

+ Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2024

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1 Executive summary

More than eight out of ten postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are satisfied with their experience. This is a positive picture, which represents an improvement over the past year at an aggregate level, which is backed up by an increase in respondents who “agree strongly” that their experience has been a positive one.

Across the different areas of the survey, most of these have improved. In particular, the scores are more positive this year for progression (ie standards and procedures around research degrees), responsibilities (ie awareness of respective responsibilities and who to contact) and support.

Significant numbers of PGRs continue to interact with staff and across their degree using online and hybrid methods, and this is likely to continue being the case. However, satisfaction levels are not as high when interacting online, and the data suggests that one of the main factors behind this is a perceived lack of opportunities to be part of a community. Indeed, at overall level, creating the right kind of community for researchers is one of the key areas where improvements may be required.

Across many areas of the survey, there is a parity of experience between (UK domiciled) PGRs from a range of different ethnic backgrounds, although it is not the case among students from mixed race backgrounds. However, the 2024 data still points to students from White backgrounds having greater access to development opportunities and finding themselves less affected by financial pressures, which provides evidence of a persisting ‘gap’ in the quality of some aspects of the experience

Overseas PGR students are generally very satisfied with their experience, although they are more likely to be experiencing financial pressures. One of the areas where overseas students are more satisfied is around the PGR community, which may potentially provide some learnings for how to meet the needs of home students as effectively in this key area.

Financial pressures are a challenge for both institutions and their PGR communities. Respondents report that they have had fewer opportunities this year to attend conferences or teach – which may be related to a squeeze on institutional budgets. For PGRs themselves, a high proportion say their studies have been impacted “a lot” by cost of living concerns, which, for those most affected, could be feeding through into a higher potential to consider leaving and/or lower confidence to complete on time.

2 Methodology

2.1 Background

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) provides higher education institutions (HEIs) with the opportunity to fully understand the experience of postgraduate researchers (PGRs), both at local level and by aggregate comparison with other providers. For PGRs themselves it offers the opportunity for their feedback to help shape direct action taken by their institution.

PRES provides confidential results to participating 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, ranging from the sector overall to specific representative groups or geographies.

2.2 Content

Much of the content of PRES remains consistent year to year. Alongside this focus on consistency there is also scope to evolve the content and bring in new or updated question areas, with individual items being updated in consultation with the participating HEIs as and when conditions in the external environment require it.

For example, parts of PRES were updated significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic to reflect the range of online studying and remote interactions taking place, several of which have remained in the survey as the best way of positioning the PGR experience post-pandemic.

For 2024, the main changes to the question set were as follows:

- + in response to the challenges facing students and HEIs around finances, we added a question on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis
- + in response to a range of feedback about the definition of international students and the potential for under-reporting, we also added a question to make it clearer for students to understand if they were to be classed as an international student or not
- + to better understand socio-economic background, we replaced a question on free school meals (which was not widely understood outside England and Wales) with a question on parental education
- + we added a question for respondents reporting a disability, asking whether reasonable adjustments have been made by their institution
- + the Covid-19 support section, first introduced in 2021, was removed.

The key sections in the survey are:

- + **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).

There are also sections covering the overall experience (including an “overall satisfaction” question and two key open questions¹), career motivations, demographics, and development opportunities including teaching.

2.3 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.² Data was collected between 1 February and 16 May 2024. Within this survey window, HEIs were offered the flexibility to decide when they ran the survey, provided that the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

2.4 Sample size

Until 2017 PRES ran on a biennial basis, with Advance HE introducing an annual cycle from 2018. Accordingly, we have seen some HEIs (including several larger, research-intensive institutions) choose to follow a biennial approach, but a large number have taken the opportunity to reflect the views of their PGR community each year.

As a legacy of the biennial history of PRES, we see a pattern of high participation every two years, with a different number of participating institutions (around 60% as large) in

¹ All open comments featured in this report have been included verbatim, with no editing for grammar or punctuation.

² www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk

intervening years. In 2024 there was strong participation across the sector, particularly among institutions with smaller PGR cohorts.

PRES participation: institutions and responses (2015–2024)

	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Institutions	123	117	66	107	45	94	62	105	61
Responses	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600	8,432	39,855	13,922	37,661	12,123

2.5 Benchmark groups

The participation cohort of 61 institutions was spread across a range of geographies and types of institution, enabling Advance HE to provide a wide range of (anonymised) benchmark groups for comparison. Each participating institution receives a bespoke suite of reports and the choice of comparison against three benchmark groups.

Benchmark group 2024	Number of HEIs
Total sector	61
Cathedrals Group	7
Guild HE	6
Million Plus	8
Pre-92	22
Post-92	27
Small & Specialist	12
University Alliance	7
Australia	4
London	14
Scottish	8
Welsh	5

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.

2.6 Australia

PRES is available to Advance HE members anywhere in the world, but historically it had principally been UK institutions choosing to take part. In 2023, we were pleased to work with four institutions from Australia taking part in PRES, and this number was repeated in 2024, with a slightly different mix of institutions.³

³ This report represents the results at overall level including the four Australian institutions, hence it is not a purely UK snapshot.

This enabled us to produce another Australian benchmark (available to participating institutions), building on the one provided in 2023. This is something we are looking to build and expand on, to further represent Australian institutions within PRES.

2.7 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.

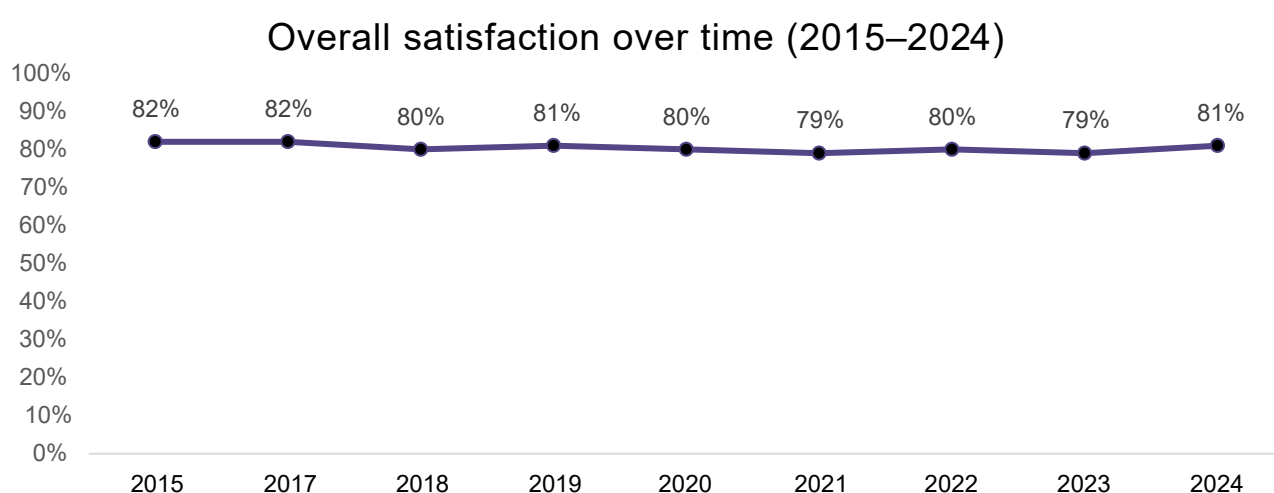
That said, the sample sizes in each year are very robust with a very small margin for error in any particular year.

3 Overall satisfaction

3.1 The overall experience

Among a range of questions covering different aspects of the experience, the question set within PRES includes a question on how PGRs rate their experience overall.

The specific question 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 five-point scale. Our key results for this question (and for similar scale questions throughout this report) 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.

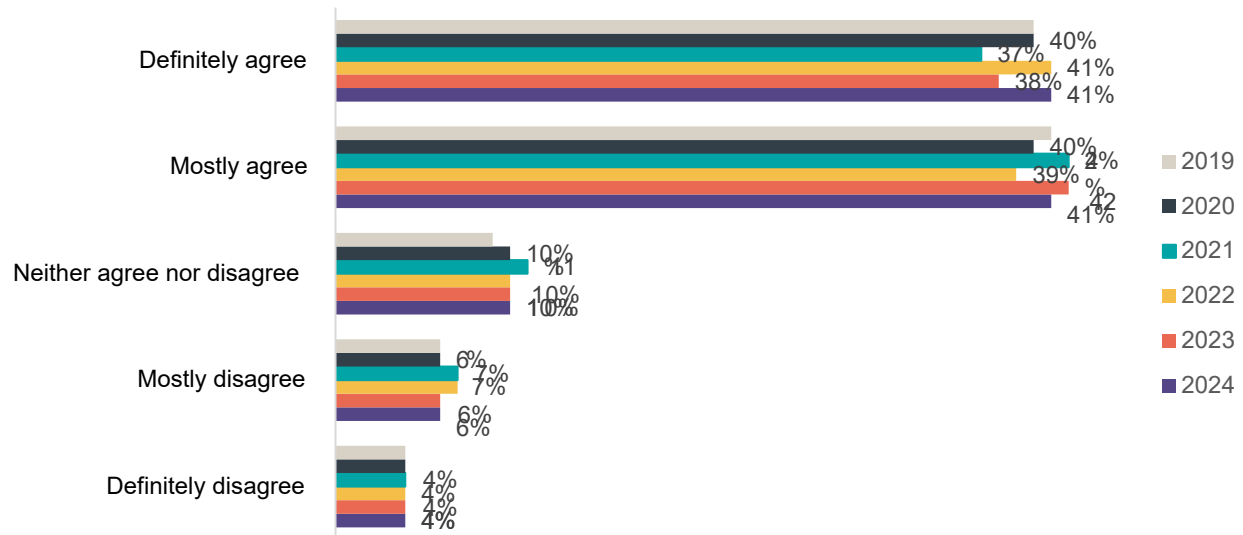


Overall satisfaction remains positive and has been consistently around or just over 80% satisfaction for a number of years. When PRES was still a biennial survey in 2015 and 2017, satisfaction levels were at 82%. This did decline in the years before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, to a level of 79%, reflecting a range of challenges faced by HEIs to deliver the best possible experience under the prevailing context. We saw in the years straight after the end of the pandemic that satisfaction levels did not immediately recover, and hence the latest increase of 2% is an encouraging finding.⁴ It is important to note that although we are dealing in small changes in absolute terms, the size of the sample means that even a 1% or 2% change generally represents a statistically significant difference and hence is worthy of attention when considering the direction of travel of such a key overall score.

⁴ Throughout much of this 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 breaks down when we consider the strength of feeling behind the overall number.

