

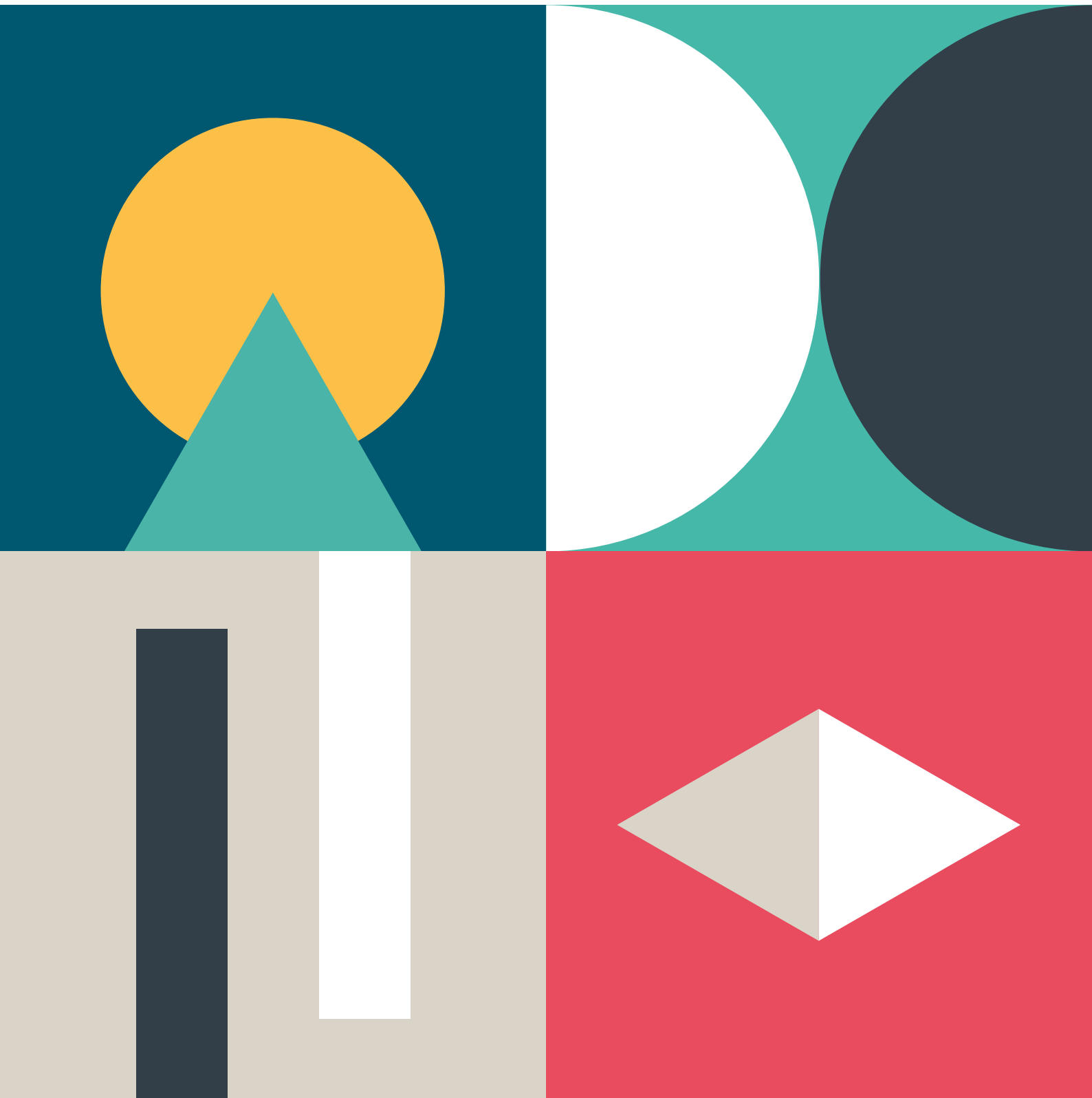
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023: Australia summary report

POSTGRADUATE

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

SURVEY

Dr Charlotte Holden



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1. Foreword by Professor David Sadler

This report provides the first specific insight into the views of higher degree by research students in Australia from a group of institutions that took part in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey in 2023. At the University of Western Australia we have found it incredibly valuable to understand the experience of this group, whose experience of university is naturally different to that of undergraduate or taught postgraduate students. Having a survey that is tailored specifically to their experience has been helpful in more fully understanding the ways we can more effectively support the needs of future cohorts.

The report provides a comparison between the results of the four participating Australian institutions and the UK institutions that also took part in the 2023 survey. This benchmarking is particularly helpful from an institutional planning perspective, and it is very encouraging to see that Australian students had a favourable experience in comparison to the wider benchmarking group.

There is, of course, always more we can do to improve the support for our students. The results have shone a light on some key differences between the experience for different groups of research students, particularly those who study online in comparison to in person, and I am looking forward to working with colleagues in my institution to focus on initiatives for these students using evidence from this survey.

I hope a growing number of Australian institutions will take part in the survey in future, contributing to a more detailed understanding of HDR students nationally.

Professor David Sadler

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education, The University of Western Australia

2. Executive summary

This report explores the responses from Australian Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and compares their feedback to the views from students across the full range of institutions that took part in the survey.¹ The responses have been obtained from HDR students at four institutions across Australia, providing the opportunity to produce the first benchmark summary of combined results for Australia. A list of these institutions can be found in Appendix 2.

There is strong evidence that the experience of HDR students is a positive one. Encouragingly, overall satisfaction with the experience among Australian students was relatively high, at 80%, and was marginally higher than for students across the total sample.

On many aspects of the survey the results for Australian students broadly matched those for the total sample, both at overall level and in terms of specific cohorts. In terms of the key areas of the survey, Australian students were most satisfied with supervision and the research skills training they received – both areas receiving some high scores. By contrast, they were least satisfied with their higher degree research community and the opportunities offered to them to connect with their peers and the research culture at the institution – issues that were very much apparent across participating institutions as a whole. Building a robust research culture is potentially a key factor in ensuring the full development – and satisfaction – of HDR students, and the results indicate that this is one of the key areas where HDR students are not fully satisfied. Building on this, the ‘community’ section is new to the survey this year and it appears to have helped highlight some key areas where participating institutions may decide to focus their enhancement activity.

Strikingly, there appears to have been a clear difference between the experience of those Australian students who had most of their contact with staff in person and those who had most of their contact virtually, with face-to-face interaction linking to a more positive experience across most aspects of the survey. This was the case across participating institutions as a whole, as well as for Australia. Similarly, students who studied full time were more positive about their experiences than those students who studied part time. To respond to this, institutions could investigate how best to ensure that students who have most of their contact with staff virtually, or who study part time, have access to the same kinds of opportunities to discuss their work and connect with their peers.

A similar proportion of Australian students considered leaving their higher degree research course compared to students from across all participating institutions – around one in three. However, this does not necessarily mean that they did go on to leave or will do so. Likelihood to consider leaving was influenced by how the students interacted with staff, which suggests HDR students could adopt a hybrid approach when interacting with staff, to allow flexibility around when they study while maintaining in-person contact.

¹ 105 institutions took part in the survey; 101 from the UK and four from Australia.

For both the total sample and Australian students, there is evidence of financial concerns playing a role in whether students have considered leaving their course. In previous years, for the total sample,² the influence of financial concerns was relatively low, but in 2023 students cite cost-of-living challenges as the principal reason for considering leaving. This clearly points towards a need for institutions to ensure they fully understand the range of pressures HDR students are under from a financial point of view, and take action to help support students who are in paid employment or under financial pressure to continue to be able to conduct their research and take part in wider activities.

² Previous years' data is not available for Australian students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey content

Since 2009, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) has enabled students studying for a higher degree by research (HDR) to give feedback on their higher education experience. This has provided institutions with robust data on areas of best practice and those they could improve. While participation in the survey was almost exclusively in the UK in its earlier years, in recent years there has been a steadily growing presence of Australian institutions.

While the core content of PRES remains consistent from year to year, the survey is adapted to respond to contemporary issues within higher education. In 2020, a Covid-19 section was added to understand students' perspectives on how their institutions had adapted to the changing learning environment. This section became optional within the survey for 2023 to try to capture the feedback from students who may have been at the start of their degree programme during the pandemic.

In the last year, the global higher education sector has been focused on understanding and improving students' sense of belonging to their institution (Crawford et al, 2023; Blake, Capper and Jackson, 2022) and so a community section was introduced in 2023. The full questionnaire contained the following sections:

- Supervision (four closed questions, one open question)
- Resources (seven closed questions, one open question)
- Research culture (four closed questions, one open question)
- Community (three closed questions, one open question)
- Progression (four closed questions, one open question)
- Responsibilities (four closed questions, one open question)
- Support (three closed questions, one open question)
- Research skills (four closed questions, one open question)
- Professional development (four closed questions, one open question)
- Covid-19 (three closed questions, one open question)
- Overall experience (two closed questions, one open question).

The survey also included sections on career motivations, development opportunities and demographics.

3.2 Data collection

The survey was conducted using an online surveys platform, Jisc Online Surveys (2023). The surveys were distributed by participating institutions to their postgraduate research/ HDR students. The survey ran for a minimum of 21 days between 1 February and 15 May 2023. Institutions were free to select their survey period within this timeframe.

3.3 Sample size

PRES was run biennially until 2018. Since then, it has run annually. It is up to institutions how often they take part in the survey. Some institutions choose to take part every other year, but there are a substantial number of institutions who opt for surveying students and receiving their feedback on an annual basis.

Four Australian institutions took part in 2023, the largest number to date. We are hopeful that the number of Australian institutions taking part will increase year on year and we encourage other Advance HE member institutions globally to consider taking part too.

Table 1. PRES participation 2023

Year	Total sample responses	Total participating institutions	Australian responses	Number of Australian institutions
2023	37,661	105	1,572	4

As four Australian institutions took part in 2023, an Australian benchmark was created to provide participating institutions with context for their results. A list of participating Australian institutions can be found in Appendix 2. While the results of individual institutions are confidential, institutions can request a tailored set of comparator institutions whose results are added together and anonymised to avoid disclosing an individual institution's results.

3.4 Presentation of findings

Most questions in PRES are analysed by combining the top two responses, 'Definitely agree' and 'Mostly agree', to create an 'agree' aggregate.

