

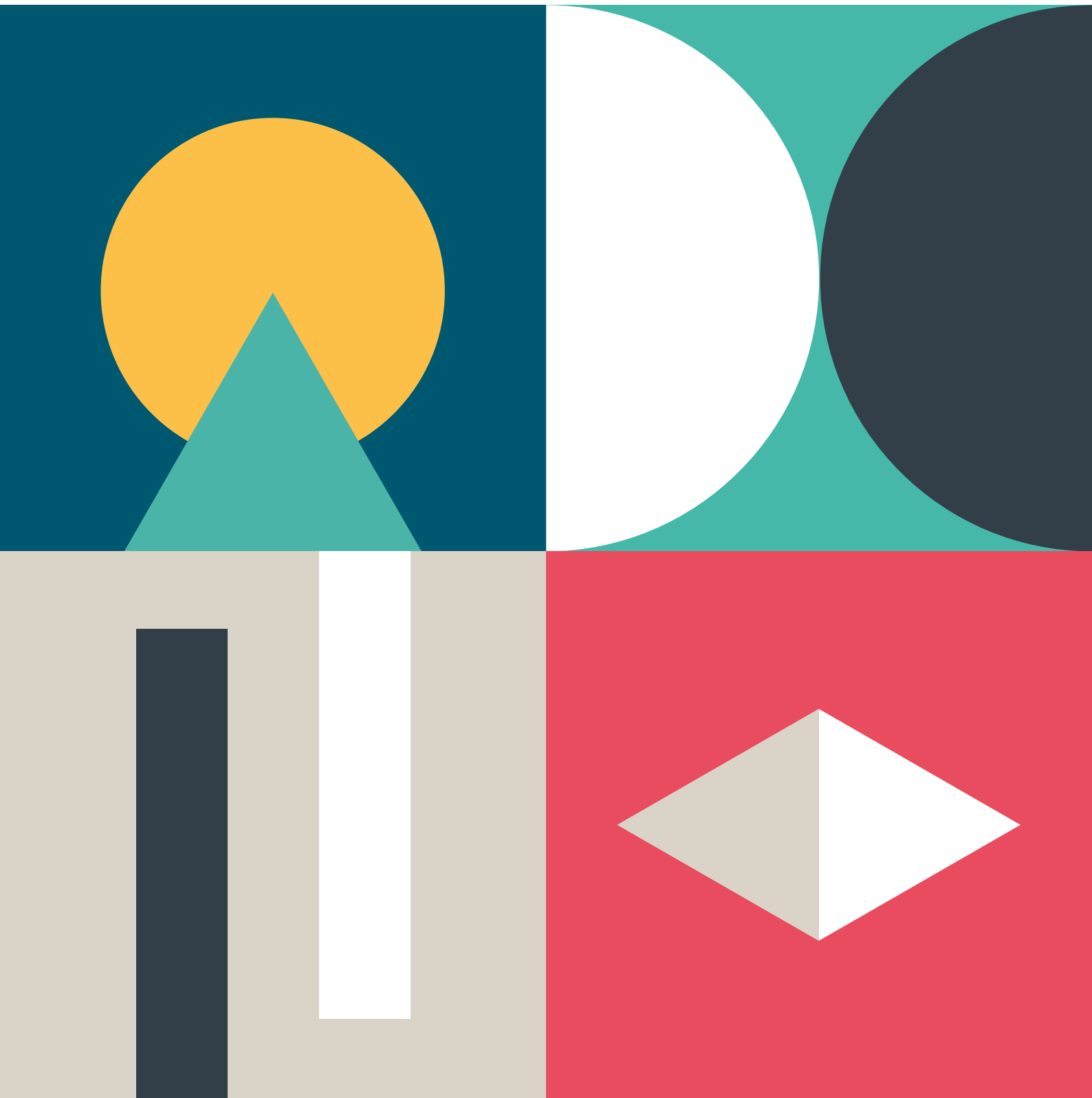
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023: sector results report

POSTGRADUATE

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

SURVEY

Jonathan Neves



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1. Executive summary

The postgraduate researcher (PGR) experience remains positive, with nearly four out of five PGRs satisfied with their experience.

Among the positive stories this year, there has been a clear improvement in elements of research culture, an area that is key to the PGR experience. In particular, PGRs are a lot more positive around opportunities to discuss research with other researchers.

The other main area of year-on-year improvement has been in terms of the opportunities provided to PGRs to develop their wider skills and career preparation. Having initially been impacted during the peak of the pandemic, opportunities such as attending or presenting at conferences, publishing, teaching or demonstrating have generally recovered strongly. This offers encouraging evidence for how postgraduate research programmes can help with career readiness.

However, we should point out that there has been a marginal decline in overall satisfaction, from 80% to 79%, and that levels are trending lower than they were a few years previously. In terms of specific areas within the survey, the main declines were seen in receiving an appropriate induction and providing clarity around assessment and general quality/standards procedures. From correlation analysis, we can also identify two aspects with particular potential for improving the wider experience: creating a sense of belonging (a new question area) and closing the feedback loop (a regular area identified for improvement).

There was clear evidence of a less positive experience among specific cohorts. In particular, Black PGRs were a lot less likely to have been offered specific development opportunities, for example around conferences, teaching and publication. Female PGRs were less satisfied with the research culture and community. PGRs who said they had received free school meals (in year 11) were less confident about the future, while disabled PGRs were less satisfied across many areas, as we have seen before.

There is evidence in this year's results that face-to-face interactions with staff are increasing, but with a hybrid approach becoming established as the most common. Significantly, satisfaction levels are strongly linked to methods of interacting with staff, with a major decline in satisfaction among PGRs who interact mainly online. There is now an 11-point difference in satisfaction between those who interact mainly in person, compared to online.

We also have evidence in this year's results of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the PGR population. There has been an increase in the proportion of PGRs who have considered leaving their course, with financial concerns increasingly cited as a cause, and free text comments providing more detail on the pressures that some PGRs are facing.

2. Methodology

2.1 Background

Since it began in 2007, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) has become the largest annual survey of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) in the sector.

PRES provides confidential results to participating higher education institutions (HEIs) to drive enhancement of their PGR provision. A key feature of PRES is the range of benchmark comparisons it provides, offering participants a range of comparator groups, from the sector overall to specific mission groups or geographies.

2.2 Survey content

PRES aims to strike a balance between consistent question sets to enable comparison over time, and annual updates to reflect feedback from the sector and in response to prevailing external conditions.

For example, changes were brought in during the Covid-19 pandemic to reflect the range of online studying and interactions taking place, several of which have remained in the survey as a helpful lens through which to view the experience. This included a specific question bank on the institutional response to Covid-19, which was still relevant this year to the PGR population in particular.

For 2023, there were several targeted updates. These included a new question bank on community and belonging, reflecting prevailing discussion in the sector around the importance of students at all levels feeling part of a community.

The key sections in the survey are listed below:

- + **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)
 - + **Progress and assessment** (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 support – optional** (three closed questions, one open question).

There are also sections covering the overall experience (including an “overall satisfaction” question), career motivations, demographics and development opportunities including teaching.

2.3 Demographics

In 2022, to reflect updates to Advance HE’s data monitoring guidance for the sector, questions on sex and trans status were added, and existing questions on ethnicity and disability were updated.¹ In 2023, the wording of the questions on sex and gender identity was updated, in line with a recent update in Advance HE’s guidance.

For 2023 we also added some new questions to provide scope for analysis on social background:

- + whether the respondent was the first in their family to go to university
- + whether the respondent (if from the UK) received free school meals.²

2.4 Data collection

Surveys were distributed by participating HEIs directly to their PGR population, who responded to a link to the survey hosted on the Jisc Online Surveys platform.³ Data was collected between 1 February and 15 May 2023. Within this timeframe, HEIs were offered the flexibility to decide when they ran the survey, provided that the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

2.5 Sample size

PRES takes place annually, although until 2018 it was biennial. Accordingly, we have seen some institutions (including several larger, research-intensive institutions) choose to stick to a biennial approach, but a large number have taken the opportunity to reflect the views of their PGR community each year.

We therefore see a pattern of high participation every two years, with a different number of participating institutions (around 60% as large) in intervening years. 2023 achieved very strong participation across the sector.

¹ Advance HE (2022) *Guidance on the collection of diversity monitoring data*. York: Advance HE. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/guidance-collection-diversity-monitoring-data

² Specifically in year 11 or equivalent at school

³ www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk

PRES participation: institutions and responses (2012–2023)

	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Institutions	122	123	117	66	107	45	94	62	105
Responses	48,401	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600	8,432	39,855	13,922	37,661

2.6 Benchmark groups

The strong and varied participation enables us to provide range of benchmark groups for comparison, with institutions given the choice to select up to three benchmarks groups for their individual reporting.

Benchmark groups 2023

Benchmark group 2023	Number of HEIs
Total sector	105
Cathedrals Group	7
Guild HE	9
Million Plus	11
Russell Group	19
Pre-92	50
Post-92	45
Small & Specialist	10
Australia	4
London	24
Scottish	11
Welsh	7

In addition to these benchmarks, participants can request a tailored set of comparator institutions (a minimum of three), whose results are added together and anonymised.

2.7 Australia

PRES is available to Advance HE members anywhere in the world, but to date it has principally been UK institutions choosing to take part. In 2023, we were pleased to work with four institutions from Australia taking part in PRES, the largest number to date.⁴

This enabled us to produce the first Australian benchmark, offered as a comparison to participating institutions, and is something we are looking to build and expand on, to further represent the Australian sector within PRES.

⁴ This report represents the results at overall level including the four Australian institutions, hence it is not a purely UK sector snapshot.

2.8 Year-on-year comparison

As noted above, annual participation in PRES alternates between a large sample of HEIs and a sample around 60% as large. Accordingly, we have displayed annual comparisons in this report across a range of years to reflect this varying participation.

That said, the sample sizes in each year are very robust with a very small margin for error in any particular year.

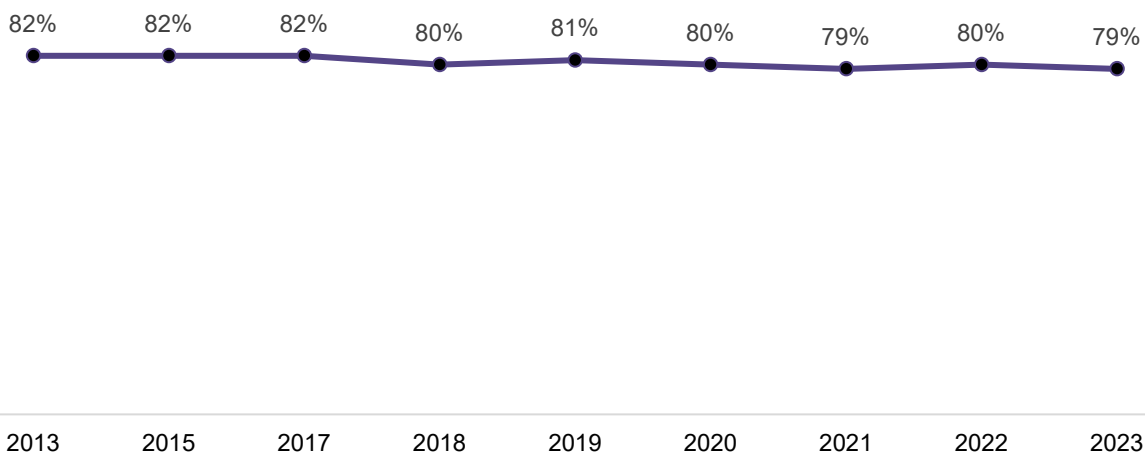
3. Overall satisfaction

3.1 The overall experience

This report will go on to discuss a range of specific issues that impact on the PGR experience and how these are reflected in the results for individual questions. However, we begin our analysis of PRES 2023 with a look at how PGRs rate their experience overall.

