2019
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

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AdvanceHE

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY

Contents

1. Executive Summary

This report draws together the key learnings from a dataset which represents the views of over 50,000 Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) across 107 higher education institutions (HEIs) – the largest survey of its kind.

The Postgraduate Research (PGR) experience across the sector remains a positive one, with overall satisfaction increasing to 81%. However, the score achieved in 2019 remains lower than for the period 2007 to 2017, which indicates that opportunities for improvement still remain. One area that continues to score relatively poorly, despite a more focused set of questions this year, is the quality of the research culture within a department or research area, which may potentially hold the key to boosting the overall rating of the experience. It is inspiring to see that PGRs are overwhelmingly motivated by their interest in their subject rather than available funding, however it is concerning that their confidence in completing within timescale reveals a declining trend over time. Additionally, satisfaction levels through each stage of a PGR degree appear to reduce until graduation is reached.

Unique to this edition of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), a revised set of questions has enabled us to provide direct comparison of levels of wellbeing among PGRs with those of undergraduates and the general population. This analysis reveals that although the wellbeing levels of PGRs are fairly low, they are above those of the undergraduate population, with the stark exception of anxiety, where PGRs report clear concerns. We have seen above how the length and stages of a PGR degree can impact on levels of confidence, and this may in turn be leading to high levels of anxiety.

For the first time, 'free text' comments have been analysed, with results provided to participating institutions and summarised here. Key areas for improvement included supervision and support, as well as working culture and environment – which chimes with the relatively low scores we have seen for research culture.

Comparison of the experience among (UK domiciled) PGR students of different ethnic backgrounds provides a mixed picture. Overall, students of White ethnicity tend to be more satisfied, but Black and Chinese students are also generally positive. The main ethnic groups who are less happy are those of Asian, Mixed and 'Other' backgrounds. Any differential experience requires further investigation, but the results among Mixed and 'Other' ethnicities need unpicking, as these groups are comprised of several smaller groups which may be facing particular challenges.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite more than 50,000 PGRs participating in the PRES on a regular basis, not all PGRs feel that their feedback is valued or acted upon. This suggests greater opportunities exist for institutions to use the feedback from the PRES and other forms of student insight to explain to PGRs how their views are making a difference.

2. Introduction

The importance of measuring student satisfaction in higher education (HE) is recognised by academia, practitioners and students alike.[1] Since its introduction in 2007, PRES has contributed to this body of knowledge. It is the leading annual survey of the postgraduate researcher experience.

PRES has been designed to aid and support enhancement by providing key information to support strategic decisions and to target areas for improvement. Each participating institution receives its own tailored, institutional-level results by the end of June each year – just a few weeks after the survey closes. PRES offers institutions the insights to help them explore where and how their postgraduate research experience may be improved, and the results can be used alongside other sources of data in order to gain a broader picture.

Each participating institution can compare their results against a variety of benchmarking groups. The data reflects insight into the experiences of a range of types of PGR student, including PhDs, professional doctorates, Masters by Research and MPhil (with and without transfer to PhD).

This report is an overview of the overall findings. It explores recurrent and emerging themes pinpointing where detailed research may be valuable in further validating the findings and exploring solutions and options for a better postgraduate research experience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey design

In 2019, PRES comprised 41 questions - 31 closed 5-point Likert scale questions and 10 optional open text questions (including the option for five *Wellbeing* questions mirroring the Office for National Statistics 0 to 10 scale). Questions are grouped into seven core themes:

+ Supervision
+ Resources
+ Research Culture
+ Progress and Assessment
+ Responsibilities
+ Research Skills
+ Professional Development

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[1] QS (2019) Why student satisfaction is the key to student recruitment. Available online: https://www.qs.com/why-student-satisfaction-is-the-key-to-student-recruitment/

Data is collected via an online survey method using Jisc Online Surveys[2] software. Surveys are distributed by individual higher education institutions directly to their PGR student population. In 2019, data was collected between 1 February and 17 May 2019. Institutions were able to choose when they ran the survey within this timeframe, provided that the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

Over the past 12 years, PRES has undergone various developments to keep pace with change and adapt to contemporary PGR experiences. Examples include aligning it more closely with Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF) which was done in 2013; while the results of a consultation in 2017 introduced a greater focus on modules, more flexible guidance around publication of data and the introduction of a section focusing on PGR wellbeing.

In 2019, PRES has continued to evolve. For example, the initial wellbeing questions have now been aligned with the Office for National Statistics and the Graduate Outcomes Survey. This brings PRES into line with other Advance HE surveys, such as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and the Student Academic Experience Survey. The revised wording of questions followed consultation with institutions, which included a redesigned '*Research Culture*' section. Also new this year was a pilot project which provided analysis of a key 'free text' question in PRES. Forty-two institutions took part in the pilot and received bespoke reports. This pilot has helped to provide an additional perspective on the data and consequently a richer understanding of the PGR experience.

3.2 Sample size

In 2019, 107 institutions participated in PRES (listed in Appendix 1) with 50,600 individual respondents. This represents a strong response rate of 42%. Sample sizes for 2008–2019 are highlighted in Figure 1 below. A detailed respondent profile is in Appendix 2.

Figure 1: PRES participation: institutions and responses (2007–2019)

	2009	**2011**	**2013**	**2015**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**
Institutions	82	102	122	123	117	66	107
Responses	18,644	31,202	48,401	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600

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[2] Jisc Online Surveys (2019) *About online surveys*. Available online:
https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/about/

3.3 Benchmark groups

In 2019, the following benchmark group comparison results were produced for participating institutions:

Global	**Post-92**
Cathedrals Group	**Russell Group**
Guild HE	**Small and Specialist**
Million Plus	**University Alliance**
Pre-92	

4. Overall Satisfaction

4.1 Understanding overall satisfaction

It is encouraging that in 2019, the vast majority of PGRs (81%) agreed that they were satisfied with their experience. Of those who '*disagreed*', which was 10%, only 4% of those '*definitely disagreed*'.

Figure 2: I agree that I was satisfied with my experience
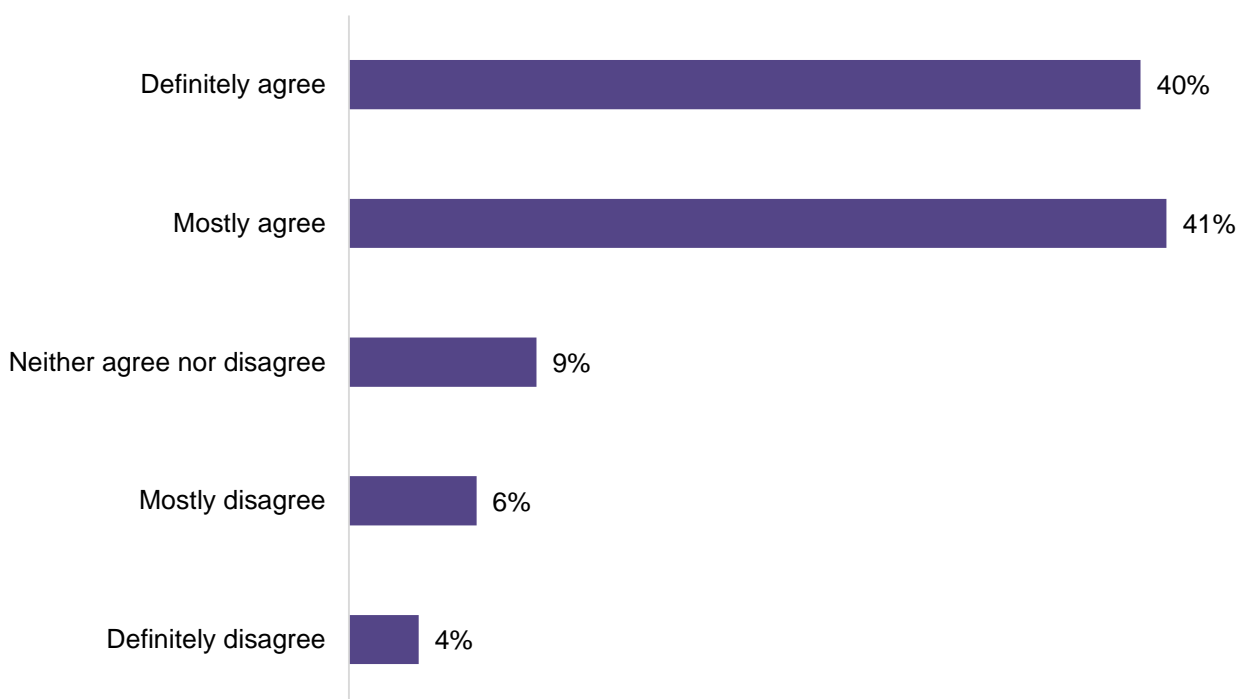
From a longitudinal perspective, illustrated in Figure 3 below, it is clear that the PGR experience has remained generally positive overall since 2007 and the 2019 results are consistent with that narrative.