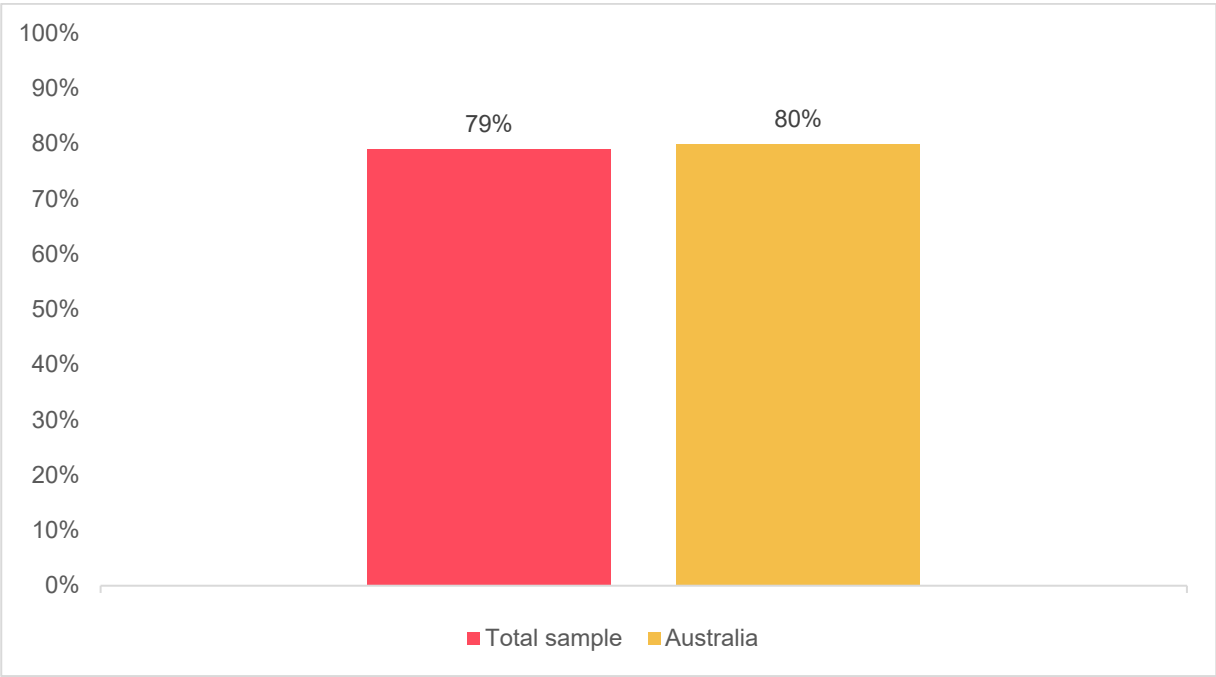
This report examines Australian students' responses and compares these with students from across the total sample of responses. The total sample results include the results from UK and Australian institutions. A comprehensive list of all institutions who took part in PRES 2023 can be found in Appendix 3.

4. Overall satisfaction

4.1 Overall

A measure of overall satisfaction is an indicator of students’ feelings on their entire HDR experience. PRES measures overall satisfaction using the question “Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme”. As can be seen below, total sample overall satisfaction and Australian overall satisfaction are largely similar, with marginally higher results for students at Australian institutions.

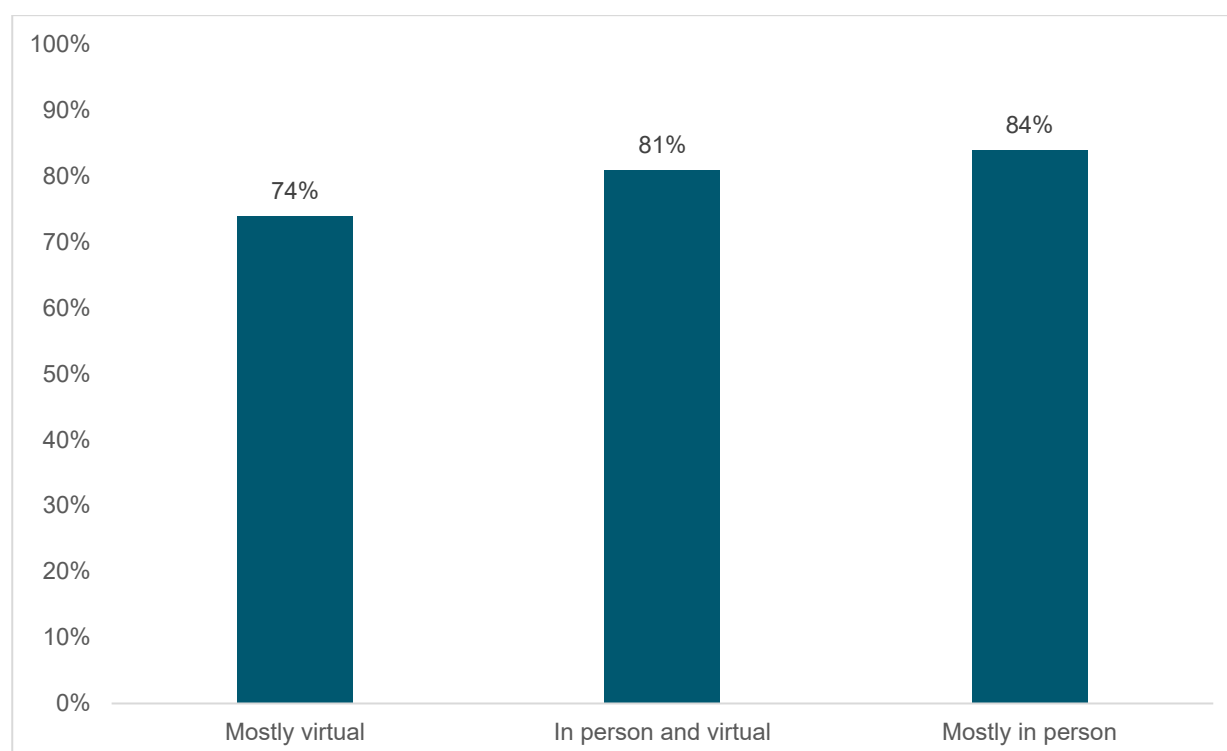
Table 2. Overall satisfaction – total sample and Australia



4.2 Overall satisfaction by contact with staff

Across both the total sample and Australia, students who mostly interacted with staff in person rated their overall experience higher than students who mostly interacted with staff virtually. As we will see later in this report, students who mostly interacted with staff virtually were least satisfied across all core sections of PRES 2023.

Table 3. Australian students'³ overall satisfaction by contact with staff

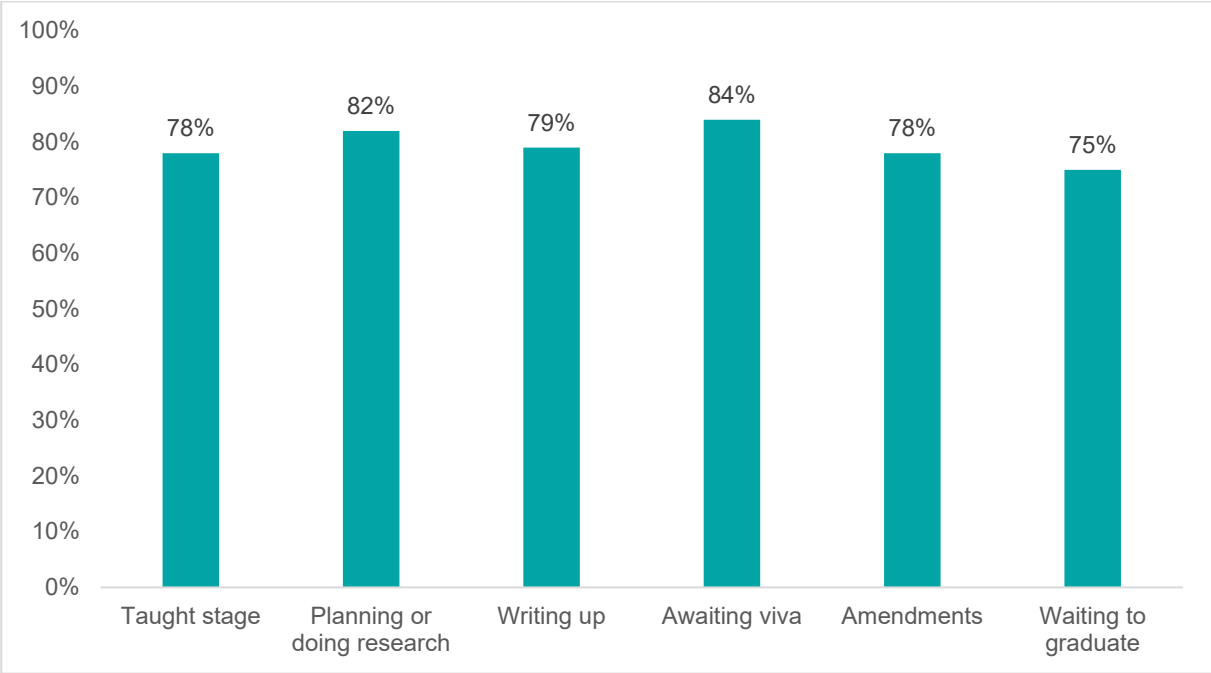


4.3 Overall satisfaction by stage of research

Overall satisfaction fluctuates quite strongly over the stages of research for both Australia and the total sample. Looking specifically at Australian students, levels of satisfaction were higher for those who were awaiting their viva, and quite a bit lower when they were waiting to graduate.

³ For this chart and others across the report 'Australian students' comprises all those students studying at Australian institutions participating in PRES 2023.

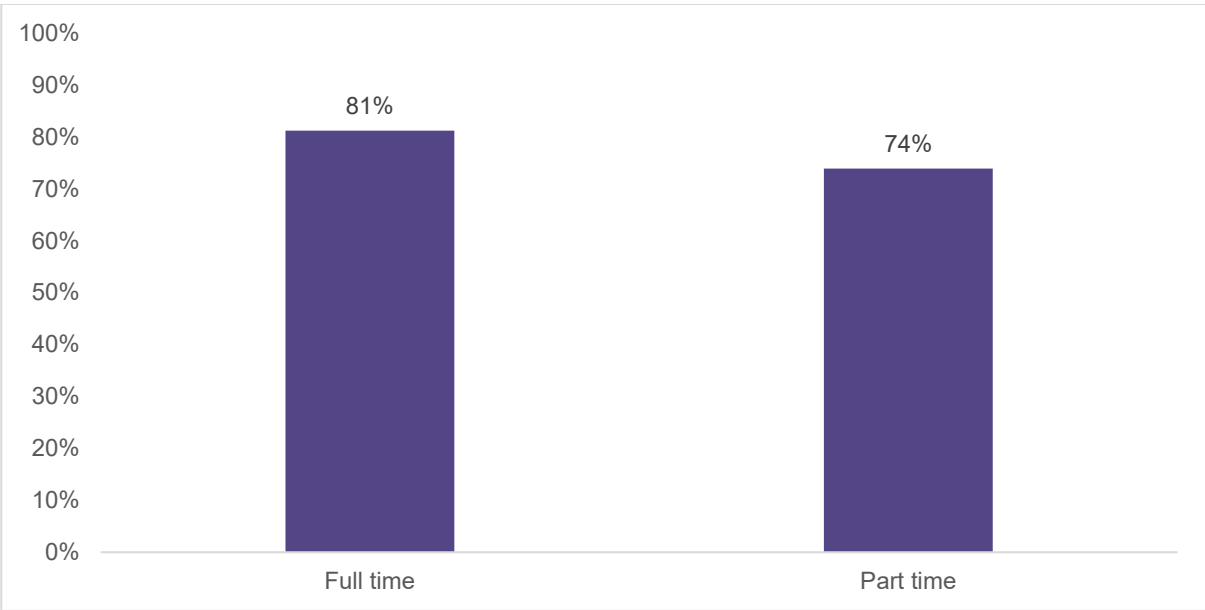
Table 4. Australian students’ overall satisfaction by stage of research



4.4 Mode of study

Full-time students in Australia were more satisfied with their higher degree research experience than part-time students, with a major difference of seven percentage points. This difference was also found at total sample level, suggesting that more focus may be required on delivering the best possible experience to part-time HDR students.

