

**Teacher perspectives on  
GCSEs and learner outcomes**

Survey results 2023/24





## Introduction

NCFE partnered with the daily survey app Teacher Tapp to understand how teachers across primary and secondary schools in England feel about current and future qualifications, as well as what their school views as the most important measurable outcome.

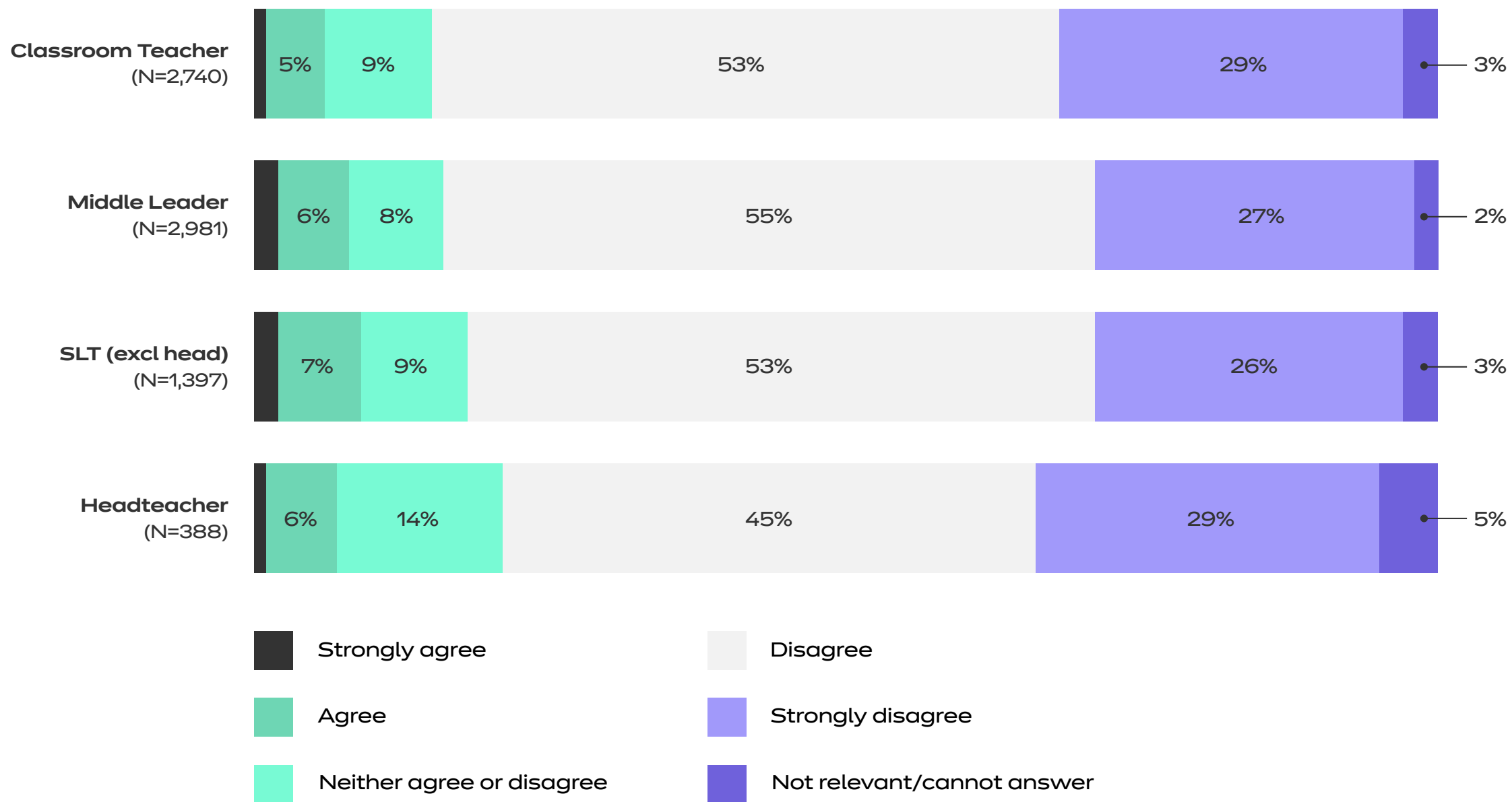
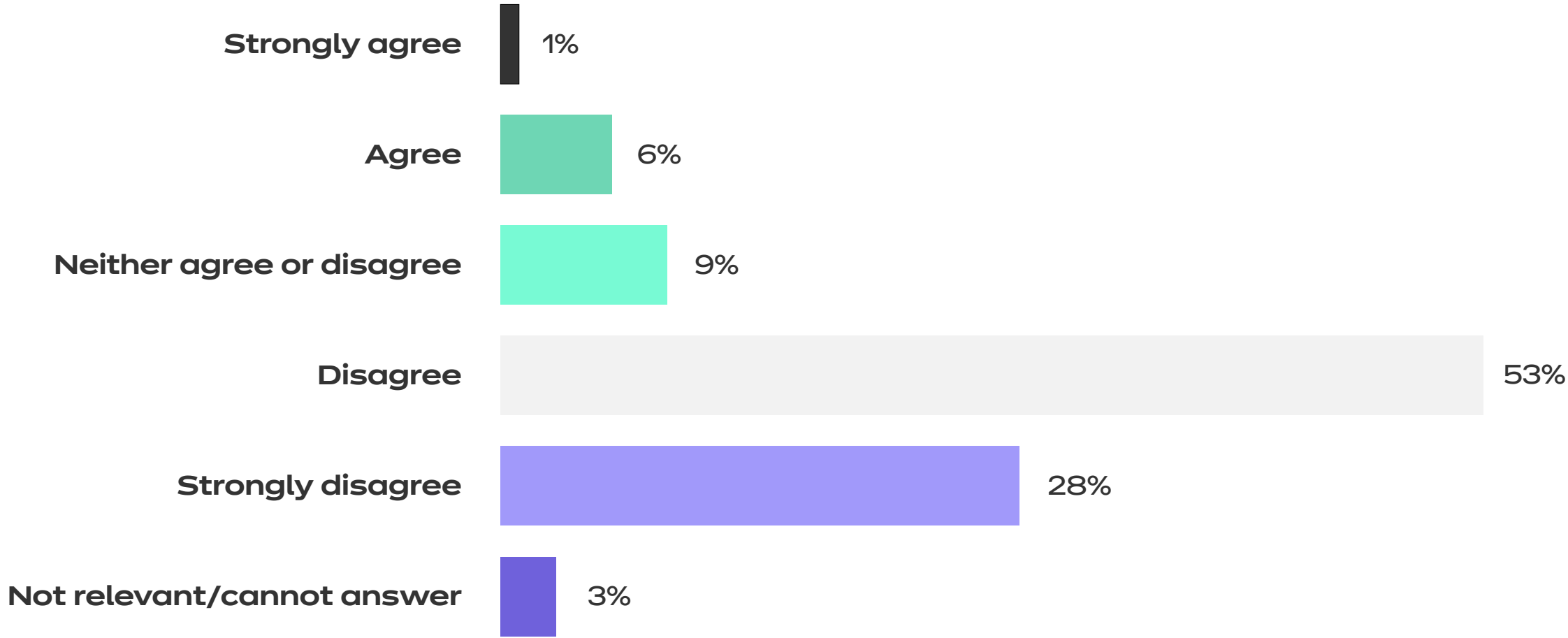
The analysis in this document is for all teachers in England, including those in private schools. The questions asked were:

