

2020

Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

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 AdvanceHE

POSTGRADUATE

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

SURVEY



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1. Executive Summary

This report examines the key findings from a dataset which includes the views of over 8,000 students from 45 institutions.

Overall satisfaction across the sector remains high, at 80%. This is in line with the 2018 figure and just 1% below the 2019 score, indicating a degree of stability over the past three years. Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) who are motivated to work with a particular academic and those at the end of their programme of study are among the most satisfied.

Research Culture continues to be the area in which PGRs are least satisfied, with this area seeing a dip in satisfaction of 3 percentage points since 2019. PGRs who do not live with other students during term-time report lower satisfaction in this area compared with those who do, driven by fewer interactions with the research community.

2020 was a challenging year for the higher education sector, and indeed all aspects of society around the world, due to the situation surrounding Covid-19. Restrictions on freedoms came into place part way through the PRES (Postgraduate Research Experience Survey) fieldwork period, enabling a comparison of responses received during 'lockdown' with those received before lockdown. While words such as 'restrictions' and 'lockdown' have negative connotations, there is evidence that support provided by institutions helped to create a positive experience despite the challenges faced. Overall satisfaction levels among PGRs responding to the survey before lockdown (77%) are lower than among those who responded during lockdown (82%), as are satisfaction levels with each element of the research degree experience. Particularly encouraging is that a significantly larger proportion of PGRs who responded to PRES during lockdown felt that their feedback was valued and acted upon, and comments reveal examples of supervisors going out of their way to engage with and support PGRs.

However, the challenging impacts of the lockdown have clearly been felt. Those responding after 16 March were less likely to have received formal training for their teaching, and were also less confident that they will complete their research degree programme within their institutions' expected timescale – particularly if they were in the later years of their degree.

Beyond any lockdown-related analysis, comparison of the experience among PGRs studying on a full- and part-time basis shows that, while there are only slight differences in satisfaction overall, full-time research students report higher satisfaction with elements of their programme related to research culture. It appears that timing and location of opportunities to network with the research community, rather than awareness of such opportunities, are particular issues for part-time PGRs. Conversely, and concerningly, full-time PGRs report considerably lower levels of wellbeing than part-time PGRs. Comments reveal that issues such as loneliness and isolation, as well as a sense of competitiveness and culture of long working hours contribute to lower levels of wellbeing. Opportunities to teach are a theme frequently mentioned in part-time PGRs' comments in regard to how their experience could be improved, indicating that widening access to such opportunities to teach or demonstrate could be key to improving their experience.

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 largest 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 early July 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. These data reflect 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 2020, PRES comprised 43 questions, including 10 batteries of closed 5-point Likert scale questions, 10 optional open text questions, and the option for 4 Wellbeing questions mirroring the Office for National Statistics 0 to 10 scale. Questions are grouped into 7 core themes:

- **Supervision**
- **Resources**
- **Research Culture**
- **Progress and Assessment**
- **Responsibilities**
- **Research Skills**
- **Professional Development**

Data is collected via an online survey method using Jisc Online Surveys² software. Surveys are distributed by individual higher education institutions directly to their PGR population. In 2020, data was collected between 3 February and 18 May 2020. Within this timeframe, institutions were able to choose when they ran the survey, provided that the survey was open for a minimum of 3 weeks.

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/>

² Jisc Online Surveys (2020) *About online surveys*. Available online: <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/about/>

Over the past 13 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) 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, the wellbeing questions were aligned with the Office for National Statistics.

In 2020, the discipline question was changed to reflect the 2021 REF categories and the gender question was amended to include non-binary gender options to match Advance HE guidelines. Two questions were added: one question on living arrangements and a further question on distance to campus. To keep the length of the survey down, the question on why PGRs had considered leaving was removed.

3.2 Survey dates

In 2020, the spread of the Covid-19 virus has impacted all parts of life and society, including the higher education sector. As restrictions intended to slow the spread of the virus were introduced during the PRES fieldwork period, analysis could be performed on responses received before and during the lockdown period in order to understand the impact of the circumstances on results.

In this report, responses received on or before 16 March are considered 'pre-lockdown' responses and those received after 16 March are 'during lockdown' responses. 3,234 PGRs responded to the survey pre-lockdown and 5,198 responses were received during lockdown. We have selected 16 March as the key date to use in our analysis because this is when tougher restrictions on life in the UK were announced and by which time many higher education institutions had moved their teaching online.

3.3 Sample size

In 2020, 45 institutions participated in PRES with 8,432 individual respondents. Figure 1 shows sample sizes for 2011–2020. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on some institutions being able to run the survey in 2020.

Figure 1: PRES participation: institutions and responses (2011–2020)

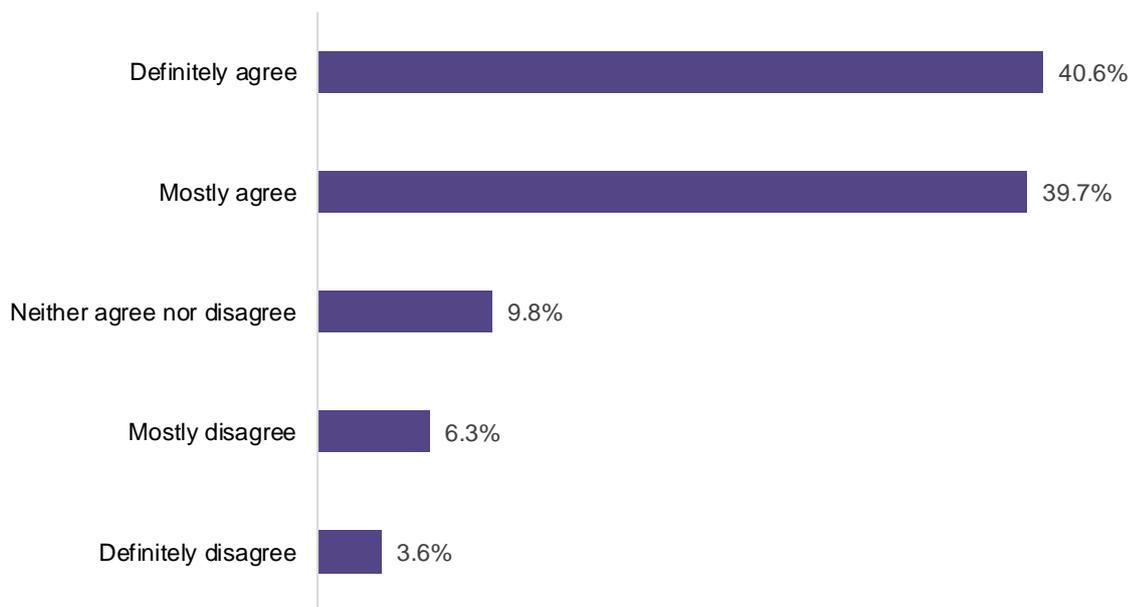
	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020
Institutions	102	122	123	117	66	107	45
Responses	31,202	48,401	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600	8,432

