

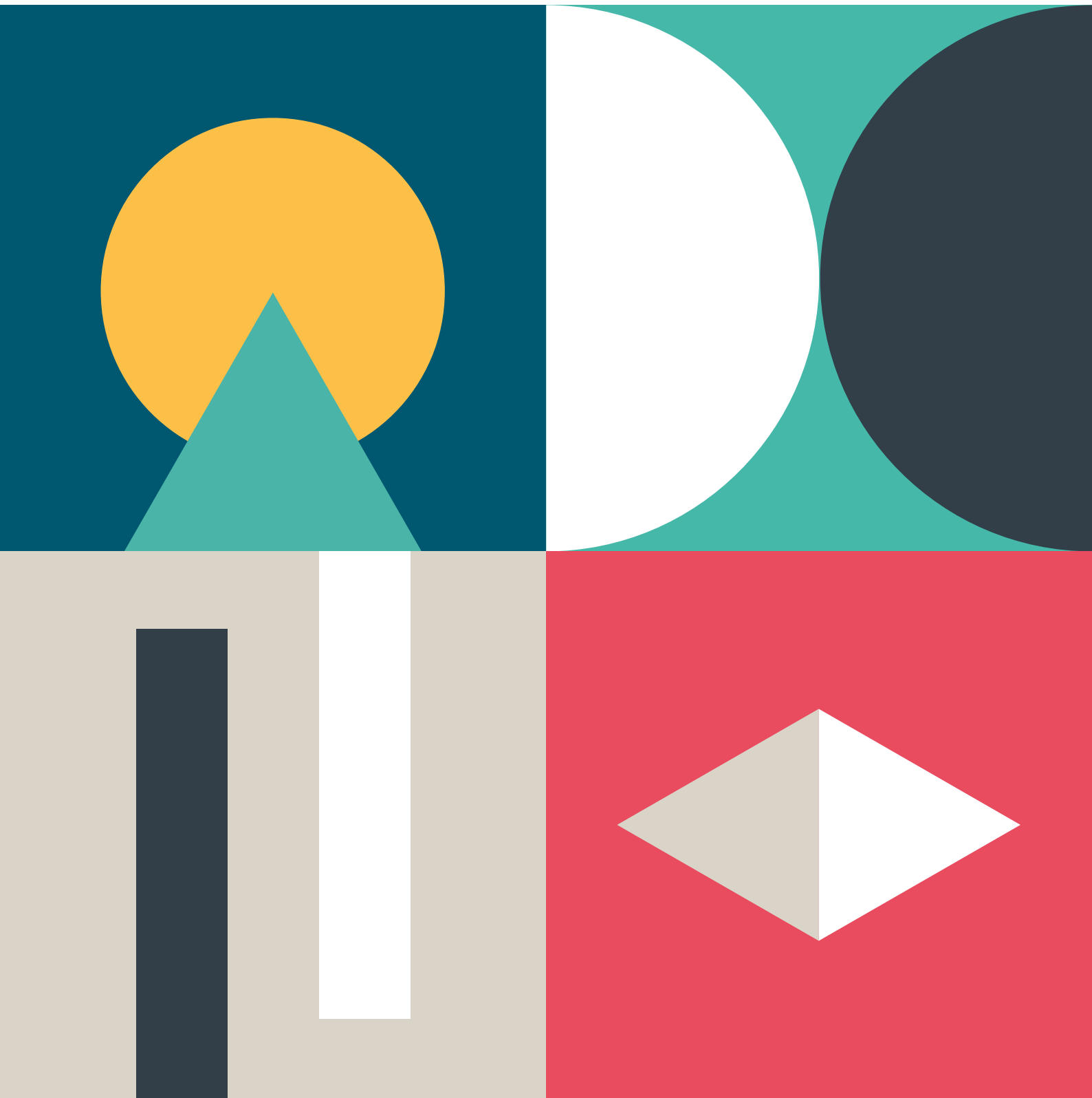
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2022: sector results report

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POSTGRADUATE

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

SURVEY



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1 Executive summary

This report examines the key findings from a dataset which includes the views of thousands of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from institutions across the sector.

Overall satisfaction across the sector has risen slightly from 79% to 80%, stemming the tide of a slight but consistent fall over the past three years. Although the overall increase is just 1% (1 percentage point¹), there has been an encouraging increase in strength of feeling, with many more PGRs in 2022 who “definitely agree” that they are satisfied compared to 2021. We have yet to see a recovery in satisfaction for undergraduates, as measured by the National Student Survey,² so this recovery in PRES is a positive finding.

A significant amount of PGR interaction with staff continues to take place online. Although there has been a shift to a more hybrid approach, part online and part in-person, there is only a very small cohort for whom the majority of interaction was in-person. Despite this continued online focus, the results point towards PGRs being more likely to be happy with a face-to-face or hybrid experience, with satisfaction rates increasing for those cohorts. By contrast, satisfaction rates for the relatively high number who have mainly interacted via online methods are lower, and have fallen in the past year.

Despite an increase in satisfaction across the total sample, the results provide evidence that the experience is not the same for all PGRs. In particular, PGRs with a declared disability experience significantly lower – and declining – levels of satisfaction, despite the increase in satisfaction across the total sample. Disabled PGRs are particularly likely to cite issues with access to appropriate working spaces, health and wellbeing support and feeling that their feedback is listened to and acted on.

According to HESA data, a large proportion (around 40%) of PGRs studying in the UK are domiciled outside the UK, and this is largely replicated in the PRES sample. Significantly, satisfaction rates are higher among non-UK nationals, and have increased in 2022, while satisfaction for UK domiciled PGRs has actually fallen slightly.

In terms of key drivers of satisfaction, one of the key aspects is how institutions value and respond to feedback. This has the highest correlation with satisfaction, but scores remain relatively low. This indicates that any investment to improve how feedback from PRES and other feedback mechanisms is acted on could have a positive return for how PGRs value their whole experience.

1 When referring to year-on-year changes we are referring to percentage points, but predominantly use “%” for brevity.

2 Ipsos and Office for Students (2022) ‘National Student Survey’. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.thestudentsurvey.com

In term of specific aspects of the survey, there has been a recovery in many areas compared to the past two years, which shows the impact of the pandemic. In particular, there have been strong improvements in access to resources and facilities, with PGRs often praising how their institution has adapted and developed facilities to meet their needs. Dedicated Covid-19 support was also praised, particularly the quality of communications, while overall support across aspects of academic skills, accessing or using resources, and health and wellbeing needs also received high scores.

While we have seen several areas of the survey increase in 2022, PGRs are still reporting lower levels of access to key developmental experiences such as face to face conferences, submitting a paper for publication or communicating their research outputs to their peers.

2 Introduction

Since its introduction in 2007, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) has established itself as the largest annual survey of the postgraduate research experience.

The focus of PRES is to aid and support enhancement of provision for PGRs by providing key comparative information, within an institution and between different types of institutions. PRES also helps engage PGRs themselves by providing a widely respected instrument for representing their voice.

Each participating institution receives its own tailored suite of results reports by early July each year, just a few weeks after the survey closes. Each institution can compare their results against a variety of benchmarking groups, as well as the sector average. This data reflects insight into the experiences of a range of types of PGR student, including PhDs, professional doctorates, Masters by Research and MPhil (with and without transfer to PhD).

This report is an overview of the overall findings at sector level, highlighting areas of strength and those that could be improved, which many institutions with Postgraduate Taught provision are likely to find useful.

3 Methodology

3.1 Survey content

Over the past 13 years, PRES has developed to keep pace with change and adapt to contemporary PGR experiences. Examples include aligning it more closely with Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF)³ in 2013; while the results of a consultation in 2017 introduced a greater focus on modules and more flexible guidance around publication of data. In 2020, the discipline question was changed to reflect the 2021 REF categories.

However, PRES's core content remains consistent each year, with some questions added and amended through regular consultation with participating institutions. In 2020 (in time for the 2021 survey) there was a major consultation exercise to ensure the content reflected the PGR experience during the pandemic, with a dedicated section on Covid-19 support. A general support section was introduced, and the section on resources overhauled.

For 2022, we kept many of these changes consistent, not least as the pandemic was still a major issue affecting higher education institutions during the period (January to February 2022) when the survey was being set up. The full questionnaire contained nine main sections, as outlined below:

- + **Supervision** (four closed questions, one open question)
- + **Resources** (seven closed questions, one open question)
- + **Research culture** (four closed questions, one open question)
- + **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** (three closed questions, one open question).

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

3 Vitae (2022) 'About the Vitae Researcher Development Framework'. Cambridge: Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC). Available at: www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework

3.2 Demographics

In April 2022, Advance HE published revised advice for its member institutions for the collection of data (including through surveys) across a range of demographic categories.⁴ The demographic section of PRES, and our other main surveys, has been amended accordingly. The main changes included adding questions on sex and trans status, as well as updating the existing questions on ethnicity and disability.

3.3 Data collection

Data was collected via an online survey method using Jisc Online Surveys⁵ software. Surveys were distributed by participating institutions directly to their PGR population. Data was collected between 1 February and 16 May 2022. Within this timeframe, institutions were able to choose when they ran the survey, provided that the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

3.4 Sample size

PRES runs as an annual survey, although until 2018 it was run biennially. As a non-compulsory survey for enhancement purposes, it is up to institutions how often to take part. Accordingly, we have seen some institutions choose to stick to a biennial approach, but a relatively 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 slightly smaller number of participating institutions (around 60% as large) in intervening years. Due to the fact that some institutions with a larger PGR cohort choose not to take part every year, we do see proportionally smaller sample sizes in terms of PGR responses in these intervening years – such as 2022.