Figure 3: Satisfaction over time (2007–2019)

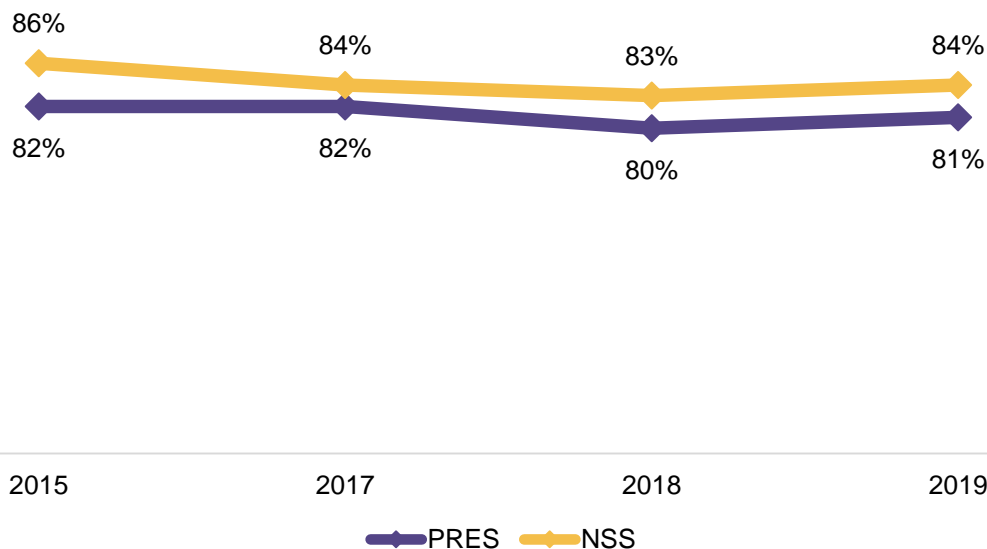| 81%	83%	84%	86%	82%	82%	82%	80%	81%
2007	2008	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019
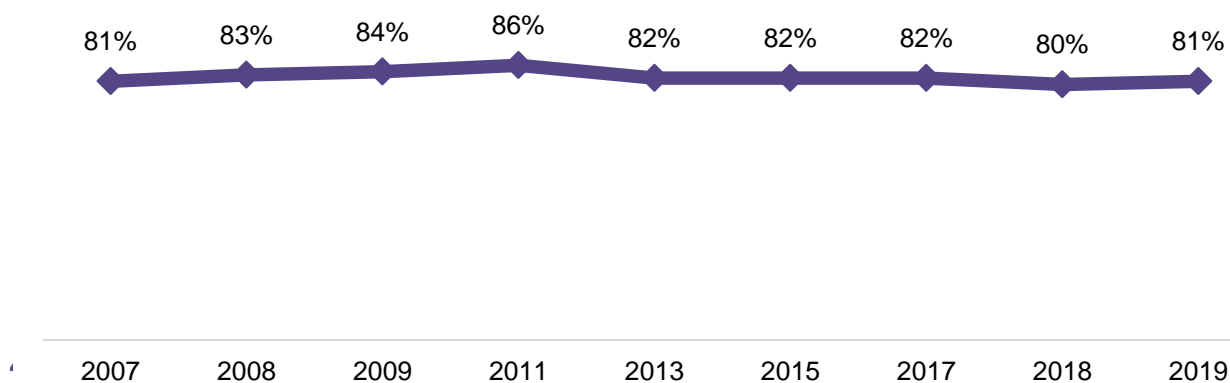
One potential reason for the decrease in 2018 and subsequent improvement is that the 2018 PRES survey coincided with the widespread UCU (University and College Union) strike action over pension arrangements. With this in mind it is encouraging, and also logical, that in the absence of any major strike action in 2019, levels of satisfaction have increased, although it should be noted that the current level of 81% is still below the high point of 86% achieved in 2011.

4.2 Postgraduate versus undergraduate comparison

To obtain a different perspective of the postgraduate experience, a direct comparison can be made to the undergraduate experience (Figure 4), using the National Student Survey (NSS) data.[3] NSS applies an identical 5-point Likert rating scale to that used in PRES. From this analysis, it can be seen that although both student cohorts are satisfied with their overall experience, undergraduates have tended to reflect higher satisfaction year-on-year than PGRs, with both cohorts displaying similar trends in terms of a decline from 2015 to 2018 and then an increase in 2019.

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[3] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/ [Accessed 4 October 2019].

Figure 4: PRES comparison with NSS (2015–2019)

4.3 Areas for improvement

In 2019, opportunities for improving the PGR experience were explored through qualitative analysis of Question 20. This posed the question, '*what, if anything, is the top area in which your experience of your research degree programme so far could be improved?*' This analysis was offered as a pilot initiative for the first time this year and HEIs had the choice to opt in or out.

Of the 50,600 PRES respondents, comments from 10,303 PGRs were submitted for analysis by institutions opting to take part in this initiative (Figure 5). The qualitative comments were then coded and analysed[4] and grouped into eight predominant themes and further sub-themes, which are shown in Table 1.

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[4] Free text comments were analysed and coded by QDAS (www.qdaservices.co.uk/) using MAXQDA software.

Figure 5: Number of PGRs' comments analysed
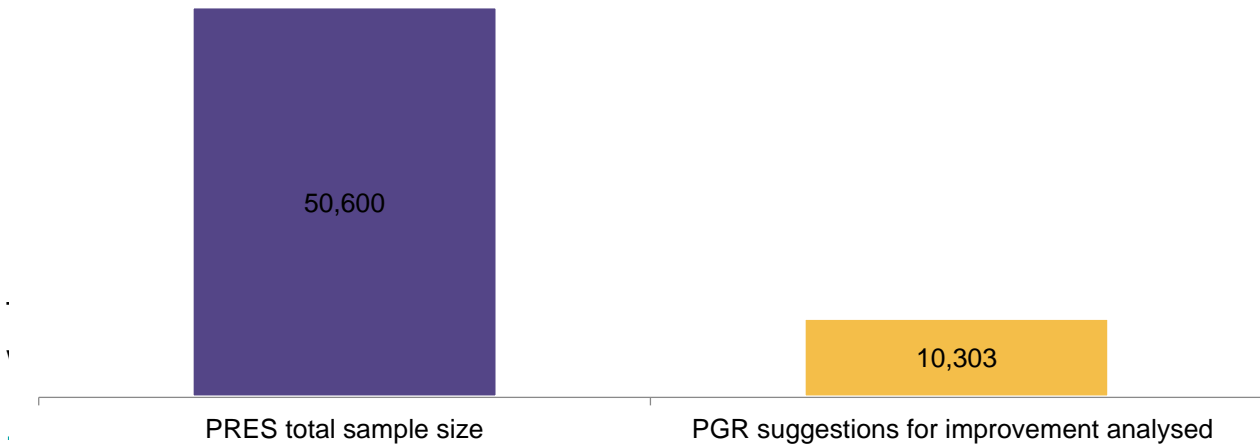
This shows that the top three most frequently cited suggestions for improvement by PGRs were associated with:

+ Learning and Support (38%)
+ Working Culture and Environment (24%)
+ Programme Design (23%)

The second- and third-level themes are a subset of level one and provide further insights into how PRGs think enhancement could be made. For example, 38% of all comments for improvement were classified under the theme of learning and support. Of the learning and support comments, 46% related to supervision, and 24% of the supervision comments mentioned engagement with the supervisor.

Table 1: Suggestions for improving the PGR experience

FIRST-LEVEL THEMES % of comments received	SECOND-LEVEL THEMES % of first-level theme	THIRD-LEVEL THEMES % of second-level theme
Learning and Support (38%)	Supervision (46%)	*General supervision (27%); Engagement of supervisor (24%); Time/frequency with supervisor (10%); Progress review and ongoing guidance/examination (10%); Supervisor's experience/knowledge of area (8%); Supervisor relationship (4%); Consistency/continuity of supervisor (2%)*
	Course administration processes (16%)	*General course admin (20%); Admin support (11%); Ethics approval (4%)*
Working Culture/ Environment (24%)	Connecting to others/networking (43%)	*PGR community – greater contact/interact with others (48%); General (35%); Cross-discipline/-school/-institution working (17%)*
	Working atmosphere/culture (18%)	-
Programme Design (23%)	Suggestions for specific content (54%)	*Methods training (40%); Specific suggestions/general (23%); Writing (16%); Transferable skills – including presenting and communicating (14%); Programming (5%); Practical/lab work (2%)*
	Content not relevant/not specific (15%)	-
Programme Delivery (21%)	Clarity of guidance/expectations/ deliverables (34%)	-
	Support for part-time/distance/full-time working students (21%)	*Part-time/Working full-time (52%); Distance learners (36%); Caring responsibilities (7%); Disabled (4%)*
Physical Infrastructure/ Facilities (15%)	Facilities and resources: availability, access and support in using (59%)	*Labs and equipment (26%); Computers/IT (25%); General facilities and resources (24%); Library and books (15%); Technical support (10%)*
	Physical working environment, e.g. desk space (41%)	-

4.4   Overall satisfaction by benchmark group

Some groups, in particular the Small and Specialist, Universities Alliance and Guild HE, show significant improvement in 2019; while the same data indicates something of an erratic journey over the past three years. It would be interesting to explore the factors leading to these patterns to see if all groups can learn from factors which cause these quite marked changes in PGR satisfaction.