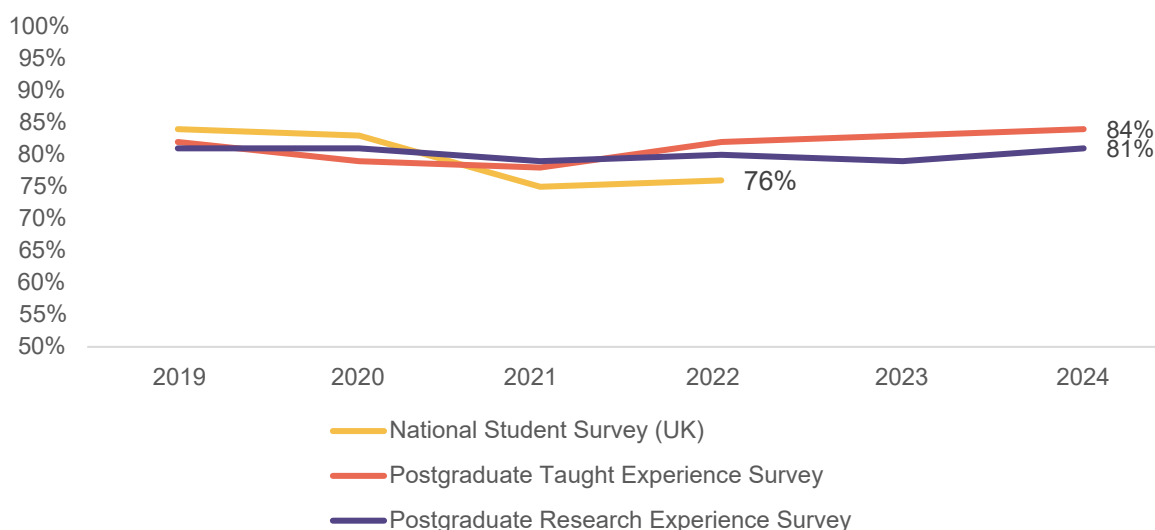
Overall satisfaction – strength of feeling over time



Encouragingly, there has also been an improvement in strength of feeling, to complement the overall improvement in satisfaction, with now just as many PGRs who “definitely agree” that they are satisfied with their experience as there are who “mostly agree”. This is a positive picture compared to 2023 when PGRs were less likely to give the highest satisfaction score, even if they were still generally satisfied.

3.2 Postgraduate and undergraduate comparison

Overall satisfaction across different large-scale surveys



Advance HE administers both the PRES and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES),⁵ 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 most recent comparable data from the UK National Student Survey (NSS).⁶ The NSS data featured is UK-wide, and is only available up to 2022 as the comparable “overall satisfaction” question is no longer included in the NSS in England.

Postgraduate satisfaction, for both cohorts, is now a few percentage points higher than the most recent comparable undergraduate satisfaction. Despite the recent increase, PGR satisfaction remains slightly lower than at postgraduate taught level as measured through PTES.

⁵ 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>

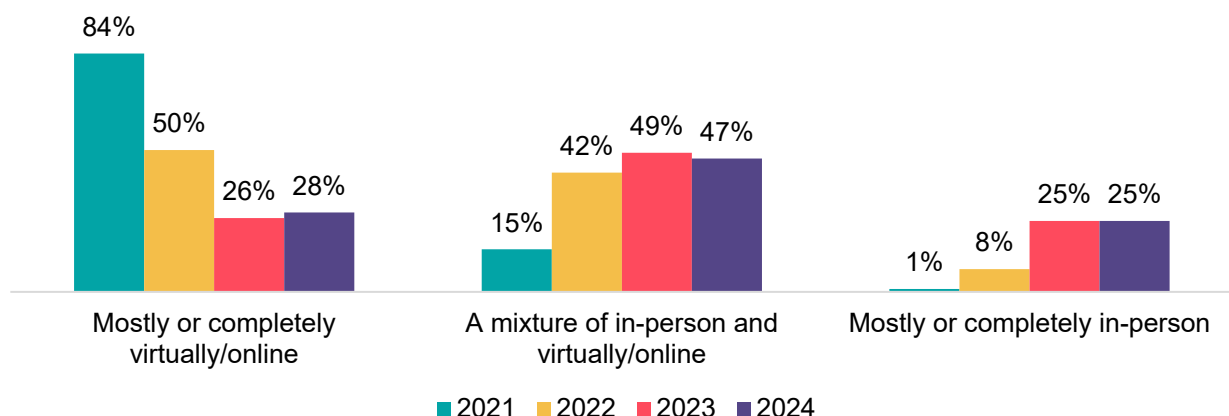
⁶ Office for Students (2023) *National Student Survey 2023 results*. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/nss-data-archive/nss-2023-results/

4 Online and in-person comparisons

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we added what have become key questions within the survey to identify whether PGRs could principally be classified as “online” or “in-person”. Given the nature of postgraduate research, we worded this question specifically around the interaction with staff, as opposed to attending class, as we might have done for undergraduate or taught postgraduate study. During the pandemic, in particular, this facilitated an interesting level of analysis by comparing intended mode (of interacting with staff) versus actual mode, helping us to understand the extent to which learning, and study had been impacted.

This year, we have analysed the question on actual mode of interaction to identify the extent to which “online” and “in-person” interaction may be evolving at PGR level as we continue to move away from the period most affected by the pandemic. We can also use this information to assess whether the mode of interaction is linked to a better or worse quality of experience.

Usual contact with staff during the current term

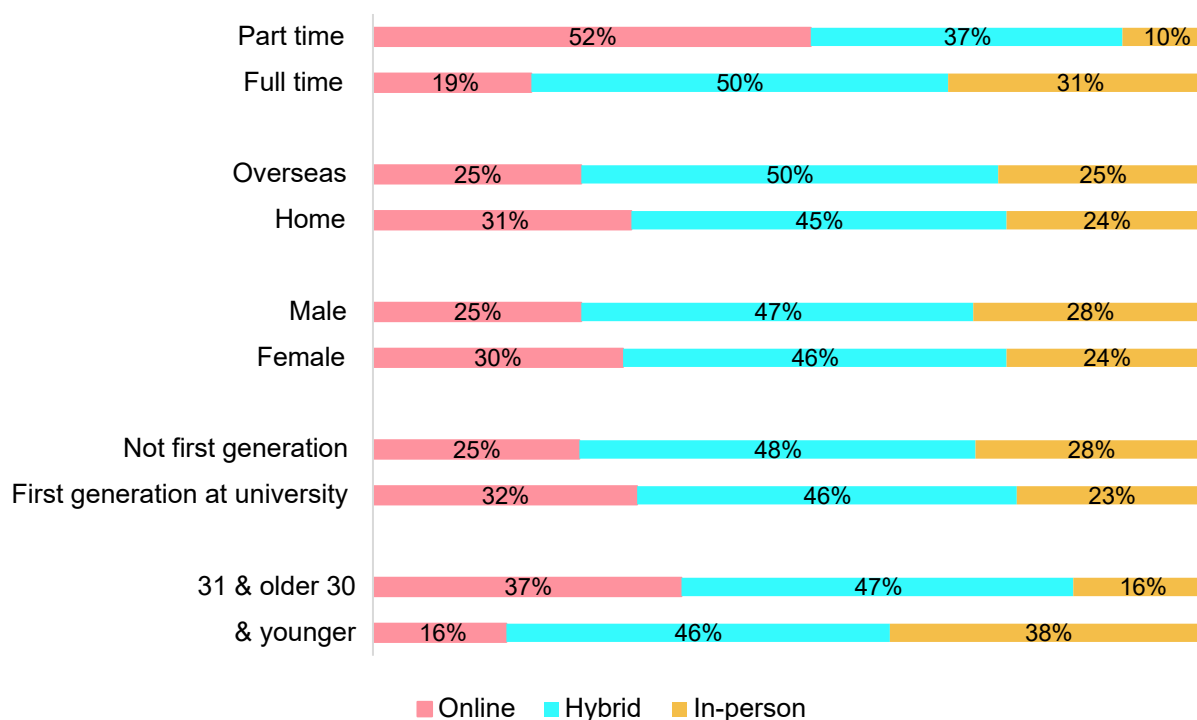


There has been little material change since 2023, as we seem to have a relatively steady picture of principally hybrid interaction, and similar proportions of PGRs (about one in four) tending to meet their supervisors and staff members in-person or online. There has been a small shift towards online interaction rather than hybrid interaction, but it appears that the adjustments during the pandemic, and the reverse adjustments immediately afterwards, may have now stabilised.

4.1 Who is most likely to interact online and in-person?

As we have seen above, most interaction for the 2024 PRES audience has been hybrid. However, there are some quite significant fluctuations when we compare this between selected demographic groups.

Main method of interaction – for selected demographics



As the above chart demonstrates, there are major differences between part- and full-time students, and between mature and younger students. Part-time PGRs are strongly weighted towards online interaction and are, in fact, the group on this chart with the highest likelihood to interact online.

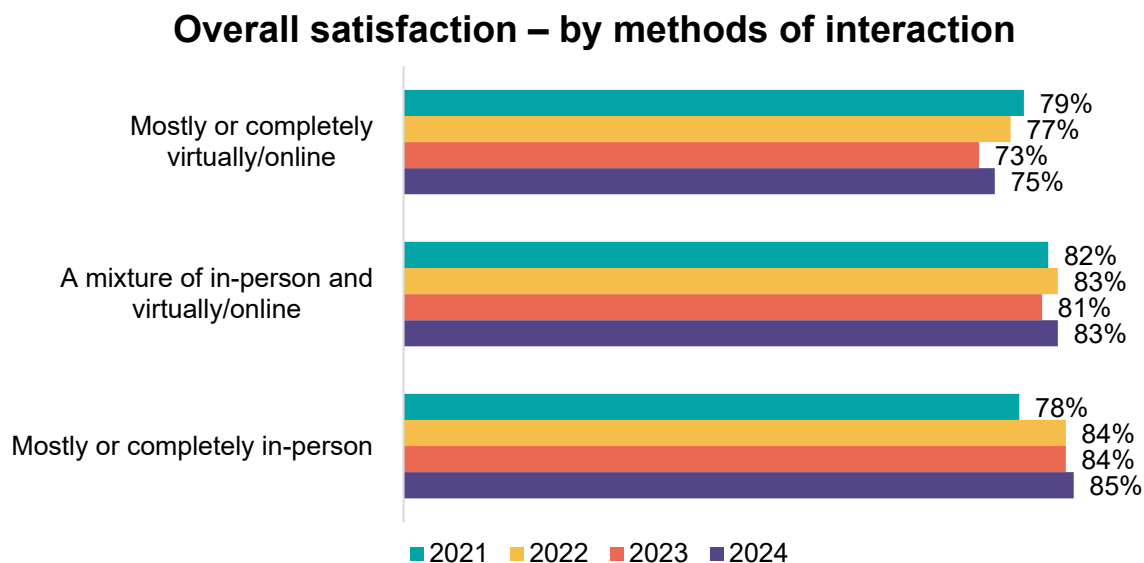
Similarly, “mature” students (defined here as being aged 31 and over) are much more likely than younger students to interact online – although for both these groups, hybrid is the most common outcome.

There are also notable differences related to whether or not the respondent is their first in their family to go to university, a measure we have introduced into the survey as a proxy measure for students’ social-economic background.⁷ Strikingly, first generation students are more likely to interact online, although for both groups, a hybrid approach is the most common. This is significant in that although first-in-family students are more often associated with more financial challenges, there does not appear to be any evidence of a lack of access to online learning being an issue. However, we may reasonably speculate that first generation students could be seeking out online interaction as a response to being

⁷ 100 Faces (2024) ‘Stats behind the stories’. London: Universities UK. Available at: 100faces.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stats-behind-the-stories

faced with a greater need to work in order to fund their study, or dealing with challenging costs of commuting.

4.2 How does satisfaction vary?



Although satisfaction levels in general have moved in the right direction, there remains a clear gap between the high levels of satisfaction reported by PGRs who interact mainly in-person (85%) and the lower levels reported by those who interact mainly online (75%) – although in both cases the scores are higher than they were in 2023.