4. Overall Satisfaction

4.1 Understanding overall satisfaction

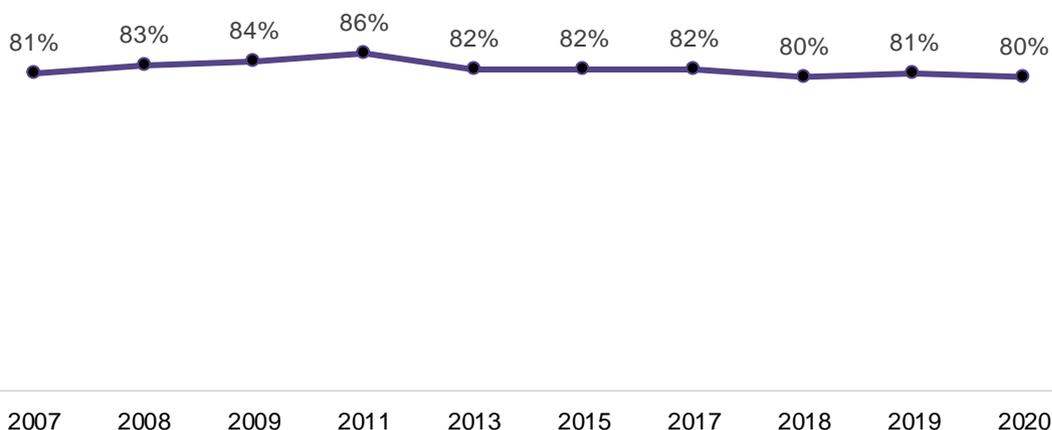
Overall satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience remains high in 2020, at 80%. This is in line with the 2018 figure and just 1% below the 2019 score.

Figure 2: I agree that I was satisfied with my experience



That being said, from a longitudinal perspective illustrated in Figure 3 below, 80% overall satisfaction is among the lower of the scores observed since 2007. While this chart illustrates that overall satisfaction has been consistently high, and the 2020 score remains in line with this, it will be interesting to see whether scores recover, or dip to levels below those which we have seen before, in the coming years.

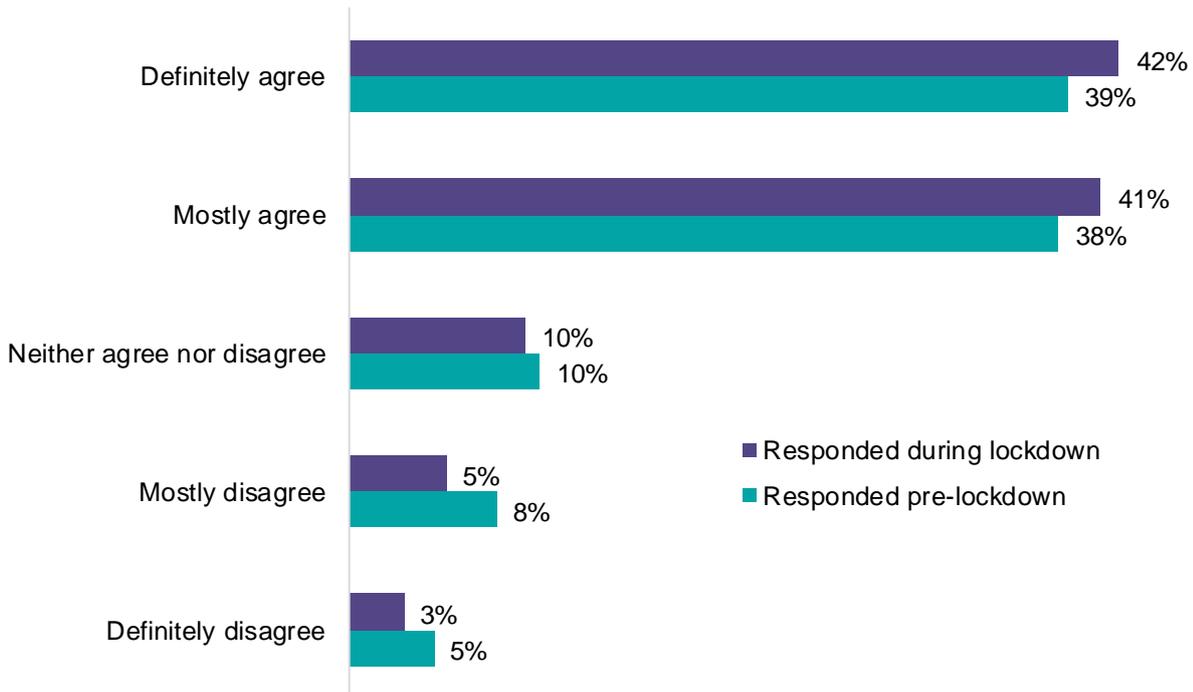
Figure 3: Satisfaction over time (2007–2020)



4.2 Pre- and during-lockdown comparison

A logical suggestion might be that the slight decrease in overall satisfaction in 2020 is due to the Covid-19 situation and the disruption and uncertainty it may have caused to the research degree experience; however, the data suggest that this is not the case. We can see that agreement levels among PGR students responding to the survey before lockdown (77%) are lower than among those who responded during lockdown (82%).

Figure 4: Satisfaction among PGRs responding before and during lockdown



Students highlight exceptional support during lockdown

When asked about the most positive aspect of their research degree programme so far, several students make reference to how well supported they have felt by staff members during the pandemic. Comments include examples of staff members going above and beyond to help students, including lending equipment.

“Under the specific conditions of Covid-19 I felt a huge effort from my Faculty/Department/supervisors/Administration team and students, to make sure all research degree students were doing well and keep up our motivation.”

“Due to Covid-19, all facilities closed. My supervisor went out of their way to loan small equipment to me to be able to continue to collect data and work from home.”

“My supervisor is excellent in terms of academic knowledge and always supports me, such as giving a lot of comments and feedback back to me after we have meetings. Moreover, when I feel confused and not so sure about some parts of my research, they are always here to support even during Covid19.”