The specific question on overall satisfaction is worded as follows: *“to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement – overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme”* with agreement on a 5-point scale. When reporting on this question (and indeed, similar questions and scales in the survey), we combine the proportion who said they either “definitely agree” or “mostly agree” that they were satisfied. This provides one of the main measures within PRES and one of the key aspects on which we provide comparison data to different institutions.

Overall satisfaction over time (2013–2023)

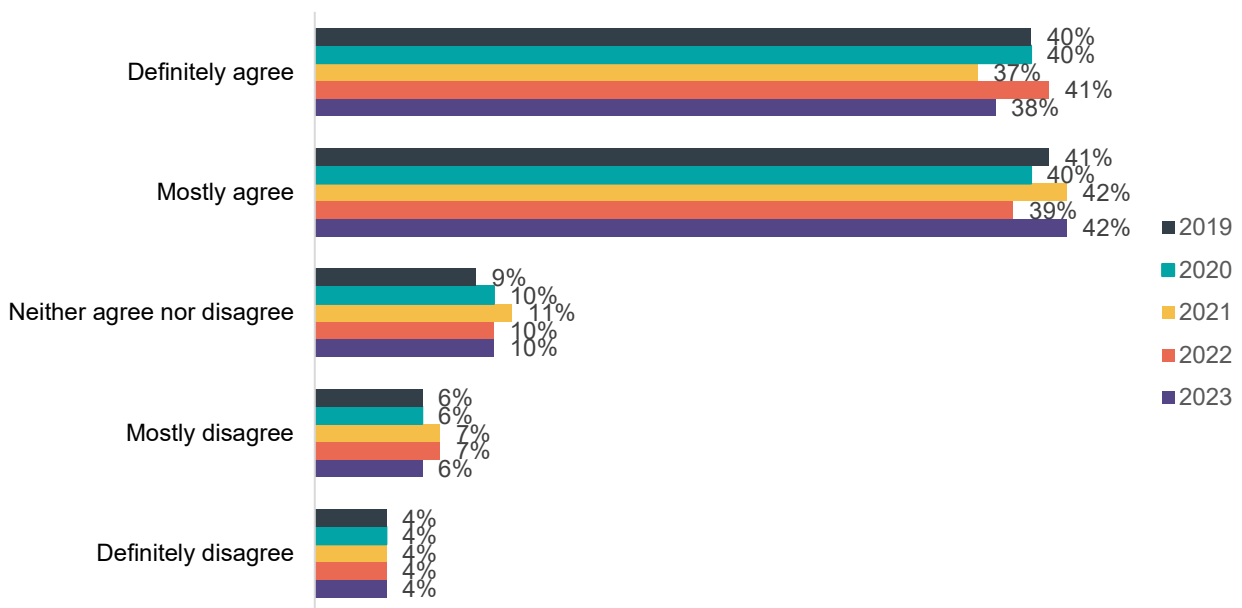


Just under eight out of ten PGRs are satisfied with their experience, which is, and remains, a positive result. However, although we are dealing in small changes in absolute terms, the size of the sample means that we should pay attention to even a 1% or 2% change.⁵ Accordingly, if we look at the last four years, we can see that satisfaction levels are not as high as they were during the period 2013 to 2017. The decline (to 79%) to 2021 may have been linked to the Covid pandemic, and hence the increase in 2022 was welcome, but to fall back down to 79% in 2023 is potentially a slight concern.

⁵ Throughout much of the report, when we are referring to percentage points, as in this case, we use “%” for brevity.

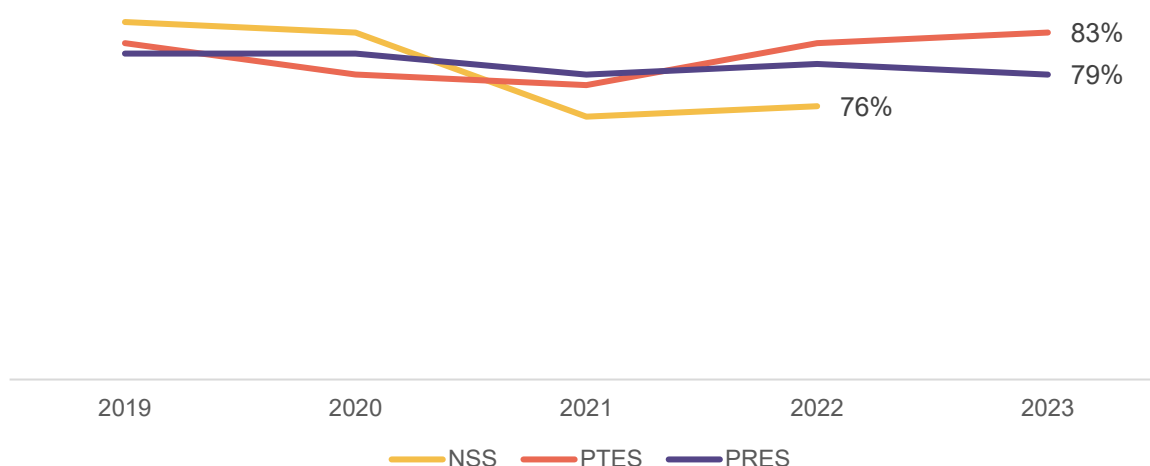
The following chart provides more specific information about how the overall satisfaction score is comprised. There are similar numbers of PGRs who “agree strongly” that they are satisfied with their experience as there are who “agree slightly”. Encouragingly, there are very few respondents who “disagree” that they are satisfied. That said, however, the chart underlines the lower score this year compared to 2022, as well as the downturn in results if we take the last four years together, in that the overall strength of feeling is marginally lower. This might be interpreted as telling us that the PGRs who are satisfied are slightly less delighted this year, and over the past few years as a whole.

Overall satisfaction – strength of feeling (2019–2023)



3.2 Postgraduate and undergraduate comparison

Overall satisfaction across different sector surveys



Advance HE runs both the PRES and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES),⁶ both of which provide a key view of the postgraduate experience at sector level. To provide comparison to the undergraduate experience, the chart above displays the comparable data from the National Student Survey (NSS).⁷ The NSS data featured is UK-wide, which is only available up to 2022 as the “overall satisfaction” question is no longer included in the NSS in England.

PGR satisfaction is now a few percentage points lower than PGT satisfaction, as measured through PTES, but both PGR and PGT satisfaction levels are trending above the (most recent) levels for undergraduates from the NSS, which fell significantly during the pandemic and did not initially recover.

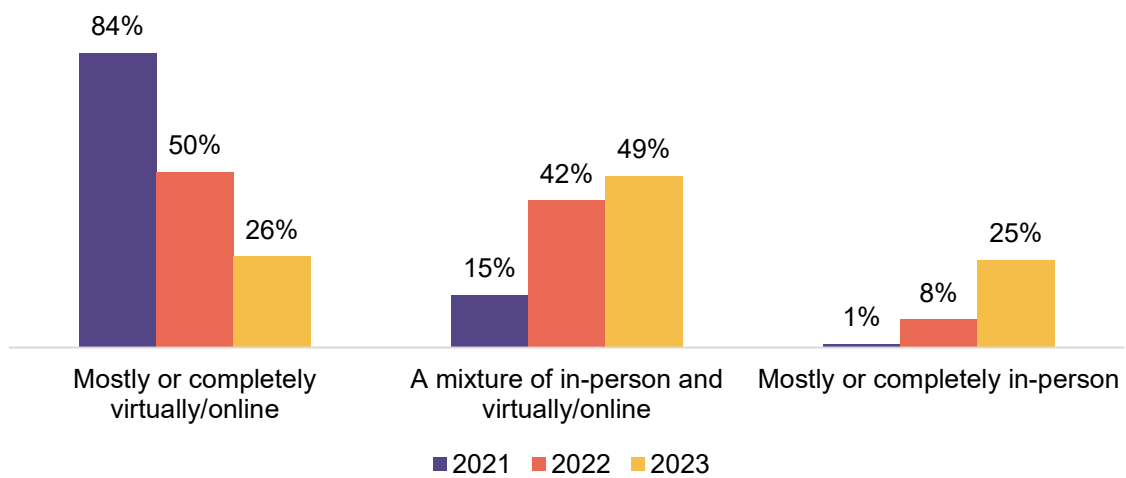
⁶ See the Advance HE website for a separate report on the PTES results. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-ptes#reports>

⁷ Office for Students (2023) 'National Student Survey – NSS' (UK results). Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-provider-level

3.3 Overall satisfaction and contact with staff

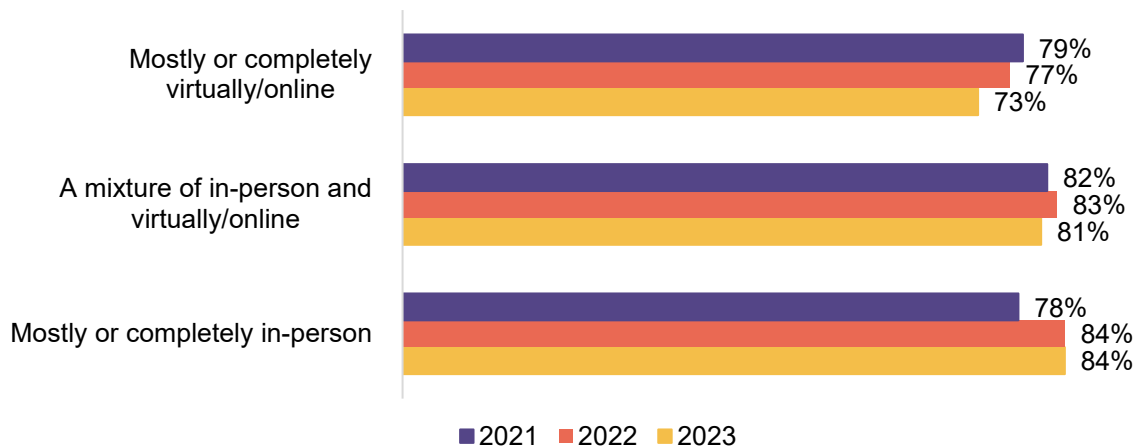
During the pandemic, we added what have become key questions within the survey to understand how PGRs have mainly interacted with staff. There has been a clear evolution in this since 2021, when interaction was, understandably, principally online as a result of pandemic restrictions. In 2023, there is still a lot of interaction taking place online, but there is an almost exact balance between in-person and virtual, with the largest proportion of PGRs telling us they had a mix of both.

Usual contact with staff during the current term



A return to full in-person interaction appears unlikely, but it is clear that the role of in-person communication with supervisors and other staff members is gaining in prevalence.