Participation in 2020 was strongly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

PRES participation: institutions and responses (2011–2022)

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Institutions	102	122	123	117	66	107	45	94	62
Responses	31,202	48,401	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600	8,432	39,855	13,922

PRES has been, and remains, available to Advance HE members anywhere in the world, but to date it has principally been UK institutions choosing to take part. In 2022, there was one institution from Australia, and this is one part of the world, in particular, where we hope to expand participation – see Appendix 2 for a full list of participants.

4 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

5 Jisc (2022) *Online surveys (formerly BOS)*. Bristol: Jisc. Available at: www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk

3.5 Benchmark groups

In 2022, the following benchmark groups were produced to provide participating institutions with a context for their own results:

- + Global
- + Million Plus
- + University Alliance
- + Pre-92
- + Post-92
- + Guild HE
- + Cathedrals Group
- + Small and Specialist
- + Scottish
- + Welsh
- + London.

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.

3.6 Year-on-year comparison

The 2022 results are extremely robust, with nearly 14,000 participants. However, there are some differences in the participant group of institutions, with some larger institutions not taking part this year. Accordingly, we have conducted some brief analysis (see section 4.3) among institutions taking part in both 2021 and 2022 which has given us full confidence in the wider year-on-year comparisons used in this report.

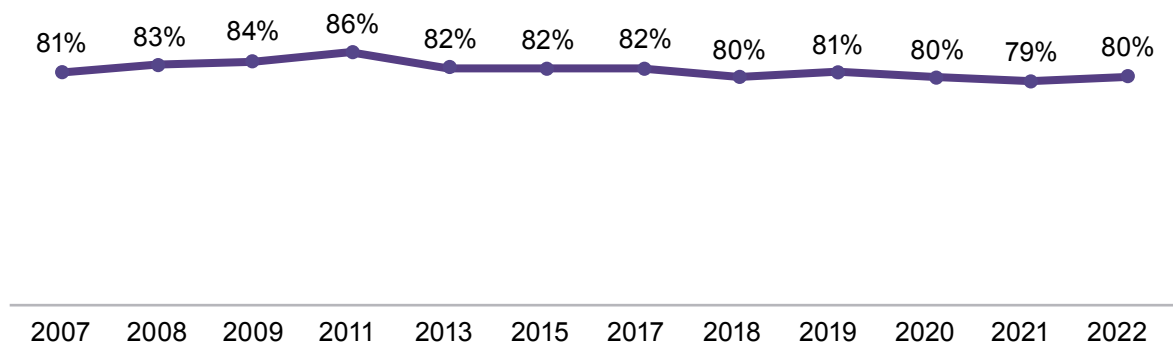
4 Overall satisfaction

4.1 Understanding overall satisfaction

As mentioned above, there is a specific question asking about the overall experience (“to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement – overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme”), and this question is used here as one of the key measures for comparison over time. It is also used as a benchmarking question for participating institutions in their own reports. When reporting on this key measure, we add together the proportion who said they either “definitely agree” or “mostly agree” that they were satisfied.

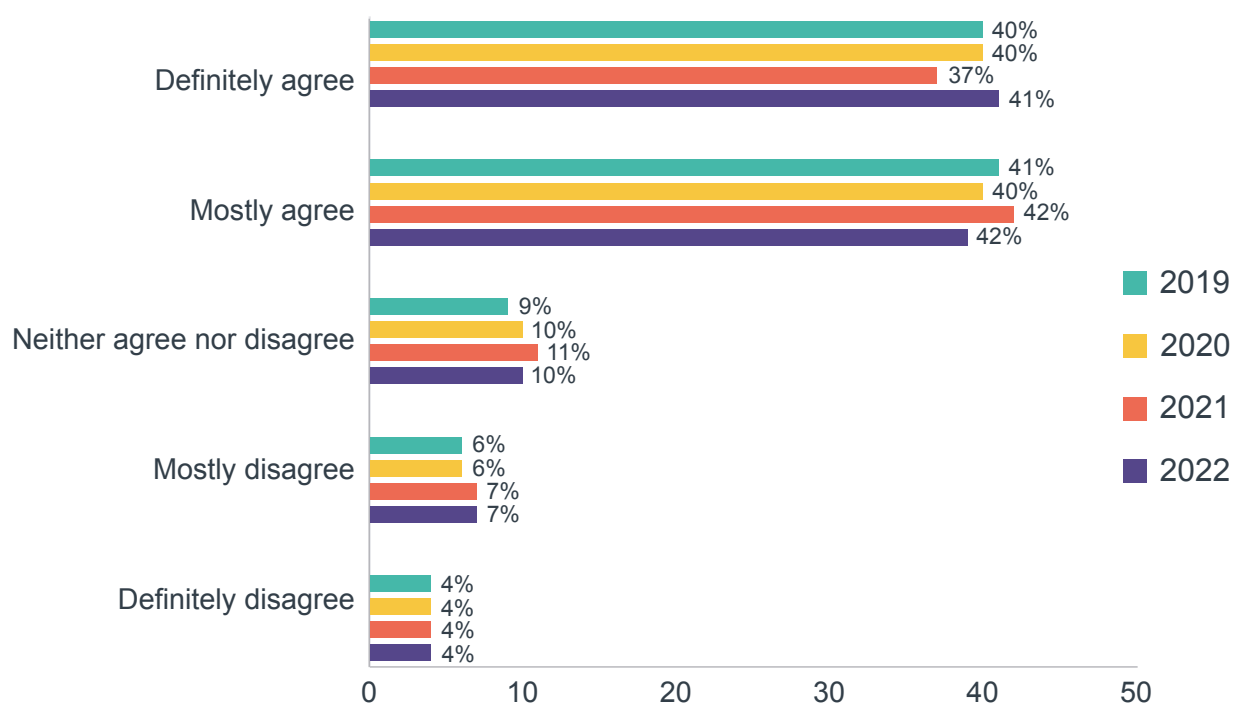
Despite the fluctuations in participation, it is clear from the table below that the experience has been, and remains, relatively consistent. Satisfaction was particularly high back in 2011 but there were subsequent changes in the content and scales of the survey so comparison from 2013 onwards is perhaps more relevant. It is fair to say that current levels are not as high as back in the period from 2013-2017 but it is also clear that the previous concerns around the beginning of a decline from 82% down to 79% (2021) have been halted for the moment and that this year’s satisfaction levels are strong in absolute terms.

Figure 1. Overall satisfaction over time (2007–2022)



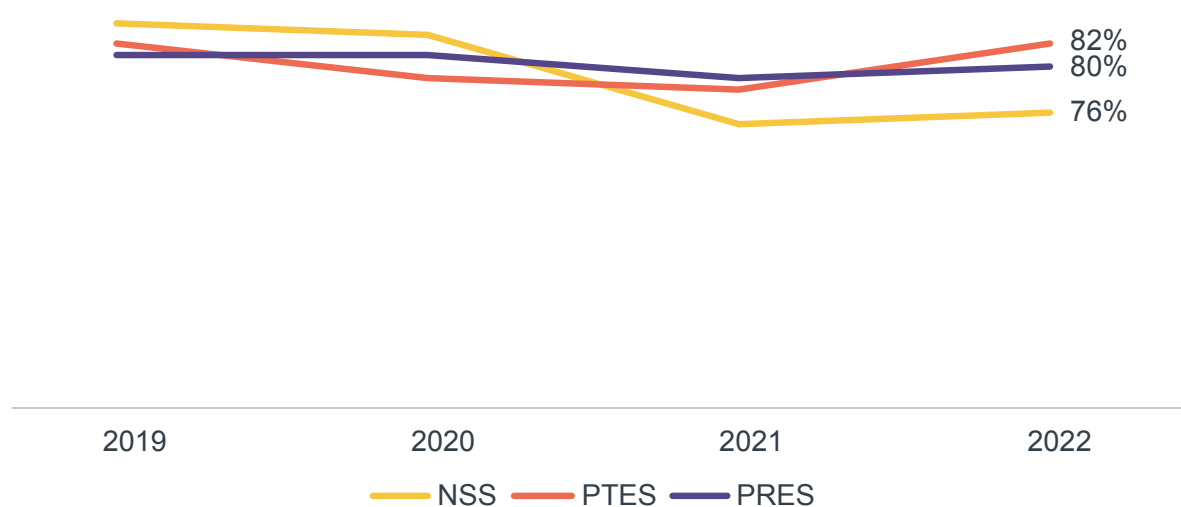
The chart below provides a more detailed perspective as to how overall satisfaction has changed over the last four years. In 2021 there was a decline in strength of feeling with more PGRs only agreeing “to some extent” that they were satisfied. Encouragingly, we have seen a strong shift this year from 37% to 41% who “definitely agree” that they are satisfied with their experience. As well as an overall increase when we combine those who “mostly” and “definitely” agree (the main basis for the measurement), this uplift in strength of feeling is positive.

