

2018
Postgraduate
Research
Experience Survey

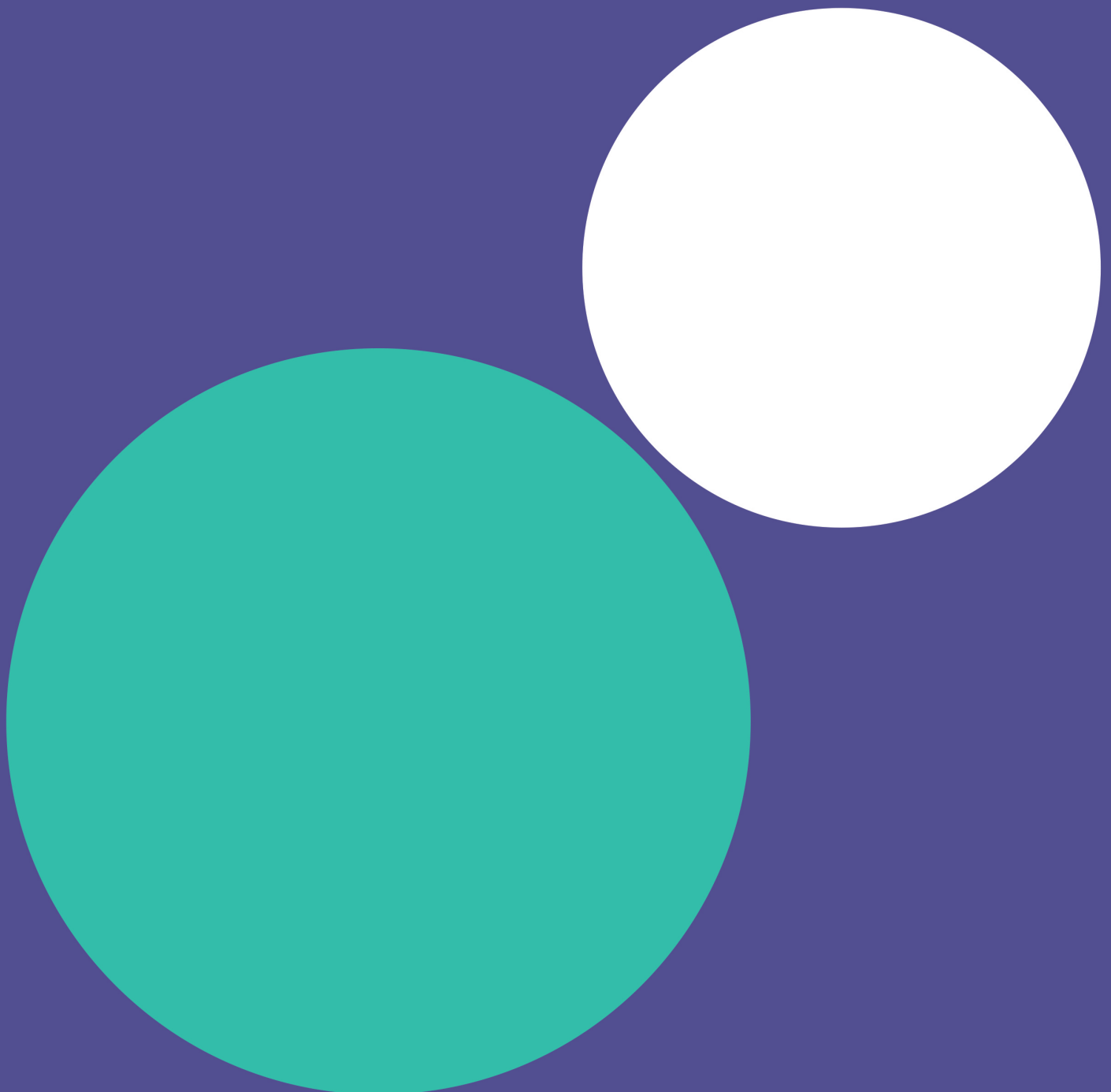
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AdvanceHE

POSTGRADUATE

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

SURVEY



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1. Executive Summary

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is now offered on an annual basis, and although this has introduced some changes in regard to the institutions who participated in 2018, it continues to provide a robust benchmark of the postgraduate research (PGR) experience.

Postgraduate researchers continue to rate their experience positively, with 8/10 being satisfied overall. However there has been a clear 2% decline since 2017, a fall which has taken place across most mission groups. Results among Small and Specialist, Million Plus, Guild HE and institutions in London are relatively disappointing, with London in particular experiencing the largest decline. By contrast, the experience remains very strong among institutions in Wales, and those within the Cathedrals Group.

The most positive aspects of the PGR experience are around supervision, with around 9/10 researchers being satisfied with their supervisors' knowledge and availability. Researchers also praise how their PGR experience has developed their research skills. In comparison, results are less positive for research culture, with only around 60% of researchers satisfied with their research ambience, and their opportunities to collaborate with other students.

Aspects of research culture, although traditionally low scoring, had begun to increase in previous years, but this unfortunately appears to have been reversed in 2018. This decline is put into context by analysis which highlights research ambience (one of the aspects within research culture) as being one of the three areas of the experience with the greatest impact on satisfaction. Hence, improving this aspect potentially holds the key to driving improvements in satisfaction overall.

At undergraduate level, Advance HE research, in partnership with HEPI (the Higher Education Policy Institute), through the Student Academic Experience Survey¹ has identified major discrepancies in the experience of non-white students. Encouragingly, results from PRES suggest that this is less of a concern at PGR level, with UK-domiciled researchers of Black ethnicity being most likely to believe their research degree programme is worthwhile.

The Student Academic Experience Survey also identified how undergraduate students who work long hours in paid employment can potentially be disadvantaged. Again, PRES results highlight that this does not appear to be the case among postgraduate researchers.

By contrast, PRES results do identify a divergence in the experience for disabled learners, who are less satisfied overall. Results also highlight how the experience can become more challenging for researchers as they progress through their studies, with those in their fourth year and beyond reporting the most negative experience.

PRES also measures wellbeing among the PGR community. Unlike the undergraduate community, where wellbeing appears to be in decline, PGR wellbeing has remained broadly consistent – although there is still a large number of researchers for whom wellbeing, and work-life balance in particular, remains a concern.

¹ Neves, J and Hillman, N. (2018). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI.

2. Methodology

2.1 Approach

The Advance HE Postgraduate Research Experience Survey first piloted in 2007 and since then has become well embedded within the UK as the major survey-based barometer of the PGR experience.

PRES has been designed to aid and support enhancement, by providing key information to support strategic decisions and target areas for improvement. Each participating institution receives their own confidential, institutional-level results by the end of June. In this way, the PRES results provide institutions with a key starting point for exploring where and how the postgraduate research experience may be improved, and can be used alongside other sources of data in order to gain a fuller picture. Each participating institution is able to compare their own results against a variety of benchmarking groups.

The survey was redesigned in 2013 in order to streamline and align it more closely with Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF). In 2017 there was a consultation on the future of PRES, including the survey window, developing a module more specifically related to experiences of doctoral training and relevance to career, developing a module to understand engagement, improved relevance for PGRs studying at multiple institutions, and publication of data. Through this consultation the following recommendations from stakeholders were adopted for 2017 onwards:

- institutions may publish their own results externally if they wish
- institutions can now open and close PRES within a flexible survey window between 1 February and mid-May
- PRES is now available to be run by institutions on an **annual** basis.

The survey retains its seven core scales relating to the PGR experience:

- supervision
- resources
- research culture
- progression
- responsibilities
- research skills
- professional development.

PRES explores the experiences of a range of types of PGR student including PhD students, professional doctorates, Masters by Research and MPhil (with and without transfer to PhD).

The survey window was open from **1 February to 18 May 2018**. Institutions were able to choose when to run the survey within this window, as long as the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

2.2 Participation

PRES has previously been a biennial survey, but 2018 marked the first year of PRES being available as an option to run annually – hence this would ordinarily have been an ‘off’ year with the survey returning again in 2019. This change was to provide institutions with the flexibility to run the survey in years when it previously was not available, although we recognise that a two-year cycle will still be adopted by a proportion of participating institutions.

Institutions	Respondents
66 ²	16,747

Around 60% of regular participants in the UK took part in 2018, providing a total sample of nearly 17,000 Postgraduate students. The size of the survey is therefore smaller than in previous biennial editions of PRES but this was in line with expectations.

2.2.1 UK benchmark groups

Several of the institutions choosing not to run PRES annually (i.e. in 2018) were from the Russell Group and/ or based in Scotland. In particular, participants from the Russell Group have tended to provide the largest sample cohorts over the years so the absence of these institutions has resulted in a smaller overall cohort.

However, based on 2018 participation, the following benchmark group comparison results were produced for participating institutions.

- Global
- Cathedrals Group
- Guild HE
- London
- Million Plus
- Pre-92
- Post-92
- Small and specialist
- University Alliance
- Welsh

2.2.2 Global participation

A key feature of PRES 2018 has been the participation of three institutions from outside the UK, as part of an ongoing drive to expand the reach of PRES:

- Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
- Koç University, Turkey
- University of Queensland, Australia

These three institutions comprise part of the sample cited above. Although there were not sufficient institutions outside the UK this year to analyse separately, their results are fully included in all the total results referred to in this report.

² Global participation. See appendix for full list of participating institutions.

3. Sample Profile

Category	PRES 2017 ³	PRES 2018
Gender		
Female	51%	55%
Male	49%	45%
Age		
30 and under	59%	49%
31 and over	41%	51%
Disability		
Reported disability	8%	9%
No reported disability	92%	91%
Ethnicity		
White	66%	71%
Black	5%	6%
Asian (including Chinese)	18%	13%
Mixed and other	11%	10%
Domicile		
UK	65%	63%
Other EU	9%	8%
Non-EU	26%	29%
Study		
Full time	81%	74%
Part time	19%	26%
Learning		
Face to face	82%	82%
Distance learner	18%	18%

Although the sample in 2018 has many similar characteristics to that of 2017 (and previous years), there is a major difference in terms of age, with the 2017 sample containing a greater number of mature students. This appears to be a function of low Russell Group involvement in 2018, as Russell Group PGR students in PRES tend to be younger, with a large majority aged 30 and under.

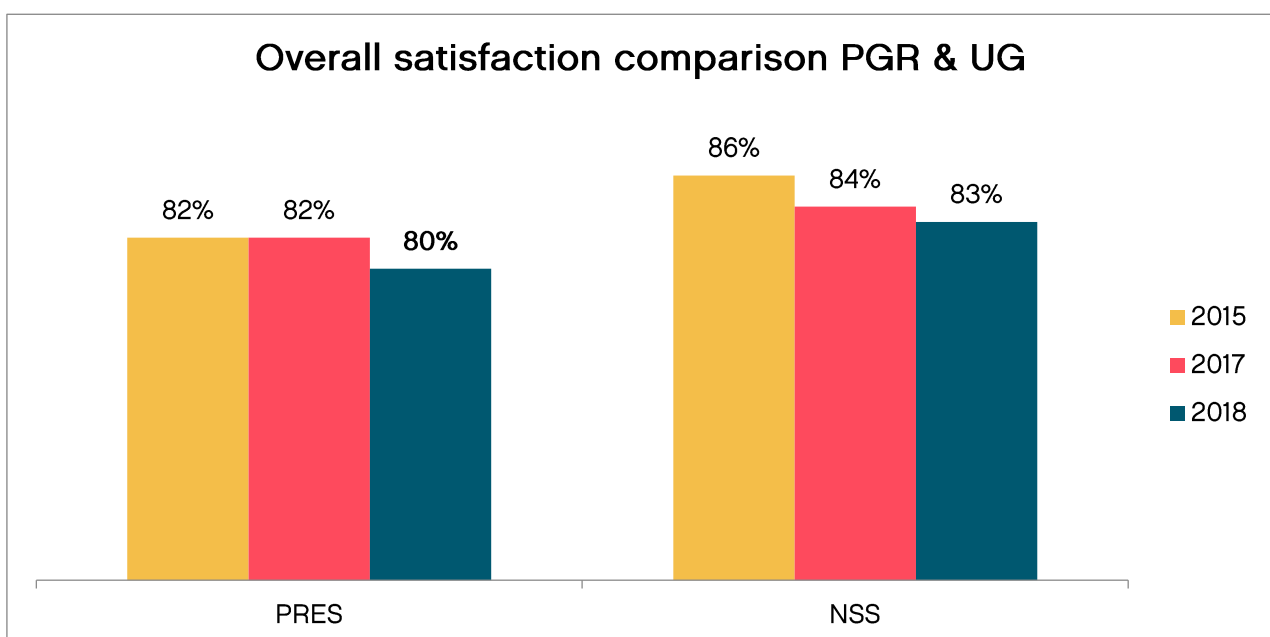
³ Figures for both 2017 and 2018 are based on respondents who provided one of the coded answers featured and excluded those responding as “don’t know”.