Figure 6: Overall satisfaction by benchmark group (2017–2019)
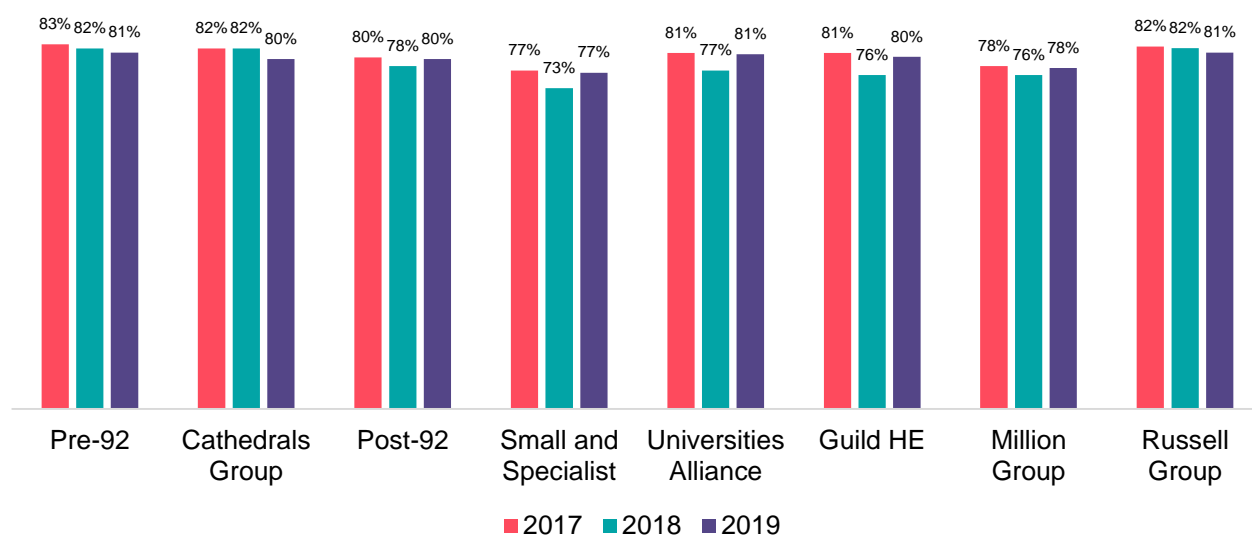
4.5   Overall satisfaction by subject

There is a large difference in satisfaction between the best-performing subject – Mathematical Sciences – and the worst-performing subject – Communication and Media Studies, which has fallen by 3% since 2018.

PGRs within Health subjects tend to be most satisfied, and Social Sciences the least satisfied, although at cluster level there tends to be little overall difference. Within the context of an overall increase in satisfaction this year, the declines within Communication and Media Studies and Clinical Medicine are perhaps surprising at a national level, and may be reflective of a range of different factors impacting upon the experience at different universities.

Figure 7: Satisfaction by JACS1 subjects
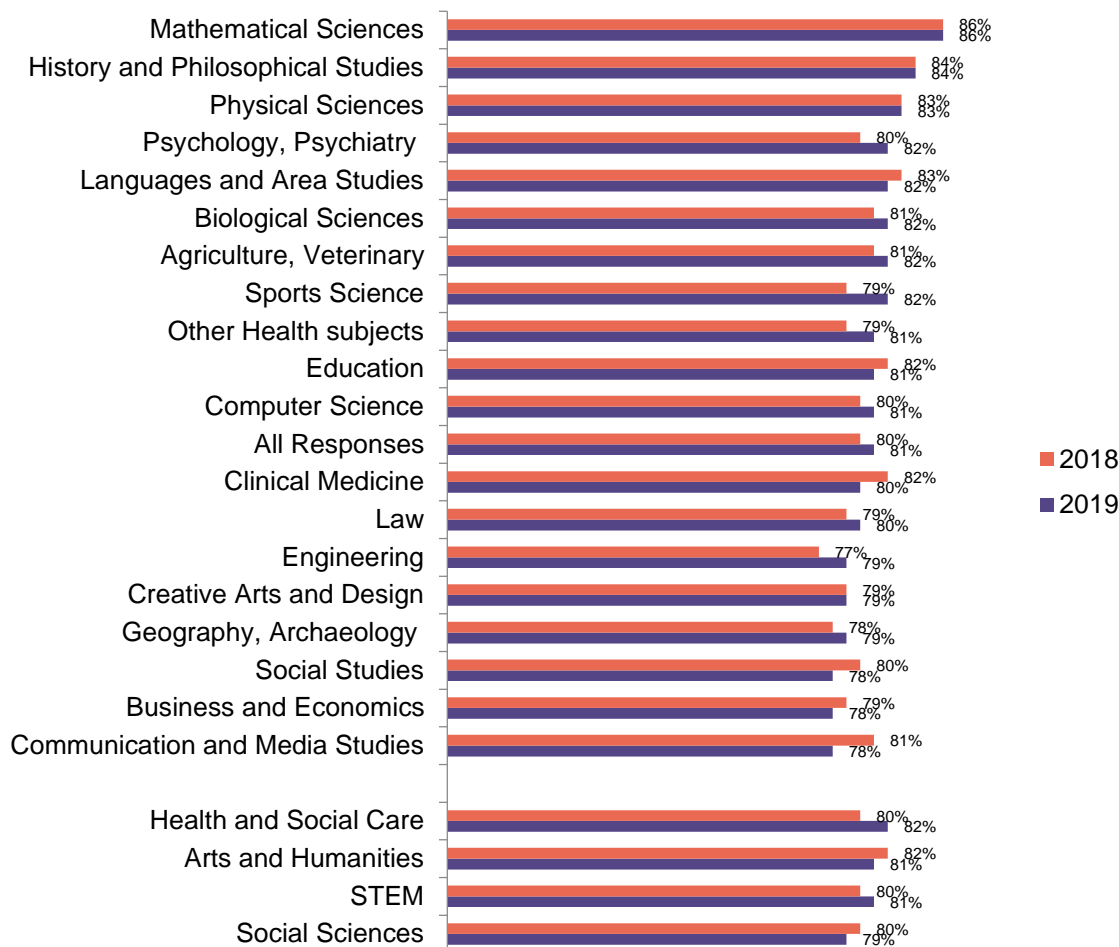
5. The Student Journey in 2019

5.1 Motivations for undertaking a PGR degree

It is encouraging to observe that the greatest motivation for undertaking a PGR degree is interest in the subject of study (41%, Figure 8). This measure has increased in importance by 6% over the last three years.

From a career perspective, the main motivation is perhaps unsurprisingly found within improving academic career prospects (31% - again reflecting an increasing trend of 4% since 2017) rather than non-academic career prospects (9%). Interestingly, the availability of funding only offers minimal levels of motivation, reflected by just 3% of respondents.

Figure 8: Motivations for pursuing a PGR degree (2017–2019)
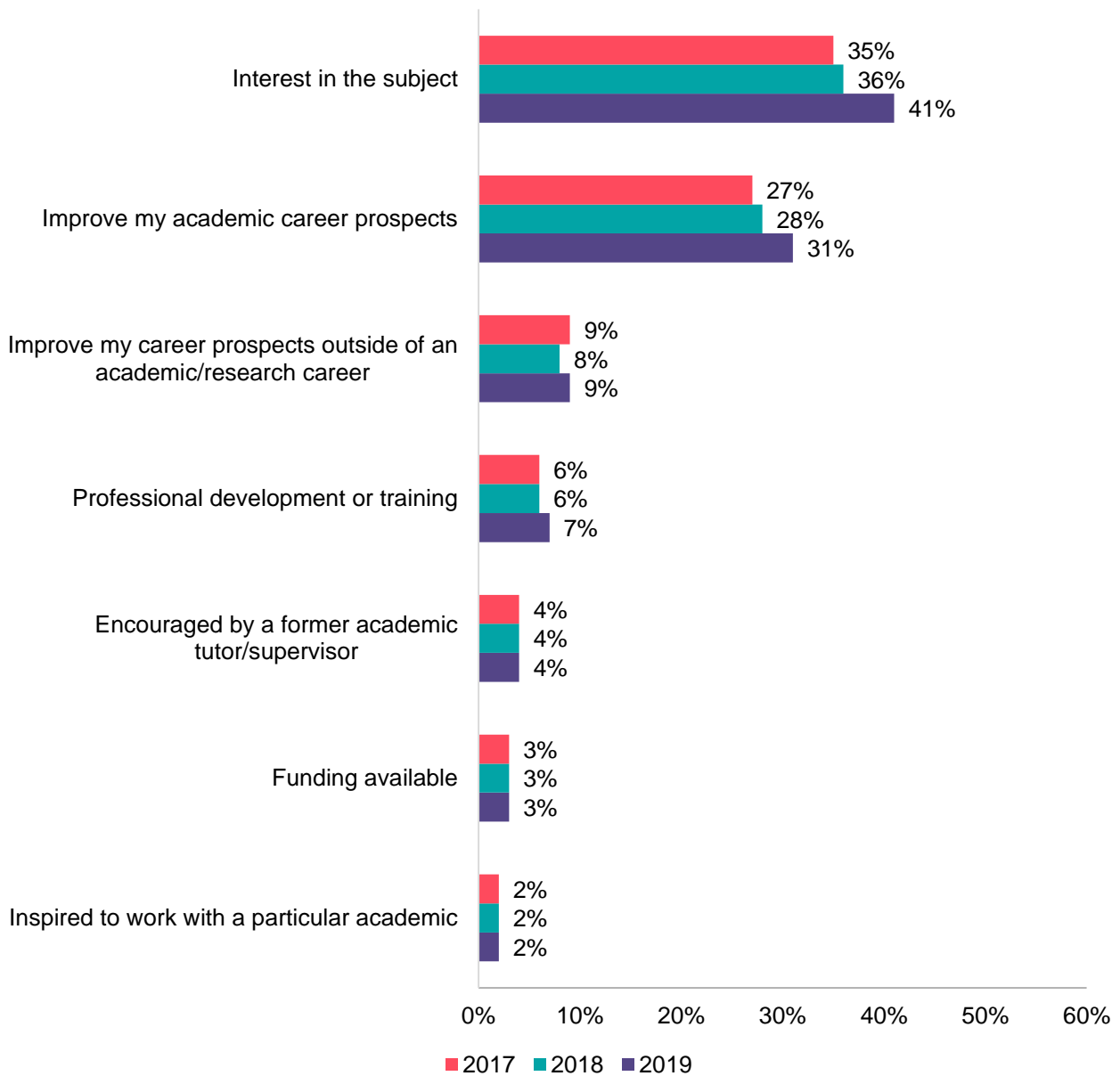
5.2 Confidence in completing within timescale

Figure 9 illustrates levels of confidence throughout the PGR experience. It suggests that whilst the confidence of PGRs is relatively high at the start of their studies, it steadily reduces over time.