As might be expected, those who interact in a hybrid way report satisfaction levels part way between the two, although at 83% satisfaction, this is much closer to the score for in-person interaction.

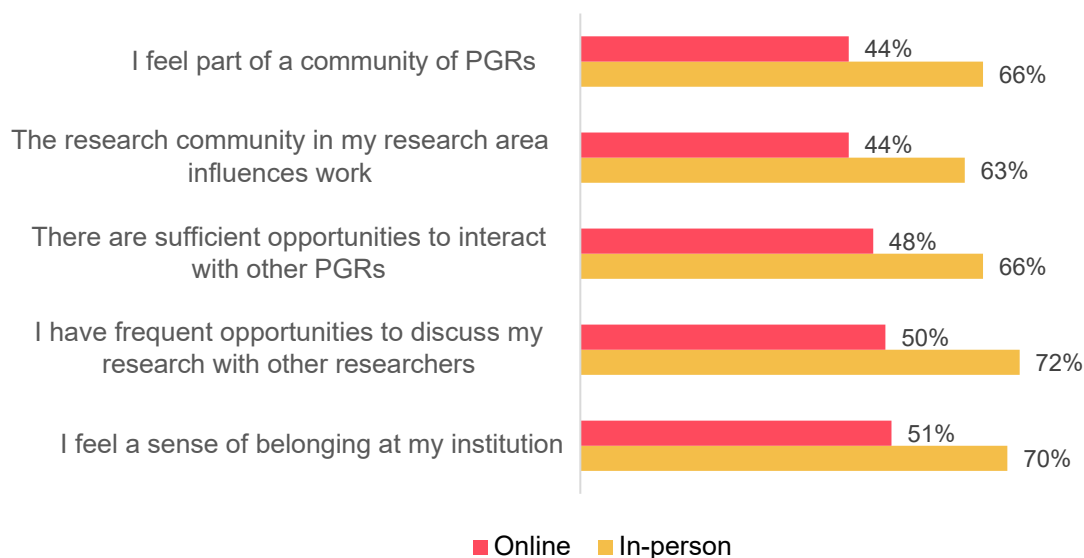
Despite the fact that online interaction appears to be here to stay, and to remain at a consistent level (albeit much lower than during the pandemic), there appears to be a need to fully understand what might be driving the lower scores, and how this visible gap might be closed.

4.3 Mode of interaction – largest gaps across the survey

The analysis below can assist this, as it identifies specifically where the largest gaps lie across the survey between the experience of PGRs who interact online or in-person.

What is striking is that the main differences are all related to similar aspects around community and research culture. This is logical in that the experience of being part of a community is likely to differ significantly for those who are principally interacting online, but it is still instructive to bring attention to such large differences in scores.

Largest gaps in satisfaction – by interaction type



Although the online experience is well established, it is striking to note the challenges, as perceived by PGRs themselves, in terms of feeling they belong or are part of a community. A fully online experience is convenient for many PGRs, enabling them to balance wider commitments and barriers such as distance from campus. However, it appears that this physical distance is proving a barrier to interactions around research. Given the nature of a PGR qualification and the fundamental importance of facilitating discussions around research, this is potentially a major area for focus across the sector to ensure the benefits of an online/distance learning experience are complemented by creative ways of enabling engagement with all types of research communities.

Comments from distance learning PGRs highlight the challenges but also some opportunities around belonging and research culture

"Whilst I may not feel part of a "community" of PGR students I do not see it as a negative as I am a distance learner for my professional doctorate and have a strong affiliation to my profession and have made research links within it, given it is a small, highly specialised profession."

"I mostly work off campus and have spent a lot of time overseas doing fieldwork. I also don't live in (city)in the UK, so I don't feel particularly connected to the institution"

"Interacting with research students could have been initially limited due to the coronavirus pandemic, whereby compulsory lectures were all held online. I also study remotely and do not need to access resources on campus. Therefore, since lockdown restrictions have been lifted, I have no need to come to campus. There is a Whatsapp group that enables students to engage and interact. Yet, I have only just found out about this. I ponder if other remote students are also aware?"

"Huge and interesting range of meetings and seminars available but unfortunately the reality of distance learning is that it's difficult to make the most of them even when they are streamed online. Maybe it's just me."

"I am a part-time mature student working from home There have been many times when I have felt "left-out" of PGR activities. I understand that this is in part because of my age, conditions and distance from campus butI have not felt any institutional or student support efforts to reach out to me or cater for my particular needs."

5 Domicile and ethnicity

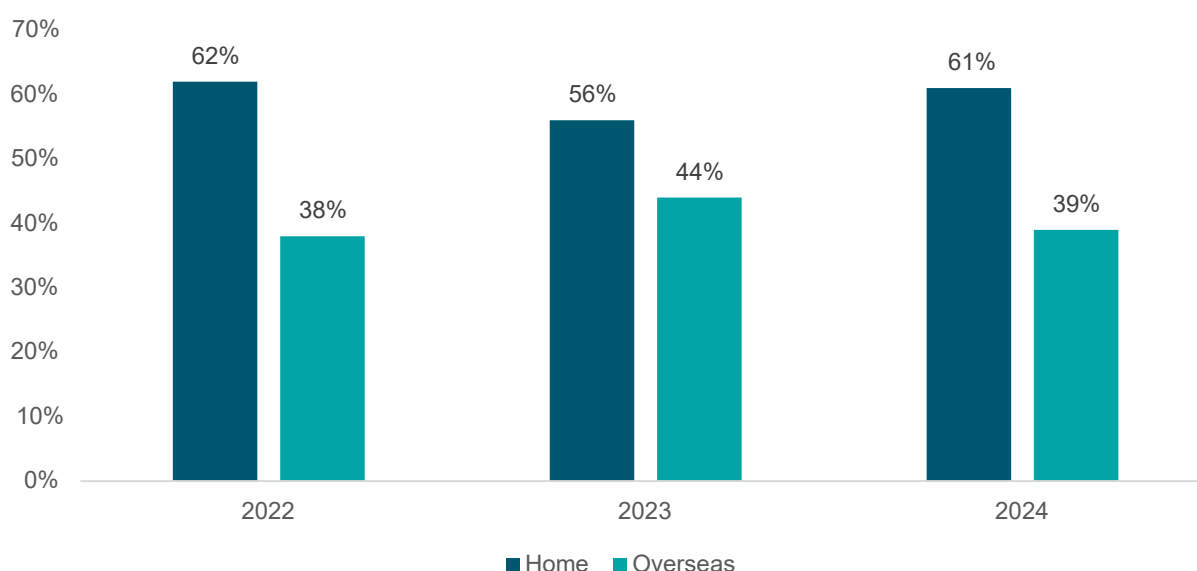
5.1 Home and overseas students

When assessing the different responses of “home” and “overseas” students it is important to point out that while, in most cases, we are assessing responses where “home” students are from the UK and “overseas” students are from outside the UK, our data also includes 1,300 responses from Australia, equating to around 11% of the sample. In these cases, “home” students are from Australia. Hence this analysis is concerned with the experiences of “home” and “overseas” students across the board as defined based on the location of the institution.

In 2024 we introduced an additional question to clarify how students defined themselves as being from home or overseas, following feedback that there may have been some misunderstanding among some international students, particularly in the UK, about where they considered to be their permanent home.⁸

However, the data below indicates that, particularly in comparison to 2022, which was a more comparable sample of institutions in terms of size and mission group (see discussion in earlier sections), there appears to have been no material change in the proportion of home and overseas students in the survey.⁹ This provides good evidence of the reliability of this measure, underpinned by a clarification question moving forward.

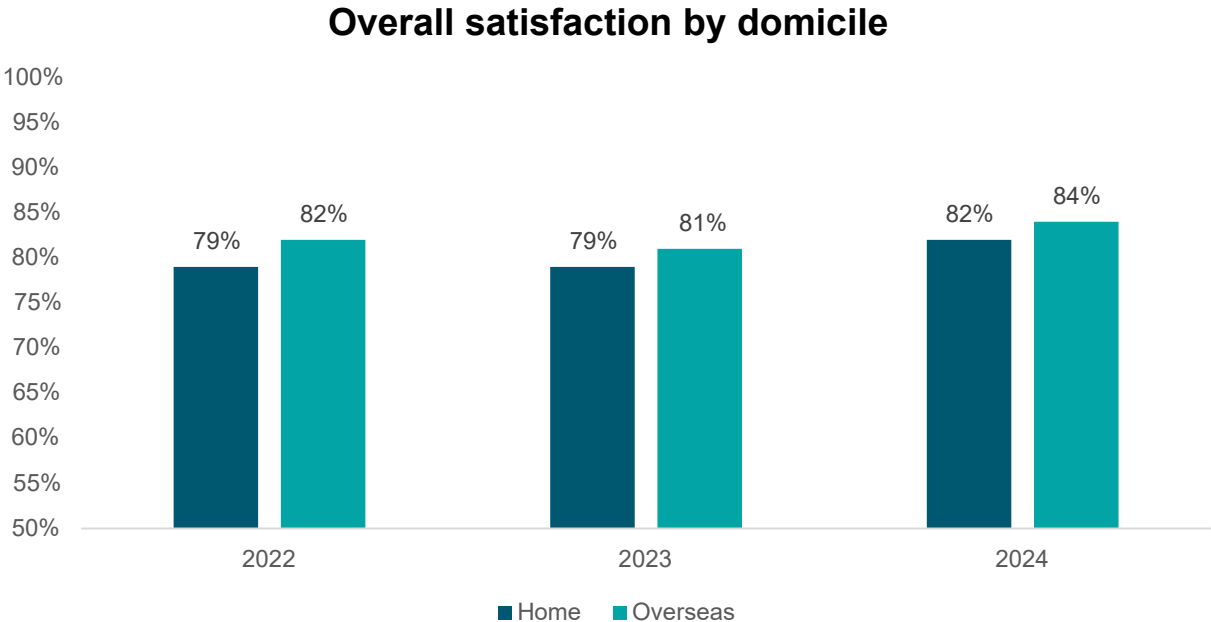
Home/overseas – percentage of responses



⁸ The new question was worded: “Are you an international student” (Yes/No/Don’t know)

⁹ This excludes where data is not available eg unknown or not stated

Looking now at satisfaction levels, there is a relatively small difference between home and overseas students, with the latter reporting higher levels of satisfaction, at 84%.