4. Overall Satisfaction

4.1 Trends over time

The PGR experience remains positive overall. Four out of five researchers are satisfied, with exactly half of these (40% overall) being very satisfied. However, there has been a 2% overall decline in satisfaction year on year which, given the robust base sizes, is a statistically significant difference.

The overall satisfaction question uses a 5-point Likert scale, which matches that used in the National Student Survey (NSS)⁴. We can therefore compare, at an overall level, the relative experiences of postgraduate researchers and undergraduate (UG) students, as displayed in the chart below.



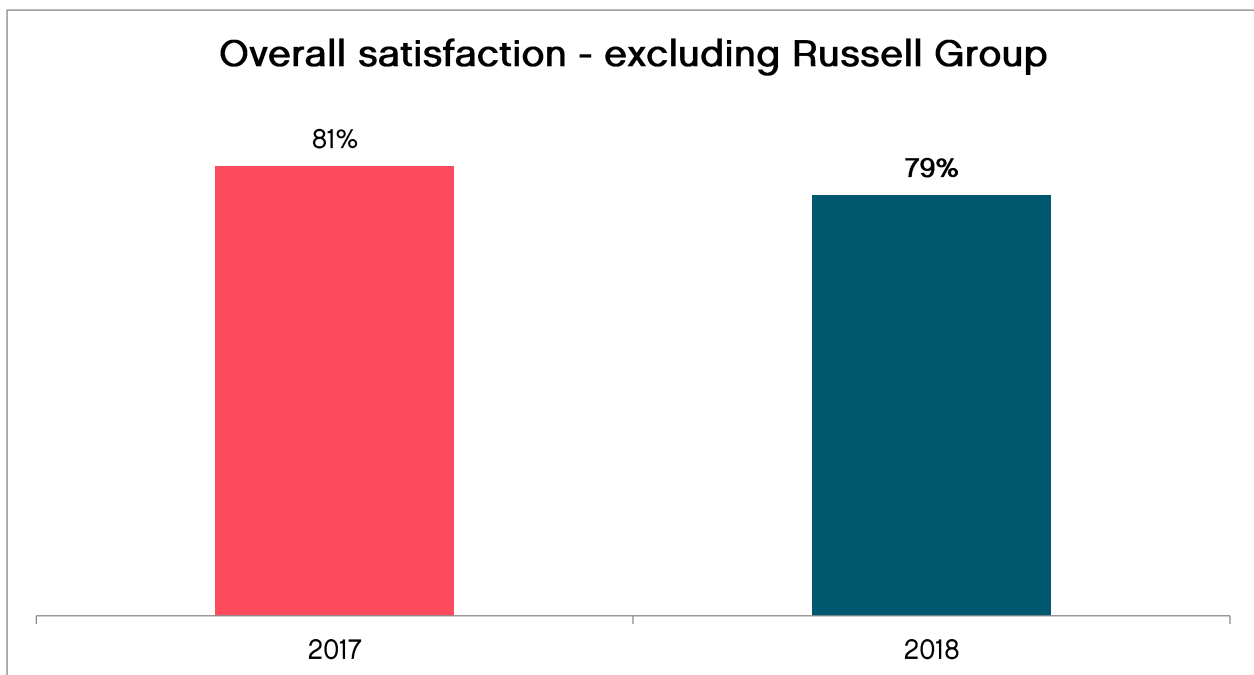
Base: All respondents. Statistically significant differences (95% level) from PRES between 2017 and 2018 in bold. External data from NSS not tested for significance.

Consistently, although both cohorts are satisfied with their experience, results among undergraduates have been more positive over the years. There is also consistency in that both surveys show a decline over time since 2015, although the decline for PRES has occurred specifically in 2018.

We know, as discussed above, that there are some differences in the types of institution that chose to take part in PRES in 2018. However, to what extent has this affected the overall satisfaction, or is there clear evidence that the experience is declining?

The main difference in 2018 is the significant reduction in participation from Russell Group institutions, so if we remove Russell Group institutions from the sample we can aim to compare “like for like” results over the past 2 years.

⁴Source: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/get-the-nss-data/> [Accessed 10 September 2018]

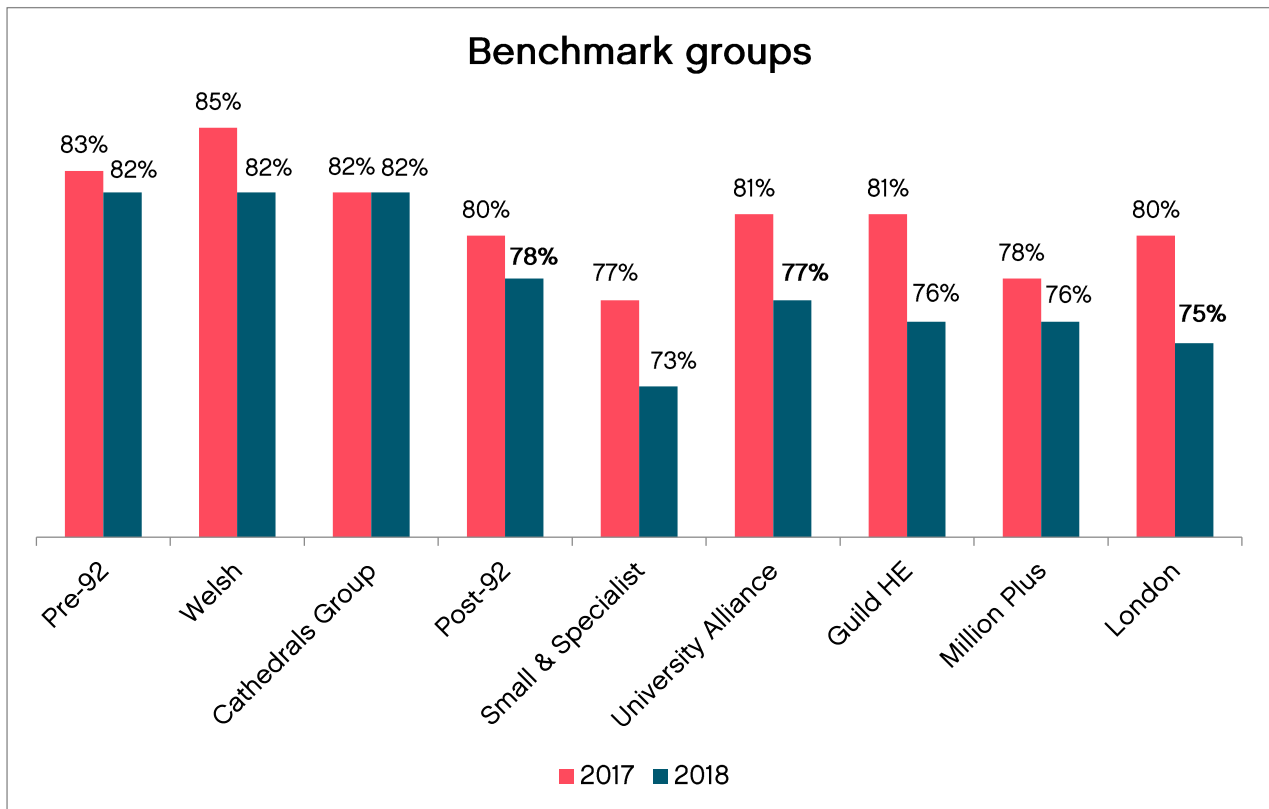


Base: Total sample with Russell Group removed (24,111/12,502). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

It is striking that even by removing Russell Group institutions from both 2017 and 2018, the 2% decline in satisfaction has been maintained. The scores are slightly lower, as we have removed Russell Group researchers, who tend to be more satisfied, but we can clearly see that there has been a decline in satisfaction overall.

4.2 Overall satisfaction by benchmark group

With more than 60 institutions taking part, there are a large number of benchmark groups that we can use to compare the results, both within and across different years.



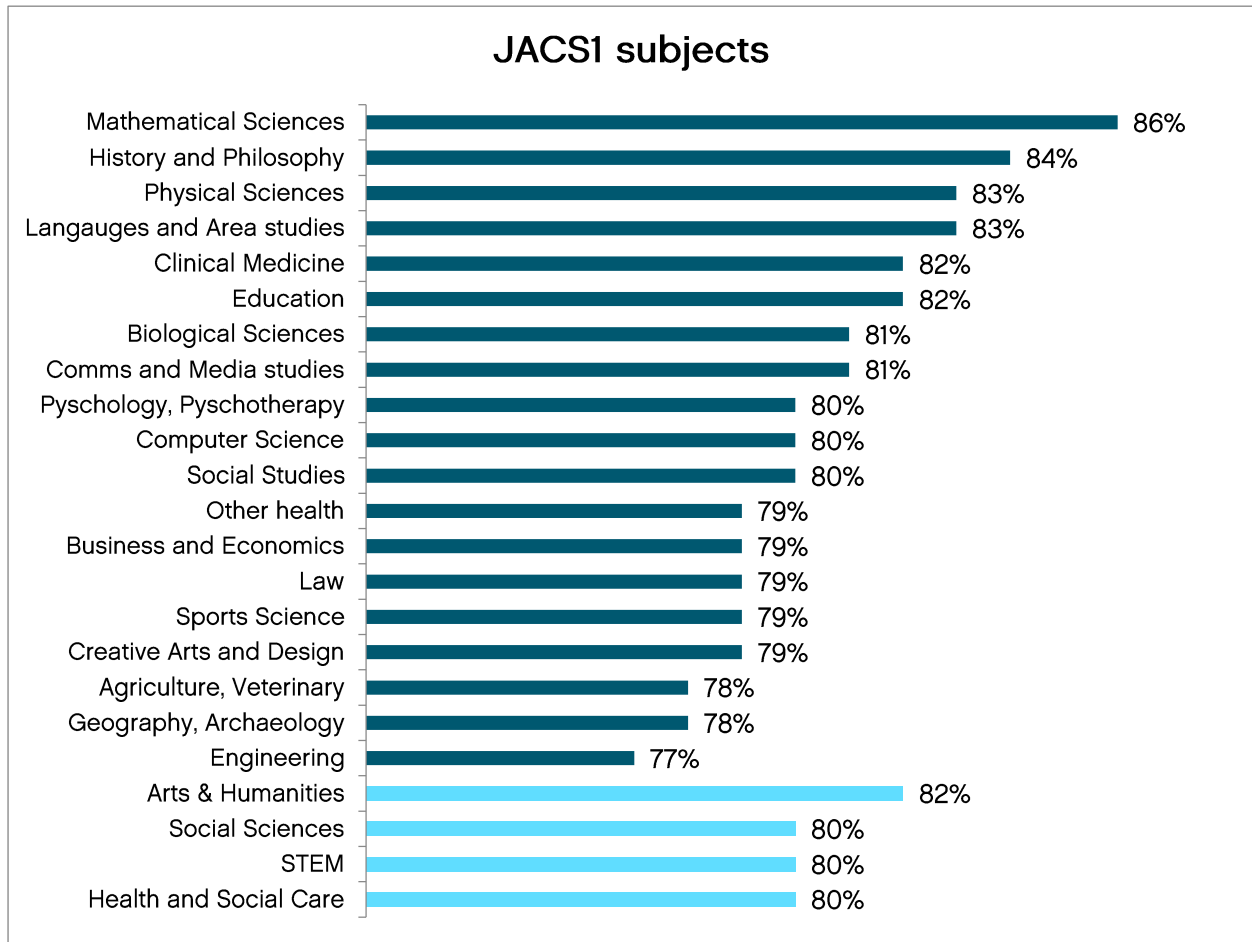
Base: All respondents in each benchmark group. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

The year-on-year comparison underlines the overall decline in satisfaction, in that, with the exception of Cathedrals Group institutions (which has not changed), satisfaction among all benchmark comparison groups has declined over the past year. It should be recognised that due to differing base sizes, not all of these differences are statistically significant, but Post-92, University Alliance and London benchmark groups do all show a significant decline.