It is difficult to know exactly what lies behind this trend, however it is independently recognised that completing a doctorate, for instance, can be a highly exposing personal experience which may impact on self-confidence. The two significant reductions seen after Year 4 and Year 7/8 may be attributable to the 'overtime' points for full-time (four years) and part-time PGRs (seven or eight years). Overall, this could provide an interesting focus for further research.

Figure 9: Confidence in completing within timescale

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
86%	81%	81%	81%	74%	74%	74%	73%	62%

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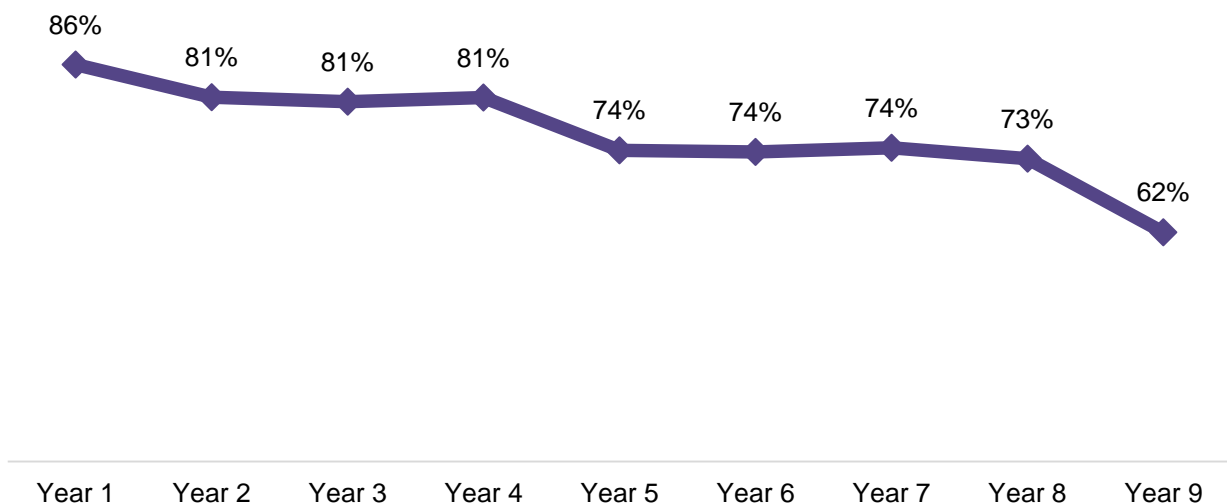
5 Vitae (2019) Overcoming challenges common to doctoral researchers. [Available online: https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/starting-a-doctorate/overcoming-challenges-common-to-doctoral-researchers]

5.3   Satisfaction during the stage of degree

When exploring the PGR experience at different stages of the degree (Figure 10), it can be seen that satisfaction remains the same at the beginning of the process during the taught and research planning stages (both 82%), before reducing steadily while writing up and submitting the thesis (both 79%). This is followed by the lowest point of satisfaction: making amendments to the thesis following the viva (77%).

However, following this stage, satisfaction begins to increase, rising to 81% at the point of awaiting graduation and finally returning to 82% satisfaction once graduation has been completed. It is possible that this trend mirrors the more stressful periods of the PGR process, especially when for many PGRs the time pressures for completion as seen in Figure 10 also increasingly become a factor.

Figure 10: Satisfaction by stage of degree
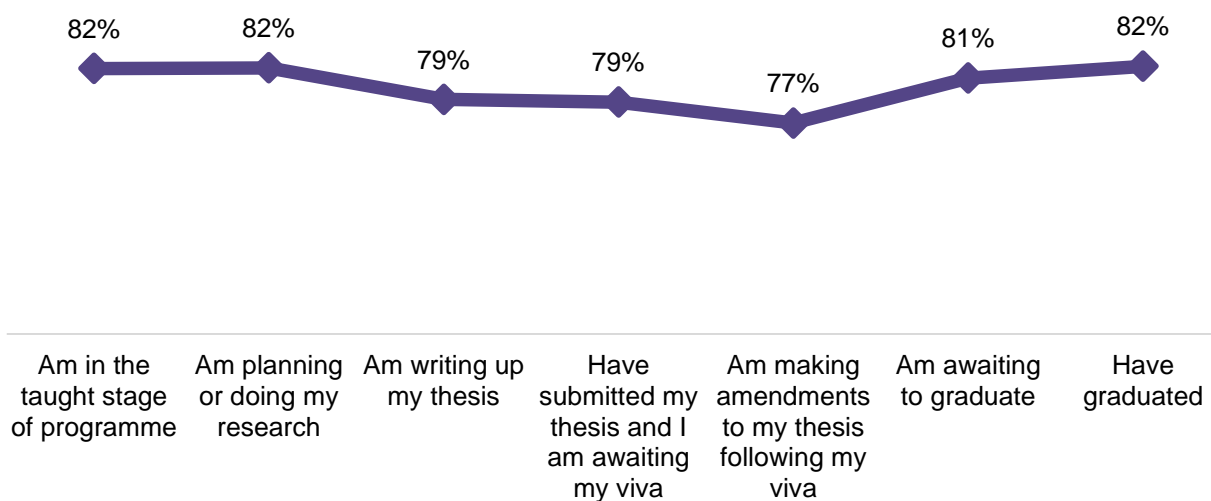
6. PGR Experience Themes

6.1 Year-by-Year Comparison

To further explore PGR experience, PRES measures seven core themes, with each theme drawn from an average of four individual questions. Figure 11 illustrates a comparison of these themes for 2017 to 2019.

The graph shows that only *Resources* has increased since 2018, albeit slightly. Other themes have remained static which is perhaps surprising in the light of the increase we have seen in overall satisfaction. It should be noted that in 2019, questions associated with *Research Culture* were amended after consultation with institutions to improve clarity. Although the 2019 score cannot be directly compared to previous years, this still remains the lowest-scoring theme of the seven areas measured, and significantly so. Given that this figure is such an outlier, there is a clear case to explore this factor in more detail.

Figure 11: PGR experience themes (2017–2019)
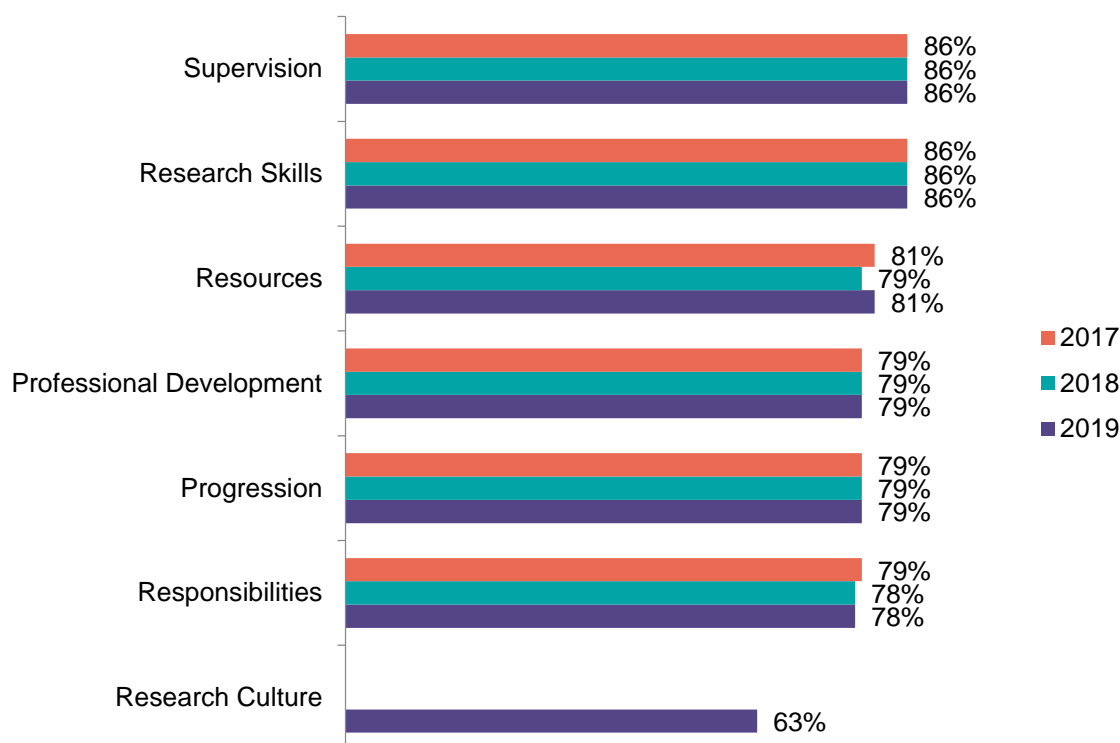
Note: For 'Research Culture', only 2019 is reported in Figure 12 due to changes in the question structure in 2019

6.2 Focus on Supervision

Analysis in the 2018 sector report highlighted that *Supervision* featured regularly as a top driver of PGR satisfaction.[6] This section explores measures associated with PGR supervision in more detail, and highlights that the level of supervision is generally strong.

