Advance HE

POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT EXPERIENCE SURVEY

Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2026: sector results report

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November 2026



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Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2026

Shona Quinn

Executive summary

- Overall satisfaction with course quality increased to 87% in 2026, the highest level recorded in PTES. Results across the main question themes have either remained stable or increased slightly compared to 2025.
- Teaching and resources continue to receive particularly positive results, while community remains the lowest-scoring question theme. However, results vary substantially between institutions, particularly for the community theme.
- Organisation and course support remain the themes most strongly associated with overall satisfaction. Students who felt appropriately guided and supported, and whose course was well organised and running smoothly, were more likely to also be satisfied with course quality.
- Analysis of responses related to assessment and feedback shows that whether students reported receiving feedback on time varied considerably between institutions. At around half of institutions, 85% or more of respondents agree that feedback was provided on time. However, at some institutions, fewer than 70% of respondents say this is the case.
- Within both the home and overseas cohorts, part-time respondents reported slightly higher overall satisfaction than their full-time counterparts. However, in relation to teaching, part-time students were less positive about their academic contact time and the support they receive for their learning.
- Paid work is a common part of the taught postgraduate experience for both full-time and part-time students. More than half of full-time respondents reported undertaking paid work unrelated to their course during an average teaching week, while almost a quarter worked for 16 hours or more. Students working more than 20 hours per week were less likely to agree that their workload was manageable or that their timetable fitted well with their other commitments, regardless of whether they were full-time or part-time students.
- The proportion of respondents who had considered leaving continued to decline, falling from 18% in 2022 to 14% in 2026. Difficulty balancing study with other commitments remained the most frequently reported reason for considering leaving but among full-time students who had considered leaving, mental and emotional health reasons were the most common reason given. Students who were dissatisfied with the quality of their course were far more likely to report that they had considered leaving their course.

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) has been running in the UK higher education sector for 17 years. It offers Advance HE member institutions a chance to gather feedback from taught postgraduate students. Participating institutions receive benchmarking from Advance HE to show how their results compare with the sector and a selection of other benchmark groups. The 2026 survey includes participation from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the results offer insight into taught postgraduate student experiences across a broad range of institutions from the UK higher education sector.

1.2 Survey content

PTES results provide participating institutions with an important dataset showing how students have reported their experiences across a range of topics relevant to taught postgraduate study and wider student experience.

Much of PTES is arranged into themed question sets, with between three and seven questions on each topic.

The themes covered by the main question sets in PTES 2026 are:

+ Teaching and learning
+ Engagement
+ Community
+ Assessment and feedback
+ Dissertation or major project
+ End-point assessment
+ Organisation and management
+ On-campus resources
+ Online learning resources
+ Support
+ Skills development

Eight of the question sets are core to the survey and are available to all respondents. A further three question sets (dissertation or major project, end-point assessment and on-campus resources) are optional to allow institutions to tailor the survey to specific audiences and ensure the survey is relevant to respondents.

In addition to these themes, the survey also asks demographic questions to support with analysis and additional questions, such as overall satisfaction with course quality and whether students had considered leaving their course. After a number of changes to the survey in 2025,[1] 2026 saw more minor alterations, with the largest change being the removal of a question on cost of living and the introduction of a question on paid work ("In an average teaching week, roughly how many hours have you spent in paid employment unrelated to your course?"). This change was made to provide comparable data between the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) for undergraduates, PTES for taught postgraduate students and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) for research postgraduates. Across these three surveys, the answers to this question will offer insights into the extent that students at different levels of study are combining their studies with paid work.

When respondents answer questions in the main themed question sets, they are shown a range of statements and asked to what extent they agree or disagree with these statements. Respondents can select 'Definitely agree', 'Mostly agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly disagree', 'Definitely disagree' or 'Not applicable'. 'Not applicable' results are removed prior to analysis. Question and theme results are calculated by dividing the number of positive responses ('Definitely agree' or 'Mostly agree') by all valid responses. This produces a score representing the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement. In this report, results will be provided to the nearest whole percentage, but participating institutions have access to exact results for their own institution, the sector and a range of benchmark groups.

PTES asks all respondents, 'What has been the one most positive aspect of your course so far?' and 'What one thing would most improve your experience of your course?', inviting a written response for these two questions. Institutions can also choose to include open comment questions at the end of each themed question set if they wish to receive further feedback.

1.3 Participation

In 2026, more than 95,000 taught postgraduate (PGT) students from 105 institutions responded to PTES. Advance HE is grateful for the support from the sector in running this survey. Institutions can decide which taught postgraduate students to include in their sample, based on guidance from Advance HE. Students invited to complete PTES should be studying a programme of at least 60 credits, the greater part of which is at Master's level and taught. Institutions can then decide whether particular cohorts of students, such as January starters, should be invited to complete the survey. The group of institutions running PTES varies slightly from year-to-year, with 91 of the 105 participating institutions in 2026

[1] Quinn, Shona (2025) *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2025: sector report*. York: Advance HE. Available at: advance-he.org/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-2025

having also participated in PTES in 2025; the number of institutions involved has been relatively stable since 2023.

Table 1. Number of participating institutions and total responses (2019–26)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Number of institutions	85	69	88	91	101	108	102	105
Responses	71 098	41 185	69 076	79 591	83 807	98 311	90 156	95 083

Institutions that participate in PTES run the survey via the Jisc Online Surveys[2] platform and issue the invitations for students to complete the survey. The survey must run for a minimum of three weeks at each institution to ensure all invited students have time to participate should they wish to do so. In 2026, data was collected between Monday 2 February and Friday 12 June. During their participation in the survey, institutions receive ongoing support from the Research and Surveys team at Advance HE, in addition to technical support from Jisc if required.

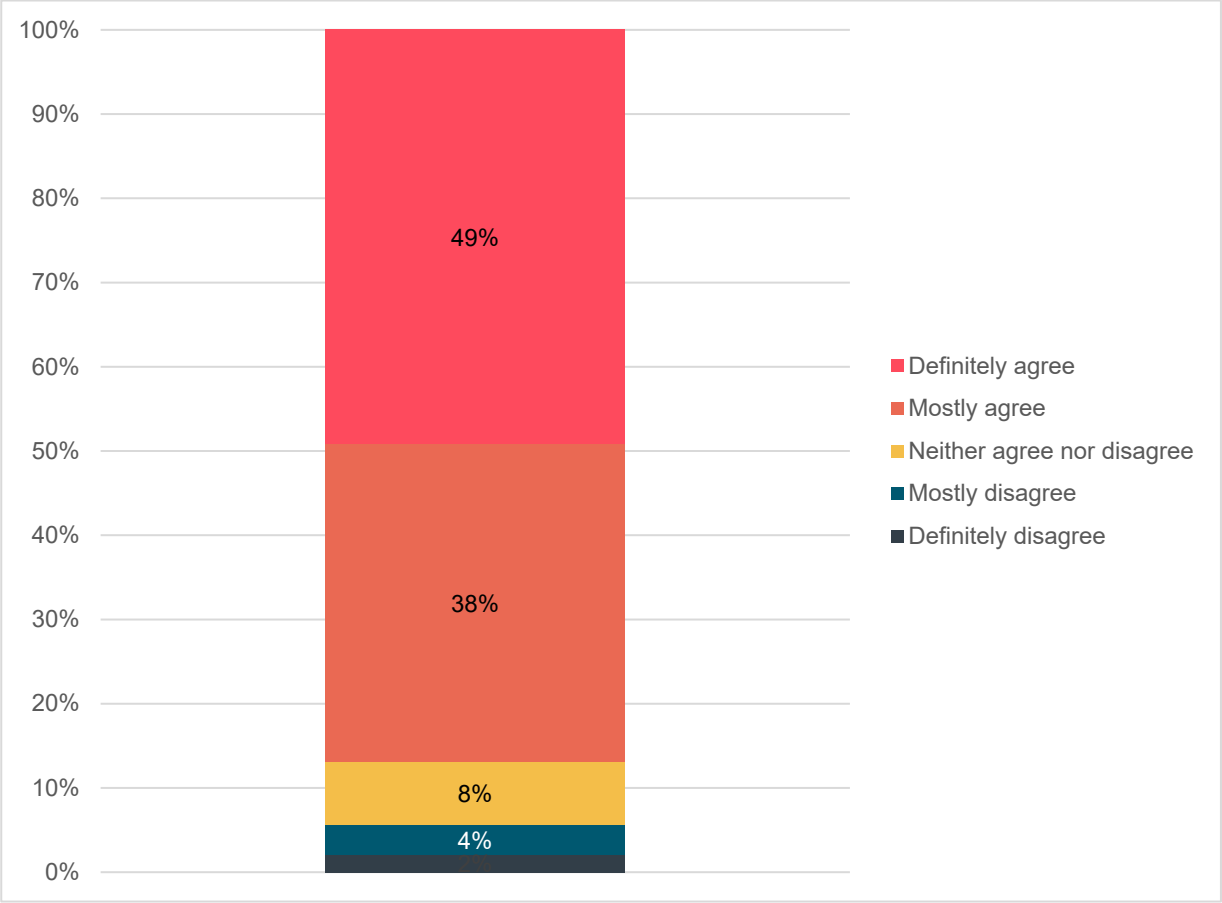
[2] Jisc Online Surveys. Available at: www.jisc.ac.uk/online-surveys

2 Overall satisfaction

2.1 Overall satisfaction with course quality

In PTES 2026, 87% of respondents agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of their course. Almost half of respondents definitely agreed with the statement (Figure 1), reflecting strong agreement that their programme meets their expectations. However, there was still a minority of students for whom this was not true. Six percent of students actively disagreed that they were satisfied with the quality of the course, a proportion that is unchanged from 2025.

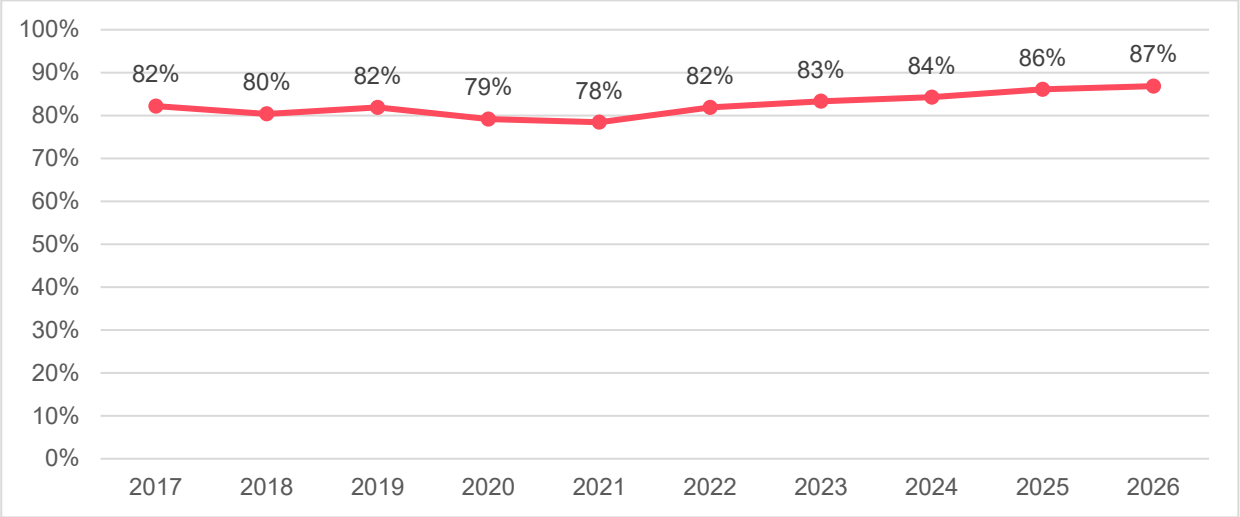
Figure 1: Breakdown of responses to 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'