Despite the decline, there are still some strong results. Institutions in Wales and among the Cathedrals Group still show very positive results, as do Pre-92 institutions. At the other end of the scale, results among institutions in London, Million Plus and Small & Specialist are relatively disappointing, with London in particular experiencing the largest decline.

4.3 Overall satisfaction by subject

There are relatively large differences in the overall experience between researchers according to the subjects they study. Interestingly, these differences do not tend to be along cluster lines as there is relatively little difference between the overall cluster scores.

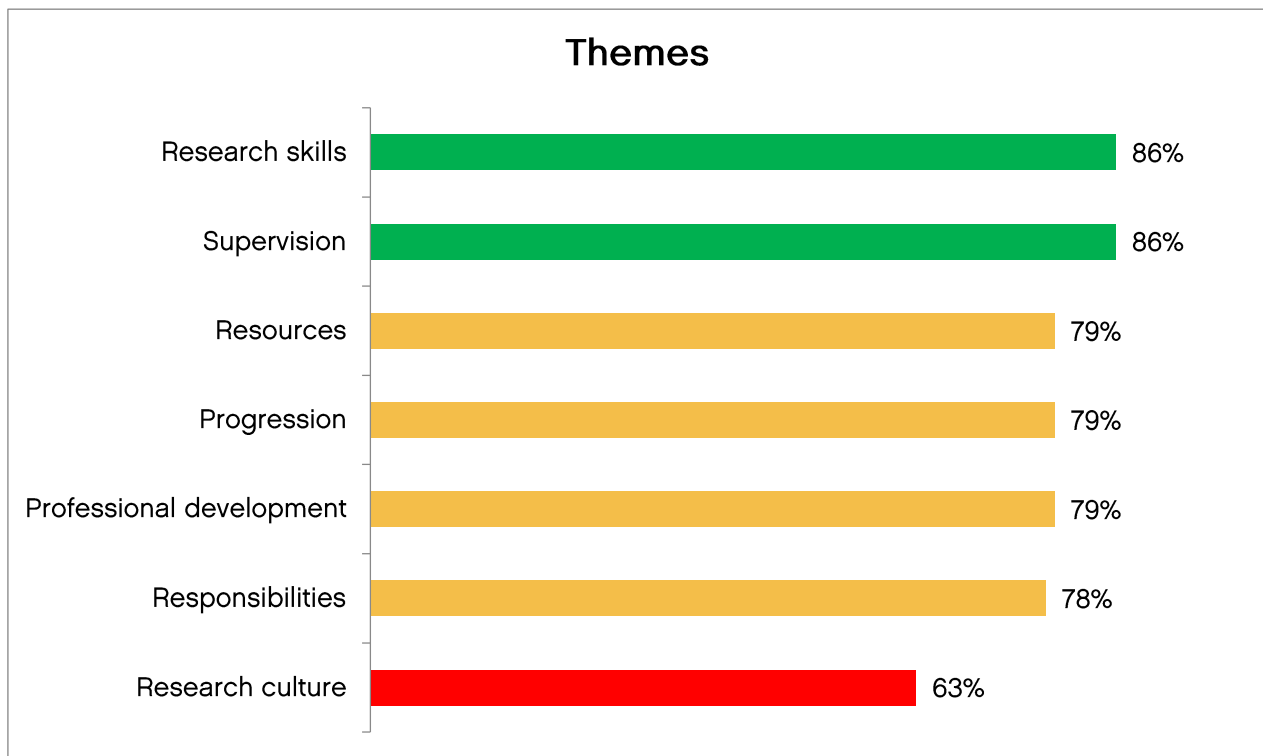


Base: All respondents in each subject.

PGR researchers studying Mathematical Sciences are significantly more likely to be satisfied than their counterparts studying Engineering. Beyond this, there are wide range of subjects with high satisfaction (History and Philosophy, Physical Sciences, Languages) and an equally wide range of subjects with low satisfaction (Geography, Agriculture, Creative Arts), with little evidence of consistency in the types of subject at either end of the scale.

5. Different aspects of the PGR experience

The PRES survey measures satisfaction across a range of 7 themes, each one comprising a number of individual questions which contribute to the overall score for each theme.

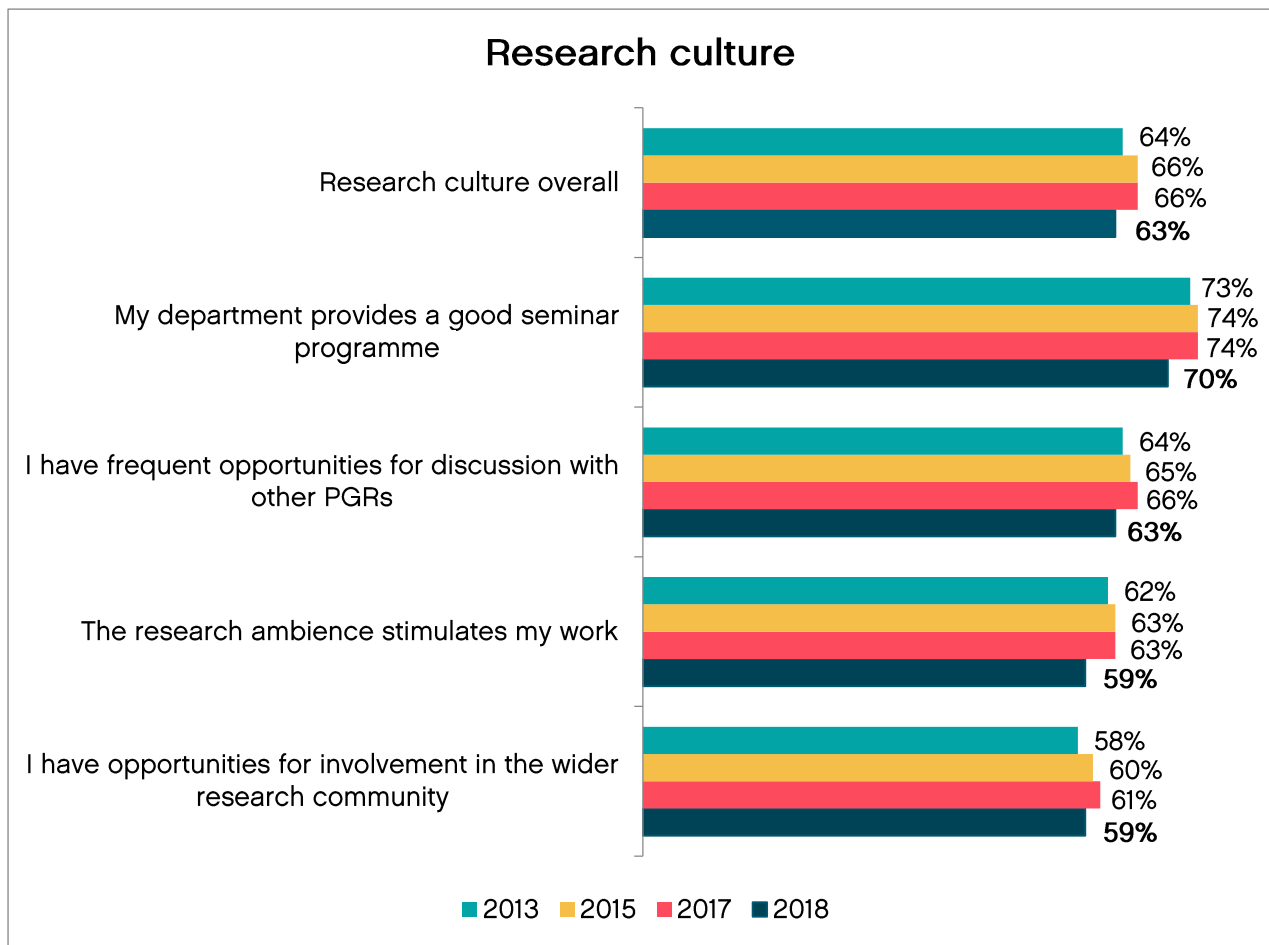


Base: All respondents (16,747).

Two aspects of the experience stand out – research skills (e.g. development of research skills and confidence) and supervision, both with on average between 8 and 9 out of 10 researchers being satisfied. This is particularly positive in the case of supervision, which, as we will see in the next section, contains many of the elements that are most crucial to an overall satisfactory experience.

Many of the other areas (e.g. resources, progression, professional development, responsibilities) also score well, with nearly 80% satisfaction. The one exception to this is research culture, with fewer than two out of three researchers being satisfied overall. This is clearly a major aspect that researchers are not always happy with and would benefit from continued focus across the sector.

Looking specifically at the items within research culture, we can see that researchers are most critical of the research ambience around them and the opportunities for involvement in the wider research community.



Base: All respondents (46,818/ 50,556/57,448/16,747). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Despite the lower than average scores in this area, results had been moving in the right direction in the past few years. Of concern, however, is that this has been reversed via a significant decline in 2018.

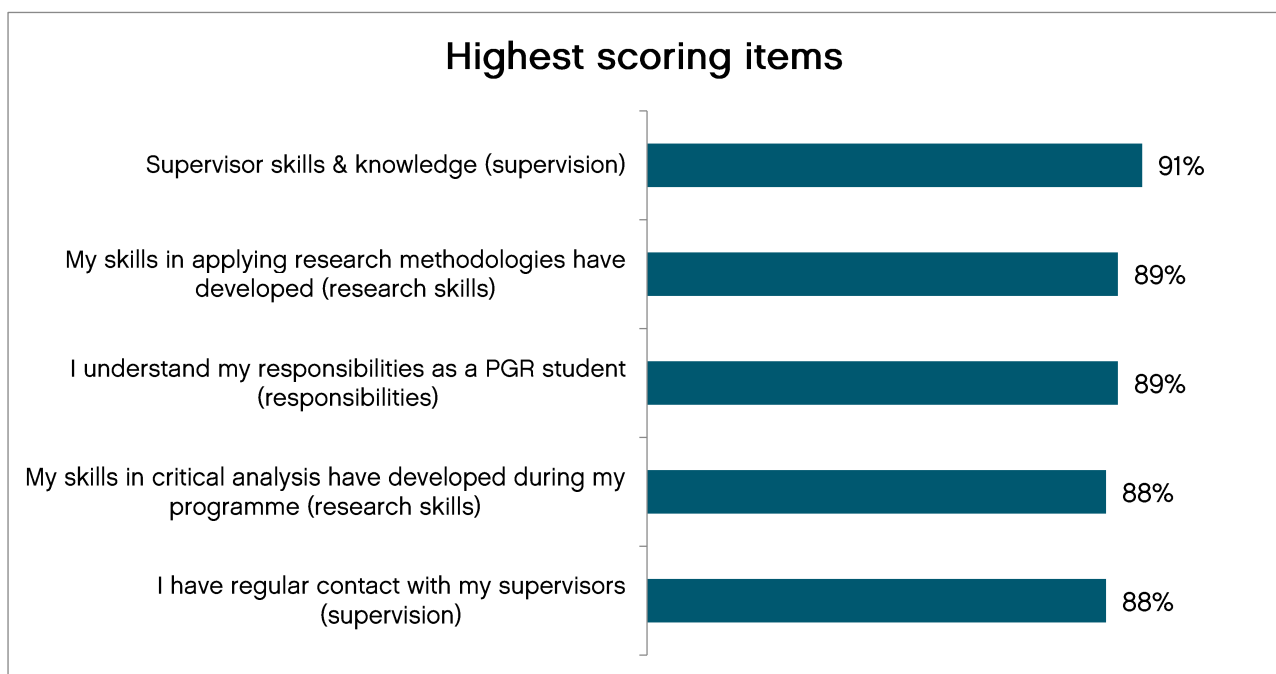
Given the changes in the overall cohort of respondents in 2018, we have also compared the 2017 and 2018 scores after excluding the Russell Group responses – see the table below – which underlines that there has still been a significant decline in 2018, albeit on a smaller scale than indicated by the total sample data.