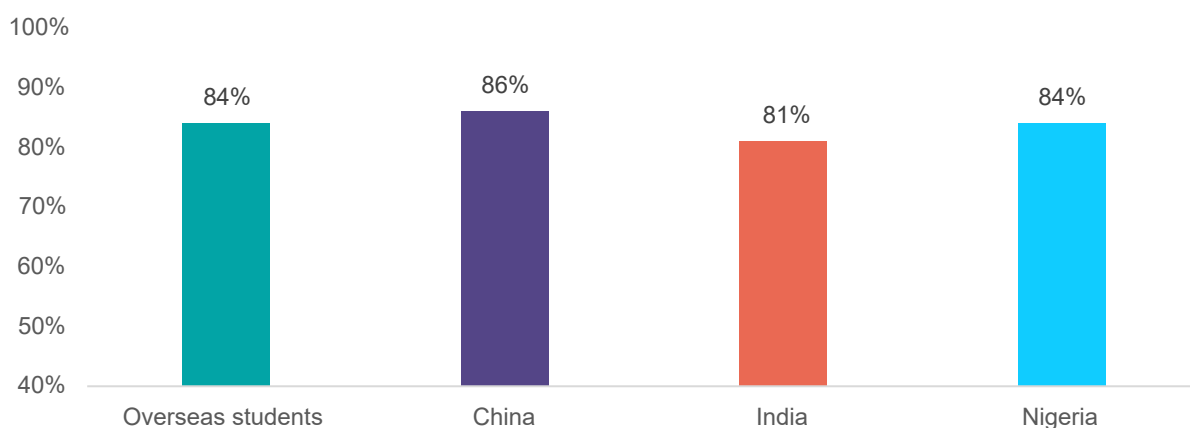


This relative difference has remained consistent over the past three years, with overseas students reporting slightly higher levels of satisfaction, with the level of satisfaction for both cohorts increasing as per the overall results that we saw in previous chapters.

While it will be important to ensure that the experiences of home students are fully understood and that all experiences are positive, the strong scores among overseas students are encouraging given the difficult recent climate that the UK, in particular, has been experiencing in terms of international recruitment.¹⁰

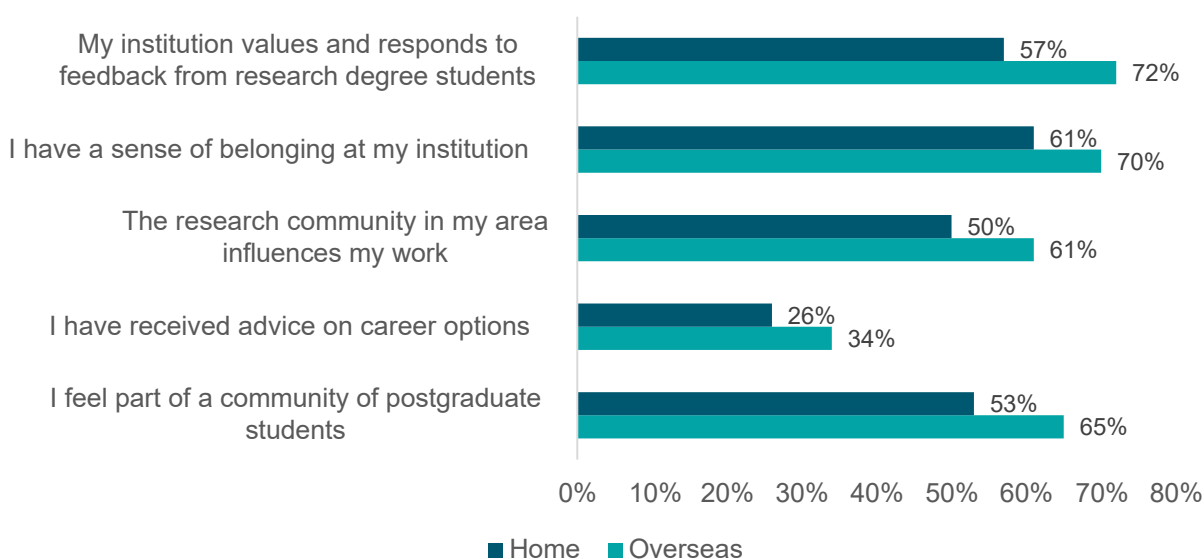
¹⁰ British Council (2024) ‘Five trends on international student mobility for 2024’. London: British Council.
Available at: opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/news/reports/five-international-student-mobility-trends-2024

Overall satisfaction by selected overseas markets



Within UK institutions in particular, three of the largest markets for overseas students at all levels, including PGR, are China, India and Nigeria.¹¹ This is likely to vary to some extent between individual institutions, but the PRES data does provide the facility for participants to assess satisfaction among PGRs from specific countries – as highlighted above. At the overall level, satisfaction among students from these three large markets is high, but particularly so for PGRs from China.

Home and overseas – largest gaps



¹¹ HESA (2024) 'Where do HE students come from?' Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#level

Looking at the five individual questions in the survey where there are the largest differences in scores between home and overseas, these cover a range of aspects. It is interesting to note that overseas students are more positive about the community (including belonging) and research culture, areas that do not tend to score well in absolute terms. Overseas students are a lot more likely to feel their feedback is valued, and although receiving advice on career options is very low scoring for all (one of the lowest areas across the survey), it is overseas students who report this happens with more frequency – albeit not particularly frequently.

Although overseas PGRs are generally satisfied, there have been some mixed experiences

"My supervisor lacked skills needed to supervise an international student... He just wanted me to work 24/7. Once I asked him I want to visit my family in home country which he discouraged and didn't allow me to visit home."

"Better mental health, wellbeing and financial assistance specifically for international students."

"Stronger academic community, especially for international student-parents like me."

"As an international....university has made it very hard to feel like I belong as they made me sign a new contract to be paid hourly instead of salaried."

"If international students were treated equitably and there was actual support available for international graduate students."

"The office in charge of helping international students with visa matters has been oblivious and disorganised at times. Visa matters are a serious one. This problem has caused me tremendous stress in the past. And it did make me feel like my university didn't care. In contrast with this, the Doctoral School has been instrumental in assisting me every time I requested support in various forms."

"As an international student who ...stayed the whole lockdown alone in the UK, my supervisor was like a family member to me."

5.2 Ethnicity (UK domicile)¹²

Historically there has been a range of data pointing to an unequal quality of experience among students from minoritised ethnic groups. One of these data sources has been the Advance HE-HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) which identified a consistent gap in terms of key metrics such as value for money, meeting expectations and likelihood to select the same course again.

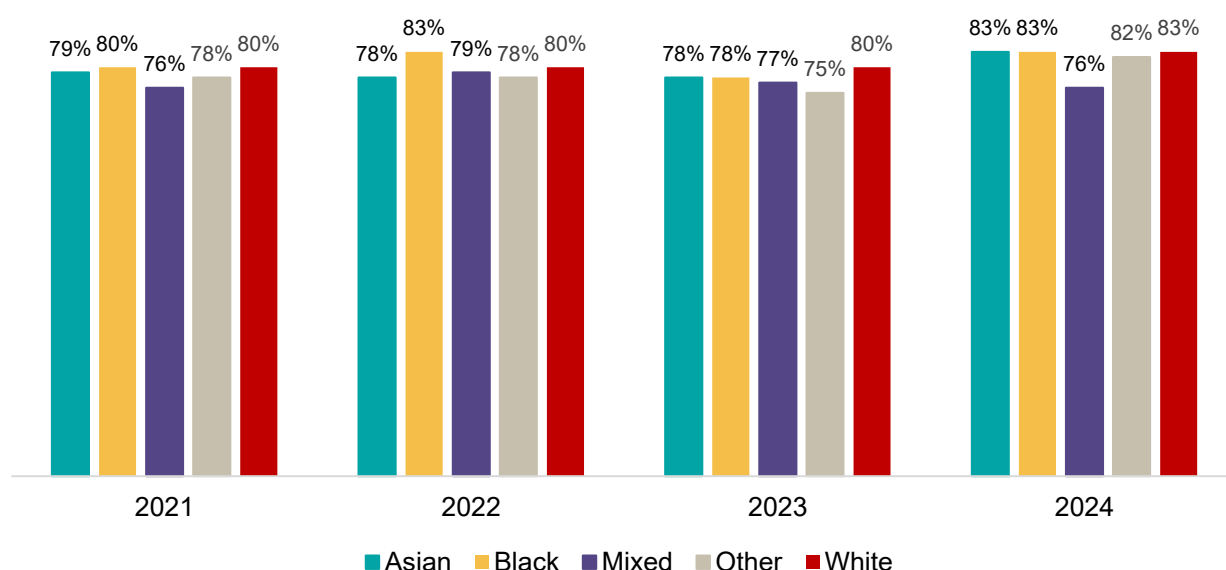
Encouragingly, the 2024 data from the SAES showed evidence of this gap closing, with only a small gap between minority ethnic and White students in terms of perceived value for money and no difference when rating the experience compared to expectations.¹³

At PGR level, the 2024 results from PRES are some of the most positive we have seen in terms of equality of the experience across all different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, students from Mixed ethnic backgrounds are significantly less satisfied than other ethnic groups, but elsewhere there are clear improvements across the board compared to 2023, particularly for PGRs from Asian, Black and “other” ethnic background.

¹² As is standard across Advance HE’s survey reports, this ethnicity analysis focuses specifically on students from the UK.

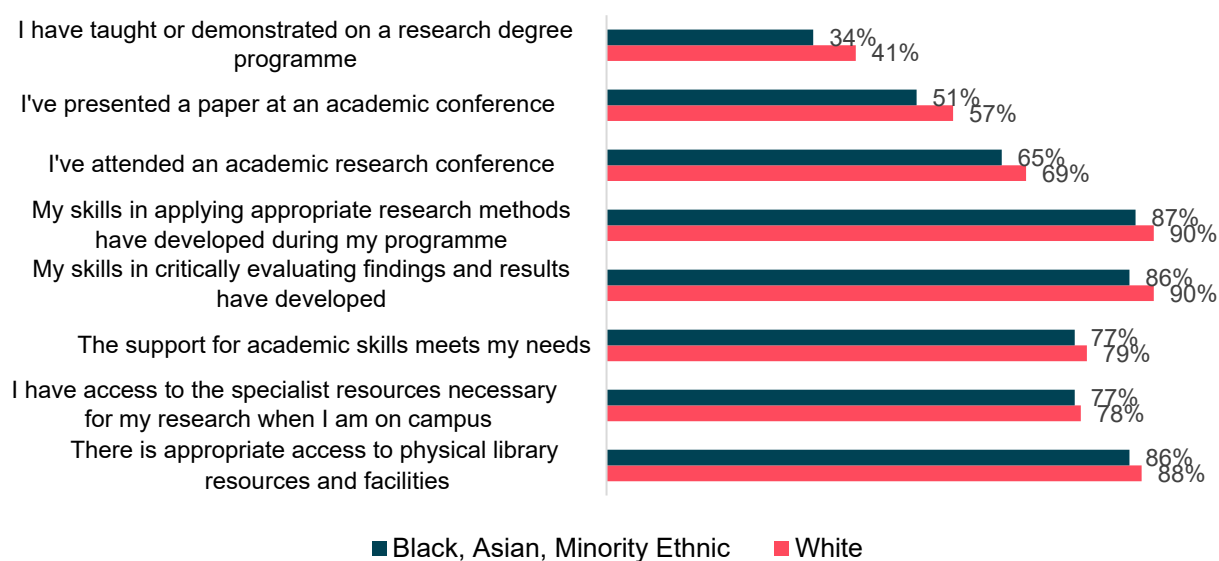
¹³ Neves, J, Freeman, J, Stephenson, R and Sotiropoulou, P (2024) *The Student Academic Experience Survey 2024*. York: Advance HE, p 49. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2024

Overall satisfaction levels – by ethnicity



The following analysis focuses on the specific areas in the survey from 2023 that showed the greatest gaps in the experience between PGRs of minority ethnic and White backgrounds, comparing this to the 2024 results to understand if there is still a divergence in this area across the aggregate of participating institutions.