The steady increase in overall satisfaction with course quality has continued (see Figure 2) and 87% is the highest overall satisfaction seen in PTES. This is an encouraging result in a sector navigating how to deliver quality programmes while facing significant complex challenges, including financial pressures.[3]

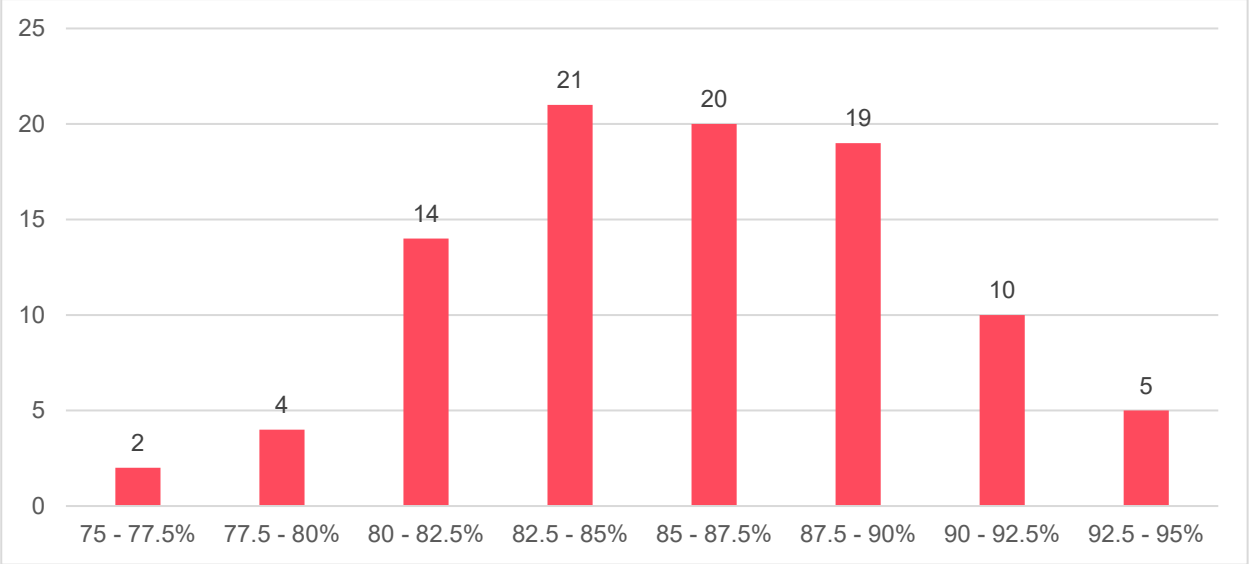
[3] Office for Students (2026) *Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2026*. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-2026

Figure 2: Overall satisfaction results over the last 10 years (2017–26)



Given the continuing positive trend, it is useful to examine how this translates to the institutional level. Very few institutions see overall satisfaction with course quality below 80%. Compared to 2025, more institutions are seeing particularly high levels of overall satisfaction with over 90% of students agreeing they are satisfied with course quality (see Figure 3). However, there is clearly still substantial variation among institutions and, given institutions with the lowest satisfaction levels have almost a quarter of students not satisfied with the course quality, some institutions still have room for improvement to make sure that their programmes meet students' overall expectations.

Figure 3: Distribution of institutional overall satisfaction results

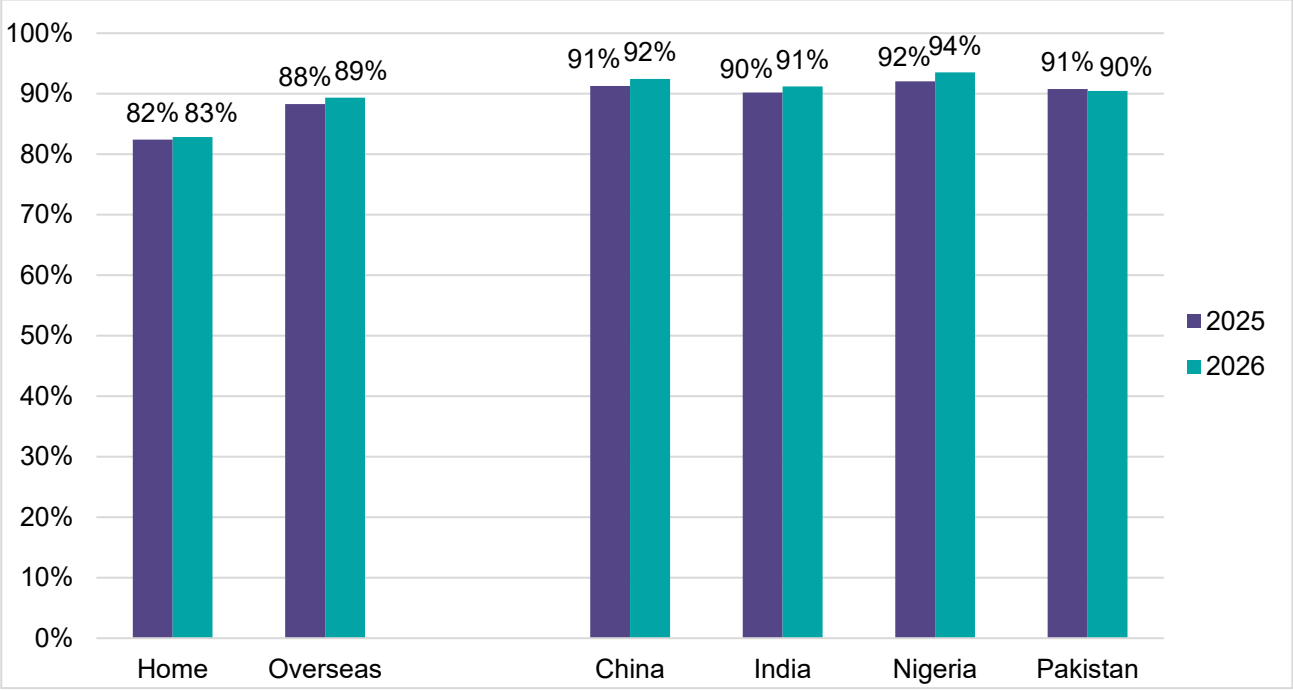


2.2 Overall satisfaction among different student groups

Overall satisfaction with course quality was above 80% among most student groups, although there was still clear variation between students with different demographic characteristics. Unfortunately, the gap in reported satisfaction between students with a known disability (80%) and students with no known disability (88%) persists, although at eight percentage points this is slightly lower than it has been in recent years.

Satisfaction with course quality was higher among overseas students than home students, continuing another trend observed in recent years. The six-percentage point gap in satisfaction between home and overseas students has remained the same between 2025 and 2026 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Overall satisfaction by domicile



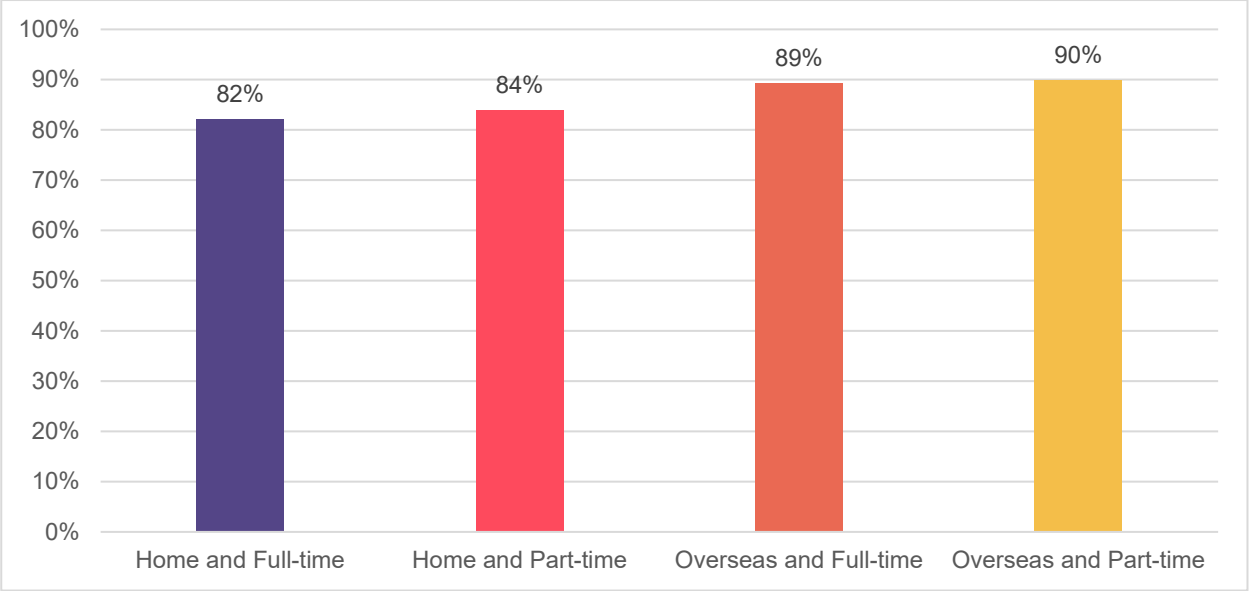
Students from China, India, Nigeria and Pakistan make up 63% of the international student respondents to PTES (and 71% of non-UK PGT students overall).[4] As in 2025, it is still the case that students from these countries show overall satisfaction with course quality above even the average for international students. However, it is important to remember when considering these satisfaction levels that this is reported by students while still on-course. This is no guarantee that their long-term satisfaction with the programmes will remain as high if, after course completion, they find their course has not provided hoped-for opportunities. Among international students, active dissatisfaction with course quality reported in PTES was just 4% but there is some evidence from HESA Graduate Outcomes

[4] HESA (2026) *HE student data: where do students come from?* Cheltenham: Jisc. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#detailed

data[5] that dissatisfaction among international postgraduate graduates may be increasing in relation to how much they use what they know and how much their studies fit with their future plans.[6] Although increasing satisfaction while on-course is something to celebrate, the longer-term impact students feel from their course must also be taken into consideration when the sector is assessing the value it offers to students.

Overall satisfaction also varies by mode of study (Figure 5). Part-time students make up 20% of the overall cohort of PTES 2026 respondents but they comprise 42% of home respondents, although this is still underrepresentation compared to the 63% of UK PGT students who studied part-time in the most recent HESA student data.[7] As institutions are responsible for choosing which students to include in the survey population, this may be due to lower response rates from part-time students or institutional decisions regarding which programmes to include in their survey population. However, the responses received still provide valuable insight into the views and experiences of respondents from different course types.

Figure 5: Overall satisfaction by mode of study (part-time and full-time) and domicile (home and overseas)



Part-time respondents to PTES 2026 reported higher satisfaction levels than their full-time counterparts (see Figure 5) across the home and overseas respondent cohorts. Home full-time students showed the lowest levels of overall satisfaction when mode of study and

[5] HESA (2026) '*HE Graduate outcomes data*'. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates

[6] Dickinson, J (2026) 'What the Graduate Outcomes data reveals about the PGT boom'. *Wonkhe*, 10 June. Available at: wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/what-the-graduate-outcomes-data-reveals-about-the-pgt-boom

[7] HESA (2026) *HE student data: where do students come from?* Cheltenham: Jisc. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#detailed

domicile are considered together and the satisfaction gap between home and overseas full-time students is seven percentage points.

2.3 Overall satisfaction by subject

At a subject level, overall satisfaction with course quality ranges from 81% satisfaction among Law respondents to 90% satisfaction among Business and management respondents (see Figure 6). Some differences between disciplines will be influenced by the different demographic profiles of certain disciplines within the HE sector, with different discipline areas having varying proportions of home and overseas students, or different models when it comes to the most common mode of study.

