oldest students returned 11th May	https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-26/coronavirus-queensland-schools-to-be-student-free/12086568 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-15/coronavirus-queensland-schools-reopen-date-may-25/12248342
SA	3rd April-10th April; 18th Nov-23rd Nov	First closure just one week prior to term 1 holidays.	https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/sa-schools-to-close-a-week-early-in-response-to-coronavirus-pandemic-c-763482 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-18/sa-ordered-into-major-lockdowns-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/12894666 https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/healthmedicine/south-australian-schools-return-after-brief-lockdown-c-1631466
WA	6th April – 9th April	Families encouraged to keep children home for 30th March-3rd April. School resumed as normal for term 2, but home learning package options provided until 18th May	https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-26/wa-coronavirus-schools-changes-what-you-need-to-know/12093056 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-14/all-wa-students-to-return-to-school-as-coronavirus-absences-end/12245712
Tas	6th April-9th April	Term 1 finished 4 days early. For term 2, schools open to children but home learning options provided for families who prefer not to send children to school.	https://www.education.tas.gov.au/2020/04/school-term-2-update/ https://www.education.tas.gov.au/2020/04/term-2-in-tasmanian-government-schools/
NT	No closures		
ACT	24th March-2nd June	Pupil-free, schools still open to those who need it. Staggered return from 18th May, with all students returning from 2nd June	https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6691147/act-schools-to-effectively-close-and-move-to-online-learning/ https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-07/coronavirus-restrictions-act-public-schools-set-to-reopen/12221866

2 Experience of parents of students

Respondents to the November ANUpoll were asked 'At any time this year, have you been the parent or guardian of a child or young adult who has attended any of the following educational or care institutions…?' with eight potential forms of education and care asked about. Given the variation in education structures across Australia's eight States and Territories, [2] there is some uncertainty around the naming of different levels of schools and early learning, and we follow where we can the terminology used in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census of Population and Housing. Here, a preschool refers to early childhood education before the start of full-time schooling, with most children participating in one year of preschool (usually around the age of four), though some students and some jurisdictions have two years of preschool (generally for three and four-year-olds). Preschools are otherwise known as kindergartens (though in most States and Territories Kindergarten is the first year of full-time schooling) or pre-prep. Infants refers to the first four years of full-time schooling, or junior primary school.

In our analysis, due to sample size, we combine Catholic and other non-Government schools together (leading to six categories in total), with respondents able to identify more than one category if they have more than one child form whom they are a parent or guardian. In total, we have 732 respondents in our sample who were the parent or guardian of a student (or 30.5 per cent of the weighted sample). Figure 1 shows that amongst respondents to the survey who were the parent or guardian of a pre-school or school aged child that the most common form of education or care that their children were attending was an Infants/Primary school student in a government school (11.7 per cent) with the remainder of the education types reported by 5.2 to 6.8 per cent of the sample.

Figure 1 Per cent of Australians who were a parent or guardian of a student who attended a school or early learning centre, November 2020



Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

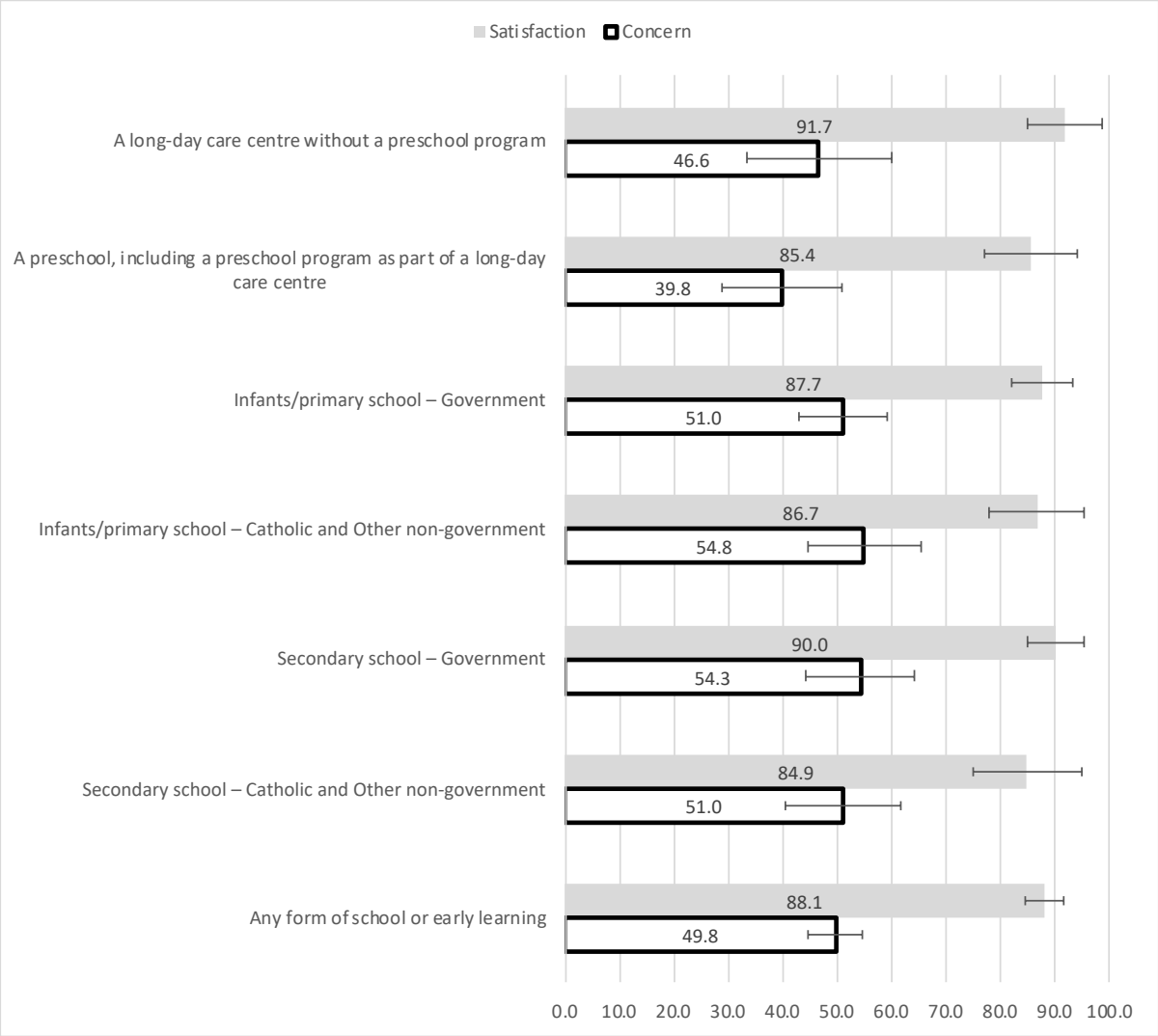
Respondents who were a parent or guardian (hereafter simply referred to a parent) of a child attending child care, a preschool, infants/primary or secondary school were asked a number of questions about their experience during the pandemic. These questions are based on similar questions that had been asked in the US by the Pew Research Center.[3] Respondents were first asked: 'Overall, how satisfied are you, if at all, with the way your children's educational institution has handled any changes related to the spread of COVID-19 during 2020?'. The vast majority of Australians were either very satisfied (47.8 per cent) or somewhat satisfied (40.2 per cent) with their child's educational institution. Only a small percentage of the population were either not too satisfied (9.0 per cent) or not at all satisfied (3.1 per cent).