Figure 12 highlights that 92% of PGRs ranked their supervisor/s as having the skills and subject knowledge required to support their research positively. Other strong scores are achieved in regular contact with their supervisor/s, and their supervisor/s providing feedback that helps the PGRs direct their research activities. By contrast, fewer PGRs (79%) felt that their supervisor helps them identify training and development needs as a researcher (79%).

Figure 12: Satisfaction with supervision: training, feedback, contact and skills
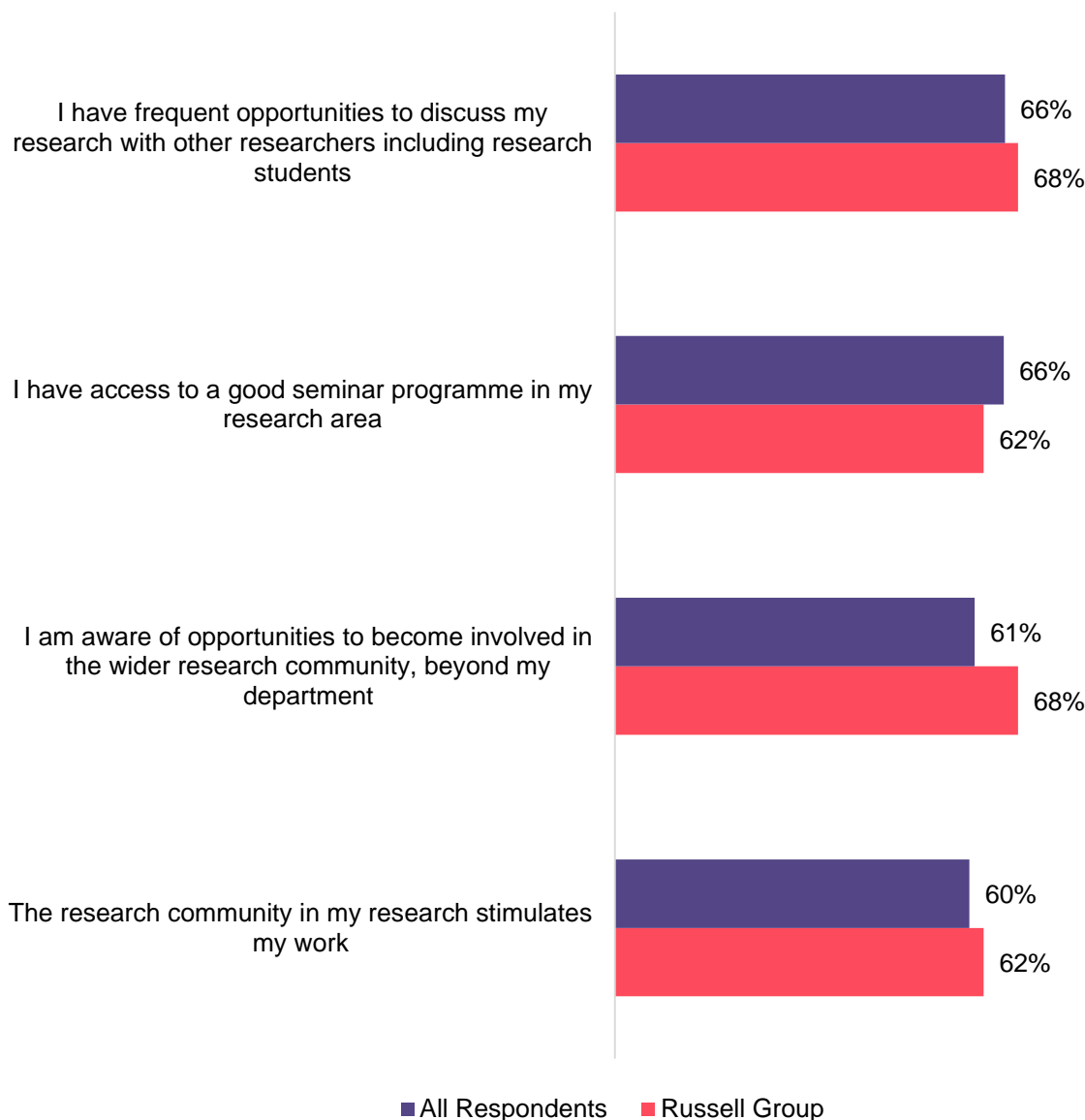

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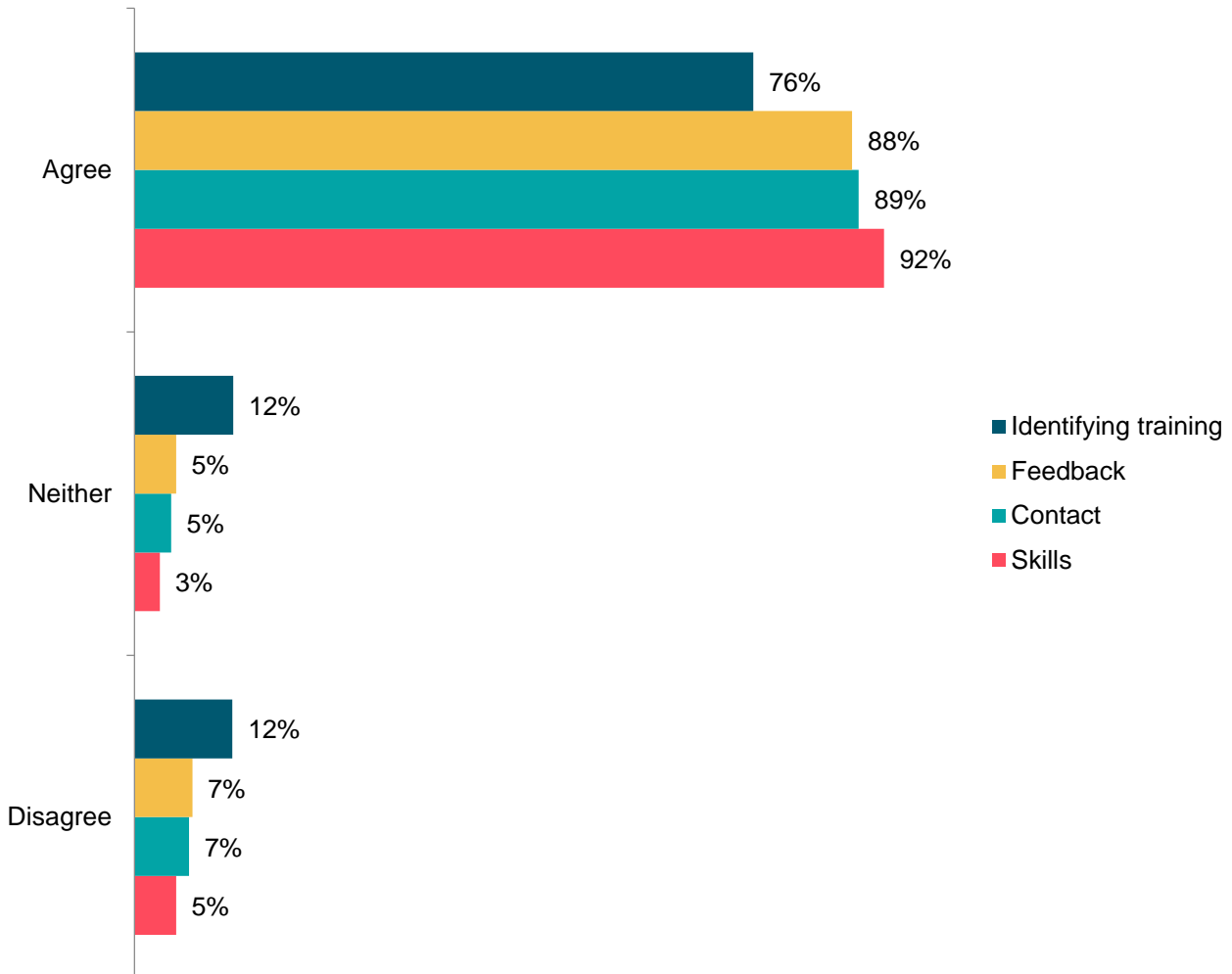
[6] Neves, J. The 2018 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. p.20. Advance HE.

7. Focus on Research Culture

Research Culture is ranked lowest out of the seven PGR experience themes in 2019, as it was in previous years before new questions were introduced. It is therefore worth exploring this in further detail. Figure 13 below illustrates the extent to which PGRs agree with four statements.