1. Do you agree that "GCSEs are suitable for every pupil"?
2. What does your SCHOOL consider to be the most important measurable outcome? [asked to secondary teachers only]
3. The Government recently announced a plan for an 'Advanced British Standard' (ABS) - do you know what this is?

NCFE works with more than 1,500 schools in the UK every year to deliver vocational qualifications for students. In 2022/23, we supported over 32,000 Key Stage 4 students studying NCFE's V Cert - a technical equivalent to GCSEs - providing much needed opportunities for learners to study technical qualifications in schools.

# Question one

## Are GCSEs suitable for every pupil?



### Analysis

Just 7% of teachers agreed that GCSEs were suitable for every pupil, with more than 80% of teachers disagreeing. In fact, 28% of teachers strongly disagreed with the statement that GCSEs are suitable for every pupil.

This sentiment was common across all demographic groups, with 9% of secondary teachers agreeing with the statement, compared to 4% of primary teachers. This was also true among teachers of different seniorities, with similar percentages of classroom teachers, middle and senior leaders also agreeing.

### NCFE's view

Parity of achievement on Technical Awards vs GCSEs is essential as vocational education can appeal to different learning styles and be engaging, motivating, and inspiring, enriching young people's lives as well as preparing them for different careers and other routes.

The maximum grade available to vocational learners studying technical awards is 8.5 (vs. GCSE 9), reducing the overall performance point potential for these subjects over academic alternatives. This in turn negatively affects perception of technical education as a "lesser" alternative to the academic curriculum, despite similarities in assessments.