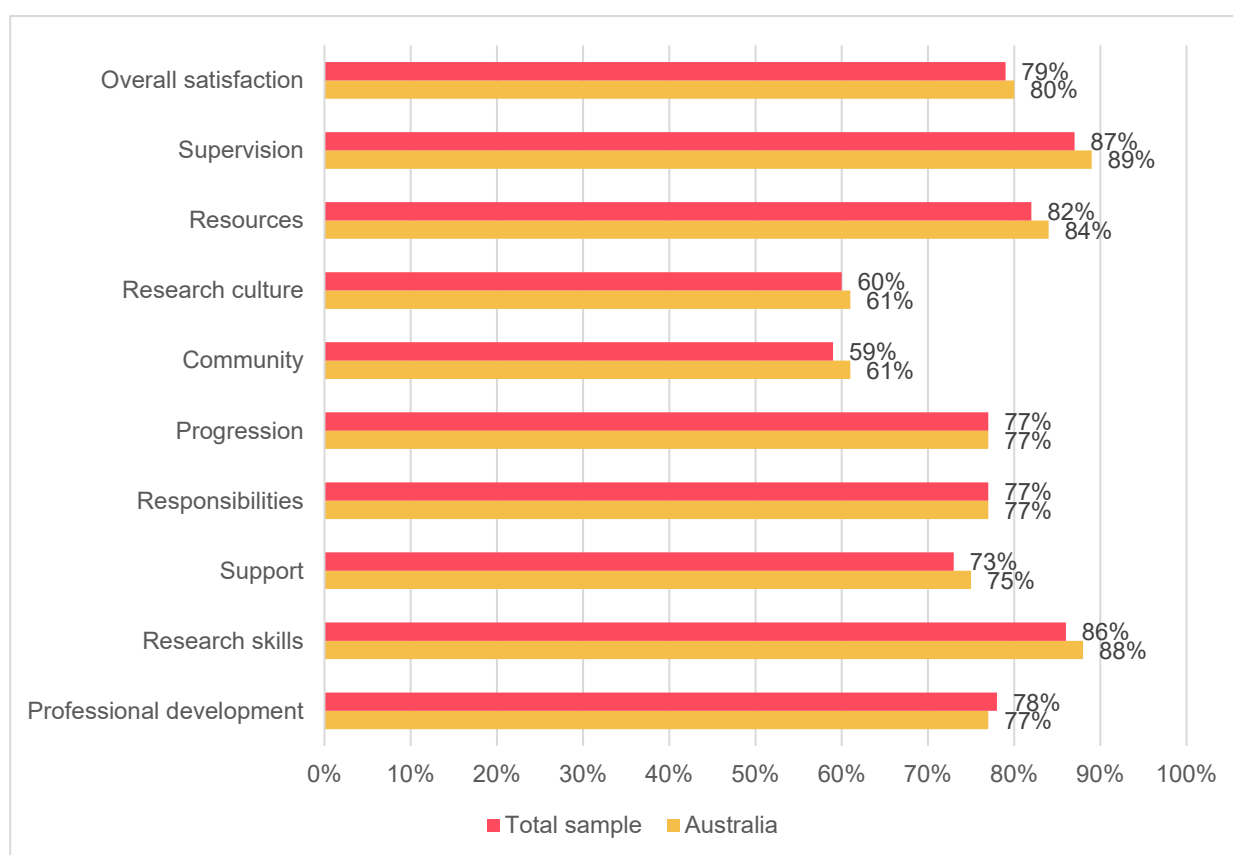
Table 5. Australian students’ overall satisfaction by mode of study



5. At a glance

Looking across all the main sections in PRES, Australian students were most satisfied with their supervision contact and their development of research skills. They were least satisfied with the community and research culture they were exposed to, although it should be noted that, at total sample level, satisfaction with the research culture has shown some positive increases in 2023. There were few major differences between the scores given by Australian students and students across the total sample, but where there were differences, students from Australian institutions tended to be slightly more satisfied than the total sample average.

Table 6. Overall satisfaction across main sections in the survey – total sample and Australia

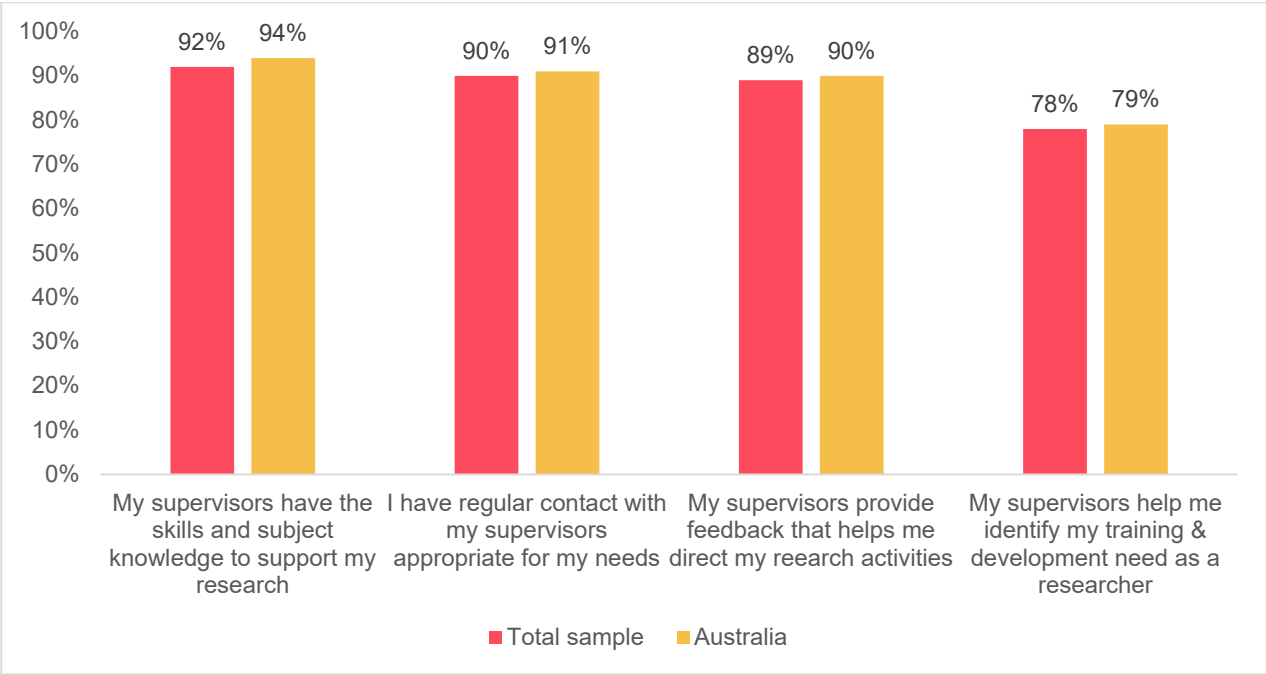


6. Supervision

6.1 Overall

Research supervisors play a crucial role in supporting students through various academic and personal challenges throughout their higher degree research experience. They need to ensure their students develop the skills required for their degree programme but also support their students with the various emotions that studying a higher degree research brings (Andriopoulou and Prowse, 2020). As reported in the previous section, many students reported being satisfied with the supervision they received throughout their degree. More granular analysis of this data for Australia shows that most of the students surveyed felt their supervisor had the skills and subject knowledge to support their research, they had regular contact with their supervisor for their needs and their supervisors provided them with feedback to direct their research activities. A smaller proportion of students felt their supervisor helped them to identify their training and development needs. All these results were very similar to the total sample, although scores for Australia tended to be one or two percentage points higher.

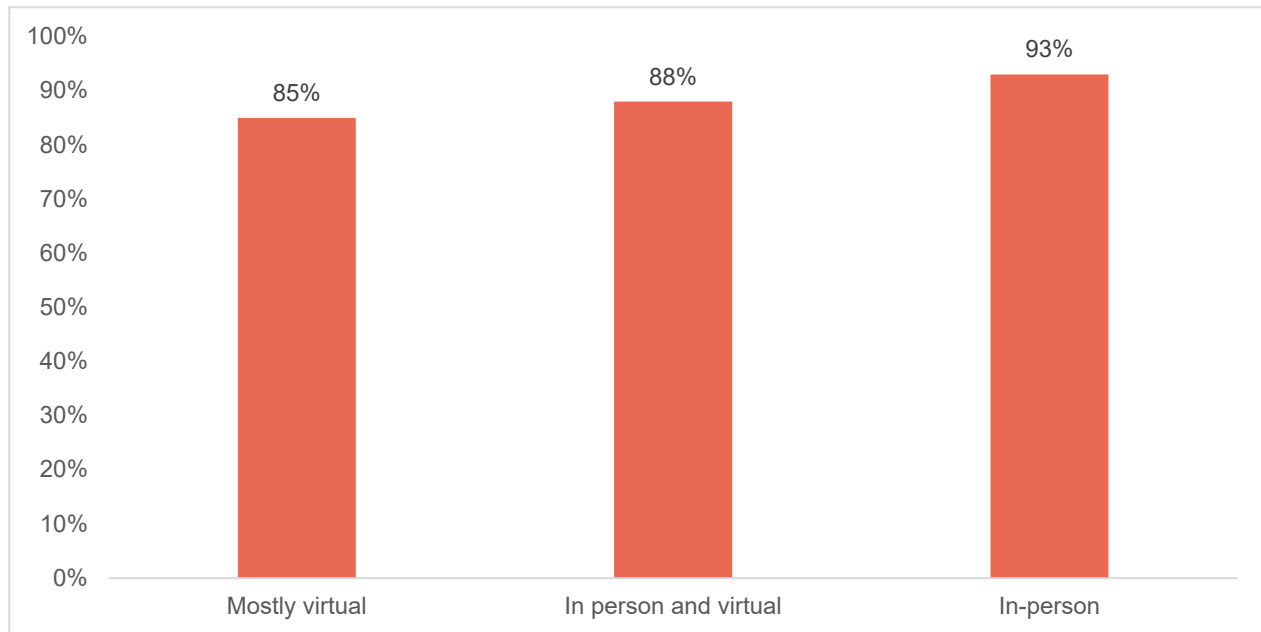
Table 7. Australian students' satisfaction with supervision