Overall satisfaction levels – by methods of contact with staff



Linking satisfaction scores to how interaction took place gives us some striking results, as identified above. There is now a clear (and growing) gap in satisfaction between PGRs who spent a lot of time interacting virtually, and those who mainly interacted face to face. The latter are much more satisfied, with a 11% difference.

Satisfaction among those who interact virtually has fallen by 4% to a relatively low level (73%), and although this represents a smaller proportion of the population this year, it is a key finding and provides an opportunity for HEIs to consider how to maximise the quality of the experience.

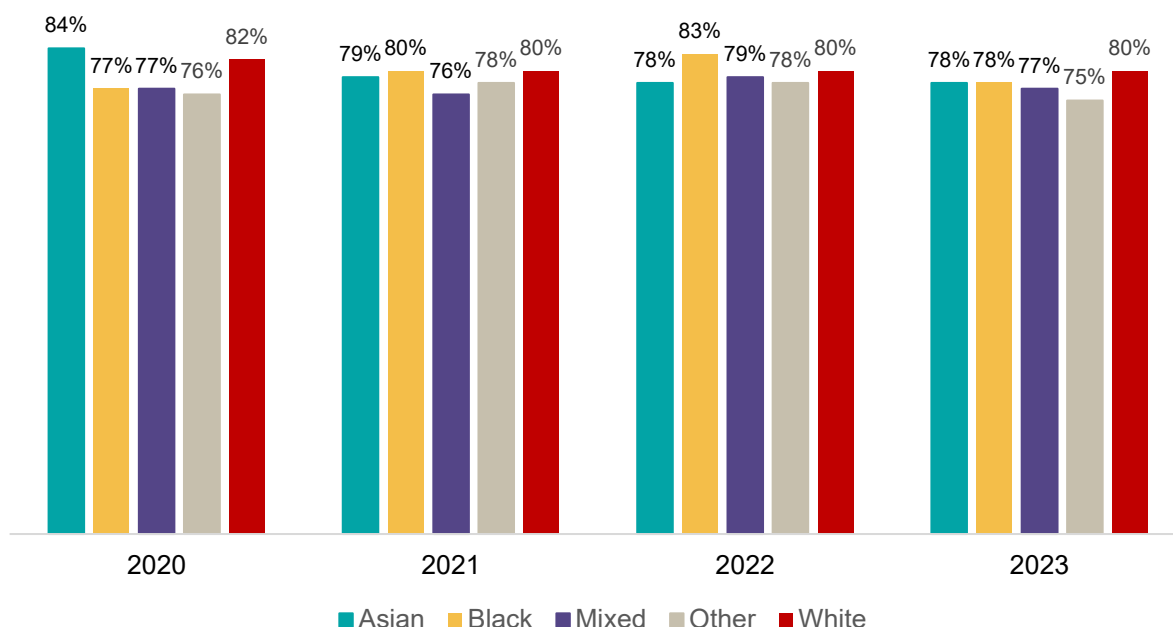
4. Overall satisfaction and specific demographic characteristics

4.1 Ethnicity (UK domicile)

Across various sector surveys we have often seen evidence of an unequal experience impacting on students of different ethnicities at all levels. For example, the Advance HE-HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey has identified how Black students at undergraduate level are a lot less likely to select the same institution again given the choice, nor to perceive good value for money, although the experience among Black, Asian and minority ethnic students overall has become more positive.⁸

At PGR level, the results from PRES show a potentially concerning trend for 2023. Satisfaction rates for UK-domiciled students of Black, Asian and other ethnicity have all fallen, with the largest decline – five percentage points – being for Black students. There has been no movement for white students, but the net result is that in 2023 there is a clear gap in the PGR experience between White students and all minority ethnic categories.

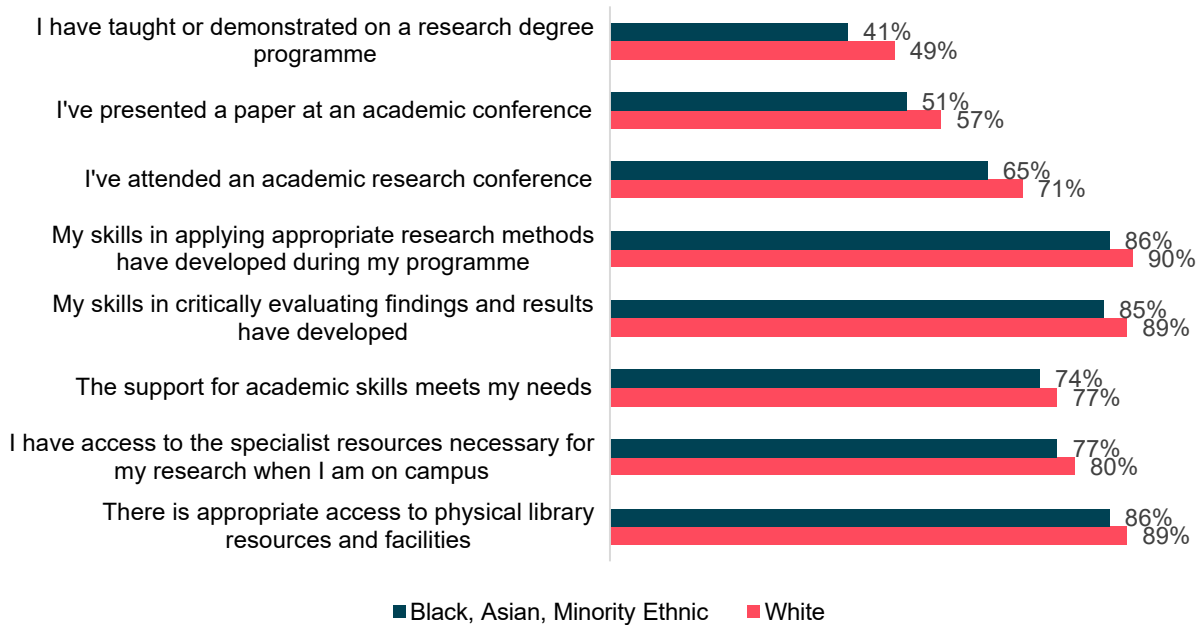
Overall satisfaction levels – by ethnicity



⁸ Neves, J and Stevenson, R (2023) *The Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*. York: Advance HE, p 33. Available at: advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2023

The following analysis looks in more detail at the specific areas in the survey where there are the largest gaps in the experience between PGRs of White and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnicity – largest gaps across the survey



In general, the gaps in the experience between PGRs from White and minority ethnic backgrounds are not particularly large, but it is important to highlight where these gaps exist.

There are some common themes emerging, with the largest gaps focused around the opportunities provided for development activity. Minority ethnic students are a lot less likely to have been offered (or taken up) teaching experience, or been able to attend a conference and/or present a paper. Such opportunities can and do play a key role in contributing to the wider development of a PGR, particularly in terms of networking and employability, as well as being able to expand current and future research ideas. On a different metric in the survey, related to this point, minority ethnic PGRs are also less likely than White PGRs to feel they have been prepared for their future career (76% compared to 78%).

Some of these differences in the frequency of opportunity are particularly apparent when we look specifically at Black students compared to White students. As the table below shows, Black students report low levels of opportunity being offered or taken up in some areas. Such discrepancies can impact on confidence and future prospects, and represent the type of issue being addressed directly by a range of current projects being funded by the Office for Students,⁹ including the ASPIRE project being delivered by Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University.¹⁰

Ethnicity – largest gaps between students of Black and White ethnicity

Development opportunity experienced during their programme	Black ethnicity	White ethnicity
Teaching	35%	49%
Placement or internship	9%	14%
Conference attendance	65%	71%
Conference presentation	46%	57%
Submitting a paper for publication	29%	37%
Communicating your research to a non-academic audience	39%	38%
Engagement with non-academic partners	32%	32%
Coaching or mentoring	33%	25%

Interestingly, the main areas of discrepancy are around teaching, conferences and publications. There are no real differences in terms of engagement beyond the academic community, while coaching and mentoring opportunities are more frequent for Black PGRs.

The other areas where there are gaps in scores between White and minority ethnic PGRs are often relatively high scoring in absolute terms, but there does appear to be a difference in the experience. The results points towards potential issues in terms of access to resources, particularly on campus, as well as the PGRs’ own assessment of how their skills have developed.

⁹ Office for Students (2021) ‘Projects to improve Black, Asian and minority ethnic students’ access to postgraduate research’. *Office for Students* (blog), 24 November. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/projects-to-improve-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students-access-to-postgraduate-research/

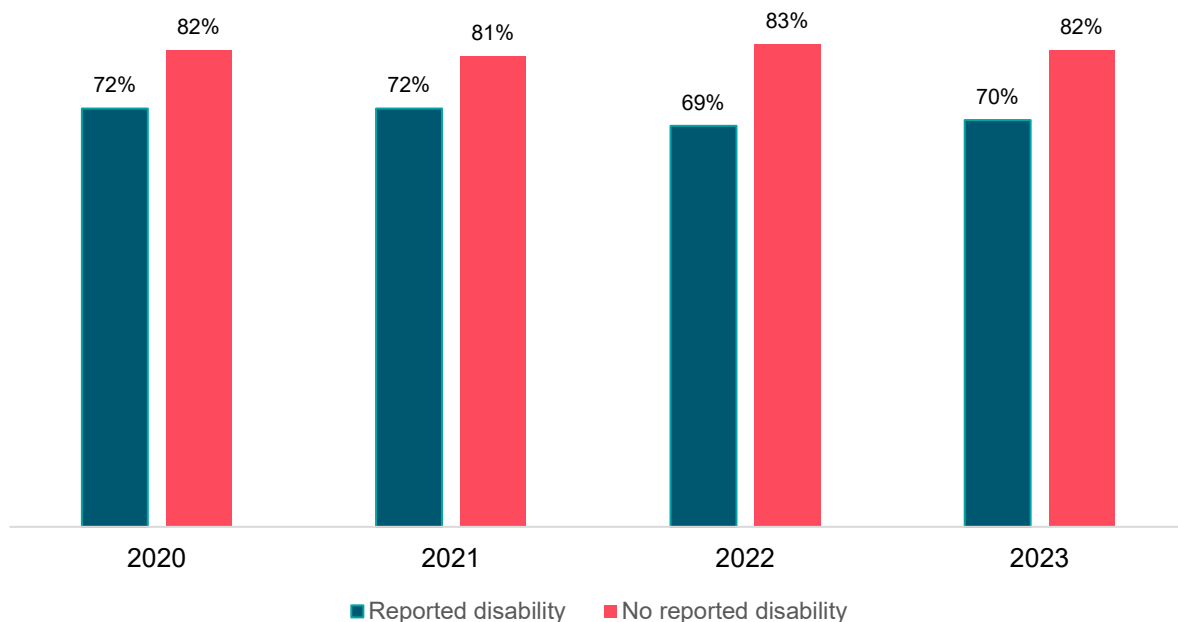
¹⁰ Awolowo, I F (2023) ‘How ASPIRE is changing the narratives for Black students’. *Wonkhe* (blog), 6 June. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/how-aspire-is-changing-the-narratives-for-black-students/

4.2 Disability

While there is limited information across the sector on the experience of disabled PGRs, past waves of PRES have identified that there is and has been a clear gap in the quality of the experience.