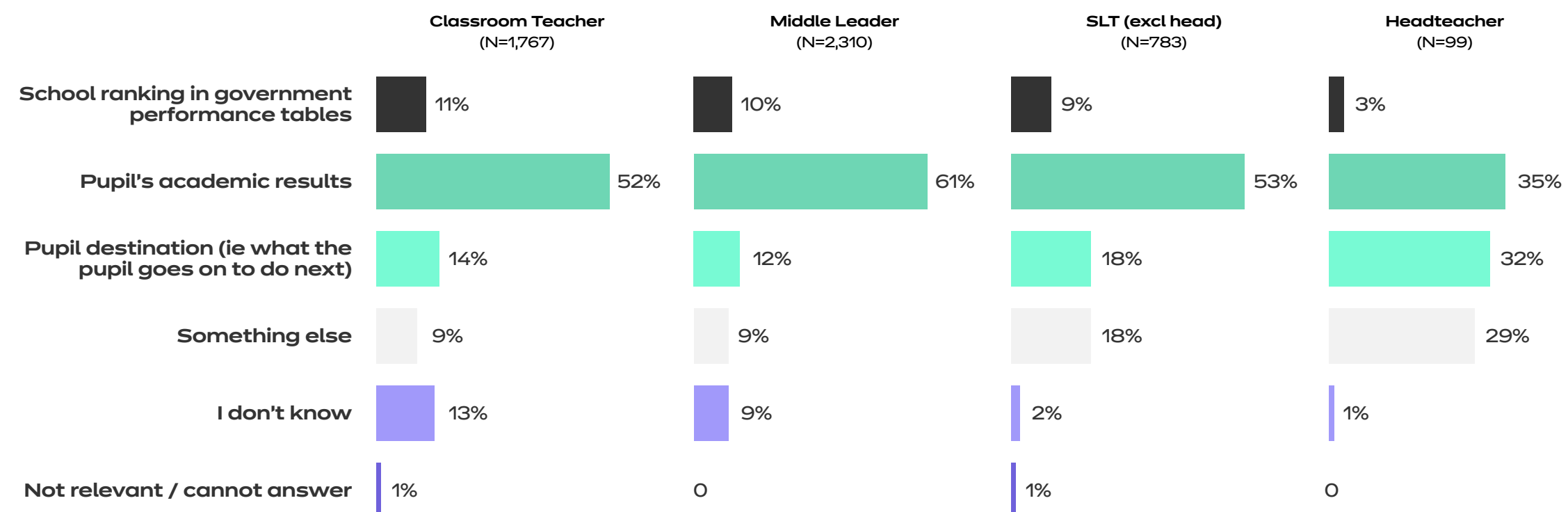
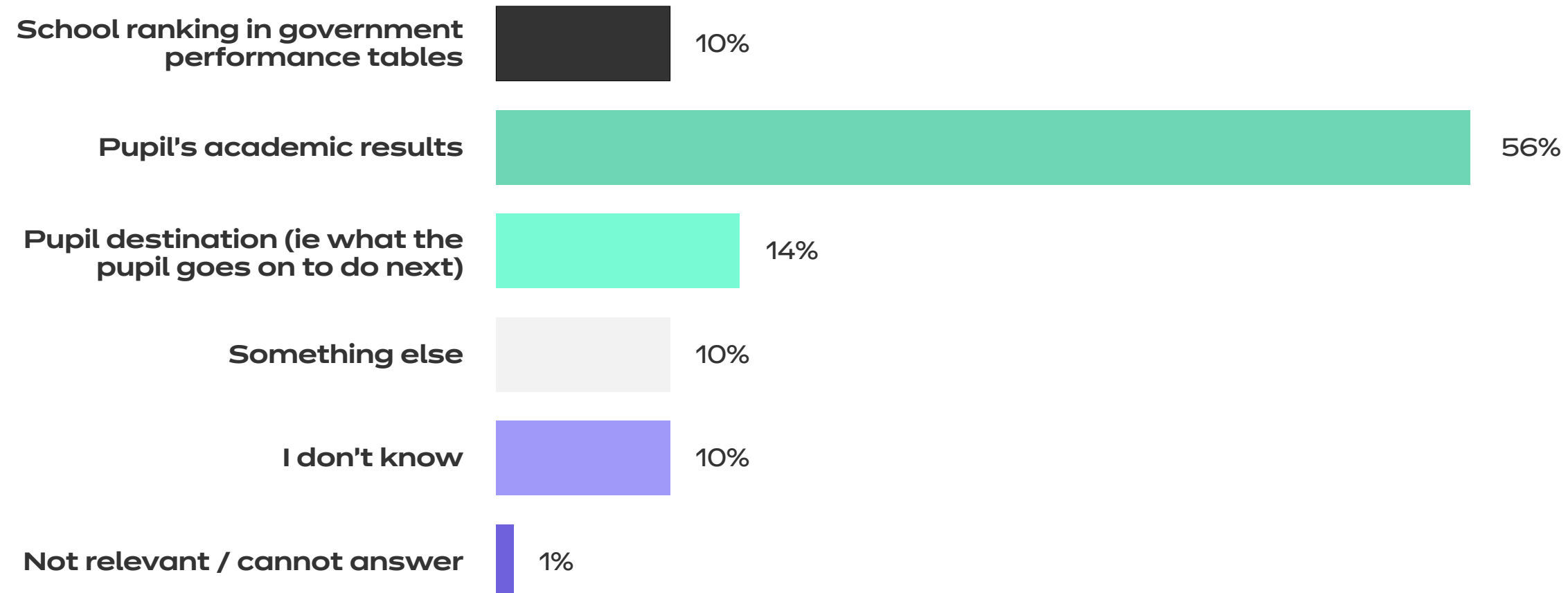
When it comes to English and Maths, the only qualifications that currently count are GCSEs. Whilst we welcome a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, there are strong alternatives to GCSEs such as functional skills, which may be suitable for the approximate third of learners who fail to achieve the GCSE standard in English and maths every year - sometimes referred to as the Forgotten Third.

The focus should be on the numeracy and literacy skills needed in employment and more practical skilled courses, rather than high-end academic subject content. This would allow those learners who have no realistic chance of gaining a GCSE "pass" to work on a qualification that will support them if they go down a vocational route at 16-19 or an apprenticeship.



# Question two

What does your SCHOOL consider to be the most important measurable outcome?



## Analysis

More than half (56%) of secondary teachers said that their pupil's academic results were the most important measurable outcome of their school, with around one-in-ten teachers choosing each of the other options.

While 52% of classroom teachers believed that academic results were their school's most important measurable outcome, this view was not shared by headteachers, only 35% of whom stated that a pupil's academic results were the most important outcome.

Instead, one-in-three headteachers stated that pupil destination was the most important, and 29% said that it was something other than the three given options.