6.2 Contact with staff

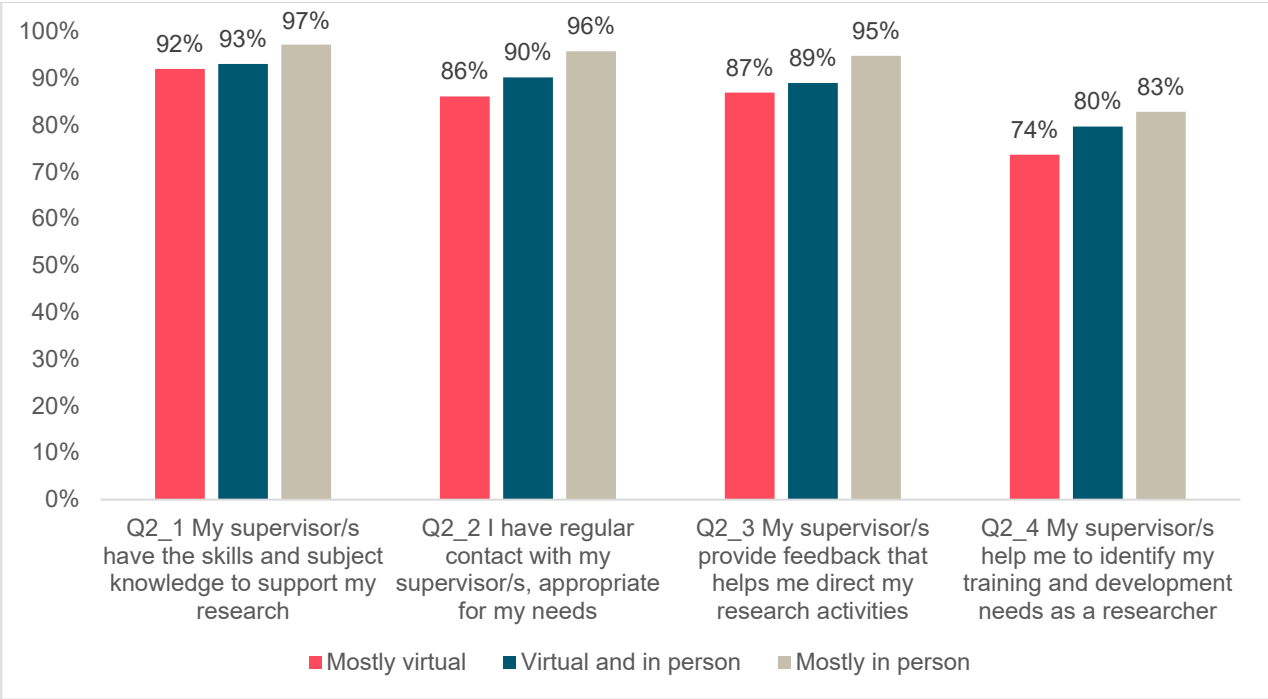
Students in Australia who had most interaction with staff through virtual means were slightly less satisfied with their supervision overall than students who adopted a hybrid approach or those who had most contact in person, as seen in the chart below.

Table 8. Australian students' satisfaction with supervision, by contact with staff



Looking in more detail, students who had most of their contact with staff through virtual means consistently reported feeling less satisfied with all aspects of supervision than students who either had hybrid or mostly in-person contact. Students who had virtual contact with staff were less satisfied with their supervisors helping them to identify their development as a researcher, which may potentially be due to fewer opportunities for online training sessions.

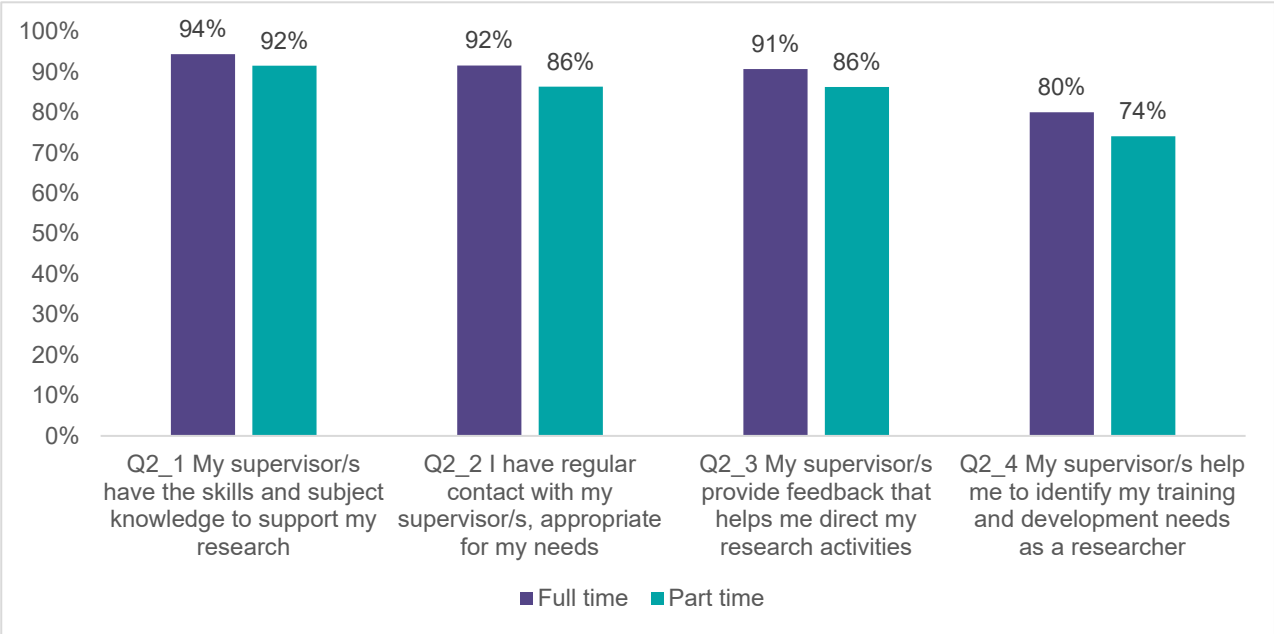
Table 9. Australian students’ satisfaction with aspects of supervision by contact with staff



6.3 Mode of study

Full-time students were more satisfied with the supervision they received than part-time students. The findings can be seen in the chart below. Meeting the needs of part-time students is clearly challenging, which points towards a need for greater dialogue around what these students want and need from their supervision.

Table 10. Australian students’ satisfaction with aspects of supervision by mode of study



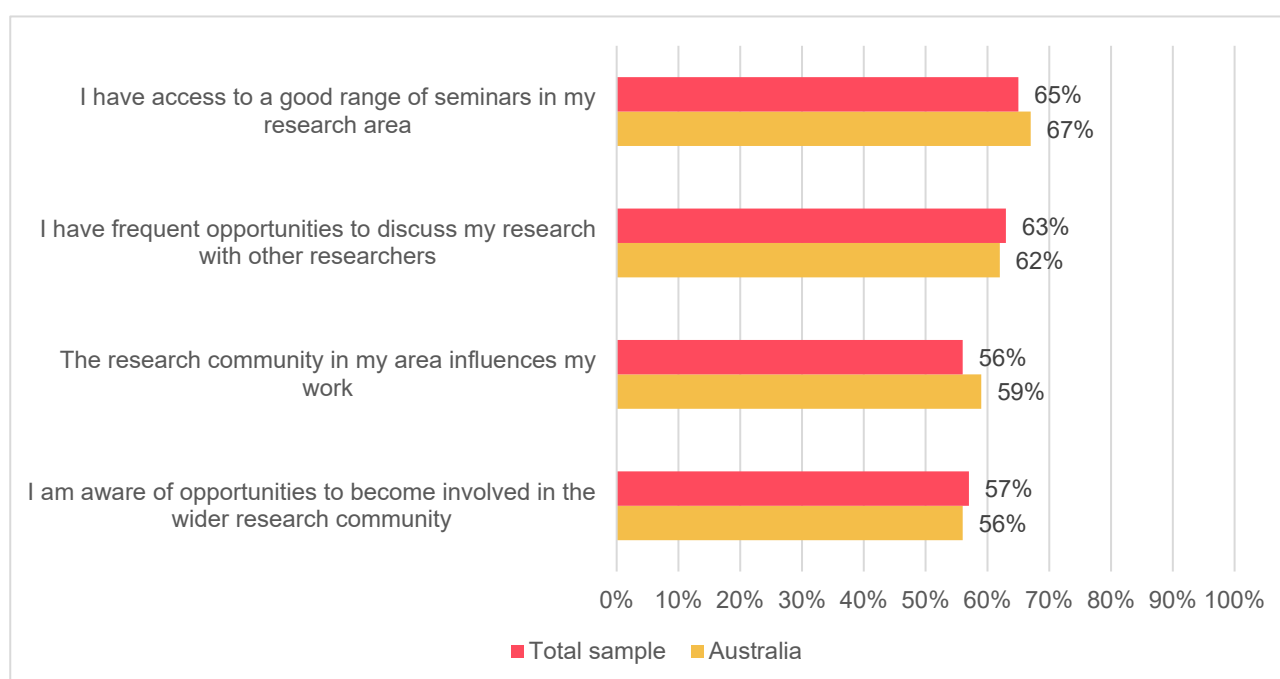
7. Research culture

7.1 Overall

The research culture within an institution is vital to allowing higher degree researchers to develop their skills and discuss their findings, enabling them to form views about their work and follow-up research. The chart below displays that just over half of Australian students (as well as students across the total sample) surveyed were aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community beyond their department. A slightly larger proportion of higher degree research students felt that the research community influences their work. The findings from this analysis indicate that institutions could explore ways in which they could embed widening the research community in their HDR programmes. This could potentially be achieved through institutional research conferences, research seminar programmes and informal discussions with staff members.

The findings for Australia across this section tended to be within one or two percentage points of the total sample – either above or below.