There was a greater level of satisfaction in Australia than when US parents were asked in October: 25 per cent very satisfied, 44 per cent somewhat satisfied, 16 per cent not too satisfied and 6 per cent not at all satisfied. It should be noted though that the US respondents were restricted to those who had children in elementary, middle, or high school, whereas the data in ANUpoll includes those who attended an early learning service. While we do not have longitudinal data for this question, it is interesting to note that in the US satisfaction in their child's education had declined from April when it was asked previously.

While Australian parents tended to be satisfied with their child's school or early learning service, there was still a considerable amount of concern for their child's learning. Respondents were asked: 'How concerned, if at all, are you about your children falling behind in their education as a result of any disruptions caused by the spread of COVID-19.' Almost half of Australians had some concern for their child's learning, with 13.0 per cent saying that they were very concerned and 36.8 per cent saying that they were somewhat concerned. For the other half of the population, 30.0 per cent said that they were not too concerned, and 20.3 per cent said that they were not at all concerned.

The level of satisfaction with education during COVID-19 and the level of concern for the learning of the child did not vary too much by the type of school or early learning service that the family was exposed to (Figure 2). We combined the very and the somewhat satisfied (grey bars) as well as the very and somewhat concerned (the hollow bars). Keeping in mind that a respondent could have a child in more than one of the types of institution and that they are answering about all institutions combined, we can see that the highest level of satisfaction was for parents with a child in a long-day care centre without a preschool program, and the lowest satisfaction was for parents with a child in a preschool program or a Catholic/Other non-government secondary school. The highest level of concern reported was amongst parents whose child attended a Catholic/Other non-government Primary school or a Government Secondary school, with the lowest concern level of concern amongst parents with a child who attended a preschool. None of these differences, however, were statistically significant at the 5 per cent level of significance, and we will return to more precise estimates of differences controlling for other factors later in this section.

Figure 2 Level of satisfaction and level of concern with child's education institution, by type of institution, November 2020



Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

We also asked parents and guardians about the direct experience of learning since the start of the pandemic and how much it had changed from previous years. First, we asked parents 'How much online instruction, if any, have your children received this year from their educational institution compared to previous years?' Across the entire parent/carer sample 54.2 per cent said that online instruction was a lot more than previous years, with 26.4 per cent saying that there was a little more online instruction than previous years. There were very few parents who said that there was less online instruction than previous years (5.7 per cent), though there was a somewhat larger minority who said that it was about the same.

The second direct question that was asked was 'How much additional instruction or resources, if any, are you or another adult in your household providing to your children beyond what is being provided by the school compared to previous years?' There was far less change with this aspect of learning compared to online instruction with 28.9 per cent saying that their involvement went up by a lot from previous years, with a further 35.1 per cent saying it went up by a little. There was still a very small proportion of respondents who said that the

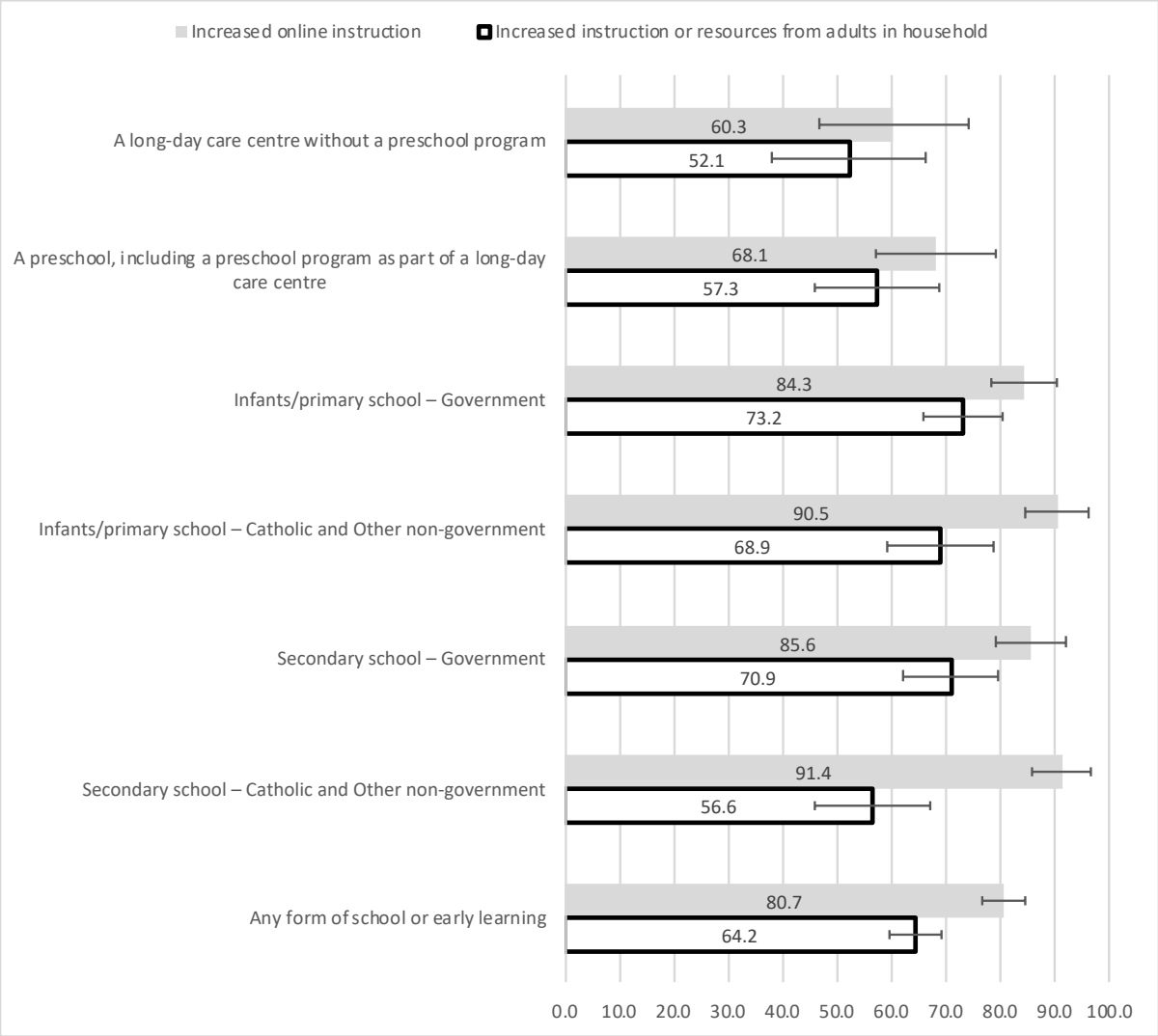
involvement of adults in the household went down (5.1 per cent), but almost a third of adults (30.9 per cent) said that their involvement was about the same.