Ethnicity – 2024 results among selected questions



Looking across all questions (beyond those charted here), it is positive to see that, from 2024 data, there is little evidence of a large and systematic gap in the experience between White and minority ethnic PGRs. However, there are some areas where gaps still exist. In

2023 we highlighted the aspects in the table above as being areas where scores among minority ethnic PGRs were lowest by comparison, and in 2024 these gaps still exist, albeit at slightly lower levels in some cases. However, if we look at the questions at the top of the chart, there are still some sizeable gaps. What is striking to note is that the areas with some of the largest gaps are all (still) related to PGR developmental opportunities.

We identified in last year's issue of this report that PGRs from ethnic minoritised backgrounds were less likely to experience a key development opportunity such as presenting their work, attending a conference, placement or teaching. The 2024 data underlines that this still appears to be an issue, with UK-domiciled PGRs from White backgrounds being more likely to be afforded, or to take advantage of, these opportunities, which can be key to the development of research profiles and subsequent careers. From this data, we do not know the reasons behind this, for instance whether there are barriers to some PGRs taking up these opportunities, whether there is perhaps an issue of awareness or whether some PGRs are simply not being offered these opportunities. However, by accessing this granular data, participating institutions can identify where there are gaps in terms of opportunity and take action to address them.

Developmental opportunities can have a significant impact but not all PGRs feel they have the right level of access to these

"there is a gap regarding opportunities for participating in conferences and symposiums outside the university's walls."

"The opportunities I have had to attend international conferences has been amazing and i wouldn't be in the job I am in now if it wasn't for this PhD. I have met some phenomenal people along the way and I am grateful for this."

"The PGR...fund was very helpful in covering some costs for a international conference where I presented however it did not cover all expenses and I would like to do more this year."

"give PGR students information on relevant conferences in their research area in order to improve their dissemination strategy."

"(would like) More teaching opportunities and others for researchers especially those from the black and ethnic minorities communities"

"(institution) is extending teaching opportunities to external lecturers while neglecting the potential of our own highly qualified researchers."

"I would like some opportunity to engage with students more in the form of marking or dissertation supervision as well as more opportunities to lecture."

"I feel that supervisors are inconsistent with offering support for networking, and also conference access for networking/professional development"

6 Key drivers of overall satisfaction

Using the overall PRES dataset, we have conducted correlation analysis to identify which questions in the survey are most closely linked to overall satisfaction.

This provides key insight as to where improvements to a particular area may potentially have the greatest impact in terms of the overall experience. By combining this with the actual satisfaction scores, we can identify the areas that have high correlation but also low satisfaction – where the greatest potential for improvement and impact may lie.

Question measure (top 10 correlations)	Theme	Position in top 10 2023	Pearson correlation value (2024) ¹⁴	Satisfaction level 2024
I feel a sense of belonging at my institution	Community	1	0.626	64%
My institution values and responds to feedback from PGRs	Responsibilities	3	0.595	62%
Support for academic skills meets my needs	Support	Not in top 10	0.579	77%
Confidence to be creative or innovative	Research Skills	2	0.568	80%
My supervisors help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher	Supervision	4	0.558	79%
The support for health and wellbeing meets my needs	Support	Not in top 10	0.556	65%
My supervisor provides feedback that helps direct my research activities	Supervision	5	0.527	90%
I received an appropriate induction to my research programme	Progression	9	0.518	76%
My skills in applying appropriate methodologies have developed	Research skills	7	0.517	89%
I know who to approach if I have any concerns about my programme	Responsibilities	Not in top 10	0.515	78%

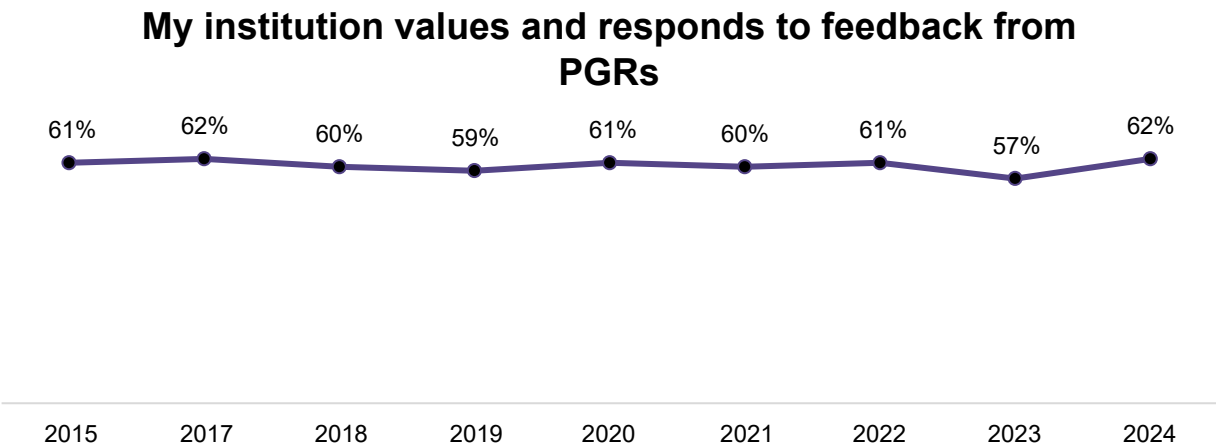
¹⁴ Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.501+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

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). This would be likely to vary to some extent at institutional level, but it does provide a helpful framework for institutions to compare their own results against when considering how best to direct enhancement resources and activities.

The above table identifies three areas for high priority. Specifically, these relate to feeling a sense of belonging, responding to feedback from PGRs and providing support for health and wellbeing. These items correlate strongly with overall satisfaction and show clear room for improvement in terms of their scores – being shaded in red as their satisfaction/agreement score is below 70%.

The questions on sense of belonging and responding to feedback were also highlighted in the same analysis based on 2023 data, so this does give a consistent picture in terms of what is linked closest to satisfaction and yet not scoring particularly well.

For the question on feedback, this has fluctuated at a relatively low level of around 60% for several years. This fell to 57% in 2023, the lowest we have seen, but it is more encouraging to see it has increased to 62% in 2024, albeit still at a level with clear scope for improvement given its strong links to satisfaction.



We saw earlier in this report that levels of satisfaction with feedback opportunities (and response) are much higher among overseas students, which suggests that higher scores in this area are potentially achievable. However, it would be worth investigating at local level as to how overseas PGRs view the feedback opportunities and whether there is anything related to the status of being an overseas student that leads to different perceptions to those of home students in terms of closing the feedback loop.

Sense of belonging is part of the battery of statements on community which, as we will see in the next chapter, scores consistently at or around the 60% level, but has improved slightly over the past year.

The other priority area is the question on support for health and wellbeing, which was a new question in 2021. In 2022 and 2023 this was not shown in the data as having such a strong link to overall satisfaction, but its inclusion this year makes intuitive sense given the long-term focus on providing wellbeing support across students at all levels, which gathered even greater prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic. We will discuss later how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting students in different ways, but we may reasonably speculate that providing wellbeing support is of particular importance at the present time given the range of challenges that PGRs face in the current economic climate.

In terms of how PGRs rate this support, this has fluctuated since the introduction of the question, and it is encouraging to see that the 2024 score is an improvement on the previous year. However, the relative scores do show this is an area where local and sector-wide enhancement activities may reasonably be directed on the expectation of a high potential for impact.

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Support for health and wellbeing meets my needs	61%	66%	63%	65%

7 Satisfaction with areas of the PGR experience

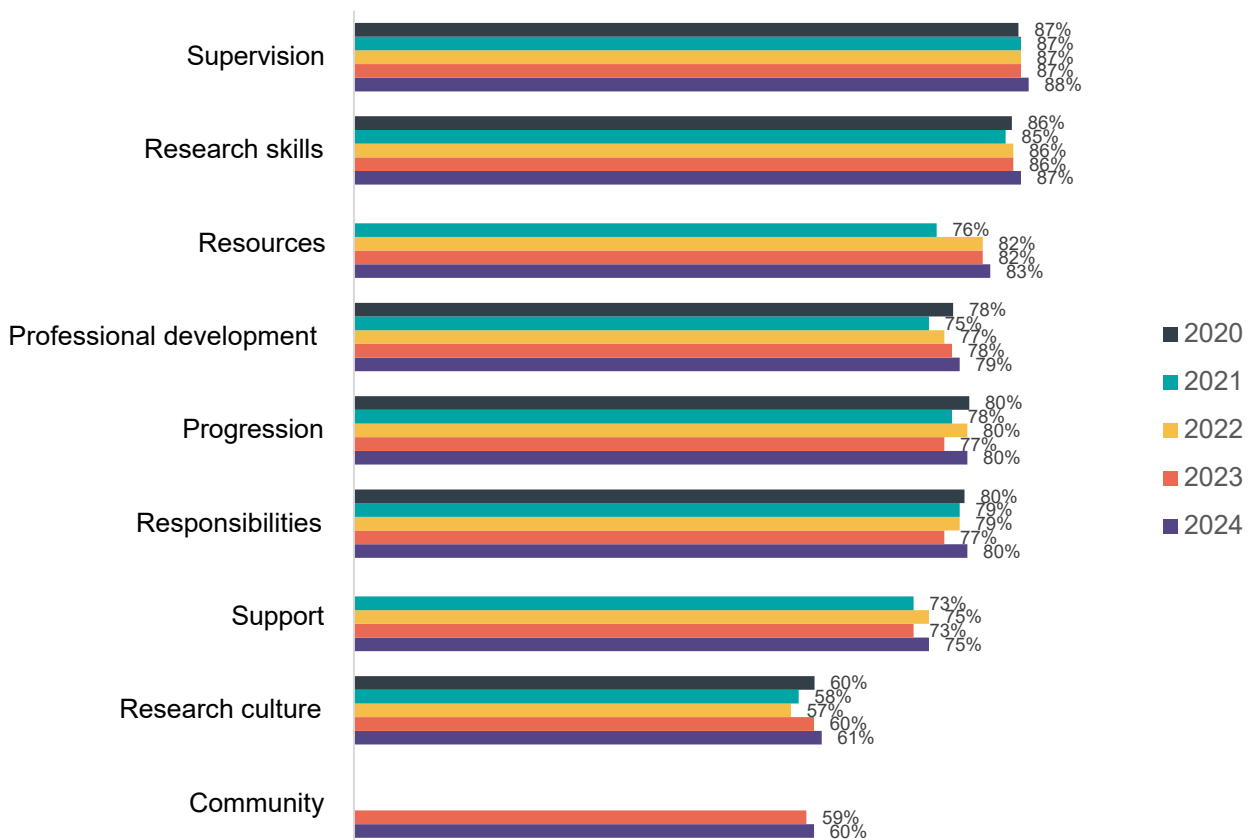
7.1 Elements of the student experience

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

The chart below compares satisfaction with the different areas of the student experience over the past five years. Matching the increase in overall satisfaction we saw earlier, there have been improvements across most areas, and no areas of decline – at aggregate level.

In particular, there have been positive improvements for progression and responsibilities, but the scores for research culture and community remain relatively low.