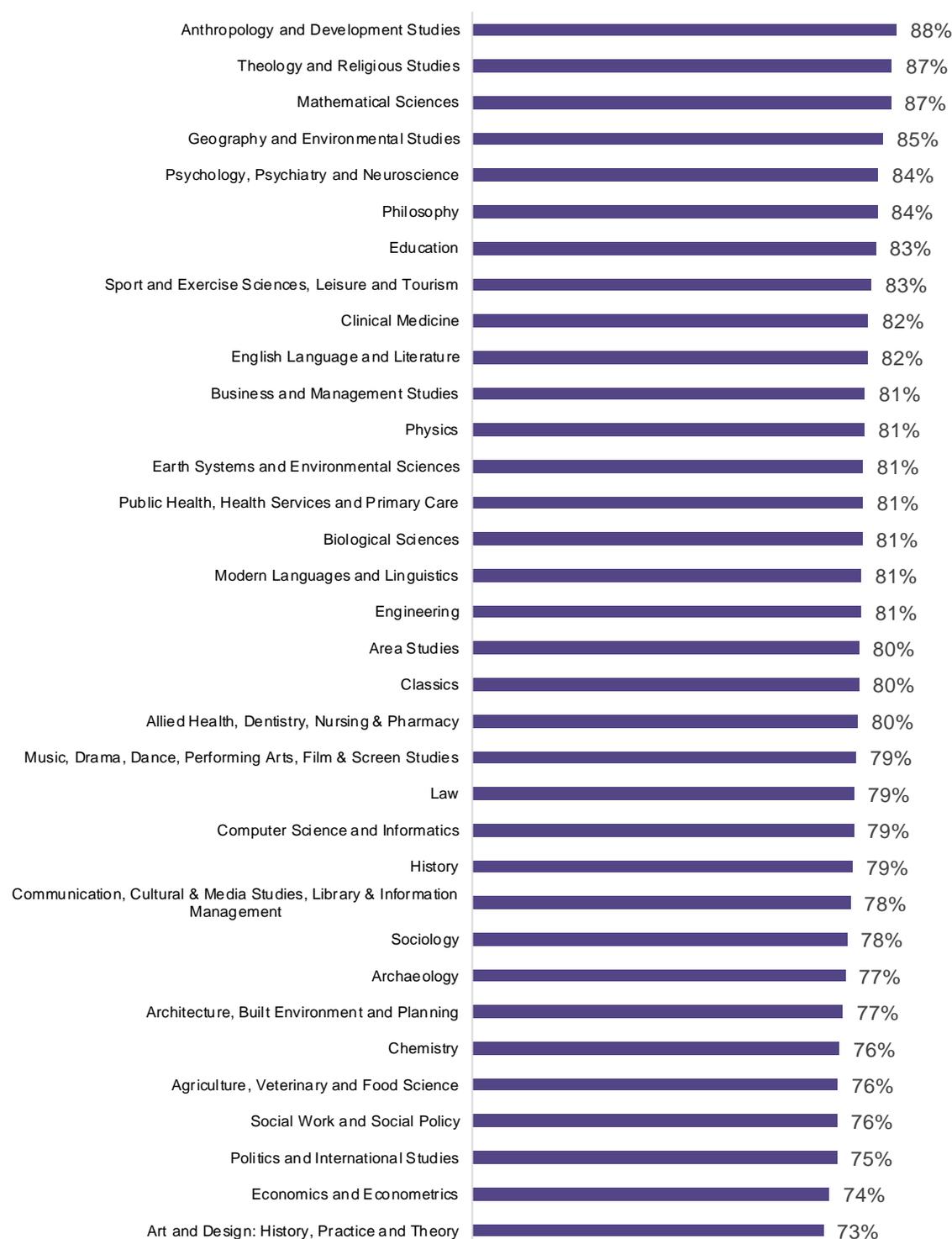
- All comments from PGRs responding during lockdown

Further comparison of pre- and during-lockdown responses can be found in section 6.

4.3 Overall satisfaction and discipline

In 2020, the discipline question was changed to reflect the 2021 REF categories, hence only 2020 data is shown in Figure 5. The discipline with the highest overall satisfaction levels was Anthropology and Development Studies, in which 88% of PGRs were satisfied. This is 11 percentage points higher than the discipline with the lowest satisfaction overall (Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory).

Figure 5: Satisfaction among PGRs



Disciplines can be grouped into the former JACS clusters (Arts and Humanities, Health and Social Care, Social Sciences, and STEM) however very little difference is observed, with each of those four cluster groups having between 79% and 81% overall satisfaction.

Art and Design students would like more teaching and opportunities, and more specialist equipment and spaces

PRES asked PGRs to identify one top area in which the research degree programme experience could be improved. Responses include creating more teaching opportunities for PGRs and developing stronger research communities for PGRs to connect and share knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, an issue highlighted which is quite specific to art and design students is a need for more specialist resources, such as exhibition and studio space.

“More opportunities to share my knowledge with undergraduate students would be nice, particularly in terms of teaching opportunities.”

“I find it very difficult to find a job in teaching because of the lack of experience or training needed to be taken during my PhD course.”

“More of a coherent PhD student community and more interaction with other postgraduate students/courses.”

“The community of researchers not sufficiently considered for the benefit they can offer each other.”

“More exhibition test spaces.”

“Having access to special equipment that are not available to me yet.”

“A practical workspace i.e. a studio space to make kinetic sculpture.”

- All comments from Art and Design PGRs

4.4 Overall satisfaction and ethnicity

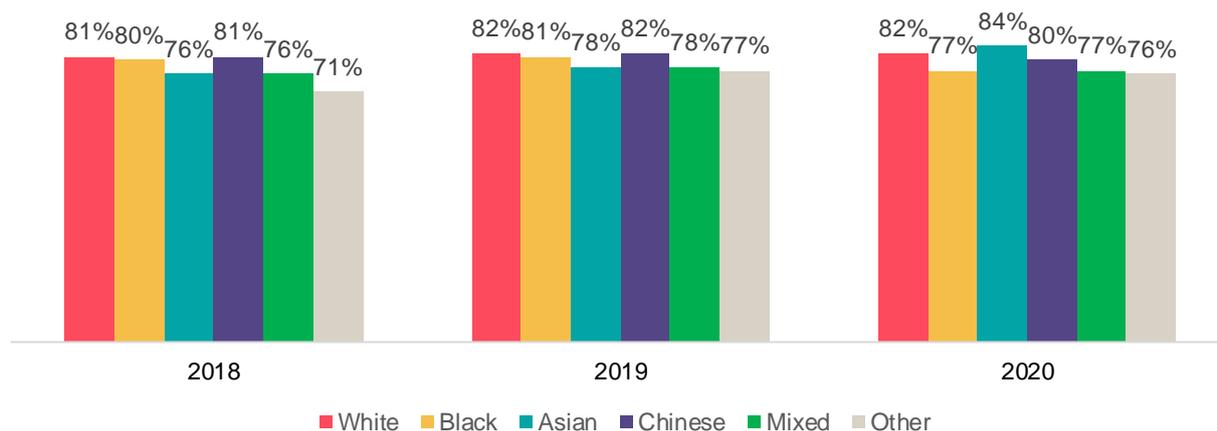
A wide body of evidence at undergraduate level demonstrates that the student experience and subsequent outcomes are often less satisfactory for students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds compared to those from White backgrounds,³ however relatively less evidence concerning the postgraduate experience exists. The Advance HE Ethnicity and the Postgraduate Student Experience Report⁴ aims to develop this rather scarce body of evidence. It includes detailed analysis of the differences in satisfaction among PGRs of more specific ethnic backgrounds and what might be driving these differences, to help the sector understand which particular groups might be having a less than optimal postgraduate student experience and why.

³ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-case-studies.pdf> [Accessed 30 September 2020].

⁴ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/ethnicity-and-postgraduate-student-experience-report> [Accessed 25 September 2020]

The analysis below has been carried out among UK-domicile PGRs only, in order to remove any impact of overseas students. Perhaps the most noticeable change over the last 3 years is the increase in satisfaction among PGRs from Asian backgrounds, from 76% in 2018 to 84% in 2020, making Asian PGRs the most satisfied this year. Unfortunately, there has been a 4 percentage point drop in satisfaction among Black PGRs this year, bringing their satisfaction levels (77%) in line with those of Mixed ethnicity, just 1% above PGRs of Other ethnicity.

Figure 6: Satisfaction among PGRs and ethnicity (UK domicile only)



4.5 Satisfaction with areas of the student experience

The PRES survey measures satisfaction across 7 different themes. Each topic is formed of between 3 and 6 questions, the average satisfaction with which is calculated to be the overall score for that theme.