There was significant variation in the change in online instruction depending on the type of institution that children in the household were attending. The greatest increase in online instruction was amongst those who had children attending a non-government secondary school (91.4 per cent) or a non-government infants or primary school. There were much smaller increases in online instruction in early learning services.

The greatest increase in instruction or resources provided by adults in the child's household appears to have occurred in government infants or primary schools (73.2 per cent) or government secondary schools (70.9 per cent). There were smaller reported increases in non-government schools, and in early learning services.

It would appear that non-government schools coped with the COVID-19 pandemic through online instruction, whereas government schools relied more on adults in the households of their students.

Figure 3 Increases in online instruction and additional household instruction/resources, by type of institution, November 2020



Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

2.1 Factors associated with education experience

In addition to the type of school in which a child attends, there are a number of other characteristics that predict a household's experience with education during the COVID-19 period. We explore these factors in Table 2 below based on a regression analysis of the categorical questions described above. Specifically, we estimate four separate models with the dependent variable for each being the four-category responses to the questions outlined above. The model is estimated as an ordered probit model, with higher values representing a higher level of satisfaction with education, a greater concern for the child's learning, or a greater change in instruction. Explanatory variables include demographic, socioeconomic (including income) and geographic measures, as well as the type of education institution where the parent has a child attending (the omitted category is someone who only has a child at a government infants/primary school), as well as the type of household (the omitted category is a couple household).

Reading across the table, those parents who lived in Victoria were less satisfied with their education institution than those in other parts of the country, and were more concerned about their child's learning. They were also more likely to say that their child had experienced an increase in online learning and that the household had provided more instruction and resources. None of these results are surprising, given the extended lockdown that occurred in Victoria during the second wave of infections. However, it does highlight the potential education costs of that second wave, in addition to the social, mental health and economic costs documented in other papers in this series.

Females were more satisfied with their child's education institution, and less likely to be concerned about their child's learning. Younger parents had the lowest level of concern, with young parents and older parents less likely to say that the household increased their level of instruction and resources than the omitted category (aged 35 to 44 years). Compared to parents born in Australia, those born overseas in a predominantly English speaking country had higher satisfaction and less concern, whereas those born in a non-English speaking country were less satisfied and more concerned. Finally, from a socioeconomic perspective, lower educated parents and those with relatively disadvantaged areas were less satisfied than the rest of the population, whereas those who lived in a household with relatively low incomes were more concerned about their children's learning, and more likely to say that they had to increase their own instruction or resources.

It would appear that some of the differences by education institution presented earlier were due to other characteristics of the respondent/household. There were still some differences though. In particular, compared to all other parents, those who had a child attending a government secondary school were significantly less likely to be satisfied with the adjustments that their child's education institutions made, and more likely to be concerned about their child's learning. Compared to those who only had children in a government infants/primary school, those parents who had a child in a government secondary school, or a non-government school (infants/primary or secondary) reported a greater increase in online instruction, whereas those who had a child in a long day care centre reported a smaller increase.

Table 2 Factors associated with parent views on education during the COVID-19 pandemic – November 2020

	Satisfaction		Concern		Online instruction		Own instruction	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Victorian	-0.249	*	0.533	***	0.464	***	0.487	***
Female	0.293	**	-0.272	**	0.024		-0.182	
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.809		-0.676		-0.373		-1.667	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.162		-0.338	**	0.089		-0.248	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.024		-0.161		0.007		-0.273	**
Aged 55 plus	0.374	*	-0.278		0.080		-0.383	**
Indigenous	-0.218		0.338		-0.214		-0.446	
Born overseas in a main English speaking country	0.434	**	-0.537	***	-0.488	**	-0.232	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.359	*	0.526	***	-0.133		-0.277	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.106		0.007		-0.033		0.121	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.707	**	-0.014		-0.651	**	-0.095	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.100		-0.104		-0.222		-0.214	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.056		-0.021		-0.408	*	0.065	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.119		0.150		-0.359	*	-0.050	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.517	**	0.101		-0.225		-0.303	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.173		0.095		-0.127		-0.151	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.029		-0.079		0.183		-0.141	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.187		0.179		0.212		0.122	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.171		-0.132		0.042		0.145	
Household income in 1st (lowest) quintile	-0.247		0.558	**	-0.203		0.818	***
Household income in 2nd quintile	-0.048		0.204		-0.021		0.188	
Household income in 4th quintile	0.138		-0.161		-0.008		0.089	
Household income in 5th (highest) quintile	-0.026		-0.327	*	-0.008		0.276	
A long-day care centre without a preschool program	0.025		-0.030		-0.591	***	-0.375	*
A preschool, including a preschool program as part of a long-day care centre	-0.177		-0.113		-0.232		-0.121	
Infants/primary school – Catholic and Other non-government	-0.037		0.211		0.393	**	-0.058	
Secondary school – Government	-0.351	**	0.330	**	0.312	*	0.067	
Secondary school – Catholic and Other non-government	0.059		0.115		0.335	**	-0.198	
Single parent household	-0.261		0.142		0.207		-0.029	
Other (non-couple) household	-0.018		-0.068		0.038		-0.033	
Cut-point 1	-2.373		-0.902		-1.941		-1.961	
Cut-point 2	-1.693		0.115		-1.131		-0.594	
Cut-point 3	-0.311		1.405		-0.276		0.447	
Sample size	673		673		657		665	