Year-on-year comparison excluding Russell Group	2017	2018
My department provides a good seminar programme	71%	69%
I have frequent opportunities for discussion with other PGRs	65%	62%
The research ambience stimulates my work	60%	58%
I have opportunities for involvement in the wider research community	59%	59%

Base: Total sample with Russell Group removed (22,994/11,732). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Providing opportunities for involvement in wider research has not declined significantly for non-Russell Group researchers, but the other three aspects, including the key aspect of research ambience (see the key drivers of satisfaction section) have fallen significantly, reversing the positive trend over the past few years.

Within the 7 main sections described above there are 38 items in total – 4 in each. Ranked in the chart below are the 5 highest-scoring items across all these themes.



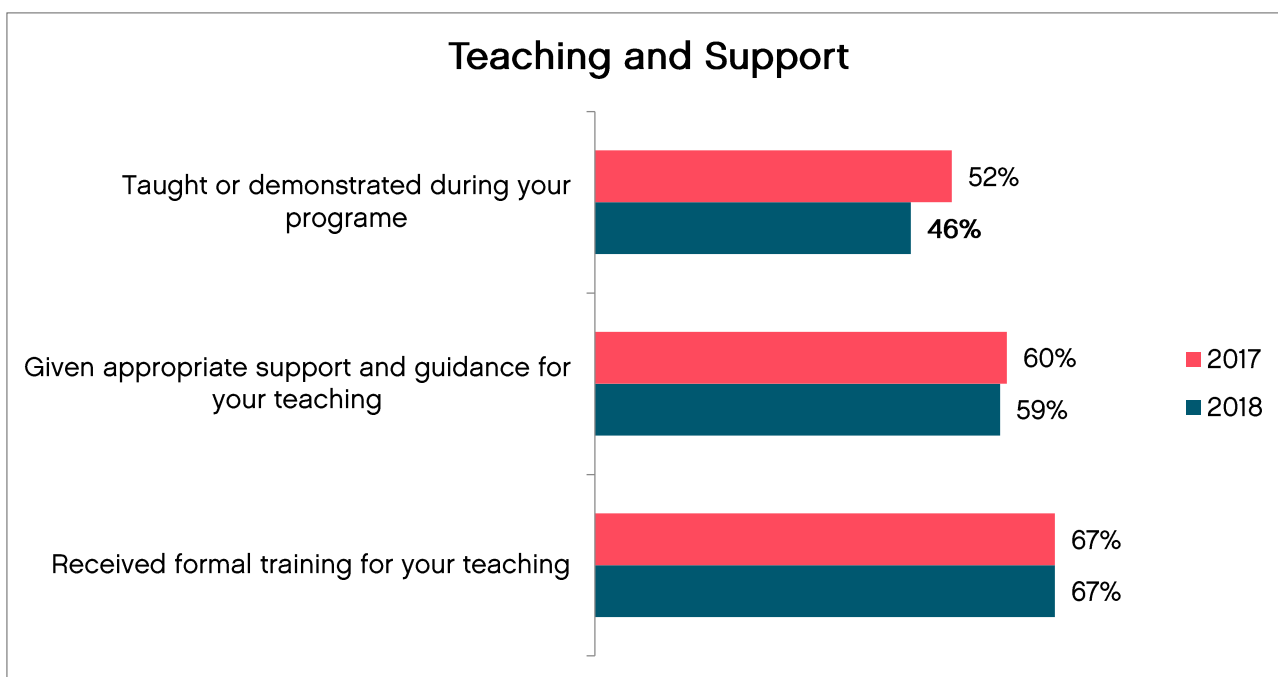
Base: All respondents (16,747).

Around 9/10 respondents are satisfied with these particular areas of their experience, which fall across three themes: supervision; research skills; and responsibilities.

At the other end of the scale, 4 of the 5 lowest scoring items are within research culture – as displayed earlier. The remaining low scoring item beyond research culture was around student feedback, within the responsibilities theme, with just 60% agreeing with the statement “my institution values and responds to feedback from research degree researchers”. This figure in itself is perhaps surprising given how well the PRES survey is embedded and used for enhancement across the sector, but it does highlight the continued need for focus on letting researchers know how feedback is being acted upon.

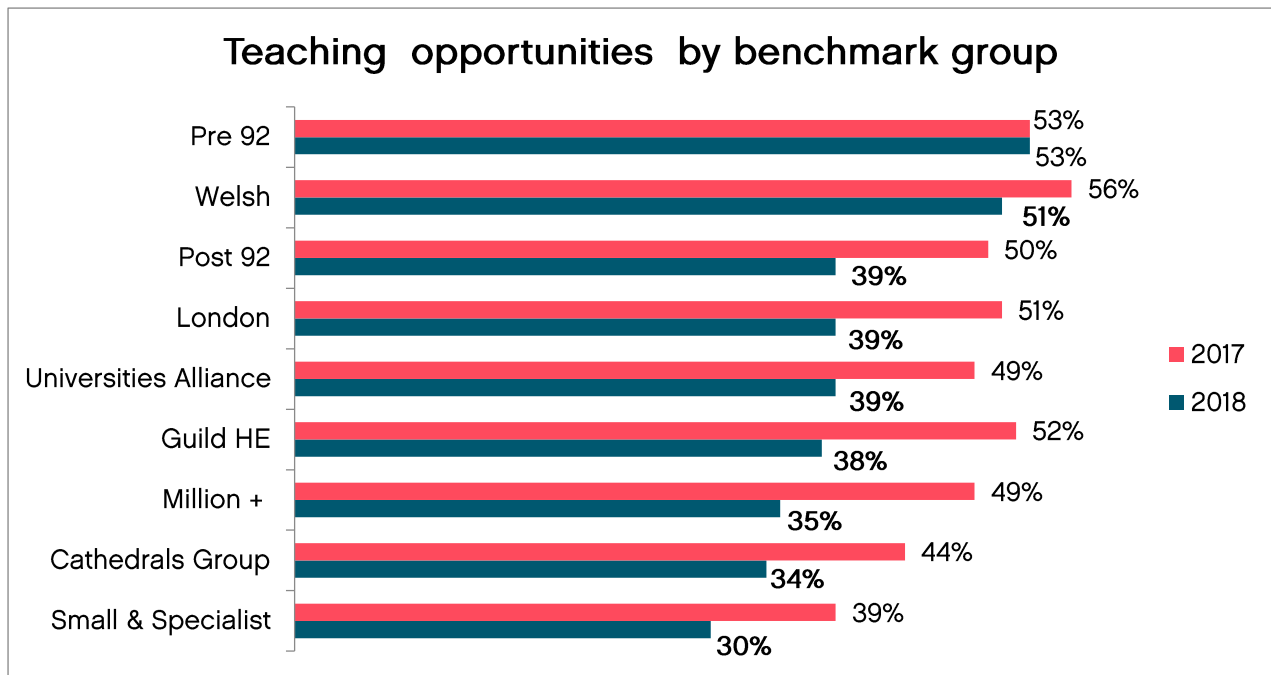
6. Teaching opportunities

As well as the 7 themes discussed in the previous section, PRES contains a dedicated section which measures the teaching opportunities and support provided. Specifically, this asks researchers whether or not they have taught (or demonstrated) during their studies and if so, whether they have been provided with appropriate support.



Base: Whether taught or demonstrated – all respondents (57,264/16,747). Other questions – all respondents who have taught (28,646/7,383). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Under half of researchers have taught or demonstrated during their research degree – a significant drop of 6% since 2017. Although Russell Group researchers (largely absent from the 2018 survey) were previously the most likely (53% in 2017) to be given teaching opportunities, this does not account for the changing score on this aspect. Across other benchmark groups which are included in the survey in the past two years there were significant falls across the board (as shown in the chart below), with researchers in almost all benchmark groups being less likely in 2018 to say they have been provided with opportunities to teach or demonstrate.



Base: All respondents in each benchmark group. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Among those researchers who were given opportunities to teach, there appears to be room for improvement. Just 60% felt they were given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching, while two out of three (67%) received formal training for their teaching – figures which are comparable to 2017.

7. Training and development opportunities

A key aspect of the PGR experience as measured through the PRES survey is the extent to which researchers have been provided with opportunities, advice or training to develop their skills in various aspects which can contribute to their development as a researcher as well as their wider preparation for a future career.



Base: All respondents (57,448/16,747). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

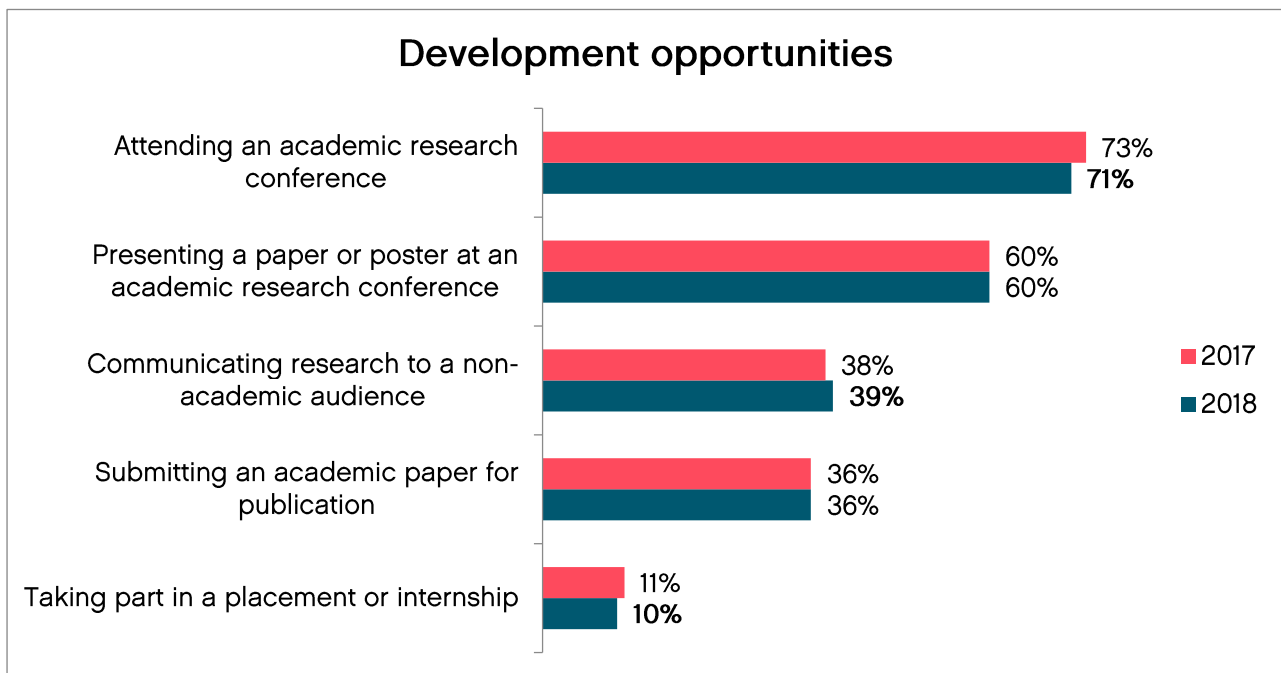
Looking specifically at advice or training, a relatively high proportion of researchers have received training to develop their research skills, but by contrast just over a quarter have received advice on career options. What is striking about all these four aspects of training and advice is that, on the face of it, there has been a strong, statistically significant decline in the proportion of researchers who report receiving this advice.