We compared the views of all respondents to those from the traditionally research-intensive Russell Group universities. As the graph shows, the Russell Group scores more highly in three out of four measures (ranking between 2% to 7% higher). However, *access to a good seminar programme in my research area* appears to be a particular area of concern for Russell Group students.
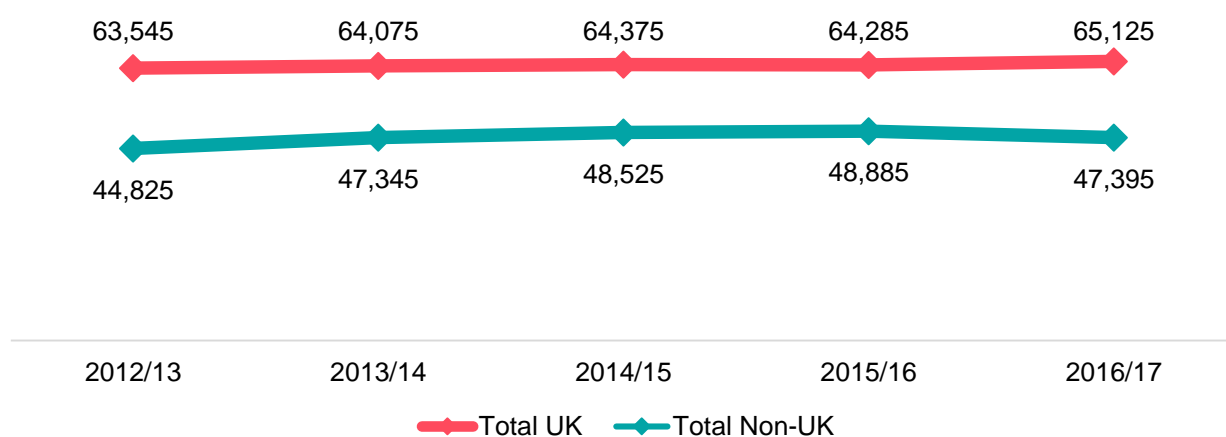
Figure 13: Perceptions of PGR research culture

I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students — 66% (All Respondents), 68% (Russell Group)

I have access to a good seminar programme in my research area — 66% (All Respondents), 62% (Russell Group)

I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department — 61% (All Respondents), 68% (Russell Group)

The research community in my research stimulates my work — 60% (All Respondents), 62% (Russell Group)

■ All Respondents   ■ Russell Group

8. International Research Student Experience

Few would argue that international research students offer a wide range of benefits to the higher education sector and the UK more broadly through areas such as international collaboration in research and education. There are also tangible economic benefits, and there is evidence to suggest that international student participation in UK HE enhances perceptions of the UK more generally.[7] Sector-wide data over a five-year period[8] shows that the proportion of non-UK students in relation to the total UK student numbers has been increasing up to 2015/16, albeit slightly reducing in the most recent figures available (Figure 14). With recent governmental policy changes in September 2019 announcing international research students will be allowed to stay in the UK for two years after graduation,[9] the number of international research students may increase in coming years.

Figure 14: HE student enrolment by domicile

[7] https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/18261/1/13-1172-wider-benefits-of-international-higher-education-in-the-uk.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2019]

[8] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from [Accessed 15 October 2019]

[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-49655719 [Accessed 15 October 2019]

Overseas students report slightly higher levels of satisfaction than home students (81.3% compared to 80.6%; Figure 15). This bodes well for international PGR recruitment.

Figure 15: Overall satisfaction by home and overseas student background
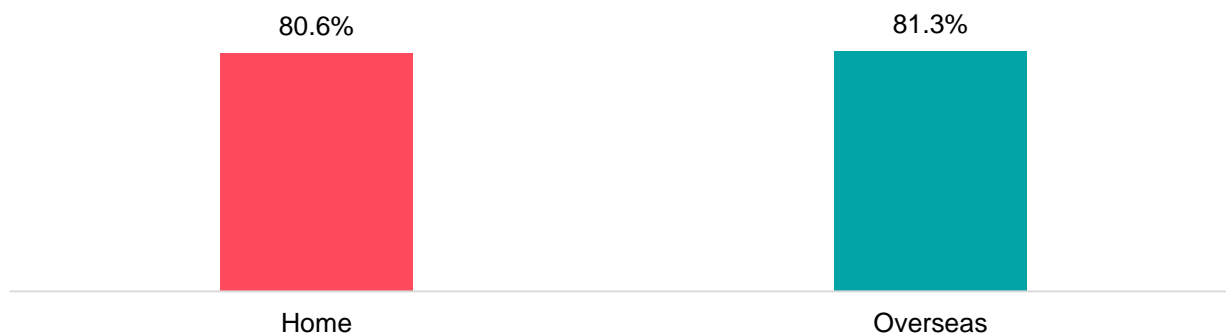
9. Ethnicity

We know from a wide body of evidence at undergraduate level that the student experience and subsequent outcomes are often less satisfactory for students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds compared to those from White backgrounds[10].

Additionally, the Advance HE–HEPI 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES)[11] highlighted specifically how the experience of BAME students on key issues such as value for money and learning gain consistently lags behind that of White students.

However, there has been less comparative analysis carried out at postgraduate level, which provides an opportunity here to shine a light on any differences. The analysis below has been carried out among UK-domicile PGRs only, in order to remove any impact of overseas students (who comprise significant proportions of the PGR population in a range of ethnic groups) on this ethnicity analysis.

In broad terms, White students appear to have the most satisfactory experience, but it is fair to say that the starkest differences are to be found by comparing specific ethnic groups rather than by assessing the BAME cohort as a whole. Among the main categories, Asian PGRs appear to be least satisfied with their experience, which broadly matches what we found at undergraduate level in the SAES. By contrast, PGRs from Black backgrounds display relatively high satisfaction – albeit at lower levels than for White PGRs.

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[10] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-case-studies.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2019].

[11] Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p. 29.

The two cohorts where scores are lowest are PGRs of Mixed ethnicity and those who classify themselves under the range of 'Other' categories. We have seen significant fluctuation – as we have for many results over the past three years – but levels of satisfaction remain relatively low. Both these categories – Mixed and Other – are potentially quite challenging as they are defined by diversity and contain a range of sub-categories. Hence, identifying and understanding what may be behind the consistently lower scores may prove particularly difficult, but these results appear to identify a significant need across the sector to delve deeper into the composition of these categories.

Figure 16: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background (UK domicile)
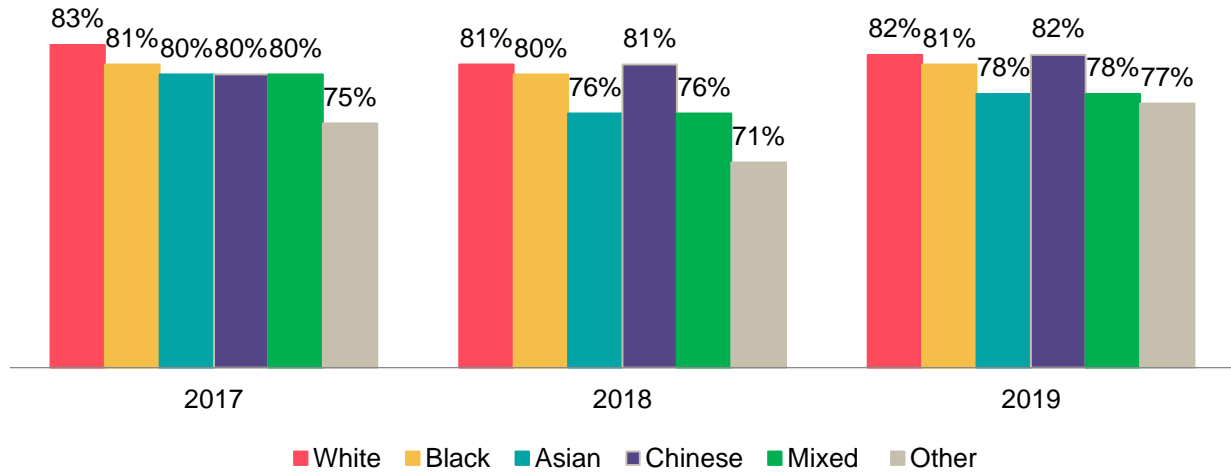
10. Training and Development Opportunities

A significant element of the PGR experience focuses upon the extent to which training, advice and development opportunities exist. In Figure 17, the findings for 2019 suggest similar scores to those of the previous two years, with training to develop research skills being the most frequent opportunity provided (76%), whereas by contrast there appear to be fewer opportunities provided and/or engagement with advice on career options (31%).

It is encouraging however that careers advice has increased this year back up to its 2017 levels, which is potentially key to helping PGRs make the most appropriate career decisions as they approach completion.