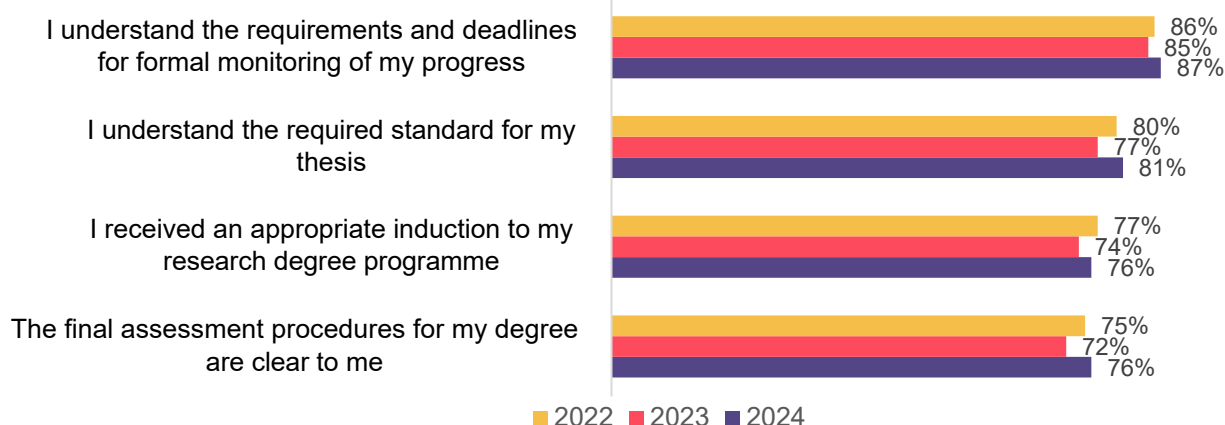
Satisfaction with areas of the research degree experience



7.2 Progression (standards, procedures)

This was one of the areas of strongest improvement overall, so we have displayed the different question areas in more detail below.

Satisfaction with elements of progression



In general, PGRs are very complementary about the communication around standards and procedures that underpin their progress and assessment, with all these areas showing a clear increase compared to the 2023 results, which were already at a relatively high level.

Although PGRs are often happy with communication about procedures for progression and success, this can be a source of frustration for others

“Expectations have been very well explained and modelled through constructive feedback. Just need to develop a clearer understanding of final assessment procedures, although these are some way in the future still.”

“There is no clear standard for what is expected with practice-led research. It took me months to even find the word count requirement for that type of research degree submission”

“I am clear on my progression but haven't quite reached thesis standard, my supervisors will let me know when they think that I am producing work that is of the standard for my thesis.”

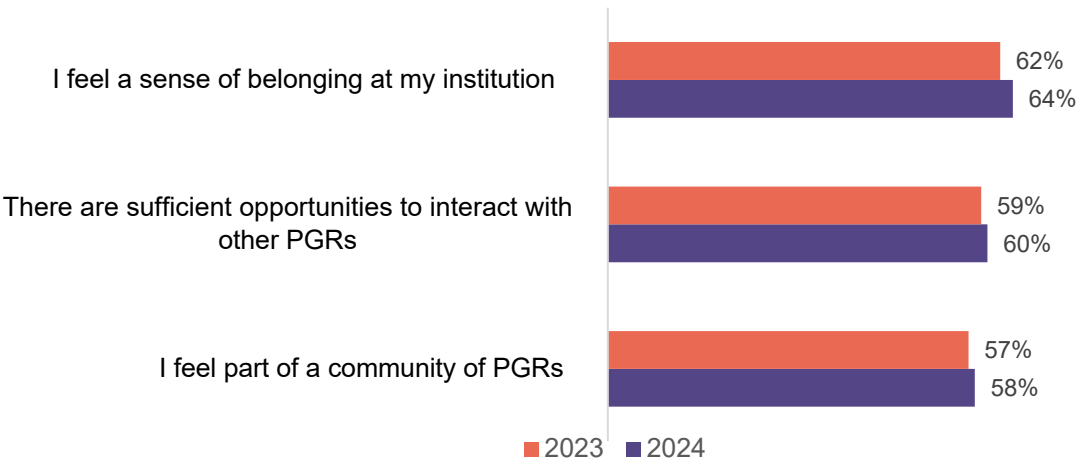
“(would like) A better understanding of the standard required for the finished product. The difference between the written thesis and the expectations of the examiners, in my case, was large.”

“The formal requirements for the thesis and the viva were not really mentioned at all, but plenty of attention was paid to the probation and progress review.”

7.3 Community

Representing one of the lowest scoring sections of the survey (despite some small improvements), we now go on to provide more information from the open comments about PGR concerns around community.

Satisfaction with elements of community



Introduced as a new area for 2023, the perception of community is an aspect where there clearly appears to be room for improvement – particularly in reference to the question around sense of belonging being the question with the strongest correlation with overall satisfaction (as discussed earlier). Despite some relatively small increases in the rates of agreement across these three questions in 2024, the perception of community remains one of the lowest scoring areas in the survey.

PGRs continue to raise concerns about how their experience of community

“And I am not sure if there is a specific research community in the university associated with my particular research specialism - my supervisors haven't mentioned one”

“I think students are not deeply involved in a strong research community. Typically, only students who are working on their supervisors' projects are engaged in meetings, seminars, etc. Conversely, students undertaking their own projects often work independently and are not exposed to such opportunities.”

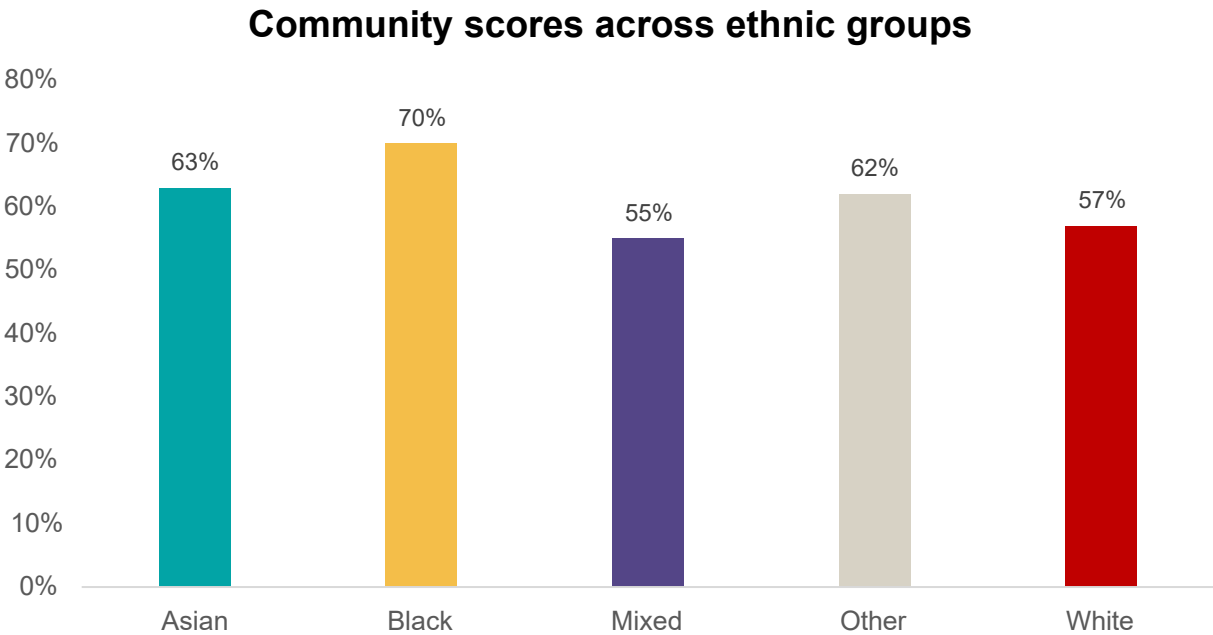
“The research community within my field of study and within my building is mostly welcoming and pleasant to be a part of. Feeling a sense of belonging in my wider institution would be better promoted by feeling like (institution) valued the contributions of PhD candidates, rather than treating us selectively as students or staff when the situation suits the university”

“This institution NEEDS to develop a PhD community. There are no spaces for us to meet and work or just catch up and discuss our experiences as PhD students. I have raised these issues to the [university], my supervisors, and the head of school but nothing has been done. This lack of a community is also incredibly detrimental to international students”.

Despite the fact that the elements within community score relatively poorly overall, there are some notable differences across different ethnicities which go against some recent trends in the wider data.

As we saw earlier, the experience among UK domiciled students from minority ethnic students now broadly matches that of White students, despite there being some elements of the experience where gaps remain, particularly around development opportunities. However, until now, we have not typically seen evidence of the minority ethnic experience being more positive.

Yet, when we dig deeper into the data around community, we can in fact see higher scores among students from Black, Asian and “other” ethnicities, all clearly more positive than White students. These results imply that concerns about belonging and being part of a community are not felt equally by ethnicity, and are in fact relatively likely to affect students from White backgrounds. We should also point out that PGRs from Mixed ethnic backgrounds are also likely to perceive concerns around the community aspect, which is consistent with the relatively low levels of overall satisfaction highlighted earlier in this report.



7.4 Development opportunities

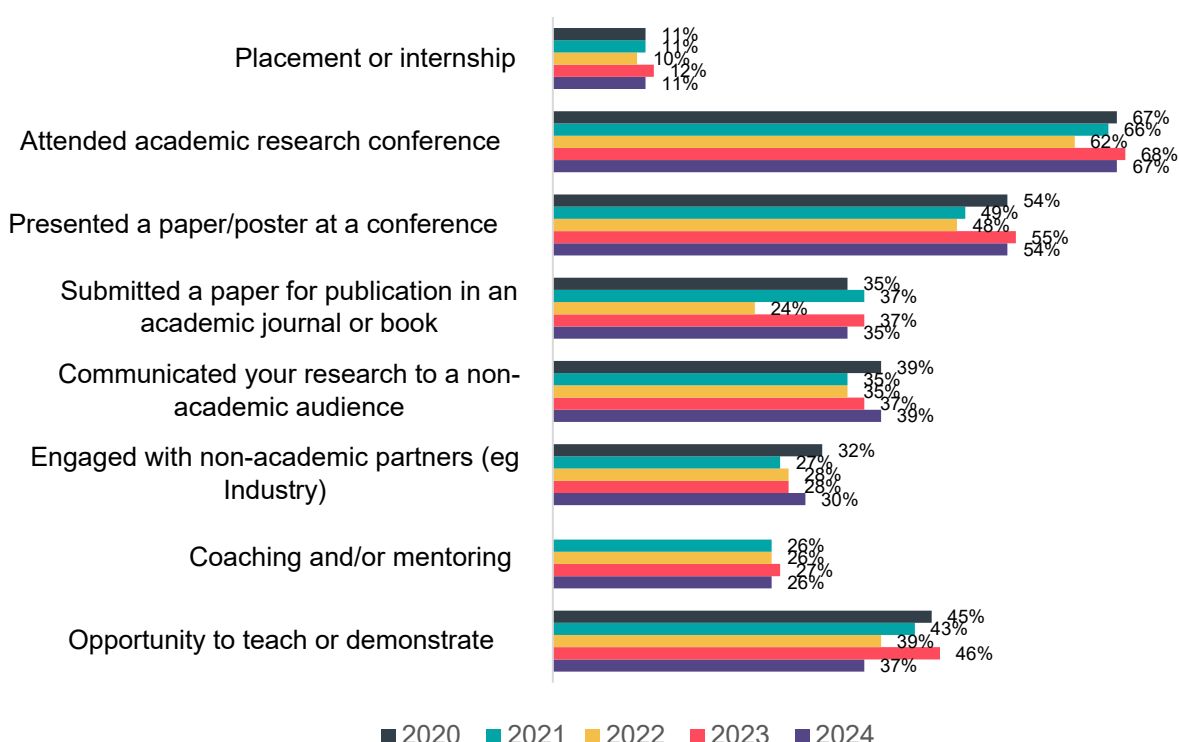
A key element of the wider development of postgraduate researchers is related to the opportunities provided and taken up. This can include showcasing research, sharing skills with others through coaching or engaging in direct career preparation such as internships and placements and benefiting from opportunities to teach.