Figure 6: Overall satisfaction by subject (CAH1 level)

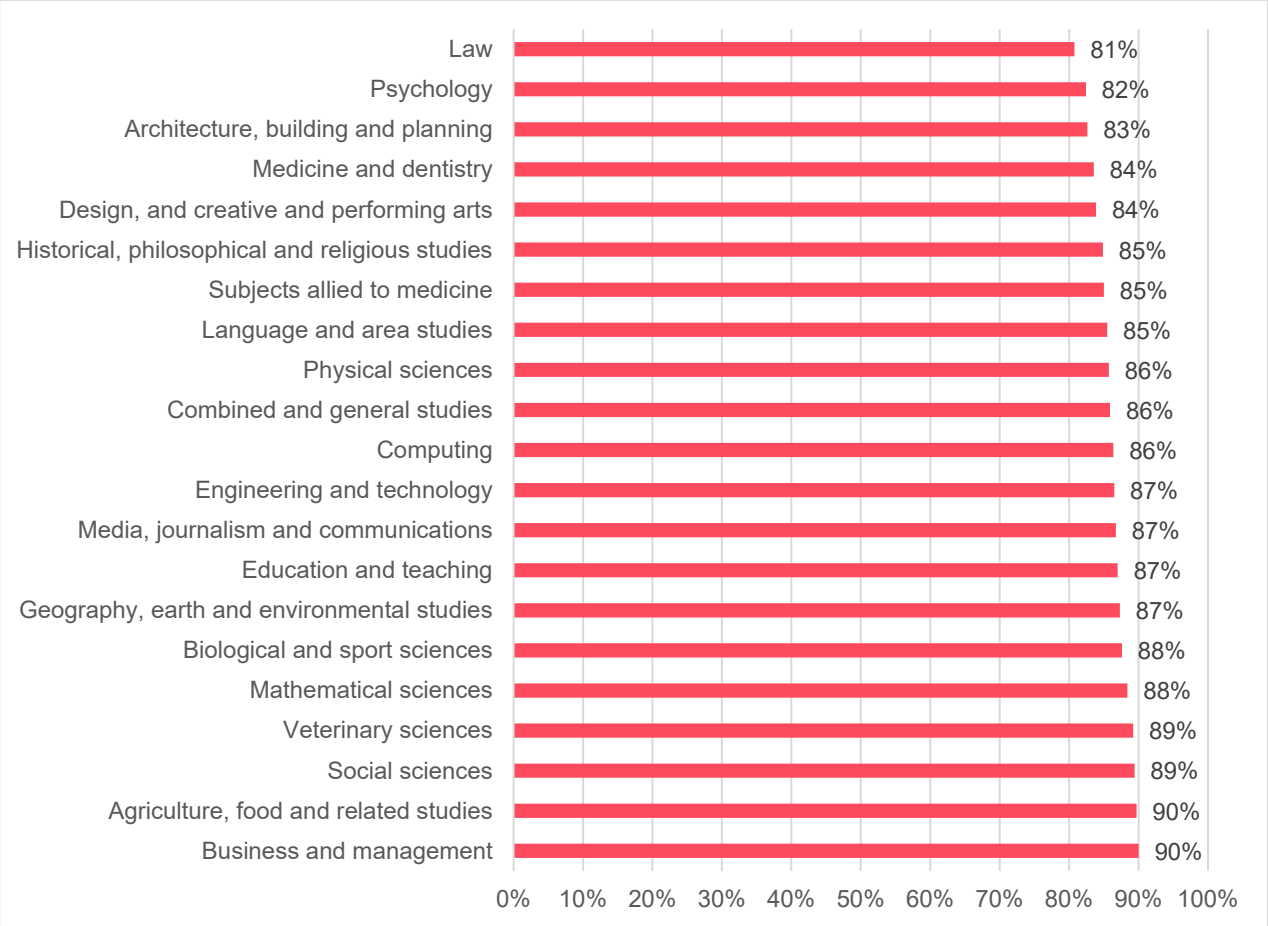


Table 3: CAH1 disciplines with highest overall satisfaction among home students

Discipline	Overall satisfaction result
Veterinary sciences	87%
Social sciences	87%
Biological and sport sciences	86%
Education and teaching	86%
Mathematical sciences	86%

Table 4: CAH1 disciplines with highest overall satisfaction among overseas students

Discipline	Overall satisfaction result
Veterinary sciences	95%
Agriculture, food and related studies	92%
Business and management	91%
Social sciences	91%
Education and teaching	91%

Examining satisfaction with course quality by discipline and domicile, it is notable that there is some consistency in the disciplines with the highest levels of satisfaction. Veterinary sciences, Social sciences, and Education and teaching were among the subject areas with the highest overall satisfaction for both home and overseas students (see Tables 3 and 4). Within Social sciences, there was further variation within this broad discipline area. Social work programmes were particularly highly rated by home students (with 89% overall satisfaction), while among overseas students, Health studies (93%), Politics (92%) and Social policy (92%) programmes were particularly well-received. Institutions participating in PTES 2026 received detailed subject-level reporting allowing them to examine these differences and assess how these sector-level results compared with the results at subject level in their own institution.

3 Correlations with overall satisfaction

Looking at correlations between overall satisfaction and all individual question items in the main question themes reveals which elements of the student experience included in PTES are most closely associated with satisfaction with course quality.

Table 5: Top 10 strongest correlations between individual measures and overall satisfaction

Question	Theme	Correlation: 2026 [8]	PTES 2026 score	Correlation: 2025
I was given appropriate guidance and support throughout my course	Organisation	0.664	85%	0.667
The course is well organised and is running smoothly	Organisation	0.655	83%	0.656
I am happy with the support for my learning I receive from staff on my course	Teaching	0.634	85%	0.635
As a result of the course I feel better prepared for my future career	Skills development	0.629	83%	0.637
My confidence to be innovative or creative has developed during my course	Skills development	0.611	84%	0.615
As a result of the course, I have developed my skills as an independent learner	Skills development	0.597	90%	0.6
Teaching staff are good at explaining things	Teaching	0.590	91%	0.598
The learning materials provided on my course are useful	Teaching	0.582	89%	0.588
My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my course	Skills development	0.581	84%	0.588
The course has enhanced my academic ability	Teaching	0.580	89%	0.594

The results of this analysis (see Table 5) show considerable year-on-year stability. This list features the same 10 question items as in 2025, albeit with some slight changes in the ordering and nine of the 10 question items also featured on the equivalent list in 2024. The two question items with the strongest correlations with overall satisfaction with course quality

[8] Results provided are Spearman's correlation coefficients. All correlations are significant at 99% and use the correlation guidelines where 0.501+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak.

are the same as in PTES 2025. The strongest associations continue to come from questions related to organisation and course support (as opposed to the non-course support asked about in the support theme questions).

Two of the top three strongest correlations relate to support and guidance during the course. Evidence from the Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (PAQ) project shows that for taught postgraduate students, feeling recognised and seen by those involved in their education helped them to feel valued at their previous place of study.[9] This may help explain why students who felt supported and guided throughout their studies were substantially more likely to report satisfaction with course quality overall. Students' perceptions of course quality appear to be shaped not only by academic content and delivery but also by the support they receive during their time on the course.

Beyond organisation and course support, many of the strongest associations are linked to students' perceptions of their own development. Four of the 10 strongest correlations come from the skills development theme. Students who felt their course had prepared them for their future career, developed their skills as independent learners or enhanced their academic ability were all substantially more likely to report satisfaction with course quality overall.

The pattern of results is broadly consistent with previous years of PTES. Students who feel supported and guided throughout their studies, who experience a well-organised course and who report positive development of their skills and abilities are more likely to express satisfaction with course quality overall. While correlation does not determine causation, these relationships have shown considerable stability over time, suggesting they reflect consistent features of the taught postgraduate experience rather than experiences specific to the 2026 cohort of respondents.

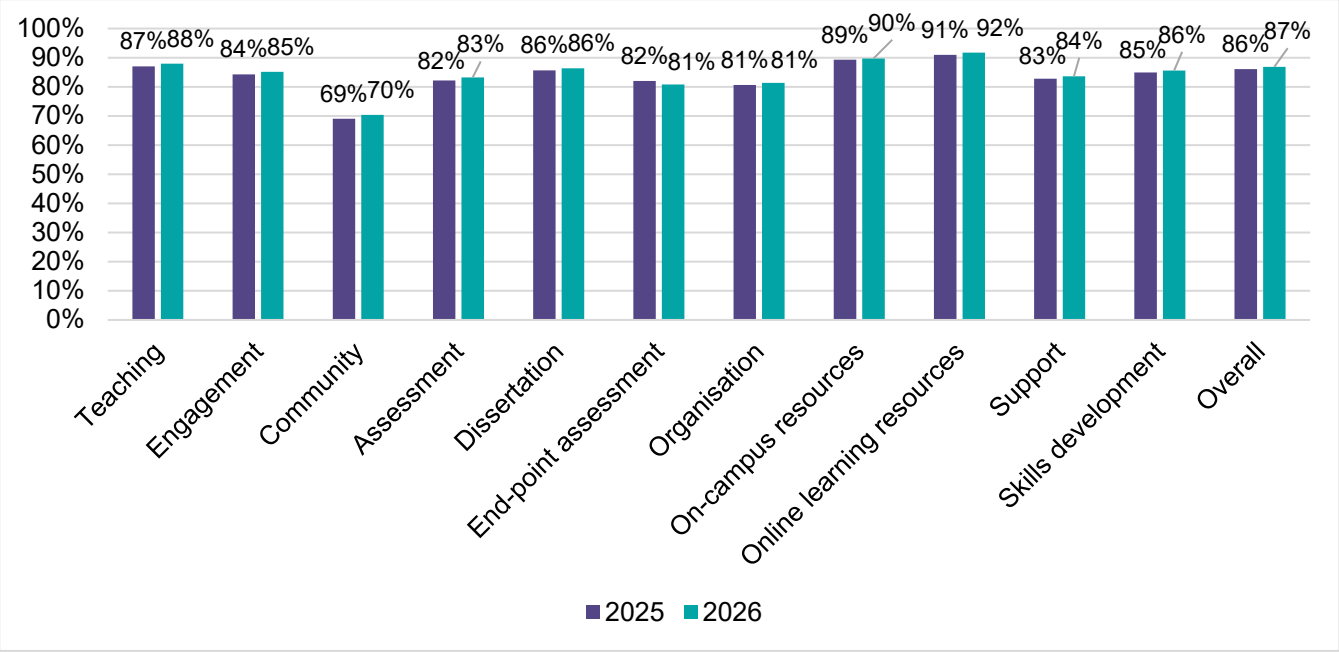
[9] Morgan, M, McIntosh, E, Hamshire, C and Page-Tickell, R (2026) '"Belonging" is in the eye of the beholder – steps to creating a sense of "belonging": a practitioner's approach'. *HEPI*, 24 May. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2026/05/24/weekend-reading-part-two-belonging-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder-steps-to-creating-a-sense-of-belonging-a-practitioners-approach