Figure 2. Overall satisfaction – strength of feeling (2019–2022)



4.2 Postgraduate and undergraduate comparison

Figure 3. Overall satisfaction across different sector surveys



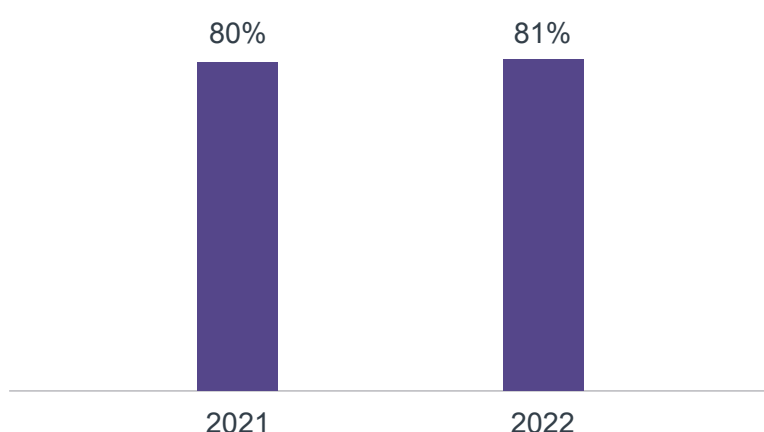
To provide further context to the results, the above chart compares the key overall satisfaction question from the undergraduate National Student Survey (NSS)⁶ together with the Advance HE Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), as well as the latest PGR results from PRES. While undergraduate satisfaction (NSS) fell significantly during the pandemic, and has not yet recovered, it is encouraging that the drop in satisfaction in PRES during the same period was relatively small and has recovered slightly. Satisfaction among postgraduate taught students, by contrast, has jumped to a relatively high level in the past year.

4.3 Overall satisfaction among institutions participating in both 2021 and 2022

As discussed briefly above, there are differences in terms of the institutions that take part in PRES each year, with some of the institutions with a larger PGR cohort currently choosing to take part every two years.

While the overall sample sizes are large and extremely robust, providing a high level of statistical confidence in year-on-year comparisons, there are some differences in composition of the sample of institutions. Accordingly, we have conducted some summary analysis based on **institutions taking part in both 2021 and 2022**, in order to assess the extent to which, if at all, the fluctuations in participation may affect the reliability of year on-year comparisons. **Forty-one institutions** participated in PRES in both years.

Figure 4. Overall satisfaction among the 41 institutions participating in PRES in both 2021 and 2022



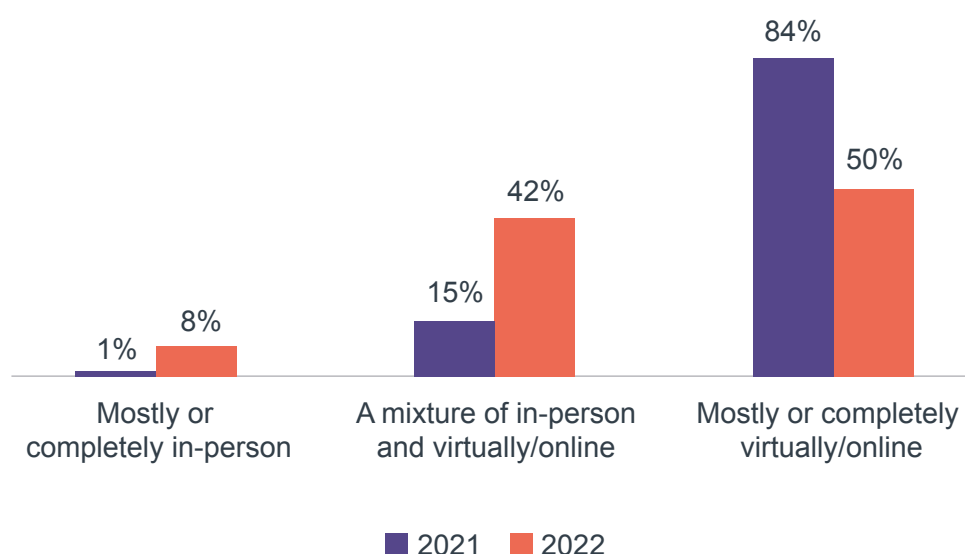
6 Office for Students (2022) '*National Student Survey – NSS*'. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-provider-level

The chart above shows that, as with the figures for the total sample, there has been a 1% uplift in satisfaction across the past year. The percentages are 1% higher, respectively, when compared with all participating institutions, but they do provide a level of confidence in the main year-on-year results being representative of the sector without needing to make any statistical adjustment in light of the changes in participation.

4.4 Overall satisfaction and contact with staff

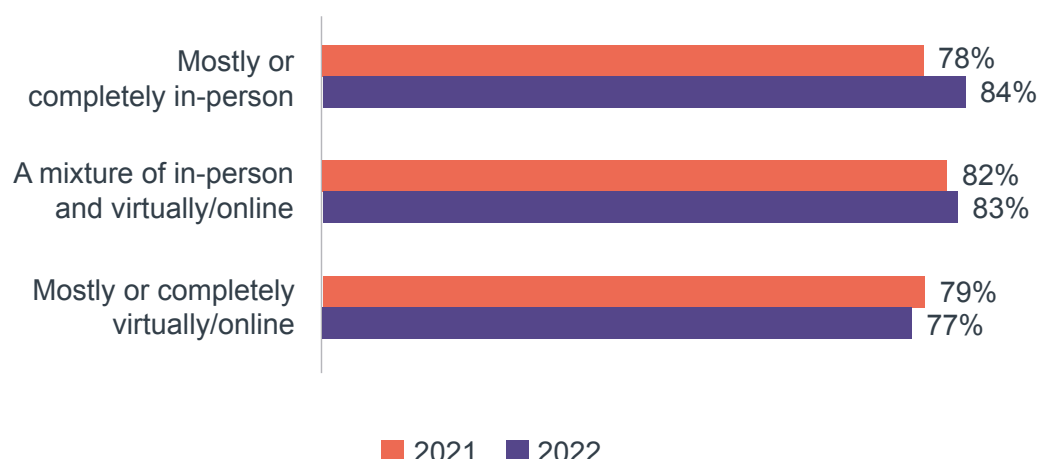
As part of the evolution of the survey to reflect the experience during the pandemic, questions were added for 2021 to capture how PGRs usually had contact with staff. This provided a useful initial benchmark for how contact with staff may have changed, and whether this was having a positive or negative impact on the overall experience.

Figure 5. Usual contact with staff during the current term



We do not have this information from before the pandemic, but it is striking to observe that half of PGRs still have all or most of their contact with staff virtually/online. However, that said, we do see a major difference between 2021 and 2022, in that there has been a near three-fold increase in the proportion who engage with staff using a “hybrid” mixture of in-person and online, as well as a further 8% who engage mostly in-person (compared to just 1% a year ago). Online interaction for PGRs appears to be here to stay, even though there is clearly a key role for in-person contact as well.

Figure 6. Overall satisfaction levels – by methods of contact with staff



There have been some key changes in how overall satisfaction links to, and is potentially affected by, methods of contact with staff. When first measured, in 2021, satisfaction levels were highest among PGRs who interacted with staff in a hybrid way, with little difference in the scores between those interacting mainly (or completely) online and those interacting mainly virtually. This has changed in 2022. PGRs interacting mainly in-person (still a small cohort) are the most satisfied. By contrast, those dealing with staff mainly virtually are a lot less satisfied (5% less).

While this does not necessarily imply that virtual contact is less effective, it does suggest that a return to face-to-face contact has been highly valued and potentially this has helped drive a strong positive reaction among some PGRs. What is particularly striking is that although interacting predominantly in-person is relatively rare, and was even more so in 2021, satisfaction levels among these small cohorts have increased strongly. This suggests that in-person interaction, even when it did take place in the recent past, was not able to be fully effective in the light of wider prevailing conditions at the height of the pandemic.

5 Overall satisfaction and key demographic characteristics

5.1 Ethnicity

The Black, Asian and minority ethnic attainment gap at undergraduate level is an established issue of concern with the UK higher education sector.^{7,8} Efforts to fully understand and address this are ongoing. Evidence of a lower quality student experience, as identified in the Advance HE – HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey, is seen as an important and potentially related issue.⁹

At PGR level, by contrast, equivalent data on submission rates by ethnicity is not fully available.¹⁰ However, the large-scale data provided by PRES allows us to assess relative differences in the quality of the experience between different ethnic groups even in the absence of information to help us understand whether there are inequalities on levels of progress.

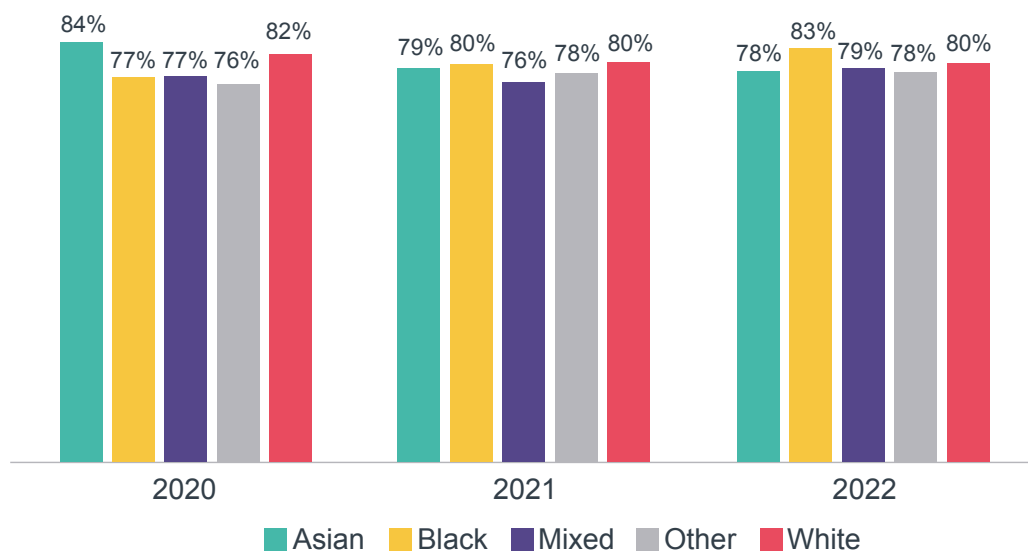
The following chart assesses levels of satisfaction among PGRs from different ethnic backgrounds, and is based on all UK domiciled students in the survey (an approach consistent with Advance HE's other surveys).