Figure 7 compares satisfaction with the different areas of the student experience over the past 3 years. Scores are broadly consistent over time, with Supervision and Research Skills consistently the areas with which PGRs are most satisfied, and Research Culture and Wellbeing the areas with most room for improvement. While average ratings of life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety among the general UK population all deteriorated in the year 2019–2020⁵ (prior to lockdown), PGR wellbeing is only 1% below that reported last year.

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2019tomarch2020> [Accessed 30th September 2020]

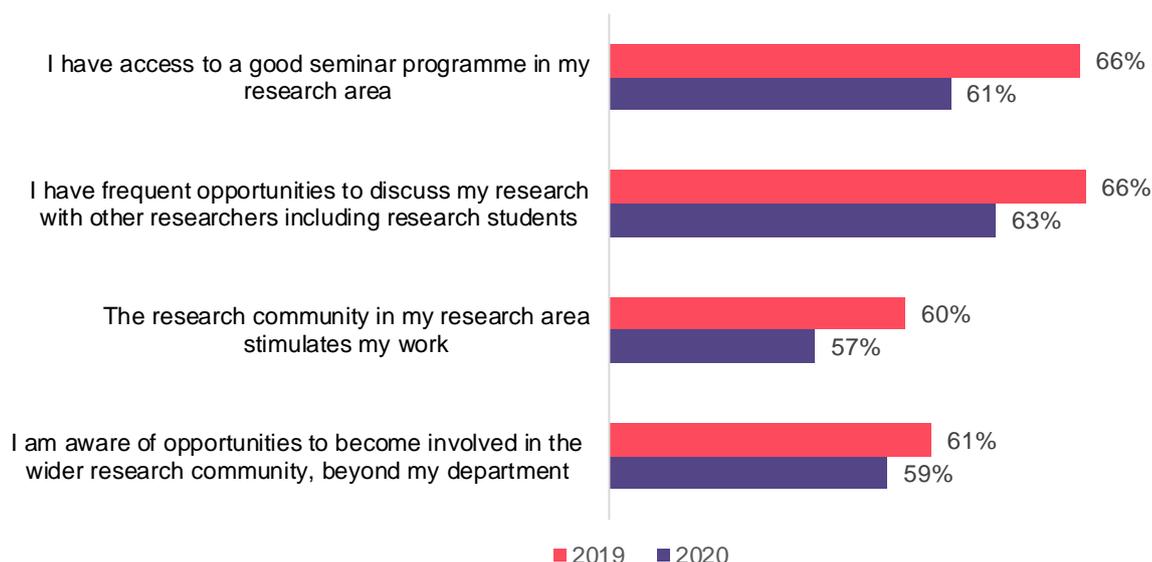
Figure 7: Satisfaction with areas of the research degree experience



Note: For 'Research Culture' and 'Wellbeing', 2018 data is not reported due to changes in the question structures in 2019

The score for Research Culture has seen a 3% lower score this year compared with 2019; satisfaction with all elements within this theme is lower in 2020. The element which has seen the largest dip (of 5%) since 2019 is access to a good seminar programme, indicating the need to continue to ensure that PGR students have access to a good seminar programme in the coming year, in which many may need to be delivered remotely.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with elements of the research degree experience related to Research Culture



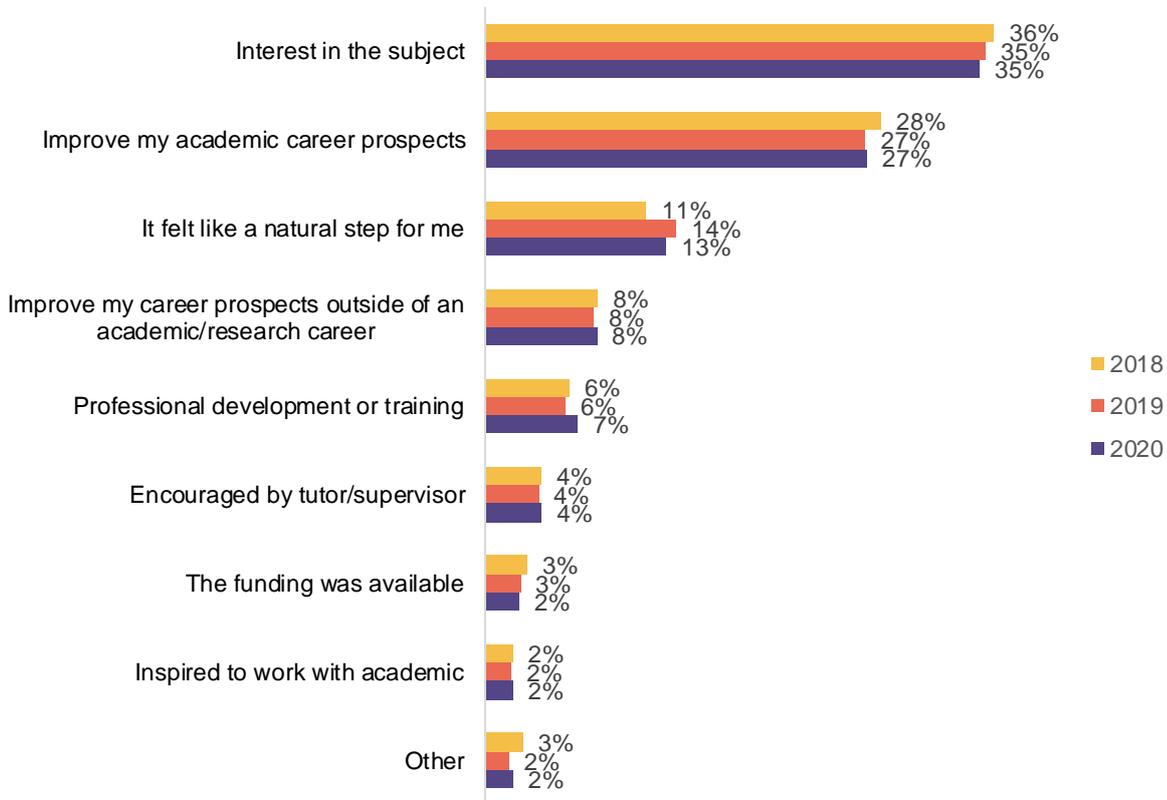
A more in depth analysis of the Research Culture among full- and part-time PGRs and PGRs with different living situations is in sections 7.1 and 8.3.

5. PGR journey in 2020

5.1 Motivations to study

Comparison of 2020 data with responses received in the previous two years show that PGRs' motivations to study for their postgraduate research degree remain broadly consistent over time, and it is encouraging to see that the most common motivation remains interest in the subject (chosen by 35% in 2020). That being said, a slight decrease over time can be observed in the proportions of PGRs citing interest in the subject as their main motivation.