4 Elements of the student experience

4.1 Overview

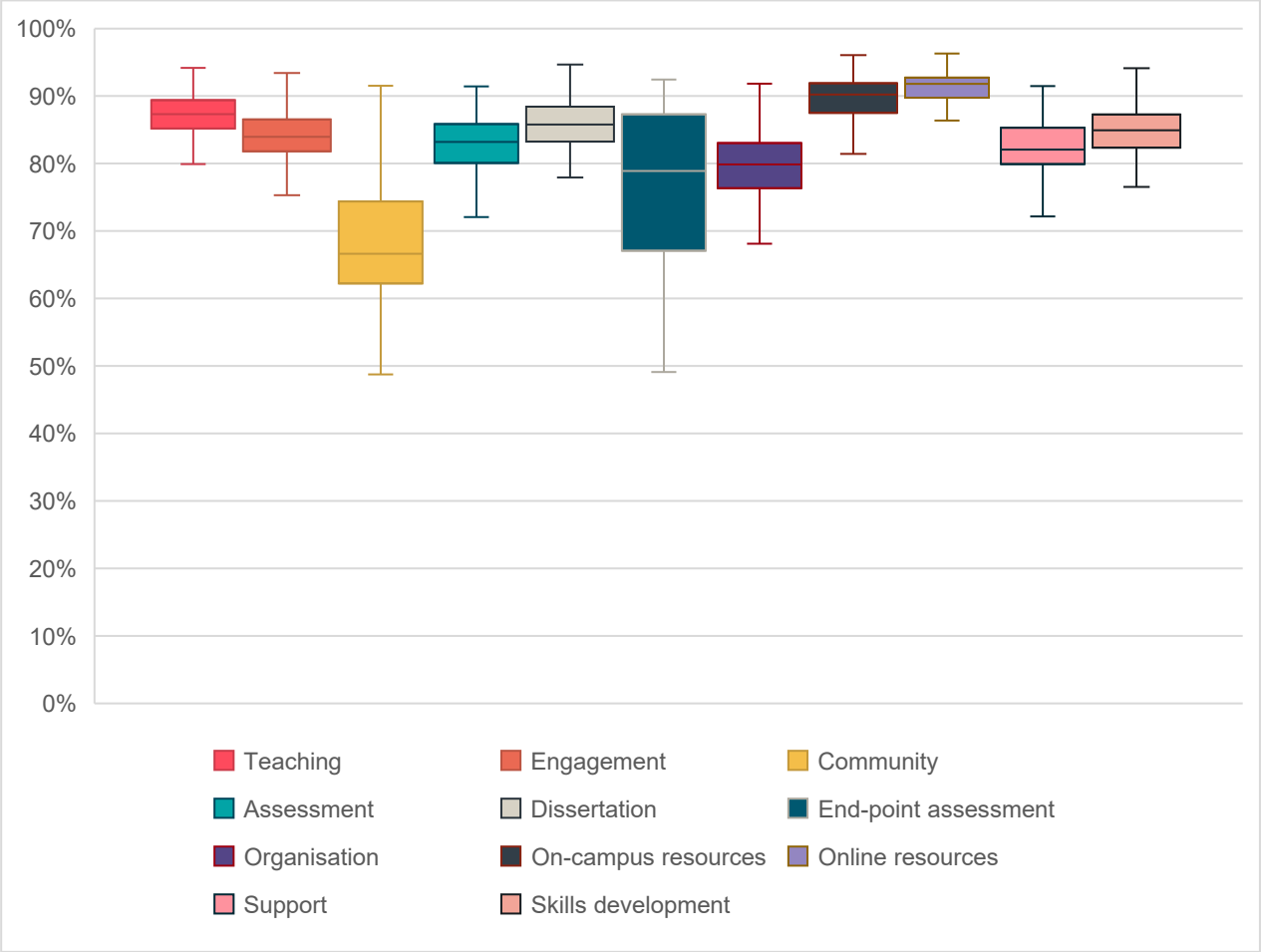
Results across the 11 question themes in PTES have been broadly stable between 2025 and 2026. Eight of the themes have seen slightly increased theme scores but all changes from 2025 were by one percentage point or less (see Figure 7) and do not represent a substantial year-on-year shift. The two resources themes remain the highest scoring sections of PTES, with score of 90% for on-campus resources and 92% for online resources.

Figure 7: Question theme scores in 2025 and 2026



Similarly to previous years, the community question theme remains the lowest scoring theme, indicating that PGT students continue to feel less positive about their sense of belonging and community than they do about other aspects of their student experience. End-point assessment is the one question theme that has shown a decline in its score between 2025 and 2026, but only around 3% of PTES respondents answered questions in this optional question theme, so more year-to-year variation may be expected.

Figure 8: Box plot of institutional question theme scores for 2026[10]



The year-on-year stability in the question theme scores is not due to uniform experiences across the sector. Results by institution show that there are considerable differences in students' satisfaction with different elements of their student experience. The highest scoring themes, those focused on resources, show the smallest amount of variation, with scores for online learning resources ranging by approximately 10 percentage points from the highest scoring institution to the lowest scoring institution. All institutions are scoring above 85%, suggesting this is an area where many institutions understand student needs and can meet them.

In contrast, the community theme scores for the highest and lowest scoring institutions vary by more than 40 percentage points, in addition to the scores generally being lower than for other question themes. For eight of the question themes, three-quarters of institutions have scores of at least 80%, whereas for community, three-quarters of institutions have scores below 75%. The wide variation may be partly attributed to the different delivery profiles at institutions. As in previous years, full-time students across the sector are far more likely than part-time students to report a sense of belonging, feeling part of a community and having

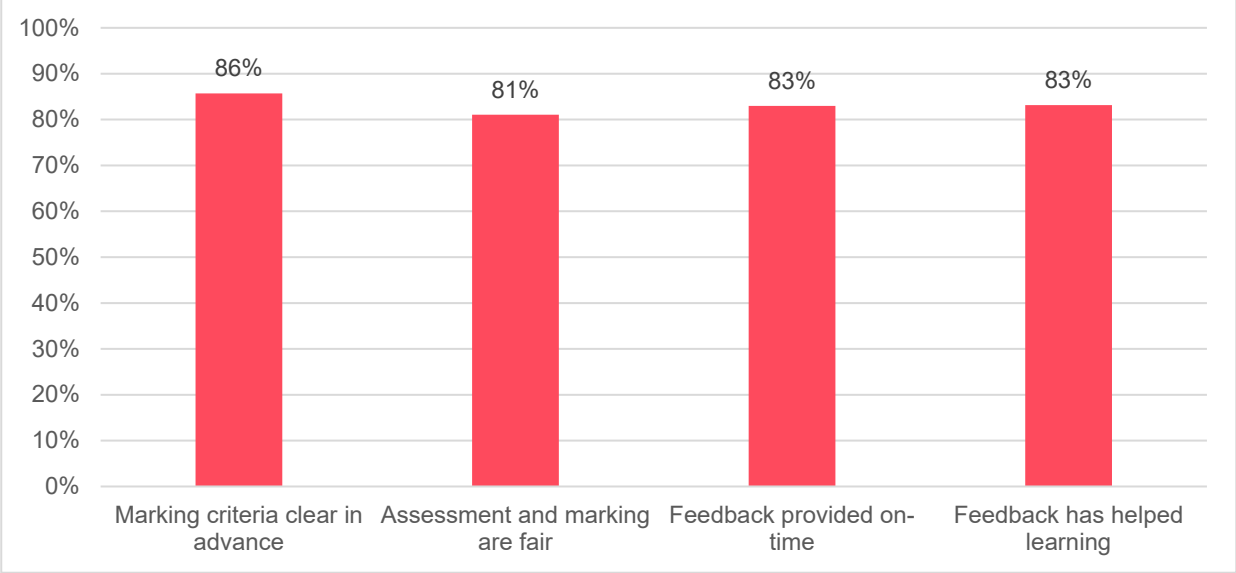
[10] Outliers have been removed.

sufficient opportunities to interact with other postgraduate students. Institutions with higher proportions of part-time PGT respondents may face particular challenges in achieving higher scores for the community question theme. This does not mean they are not working hard to cultivate a sense of community among their PGT student populations, but the differing nature of the students' engagement with their institution will increase the challenge when trying to nurture a sense of PGT community.

4.2 Assessment and feedback

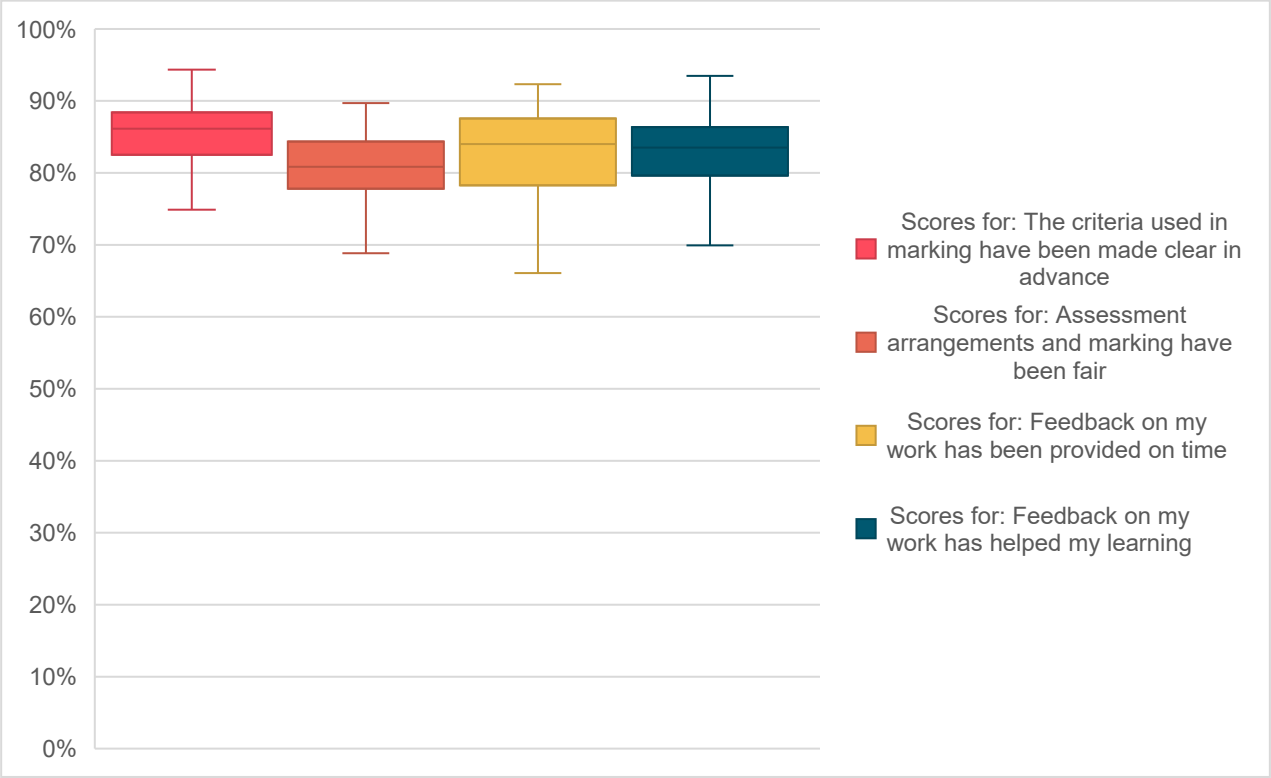
Institutional scores for the assessment and feedback theme vary by around 20 percentage points, with around 25% of institutions scoring below 80% for this theme. This question theme consists of four statements related to assessment, marking and feedback. Before being asked to report how much they agree with these statements, respondents are reminded that feedback includes written and oral feedback in formal and informal contexts. This is intended to help reflect the range of types of feedback PGT students may receive depending on the forms of assessment included in their programme. The statements cover whether marking criteria are made clear in advance, whether marking and assessment arrangements are fair and whether feedback has been provided on time and has helped learning.

Figure 9: Question scores within the assessment and feedback question theme



Respondents were most positive about the clarity of marking criteria (86%) but results were lower for whether assessment arrangements and marking were fair (81%). Respondents appear to be more confident in understanding what assessment is expecting of them but with slightly less agreement about whether the feedback that they are receiving meets expectations around fairness, timeliness and helpfulness.

Figure 10: Box plot of institutions' question scores in assessment and feedback question theme



Between institutions, there is most variation in whether students reported that feedback had been provided on time. The Pre-Arrival Questionnaire results from 2025–26[11] suggested that PGT students have high expectations of how soon they will receive feedback, with 46% of respondents expecting it within five working days, rising to 56% among non-UK domiciled PGT students. PTES results suggest that while, in terms of timeliness of feedback, many institutions are successfully managing or meeting expectations around feedback timescales, others are not, with fewer than 70% of students at some institutions reporting that feedback is provided on time. Where this hasn't happened, open comment feedback from students suggests that the main frustrations with this are twofold.