The data shows a mixed picture, but provides evidence that, in recent years at least, there are no major, consistent discrepancies in the experiences between students of different ethnicities. White students are among the most satisfied, but not exclusively so. In 2022, Black PGRs are the most satisfied among the four groups highlighted in the chart – representing a strong increase from 2020 and 2021 – while PGRs from Asian backgrounds were particularly satisfied back in 2020 but are less enthusiastic about their experience this year.

For all groups, it will be important to monitor any fluctuations over several years in order to identify any concerning trends. Positively, the 2022 data does not identify any major issues of concern on this aspect.

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- 7 Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #CLOSINGTHEGAP*. London: Universities UK. Available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf
- 8 McMaster, N C (2021) *Ethnicity awarding gaps in UK higher education in 2019/20*. York: Advance HE. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/ethnicity-awarding-gaps-uk-higher-education-201920
- 9 Neves, J and Brown, A (2022) *The Student Academic Experience Survey 2022*. York: Advance HE, p 33. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2022
- 10 Baker, S (2020) "Direct intervention' needed to up BAME postgrad representation". *Times Higher Education (THE)*, 23 June. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/news/direct-intervention-needed-bame-postgrad-representation
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Figure 7. Overall satisfaction levels – by ethnicity



5.2 Disability

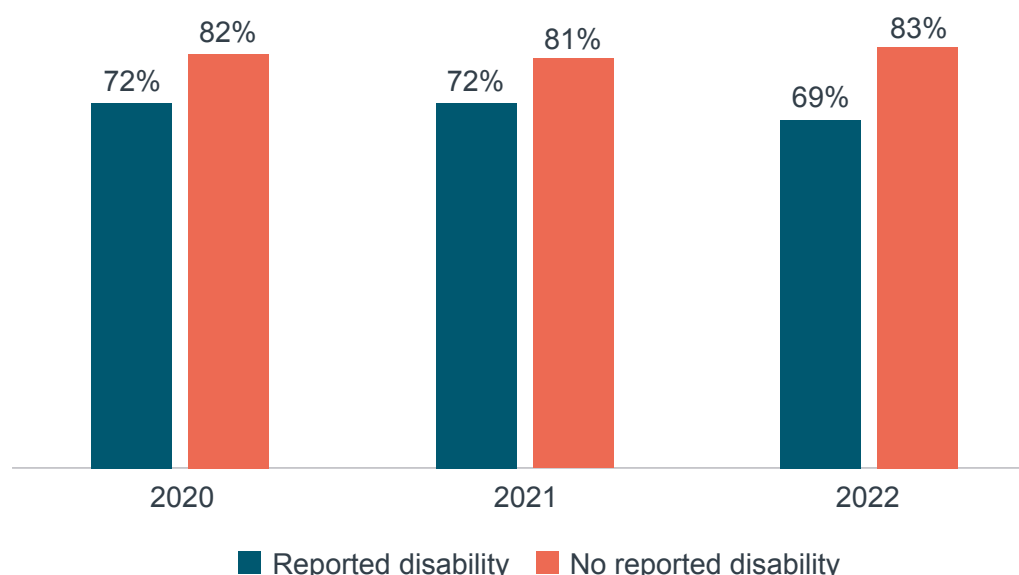
Although the Disabled Students' Commission¹¹ conducts a significant amount of work to inform and influence the support provided to disabled students, the amount of information and data from surveys and other instruments across the sector on the experiences of PGRs with disabilities is relatively limited.

Accordingly, the large dataset provided by PRES¹² can play a key role in helping to highlight where the overall experience may not be meeting expectations.

11 Office for Students (2022) '*Disabled Students' Commission*'. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/disabled-students-commission

12 In 2022 a sample size of 1,659 PGRs (out of 13,922) declared a disability

Figure 8. Overall satisfaction levels – by disability

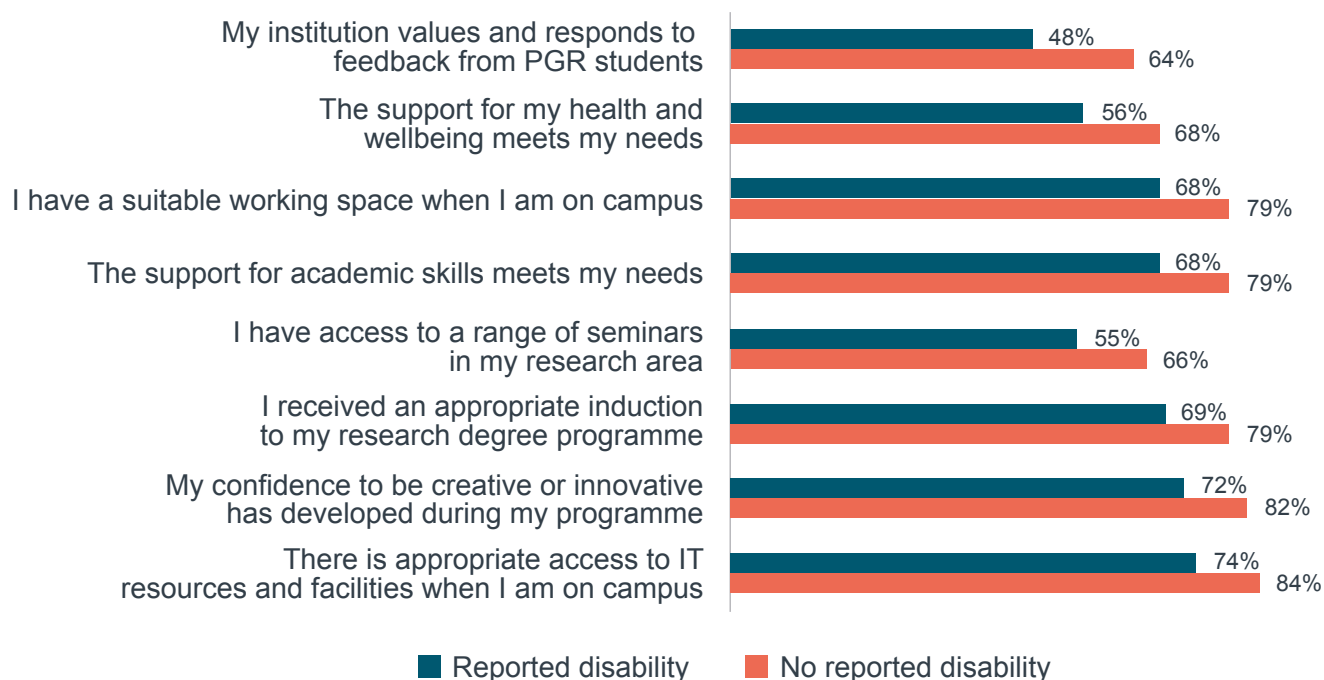


Unfortunately, levels of overall satisfaction are, and have been, lower for disabled students than for those with no reported disability. This is more extreme in 2022 than in recent years, with results highlighting a 14% (percentage point) gap. This kind of gap is by no means unique to PRES, with the Student Academic Experience Survey also reporting a less positive experience among disabled students.¹³ However, it is important to highlight that there has been a decline in satisfaction among this cohort this year – in the context of an increase in satisfaction among the total sample.

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

13 Neves, J and Brown, A (2022) *The Student Academic Experience Survey 2022*. York: Advance HE, p 36. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2022

Figure 9. Disabled students – largest gaps across the survey



While results were much lower for disabled PGR students across most aspects of the survey, they were particularly low for quality of induction, suitability of working space/resources, health/wellbeing support, and valuing feedback. The question on valuing feedback often receives low scores, despite PRES itself being a key feedback mechanism, but we see a particularly low score for disabled students.

We see a range of coverage on how students overall are facing mental health challenges, but there has also been recent research identifying how students (at undergraduate level) with a disability are facing even more challenges in this area.¹⁴

The issue of a suitable working space is related to another question in PRES (also featured in this chart), about appropriate access to IT resources on campus. For these questions, disabled PGR students are 11% and 10% less satisfied respectively than those with no disability, which underlines that providing suitable equipment (both technical and non-technical) that takes account of particular needs is not something that is always done particularly well.

Across the range of the experience, the free text comments below provide a cross section of some of the issues facing disabled PGR students. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these comments do provide further detail that institutions can explore among their own sets of results, alongside the quantitative questions, to build a full picture of the disabled PGR experience.¹⁵

14 Shaw, D (2022) 'Over half of disabled students struggle with their mental health while at university'. *The Tab*, 30 August. Available at: thetab.com/uk/2022/08/30/over-half-of-disabled-students-struggle-with-their-mental-health-while-at-university-270652

15 Institutions can access their own open comments directly as well as coded analysis provided by Advance HE

PGRs with a disability would like more help with financial support, resources and library facilities

“I have a disability and accessing hard copy books can be an issue – [either] getting them to a uni campus near to me. Would be more helpful if more resources available online.”