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

Notes: Ordered Probit regression model. The base case individual is female; aged 35 to 44; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); and lives in a capital city. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

2.2 Relationship between increased instruction and satisfaction/concern with learning

Results presented above suggest that there is a considerable amount of variation in satisfaction with and concern for learning, as well as the changes in instruction during the COVID-19 period. In this sub-section, we explore this variation in more detail by considering how they relate to each other. Specifically, we replicate the regression models from Table 2, including as additional explanatory variables change in online instruction, as well as changes in instruction/resources from adults in the household. For these variables, the omitted category is those who reported no change in either type of instruction.

Keeping in mind that we are controlling for a range of demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and education characteristics, it is interesting that we still find a significant association between changes in instruction and satisfaction/concern. More specifically, we do not find any association with reported changes in online learning and satisfaction/concern, but we do find a strong association with increases in instruction and resources from people within the child's household. Those who had a decrease in the level of instruction and resources reported lower satisfaction with their child's education institution, but no difference in their level of concern. At the other end of the distribution, those who experienced an increase in instruction/resources from within the household reported a significantly lower level of satisfaction, as well as a significantly higher level of concern.

Table 3 Factors associated with parent views on education during the COVID-19 pandemic, including increased instruction – November 2020

	Satisfaction		Concern	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Online instruction – Less	-0.293		-0.052	
Online instruction – A little more	0.162		-0.150	
Online instruction – A lot more	0.254		0.012	
Own instruction/resources – Less	-1.071	***	0.215	
Own instruction/resources – A little more	-0.246		0.488	***
Own instruction/resources – A lot more	-0.473	***	0.530	***
Victorian	-0.212		0.452	***
Female	0.371	***	-0.250	**
Aged 18 to 24 years	-1.181	*	-0.386	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.120		-0.365	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.044		-0.109	
Aged 55 plus	0.276		-0.195	
Indigenous	-0.076		0.390	
Born overseas in a main English speaking country	0.461	**	-0.502	**
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.329	*	0.552	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.051		0.030	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.839	***	-0.006	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.224		-0.114	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.185		-0.037	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.230		0.141	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.518	**	0.134	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.124		0.172	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.055		-0.084	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.131		0.102	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.201		-0.207	
Household income in 1st (lowest) quintile	-0.185		0.425	*
Household income in 2nd quintile	0.114		0.161	
Household income in 4th quintile	0.154		-0.152	
Household income in 5th (highest) quintile	0.021		-0.344	*
A long-day care centre without a preschool program	0.109		0.037	
A preschool, including a preschool program as part of a long-day care centre	-0.083		-0.135	
Infants/primary school – Catholic and Other non-government	-0.085		0.190	
Secondary school – Government	-0.298	**	0.257	*
Secondary school – Catholic and Other non-government	0.063		0.106	
Single parent household	-0.395	*	0.207	
Other (non-couple) household	-0.031		-0.043	
Cut-point 1	-2.629		-0.676	
Cut-point 2	-1.847		0.389	
Cut-point 3	-0.384		1.695	
Sample size	655		655	

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

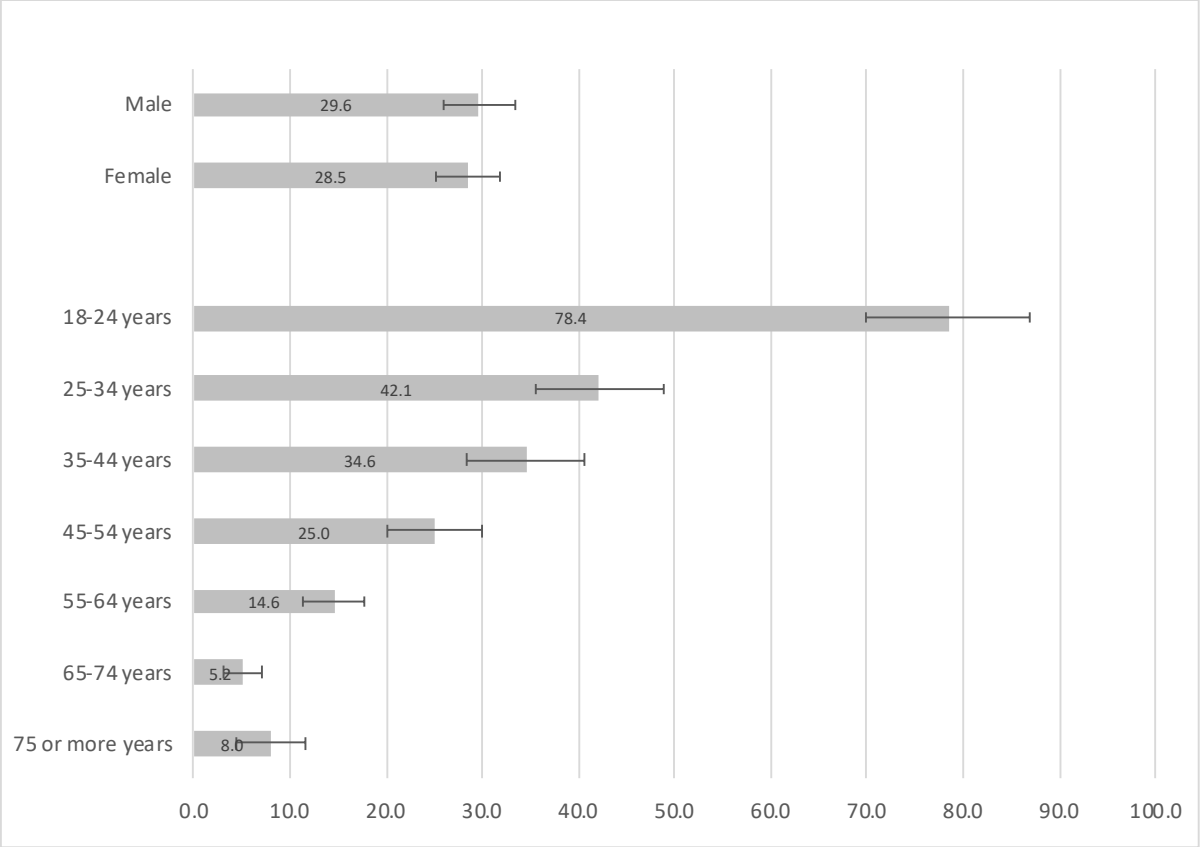
Notes: Ordered Probit regression model. The base case individual is female; aged 35 to 44; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); and lives in a capital city. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