Due to the in-person nature of many of these opportunities, they perhaps understandably declined in frequency during the pandemic, with the PGR population potentially missing out on key development interactions as a result. Frequency of these interactions continued to decline up to 2022, but did begin to recover in 2023.

In 2024, the data shows a mixed picture. Levels in general are higher than in 2021 and 2022, but the gains in 2023 have not always been maintained.

Positively, there is evidence of greater opportunities to interact with industry and present research to non-academic audiences. However, there are slightly fewer opportunities to attend and present at academic conferences, which may be related to the squeeze on institutional finances that is being felt across many HEIs.

Development opportunities provided during the research degree programme



The largest decline is in terms of teaching opportunities, which are now at their lowest level since before the pandemic. It is well documented that students are facing a squeeze on affordability of higher education, but HEIs are also under significant pressure financially.¹⁵

While it may be relatively cost effective to deploy PGRs to teach on modules rather than bring in temporary staff, we can also speculate that HEIs may be taking decisions to distribute teaching load more widely among salaried staff as an even more cost-effective solution. Whatever is driving this, it appears that there are fewer PGRs being afforded this key developmental (and financial) opportunity than in recent years.

¹⁵ Brackley, J, Leaver, A and Yates, D (2024) 'University finances are in a perilous state – it's the result of market competition and debt-based expansion'. *The Conversation*, 31 July. Available at: theconversation.com/university-finances-are-in-a-perilous-state-its-the-result-of-market-competition-and-debt-based-expansion-234862

Some PGRs cite a lack of teaching opportunities as an area of frustration

"My experiences and developments came through my own initiative and use of social media. The university didn't provide any opportunities to develop my networks, nor have they provided any teaching opportunities"

"I would provide teaching opportunities for PhD students - I wasn't given any, despite being in the department for 7 years."

"(would like) to publish a paper or/and get a teaching opportunity in my research area"

"Getting supervisory and teaching opportunities to get better at mentoring and disseminating my research "

"Academic training opportunities, part time teaching opportunities on campus so that I can promote my academic and social values, improve my communication skills, learn and engage with other students, put my studies/ research into practice then boost my future teaching career."

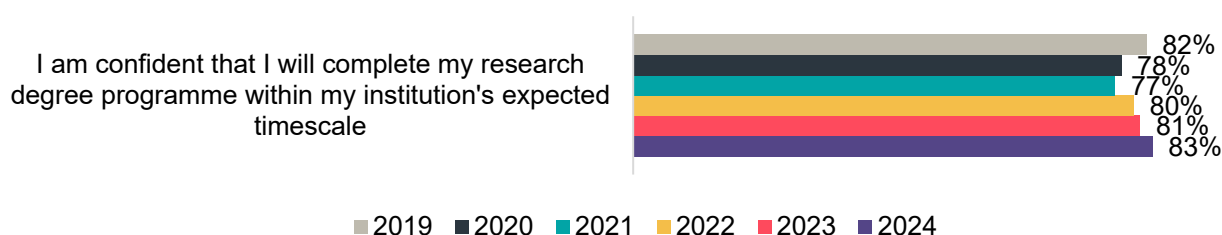
7.5 Confidence to complete programme on time

In addition to the “overall satisfaction” question (discussed earlier), an important barometer of how comfortable PGRs are feeling with their research degree is their level of confidence in completing on time. As might be expected, this did appear to be impacted during and immediately after the pandemic, as confidence levels declined and timescales potentially increased.

However, in 2023 there was a significant improvement in this measure and it is encouraging to see that this trend has continued, with the 2024 score on this measure being the highest we have seen in recent years.

As we will see in the next chapter, there are increasing cost-of-living challenges impacting the PGR audience, so it is encouraging to see that, to date, levels of confidence around completing have not been negatively impacted.

Confidence on completion – over time



A range of issues contribute to concerns around completing “on time” – yet there is also evidence of strong support

“Patchy supervision - my change of supervisors wasn't handled well, my new supervisor hadn't actually undergone supervisor training until I asked them about it. This has led me feeling like I will not finish on time.”

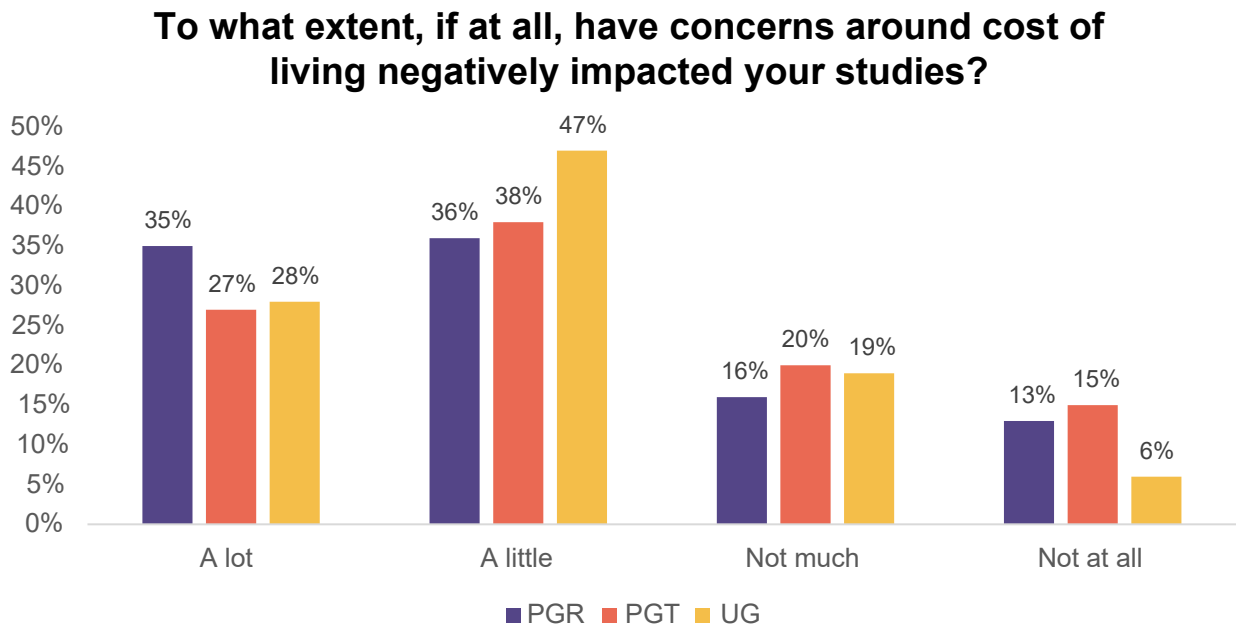
“I have been let down by staff at the university who have missed key deadlines and delayed my research far beyond what is acceptable. This has put immense strain on my study which has had to frequently change, prevented me from disseminating quality work and building reputation, and meant I will likely not submit on time nor produce work of the quality I expected”

“I would like to express a big thanks to the annual review and thesis submission team. They used to be so helpful, providing me with detailed information that helped me submit my work on time.”

“..this issue may be more reflective of the completion timeline expected by supervisors in my school. Perhaps the issue could be addressed by better clarifying and informing supervisors of the 3.5-year completion guidelines and funding schemes available, emphasising that 3.5-years is the goal, and not the minimum time required.”

8 Cost of living challenges

For 2024 we introduced a new question on cost of living challenges. As well as ensuring the relevance of the survey to the current environment that PGRs are facing, this question also enables us to understand how PGRs are feeling around financial challenges compared with postgraduate taught students and undergraduates, who are asked the same question in other large surveys, which we will refer to here.¹⁶



Of the three student groups compared in the above chart, PGRs are by some distance the most likely to say their studies have been impacted “a lot”, while undergraduates are most likely to feel their studies have been impacted “a little” and are the least likely to say there has been no impact. Among all three audience groups, however, the proportion who are impacted “a lot” or “a little” ranges between 65% and 75%, which is clear evidence that the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite across the student landscape, and is not solely affecting the undergraduate audience.

Clearly, financial challenges are a concern, and for more than seven out of ten PGRs this has had a discernible and negative impact on their studies – either “a little” or “a lot”. What is most notable is the high proportion of PGRs, more than one in three, who feel their studies have been impacted “a lot”. This is a cause for concern and highlights the need for HEIs and their graduate schools to ensure they are understanding the circumstances facing their doctoral students so that they may offer the maximum support.

¹⁶ The PGR data in the table is from PRES 2024. The PGT data is from PTES 2024. The undergraduate data is from SAES 2024.

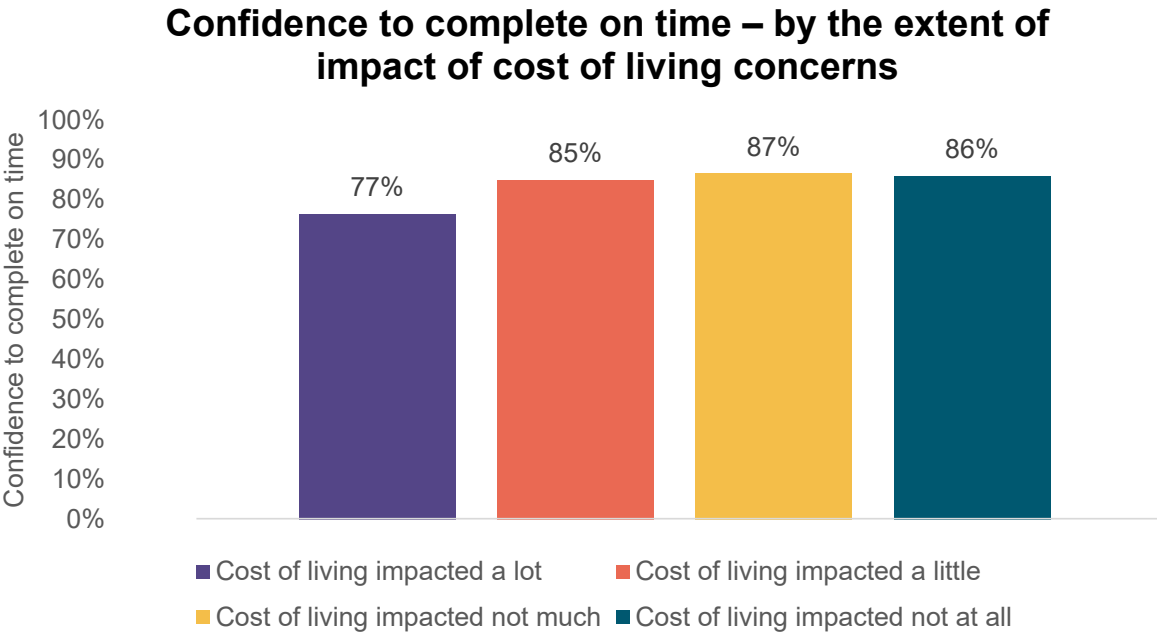
In terms of specific student groups being more affected by financial issues, the table below highlights UK-domiciled students of minority ethnic backgrounds. We saw earlier that aspects of the overall experience among students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are positive across many areas of the survey (with the exception of development opportunities), but it is concerning that these students appear to be disproportionately impacted by financial issues. This could be related to a number of aspects related to socio-economic background, or challenges related to working or commuting, but it does highlight an issue for further investigation at local level.