Table 11. Australian students' satisfaction with research culture

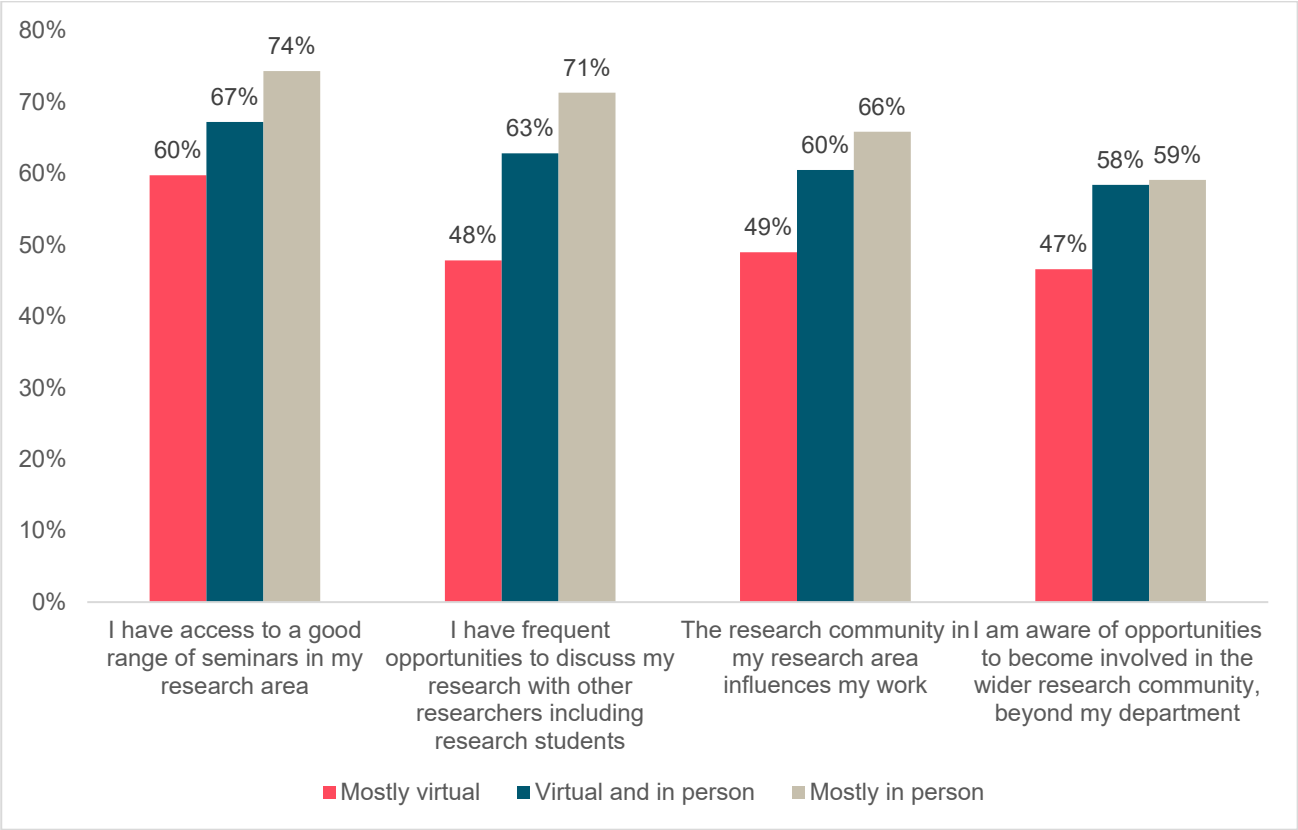


7.2 Contact with staff

Australian students who had most contact with staff virtually felt substantially less satisfied with the research culture than students who either adopted a hybrid approach or mostly contacted staff in person. The results in the chart below suggest that institutions could explore creating an online research seminar programme for students who interact with staff

virtually or host a virtual conference to allow their higher degree research students to present and discuss their findings with their peers.

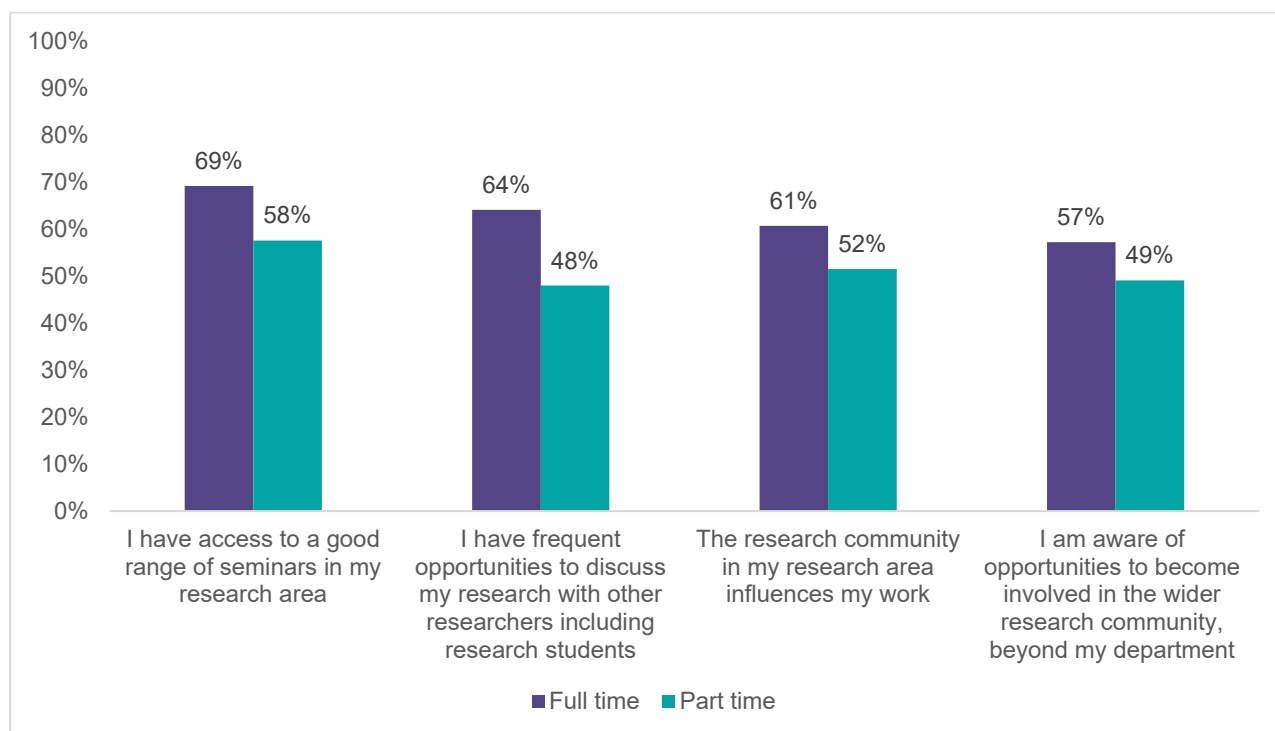
Table 12. Australian students' satisfaction with research culture by contact with staff



7.3 Mode of study

Full-time students in Australia were consistently more satisfied with the research culture at their institution than those studying part time, seen in the next chart. Less than 50% of part-time students surveyed were aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community beyond their department or had frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other researchers including their peers. While full-time students were satisfied that the research community influenced their work and they had access to a good range of seminars in their research area, institutions could explore offering more opportunities to a wider range of students to enhance their experience.

Table 13. Australian students' satisfaction with research culture by mode of study



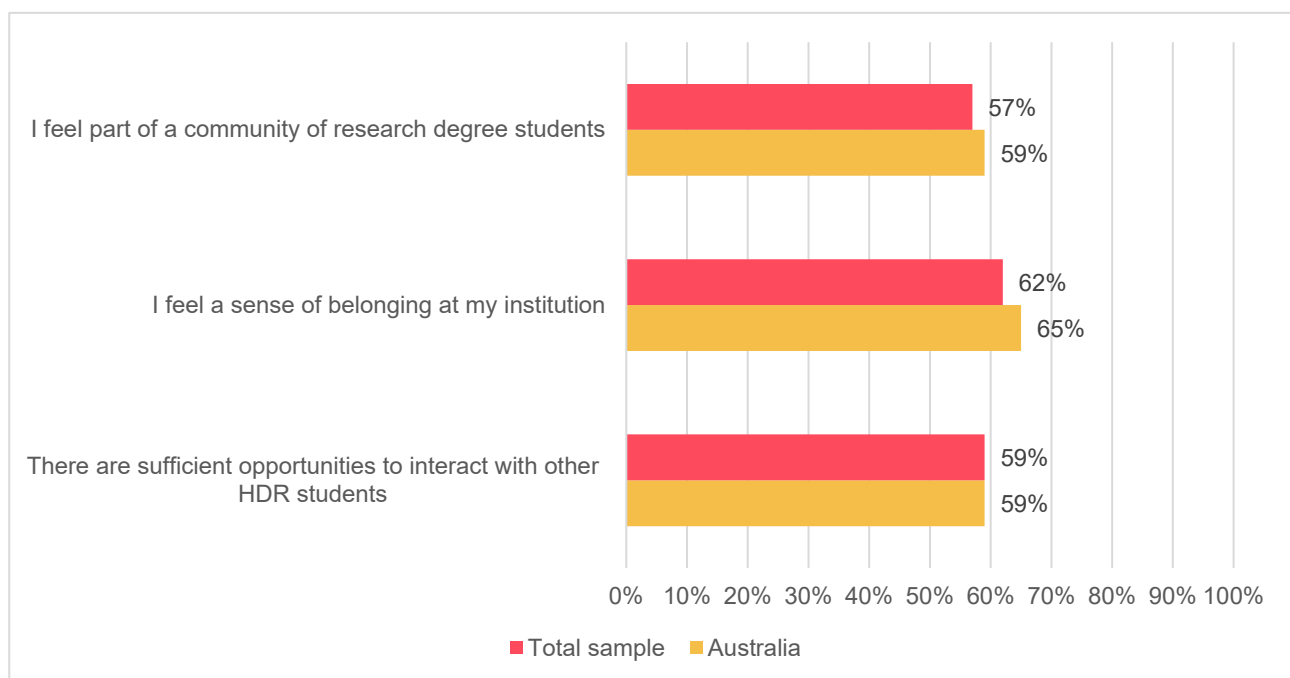
8. Community

8.1 Overall

Student sense of belonging potentially holds a strong link to their success in higher education. Research has found that interacting with peers supports academic performance (Brouwer et al, 2016). As can be seen in the chart below, students were least satisfied with the opportunities they were provided to network and engage with the higher degree research community.

As we have seen in some of the other sections in this report, results for Australia tended to be slightly above those of the total sample.