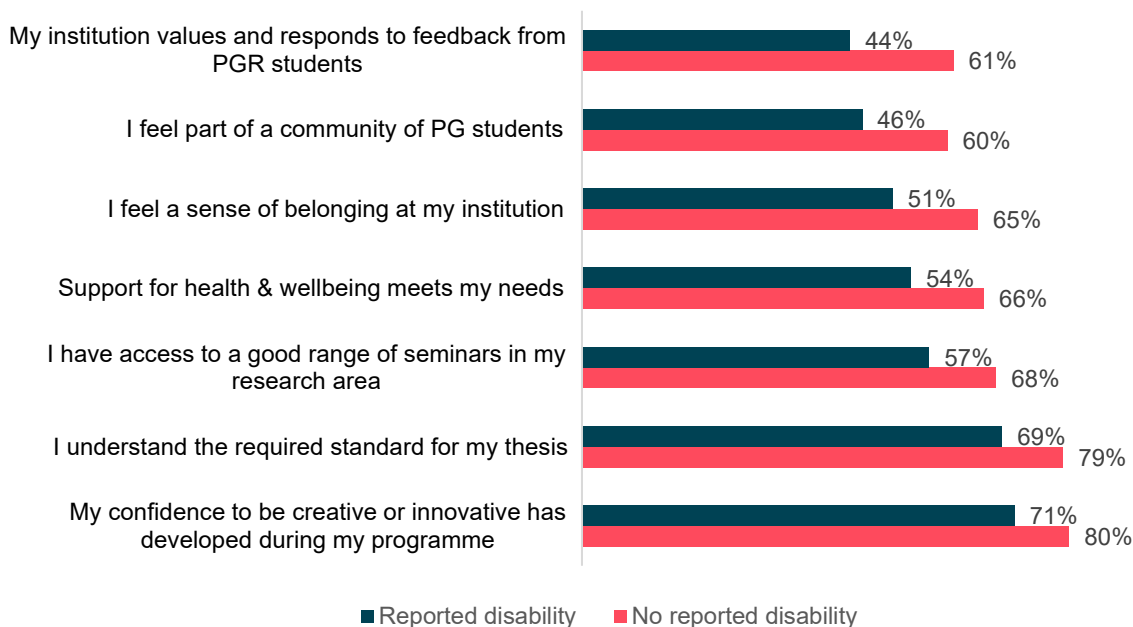
There has been little material change in 2023, with a 12% negative difference in overall satisfaction between disabled and non-disabled PGRs. However, this compares to a 10%, 9% and 14% gap across the past three years respectively and does highlight a marginally smaller gap in 2023.

Overall satisfaction levels – by disability



Looking beyond the overall satisfaction question, analysis of the individual questions within PRES identifies the main areas where PGRs who report a disability give much lower scores than those with no disability.

Disabled students – largest gaps across the survey



As well as being the largest gaps between the two cohorts, several of these points were low scoring in absolute terms.

The largest gap this year, as it was last year, was in terms of valuing and responding to feedback. This is traditionally a challenging aspect for providers across the board, with low scores being fairly common. However, the results imply that there is, and remains, a significant point around representing the voice of disabled students at PGR level.

As referred to earlier in the report, in 2023 we introduced a new scale on community. There is a large shortfall in the experience of disabled students in two out of three of the questions within this new area, which is striking. Specifically, this refers to a sense of belonging – a key area that is increasingly being considered within HE policymaking,¹¹ and feeling part of a community of PGR students.

Support for health and wellbeing is another area in which results for disabled PGRs raise some concerns about their experience. As in 2022, there is a 12% gap between our two sample groups, although scores for each cohort are 2% lower this year.

¹¹ Banahene, L and Down, J (2023) 'The heart of the matter: student loneliness and belonging'. *HEPI* (blog), 10 February. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/02/10/the-heart-of-the-matter-student-loneliness-and-belonging

PGRs with a disability would like more help with accessing student services, and feeling part of a research community

“Student support for disabled students could improve in terms of timescale of assistance.”

“I lived too far away for uni health services, my supervisor's advice was that I could also quit. There needs to be better support for disabled/chronically ill PhDs.”

“As a disabled mother of three young children its hard for me to get on to campus and engage with other researchers, it's hard for me to engage with academics outside of my supervision team.”

“I am disabled so getting to and from campus for lectures and events can be challenging (although the facilities when I get there are great). During the Covid pandemic, I benefited from all lectures and conferences being accessible on video platforms.”

“The university are focusing on singular underrepresented groups with several key opportunities this year that once again has left disabled students feeling somewhat forgotten about.”

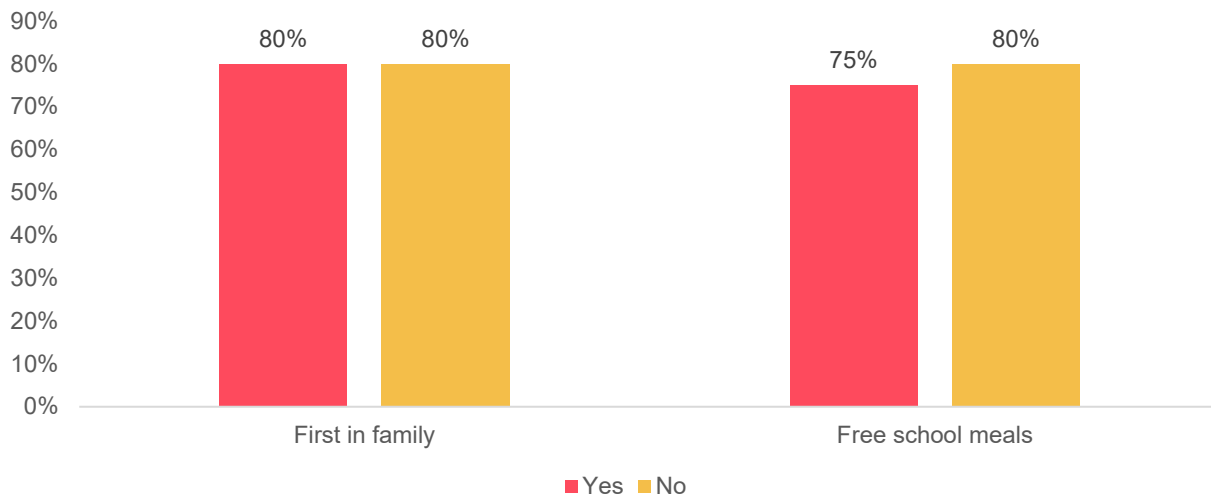
“The student support, particularly regarding mental health wellbeing, needs to be timely and personalised. The procedure of booking a therapy session was sometimes frustrating and alienating. This can put students who are already suffering at bigger risk.”

4.3 Social background

New to PRES this year, we asked two classification questions to help us understand more about the social background of PGRs in the survey. This could help identify any points of difference in the quality of the experience.

One of these questions asked about whether they were the first in their family to go to university. The other question asked whether the respondents were received free school meals at school – a question predominantly applicable to UK-domiciled PGRs.

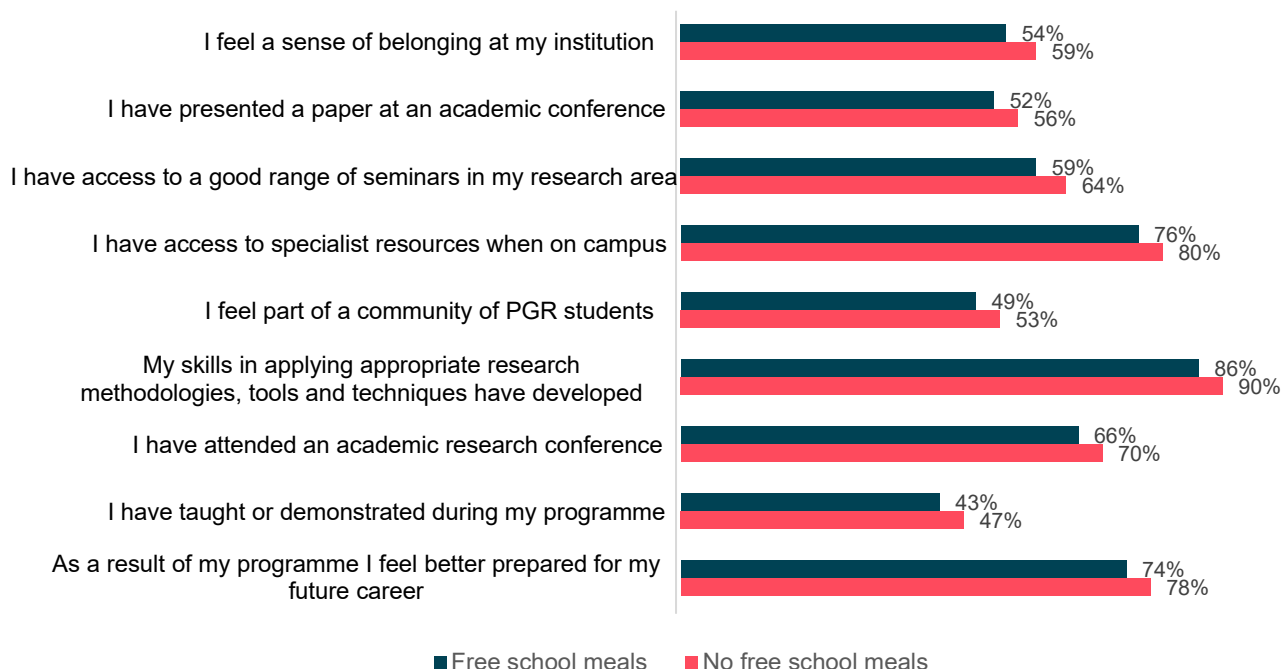
Overall satisfaction – by social background



There is no difference in overall satisfaction in terms of whether a PGR student is the first in their family to go to university. However, there is a gap of 5% on the other measure we introduced. PGRs who received free school meals were less satisfied overall than those who did not, which is a significant finding.

Looking across the rest of the survey, we can see that this gap in satisfaction is relatively consistent, providing evidence that PGR students from (assumed) less well-off backgrounds feel they have a less positive experience. It is striking that these differences in background are potentially linking to a different experience at this relatively advanced stage of their academic career.