Students report the missed opportunity of being able to use feedback from a previous assessment to inform how they approach subsequent pieces of work. The intense nature of PGT programmes, particularly those studied full-time in the space of one year, will provide less natural leeway for such delays as assessments will often fall very close together. Some students also report frustrations when their university is not meeting the standards it has set for itself, with students expected to submit assignments on time but then not receiving feedback within agreed timeframes.

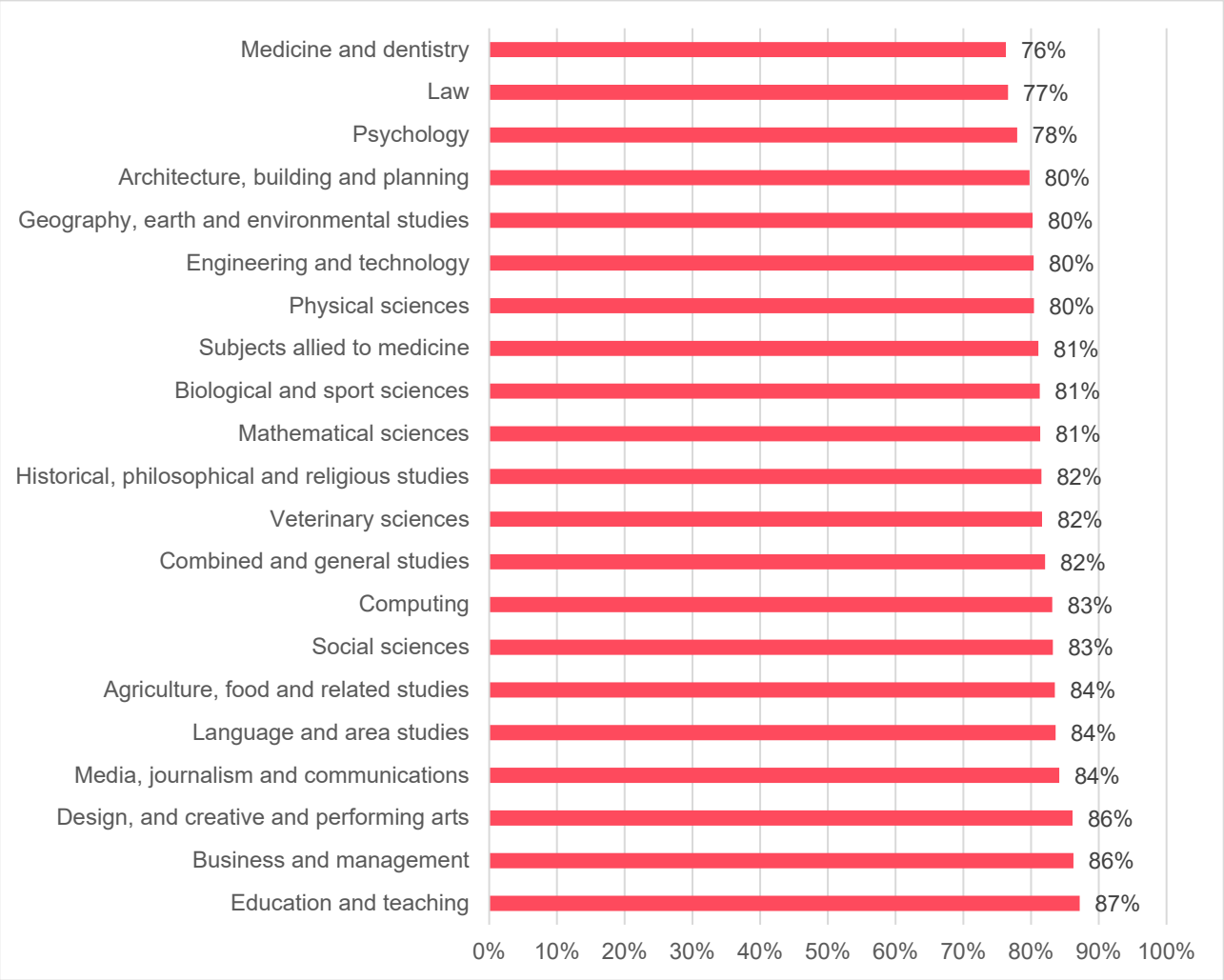
[11] The Pre-Arrival Questionnaire is a collaborative project between Advance HE, the University of East London and Jisc. Wave 1 ran in 2025–26 and more information is available in the Wave 1 initial results report, available at: advance-he.org/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results

Comments on this topic show understanding and appreciation when unavoidable delays have been clearly communicated to them but increased frustration when there has been no communication about the delay.

> *"Feedback has been delayed at times which is very hypocritical as we obviously have a deadline for our assignments and need good feedback to improve."*
>
> *"Feedback has always been of great quality and accurate – even on reflection when sometimes it's been tough to take. However, a number of assignments have had delays in marking (at least three so far) which is disappointing as we as students are held to such tight deadlines. I realise that delays can happen, and staff illness and university changes etc, but communication is key and there have been times when we haven't been told for weeks after the marking deadline what's going on."*
>
> *"The university has a two-week marking timeframe for assignments. The [department] without apology has not met these timeframes (one assignment took longer than two months to mark)… For instance, the feedback on the assessment was not provided until after the next assignment was due – therefore we were unable to learn from the feedback to improve the next assignment – essentially making the feedback useless, as we were unable to use the feedback to help our learning."*

The fairness of assessment arrangements and marking being fair shows less variation between institutions but is an area where satisfaction in general is slightly lower. No institution sees more than 90% of students agree with this statement and many institutions have less than 80% agreement that their assessment arrangements and marking are fair.

Figure 11: Assessment and feedback question theme scores by discipline (CAH1)



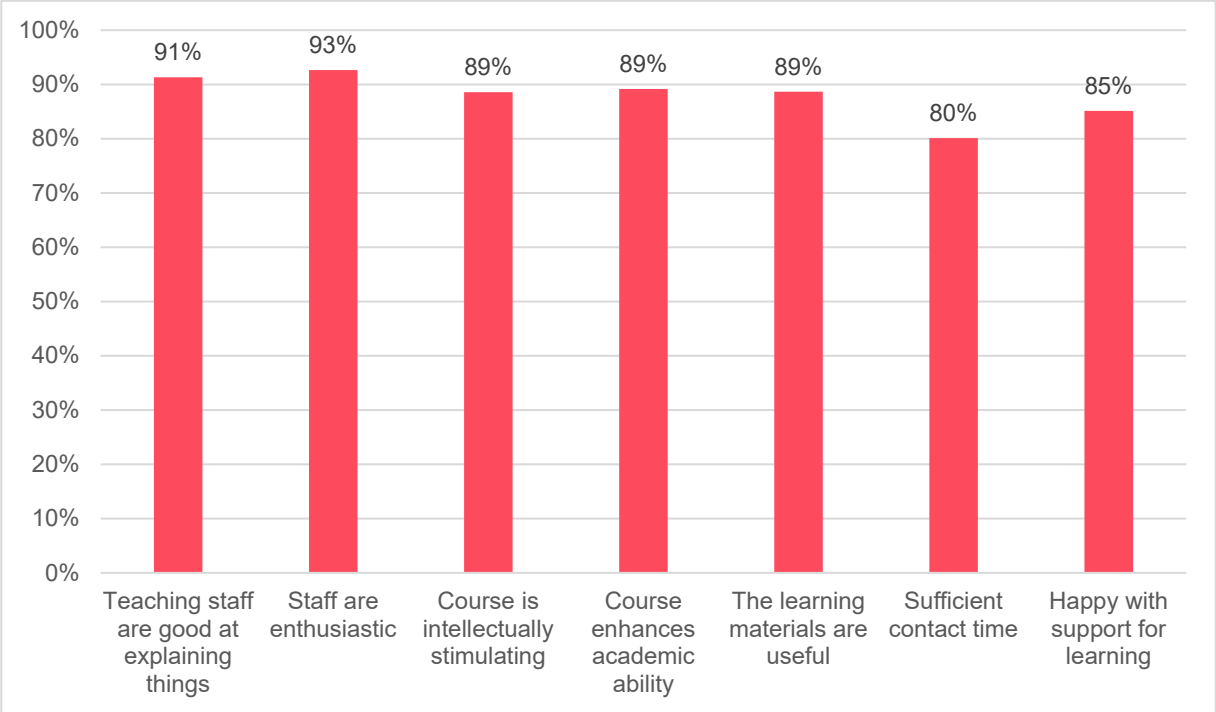
By discipline, assessment and feedback theme scores vary considerably from 76% to 87%. Education and teaching, Business and management, and Design and creative and performing arts recorded the highest theme scores, while Medicine and dentistry and Law see the lowest scores. Medicine and dentistry appears to suffer particularly due to issues with the timeliness of feedback delivery, with just 74% of respondents agreeing they receive feedback on time, two percentage points lower than the next lowest score. Timely feedback may be particularly important for students combining their PGT study with professional responsibilities as delays in receiving feedback may further reduce the time available to apply feedback to subsequent work in already limited study time.

Among Education and teaching respondents, each of the four statements in the assessment and feedback theme sees at least 85% of students agreeing, with over 90% of students agreeing that they received their feedback on time. This high rate of timely feedback applies to those studying for PGCEs and Master's programmes so it is not limited just to teacher training courses. These positive results may reflect differences in assessment and course structures, but it may be that the discipline offers lessons for building assessment cultures that both communicate requirements and meet students' expectations.

4.3 Teaching

The teaching question theme covers a range of key topics related to the academic offer of the programme and the associated staff.

Figure 12: Question scores within the teaching question theme



Teaching is one of the strongest-performing areas in PTES and four of the seven teaching question items feature in the list of PTES questions most highly correlated with overall satisfaction (see Section 3). Questions related to teaching staff see particularly high rates of satisfaction and the statement that 'staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' sees the joint highest level of agreement of any statement across the survey (93%, joint with the availability of online library resources). Teaching staff being good at explaining things also scores highly, with 91% agreement and strongly correlated with satisfaction with course quality. Teaching staff are often mentioned by students as the most positive aspect of their course so far and spoken about with high praise where students felt sufficiently supported to thrive on their programmes.

"The course is extremely well run, with supportive, approachable teaching staff and excellent clarity around expectations. As a neurodiverse student, it has been easy to follow and engage in the work, I have found assessment instructions and marking rubrics to be clear and helpful, and this has set me up to succeed. The staff have been understanding around extra support needs and extensions, where required, and answer any questions with encouragement and kindness. Although the course has been challenging, it has been a genuinely enjoyable experience and, for the first time in a long time, I have felt capable and confident in a learning environment."

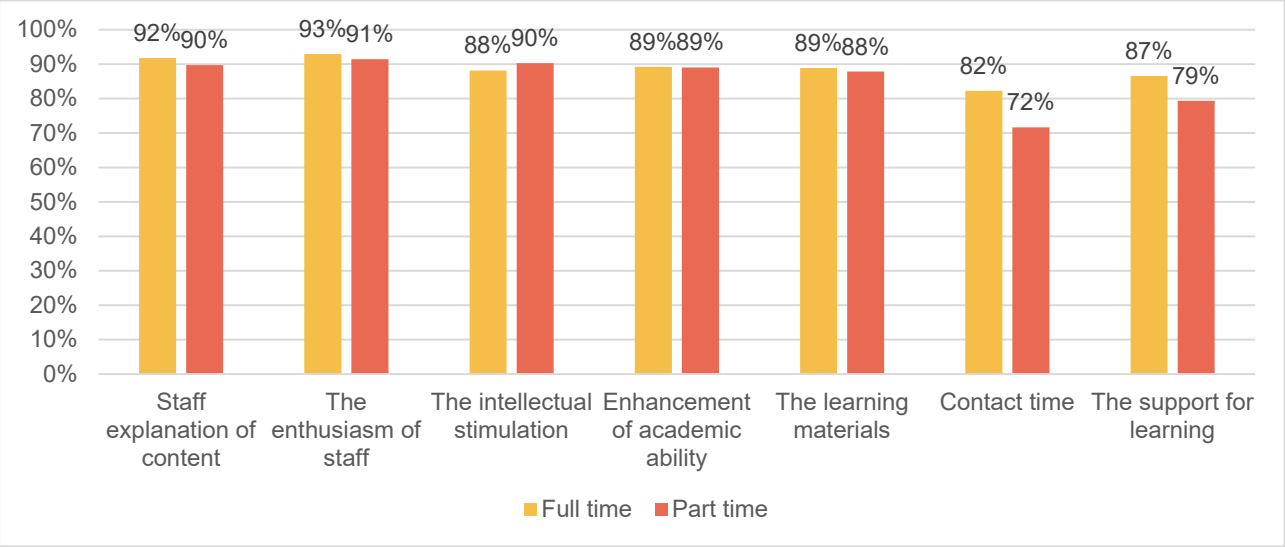
"The lecturers have been absolutely incredible. Genuinely supportive to students, understanding, encouraging, good at explaining things, they have responded amazingly when we've gone to them with problems. The course materials and reading lists were generally outstanding. [Certain modules] were phenomenal with incredibly interesting and enjoyable reading lists. I learned a huge amount in those seminars."