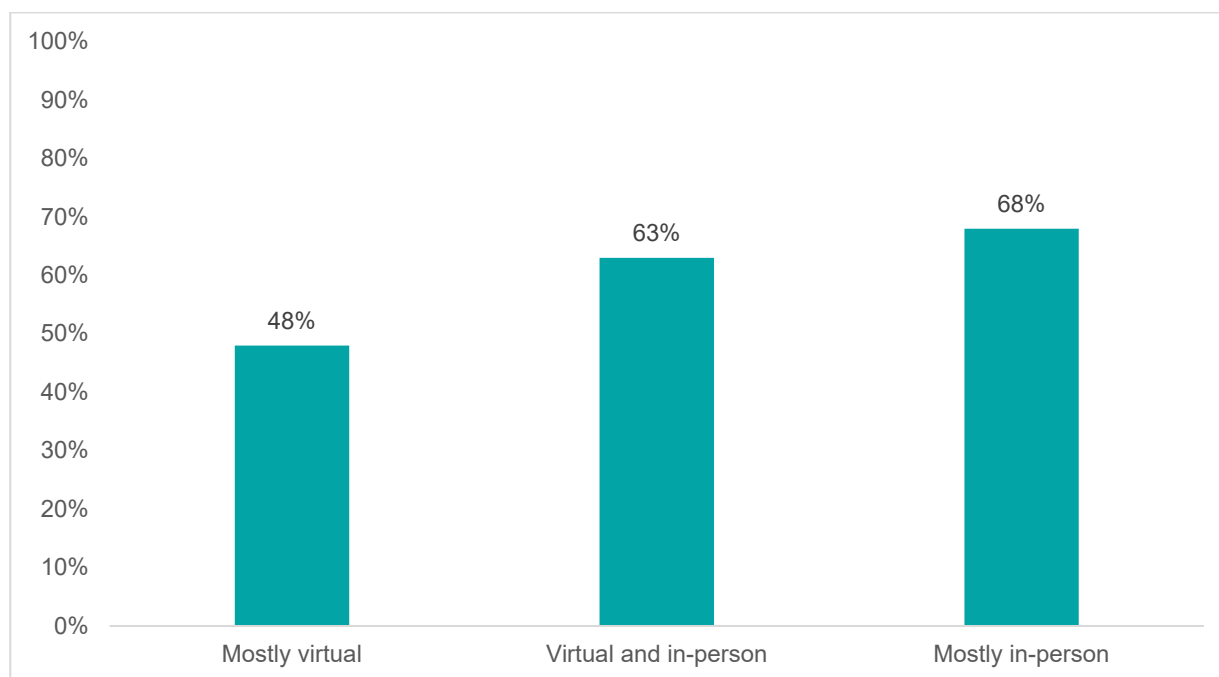
Table 14. Satisfaction with community



8.2 Satisfaction with community by contact with staff

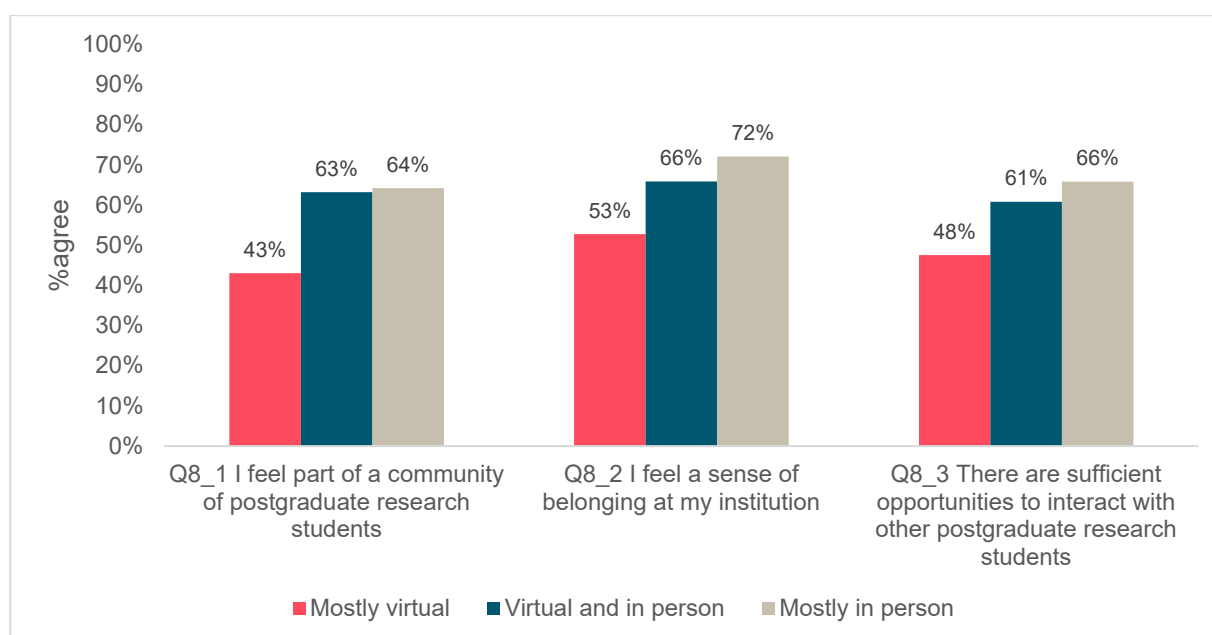
Satisfaction with the higher degree research community is not especially high, for both Australia and across the total sample. The graph below shows that students in Australia who mostly interacted with staff virtually were less satisfied with the opportunities they had to network with other research students, and their sense of belonging to their institution, in comparison to students who interacted with staff in person or those who used a hybrid approach.

Table 15. Australian students' satisfaction with community by contact with staff



Analysis of the individual questions could provide some indication of the types of opportunities institutions could offer to improve students' experiences of the higher degree research community. As shown below, less than half of the Australian students who interacted with staff virtually reported feeling part of a community of higher degree research students, or felt that there were sufficient opportunities to interact with their peers. Students who interacted with staff in person felt the greatest sense of belonging at their institution. Institutions could explore hosting online events for students who are mostly taught online to ensure they feel part of a community and have the opportunity to network with their peers.

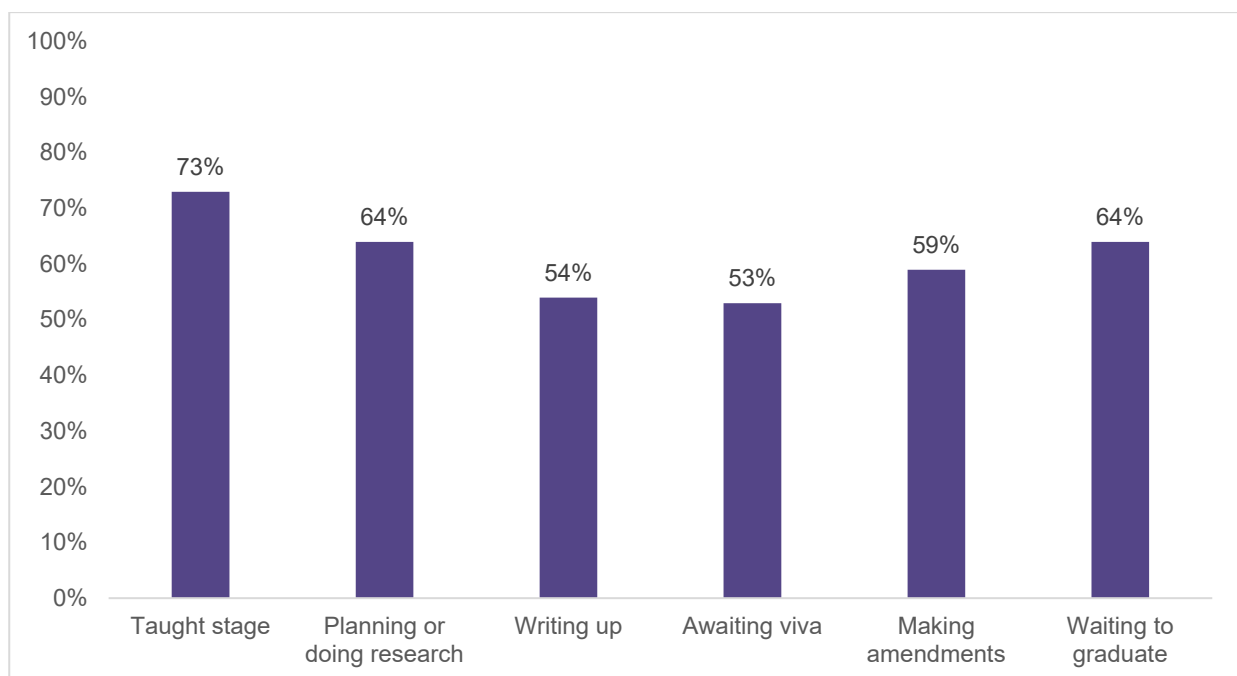
Table 16. Australian students' satisfaction with elements of community by contact with staff



8.3 Community by stage of research

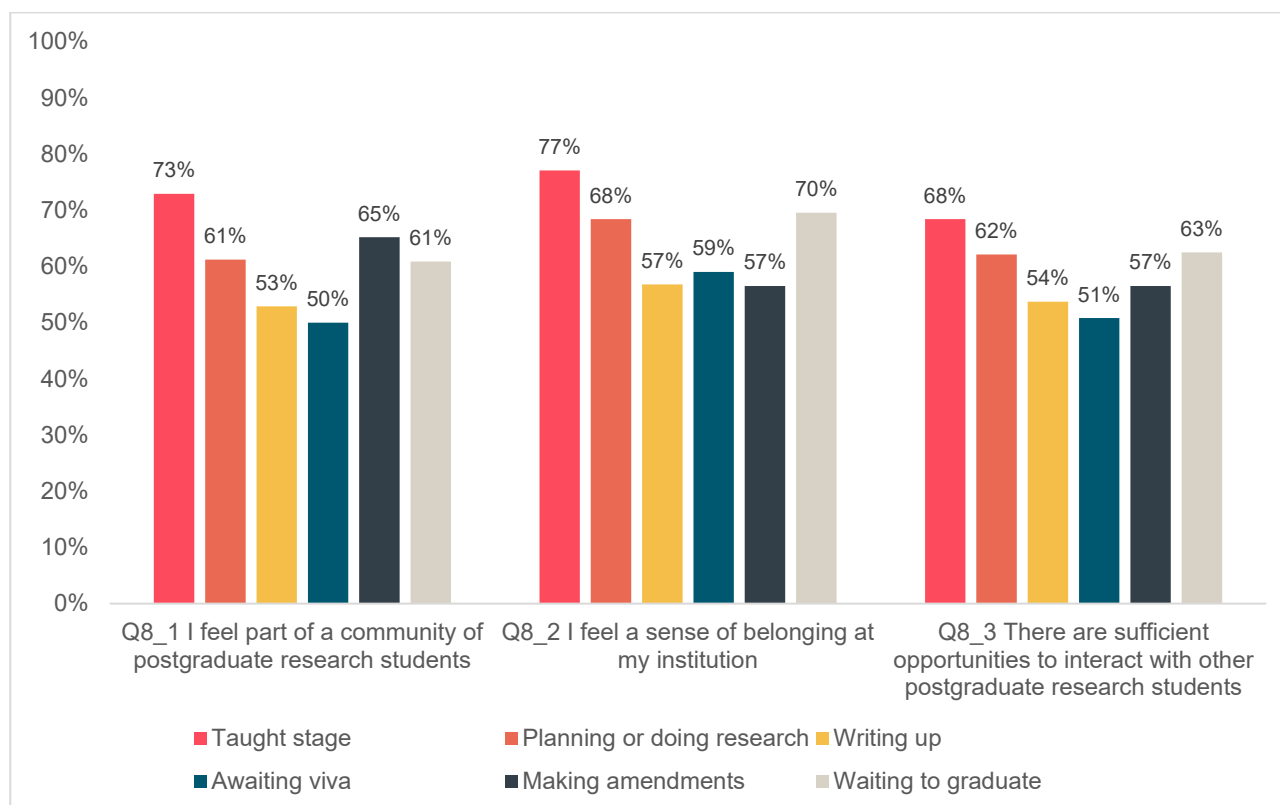
It can be interesting to examine how satisfied students are with the opportunities they are given to network within the higher degree research community by stage of research, as this may indicate where further work could be done to enhance students' experiences and opportunities to develop. The graph below shows that Australian students were most satisfied with the higher degree research community in the taught stage of their programme and were least satisfied while they were awaiting their viva. This may suggest that institutions could provide students with more opportunities to network with postgraduate students who are also awaiting their viva to share advice, tips and to feel a greater sense of belonging to the institution.