However, further analysis of the data highlights that in 2017, results were a lot more positive among Russell Group researchers, so the absence of these in 2018 is likely to have had an impact on the results. To minimise this effect we have therefore removed Russell Group responses from both 2017 and 2018 results, which has produced a different profile in terms of year-on-year scores, as shown in the chart below. Although there has still been a statistically significant decline in three out of four areas (due to the large sample sizes, a 1% difference or greater is usually significant), these differences are smaller than first identified. Indeed, there has actually been an improvement in the proportion of students who have agreed a personal development plan.



Base: All respondents outside Russell Group (24,238/12,556). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

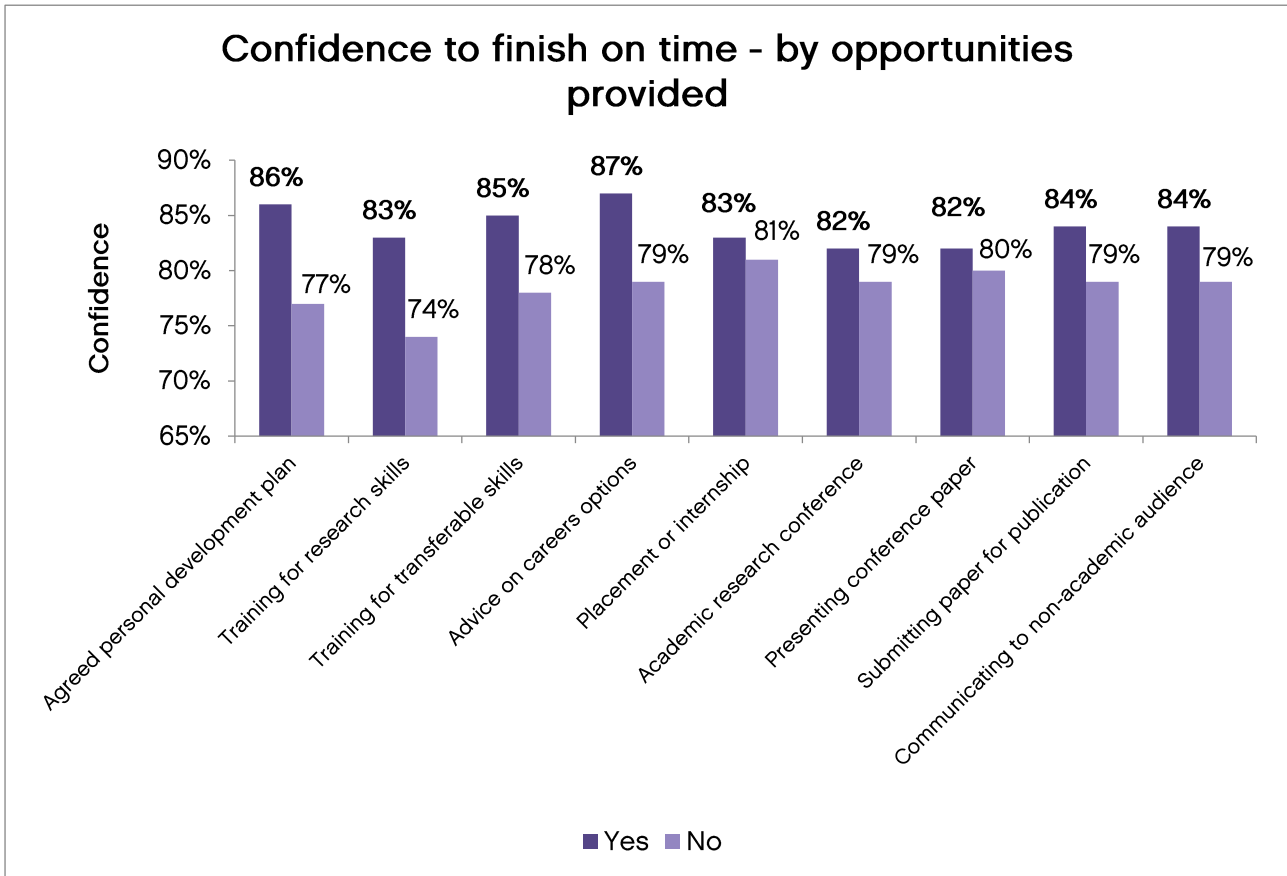
As described below, participation in development opportunities has taken place on broadly comparable levels in 2018 and 2017. Although there are some significant differences, these are relatively small, and there are some elements which have remained the same as well as one element (communicating research to a non-academic audience) which has actually improved.



Base: All respondents (57,448/16,747). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

It is relatively common for PGRs to attend and/or present at academic research conferences, although much less common to submit a paper for publication. Placements or internship opportunities are still provided relatively rarely, which is potentially a concern with regard to researchers' future employability.

Although this range of advice, training and opportunities varies widely in its frequency, these opportunities are clearly important. This is emphasised by the fact that researchers who have received this advice or taken part in an opportunity are significantly more likely to be confident to finish on time (for each item) than those who have not had the opportunities.



Base: All provided with each opportunity/all not provided. Statistical significant differences (95% level) in bold.

In particular, it is the elements of advice that have the strongest impact on confidence. Researchers who agreed a personal development plan, received research skills training and received career advice were all 9% more likely to be confident in finishing on time. Interestingly, attending a placement or internship has a relatively small impact on confidence to finish on time, but this is perhaps understandable as this could be seen as more of an employability-related opportunity than a purely academic one.

8. How could the experience be improved?

Correlation analysis enables us to identify the aspects of the PGR experience covered by the survey which have the strongest connection with overall satisfaction.

Measure – top 10 correlations with overall satisfaction	Theme	Pearson correlation value	Strength of correlation with overall satisfaction ⁵	Overall satisfaction score
Supervisors provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	Supervision	0.540	Strong	88%
Supervisors help me identify my training and development needs	Supervision	0.518	Strong	76%
The research ambience in my department stimulates my work	Research culture	0.509	Strong	59%
I have regular contact with my supervisors	Supervision	0.496	Moderate	88%
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed	Research skills	0.494	Moderate	80%
My institution values and responds to feedback	Responsibilities	0.489	Moderate	60%
My supervisors have the skills and subject knowledge to support me	Supervision	0.478	Moderate	91%
I am aware of my supervisors' responsibilities towards me	Responsibilities	0.452	Moderate	87%
My skills in applying appropriate research methodologies have developed during my programme	Research skills	0.447	Moderate	89%
Other than my supervisors I know who to approach if I am concerned	Responsibilities	0.438	Moderate	77%

⁵ Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.501+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

A correlation of above 0.501 or higher is generally recognised as a strong correlation, meaning that the results of the two items in question are strongly linked, whereas a correlation of 0.301–0.500 is seen as moderate.

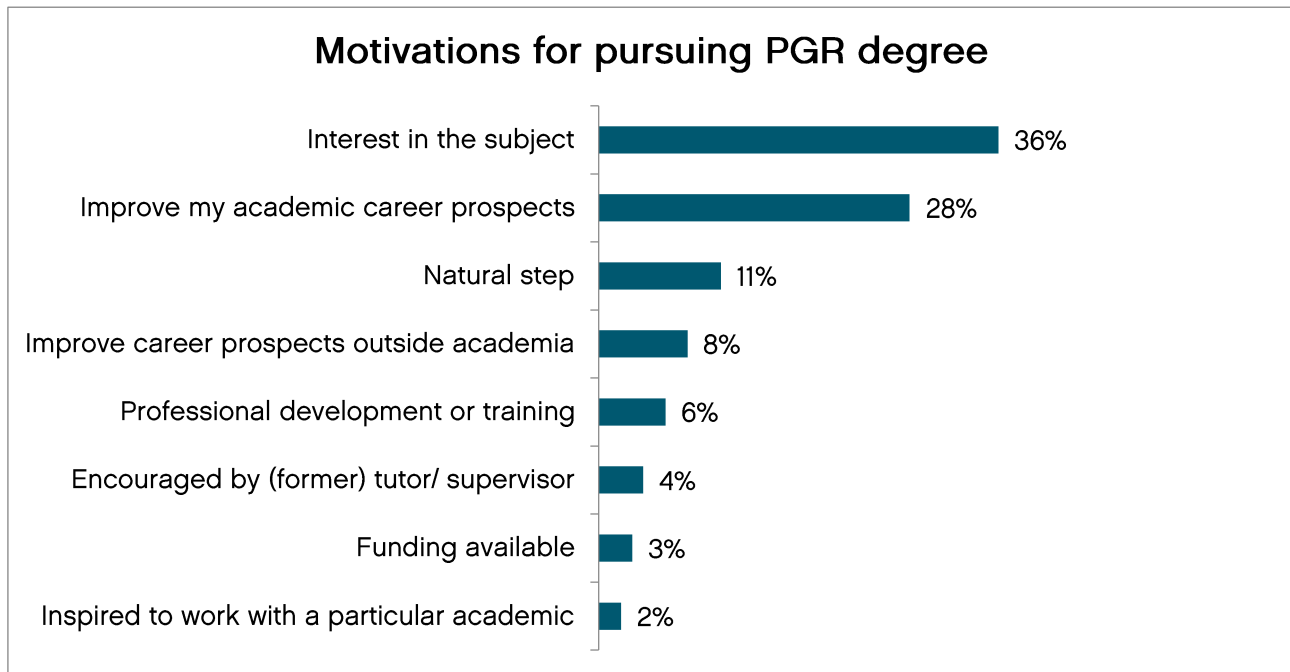
As the table above illustrates, the two areas of the experience with the strongest links to satisfaction are supervision (5 items) and responsibilities (3 items). Supervision dominates the top of the table, but results for these items are very strong. The third strongest link is research ambience (within the theme of research culture), for which scores are relatively low, with clear room for improvement. The one other aspect within the top 10 where current scores are relatively low is in terms of valuing and acting upon feedback.

We may therefore conclude that while supervision holds the key to maintaining the quality of the experience, where it is strong, addressing research ambience and acting upon feedback (areas which do not perform particularly well) potentially hold the key to improving it.

9. Motivations and career plans

The diversity of the student journey is highlighted by the ways in which the motivations and career plans of PGRs are related to their experiences.

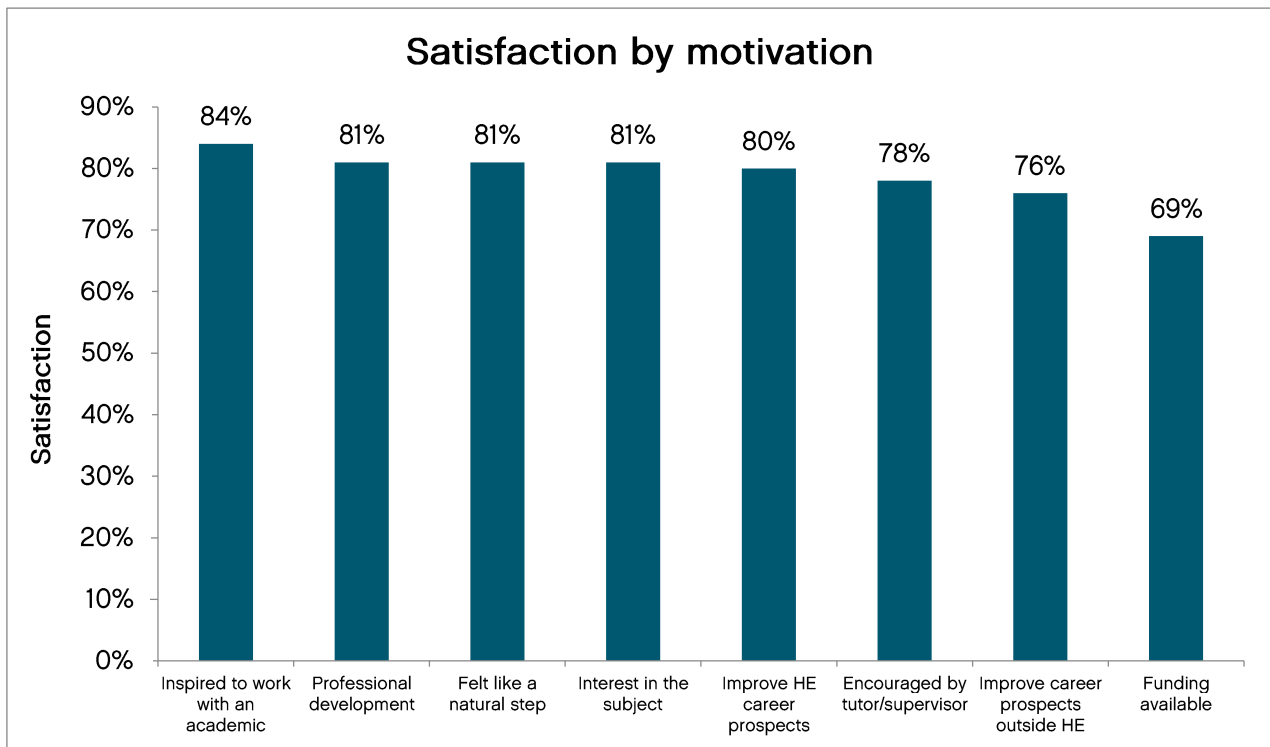
The main motivations for pursuing a research degree are an interest in the subject and improving career prospects for an academic/research career.