3 Experiences of adult learners

It is not just school and early learning students who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, adult learners have also been impacted in Universities, Vocational Education and Training and other forms of formal and informal education. Before asking respondents about

their experience as parents or guardians of students, we asked whether or not they attended an education institution in 2020, with 671 respondents or 29.0 per cent of the (weighted) sample saying they were a student in either a secondary school; technical or further educational institution (including TAFE Colleges); university or other higher educational institution; or some other educational institution. A higher proportion of young Australians were students. There is no difference between males and females in the probability of having been a student, whereas the young are far more likely to be students than older Australians (Figure 4), albeit with a slight increase again between the 65-74 and 75 plus age groups.

Figure 4 Student status, November 2020

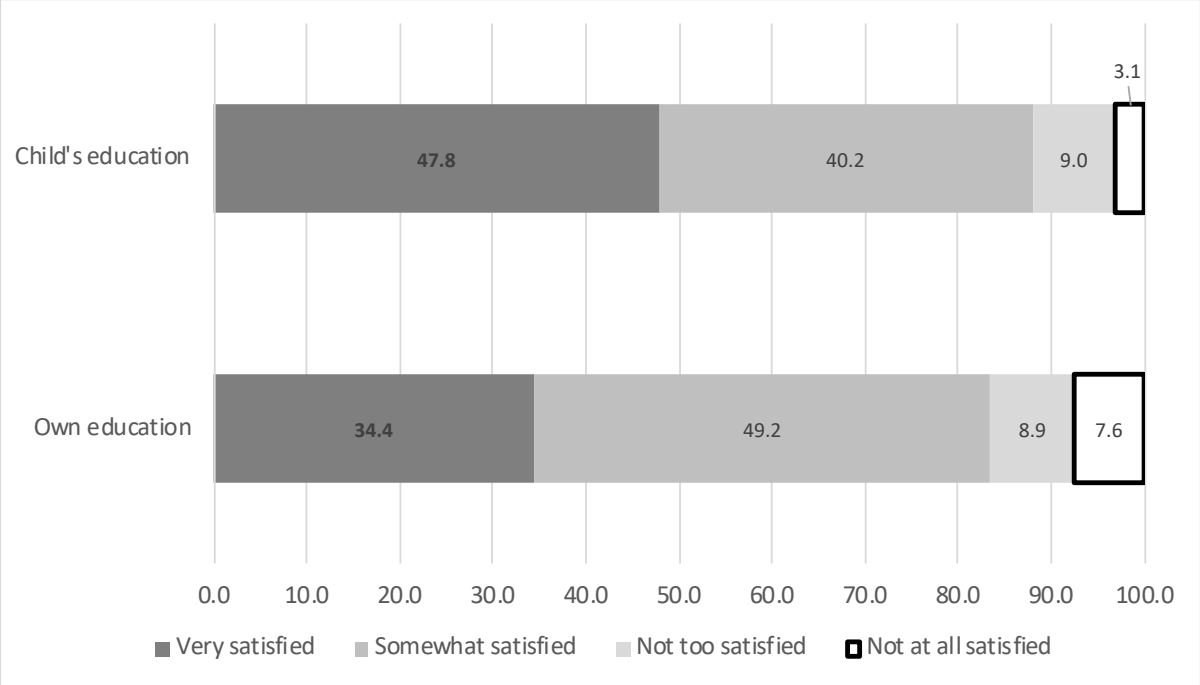


Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

We asked respondents who had attended an education institution 'Overall, how satisfied are you, if at all, with the way your educational institution has handled any changes related to the spread of COVID-19 during 2020?' There was slightly less satisfaction with one's own education institution compared to when parents s were asked about their child's institution (Figure 5), with 34.4 per cent saying they were very satisfied, and 49.2 per cent saying they were somewhat satisfied. Still, only 8.9 per cent of respondents were not too satisfied and only 7.6 per cent of respondents not at all satisfied.

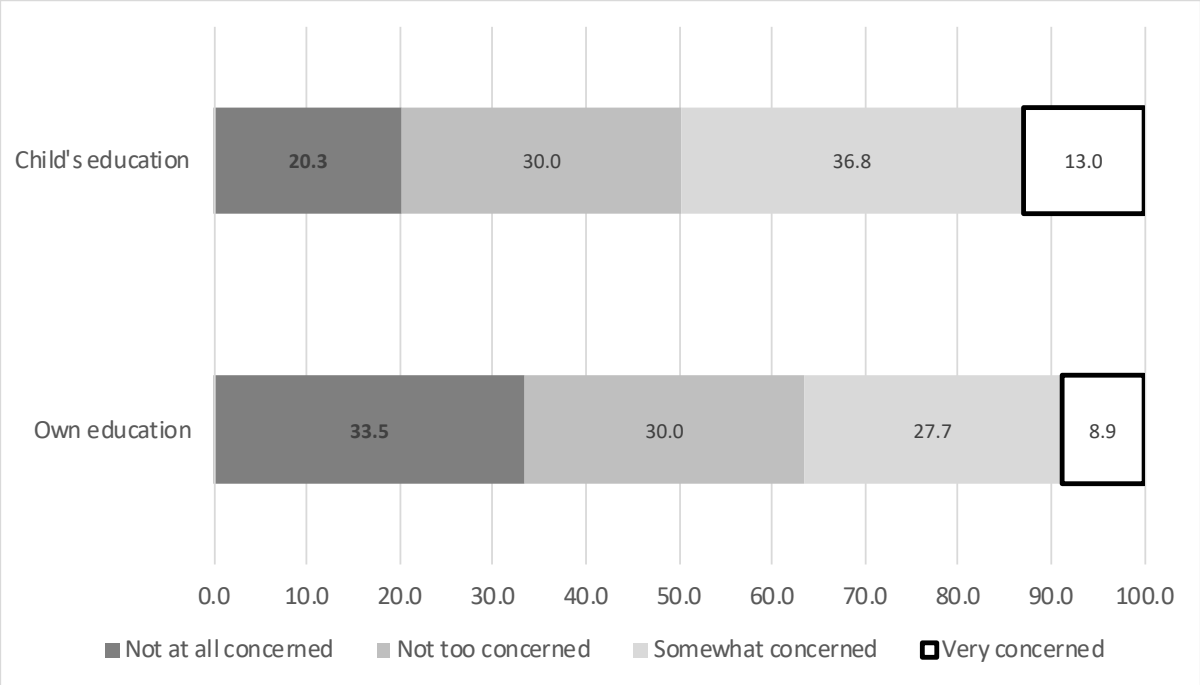
Figure 5 Satisfaction with child's education and own education, November 2020



Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

We also asked respondents who attended an education institution 'How concerned, if at all, are you about falling behind in your own education as a result of any disruptions caused by the spread of COVID-19?' Respondents were less concerned about their own education than parents were about their child's education (Figure 6) with 8.9 per cent saying they were very concerned, and 27.7 per cent saying that they were somewhat concerned.

Figure 6 Concern with falling behind in child's education and own education, November 2020



Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

There are a number of factors that were associated with the satisfaction levels and concern with learning for adult learners, as well as some factors that one might expect to have been significant that had no association (Table 4). This lack of statistical significance for some variables may be because of a relatively small sample size, so it is important not to assume no association for the general population.

With that caveat in mind, we do nonetheless find that females had a higher level of satisfaction with their own education than males, with older Australians in the sample having less concern for their own education. In an important finding, those current students who had not completed Year 12 were significantly less likely to be satisfied than those who had completed Year 12. Given we are controlling for the level of education that the student is currently studying, this strongly suggests that those with relatively low levels of education leading into the pandemic had a worse experience than those with higher baseline levels of education. Those in relatively advantaged areas were less satisfied than those in the rest of the area-level socioeconomic distribution, whereas those who lived outside a capital city were more satisfied. Those in relatively disadvantaged areas were less concerned about their own education, as were those with relatively high levels of education.

There were some associations with the type of education that a person was attending. The omitted category (attending a university or other higher education institution) had the highest level of satisfaction, with (adult) secondary school students and those attending technical or vocational education having the lowest level of satisfaction. Finally, it is interesting to note that those students who also were a parent of a child who was attending an education institution did not report a different level of satisfaction or concern than those who were not a parent (all else being equal).

Table 4 Factors associated with student's views on education during the COVID-19 pandemic – November 2020

	Satisfaction		Concern	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Victorian	0.232		0.029	
Female	0.366	***	-0.072	
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.400		0.138	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.048		-0.091	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.327		-0.041	
Aged 55 plus	0.180		-0.632	***
Indigenous	0.284		-0.600	
Born overseas in a main English speaking country	0.218		-0.323	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.304		0.098	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.060		0.160	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.695	***	-0.023	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.034		-0.236	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.171		0.068	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.276		0.086	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.067		-0.352	*
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.110		-0.449	**
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.032		-0.316	*
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.542	**	0.001	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.351	**	0.044	
Household income in 1st (lowest) quintile	-0.504	**	0.232	
Household income in 2nd quintile	-0.130		-0.080	
Household income in 4th quintile	0.053		-0.363	*
Household income in 5th (highest) quintile	-0.137		-0.295	
Secondary school	-0.382	**	-0.217	
Technical or further education	-0.299	*	-0.117	
Other education	-0.142		-0.258	
Parent or guardian of a child who attended an education institution	-0.184		0.169	
Cut-point 1	-2.189		-0.880	
Cut-point 2	-1.633		0.012	
Cut-point 3	-0.078		1.065	
Sample size	589		600	

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

Notes: Ordered Probit regression model. The base case individual is female; aged 35 to 44; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); and lives in a capital city. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

4 Views on the role of education

The previous two sections have shown that 2020 has been a very disruptive year for education in Australia. While satisfaction levels with education institutions was reasonably high, almost exactly half of parents were concerned about their child's education, and a significant minority of adult learners were concerned about their own education. As Australia (hopefully) returns to a more stable education environment in 2021, it is important to make sure that what we return to reflects the needs and aspirations of students and their families.

This is particularly important because there appears to have been a small decline in the faith Australians have in the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2020, respondents to the Life in Australia wave of data collection for that month were asked to what

extent they thought the following statement applied: 'Overall, everyone in Australia has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek'. On a scale of 0 to 10, the average response was 6.11, indicating a slightly positive view towards the education system. In November 2020, however, when we re-asked the question, this had declined to 5.97. While the difference appears small, it is statistically significant and is certainly not moving in the direction that policy makers would hope for.

One way to restore the Australian public's belief in the fairness of the education system is to respond more closely to what they see the role of education being. This should of course not be the only criteria, as there is a need for education institutions to perform a diversity of roles. However, public opinion on what the role of education institutions should be is an important component of how we structure our education system.