Table 17. Australian students' satisfaction with community by stage of research



Looking at individual elements of community, approximately half the students who were awaiting their viva reported feeling part of a community of research students and that there were sufficient opportunities to interact with other higher degree research students. Despite it not being a requirement for students to defend their thesis viva voce in most Australian institutions (Kiley et al, 2018), students studying for a PhD who will sit a viva may benefit from networking with their peers in the lead up to share knowledge and practice defending their theses. Conversely, students who were in the taught stage of their higher degree research programme felt that they were part of a community, had a strong sense of belonging to their institution and felt there were sufficient opportunities to interact with their peers. This suggests that institutions are providing opportunities for students at the beginning of their degree to network and feel welcomed into their degree.

Table 18. Australian students' satisfaction with elements of community by stage of research

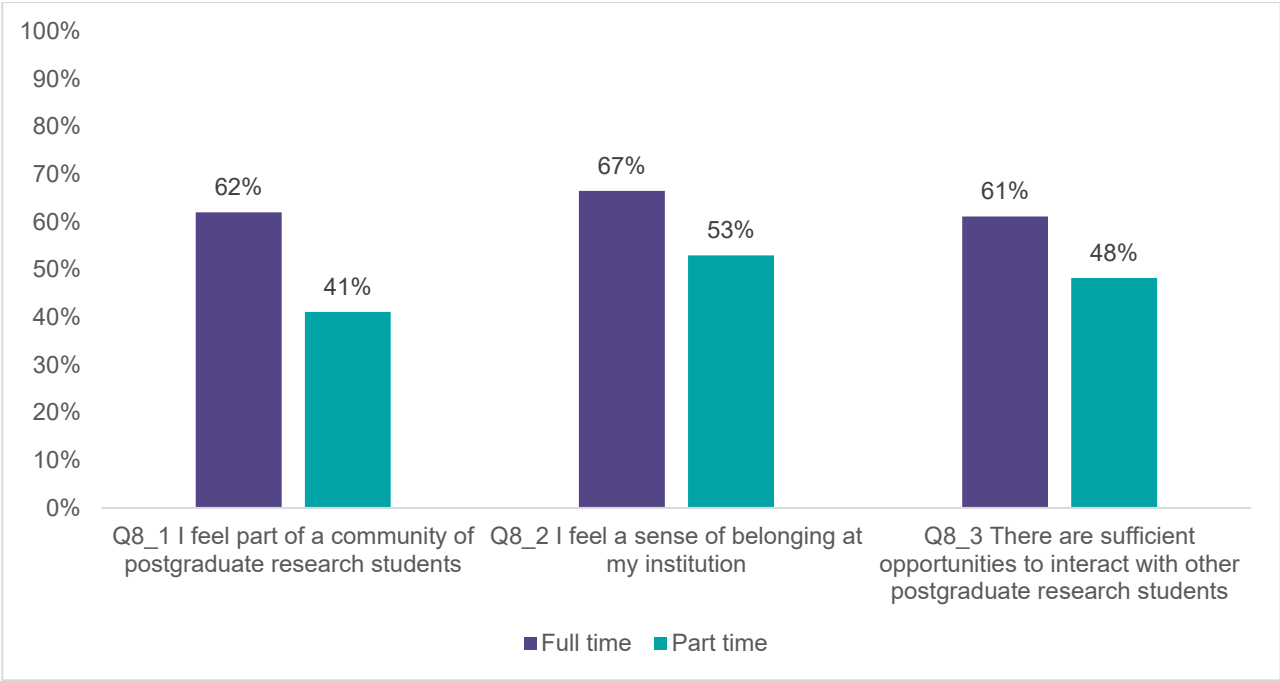


8.4 Community by mode of study

Australian students who were studying full time were more satisfied with their higher degree research student community than those students who were studying part time.

Of those surveyed, less than half of Australian part-time students felt part of a higher degree research community or were satisfied with the opportunities they were given to interact with their peers. This implies that there could be a requirement for institutions to provide more opportunities to allow part-time students to network with one another as the challenges which affect part-time students may be somewhat different to those which affect full-time students.

Table 19. Australian students' satisfaction with elements of community by mode of study

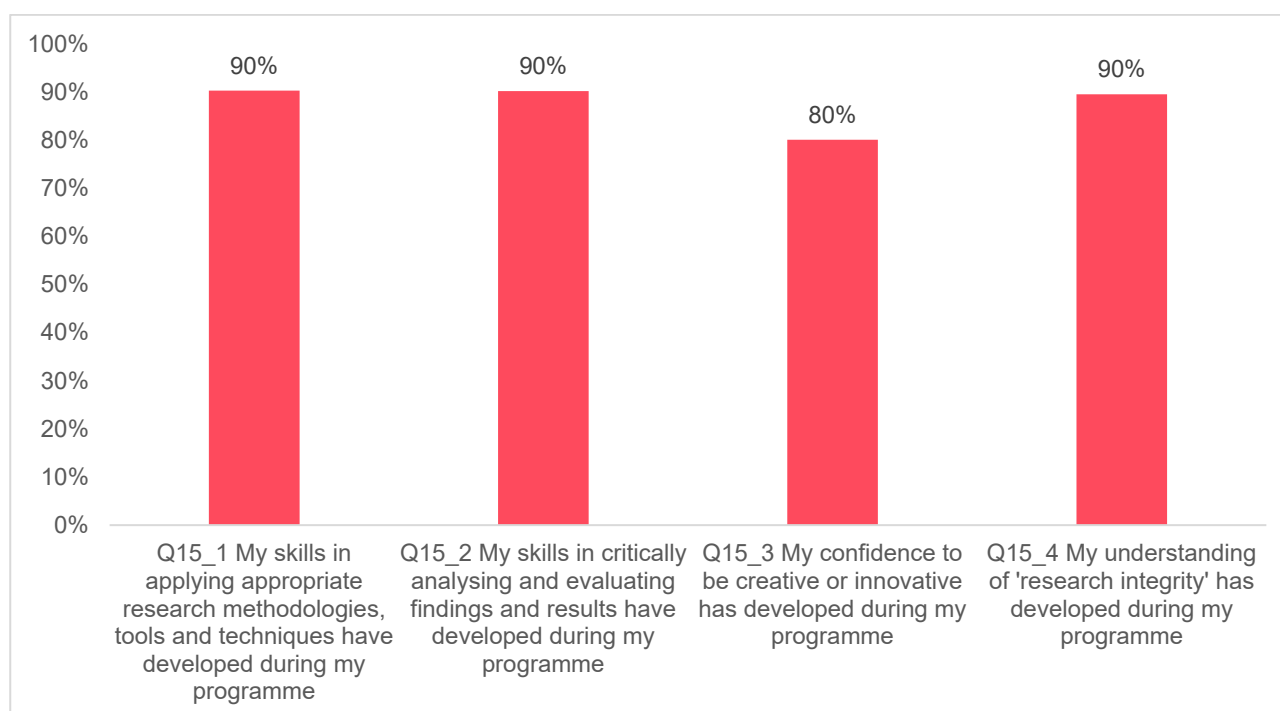


9. Research skills

9.1 Overall

Many HDR students were satisfied with how their research skills had developed. It is key that all higher degree research students have opportunities to develop their research skills, regardless of how they interact with staff, as it is integral to their degree programme, problem solving and future employment (Abbott, 2019). Analysis of the individual questions show that students felt they had developed their ability to apply appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques, the ability to critically analyse and evaluate research findings and their understanding of research integrity. However, it is also clear from the data below that a smaller proportion of students felt confident in their ability to be creative and innovative.

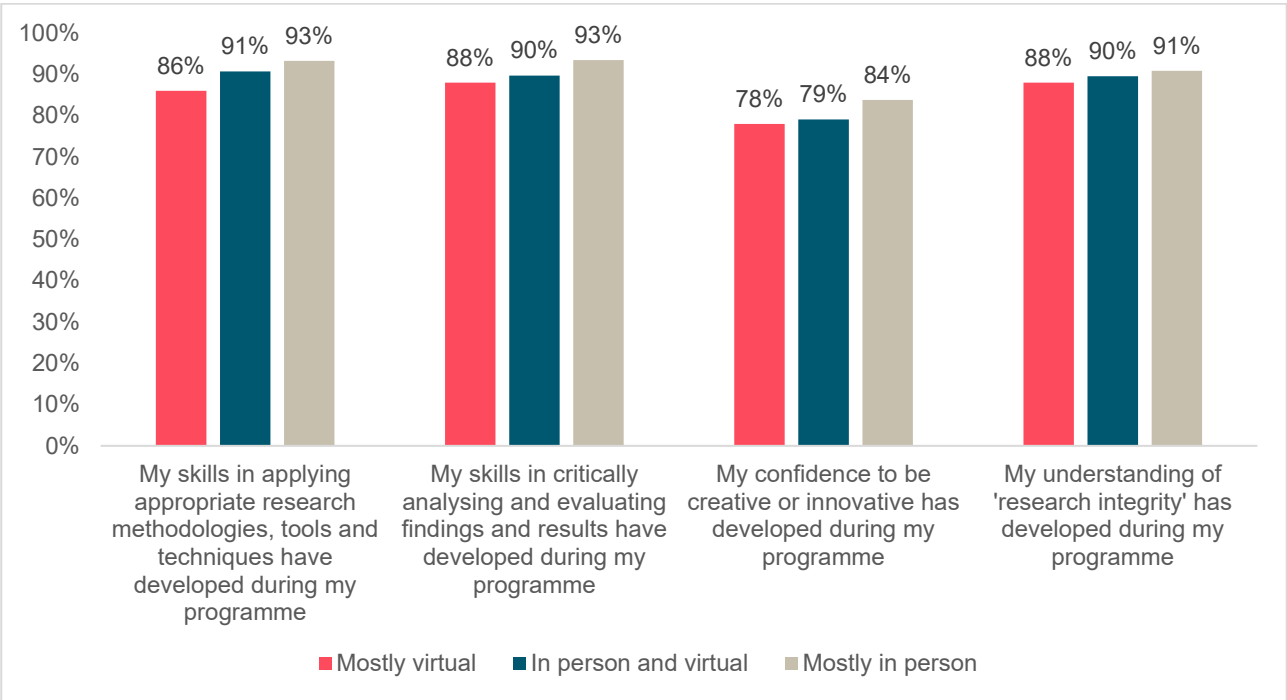
Table 20. Australian students' satisfaction with elements of research skills development



9.2 Contact with staff

The data below shows that students who mostly interacted with staff in person felt they were more confident in being creative and innovative, and felt they had developed their ability to critically analyse and evaluate findings and apply appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques than students who mostly interacted with staff virtually.