“Some libraries only provide physical copies for reference use – this makes life difficult as copying/scanning (of whole books although legal – law of 2014 – for making accessible copies for disabled persons) is not available at reasonable cost, or for disabled persons.”

“The introductory support has improved radically – I just wish I had had access to the guidance and support that is now available. Disability support does not include proofreading a thesis which is a fundamental issue.”

“In relation to the student disability service – I met with a member of staff to discuss my disability and I was advised they would email me a plan and links to relevant resources. Two months later I hadn’t heard anything and got in touch to hear the person had left. (Clearly no handover.) I asked for further support and received no response.”

“Supervisors could take more ownership of supervising, especially where a student’s individual needs (disability) might necessitate more direction and guidance.”

“I do now have a suitable work space on campus but obtaining this has been an awful experience taking approx nine months and a lot of additional work on my part.”

5.3 Domicile

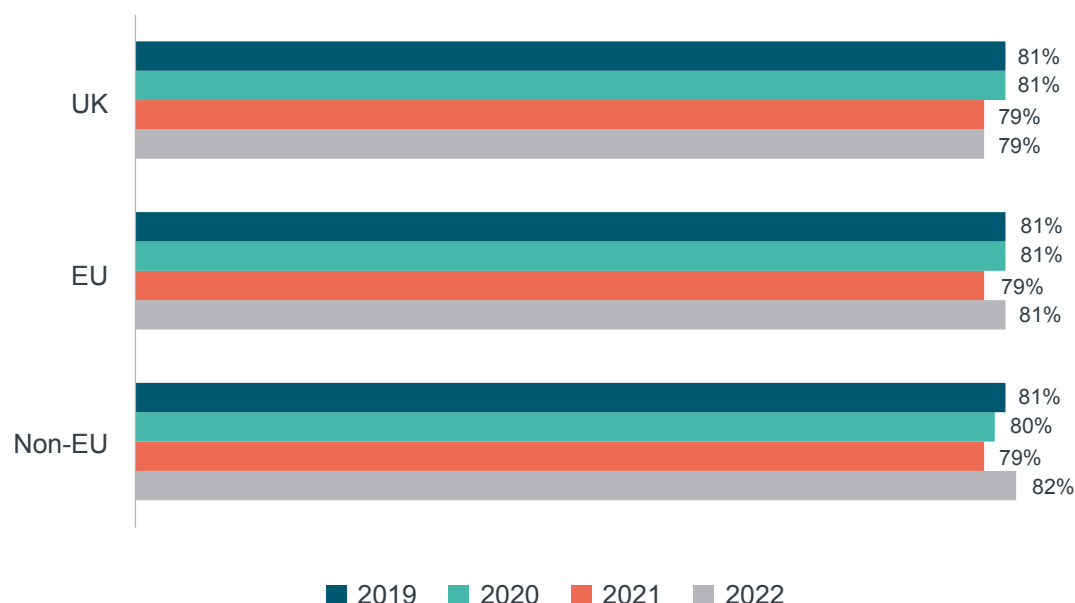
According to the most recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), a significant proportion of PGR students (just over 40%) studying in the UK are from outside the UK.¹⁶ This is broadly replicated in the PRES sample for 2022, with 61% of the sample domiciled in the UK, 8% from the EU and 29% from other countries outside the EU. Representing such a significant proportion of the audience, it is important to assess levels of satisfaction among overseas students¹⁷ and consider this in the light of any changes in overall results.

These results are significant in that they identify a divergence in satisfaction levels between students from the UK and those from abroad. This was not a factor at all in the most recent years, but in 2022 the data does point towards the experiences of overseas PGRs helping to drive the slight improvement in satisfaction, while PGRs from the UK are still reporting satisfaction levels on a similar level to those experienced during the pandemic.

16 HESA (2022) ‘Higher education student statistics: UK, 2020/21 – where students come from and go to study’. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/news/25-01-2022/sb262-higher-education-student-statistics/location

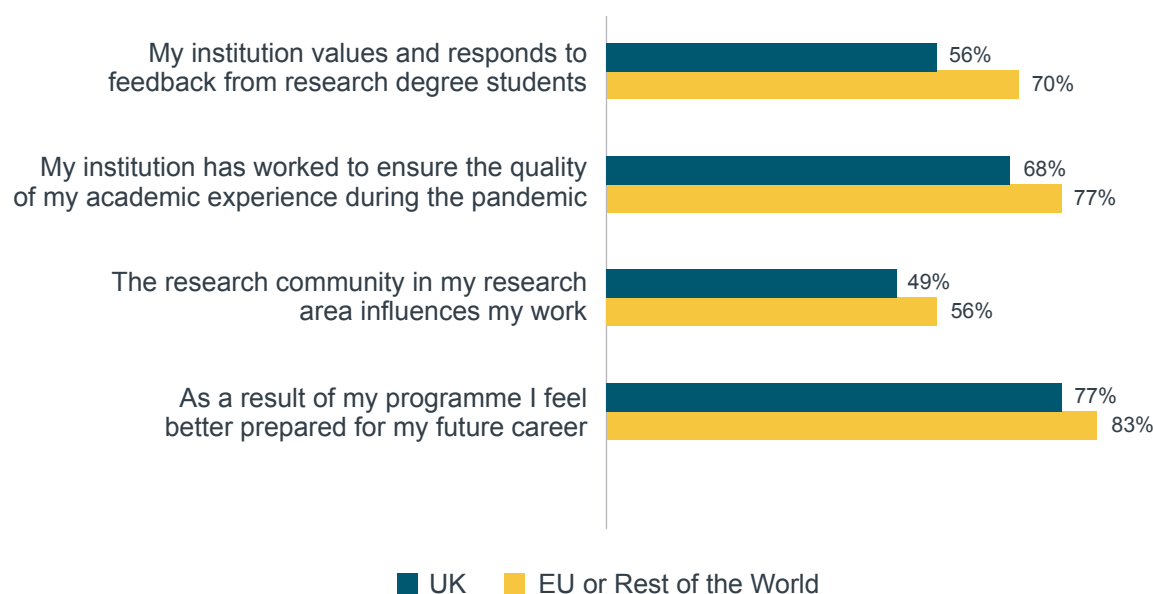
17 We recognise that not every institution in the sample is based in the UK but we have not removed any institution from our analysis of domicile in order to preserve the anonymity of each institution’s results.

Figure 10. Satisfaction over time by domicile



In terms of where the differences in the experience are most pronounced, PGRs from the UK are a lot less satisfied in terms of how their feedback is valued, how their institution maintained the quality of their academic experience during the pandemic, preparation for a future career and their connection to a research community. To fully understand how and why these perceptions differ would require some detailed investigation, but this level of divergence is clearly something to monitor as we look to see how the experiences of all PGRs can be improved.

Figure 11. Domicile – largest gaps across the survey



5.4 Key drivers of overall satisfaction

Later in this report we will go on to assess specific themes of the experience – and the individual items within it. To provide greater context for this, we have conducted some correlation analysis to identify which aspects of the experience are most strongly linked to overall satisfaction. At both sector and institutional level, this provides indications of the key areas to focus on in terms of enhancement activity to help drive improvement, on the understanding that they form the strongest linear relationship with overall satisfaction.

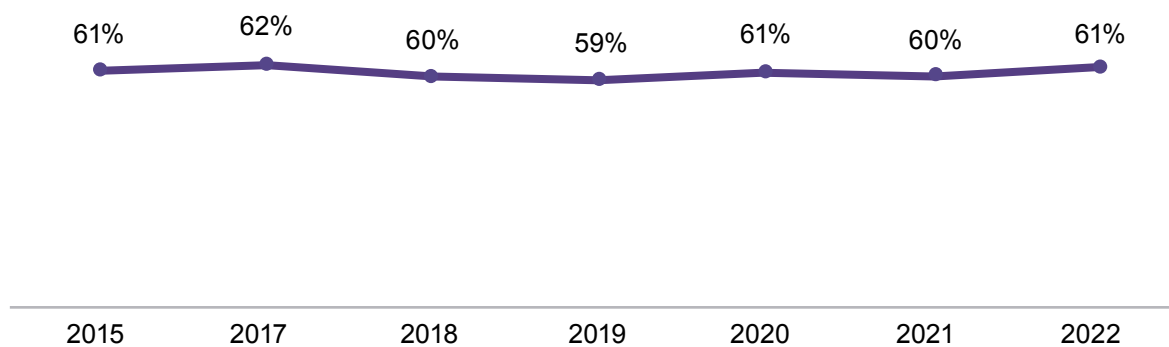
Measure (top 10 correlations)	Theme	Pearson correlation value ¹⁸	Satisfaction with measure
My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students	Responsibilities	0.564	61%
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme	Research skills	0.559	80%
My supervisors help me identify my training and development needs as a researcher	Supervision	0.545	78%
I am aware of my supervisors' responsibilities towards me	Responsibilities	0.534	89%
My supervisors provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	Supervision	0.528	90%
My skills in applying appropriate methods, tools and techniques have developed during my programme	Research skills	0.514	89%
The support for my academic skills meets my needs	Support	0.512	76%
I received an appropriate induction	Progression	0.510	77%
Other than my supervisors I know to who approach if I am concerned about an aspect of my research degree	Responsibilities	0.509	77%
I understand the required standard for my thesis	Progression	0.493	80%

While all these aspects have strong links with satisfaction (and are therefore high priorities), the column in the right enables us to identify the lower performing aspects that could potentially be targeted with specific focus for improvement. For example, the statement “I am aware of my supervisors’ responsibilities” is already scoring well, at sector level, so may not have a lot of scope for improvement. By contrast, those areas in amber and red could provide a high return on any resources dedicated to their improvement – as they are highly correlated with satisfaction and are relatively low performing.