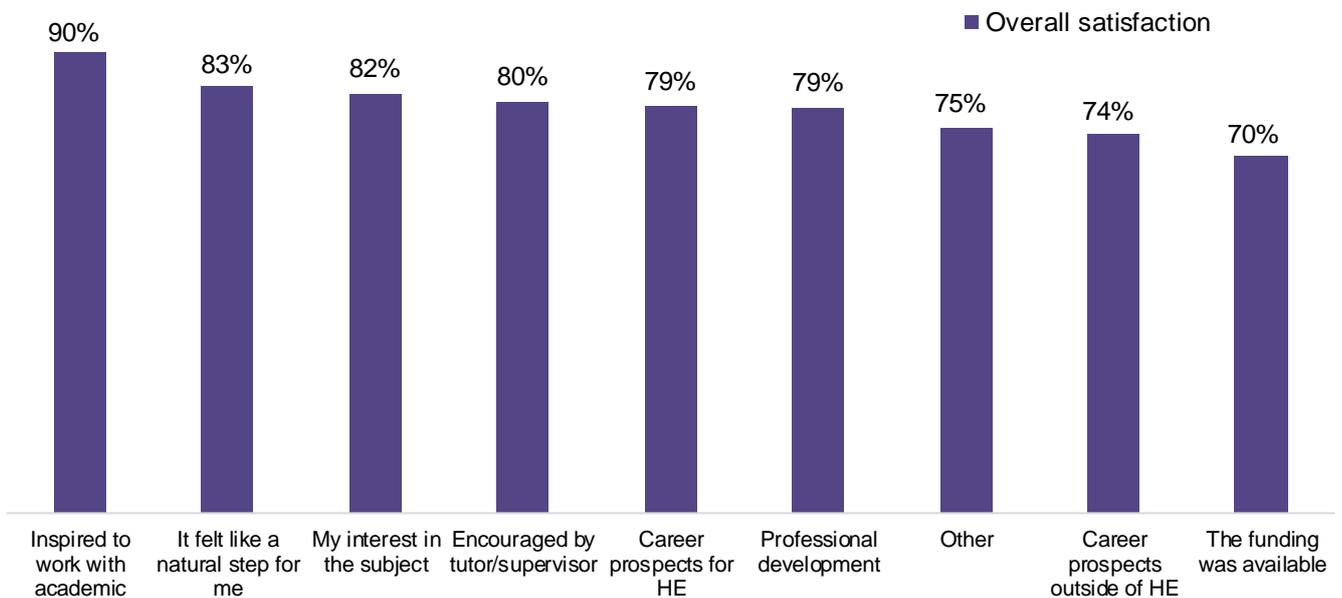
Figure 9: Motivations to take research degree programme



When we analyse PGRs' overall satisfaction alongside their motivation to study, we see that those who were inspired to work with a particular academic were the most satisfied (90%), followed by those for whom postgraduate research study felt like a natural step (83%) and those who were motivated by their interest in the subject (82%).

Conversely, a theme among PGRs who reported below average overall satisfaction is being motivated by career prospects. This includes those motivated by their career prospects outside of HE (of whom just 74% are satisfied overall), those motivated to develop professionally (79%) and those motivated by the prospect of an academic career (also 79%). A suggestion, therefore, is that the competitive nature of the job market both within and outside the higher education sector impacts the overall satisfaction of PGRs motivated by their career aspirations, in particular.

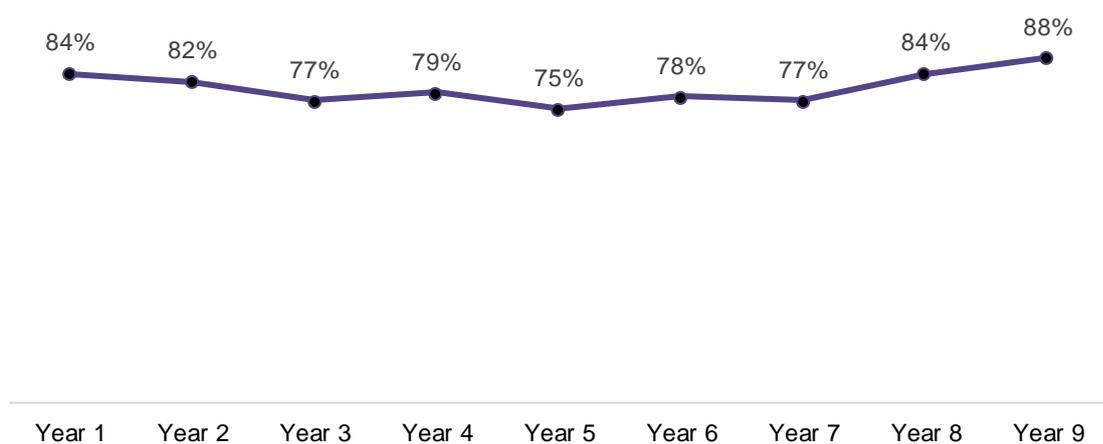
Figure 10: Overall satisfaction by motivation to take research degree



5.2 Satisfaction and year of study

The 2019 PRES report considered how overall satisfaction levels change through the different stages of a postgraduate research degree.⁶ This year, we consider overall satisfaction by time. Figure 11 demonstrates how overall satisfaction levels begin relatively high, at 84% among PGRs in their first year (compared with an average of 80%). Satisfaction decreases during the second and third years and then fluctuates, with a low of 75% in year 5. For those who study for as long as 7 years, overall satisfaction levels improve again, reaching their peak (88%) right at the end in year 9 of studies.