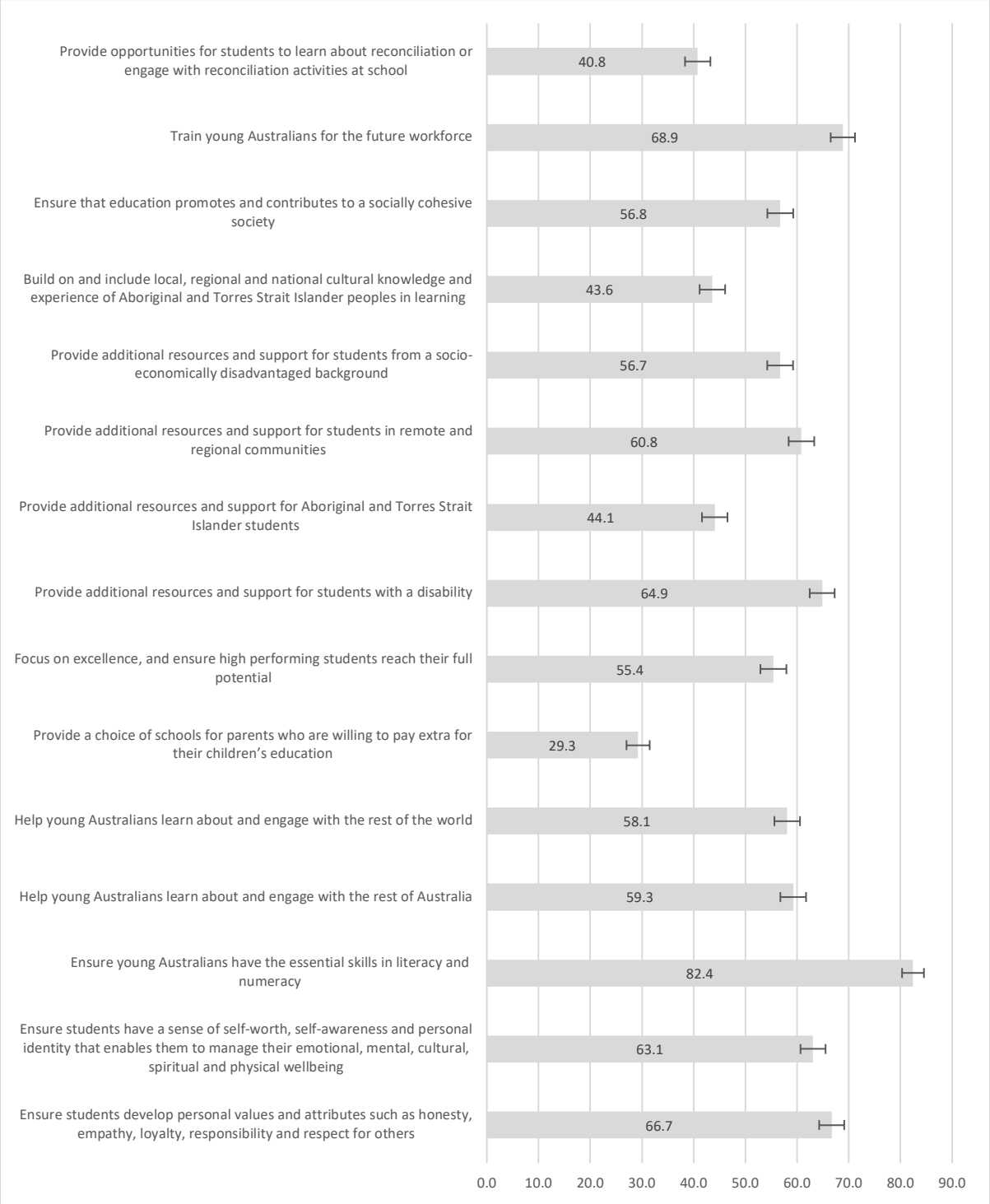
Beginning with the school system, we asked respondents 'Now thinking about school education, on the whole, do you think it should or should not be the responsibility of schools in Australia to...?' with 15 potential roles asked about, presented in a random order to respondents. Response options were definitely should be, probably should be, probably should not be, and definitely should not be. We focus on the per cent of Australians who report the first of these response categories in order to maximise the variation across the particular roles of schools.

Figure 7 shows that the role of education that had the highest level of support was to 'Ensure young Australians have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy' with 82.4 per cent of respondents supporting that statement. It is perhaps not surprising that literacy and numeracy is seen as the core role of education. However, it is important to be reminded of the centrality of literacy and numeracy to school education in Australia. Many of the other roles of education receive a majority level of support with more than two thirds of respondents saying that it definitely should be a role of schools to 'Train young Australians for the future workforce' (68.9 per cent) and 'Ensure students develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, empathy, loyalty, responsibility and respect for others' (66.7 per cent). While the basics like literacy and numeracy are seen to be important, the education system in 2021 needs to also focus on its more diverse roles.

There were a few potential roles of education that received a less than majority support. The lowest was to 'Provide a choice of schools for parents who are willing to pay extra for their children's education' with only 29.3 per cent of respondents saying that definitely should be a role. There has been a near-bipartisan support for school choice in Australia if parents cover some of the costs of education through compulsory school fees at the Commonwealth level, with the Howard government (1996 to 2007) expanding Commonwealth funding for non-government schools and the subsequent Labor government introducing the MySchool website in order to help parents make a more informed choice. While all questions were designed to have as neutral a framing as possible, it is of course possible that a different framing of school choice (perhaps without mentioning willingness to pay) would have resulted in a different response. However, school choice at the moment is for the most part restricted to students attending a non-government school with compulsory fees. The main exception is academically selective schools, though these tend to be concentrated in New South Wales, and Sydney in particular. These caveats aside, there does not appear to be strong support amongst the general population for the school system supporting school choice, at least based on ability to pay.

There is also relatively low levels of support for aspects of the school system related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Only 40.8 per cent of respondents felt it was definitely the role of schools to 'Provide opportunities for students to learn about reconciliation or engage with reconciliation activities at school' and only 43.6 per cent of respondents saying it was definitely a role of schools to 'Build on and include local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in learning'. Furthermore, despite there being majority support that a role of schools is to 'Provide additional resources and support for students with a disability' (64.9 per cent), 'Provide additional resources and support for students in remote and regional communities' (60.8 per cent), and 'Provide additional resources and support for students from a socio-economically disadvantaged background' (56.7 per cent), there was less than majority support that a role of schools is to 'Provide additional resources and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' (44.1 per cent). It should be noted though that based on the socioeconomic and geographic distribution of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, providing additional school funding based on socioeconomic status and regional/remote location is likely to impact on Indigenous students more than non-Indigenous students. It is possible that this was implicitly or explicitly factored in by respondents when answering these questions.

Figure 7 Per cent of Australians who think particular options definitely should be the role of school education, November 2020



Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

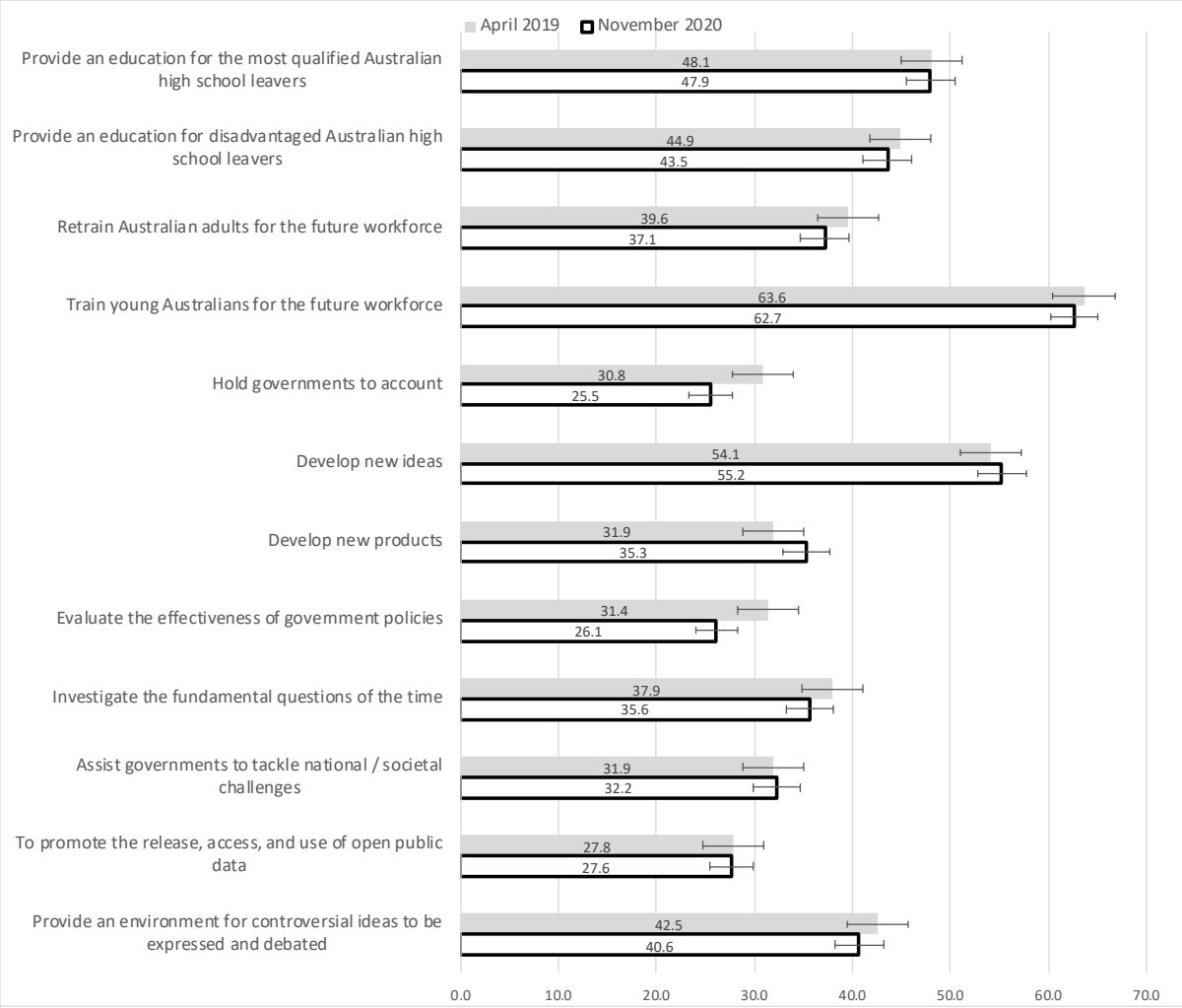
Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

We also asked about respondents' views on the role of universities, with a range of options across teaching, research, and policy impact. We repeated the same options from April 2019, which gives us an opportunity to consider how views on the role of universities have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing once again on those who say a particular option

definitely should be a role, results presented in Figure 8 show that as the pandemic appears to be coming to an end in Australia, Australians still see the core role of a university as being to 'Train young Australians for the future workforce' with 62.7 per cent of respondents saying that definitely is a role (similar to the 63.6 per cent in April 2019). There is also strong support for universities to provide basic research, with 55.2 per cent saying that it is definitely a role of universities to 'Develop new ideas' (similar to the 54.1 per cent in April 2019).

While there is some consistency in what is perceived to be the main role of universities, there are some other roles that have changed a bit over the COVID-19 period. The public policy role of universities has lost a significant amount of support, with only 25.5 per cent saying that the role of universities is definitely to 'Hold governments to account' (down from 30.8 per cent in April 2019) and only 26.1 per cent saying that it is definitely a role to 'Evaluate the effectiveness of government policies' (down from 26.1 per cent in April 2019). There has been a slight increase, however, in the per cent of Australians who think it is definitely the role of universities to 'Develop new products', increasing from 31.9 per cent to 35.3 per cent.

Figure 8 Per cent of Australians who think particular options definitely should be the role of universities, April 2019 and November 2020



Notes: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2019 and November 2020.

5 Concluding comments

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on a range of health, social, and economic outcomes in Australia. There has also been a disruption to many education systems, with most students experiencing some form of suspension to face-to-face teaching, and ongoing restrictions for many on learning and training in the workplace.

The majority of Australians, however, are reasonably satisfied with how education systems have adapted to the COVID-19 period. Some have had a better experience than others, and parents are more satisfied about the school and early learning systems than adult learners are about their own education. We also found lower rates of satisfaction amongst those with relatively low levels of education, in relatively disadvantaged circumstances, and those who had a child attending a government secondary school.

Although the majority of people were satisfied with how the education system had adapted, there were still a large number of people who were concerned about their own learning, or the learning of their child. Amongst parents, concern was greatest for those in Victoria, born overseas in a non-English speaking country, form a low-income household, or who attended a government secondary school.

While there was considerable debate on the role of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests prior to the pandemic, one of the real concerns from 2020 from an education policy perspective is the cancellation of the exams for this year. This has led to a considerable break in the time series, and a real challenge in assessing whether the concerns amongst parents are warranted and, perhaps even more importantly, whether those groups identified in social surveys like ours as being most concerned were indeed affected the most.

In 2021, there is an opportunity to reshape the education system in a way that better reflects the needs and aspirations of the Australian population. There is ongoing support for the basics – literacy and numeracy for schools, the future workforce and new ideas for schools. However, there are aspects of schools and universities that have received less support. In particular, those who see a role of universities as being providing public policy evaluation and critique (like the Australian National University), must grapple with the finding that only a small minority of Australians see that as a role of universities, and that the proportion is falling.

Australians in November 2020 are less likely to think that everyone in Australia has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek than they did prior to the pandemic. If we are to 'build back better' with regards to education in Australia, then it is important to track outcomes of students (in particular those who were most disadvantaged prior to the pandemic) and respond and engage with views of Australians on the role of schools and universities.

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Endnotes

1 In Western Australia schools were only closed for four days. While South Australia also had two periods of school shut closures the second period only lasted for about one week.

2 https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/play-learning/preschool/preschool-in-your-state

3 https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/10/PSDT_10.29.20_W77_Topline_kids.edu_.pdf