Free school meals at year 11 – largest gaps across the survey



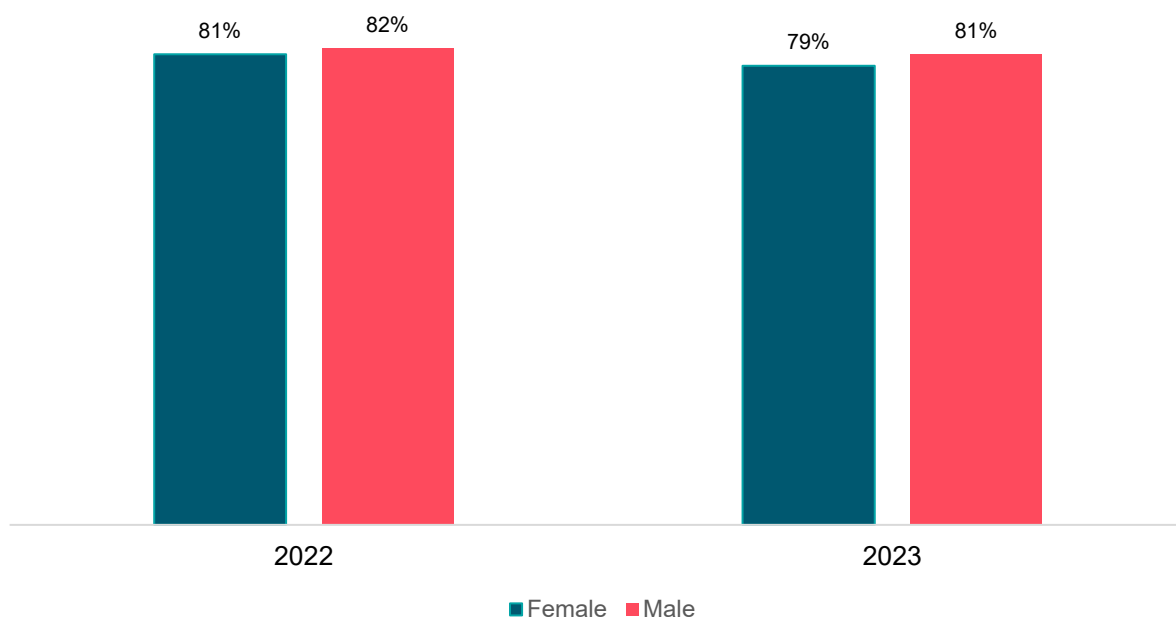
Across the items with the largest gaps identified above, there are some common aspects emerging. One is around feeling part of a community (including the item on belonging). Another relates to opportunities for skills development, specifically around conferences, presentations and teaching. Another related theme touches on confidence, with PGRs who received free school meals being less likely to feel confident about their future career, or about the development of their skills in particular areas.

4.4 Sex

In line with our revised guidance on data monitoring, Advance HE introduced a classification question on sex for 2022, and updated the wording of the categories slightly for 2023.¹² The data below provides a topline view of variations in overall satisfaction by sex since we introduced the question.

¹² In 2022 the categories for sex were “Man” and “Woman”. For 2023 the wording of these was amended, following feedback, to “Male” and “Female”. The 2022 data in the chart used the 2022 category wording.

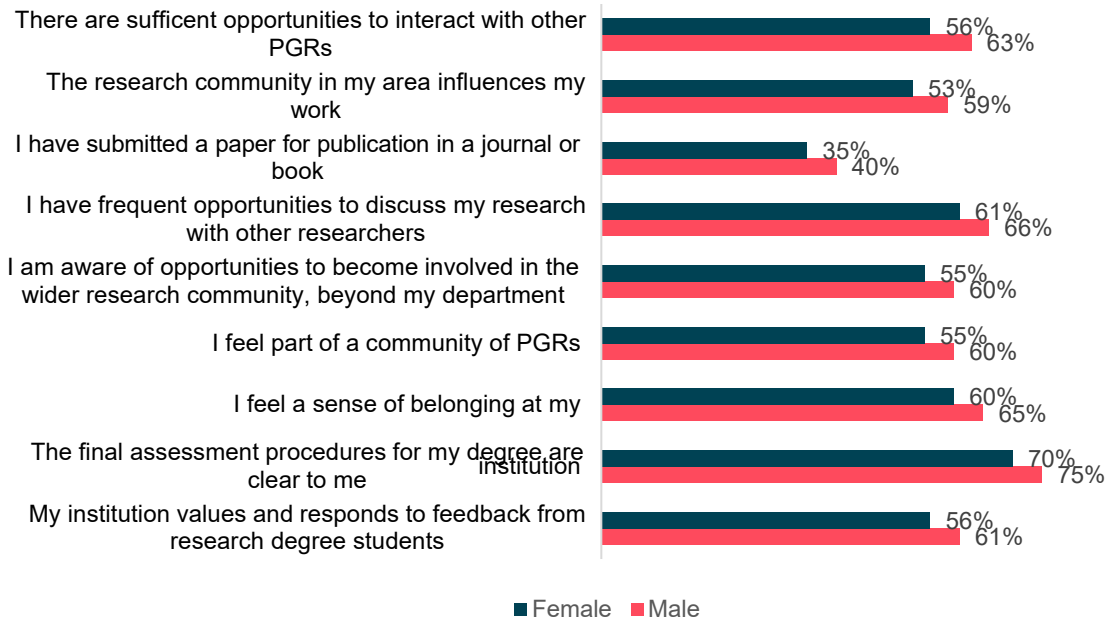
Overall satisfaction by sex



The differences are relatively small, but there is a consistent gap, with the experience of female PGRs being less positive than that of males. These differences are given particular focus when we examine specific question items in the survey. This tells us that, on most aspects of the experience, scores for female PGRs are lower than for males. Some of these ‘gaps’ are relatively large, as highlighted below.

The chart below highlights all gaps of 5% or higher. As well as there being a relatively large number of items with sizeable gaps, it is significant that many of these are drawn from similar parts of the survey. For example, all of the four items within the new community scale are listed, as are three items from the established research culture scale (see later in the report for further discussion of these scales). There therefore appears to be a discrepancy in the experience around feeling part of an academic research culture and, perhaps by extension, a wider PGR community, with female PGRs often feeling that they are not in the optimal environment to learn from and collaborate with other researchers, and other PGRs in general. By contrast, male PGRs are often a lot more satisfied on these aspects.

Sex – largest gaps across the survey



The other main area where female PGRs are less satisfied is in terms of having their voice heard through gathering feedback and acting on it. As we will see later in the report, this is an aspect with a strong link to overall satisfaction and which often receives relatively low scores. It is striking that there is such a difference in this area by sex.

4.5 Part-time and full-time study

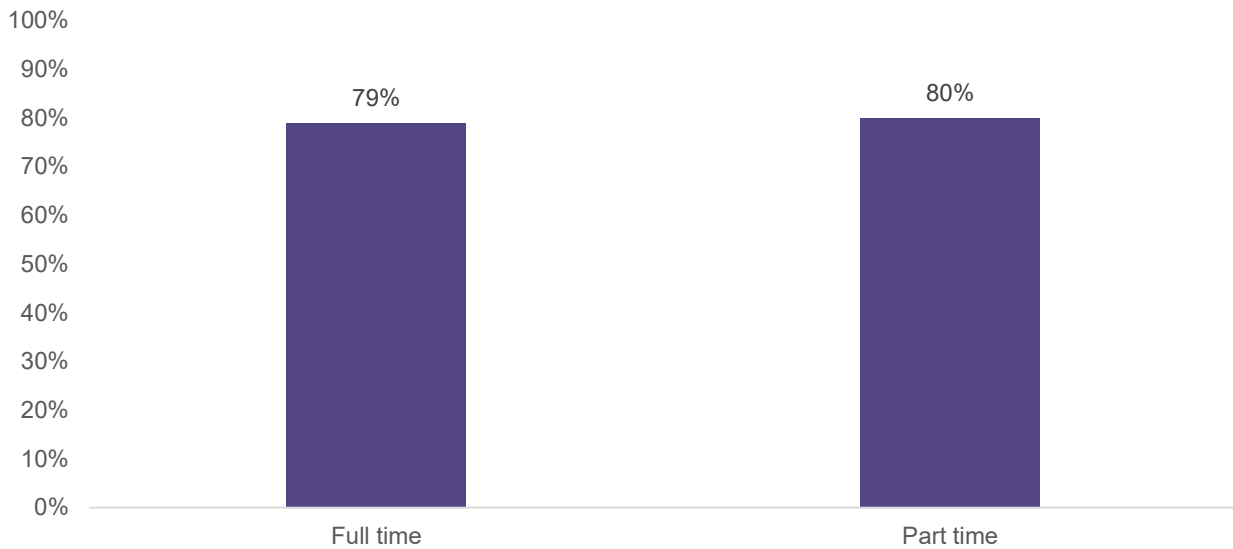
In 2023, 20% of our sample were part-time students. This is very similar to the most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics, which give a figure of 24% of PGRs studying part time in the UK in 2021/22.^{13 14}

Overall, levels of satisfaction between full-time and part-time students are the same, and are relatively strong at 80%.

¹³ [Figure 3 - HE student enrolments by level of study 2017/18 to 2021/22 | HESA](#)

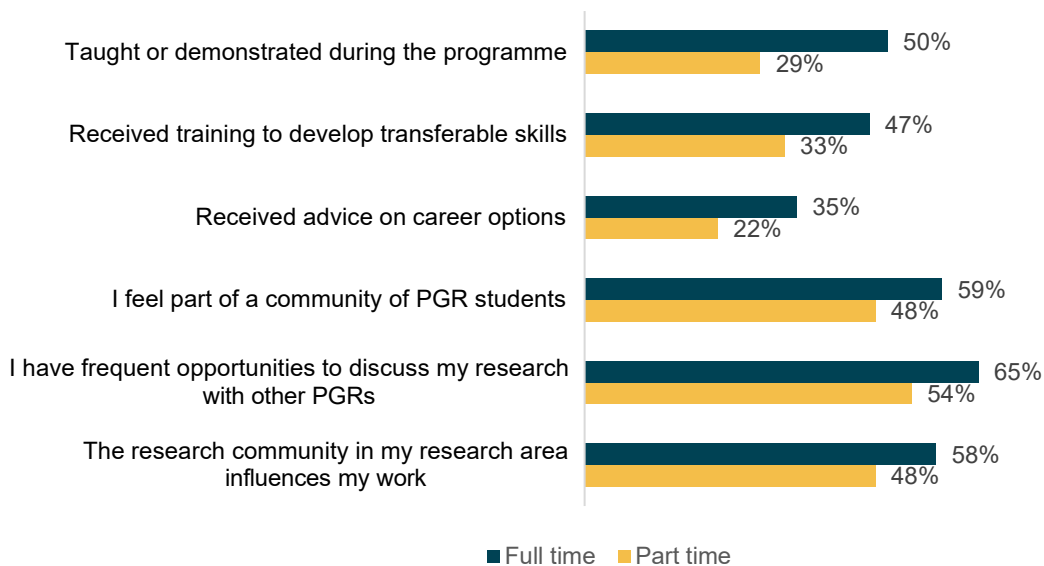
¹⁴ We recognise that not every institution in the 2023 PRES sample is based in the UK but we have not removed any institution from our analysis of domicile in order to preserve the anonymity of each institution's results.

Overall satisfaction by mode of study



However, when looking at individual items in the survey, it is apparent that there is a range of aspects of the experience that are more challenging for PGRs studying part-time.

Mode of study – largest gaps across the survey



As shown in the graph above, there are a number of aspects where part-time PGRs are less likely to have been given specific opportunities, or to feel they have received advice on careers and skills. There is also evidence of a gap in terms of feeling part of a community.

Many part-time PGRs would like more events and opportunities to be scheduled more flexibly

“(would like) Ability to engage with research seminars and conferences, as well as fellow research students.”

“I wonder if there's others like me (older, further away and part-time PhD students) and whether there could be a part-timer/distance learner scheme.”

“Improved access to online webinars and recordings made available for part-time PGRs. Improved access to stats and writing support – very difficult to access as a part-time PGR.”

“Providing a research community experience to part-time PhDs as well as full-time PhDs will help improve research student experience.”