Figure 11: Overall satisfaction and year of research degree programme

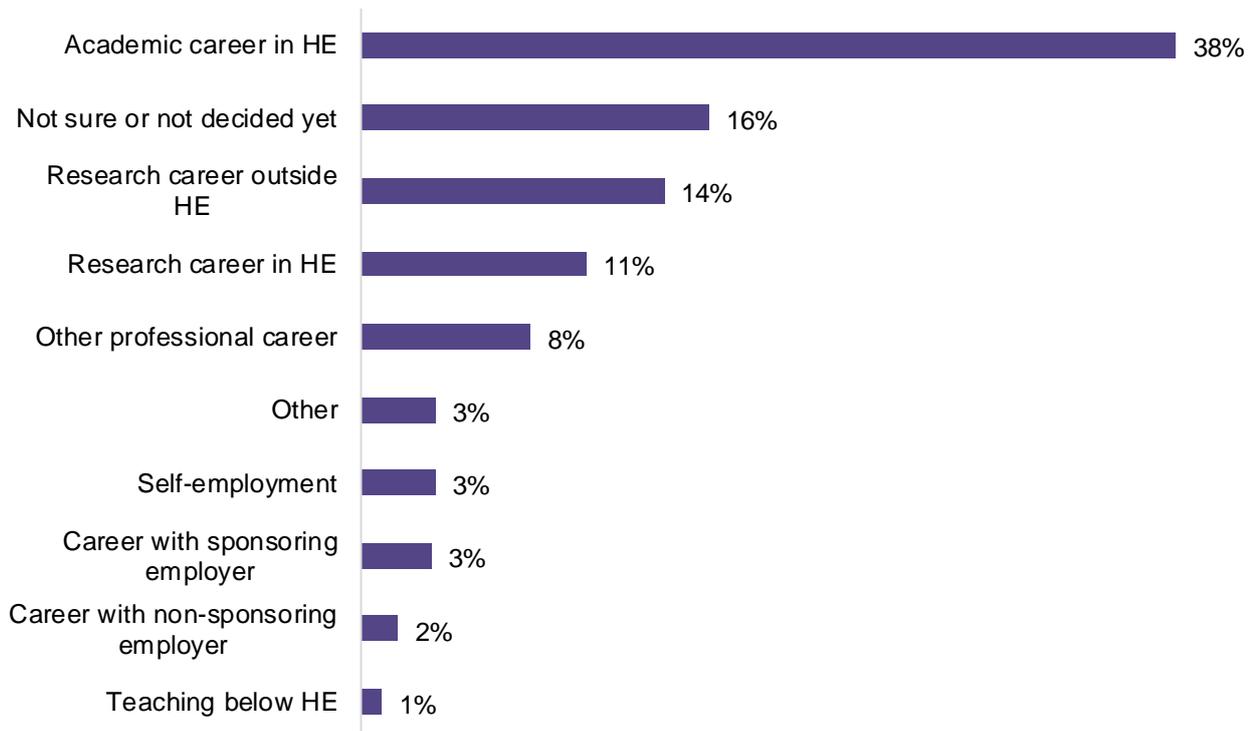


⁶ Williams, S. The 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. p. 15. Advance HE.

5.3 Future plans

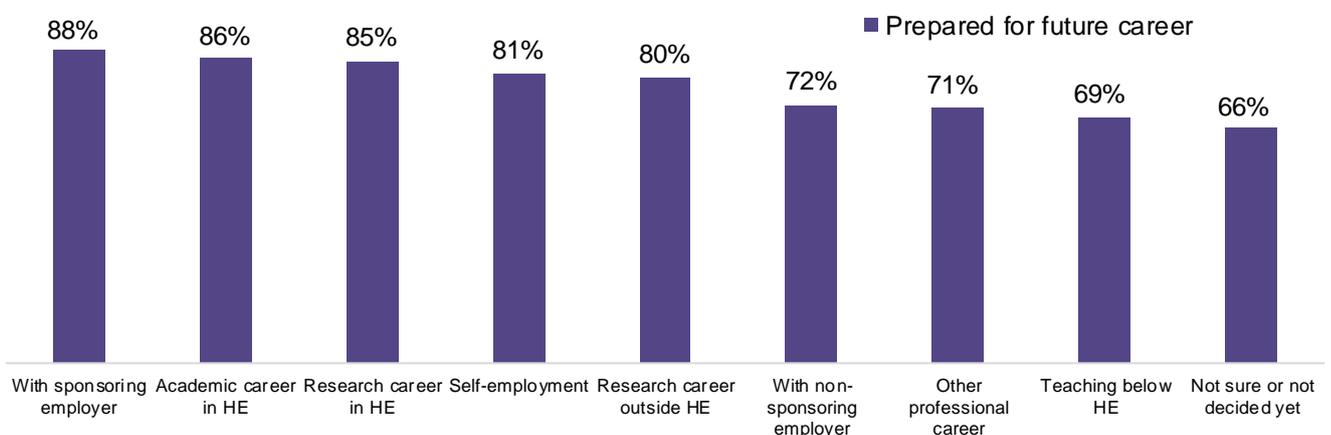
The most common future plan among PGRs is an academic career in higher education. This was selected by 38%, more than twice as many as selected any other career option. The second most common answer was ‘Not sure or not decided yet’, chosen by 16% of PGRs, highlighting the importance of careers guidance and advice for PGR students.

Figure 12: Future plans



On average, 80% of PGRs feel prepared for their future career. Those planning on a career with their sponsoring employer feel most prepared (88%). Given that an academic career in the higher education sector is the most common career aspiration, it is encouraging that 86% of PGRs with this career plan feel prepared for it.

Figure 13: Preparedness for future career and future plans



Analysis of the impact of the circumstances surrounding Covid-19 on PGRs' future plans can be found in section 6.5.

6. Impact of Covid-19

6.1 Profile of respondents pre- and during-lockdown

The flexible fieldwork period (outlined in the Methodology section of this report) means that some institutions opened and closed PRES before the lockdown, some institutions ran the survey both before and during lockdown, and others didn't launch PRES until after 16 March and therefore received all their responses during lockdown. Therefore, while a comparison of all responses received before and during lockdown has been conducted in this section, we should be aware that some differences may be caused by institutional differences. Of the 45 institutions which took part in PRES in 2020, 1 institution received all its responses before lockdown, 18 institutions received all their responses during lockdown, and 26 institutions received responses both pre- and during lockdown.

The following table demonstrates how the profile of PGRs responding before and after lockdown compare. There are slight differences in the pre-lockdown and during-lockdown samples, with the largest differences in domicile and ethnicity. In the analysis, in this section, responses from PGRs of each domicile and ethnic group have been considered, so we can be confident that the findings are not due to sample differences.

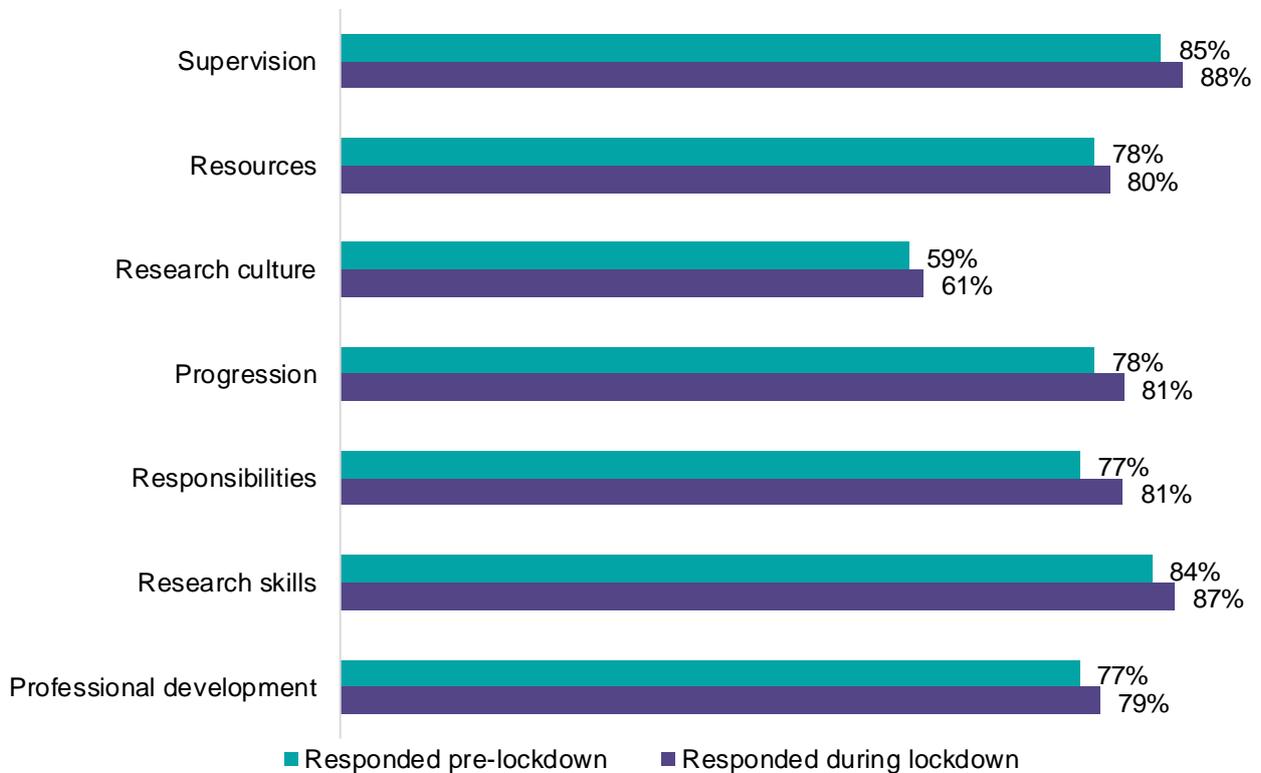
	Responded pre-lockdown	Responded during lockdown
Men	1,312 (42%)	2,307 (46%)
Women	1,760 (57%)	2,656 (53%)
Non-binary and Other	35 (1%)	46 (1%)
30 years old or younger	1,666 (54%)	2,528 (52%)
31 years old or older	1,396 (46%)	2,359 (48%)
Disabled	388 (11%)	423 (8%)
No known disability	2,751 (89%)	4,563 (92%)
Full time	2,406 (75%)	4,044 (78%)
Part time	796 (25%)	1,116 (22%)
Year 1 of studies	913 (29%)	1,358 (27%)
Year 2	786 (25%)	1,257 (25%)
Year 3	704 (22%)	1,142 (22%)
Year 4+	793 (25%)	1,340 (26%)
UK domiciled	2,131 (67%)	3,003 (59%)
EU domiciled	348 (11%)	500 (10%)
Other non-EU domiciled	711 (22%)	1,605 (31%)
White	1,811 (88%)	2,397 (82%)
BAME	247 (12%)	511 (18%)
Black	55 (3%)	121 (4%)
Asian	84 (4%)	162 (6%)
Chinese	15 (1%)	57 (2%)
Mixed	58 (3%)	88 (3%)
Other	43 (2%)	96 (3%)
Pre-92 institution	2,357 (75%)	3,468 (70%)
Post-92 institution	767 (25%)	1,496 (30%)