In contrast, 20% of respondents do not agree that there is sufficient contact time and contact time has the eighth lowest score of the 47 main question items in the survey. The lower scores seen for contact time may reflect students feeling like they do not have enough time to directly learn from staff, but prior expectations may also be a factor here as students move into PGT study. The Pre-Arrival Questionnaire wave 1[12] found that 58% of PGT respondents were basing their expectations for contact hours on assumptions from previous experience, rather than information they had received from their chosen institution. Without efforts to manage expectations upfront and explain clearly how the contact hours provided are sufficient for students to succeed in their chosen programme, gaps between expectations and reality could lead to students querying whether they are receiving 'enough' contact hours, particularly given the level of tuition fees many will be paying.[13]

[12] Gilder, T (2026) *Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire national pilot: postgraduate taught results*. York: Advance HE. Unpublished analysis.

[13] UCAS (2026) *Postgraduate fees and funding*. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: www.ucas.com/postgraduate/fees-and-funding

Figure 13: Question scores within the teaching question theme by mode of study



Contact time is also the question in the teaching theme that sees the biggest difference in scores between full-time and part-time students (see Figure 13). The gap in satisfaction with contact time may be exacerbated by the lack of clear information available regarding the structure of many part-time PGT programmes[14] or, where students are studying programmes that are taught simultaneously to part-time and full-time students, by students comparing themselves to their full-time peers who may find it easier to take up additional contact time opportunities such as drop-in sessions.

Similarly, part-time students are less likely to agree that they are happy with the support for learning they receive from staff on the course. This difference is particularly interesting given the strong correlation between satisfaction in this area and satisfaction with overall course quality. In open comment responses to PTES from part-time students, many comments reflect course design that is not sufficiently tailored to part-time students, limiting students' ability to take up support that may be available.

[14] Fairweather, E (2025) 'A matter of time: why our universities can't crack the part-time postgrad code', *HEPI*, 15 January. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/01/15/a-matter-of-time-why-our-universities-cant-crack-the-part-time-postgrad-code

“While the teaching staff are intellectually stimulating and the core materials are useful, the delivery model is fundamentally flawed for part-time students. There is a significant disconnect between the quality of the content and the accessibility of the staff. The shift to an in-person-only model for attendance-only modules has severely reduced "sufficient academic contact time". For those in full-time employment or full-time carers, the removal of virtual access means we are physically barred from the "contact" this section measures. I am dissatisfied with the support received because it is tailored for a full-time schedule.”

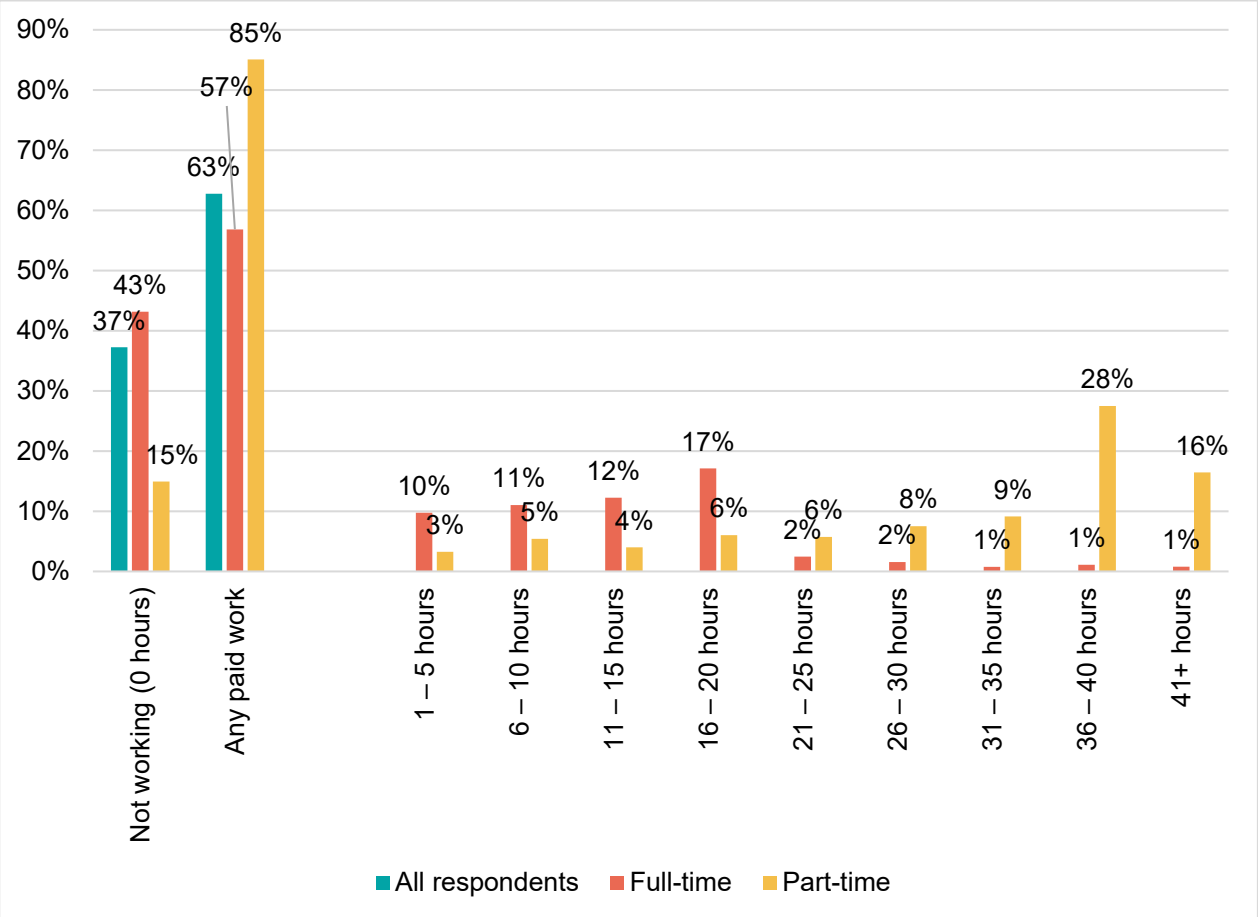
“As a part-time student, I could have used additional support/contact time with staff as I felt quite isolated. Overall, I thought the learning materials/readings were excellent. The one reservation I have is about the Dissertation project…The Dissertation writing workshop was excellent, and I wish we could have had a few more of those to help us along the way. Because I am a part-time student, I was not on the mailing list for it and found out about it through the cohort's WhatsApp page. The same went for my other part-time colleagues in the second year.”

5 Working for pay

5.1 Overall results

The PTES survey had relatively few changes between 2025 and 2026, but one significant change was the introduction of a question asking how many hours of paid employment, unrelated to their course, they undertook during an average teaching week. While students working for pay has been topical discussion in the sector in recent years,[15] given the rising cost of living, there has been little sector-wide evidence on the amount of paid work undertaken by taught postgraduate students during their studies. The addition of this question aims to aid sector understanding as well as providing institutions with data about their own students' amount of paid work and how this compares to the wider sector averages.

Figure 14: Percentage of respondents, by number of weekly hours of paid work and mode of study



[15] Dickinson, J (2025) 'The student experience is beyond breaking point'. *Wonkhe*, 12 June. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/the-student-experience-is-beyond-breaking-point-2

The results demonstrate that paid work is currently very common among both full-time and part-time postgraduate students on taught programmes. More than half of full-time respondents reported undertaking paid work during an average teaching week, with 24% of respondents working 16 hours or more (see Figure 14). However, a considerable portion (43%) of full-time students are not working during a typical teaching week and experiences are not evenly distributed across the sector. Among institutions receiving at least 100 responses, the proportion of full-time respondents undertaking no paid work ranged from 19% to 80%, while the proportion working more than 16 hours per week ranged from 1% to 45%. The considerable variation between institutions suggests that paid work is not experienced uniformly across the full-time taught postgraduate cohort. There are likely to be several factors influencing this institutional variation, including student demographics and the strength of local labour markets. While undertaking paid work alongside study is common for many respondents and at many institutions, it is far from universal.

Unsurprisingly, the situation is clearly different for part-time respondents. Of these, 85% reported undertaking paid work in an average teaching week, while over half reported working 31 hours per week or more. Given that many part-time students will be older and more likely to be combining study with existing employment, and may even be studying for the postgraduate course as part of developing skills for their existing profession, this pattern is not surprising. However, it is still a useful reminder of the extent of other commitments that part-time students will be juggling alongside their study.

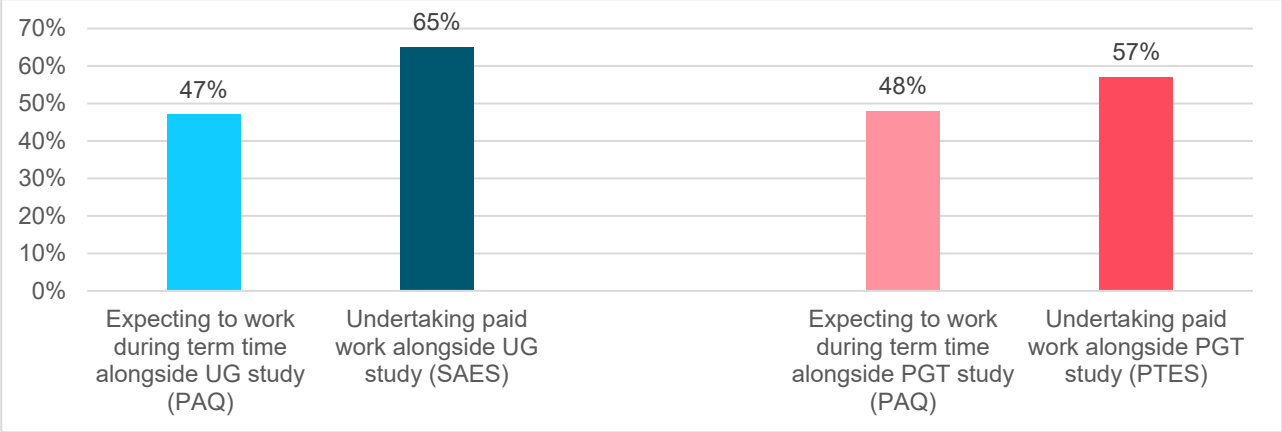
The proportion of respondents undertaking paid work is very similar regardless of domicile. Among full-time respondents, 55% of home students and 57% of international students report working for pay in an average teaching week. However, the international student experience of combining paid work and study is not uniform; among Chinese respondents, 39% of students reported that they undertook paid work in an average teaching week, compared to 66% of Indian students.