Base: All respondents (16,747).

There is also a relatively large number of researchers who feel that their programme is a natural step for them. More niche motivations include being inspired to work with a particular academic, being encouraged by a supervisor, or making a choice directly because of the funding available. There is also a cohort of researchers who are specifically considering a non-academic career and are selecting a PGR degree with this in mind.

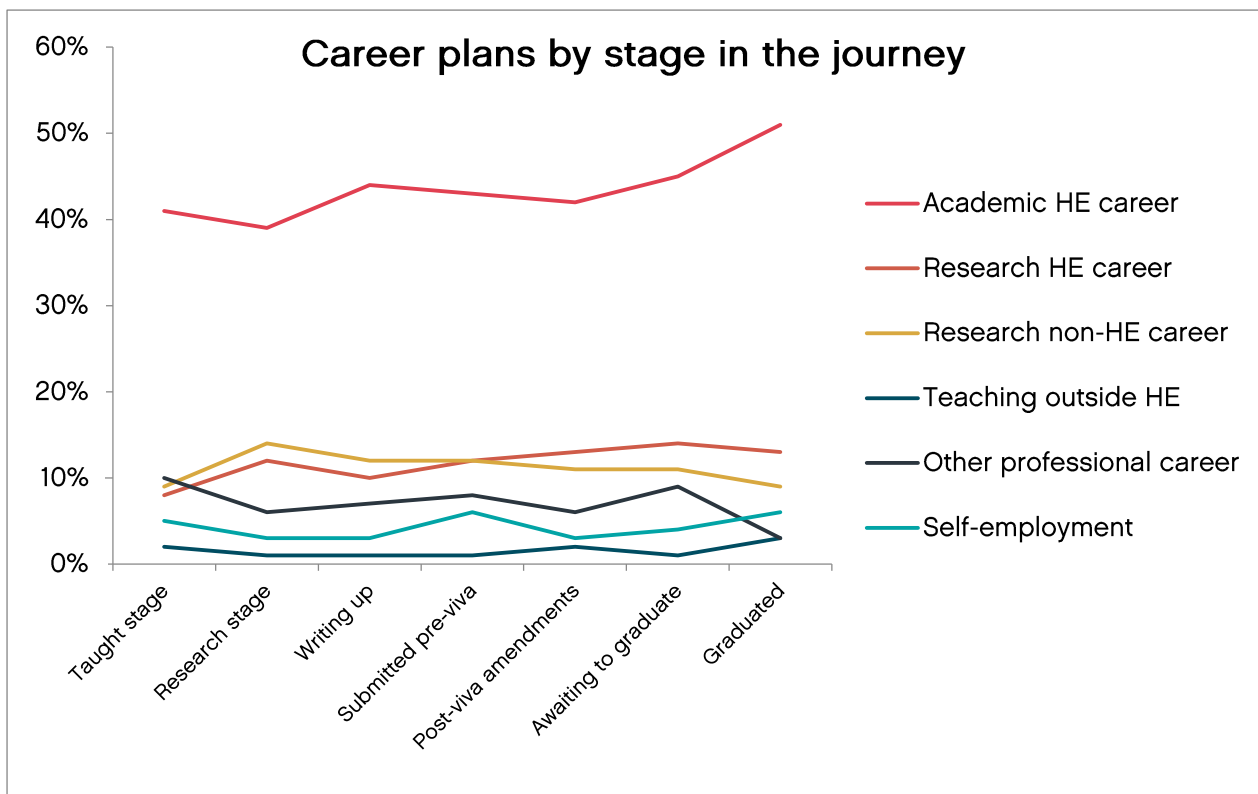
Satisfaction levels do vary depending on what motivated the student to make their choice. Interestingly, although being inspired to work with an academic is one of the more niche motivations, it is strongly linked with high levels of satisfaction.



Base: All respondents (16,747).

Career motivation (academic) and professional development are also associated with high satisfaction. At the other end of the scale, making a study choice due to funding being available is much less likely to be associated with high satisfaction. Indeed, we may broadly conclude from the above chart that if a student makes an ‘active’ choice through reasons of interest and development, they are more likely to be satisfied than those who may be encouraged by others or by financial reasons.

Like motivations, career plans also vary between researchers, but in particular they can vary by stage of course as we can see from the significant amount of fluctuation in the chart below. Although the most common career ambition is to follow an academic HE (Higher Education) career, this becomes even more popular as researchers progress towards the end of the course. The later stages of a course also see a clear increase in the desire to pursue an academic research career, which is encouraging in that the experience of academic research – a generally positive one – could be seen to have helped encourage this career choice.

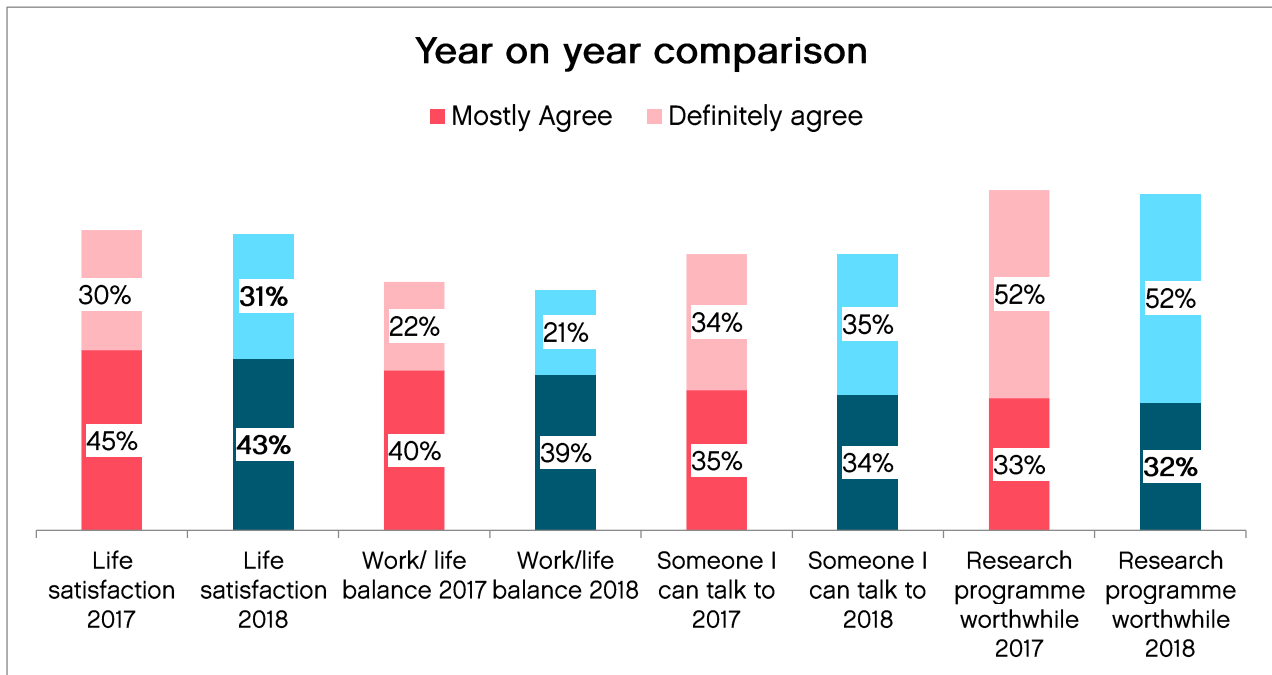


Base: All respondents (16,747).

Non-HE teaching or research careers fluctuate in importance but by the end of the journey the intention to follow these careers has not materially changed. The one area that has declined significantly between the beginning and end of the journey is a professional (non-research or non-teaching) career outside HE, which appears to be a direct consequence of the rise in the desire to pursue an academic career.

10. Wellbeing

In 2017 we introduced an optional wellbeing scale within PRES, using questions developed in conjunction with sector experts, while also drawing on existing scales used elsewhere.



Base: 2017 (28,609)/2018 (9,520). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

On the face of it, if we look at the top 2 scores on the 5-point agreement scale, then overall levels of wellbeing on these measures are not especially low. Three quarters of researchers agree to some extent that they are satisfied with their life and more than 8 out of 10 believe their studies are worthwhile.

The most concerning aspect is achieving an adequate work–life balance, where only around 6/10 agree that they have achieved this, and if we look at the “top box” (definitely agree) then only one in five agrees strongly with this aspect. Clearly, achieving the right work–life balance remains a challenge for researchers at this level.

If we look at year-on-year comparison we get a mixed picture. The only area showing a significant difference is in terms of life satisfaction, but this shows a positive increase in those who agree strongly, balanced against a decrease in those who agree slightly. The other measures only show small differences so we may conclude that in general there has not been a notable change in PGR wellbeing in the past year⁶.

This differs from the picture at undergraduate level, where the Student Academic Experience Survey 2018⁷, based on a sample of 14,000, highlighted significant year-on-year declines in undergraduate wellbeing across three out of four measures surveyed.

⁶ As with other areas in the survey we have also conducted this comparison with Russell Group responses excluded (not charted here) which underlined the overall finding that there has been no notable change year on year across the measures.

⁷ Neves, J and Hillman, N. (2018). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI.

11. A differential experience

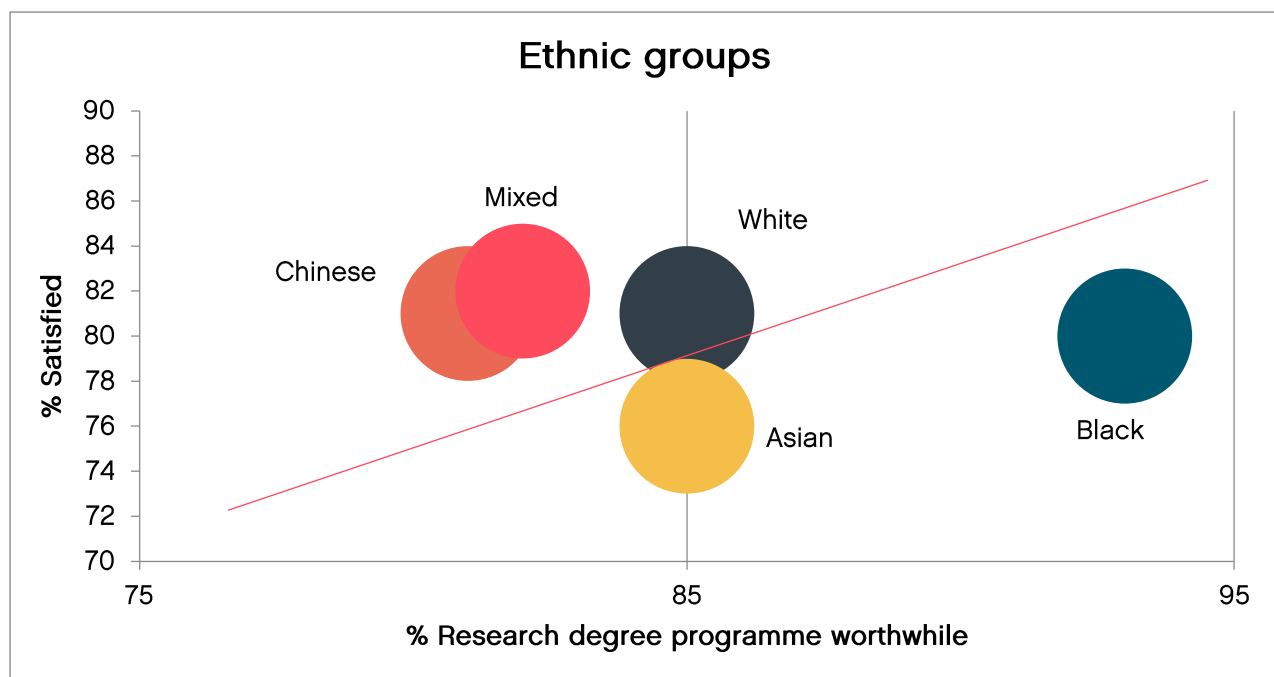
PRES captures the experiences of a range of different types of researcher, of diverse backgrounds, and from different parts of the world. It is not unusual for student surveys to reveal differences in the experience, and PRES is no different. However, there is evidence that some of the differences in the experience found in other surveys at undergraduate level are not necessarily reflected in the same way at PGR level as measured through PRES.