## NCFE's view

A huge barrier to students taking technical awards at key stage 4 (KS4) is the schools' appetite to run these qualifications – largely due to the KS4 curriculum being built around Progress 8. Schools are under pressure to deliver against the Progress 8 metric which over-emphasises academic achievement, narrowing the curriculum and pushing technical qualifications down the priority list.

Progress 8 incentivises schools to run an academic curriculum, with a minimum of 70% of the school's overall score being calculated based on academic achievement alone. In practice, it is likely to be even greater than this. Consequently, teachers are under too much pressure to deliver Progress 8 results, and attitudes have moved away from "what's best for the learner" towards "what's going to achieve the best Progress 8".

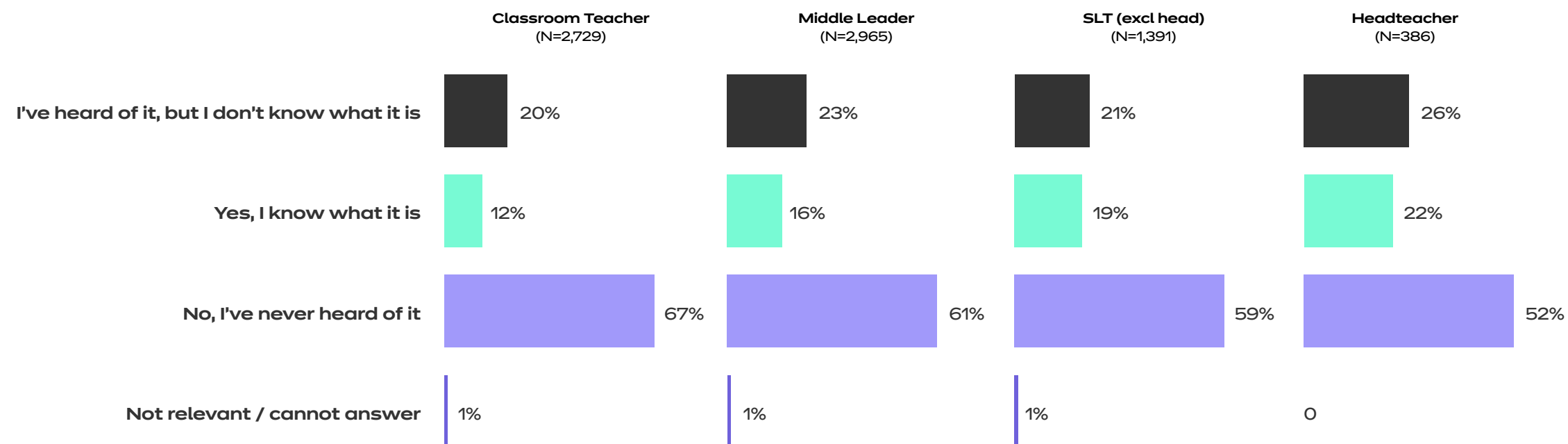
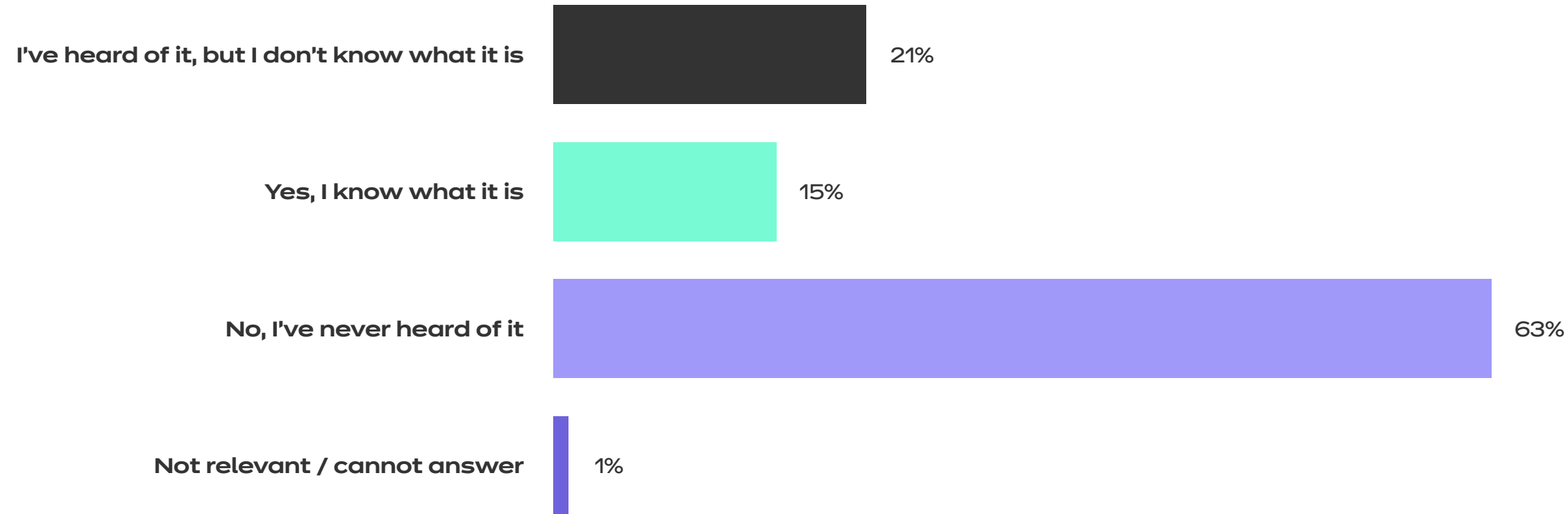
The importance of Progress 8 as a school accountability measure is imbalanced. If a school's overall Progress 8 score is below -0.5 the school will fall below the new floor standard, which could trigger a visit from Ofsted and the school will be flagged as failing. Schools with poor Progress 8 scores are nine times more likely to be given a poor Ofsted rating.