¹⁸ 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%.

The stand out aspect in terms of link with satisfaction and improvement need is valuing and responding to feedback. Clearly, PRES itself is a key feedback mechanism, but a number of institutions chose not to run PRES during the pandemic, and it appears that many PGRs (particularly those of UK domicile) are not fully convinced about how their feedback is listened to and used.

Figure 12. I agree that my institution values and responds to feedback from PGR students



This is a measure that has not changed materially over time. It has not deteriorated, but has remained at low levels, although there are examples of institutions which achieve higher scores in this area.

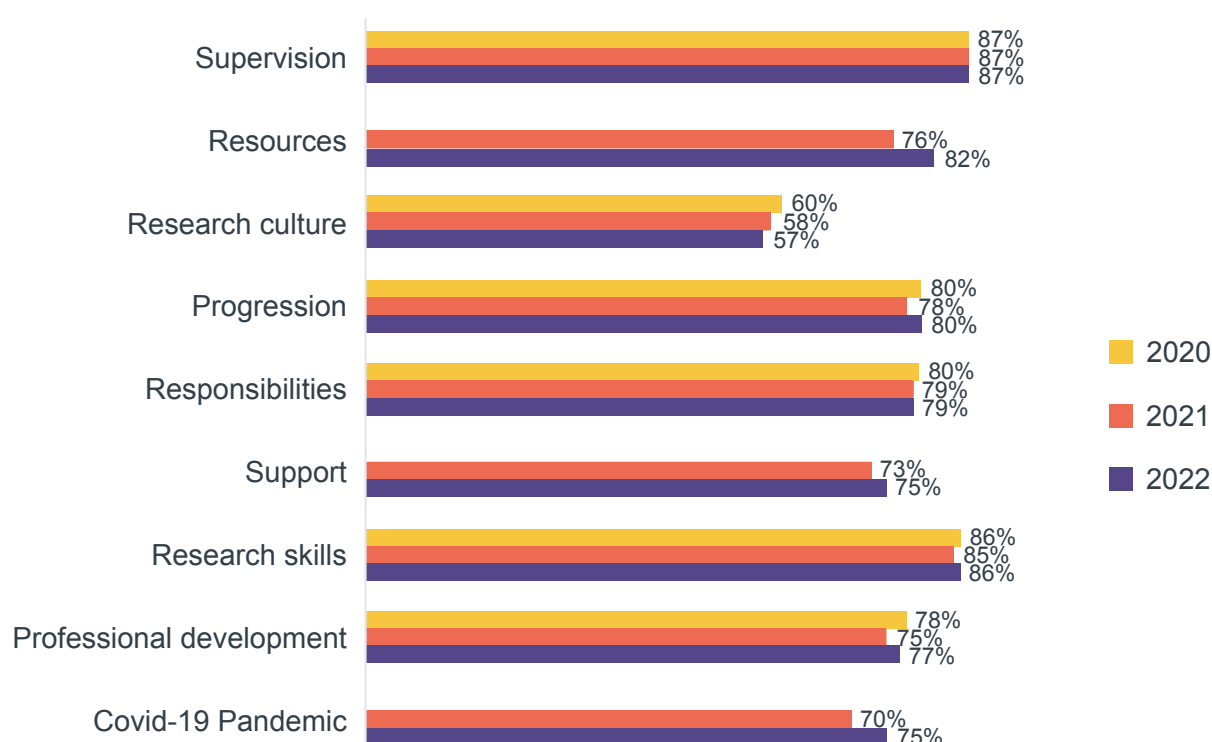
6 Satisfaction with areas of the student experience

6.1 Elements of the student experience

The PRES survey measures satisfaction across nine different themes. Each topic comprises between three and seven questions and the average satisfaction with these questions is calculated as the overall score for that theme. As recently as 2021, there were some key changes to these themes, via the addition of a section on support, an overhaul of the resources section, and a dedicated section on the institution's response to Covid-19. The research culture section is more long standing but a few years ago there were a number of updates made to this section in consultation with all participating institutions, following initial discussions with the Russell Group.

The chart below compares satisfaction with the different areas of the student experience over the past three years. Encouragingly, a number of areas displayed an improvement this year, in line with the improvement in overall satisfaction. Research culture was the one area that fell – albeit by 1%, but this is a perennially low scoring area that warrants further focus here.

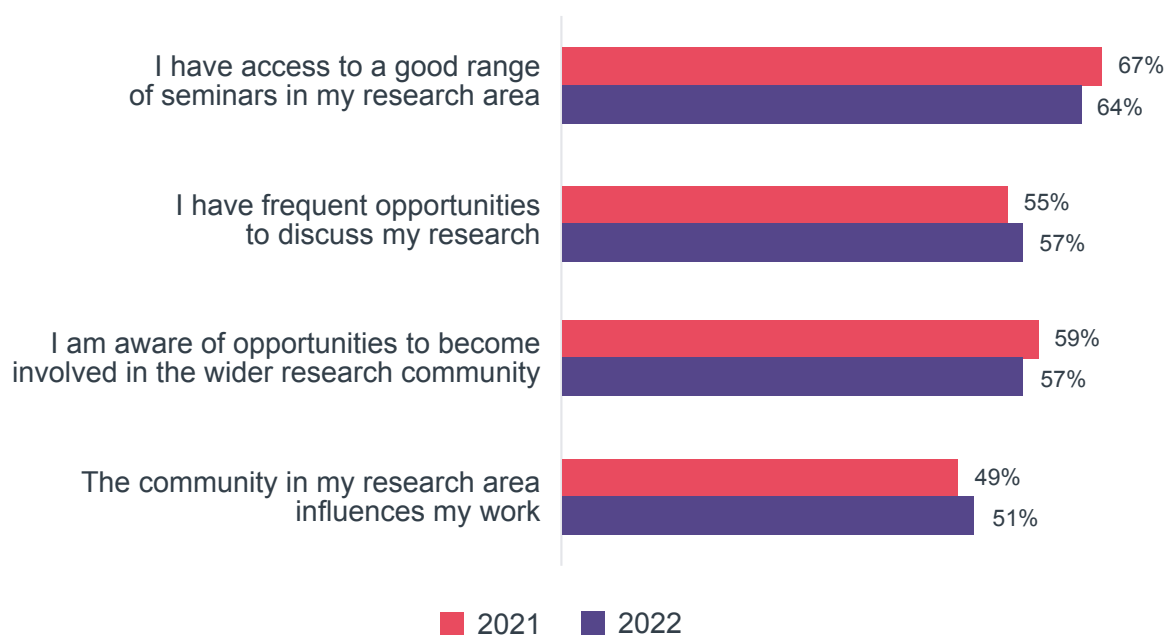
Figure 13. Satisfaction with areas of the research degree experience



6.2 Satisfaction with research culture

This area has traditionally received low scores, with PGRs often being critical of the perceived lack of attention paid to cultivating a scholarly research community environment for them to feel part of.

Figure 14. Satisfaction with elements of the research culture



Compared to many other areas covered in PRES, the scores for all aspects of research culture are low. While there is no evidence of consistent decline, the scores are all remaining on or around the same level. In particular, PGRs do not feel that their work is influenced by a research community, which implies that their institutions have not always been able to effectively build a community that PGRs feel they can access.¹⁹

19 QAA Scotland (2017) *Building a research community: Examples of policy and practice*. Glasgow: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/focus-on/building-a-research-community---examples-of-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=5feb581_18

PGRs call for a more dedicated research culture

“My first supervisor has introduced me to three students researching similar themes, otherwise I have not had any contact with other research students. I have not identified a ‘research culture’ as such.”

“I have struggled with the research culture at the university. There hasn’t been many opportunities to meet other PhD candidates in my field, or meet with other researchers outside my supervisors.”

“Almost no shared research culture. PhD students just exist on their own, there’s basically no opportunities to network in either social or academic settings.”