The table also highlights that overseas students are also more impacted by financial concerns. For overseas students studying in the UK, this is a logical finding given the significantly higher fees and the restrictions that limit paid work to 20 hours maximum per week during term time.¹⁷

Impact of cost of living by selected demographics								
	Asian	Black	Mixed	Other	White		Home	Overseas
Cost of living impacted studies "a lot"	33%	44%	38%	38%	29%		33%	37%

We saw in the previous section that levels of confidence to complete on time has increased, despite the impact of cost of living challenges, which could logically be impacting confidence for a range of reasons, including financial viability of completion and difficulty balancing work, caring and commuting commitments.

¹⁷ UCAS (2024) 'Getting work and working life in the UK for international students'. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: www.ucas.com/international/international-students/getting-work-and-working-life-uk-international-students

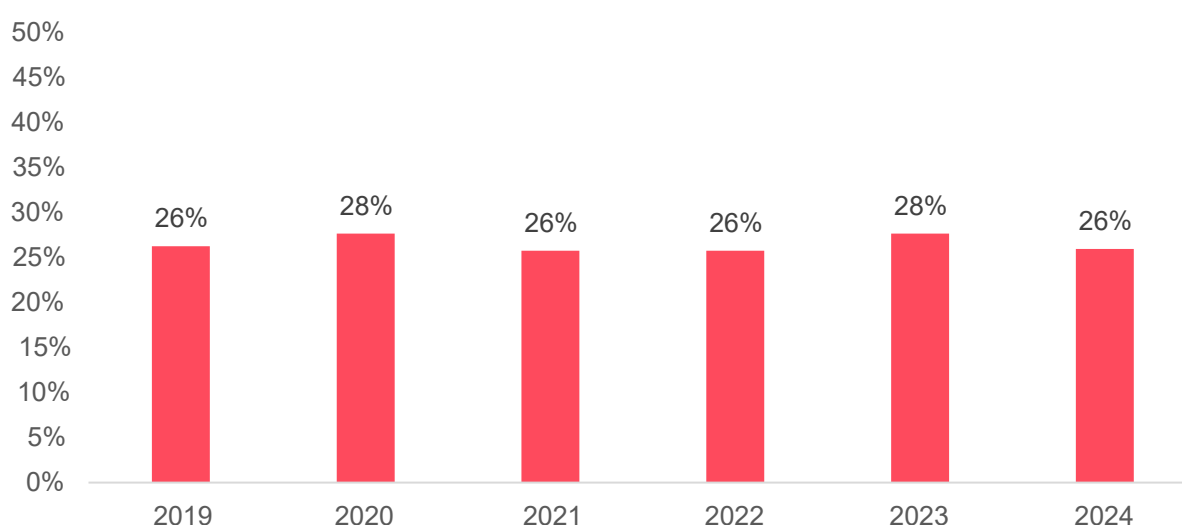


As evidenced here, confidence to complete on time is markedly lower (77%) among PGRs who felt the cost of living had impacted them “a lot”. Positively, however, confidence to complete is very high for all other groups, and there is no discernible different between those who are impacted “a little”, “not much” or “not at all”.

9 Considering leaving

Another barometer of the overall quality of the experience, but also a reflection of external challenges facing our audience, is 'likelihood to consider leaving'. This is not a direct measure of retention and likely completion, as respondents, by definition, have not left their programme and may or may not be likely to do so. However, by tracking this measure it can provide an understanding of the fluctuation in the factors that can lead to non-completion.

PGRs who considered leaving their course



Over the past few years there has been a shift in the relative importance of the different factors that have led PGRs to consider leaving. As recently as 2021 this was dominated by mental health concerns but, while this is still the main driver, there are now two other factors that are almost equally as significant – cost of living challenges and difficulties balancing research study and other commitments.

Cost of living challenges increased significantly as a factor behind considering leaving in 2023, and remains a major factor, but has not increased any further. We saw something similar in our analysis of the undergraduate Student Academic Experience Survey earlier in 2024, which showed that students were not materially more concerned about financial issues in 2024 than 2023 – although it was still identified as a major issue.¹⁸

¹⁸Neves, J, Freeman, J, Stephenson, R and Sotiropoulou, P (2024) *The Student Academic Experience Survey 2024*. York: Advance HE, p 74. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2024

Reasons for considering leaving – over time				
	2021	2022	2023	2024
Mental/emotional health	26%	23%	24%	19%
Financial difficulties	9%	12%	17%	16%
Difficulties balancing research and other commitments	11%	15%	11%	15%
Not enough support for research	9%	8%	8%	8%
Family or personal problems	4%	5%	5%	5%
	Table shows top five answers – shown as a proportion of those who considered leaving			

By contrast, balancing different commitments is becoming more of an issue driving consideration of leaving. We do not have hard quantitative evidence from PRES on the prevalence of working, commuting or caring responsibilities, but given the wider evidence of increased pressure on undergraduate students who need to balance the necessity of paid work with caring or commuting, we may reasonably speculate that financial challenges are contributing to PGRs needing to balance their research studies around a range of other commitments.¹⁹

¹⁹ Standley, N and Fesmer, L (2023) 'Most university students working paid jobs, survey shows'. London: *BBC News*, 22 June. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-65964375

Concerns around balancing responsibilities and finances are having an impact

"At the start of my journey and during the taught component I found it easier to build up networks, this is more challenging when you are part time and a remote student. My ability to manage projects has improved but my full-time employment impacts on my time management and achieving deadlines."

"In an ideal world, I would not be studying part time. Unfortunately, I am still in full time employment and it brings challenges as I wish I could devote more time to my studies. That said, I do not feel that it is necessarily detrimental to my studies as I am very organised and maximise my available time at evenings and weekends"

"f I was able to work more alongside and spend time with other PhD students, even online. As a mother with caring responsibilities, I cannot always come to campus and have felt very excluded from my peers in this time, not always told of social events happening in campus within my department."

"lack of direct communication left me unsure about .. my future, furthermore if I could afford rent/living costs. Which became so frustrating and worrying that I thought about leaving the PhD programme and contacted my thesis chair about it. I understand that securing funding may be a difficult responsibility to have, but ignoring emails is not professional and causes a lot of future and financial worries and has caused me to lose some confidence in the Institution."

10 Considerations for HEIs

Just over eight out of ten PGRs are satisfied with their experience. Although this report has focused on a lot of the areas where there may be scope for improvement, it is important to recognise the generally high levels of satisfaction being delivered at this level across the wide range of institutions taking part, in the UK and Australia.

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

“The most positive aspect of my degree programme has been my supervisors. They have supported me all the way through my research degree through teaching me new techniques that I never thought I would ever come across, as well as being a supportive shoulder to cry on when personal things have got too much.”

“The growing confidence I have experienced in my transferable abilities and skills, for example, organisation, time management, personal motivation, reflectivity and reflexivity, writing skills. These are things I’d either taken for granted or doubted prior to starting the project. I feel pride in what I am achieving (on the good days!).”

“Positive discussion, hard working staff and a supportive environment for learning.”

“It has accorded me an opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge in my chosen field of research and developed new and transferable skill sets. The unique opportunity of engaging in lecturing ... is really rewarding and I am grateful to the University and my supervisory team for this opportunity.”

“The very natural way in which I have challenged and been challenged in developing, refining and implementing my research, supported by my supervisors and the wider team at the Graduate School.”

While recognising the examples of good practice that these results showcase, the data also identifies a number of areas of the experience that would benefit from further consideration and investigation at local and overall level.

- 1 PGR study is particularly likely to be impacted by cost-of-living concerns, which appear to be disproportionately affecting overseas students as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Pressures around paid work, commuting and caring are also likely to be contributing to difficulties in balancing a range of responsibilities. Ensuring that graduate schools understand the individual challenges experienced by their students is key to providing the right kind of support and ensuring PGRs remain on track for completion.
- 2 Although there is now more in-person interaction with staff than during the pandemic, there remain significant levels of online and hybrid interaction, with little sign that this is going to decline significantly. While the flexibility this offers can often help address individual needs, satisfaction levels are consistently not as high for online interaction, in particular. The main 'gaps' in satisfaction are around a sense of community and opportunities for peer interaction. Accordingly, it will be important for HEIs to develop solutions in this area to ensure that the practical advantages of flexible study are complemented by an equal amount of collaboration opportunities for PGRs who are on campus less frequently.
- 3 Three areas of the survey, in particular, are strongly linked to overall satisfaction and have high potential for improvement – closing the feedback loop, proving support for wellbeing and creating a sense of community. There will no doubt be a range of different areas at institutional level that require attention, but these three aspects provide a good starting point for any institution looking to understand how best to maximise satisfaction with their postgraduate research programme.

Appendix 1. Respondent profile

Category ²⁰	PRES 2021	PRES 2022	PRES 2023	PRES 2024
Age				
30 and under	56%	46%	54%	43%
31 and over	43%	54%	46%	57%
Disability				
Reported disability	9%	13%	14%	16%
No reported disability	91%	87%	86%	84%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)				
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	19%	15%	18%	19%
White	81%	85%	82%	81%
Domicile				
UK	60%	61%	56%	55%
EU	4%	8%	9%	5%
Rest of the world	36%	31%	35%	39%
Mode				
Full time	80%	72%	80%	72%
Part time	20%	28%	20%	28%

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 2022 and 2024, with the split between younger and older fluctuating as participating changes, providing an older sample in 2022 and 2024. There are also fluctuations in the proportion of full- and part-time respondents, with fewer full-time participants in 2022 and 2024.

²⁰ Note: differences of +/-3% or more versus the previous year are in bold.

Appendix 2. 2024 participating institutions

Aberystwyth University	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Anglia Ruskin University	Teesside University
Birmingham City University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Bournemouth University	University for the Creative Arts
Buckinghamshire New University	University of Aberdeen
Canterbury Christ Church University	University of Bradford
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Buckingham
Cranfield University	University of Derby
Guildhall School of Music & Drama	University of Dundee
Harper Adams University	University of Hull
Heriot-Watt University	University of Leicester
Institute of Cancer Research	University of Lincoln
Keele University	University of New South Wales
Lancaster University	University of Newcastle
Leeds Trinity University	University of Northampton
Liverpool Hope University	University of Oxford
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	University of Portsmouth
London Metropolitan University	University of Roehampton
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	University of Salford
Middlesex University	University of South Wales
Northeastern University London	University of St Andrews
Plymouth Marjon University	University of Stirling
Prifysgol Bangor University	University of Strathclyde
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	University of Suffolk
Queensland University of Technology	University of West London
Royal College of Art	University of Western Australia
Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Wolverhampton
Royal Veterinary College	University of the Arts, London
Sheffield Hallam University	University of the Highlands and Islands
St George's University of London	Wrexham University
	York St John University

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