“The PhD programme is designed for those lucky students who have funding to study full time. I wish I had this option as I have found part-time study very hard.”

“A lot of the opportunities are 'in person' only eg some of the MRES modules (included as part of the research fees we pay) are only in person which makes it impossible to join for part-time students. Other universities helpfully provide some courses in the evening to help part-time students or those working.”

“This needs to change. I'd also like to see programmes, events, opportunities and support to be planned with part-time students and those with caring responsibilities in mind as I feel quite excluded most of the time.”

5. Key drivers of overall satisfaction

Later in this report we will assess specific themes of the experience – and the individual items within it. To provide greater context for this, we have conducted correlation analysis to identify which aspects of the experience are most strongly linked to overall satisfaction.

For participating institutions, and the sector as a whole, this helps direct the focus on the key areas that are likely to have the strongest impact on overall satisfaction. We can combine this with identifying which of those are lowest scoring and hence could potentially benefit most from any enhancement activity.

Key drivers – top 10 correlations with overall satisfaction

Measure (top 10 correlations)	Theme	Position in top 10 2022	Pearson correlation value (2023) ¹⁵	Satisfaction level 2023
I feel a sense of belonging	Community	New question	0.639	62%
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme	Research skills	2	0.569	78%
My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students	Responsibilities	1	0.564	57%
My supervisors help me identify my training and development needs as a researcher	Supervision	3	0.549	78%
My supervisors provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	Supervision	5	0.544	89%
I am aware of my supervisors' responsibilities towards me	Responsibilities	4	0.534	87%
My skills in applying appropriate methods, tools and techniques have developed during my programme	Research skills	6	0.529	89%
I feel part of a community of PGRs	Community	New question	0.526	57%
I received an appropriate induction	Progression	8	0.524	74%
My skills in critical analysis have developed during my programme	Research skills	Not in top 10	0.516	88%

¹⁵ Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.501+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

Based on this analysis, the key targets (at sector level) would be those with a high correlation but a relatively low current satisfaction score (in red).

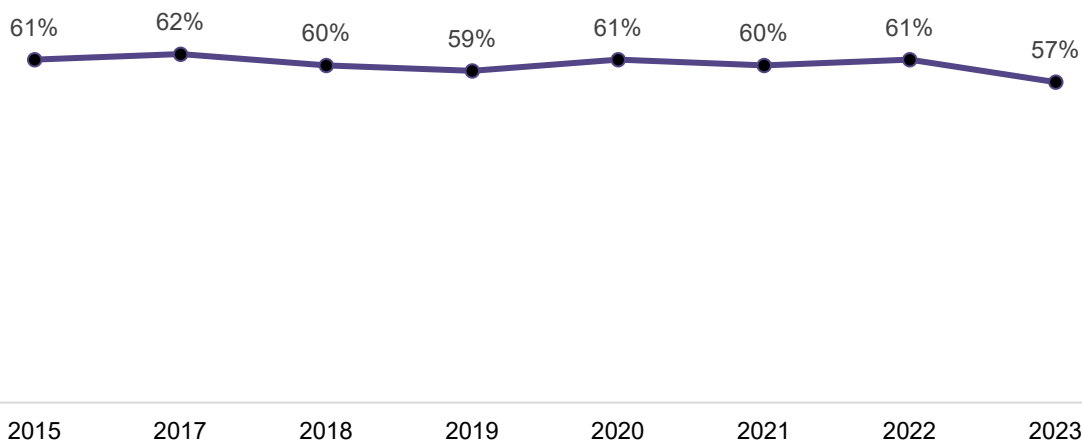
The above table identifies three areas in particular for high priority. Specifically, these relate to feeling a sense of belonging, feeling part of a community, and responding to feedback from PGRs. These items correlate strongly with overall satisfaction and show clear room for improvement in terms of their scores.

For the questions on belonging and community, it is significant that they has not been covered before in PRES, but their inclusion as part of the new community section would appear to be a positive addition to the survey, highlighting an issue where many PGRs perceive a gap in their experience.

The other question item with a high correlation and lower satisfaction has been identified before – and measures how institutions value and respond to feedback. The nature of PGR study is that it requires a great deal of independence, which may potentially feed through into an increased level of importance for PGRs in feeling that their voices are heard. This is clearly a key aspect for PGRs, as it has been regularly identified as linking strongly to satisfaction. However, it remains one of the lower scoring items among those that have been included in PRES for a number of years.

It is important to note that there has been a downturn in this aspect for 2023. In fact, the 4% year-on-year decline is the single largest fall across all core elements of PRES. This potentially represents a missed opportunity given the extent to which PGRs clearly place value on being heard through the feedback process.

I agree that my institution values and responds to feedback from PGR students



The other question items identified in the correlation analysis all score reasonably well, or very well and hence there is less scope (but still some scope) for interventions that may directly influence the overall experience. There are several items around research skills and supervision that are performing well, but there is a key aspect around helping PGRs' confidence with creativity and innovation that does not score particularly highly. This could be an area to understand better and focus investigation among the PGR community.

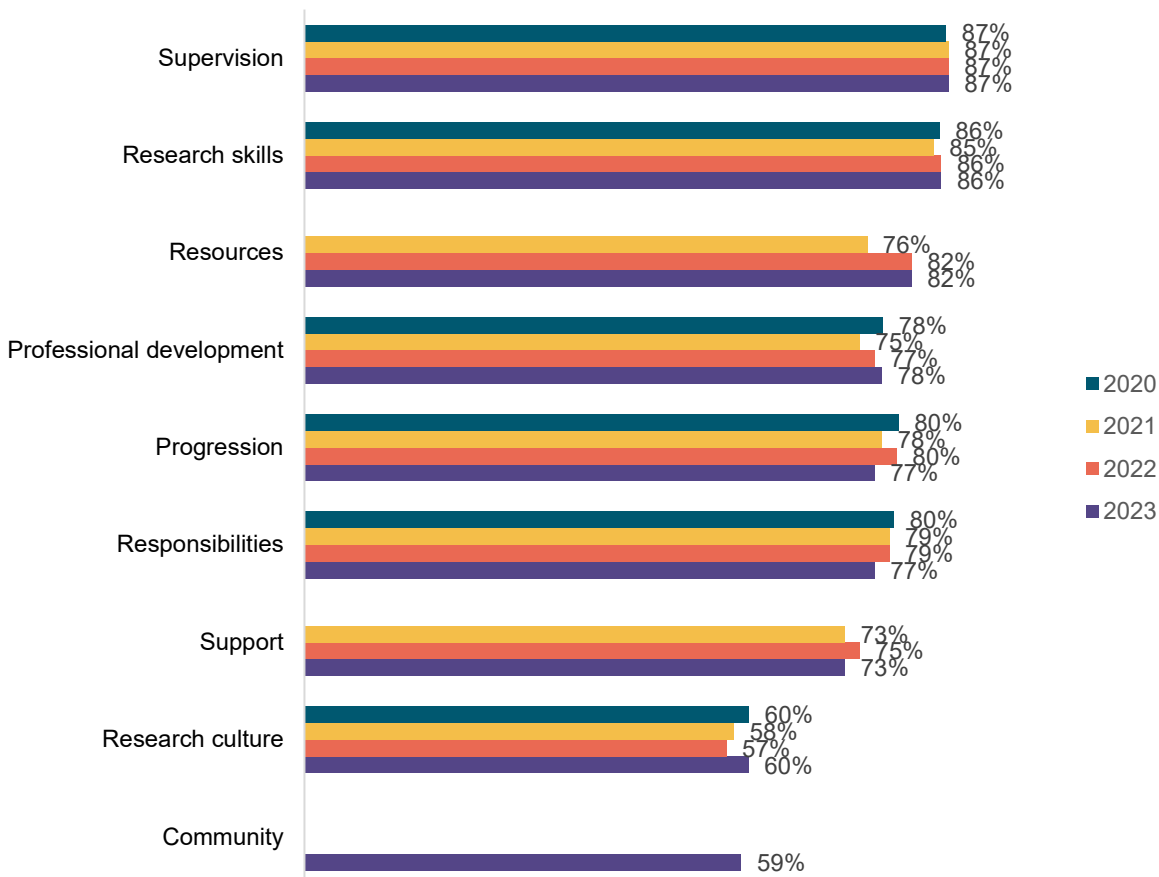
6. Satisfaction with areas of the student experience

6.1 Elements of the student experience

PRES measures satisfaction across 10 different core themes. Each theme has a number of individual question items within it, and these are aggregated together (as well as assessed separately) to provide overall aggregate scores for each theme.

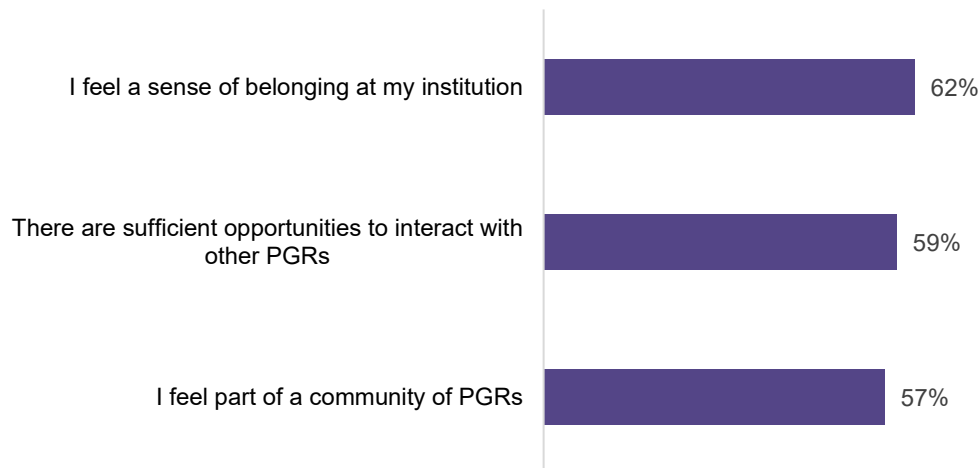
The chart below compares satisfaction with the different areas of the student experience over the past four years. There were few major changes this year. Most changes, if there were any, were by 1% or 2%, either higher or lower. It was encouraging to see research culture improve by 3% – the largest improvement at this aggregate level. By contrast, there was a 3% decline in the overall score for progression, while the new area of community scored the lowest of all.

Satisfaction with areas of the research degree experience



6.2 Satisfaction with community

Satisfaction with elements of community



Introduced as a new area for 2023, we have already seen that feeling a sense of belonging is the one question across the whole survey with the strongest correlation with overall satisfaction. We have also seen earlier in this report that feeling part of a community, as well as being low scoring overall, is one of the areas of largest gaps in the experience when considering social background and disability.

Clearly, these aspects are being identified as important, and for many PGRs this is one of the aspects that they would most like to see changed or improved.

Some PGRs are looking for a greater sense of community

“(would like more) sense of community and belonging as a PhD student, have met others but hard to stay in touch and have a community when we are so spread out over the campus.”

“The departmental postgrad socials (which seem to have disappeared). If you want to build a research community and a sense of belonging, you need to offer people the chance to socialise outside of conducting research.”