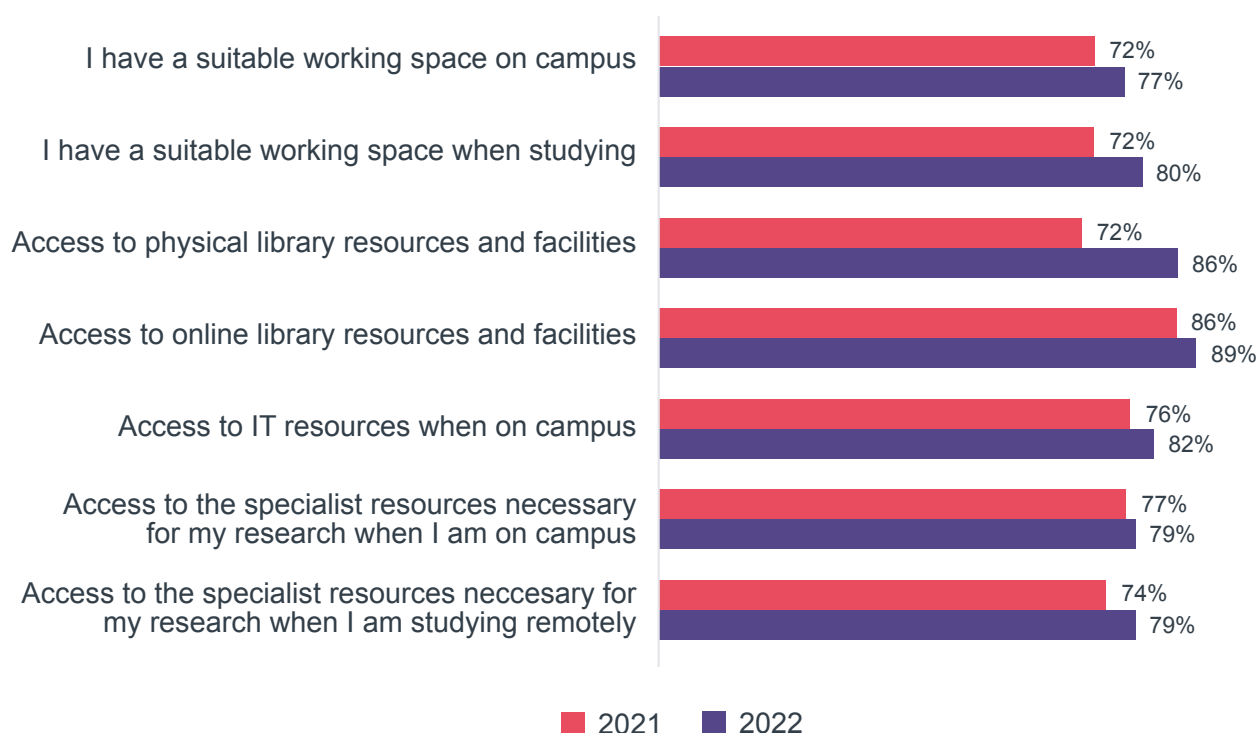
“The attitudes towards research students is that of less importance compared with taught undergraduates and research is not highly regarded when compared with teaching.”

“Things are getting better, however there is still a severe lack of a PhD/research community. Having started in the middle of the pandemic, I have no concept of what ‘normal’ research life was like on campus, and it would be great if things could return to more normality. I think social aspects of the research culture, particularly across different schools, should be a top priority.”

6.3 Satisfaction with resources

Overhauled in 2021 to reflect the resources and support required during the peak of the pandemic, the resources section has seen a particularly positive improvement in 2022.

Figure 15. Satisfaction with elements of the resources provided



There are relatively strong scores (and good improvement) across the board. This implies that the resource needs of PGR students are taken seriously. In particular, access to physical library resources, and a suitable working space have shown clear improvements in 2022 – although, as we saw earlier, there are lower scores among PGRs who declare a disability.

PGRs are generally positive about resources

“I enjoy the intellectual stimulation and having access to so many resources.”

“(institution) offers great access to most of the online sources and repositories, which have been the basis of my research.”

“I have been fortunate to have a lot of access to major experimental facilities, which I expect to continue throughout the rest of my degree.”

“The access to worldwide papers and research, the library facilities including finding, advising and providing research from other real and virtual places that I have requested plus all academic staff. On the whole the signposting to get support and information is very good.”

“The university itself is well equipped, be that the library and study spaces (which are comfortable and useful) or extra-curricular spaces (such as the sport provision)”

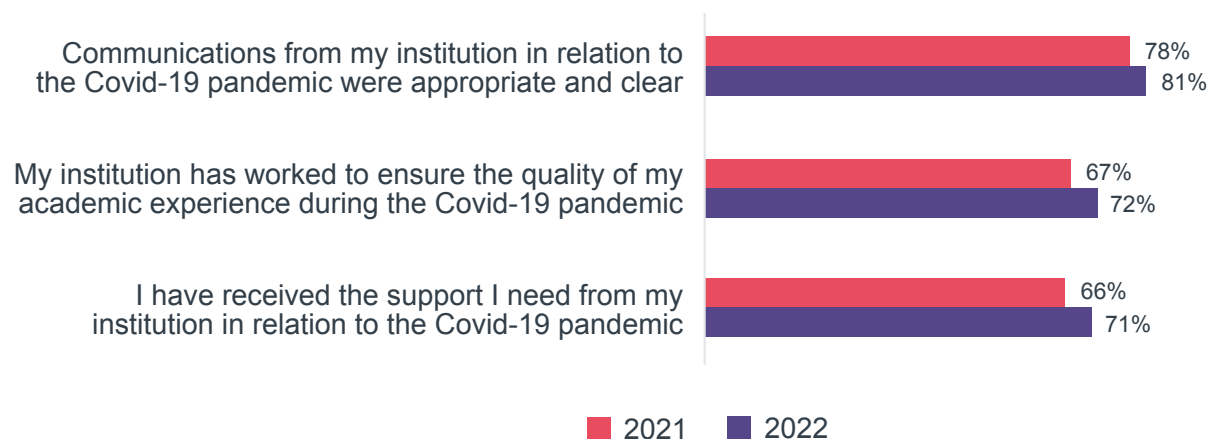
6.4 Satisfaction with institutions’ responses to the pandemic

At the time of writing, we have been fortunate enough to enjoy several months of lower levels of Covid-19 infection with very limited (if any) restrictions impacting on daily life or campus life. However, it is important to remember that as recently as January/February 2022 there were still significant restrictions in place that impacted on university life in different parts of the UK.²⁰

Accordingly, it is still very relevant to consider and compare the responses to the dedicated section on the pandemic response since this optional section was first introduced in 2021.

²⁰ Walker, P (2022) ‘All you need to know about the end of Covid rules in England’. *The Guardian*, 21 February. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-end-of-covid-rules-in-england

Figure 16. Agreement with statements related to Covid-19



The findings displayed above point towards clear levels of progression in terms of how universities have responded to the challenges of the pandemic in order to ensure the quality of the PGR experience. Communications score highly (81%), while the other two aspects (worked to ensure academic quality and quality of support) have both seen an uplift of 5% – among the strongest uplifts we have seen this year.

PGR comments highlight some praise for pandemic response, with some aspects that could have been handled better

“I think the institution did what it could as there is no pandemic handbook and every situation is an isolated case. In my case, they offered me some technical support that helped me avoid the pandemic’s distractions as much as possible. I think the university activated some support that was beneficial for several students but maybe insufficient as well in some cases.”

“Postgraduate researchers received a lot of updates from the university that were either directed at undergraduate students, or staff – little was applicable to our group.”

“It has been a challenging time for everyone. I can see that everyone at the university has worked really hard and I am hugely appreciative of that. Support-wise, I was not approached with anyone checking in to see how I was or to share supports and adaptations that were available, and only heard about things through other doctoral candidates or by searching the internet myself. I would have appreciated even just an email from my supervisor to see how I was. But I know we were all just trying to get through unprecedented times.”

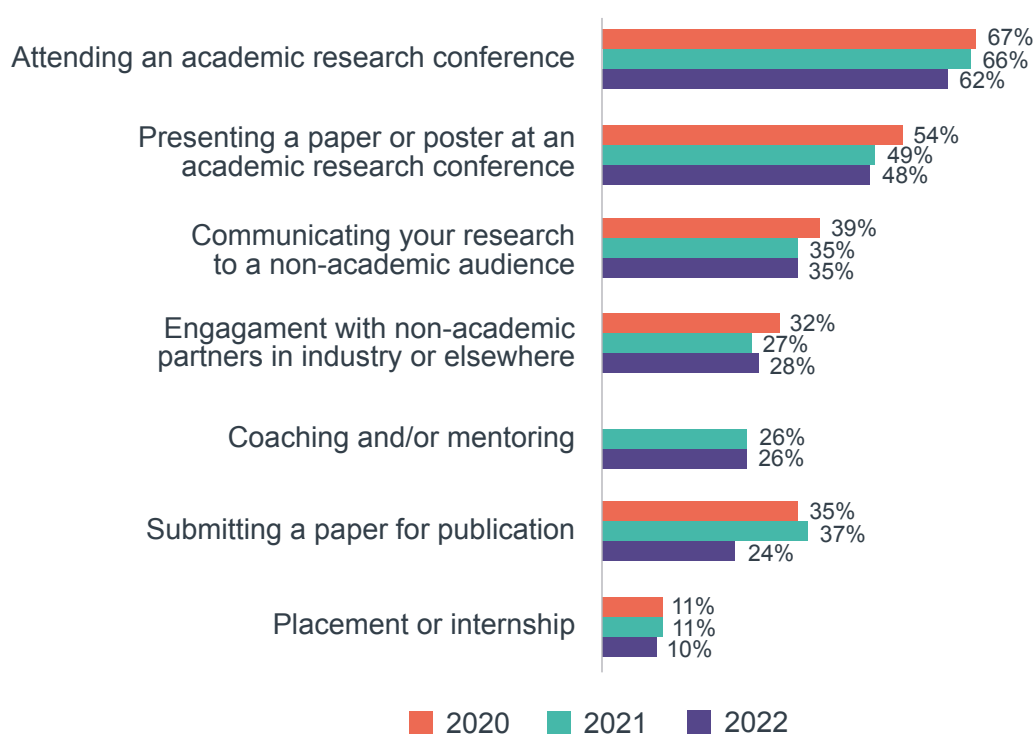
“Communication has been regular and clear. However, I’m not sure whether the impacts upon student mental health and wellbeing during the past two years has been fully acknowledged.”

6.5 Development opportunities

One of the areas of the postgraduate research experience that was impacted by the pandemic is opportunities for professional development. Just as direct employability skills often play a key role in an undergraduate experience, there are a range of professional development opportunities that have traditionally been seen as important elements of a PGR experience in terms of helping shape future career prospects.

Perhaps understandably, many of these opportunities have been limited, or changed in nature during the periods of pandemic restrictions. Hence, this year's survey provides the opportunity to monitor any change during a period of generally fewer restrictions.