The 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey, cited earlier, identified major differences in the undergraduate experience by the following characteristics:

- Ethnicity: UK-domiciled students of White ethnicity reported a more positive experience, with Asian students in particular experiencing more difficulties.
- Working for pay: Full-time students who work for pay for more than 10 hours a week tend to be less satisfied overall.

We have conducted similar analysis of the PRES results, plotting the different student groups using measures of overall satisfaction and agreement that their degree programme has been worthwhile.

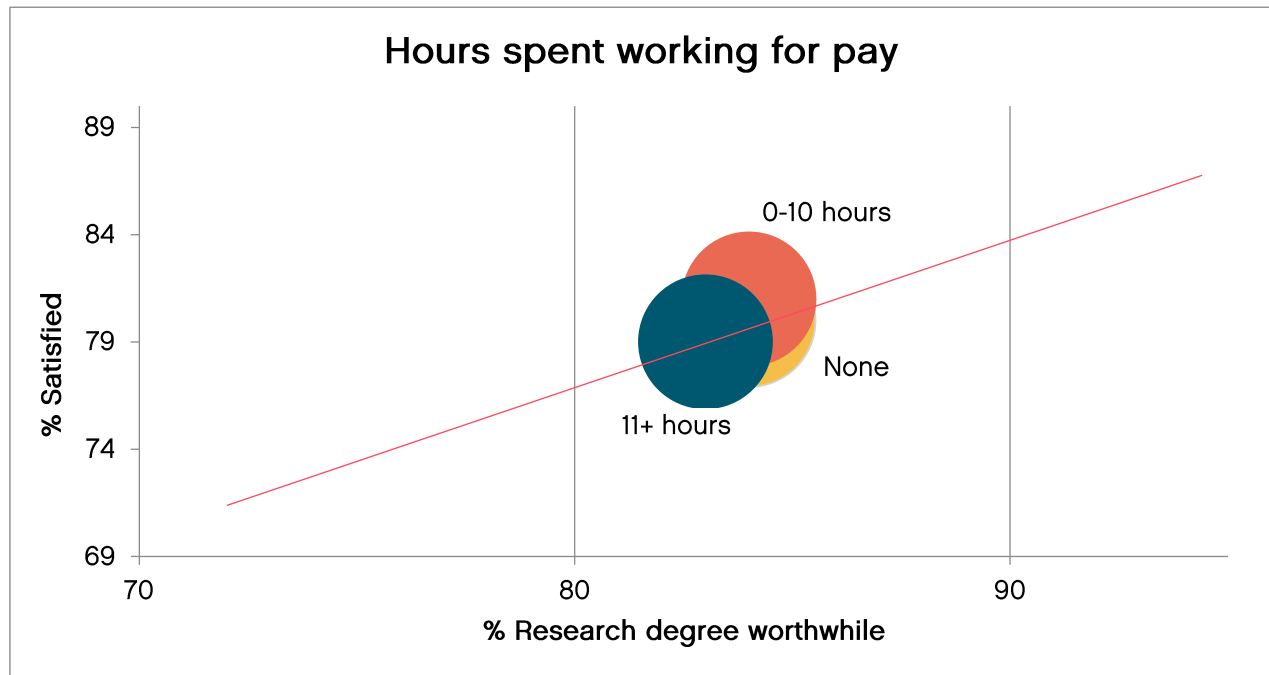
Firstly if we look at ethnicity, we can see that there are differences in the experience but it is not necessarily white PGR students who have the best experience.



Base: UK domicile. White (8,056); Black (326); Asian (445); Chinese (100); Mixed (281).

UK-domiciled Black PGR students identify themselves as being generally satisfied but in particular they are highly likely to feel their degree programme is worthwhile. There are relatively few differences across the remaining ethnic groups, and although Asian PGR students are slightly less satisfied, there is no evidence that any ethnic group faces a particularly challenging experience compared to any others.

Conducting similar analysis by the extent to which a (full time) PGR student spends time in paid employment also throws up some differences in comparison with the differences that the Student Academic Experience survey found for undergraduates.

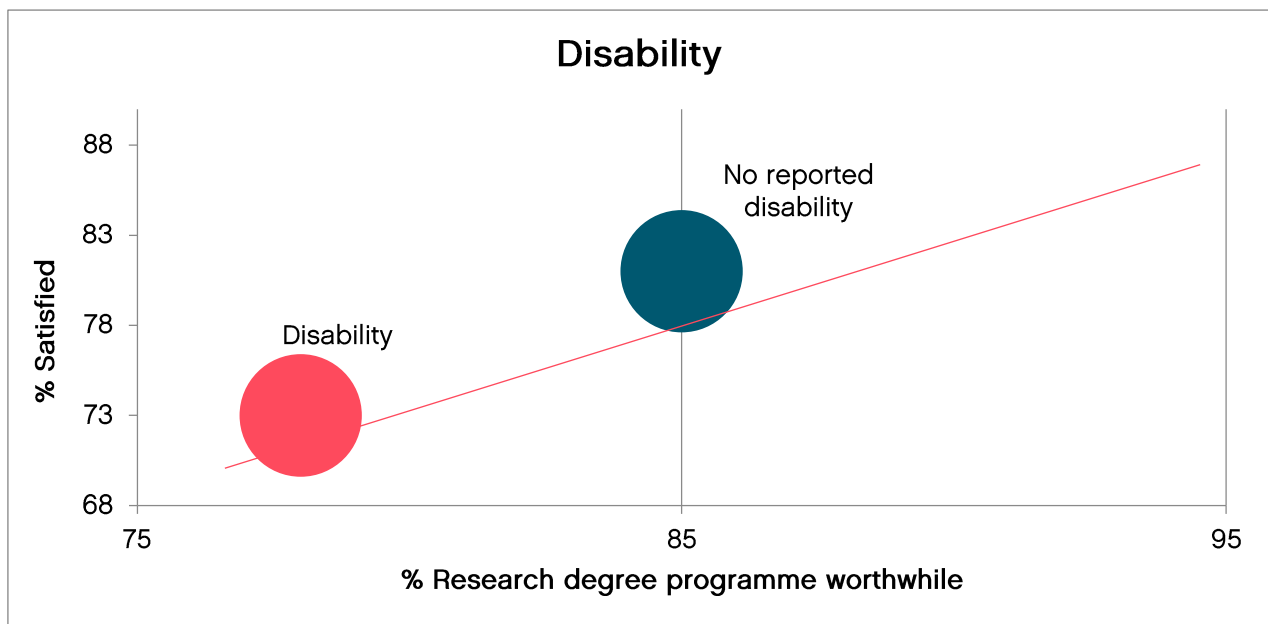


Base: Full-time students. 11+ hours (2,101); 0–10 hours (1,980); None (8,255).

At PGR level, the extent to which a PGR student spends time working for pay appears to make very little difference to the experience. Researchers who work 11+ hours are marginally less likely to be satisfied or to feel their studies are worthwhile, but these 1% differences are not statistically significant.

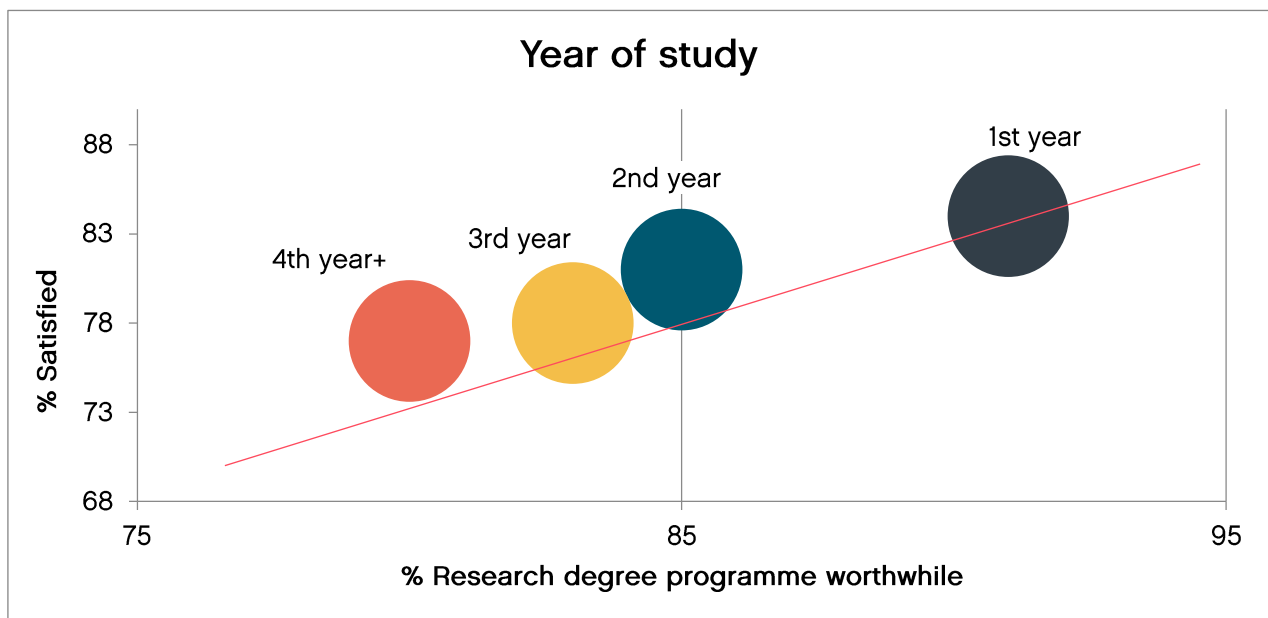
We can only speculate as to the reasons for this, but one potential explanation could be that undergraduates are less prepared for the challenges of balancing the conflicting demands of work and study, while postgraduate researchers have more experience and therefore are more likely to have strategies in place to cope with this.

Although working status and ethnicity do not appear to be associated with a less satisfactory experience, there are other characteristics that are impacted.



Base: Reported disability (1,401); No disability (14,736).

There are major differences among disabled researchers, who are significantly less likely to be satisfied or to feel their degree is worthwhile. Clearly, this is a concerning finding, highlighting a need for further investigation at both a sector and institutional level.