Figure 17: Skills training and advice (2017–2019)
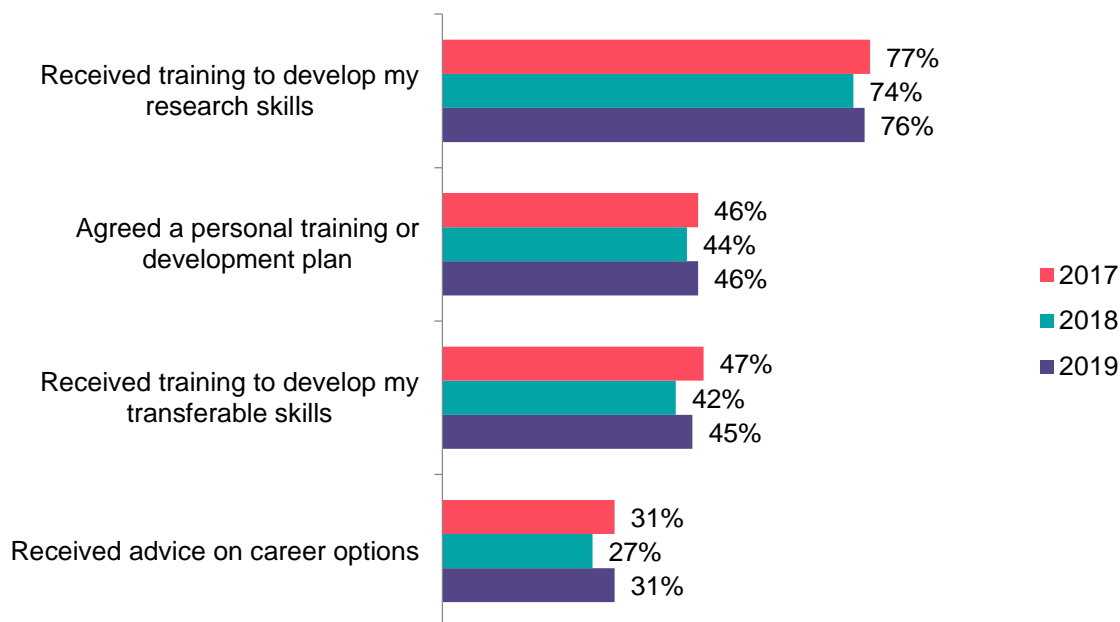
11. Teaching Opportunities

Although not all PGRs have opportunities to teach, doing so can potentially play a key role in future employability as well as to help embed the knowledge being developed during their research.

In 2019, responses associated with teaching opportunities were broadly similar to those seen in previous years, with a slight increase in the numbers who either taught or demonstrated during their programme and – among those who taught or demonstrated – those given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching both increasing slightly since 2018.

However, a relatively high proportion of PGRs (27%) stated they did not agree they had been given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching. This therefore suggests further opportunities exist in this area to ensure PGRs feel they have the necessary support for the teaching that they deliver.

Figure 18: PGR teaching opportunities (2017–2019)
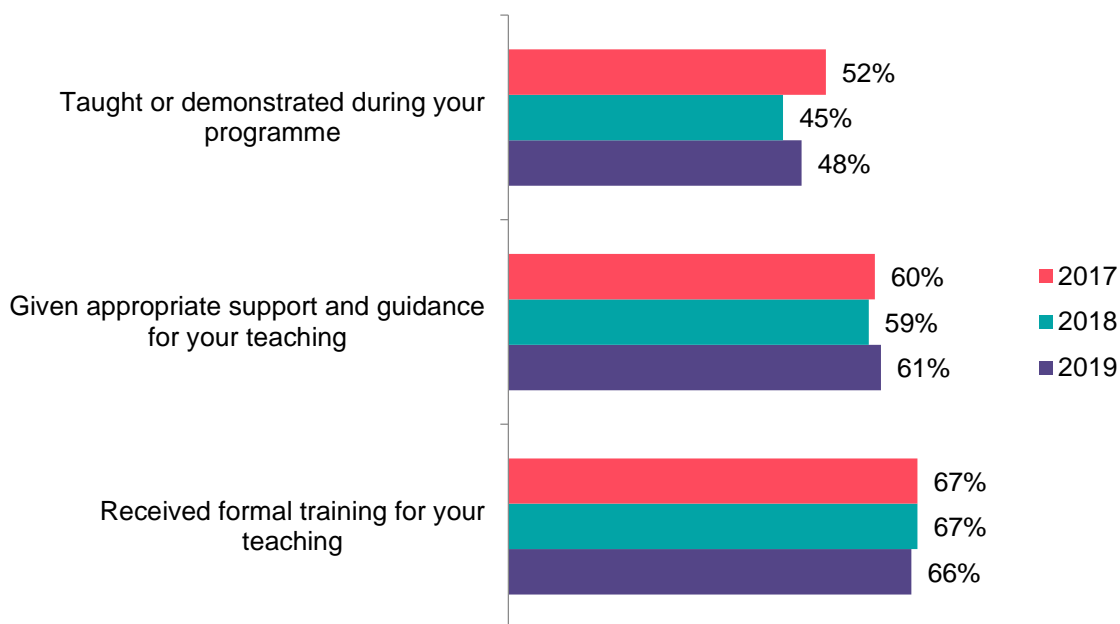
Note: The questions on 'given appropriate support' and 'received formal training' were only asked of those PGRs who answered 'yes' to the first question in this section – i.e. they had taught or demonstrated during their programme.

12. PGR Wellbeing

In 2019, the PRES adopted the standardised wellbeing questions used by the Office for National Statistics[12] to facilitate national comparison (Figure 19). We have also compared these results to the latest available data for undergraduate students, taken from the Advance HE–HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey.[13] This provides a unique opportunity at sector level to compare PGR wellbeing to the national and undergraduate population using a consistent scale.

As a broad overview, the data highlights that both undergraduate and postgraduate research students display lower levels of wellbeing than the general population. PGR wellbeing is no different to the general population in terms of life being 'worthwhile', but PGRs are much less satisfied and happy with their life. It is striking however that PGR wellbeing in these aspects is generally a lot higher than among undergraduate students.

The area of most concern among the PGR population is in terms of anxiety. Although measured on the same 0 to 10 scale, the score is presented using responses of 0 and 1, whereby '*0*' was '*not at all anxious*' and '*10*' was '*completely anxious*' – hence, to match the other metrics, a 'high' score is more positive. This wellbeing measure shows a stark difference for PGRs set against the national scores, reflecting a difference of 27%, and also a slight negative difference compared to the undergraduate population, suggesting the pressures of PGR study can create very high levels of anxiety. Despite a range of initiatives in this area, HEIs face a continued challenge to keep pace with student wellbeing concerns, which, as this data pinpoints, are prevalent at both undergraduate and PGR level.

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[12] Office for National Statistics (2019) Measuring national well-being: May 2019 release. [Available online: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeingdomainsandmeasures]

[13] Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p. 47.

Figure 19: Wellbeing – PGRs and the UK population
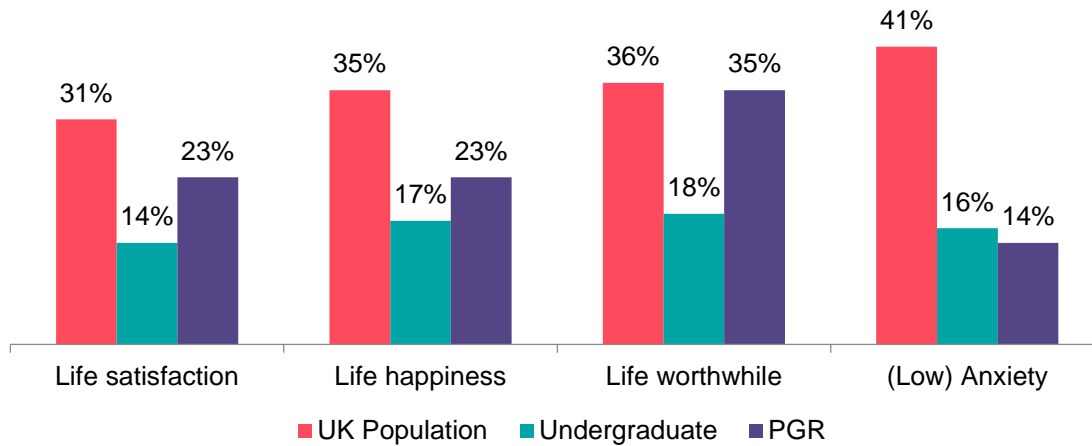


Note: Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness; 0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

13. PGR Retention

13.1 PGR risk of non-continuation in 2019

An important part of understanding the PGR experience is to analyse the proportions of PGRs who considered leaving their course. Figure 20 shows that in 2019 just over a quarter (26%, or 13,252) of PGRs stated they had considered leaving their course. This compares to 68% (34,306) who stated they had not, and 6% (2,778) who preferred not to answer. Retention rates are a critical issue for both PGRs and HEIs. Although a postgraduate researcher considering leaving does not always follow through into discontinuation, the data suggests there is a large cohort who are often at risk as they go through their journey.

Figure 20: PGR risk of non-continuation in 2019 (Percentage of those considering leaving)
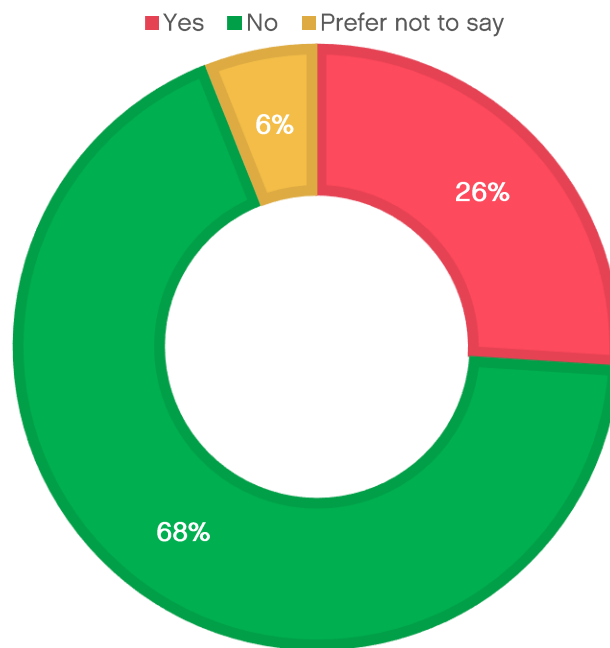
13.2 Risk of non-continuation – trends over time

Figure 21 illustrates the proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course over the last three years and shows that the situation has changed very little over the last three years. The consistency of these figures suggests that any remedial action being put in place faces a challenge to have an impact at an overall level, as there are likely to be a range of issues (as discussed below) that HEIs may find it difficult to directly impact.