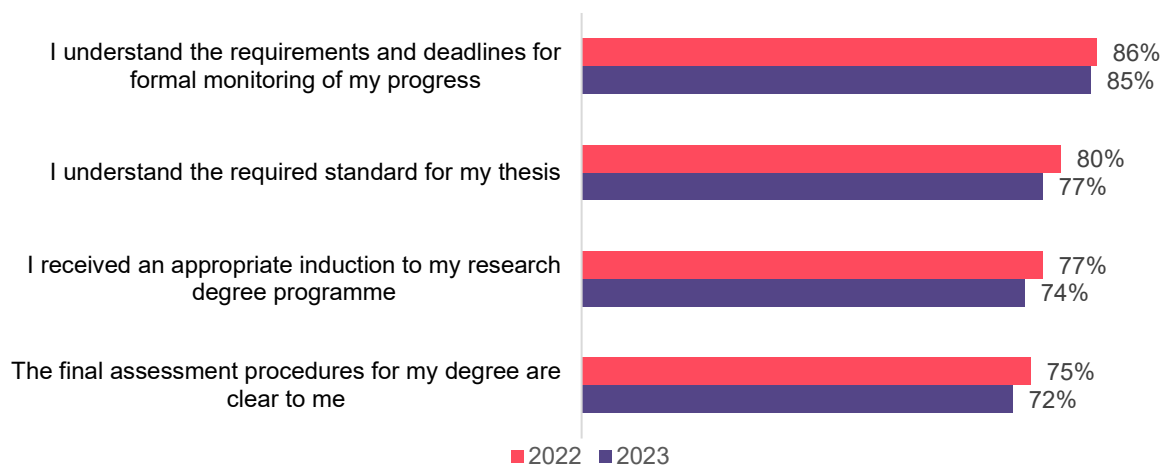
“After six years, I would struggle to tell you who is in charge of the PGR community in which I belong to. I know there have been colleagues who have taken part responsibility for supporting PGRs within the institute, but this is a bolt on to their full-time role which compromises the quality of support that can be given.”

“The lack of opportunity to interact with other postgraduate researchers and forming a community, especially early on, has negatively impacted my ability to form a support network.”

“Research is already a solitary experience, especially when your supervision team lacks engagement. With an active, diverse, PGR community, candidates could share ideas, debate, explore their research areas, and offer support to one another. For this to work, the university would need to facilitate and encourage this.”

6.3 Satisfaction with progression (assessment, induction, quality and standards)

Satisfaction with elements of progression



As mentioned above, there have been relatively few sizeable changes in ratings this year. However, the section on progression is notable in that all elements within it have declined. Three of these have declined by 3%, representing some of the largest year-on-year declines across all the elements of the survey. Although titled “progression” these elements are more about communicating required standards and processes to PGRs, and it is striking that that all four areas have declined.

While different institutions will have different areas that may have declined, arguably the priority of these elements across the whole sector is the quality of the induction process for PGRs. Three-quarters of respondents are satisfied with this, which is not especially high, and as well as being a declining score, it was identified in the correlation analysis as one of the top 10 survey items with the strongest link to overall satisfaction.

Some PGRs call for more effective inductions, and clearer communication around requirements and standard

“Probably information about formal procedures, resources, requirements, etc. There was not a formal induction process when I began my PhD.”

“I had to make extra effort to receive all the necessary information. Asking colleagues would not help because either they did not know or each one was saying something different.”

“Clear guidelines about what the required content, style, standard and format for PhD thesis would be helpful.”

“Finding clear and reliable information on the thesis and submission requirements was a nightmare. One of the documents offering guidelines on formatting and submitting has not been updated in so long that it still states that CD-ROM copies should be submitted.”

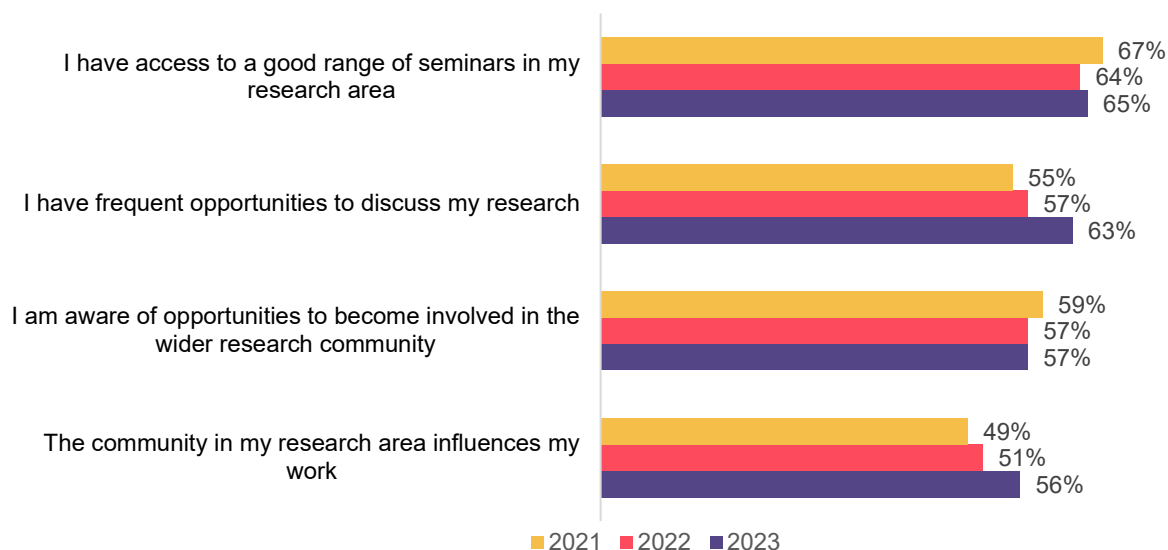
“I feel like a better way to go would be to have a yearly induction for students, like a first-year induction, then a second year... and a third-year induction that cover the things that are relevant.”

6.4 Satisfaction with research culture

Research culture has traditionally been a challenging area for institutions to fully meet the needs of their PGR community. In PRES, this has often been the lowest scoring of the core sections, and while scores are still relatively low, these results are positive in that three out of four of the survey items have improved over the past year.

In particular, there has been a strong improvement in terms of providing frequent opportunities to discuss research (the single largest improvement across the core sections) and facilitating access to a research community to share ideas and influence the development of research ideas – again, one of the strongest improvements this year.

Satisfaction with elements of the research culture



These improvements are very positive and represent real evidence that a significant amount of work in being done, post-Covid, to create the right kind of intellectual community for PGRs. However, meeting all needs in this area remains a challenge and, as we saw earlier with the results around sense of belonging and community, there are many PGRs who, despite these improvements, are looking for a greater sense of connection.

PGRs have a mixed view of the research culture

“Always lots of opportunities to collaborate and share research. There is a great doctoral community.”

“Zero interest in my department to provide PGRs respectable opportunities to present our work. We need to organise conference presentations ourselves, and these are often physically inaccessible. No work to connect researchers with similar interests and research focuses. I was completely isolated for four years in my area.”

“Would like a little more active promotion of research societies and such in my field by the department, but overall not bad.”

“There seems to be a really strong seminar culture at (my institution) which is really positive from a learning and development/networking perspective.”

“My research group is the only one, in this university, to work in the research area it targets, and my own research area is only a part of my group's topics. This is the reason why I have few people to interact with for things which really interest me, even though my group does very interesting work in different areas.”

6.5 Development opportunities

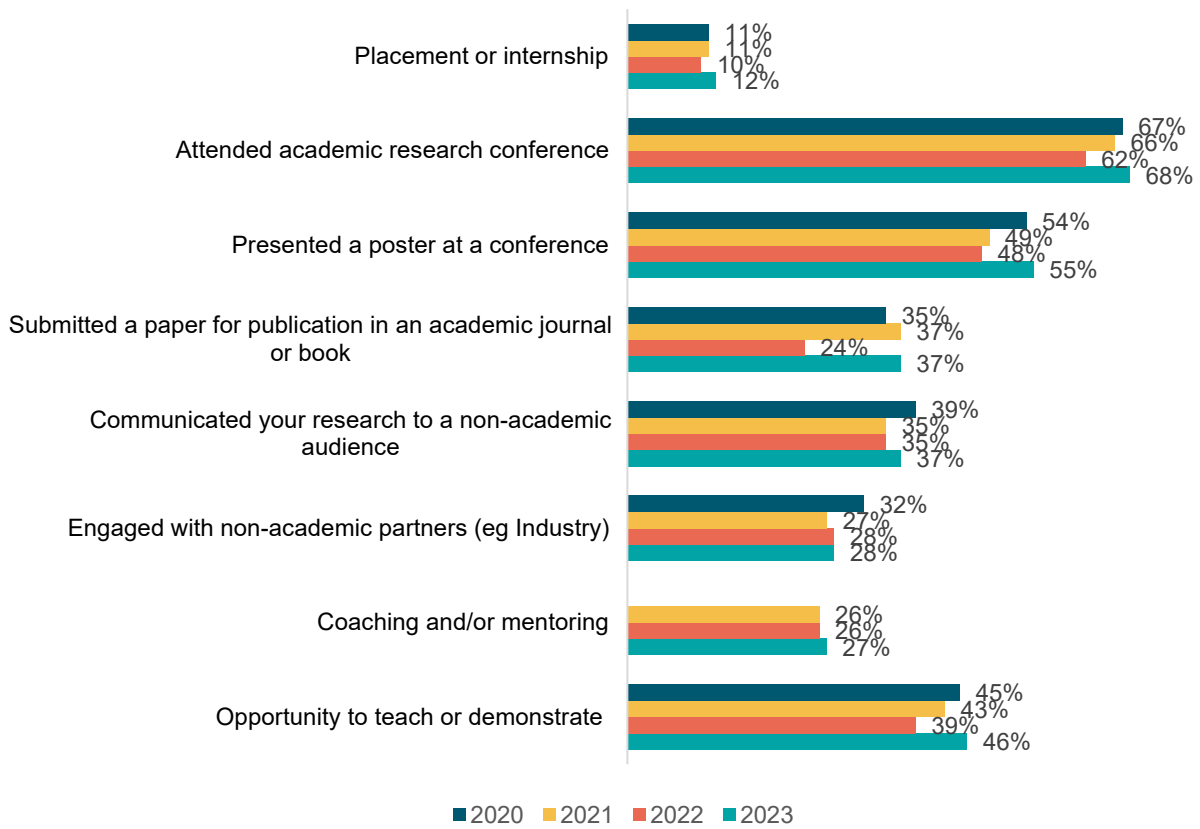
A key element of the wider development of postgraduate researchers is related to the opportunities provided and taken up. This can include showcasing research, sharing skills with others through coaching or engaging in direct career preparation such as internships and placements. Opportunities to teach or demonstrate are also seen as a valued aspect of the experience. Unfortunately, the frequency of these opportunities was directly impacted by the pandemic and did not immediately recover. As recently as 2022, there were far fewer of these opportunities than in earlier years.

Positively, in 2023 we have seen a strong increase in the availability, and take up, of many of these activities, reflected in the range of face-to-face events that have returned to, or been added to, the sector calendar. The past year or so has seen a return to in-person conferences and events across the sector, and this is reflected in a strong increase in the proportion of PGRs attending and/or presenting at an academic conference.