With GCSE English and maths, the learner's grade contributes to the overall performance point score, whereas Functional Skills adopt a pass/fail model that does not allow for performance point equivalency. There could be an argument to create a numeracy/literacy functional skills qualification that supports a pass/merit/distinction model to allow vocational learning in these core subjects with performance points.

For digital skills, the only digital qualifications that currently count towards Progress 8 are in Computer Science and Digital Technologies, which are advanced digital proficiencies. Digital Skills should be made available – potentially mandatory – for all pupils to allow them to access the essential digital skills to function safely and responsibly in what is an increasingly digital world.

# Question three

The Government recently announced a plan for an 'Advanced British Standard' (ABS), do you know what this is?



## Analysis

Almost two-thirds of teachers said that they had not heard of the 'Advanced British Standard' (ABS). In total, just 15% of teachers said they were aware of the ABS and knew what it was.

Headteachers were more likely than classroom teachers to have heard of the ABS, but even among headteachers, 52% had never heard of the ABS, with 22% being aware of it and knowing what it is.

Among classroom teachers, 67% had never heard of the 'Advanced British Standard'. Primary teachers were also less likely to have heard of it, with 73% not being aware of it.

## NCFE's view

It is vital to learn from the rollout of previous new qualifications and ensure minimum disruption to students and educators. The introduction of T Levels has highlighted the challenges of rolling out a new qualification alongside existing ones. There were too many unknowns and potential gaps in provision, which created uncertainty and mistrust about the new incoming qualification.

However, there is a significant risk in defunding legacy qualifications before new qualifications are well established and proven to work. We believe it is important to ensure that new qualifications are proven to deliver outcomes before withdrawing old qualifications.

Any new qualification requires buy-in from key stakeholders, such as teachers, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers. Each needs support on the journey to adopting the ABS, particularly as A Levels are so well known and embedded in the system.

The Progress 8 measure is currently forcing schools to choose GCSE as a route for English and Maths, regardless of their suitability to the student, which is causing issues that the post-16 system is expected to address. There is a huge need for a strong vocational alternative to GCSE pre-16 and, given that the ABS is not due to launch for another decade, there is time to significantly reform English and maths.