Across full-time respondents, the proportion of taught postgraduates stating that they work in an average teaching week is lower than for full-time undergraduates responding to the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES).[16] However, the percentage of postgraduates undertaking paid work is higher than the percentage who expected to do so (48%) in response to the Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (PAQ)[17] carried out at the start of the 2025-26 academic year. The surveys have differing methodologies so caution is required with drawing conclusions, but it will be interesting to monitor trends in expectations and reported working hours as more data becomes available in future PAQ, PTES and PRES surveys.

[16] Neves, J, Stephenson, R and Armstrong, C (2026) *Student Academic Experience Survey 2026*. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/the-student-academic-experience-survey-2026

[17] Gilder, T (2026) *Pre-Arrival Questionnaire national pilot – Wave One initial results*. York: Advance HE, p24. Available at: advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results

Figure 15: Percentage of full-time undergraduate (UG) and full-time taught postgraduate (PGT) students undertaking paid work, compared with expectations of working alongside study.



The introduction of this question provides useful new evidence about the taught postgraduate experience in 2026. While specific paid work patterns vary considerably between students, and the proportion of students working varies considerably by institution, the results suggest that combining paid work with taught postgraduate study, whether full-time or part-time, is a reality for a majority of PTES 2026 respondents.

5.2 Paid work and student experience

The results of PTES 2026 provide some evidence that higher levels of paid work are associated with less positive experiences in certain aspects of the taught postgraduate experience. For both full-time and part-time students, respondents who work for more than 20 hours per week were less likely to feel that workload on the course had been manageable (see Figure 16). There is a similar pattern visible for paid work and students' agreement that their timetable fits well with their other commitments (Figure 17). HEPI's Student Working Lives project[18] found declining academic engagement (as measured by attendance) as paid work hours increase, which could easily have implications for students' ability to manage their workload and their perceptions of how timetables fit with other commitments.

[18] Wright, A, Wilding, M, Lawler, M and Lowe, M (2025) *Student working lives*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives

Figure 16: Percentage of respondents agreeing with 'The workload on my course has been manageable' by hours of paid work in average teaching week

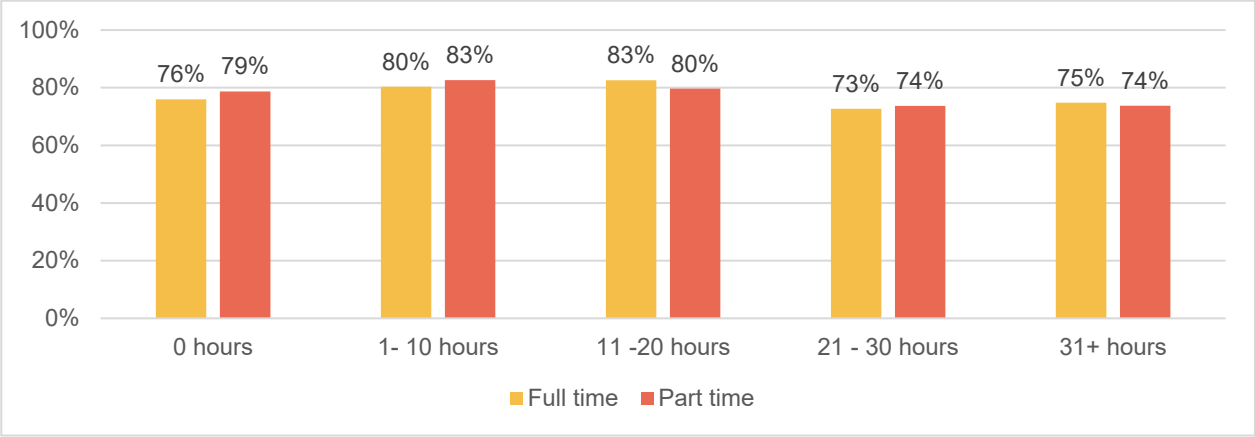
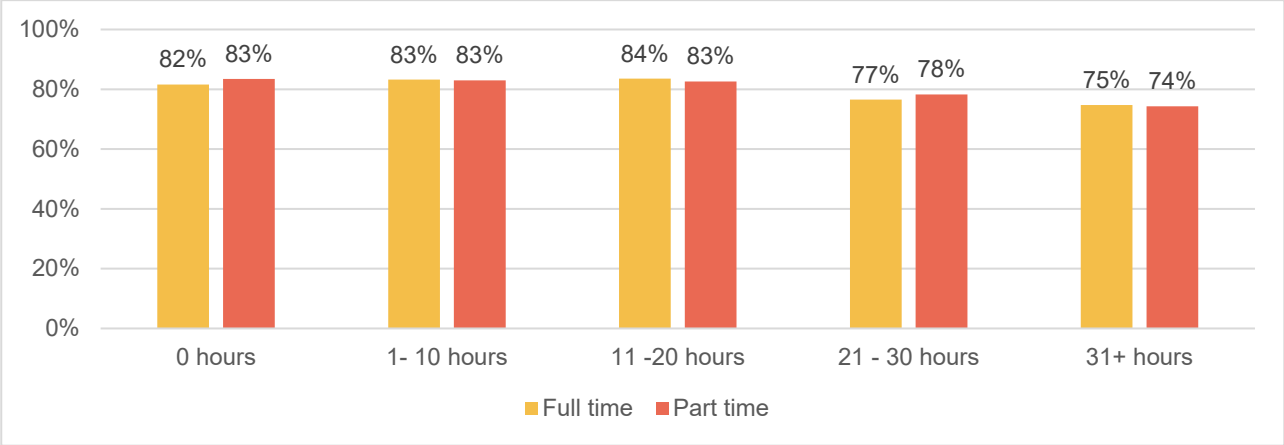


Figure 17: Percentage of respondents agreeing with 'The timetable fits well with my other commitments' by hours of paid work in average teaching week

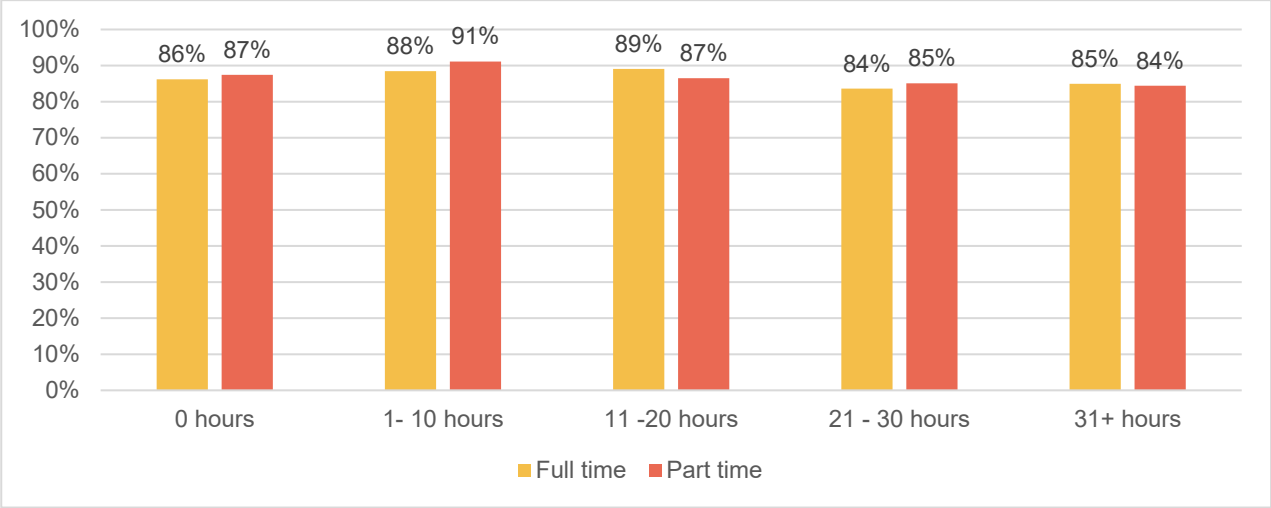


However, the relationship between paid work and reporting a manageable workload and suitable timetabling is not straightforward. Students undertaking a moderate amount of paid work (1 to 20 hours) often report more positive experiences than students who do not work for pay in an average teaching week. However, there is likely to be a range of factors at play here, particularly given that students' ability to take on paid work will depend for some on the workload and timetabling of their study programmes.

The lower reported satisfaction with workload and timetabling among students working over 20 hours per week is interesting but unsurprising given that taught postgraduate courses in UK higher education are already intense periods of study. For full-time students, in particular, balancing several days' worth of paid work with full-time study could easily place additional pressure on students' ability to manage their workloads. More surprising is the fact that a similar pattern is true of part-time students. This suggests that it may be the combination of balancing an advanced level of study with significant working hours that has

an impact on students' perceptions of factors like workload, rather than the exact balance of working hours and expected study hours.

Figure 18: Percentage of respondents agreeing with 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course' by hours of paid work in average teaching week



Satisfaction with course quality remains relatively high regardless of the amount of paid work (see Figure 18) undertaken but it is still the case that for both full-time and part-time students, those working more than 20 hours per week report lower levels of overall satisfaction than those working fewer hours.

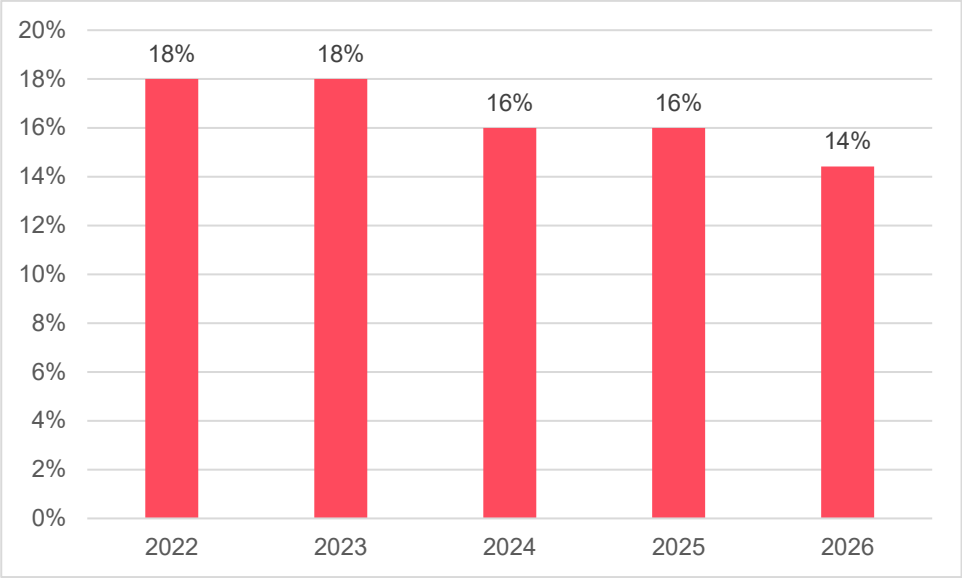
As this question was introduced for the first time in PTES 2026, it is not possible to determine from the survey dataset whether these results represent a change in how taught postgraduate students combine paid work with study. However, the results provide an indication that while many taught postgraduate students are successfully combining working for pay with their study commitments, higher levels of paid work are associated with decreased likelihood of managing workload, making this period of students' lives more challenging.

6 Considering leaving

6.1 Changes over time

Towards the end of the survey, PTES respondents are asked if they have considered leaving their course for any reason. Over the last few years, the proportion of students who have considered leaving their course has been gradually declining. In 2026, 14% of respondents had considered leaving their course compared to 18% in 2022. While this still means that over one in ten respondents have actively considered whether they ought to leave their course, it is still an encouraging trend that the proportion of students doing so is declining.