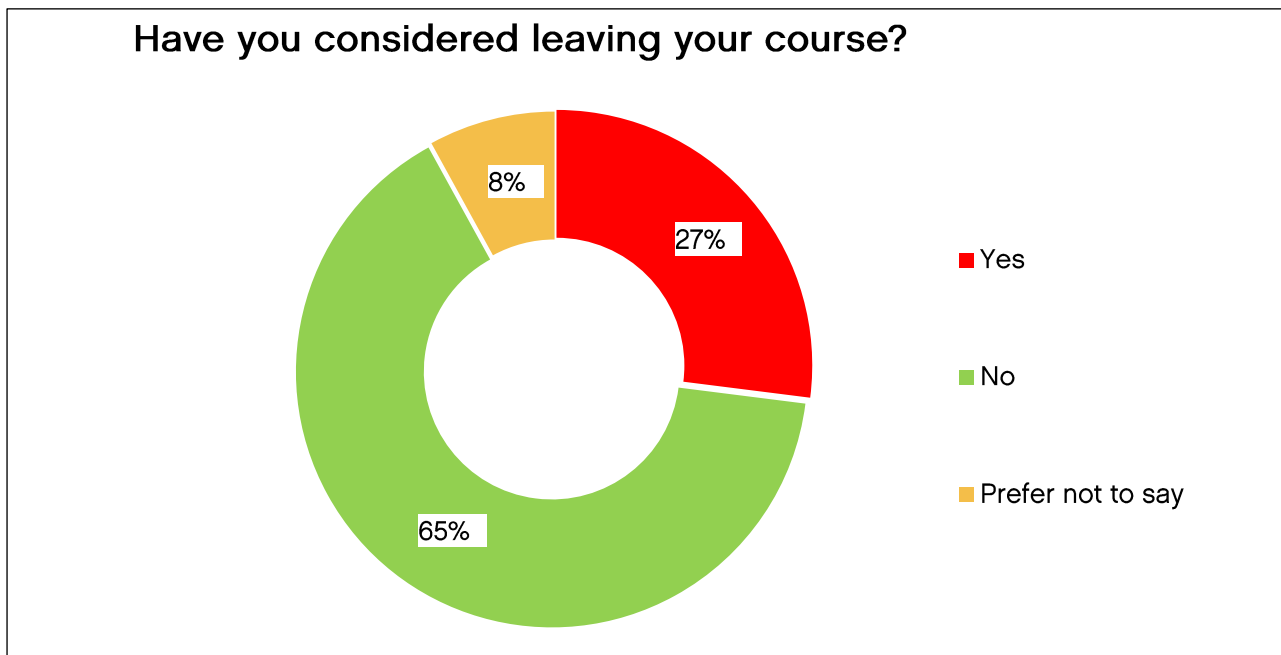


Base: 1st year (4,375); 2nd year (3,818); 3rd year (3,707); 4th year+ (4,146).

Year of study can also be a predictor of a more disappointing experience. As researchers progress through their studies, their satisfaction levels fall. This is concerning, in that we may have hoped or expected that as researchers gain experience they may enjoy their studies more. However, the reverse appears to be true, which may imply that researchers experience more pressure and frustration as they get closer to their submission deadline, which could impact on their confidence to finish on time.

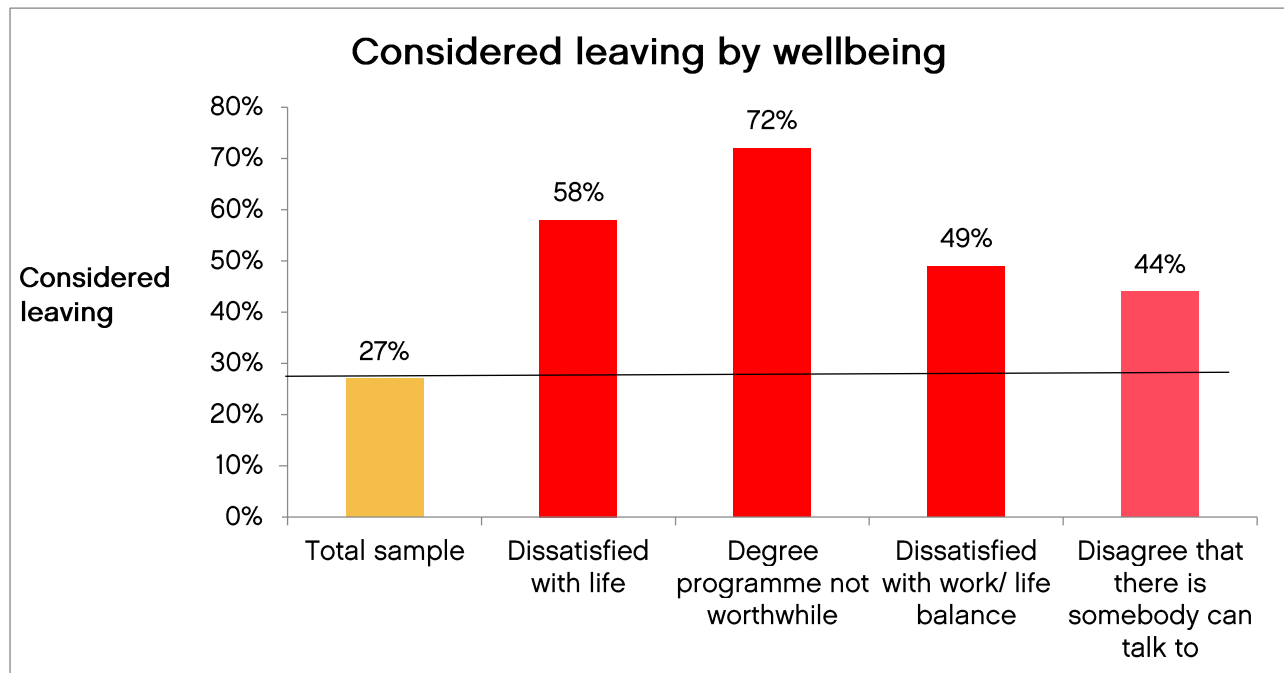
12. Retention

A question on retention was introduced in 2017, at the same time as the personal outlook (wellbeing) items. Just over one in four researchers (26.5%) in 2018 have considered leaving their course – a result that is consistent with when we first measured this in 2017 (26.3%).



Base: All respondents shown this optional question (9,504).

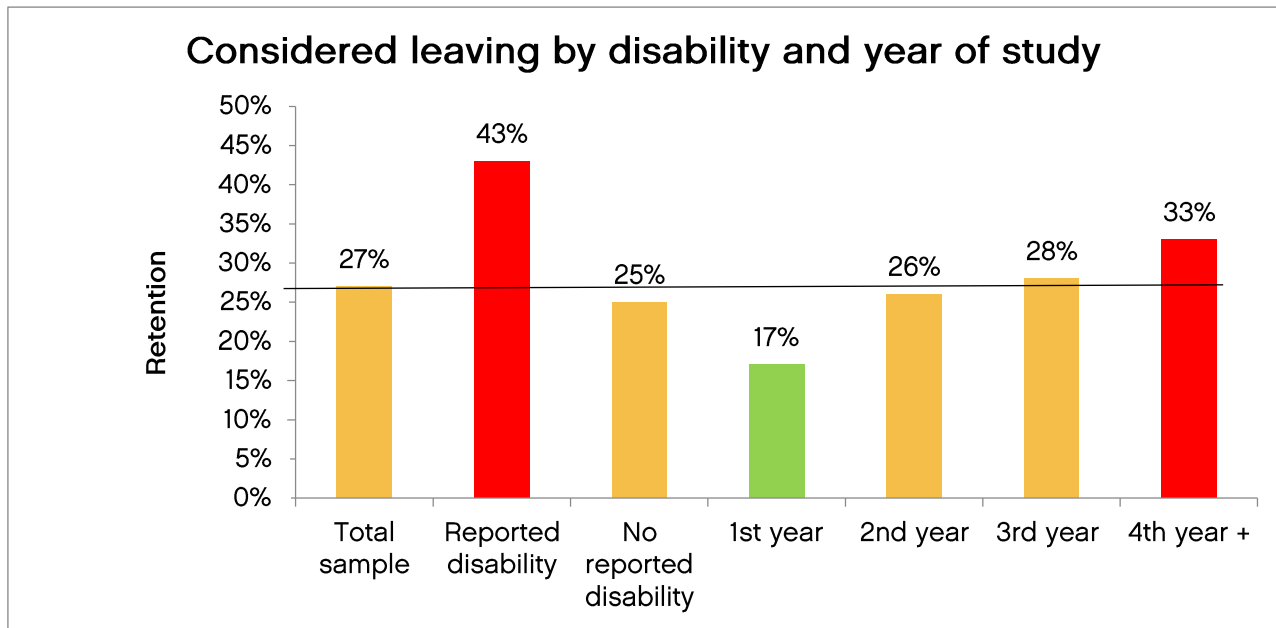
This question facilitates analysis of the relative differences among researchers who have undergone divergent experiences.



Base: Total sample in retention section (9,504); Dissatisfied with life (1,051); Degree programme not worthwhile (582); Dissatisfied with work–life balance (2,084); Disagree there is somebody can talk to (1,436). Dissatisfaction/disagree comprises responses from bottom two boxes on the 5-point wellbeing scale.

Intuitively we might expect to see a connection between wellbeing and retention, and this is borne out here. As we saw above, just over 1 in 4 researchers have considered leaving their course, but this rises strikingly among researchers who are less satisfied in terms of their wellbeing. Nearly 6/10 who are dissatisfied with their life overall, and/or their work–life balance, have considered leaving. Even more significantly, researchers who don’t feel their degree programme is worthwhile are highly likely (72%) to have considered leaving their course. These results underline the importance of identifying researchers who are experiencing difficulties either with their course or with other issues in their life which may impact on their wellbeing and constitute a risk to their continuing.

We highlighted in the previous chapter how disability and length of study time are linked to a less positive experience.



Base: Reported disability (751); No disability (8,412); 1st year (2,303); 2nd year (2,191); 3rd year (2,142); 4th year+ (2,450).

The chart above highlights clearly how this less positive experience creates a risk of researchers being more likely to consider leaving, a risk that increases as a student progresses through their studies. The difficulties faced by disabled researchers are also a major concern, with these researchers reporting a clear and increased risk of non-continuation.

13. Conclusion

This report has identified how the experience of postgraduate researchers is declining in some areas. Overall satisfaction is 2% lower than last year, which appears to be driven by a decline in research ambience, together with other aspects of the wider research culture.

To assist institutions in focusing efforts for improvement moving forward, correlation analysis in this report has highlighted that supervision, research skills (both scoring well) and research ambience (less well) are the three areas which have the greatest influence on satisfaction. Hence concentrating resources on maintaining or improving those aspects could potentially have a major positive impact.

Elsewhere, the report has identified how researchers are less likely than in previous years to be offered opportunities to teach or demonstrate – which is a concern as academic teaching is a key skill required for large numbers of researchers who intend to pursue an academic career after they graduate.

The levels of skills training and advice provided to researchers remains high in some areas, and there is evidence that continuing to support researchers in particular through personal development plans or research skills training can help boost confidence to complete their studies.

Although there are some areas, specifically ethnicity, where there is no major divergence in the experience, there are others where the differences in the experience are concerning. In particular the experience of disabled students lags behind, and this appears to require specific attention and action from institutions in order to understand how this can be addressed.

Results also provide evidence as to how the postgraduate research journey becomes more challenging over time, as researchers are faced with a range of pressures at different stages which impact on their work–life balance. Institutions therefore need to consider how to dedicate appropriate resources and expertise to identifying when researchers are dealing with particular difficulties, and supporting them accordingly through these challenges.

14. Appendix

Participating Institutions		
Aberystwyth University	Edinburgh Napier University	University of Chester
Anglia Ruskin University	Northumbria University	University of Derby
Auckland University of Technology	Open University	University of East London
Bath Spa University	Bangor University	University of Exeter
Birkbeck, University of London	Queen's University Belfast	University of Gloucestershire
Birmingham City University	University of Roehampton	University of Greenwich
Bournemouth University	Royal College of Art	University of Hull
Buckinghamshire New University	Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Kent
Canterbury Christ Church University	SOAS, University of London	University of Leicester
Cardiff Metropolitan University	Sheffield Hallam University	University of Lincoln
Cardiff University	Southampton Solent University	University of Portsmouth
Coventry University	Scotland's Rural University College	University of Queensland
De Montfort University	Staffordshire University	University of South Wales
Edge Hill University	Teesside University	University of St Mark & St John
Harper Adams University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	University of Stirling
Kingston University	University of Northampton	University of Sunderland
Koç University	University of Bath	University of Surrey
Leeds Beckett University	University of Bradford	Ulster University
Leeds Trinity University	University of Brighton	University of Westminster
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	University of Bristol	University of Winchester
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	University of Buckingham	University of Wolverhampton
Middlesex University	University of Central Lancashire	York St John University



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