**Please note: where percentages do not add up to 100%, this is due to rounding.*

6.2 Covid-19 and the different areas of the student experience

As observed among overall satisfaction in section 4 of this report, satisfaction with each theme is also higher among PGRs who responded during lockdown.

Figure 14: Satisfaction with research degree themes among PGRs responding before and during lockdown



To be confident that these differences in satisfaction are not due to sample differences, responses from PGRs who responded before and during lockdown have been considered alongside their domicile and ethnic group. Figure 15 shows that we can be confident that differences in domicile in the pre- and during-lockdown samples are unlikely to have had a large impact on the differences in satisfaction with the research degree themes, as all groups tended to report higher satisfaction levels during lockdown for all themes. There are some exceptions among the EU-domiciled cohort, however this group comprises similar proportions of both the pre- and during-lockdown samples.

When considering pre- and during-lockdown responses alongside ethnicity, we also see that all groups tended to report higher satisfaction levels during lockdown for all themes, with two exceptions. Black PGRs who responded before lockdown were slightly (1%) less likely to be satisfied with Supervision and Resources. Mixed ethnicity PGRs who responded prior to lockdown were less satisfied with Research Culture, Progression and Responsibilities. As both represent a similar, and small, proportion of both pre- and during-lockdown samples, we can be relatively confident that these differences do not have a large impact on the overall pre- and during-lockdown differences reported.

Figure 15: During-lockdown scores compared to pre-lockdown scores, by domicile

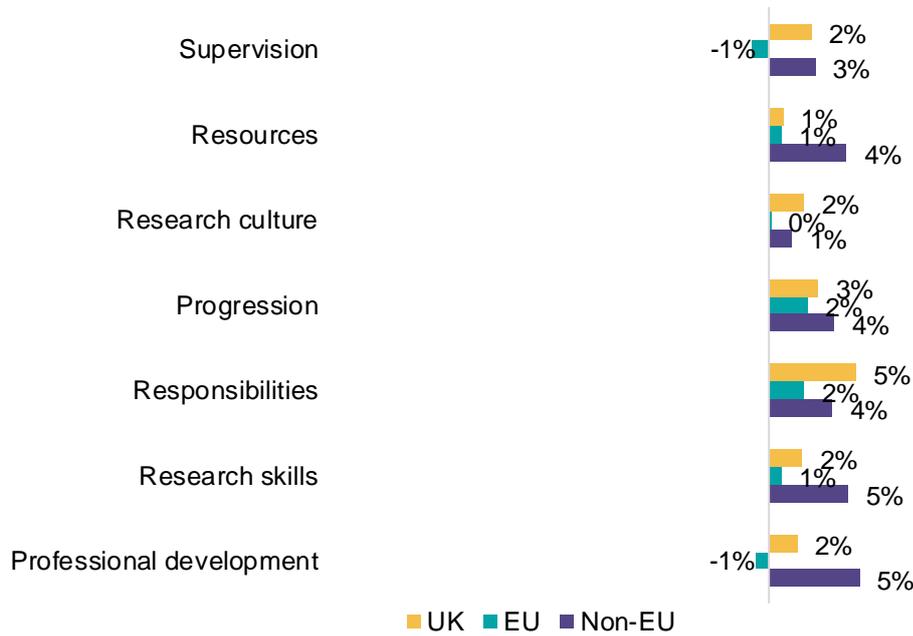
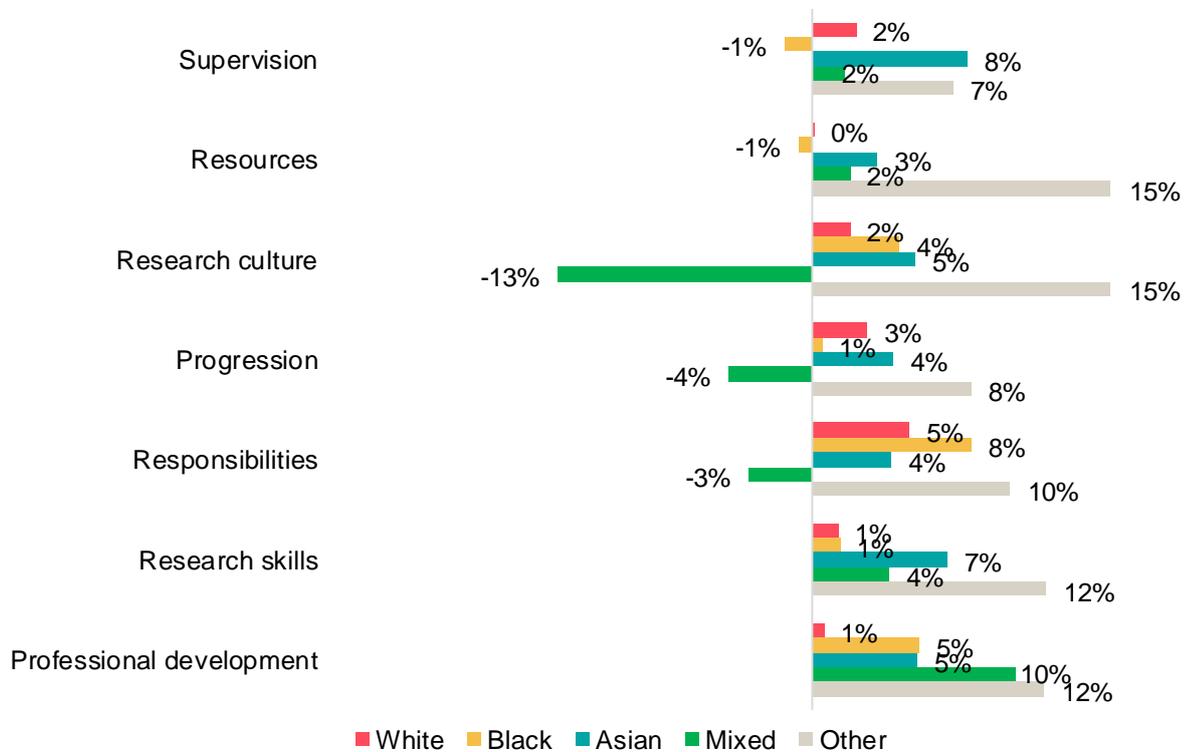