Figure 17. Development opportunities provided during the research degree programme



In the context of the recovery of some of the rest of the scores across PRES and other surveys since the height of the pandemic, these results are perhaps surprising, in that PGRs are reporting fewer development opportunities than those surveyed over the past two years. However, this makes more sense when we consider the specific wording of the question, which asks PGRs to consider their degree programme as a whole, rather than in the past few days or weeks.

In the case of submitting a paper for publication, and attending/presenting at a conference, there has been a major decline in opportunities available. While this decline in the availability of activities is perhaps disappointing for the PGRs affected, these low scores do make sense in the context that in-person conferences only really began to take place again around April 2022, while some of these other development activities may have fallen victim to a combination of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, and associated pressures on budgets where funding for non-essential activity is likely to have been restricted. There is also the likelihood of continued pressure on budgets across the board over the next few months and beyond.

PGRs are often disappointed about the lack of wider development opportunities – while others praise the experience they have had

“Opportunities to attend seminars, conferences and establish a network particular to my area of specialism was not helped by the pandemic, which has prevented travel and opportunities to make new contacts in a useful way.”

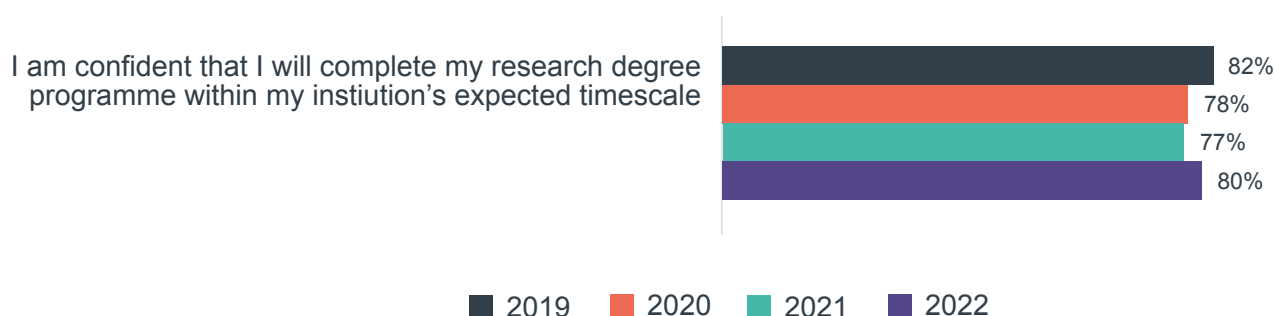
“The most positive aspect of my research is my participation in local and international conferences which allowed me to share my research, meet future collaborators, and develop my ideas for a postdoc project. This was possible with the support of my supervisors and funders and facilitated, when online, by the technical support provided by the department and university.”

“There is little, if any, incentive for supervisors to encourage their students to participate in career development activities, and with the academic pressure to ‘publish or perish’, the natural end result is pressure on students to focus on lab work at the expense of activities which might broaden their prospects. I believe the PhD programme could be significantly improved by the addition of incentives or benchmarks for the development of PhDs – eg a requirement that every student attends at least one conference in their field per year, and mandatory career sessions.”

6.6 Confidence to complete programme on time

An area where we can see a clear impact of the pandemic on the PGR experience is in terms of confidence to complete their research degree on time.

Figure 18. Confidence to complete programme on time



The above chart clearly shows that confidence levels fell with the onset of the pandemic, but have now risen again – although they are not yet at pre-pandemic levels. It is entirely logical that confidence in completion dates would begin to erode during times of uncertainty, but it is encouraging to see this begin to turn around. However, as the comments below indicate, the impacts of the pandemic on timescales are still being felt by some.

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

“They have cut funding behind the scenes. The Covid hardship fund has completely disappeared without warning. They offered funding extensions that were not sufficiently long enough – some of us have/had archives and libraries shut for over a year but they only offered us a three-month extension.”

“I took a year out of my PhD to work on clinical trials directly related to Covid-19. From the department I received no support for this, only constant reminders that my PhD extension was not acceptable and I was taking too long to complete. In total it took four and a half years to complete my PhD, including 12 months working on COVID, so actual PhD time was three and a half years.”

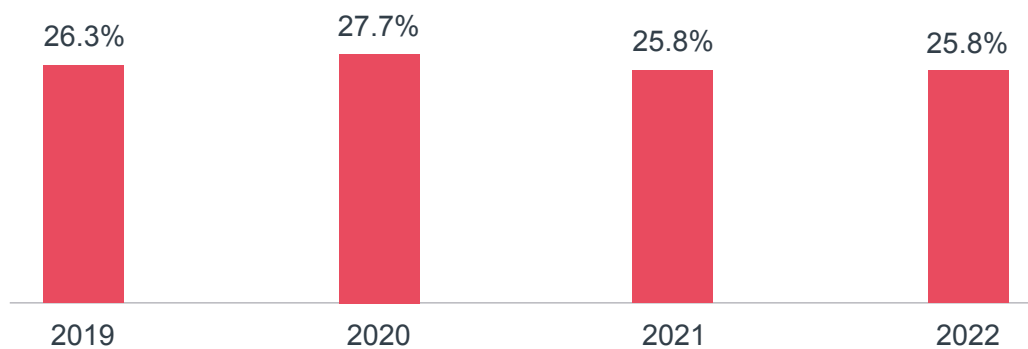
“The best support I got was a two-month extension to complete my Master’s thesis – this was very helpful! But this did not extend to my PhD. So in taking that extension I effectively lost two months from my PhD time. I am currently considering going part time for my final year – although I have not yet been able to discuss this with my supervisors and do not know whether it will be supported.”

7 Retention

7.1 Considering leaving

Despite the challenges of the pandemic and its impact on other aspects of the experience, there has been relatively little change in the proportion of PGRs who have considered leaving.

Figure 19. Proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course



We did see an increase in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic, but subsequent levels of potential churn fell in 2021 and have remained consistently low this year. This level of commitment to PGR studies is encouraging to see and, in 2022 in particular, there is evidence of a generally positive experience, as we have seen throughout this report.

8 Considerations for the sector

- 1 Online interaction continues to be the norm for many PGRs. A growing proportion are engaging with staff in a hybrid way but very few PGRs cite face-to-face engagement as their most common method of interaction. This is a key issue in that satisfaction levels are lowest, and have fallen, among PGRs who interact exclusively online. Not all PGRs prefer in-person interaction, but it is important that everybody embarking on a postgraduate research programme knows what to expect, not just in terms of the availability of supervisors and opportunities to interact with other PGRs, but how this interaction is likely to take place.
- 2 PGRs with a declared disability are consistently less satisfied than those with no disability, and these levels of satisfaction have fallen this year. Although resources are generally praised, disabled PGRs do not necessarily feel the same, and have in some cases had to make a significant effort to obtain the facilities they need. To date there have been lower levels of coverage and research into the experiences of disabled students at PGR level, but this could provide the catalyst for dedicated sector-wide initiatives to understand the specific viewpoints and needs of this cohort.
- 3 PRES is, in itself, a key method of reflecting the voice of PGRs, but it is striking that many PGRs are using this particular forum to report that they do not feel their feedback on their experience is always valued and responded to. Statistical analysis highlights that this is a vital issue, with a stronger link to satisfaction than anything else. Although there is evidence of some institutions performing well in this area, closing the feedback loop is now more important than ever to convince PGRs across the board that their voices are listened to, and that real change can be influenced where it is required.
- 4 Key development activities such as face-to-face conference attendance, presentation of research outputs, placements and publications have been restricted in recent years through a combination of pandemic restrictions and pressures on budgets. While restrictions have now eased, pressures on budgets remain, and may become even more acute in the coming months. It will be important for doctoral schools to consider how these important wider opportunities can still be provided for PGR communities to help develop their confidence and wider skills.

9 Appendix 1. Respondent profile

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

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

It is relatively unusual to see such fluctuations in profile from such a large, statistically robust sample size.

UK data from the Higher Educational Statistics Agency²¹ does point towards a relatively small increase in reported disability among PGRs, but there is no specific evidence of the shift in PRES respondents towards older, part-time candidates being a reflection of a change in the wider population.

21 HESA (2022) *Higher education student statistics: UK, 2020/21 – student numbers and characteristics*. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/news/25-01-2022/sb262-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers

10 Appendix 2. Participating institutions

Aberystwyth University	Solent University
Anglia Ruskin University	St Georges, University of London
Australian Catholic University	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Bangor University	Staffordshire University
Birkbeck, University of London	Teesside University
Birmingham City University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Bournemouth University	University of Bradford
Buckinghamshire New University	University of Buckingham
Canterbury Christ Church University	University of Cambridge
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Chester
Cranfield University	University of Derby
Falmouth University	University of Dundee
Harper Adams University	University of Exeter
Heriot-Watt University	University of Hull
Keele University	University of Kent
Lancaster University	University of Leicester
Leeds Beckett University	University of Lincoln
Leeds Trinity University	University of Northampton
London Metropolitan University	University of Portsmouth
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine	University of Reading
Middlesex University	University of Roehampton
Northumbria University	University of South Wales
Plymouth Marjon University	University of St Andrews
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	University of Stirling
Queens University, Belfast	University of Strathclyde
Robert Gordon University	University of Surrey
Royal College of Art	University of West London
Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Winchester
Royal Northern College of Music	University of the Arts London
Royal Veterinary College	University of the Highlands and Islands
Sheffield Hallam University	York St John University



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