Table 21. Australian students' satisfaction with elements of research skills development by contact with staff

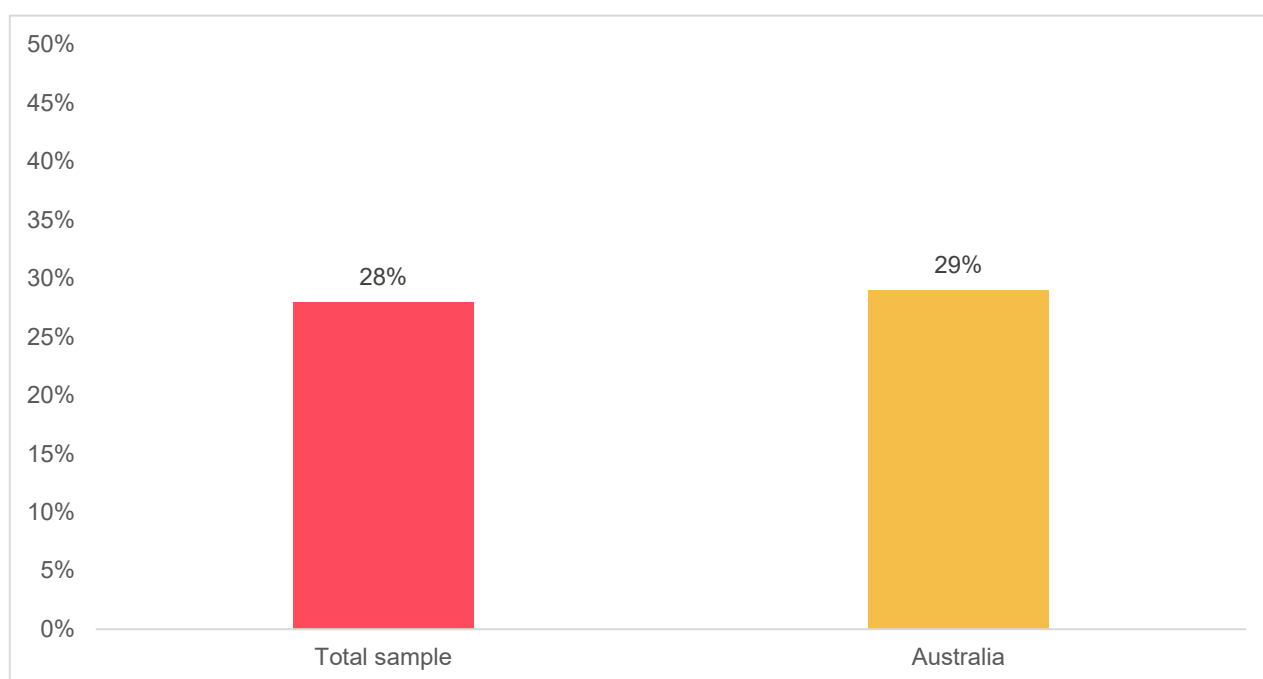


10. Considering leaving

10.1 Overall

A similar proportion of Australian students (nearly one in three) had considered leaving their higher degree research programme compared to the total sample.

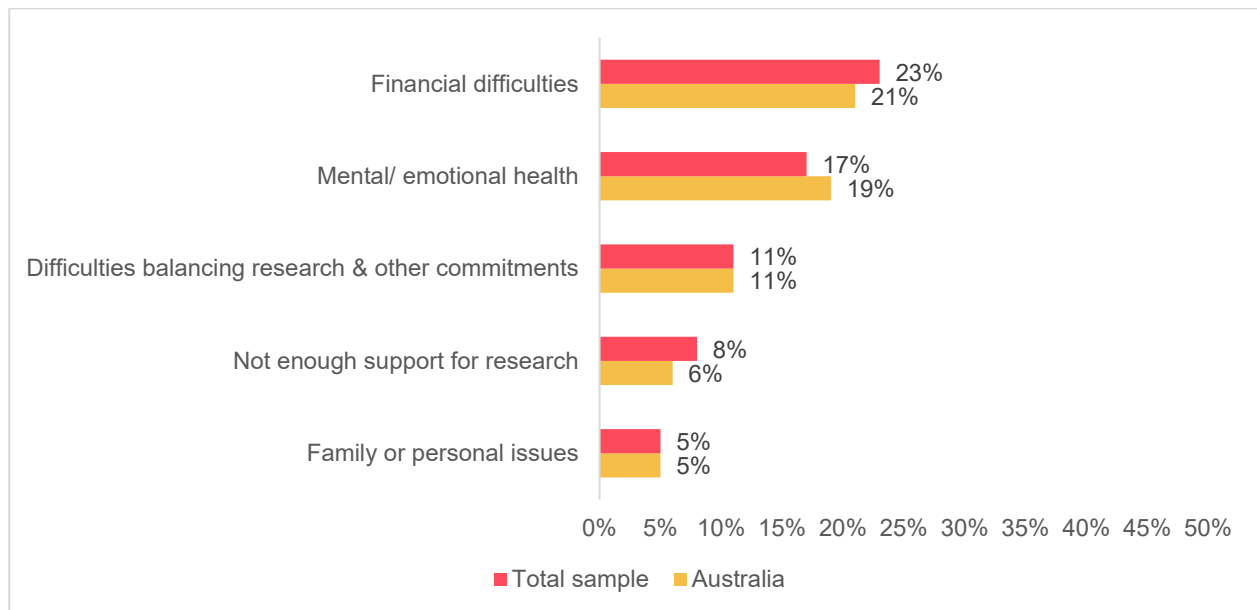
Table 22. Proportion of students who have considered leaving their programme



In terms of the reasons behind this, financial difficulties were reported as the most prevalent reason why students considered leaving – for both the total sample and Australia. This is perhaps unsurprising given the Australia Institute for Future Work reported that average Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP) debt had doubled between 2008 and 2022, and 67% of Australians believe higher education is too expensive (Littleton, 2023).

There were also concerns, in Australia and across the total sample, around student mental health, as well as balancing a range of competing priorities in the life of a HDR student.

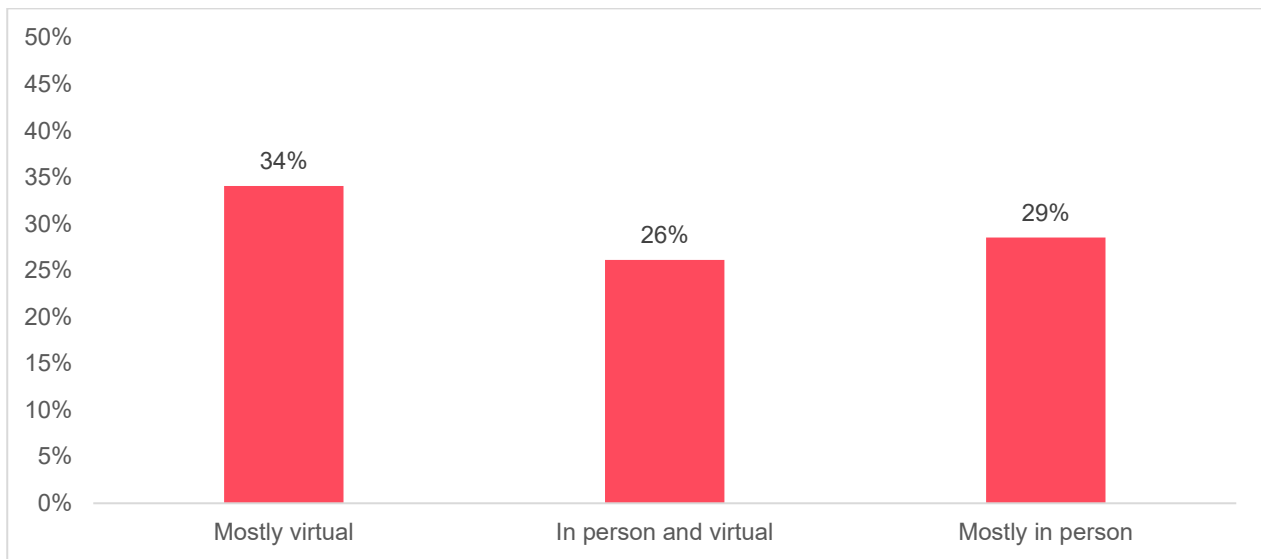
Table 23. Reasons for considering leaving⁴



Students who had most contact with staff by virtual means were most likely to consider leaving their higher degree research programme, whereas students who had most contact with staff in person were least likely to consider leaving their programme. In 2017, Australian Government data demonstrated that students who interacted with staff virtually were less likely to complete qualifications than those who were in face-to-face contact with staff (Department of Education and Training, 2017 cited in Stone, 2019, 2). This follows the picture we have seen throughout this report, that students who interact virtually are less satisfied, and it is significant that this appears to follow through into a greater likelihood to consider leaving.

⁴ Question asked of those who considered leaving – percentages are based on this proportion of the population.

Table 24. Australian students who considered leaving by contact with staff



As shown above, the lowest likelihood to consider leaving is among Australian students who have interacted using a hybrid approach, which may potentially offer the advantage of allowing students and staff flexibility about where and when they study while maintaining in-person interaction.

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12. Appendix 2

12.1 Participating Australian institutions

Name of institution
Australian National University
University of Newcastle
University of New South Wales
University of Western Australia

13. Appendix 3

13.1 All participating institutions

Name of institution	
Aberystwyth University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Aston University	Ulster University
Australian National University	University College London
Birkbeck, University of London	University of Aberdeen
Bournemouth University	University of Bath
Buckinghamshire New University	University of Bedfordshire
Canterbury Christ Church University	University of Birmingham
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Bolton
Cardiff University	University of Bradford
City, University of London	University of Brighton
Coventry University	University of Bristol
Cranfield University	University of Cambridge
De Montfort University	University of Chester
Durham University	University of Cumbria
Edinburgh Napier University	University of Dundee
Falmouth University	University of East Anglia
Glasgow Caledonian University	University of East London
Goldsmiths, University of London	University of Edinburgh
Harper Adams University	University of Exeter
Heriot-Watt University	University of Greenwich
Imperial College London	University of Hertfordshire
Institute of Cancer Research	University of Huddersfield
King's College London	University of Hull
Kingston University	University of Kent
Lancaster University	University of Leeds
Leeds Beckett University	University of Lincoln
Leeds Trinity University	University of Liverpool
Liverpool John Moores University	University of New South Wales
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	University of Newcastle
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