Figure 19: Percentage of respondents who had considered leaving their course (2022-26)



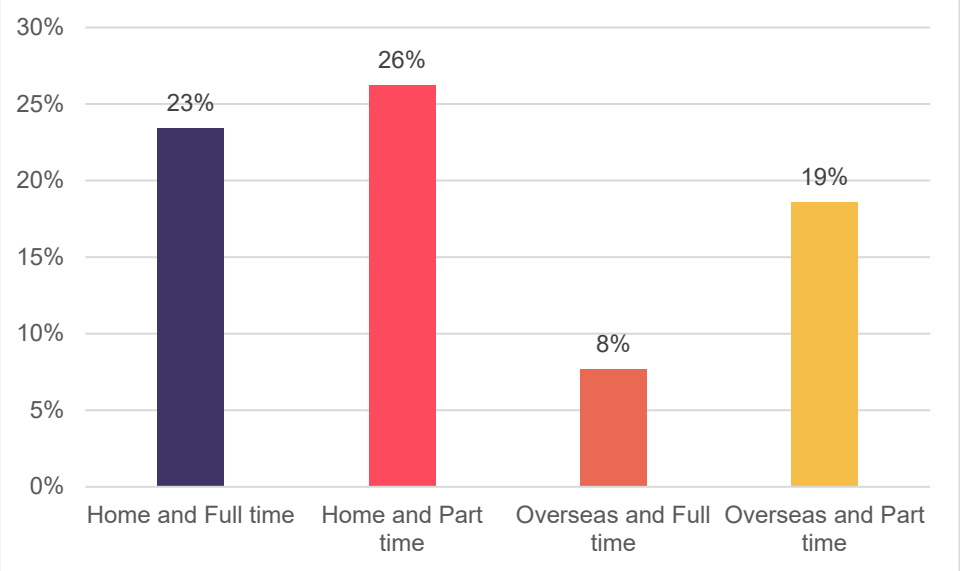
Leaving a taught postgraduate programme would be a major decision for most students, given its time and financial commitments, but it is important to note that while this data can tell us what percentage of respondents have considered leaving, the fact that these students have been invited to complete PTES means they had not withdrawn from their course at the point at which they completed the survey.

The reduction in the proportion of students who have considered leaving is also not experienced uniformly across the sector. At some institutions, fewer than 5% of respondents had considered leaving their course whereas at others, over a quarter of respondents had considered this. Institutional differences will likely have a range of factors but the scale of this variation suggests there is value in institutions examining the patterns at their own institutions to see whether patterns affecting certain student groups may be contributing, to help with directing support.

6.2 Considering leaving for different student groups

There are considerable differences between student groups in the proportion who reported having considered leaving their course. Home students were substantially more likely than overseas students to have considered leaving, regardless of mode of study (see Figure 20). Almost a quarter of home full-time students had considered leaving, compared with fewer than one in ten overseas full-time students. While the higher satisfaction levels reported by overseas students may play a role in this, there are also likely to be higher financial and practical consequences for overseas students where there may be visa implications and higher financial commitments involved.

Figure 20: Percentage of respondents who had considered leaving their course, by domicile (home/overseas) and mode of study (full time/part time)



Part-time students are also more likely to have considered leaving than their full-time counterparts. While for home students the difference is relatively small at three percentage points, the difference is much larger (11 percentage points) for overseas students. This may be because many overseas part-time students will be distance learners studying programmes with UK institutions while living abroad, so there may be fewer wider implications for withdrawal compared to an overseas full-time student who is very likely to be studying at a UK campus.

Students will be facing different circumstances when weighing up whether to leave their programme and certain student groups are considerably more likely to consider leaving their programme. Of students with a declared disability, 37% have considered leaving their course, compared to 11% of students with no known disability. The factors at play will be complex, considering 21% of home students have a declared disability compared to 6% of overseas students, and as previously discussed, overseas students overall are considerably less likely to consider leaving a programme. Students' likelihood of considering leaving cannot always be understood by looking at individual factors in isolation because different

aspects of their circumstances will combine to impact their experience of taught postgraduate study and their likelihood of leaving.

Regarding balancing paid work with study, respondents studying full-time and working for pay during a typical teaching week were no more likely to consider leaving than their peers who were not working. However, among part-time respondents, 25% of those undertaking paid work alongside their studies had considered leaving their course, compared with 20% of those who were not working.

6.3 Reasons for considering leaving

Over the last five years the reasons respondents have given for why they considered leaving have remained broadly consistent with previous years and there has been extremely little change in the reasons given between 2025 and 2026 (see Table 6). Difficulty balancing study and other commitments remains the most frequent reason given, followed by mental and emotional health problems and financial difficulties.

Table 6: The most frequent reasons given for considering leaving between 2022 and 2026 (as percentage of respondents who had considered leaving their course)

Main reason for considering leaving	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	19%	18%	19%	20%	20%
Mental/emotional health problems	14%	14%	13%	12%	12%
Other reasons for thinking about leaving	10%	11%	9%	11%	12%
Financial difficulties	8%	11%	13%	13%	12%
Felt the way the course is delivered was not as expected	10%	10%	9%	8%	8%

Fifty-seven percent of respondents who were dissatisfied with their course quality had considered leaving, compared with 10% of those who were satisfied. Dissatisfied students were clearly far more likely to consider leaving but 63% of students who considered leaving were still satisfied with their course. When overall satisfaction is examined in relation to the main reasons students have considered leaving (see Table 7), it is clear that many students who were satisfied with their course quality still considered leaving due to external factors. When their main reason to consider leaving related to either the balance with other commitments or financial difficulties, 82% of students were still satisfied with their course.

Table 7: Overall satisfaction and reasons for leaving

Main reason for considering leaving	Overall satisfaction with course quality
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	82%
Mental/emotional health problems	77%
Other reasons for thinking about leaving	58%
Financial difficulties	82%
Felt the way the course is delivered was not as expected	18%

Among different student groups there are considerable differences in why students are likely to consider leaving. This will be multifaceted but looking at mode of study and whether students are home or overseas students, there are immediate differences (see Table 8). For part-time students, the balance between study and commitments outside the course is particularly important, whereas mental and emotional health issues feature most prominently for full-time students.

Table 8: Reasons for considering leaving by mode of study and domicile

Main reason for considering leaving	Home and full time	Home and part time	Overseas and full time	Overseas and part time
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	13%	34%	12%	29%
Mental/emotional health problems	17%	7%	14%	4%
Other reasons for thinking about leaving	14%	14%	8%	12%
Financial difficulties	12%	6%	14%	22%
Felt the way the course is delivered was not as expected	8%	6%	9%	6%

Although the proportion of PTES respondents considering leaving has declined in recent years across the sector, it is still important for institutions to understand why different student groups may consider leaving. The results demonstrate that students may consider leaving because of their experience of the course and also because of pressures outside their studies.

7 Conclusions

The overall picture provided by PTES 2026 is very positive. Taught postgraduates in the UK sector are reporting high levels of satisfaction with course quality and results across the major question themes are stable or displaying slight increases in satisfaction. Teaching and resources continue to be areas where satisfaction is particularly strong while community remains the question theme with the lowest satisfaction.

Key areas for sector consideration are:

+ There is considerable variation by institution across different aspects of the student experience and results are not consistent across the sector. Students at some institutions report very positively on the community aspects of their postgraduate experience, which do not score strongly on average across the sector. This variation demonstrates the importance of institutions considering how their own results compare to these sector averages, to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of their postgraduate offer to students.

+ The strongest associations with overall satisfaction are again related to organisation and course support. This is a stable pattern in PTES results and students who felt they had received appropriate guidance and support, or who experienced a course that was well organised and running smoothly, were likely to also report that they were satisfied with their course quality overall. These consistent results show it is important to consider the wider course delivery as well as academic content, especially as the most effective ways to support students may vary considerably between programmes.

+ Within both the home and overseas cohorts, part-time respondents reported slightly higher overall satisfaction than their full-time counterparts. However, part-time students were less positive about their academic contact time and the support they received for their learning. Part-time provision is a key part of the sector's taught postgraduate offer, and institutions need to consider whether course delivery and support are accessible to students who are balancing their studies with other substantial commitments.

+ A majority of PTES respondents are balancing study with paid work. Working for pay during teaching weeks is common among full-time respondents as well as part-time students, although this does vary considerably between institutions. Regardless of their mode of study, students working more than 20 hours per week were less likely to find their workload manageable. These results provide useful context for the sector when considering course workload and timetabling, demonstrating that substantial paid work is part of the taught postgraduate experience for many full-time as well as part-time students.

+ The proportion of respondents who have considered leaving has continued to decline. Although dissatisfaction with course quality is clearly linked to considering leaving, many respondents who had considered leaving had done so due to difficulties balancing study with other commitments or mental health reasons, even if they were satisfied with their course. This highlights that many postgraduate students are navigating complex circumstances during their time studying, and different approaches and support will be needed for different cohorts to help students remain on course.

Appendix 1. List of participating institutions

Aberystwyth University	Loughborough University	University of Exeter
Arden University	Middlesex University	University of Hertfordshire
Aston University	Newcastle University	University of Huddersfield
Prifysgol Bangor University	Northeastern University London	University of Kent
Birkbeck, University of London	Norwich University of the Arts	University of Law
Birmingham City University	Nottingham Trent University	University of Leeds
Bournemouth University	Oxford Brookes University	University of Leicester
BPP University	Plymouth Marjon University	University of London (School of Advanced Study)
Buckinghamshire New University	Queen Mary University of London	University of Northampton
Canterbury Christ Church University	Ravensbourne University London	University of Nottingham
Cardiff Metropolitan University	Royal College of Art	University of Oxford
City St George's, University of London	Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Plymouth
Courtauld Institute of Art	Royal Veterinary College	University of Portsmouth
Coventry University	Sheffield Hallam University	University of Reading
Cranfield University	SOAS, University of London	University of Roehampton
De Montfort University	St Mary's University, Twickenham	University of Salford
Durham University	Teesside University	University of South Wales
Edinburgh Napier University	The Open University	University of Southampton
Glasgow Caledonian University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	University of Staffordshire
Goldsmiths, University of London	The University of Edinburgh	University of Stirling
Guildhall School of Music & Drama	Ulster University	University of Strathclyde
Harper Adams University	University College Birmingham	University of Suffolk
Hartpury University and Hartpury College	University for the Creative Arts	University of Surrey
Heriot-Watt University	University of Aberdeen	University of Sussex
Imperial College London	University of Bath	University of the Arts London
Institute of Cancer Research	University of Birmingham	University of the Highlands and Islands
Keele University	University of Bradford	University of the West of England
King's College London	University of Brighton	University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Kingston University	University of Bristol	University of Warwick
Lancaster University	University of Buckingham	University of West London
Leeds Beckett University	University of Cumbria	University of Westminster
Liverpool John Moores University	University of Derby	University of Wolverhampton
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	University of Dundee	University of Worcester
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine	University of East Anglia	Wrexham University
London South Bank University	University of East London	York St John University

Appendix 2. Respondent profile

	2026	2025	2024	Sector (HESA 2024-25)
All respondents	**95,083**	**90,156**	**98,311**	**675,375**
Age				
30 or younger	70%	71%	67%	29 and under: 65%
31 or older	30%	29%	33%	30 and over: 35%
TOTAL	**94,593**	**89,776**	**96,503**	**675,340**
Disability				
Declared disability	11%	10%	9%	12%
No known disability	89%	90%	91%	88%
TOTAL	**87,693**	**83,273**	**91,114**	**675,375**
Ethnicity (UK domicile only)				
Asian	11%	11%	11%	13%
Black	8%	8%	7%	10%
Mixed	5%	5%	5%	4%
Other ethnicity	2%	2%	2%	2%
White	73%	74%	76%	70%
TOTAL	**30,620**	**27,952**	**27,258**	**324,900**
Domicile				
UK	36%	34%	31%	50%
EU	3%	3%	3%	2%
Non-EU	61%	63%	65%	48%

TOTAL	**88,282**	**84,268**	**89,831**	**674,210**
Mode of study				
Full-time	80%	80%	79%	66%
Part-time	20%	20%	21%	34%
TOTAL	**94,964**	**90,050**	**98,203**	**675,375**
Qualification type				
Masters	87%	88%	89%	80%
Other	13%	12%	11%	20%
TOTAL	**94,236**	**90,067**	**98,194**	**675,375**

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