Figure 21: Proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course (2017–2019)
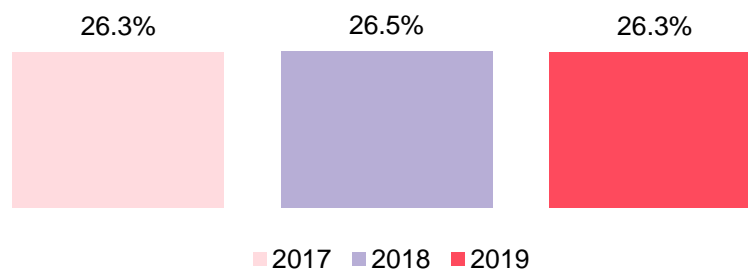
13.3 Reasons for considering leaving

Figure 22 illustrates the predominant reasons that lead PGRs to consider leaving their course. Issues relating to family, health or personal problems rank most frequently (15%), followed by financial difficulties (14%) and difficulties in balancing research and other commitments (13%). The feeling of not having enough support for their research (11%) and the feeling that postgraduate research might not have been the right choice for them also rank relatively highly (9%).

Conversely, it is interesting to consider the implications of the lower-ranking variables. For instance, the findings suggest there is a relatively good matching of PGRs to their institution and course. Only 4% cite this as a reason for leaving and only 2% feel they had chosen the wrong research degree. In terms of the day-to-day management of PGR degrees, only a small proportion found the level of research too difficult (4%) and only 2% felt there was too much work.

Of course some of these potential risk areas are outside the control of institutions although there are some aspects more directly related to the research degree experience where institutions have more influence.

Figure 22: Main (or most recent) reasons leading to PGRs considering leaving

14. Responding to PGR Feedback

Before concluding this report, it would be useful to consider the extent to which PGRs perceive their institution values and responds to their feedback. This is illustrated in Figure 23.

The results in 2019 show that whilst the majority of PGRs agree (59%) that institutions value and respond to feedback, a relatively high proportion (14%) disagree; that's more than 6,700 students.

This suggests that PGRs do not always feel their feedback is listened to or acted upon – a situation which is by no means unique to the postgraduate research environment[14]. A way for HEIs to demonstrate their commitment to acting on feedback is to point towards where and how results from surveys like PRES have driven lasting change – thereby closing the feedback loop.

Figure 23: Perception of institutions valuing and responding to PGR feedback

■ Agree   ■ Neither   ■ Disagree

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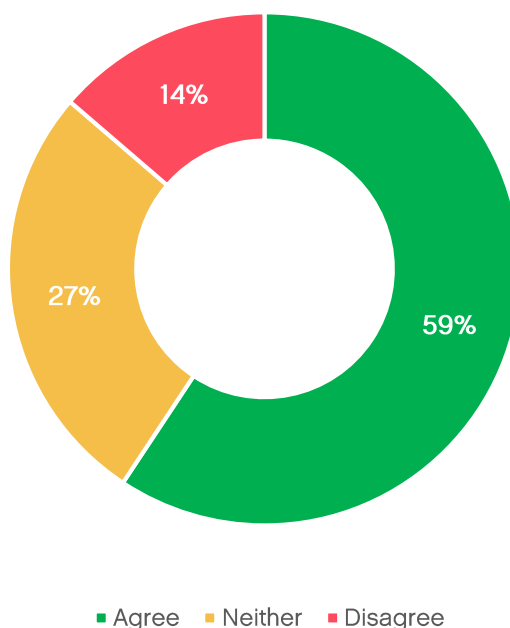
[14] Office for Students (2019) Student satisfaction rises but universities should do more to improve feedback. Available online: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/student-satisfaction-rises-but-universities-should-do-more-to-improve-feedback/

15. Conclusions

Overall, the level of satisfaction with the PGR experience is high, for which the sector is to be commended. However, there are some aspects of the experience where there is an opportunity to provide greater support.

Strikingly, measures of wellbeing suggest PGRs have lower levels of wellbeing compared to Office for National Statistics data, with the greatest differences seen in levels of anxiety. This indicates that the PGR experience is potentially an anxious one and this may be exacerbated at key stages during the journey such as writing up and submitting – feeding through into levels of confidence and wider wellbeing. Such levels of anxiety as reported here are clearly concerning, highlighting the need to put strategies in place dedicated specifically to supporting the PGR journey.

The concept of research culture is an important one to PGRs, but this has always received relatively low scores. This year, the questions have been changed to be clearer and easier to interpret but results still show there is clear room for improvement. This is underlined by free text comments which call for a more supportive research environment. Further analysis of these comments points towards a need for greater networking and collaboration opportunities with other researchers, which provides an opportunity for graduate schools to expand the structures they put in place to enable this to happen.

Delivering an experience of comparable quality across all cohorts is a key aspiration across the sector, and these findings highlight how students of White, Black and Chinese ethnicity enjoy generally high levels of satisfaction. Of more concern are the results among students of Asian, Mixed and 'Other' ethnicity, which provide a clear prompt for further investigation and action in order to fully understand how this satisfaction gap can be closed.

Overall, higher education institutions need to continue to work towards improving the PGR experience, and acting on the PRES 2019 findings can support this. However, with only 59% of PGRs agreeing that their institution values and responds to their feedback, it suggests greater opportunities to use this feedback exist.

16. Appendix

16.1 Appendix 1: PRES 2019 participating institutions

1. Aberystwyth University	37. The Open University	73. University of Greenwich
2. Aston University	38. Oxford Brookes University	74. University of Hertfordshire
3. Bath Spa University	39. Bangor University	75. University of Huddersfield
4. Birkbeck, University of London	40. Queen Mary University London	76. University of Hull
5. Birmingham City University	41. Queen's University Belfast	77. University of Kent
6. Bournemouth University	42. University of Roehampton	78. University of Leeds
7. Brunel University London	43. Royal College of Art	79. University of Leicester
8. Bucks New University	44. Royal Holloway, University of London	80. University of Lincoln
9. Canterbury Christ Church University	45. Royal Northern College of Music	81. University of Liverpool
10. Cardiff Metropolitan University	46. Royal Veterinary College	82. The University of Manchester
11. Cardiff University	47. School of Advanced Study	83. University of Nottingham
12. City, University of London	48. SOAS University of London	84. University of Portsmouth
13. Cranfield University	49. Sheffield Hallam University	85. University of Queensland
14. Durham University	50. Solent University	86. University of Reading
15. Falmouth University	51. Scotland's Rural University College	87. University of Sheffield
16. Goldsmiths, University of London	52. St Mary's University, Twickenham	88. University of Southampton
17. Harper Adams University	53. Staffordshire University	89. University of St Mark & St John
18. Heriot-Watt University	54. Teesside University	90. University of Stirling
19. Imperial College London	55. Institute of Cancer Research	91. University of Strathclyde
20. Keele University	56. The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	92. University of Sunderland
21. King's College London	57. University of Northampton	93. University of Surrey
22. Kingston University	58. University College London	94. University of Sussex
23. Lancaster University	59. University of Bath	95. University of the Arts London
24. Leeds Beckett University	60. University of Birmingham	96. University of the Highlands and Islands
25. Leeds Trinity University	61. University of Bolton	97. University of the West of England
26. Liverpool John Moores University	62. University of Bradford	98. Ulster University
27. Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	63. University of Bristol	99. University of Wales Trinity Saint David
28. London School of Economics	64. University of Buckingham	100. University of Warwick
29. London South Bank University	65. University of Central Lancashire	101. University of West London
30. Loughborough University	66. University of Chester	102. University of Westminster
31. Manchester Metropolitan University	67. University of Cumbria	103. University of Winchester
32. Middlesex University	68. University of East Anglia	104. University of Wolverhampton
33. Edinburgh Napier University	69. University of Edinburgh	105. University of Worcester
34. Newcastle Williusity	70. University of Exeter	106. University of York
35. Northumbria University	71. University of Glasgow	107. York St John University
36. Nottingham Trent University	72. University of Gloucestershire	

16.2 Appendix 2: Respondent profile

Category	PRES 2017	PRES 2018	PRES 2019
Gender			
Female	51%	55%	53%
Male	49%	45%	47%
Age			
30 and under	59%	49%	59%
31 and over	41%	51%	41%
Disability			
Reported disability	8%	9%	8%
No reported disability	92%	91%	92%
Prefer not to say	-	-	4%
Ethnicity			
White	66%	71%	65%
Black	5%	6%	5%
Asian (including Chinese)	18%	13%	19%
Mixed and other	11%	10%	12%
Domicile			
UK	65%	63%	63%
Other EU	9%	8%	9%
Non-EU	26%	29%	28%
Study			
Full time	81%	74%	82%
Part time	19%	26%	18%
Learning			
Face to face	82%	82%	88%
Distance learner	18%	18%	12%

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