There has also been a clear increase in PGRs submitting a paper for publication in a book or journal and a small increase in taking part in coaching or mentoring. In addition, teaching opportunities have also increased strongly and are back up to previous levels.

As well as being, in some cases, directed related to research activity, all these activities play a role in the development of wider technical and emotional skills. Hence, to see evidence of these activities and opportunities becoming more frequent is encouraging.

Development opportunities provided during the research degree programme



One aspect that has not seen a great deal of movement is the question around engaging with non-academic partners, which has seen little change. Although some research degrees may have more of a natural connection to industry than others, this does point towards a potential gap in terms of interaction with the non-academic community, either within the institution, locally or beyond.

PGRs often recognise the opportunities they have been afforded, but in some cases are looking for more

“(a positive aspect of the experience) The opportunity to interact with another four academic institutions and our industrial partner.”

“(a positive aspect of the experience) Completing a study of a very high standard that was suitable for submission to a journal and presented as a poster and oral presentation at national and international conferences.”

“(would like) More opportunity for career development ie teaching experience, presenting at conferences, working alongside local community.”

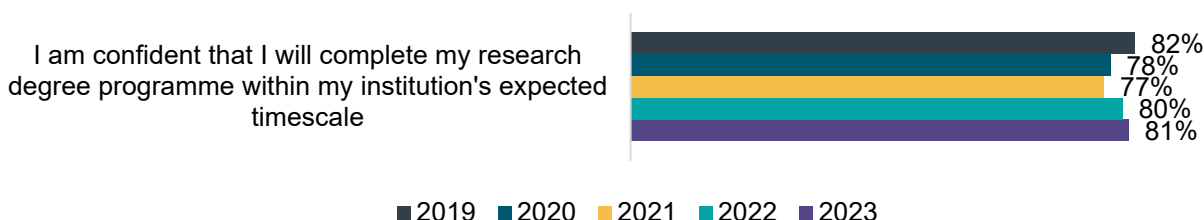
“(would like) Access to and information regarding research outside the university. Such as information on conferences, advice on how to submit a paper, or how to network.”

6.6 Confidence to complete programme on time

Although a key focus of this report has been on the “overall satisfaction” question as a key measure of the experience, another significant “overall” question that we have asked each year of the survey addresses the level of confidence that PGRs feel in completing their research degree on time. This is a key barometer of how PGRs have been able to navigate the various challenges during a long programme of study (either part time or full time) as well as the support they have received.

The onset of the pandemic coincided with a clear downturn in this measure, but it is encouraging to see a recovery in the past two years, with 81% of PGRs feeling confident of completing their programme on time.

Confidence to complete programme on time



Some PGRs still have concerns about timescale (and financial) pressures

“As previously mentioned, one of the biggest frustrations is (seemingly) being told (by the system, rather than individuals) that my inability to complete my thesis on time is my fault for being inefficient in my work/in planning my completion. Instead of this, I would like to see the university reflect a more reasonable and realistic timeframe for the completion of such a large, novel undertaking.”

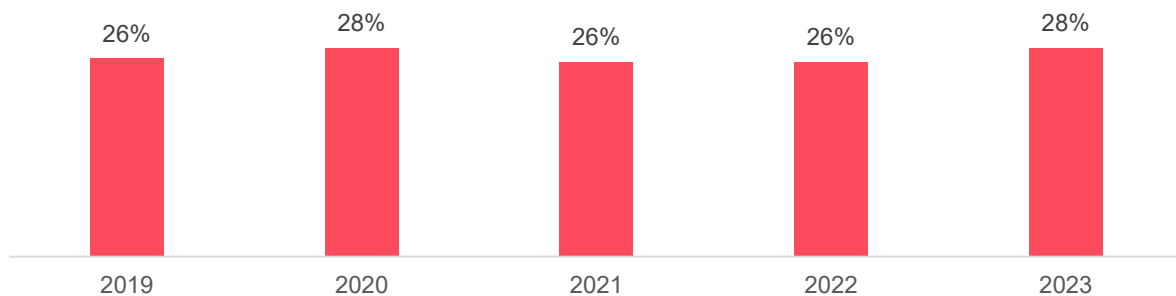
“Complete lack of monetary support for PhD students, those of us living on stipends are particularly struggling given these are barely enough to live on, which means that we take on work either teaching within the uni or outside of it. This extra work then takes time away from studying and often delays finishing, which we then get blamed for. I would have preferred to be able to focus full-time on my PhD and finish on time but I literally could not afford to.”

“I think there needs to be more leniency for time dedicated to PhD programmes depending on the topic. The expectation that a highly emotive topic can be completed in three years is somewhat unreasonable at times.”

7. Considering leaving

Since we introduced a question on 'likelihood to consider leaving' a few years ago, this has been a relatively stable measure. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we actually saw a slight decrease in the proportion who had considered leaving their programme. Significantly, however, we have seen an increase of nearly 2% in 2023, with 28% of PGRs having considered leaving.

Proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course



One of the most striking aspects within this, and potentially a factor that contributed to the increase, has been the strong rise in the proportion of PGRs who considered leaving citing financial concerns as their main reason for this. In the past two years, the relative importance of financial considerations in this context has nearly doubled.

The main reason for considering leaving has been, and remains, related to concerns around mental and emotional health, but while still a major and concerning problem, mental health concerns have declined in relative importance, at the expense of financial concerns.

Reasons for considering leaving – over time

	2021	2022	2023
Mental/emotional health	26%	23%	24%
Financial difficulties	9%	12%	17%
Difficulties balancing research and other commitments	11%	15%	11%
Not enough support for research	9%	8%	8%
Family or personal problems	4%	5%	5%

Table shows top five answers - shown as a proportion of those who considered leaving

The current cost-of-living crisis and its impact on students is well documented.¹⁶ However, there has been arguably less discussion around the specific impact at postgraduate level, something that these findings will help to balance as the sector considers the impact on all student populations.

Financial concerns are having an impact

“Accommodating the needs of those travelling long distances by improving remote access on days when we only need to be in for 30 mins to two hours (my round trip is four hours) as I lose a lot of time on these days. The cost of living is so challenging at the moment – I feel this needs to be considered further by those responsible for budgets and bursaries as there is a lack of equity regarding payment for expenses on placements.”

“As mentioned, I have felt left behind and isolated as I have moved into my second, part-time year. This is hampered by the necessity to work more days to earn more money in this cost-of-living crisis.”

“The university expects students to do good research within a certain timeline, but there are inequities in how funding is awarded to students, so how do people finish well and on time when they have to take on extra side jobs? It's unfair that some people get to have a better financial experience than others during a PhD programme. No one should suffer because they are pursuing a PhD.”

¹⁶ Universities UK (2023) ‘Latest ONS survey reveals impact of cost of living crisis on university students’. News, 5 April. Available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/latest-ons-survey-reveals-impact-cost

8. Considerations for the sector

Overall, it is important to reflect that the large majority of PGRs are satisfied with their experience, as has been the case over a number of years. This is reflected in a wide range of positive comments from PGRs praising their institutions, examples of which are included below.

Overall, many PGRs are happy with their experience and have praise for their institutions

“(I valued) the support of my supervisors and the fantastic wealth of research areas that shine in the department's courses and seminars. Without this department's constant invitations to research seminars and events I would have felt deeply isolated as a research student who embarked on my PhD during the coronavirus lockdown.”

“As a young/early career researcher, I feel validated, thanks to its staff and community. This has boosted my confidence as a researcher and made me want to definitely pursue a career in academia. Also, the quality of the supervision both in terms of dedication and of expertise has been essential to my personal and professional development, as it's of a very high level.”

“Having the opportunity to attend doctoral days and conferences to present my work. These events also support network opportunities. I'm very grateful to the PhD/doctoral team for all they do, they are engaging and enthusiastic - thank you.”

“I have absolutely loved my experience as a research student so far – thank you to all that have helped with that.”

However, there are some overall points, highlighted below, for the sector as a whole to consider.

1. Hybrid has replaced online as the main form of interaction with staff. There is also a growing level of in-person contact. Given how clearly this is linked to satisfaction levels, this does raise questions around whether PGRs who interact online are having the same depth and breadth of experience. Although there are a range of reasons why PGRs may want to continue interacting online, it will be important to ensure that they are exposed to the same level of opportunities to develop and share good practice with their peers and with the wider research community.
2. The cost-of-living crisis is clearly having an impact at PGR level. Pressures on travel costs, the need for paid work and challenges around getting to campus are all potential issues PGRs may need support to deal with, and which may ultimately impact on the likelihood of some PGRs continuing with their programme.

3. Building a sense of community can be key to a successful PGR experience – as evidenced by the new question on belonging having the highest correlation with overall satisfaction. Although there have been improvements in perceptions of being part of a genuine research culture, there is clear scope for more to be done in this area so that more PGRs feel connected with a support network to help them flourish.
4. Not all PGRs report the same high-quality experience. One area in which there are key differences between different demographic cohorts is in terms of opportunities to teach, publish and attend conferences. These opportunities seem to be less frequent for part-time PGRs, as well as PGRs from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. It will be important to understand any barriers or circumstances that might be contributing to these 'gaps' in opportunity to help develop strategies to ensure the right kind of opportunities are available to all.

9. Appendix 1. Respondent profile

Category ¹⁷	PRES 2020	PRES 2021	PRES 2022	PRES 2023
Age				
30 and under	53%	56%	46%	54%
31 and over	47%	43%	54%	46%
Disability				
Reported disability	9%	9%	13%	14%
No reported disability	91%	91%	87%	86%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)				
Asian (including Chinese)	6%	8%	7%	9%
Black	3%	4%	5%	5%
Mixed and other	6%	7%	3%	4%
White	85%	81%	85%	82%
Domicile				
UK	62%	60%	61%	56%
EU	10%	4%	8%	9%
Rest of the world	28%	36%	31%	35%
Mode				
Full time	77%	80%	72%	80%
Part time	23%	20%	28%	20%

The nature of the cycle of PRES, with more institutions, including more of the larger, research intensive HEIs, taking part every second year does make it more likely that there will be fluctuations in the demographic composition of the PRES sample.

Looking at the cycle, there are similarities between 2021 and 2023, with the split between younger and older fluctuating as participating changes each year. There are also fluctuations in the proportion of full- and part-time respondents.

¹⁷ Note: differences of +/-3% or more versus the previous year are bold

10. Appendix 2. Participating institutions

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
London Metropolitan University	University of Northampton
London South Bank University	University of Nottingham
Loughborough University	University of Oxford
Manchester Metropolitan University	University of Plymouth
Middlesex University	University of Portsmouth
Newcastle University	University of South Wales
Northumbria University	University of St Andrews
Nottingham Trent University	University of Stirling
Oxford Brookes University	University of Strathclyde
Prifysgol Bangor University	University of Suffolk
Queen Mary University of London	University of Surrey

Queen's University Belfast	University of Sussex
Robert Gordon University	University of the Arts London
Royal College of Art	University of the West of England
Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Royal Veterinary College	University of Warwick
University of London, School of Advanced Study	University of West London
Scotland's Rural College	University of Western Australia
Sheffield Hallam University	University of Westminster
SOAS University of London	University of Worcester
St Mary's University, Twickenham	University of York
Staffordshire University	Wrexham University
Teesside University	York St John University
The Open University	



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