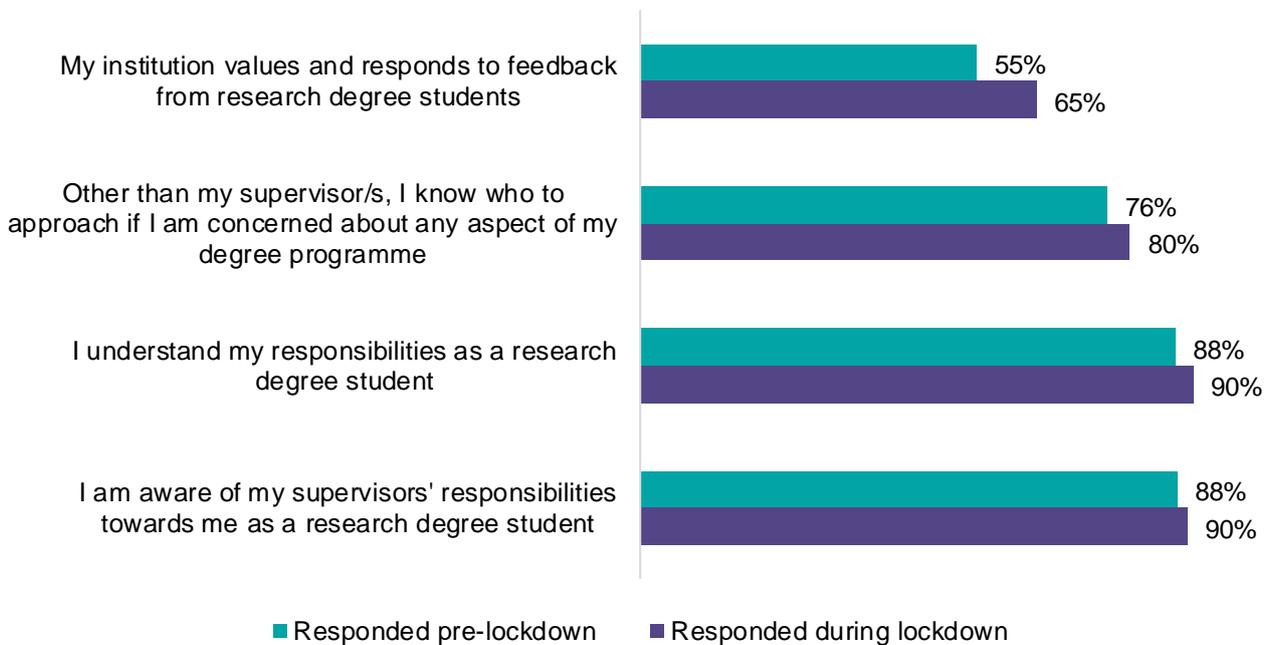
Figure 16: During-lockdown scores compared to pre-lockdown scores, by ethnicity group (all domiciles)



*Please note: Chinese ethnicity respondents have not been included in this chart due to low base size

The theme with the largest difference in satisfaction is Responsibilities, with satisfaction on average 4% higher among PGRs responding during lockdown than those who responded before. This is largely driven by the later respondents being 10% more likely to agree that their institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students, demonstrated in Figure 17 below.

Figure 17: Satisfaction with each element within the theme of Responsibilities among PGRs responding before and during lockdown



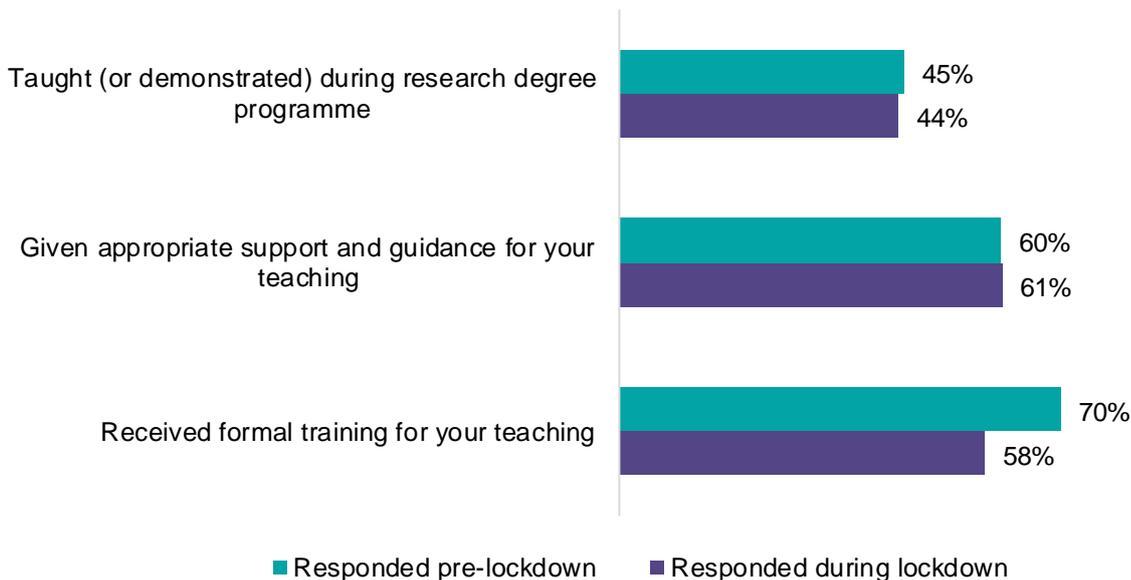
It is encouraging that a larger proportion of PGRs feel that their feedback is valued and acted upon at a time of unprecedented change and social distance, and when it is therefore especially important to make sure the student voice is represented. However, the pre-lockdown agreement levels with this statement (55%) are particularly concerning, and indicate that in normal circumstances, institutions could do more to show PGRs how their responses to PRES and other feedback mechanisms have been acted upon. Agreement with this statement is typically relatively low compared with other measures (60% in 2018 and 59% in 2019), and yet correlation analysis conducted in 2018 indicates that valuing and responding to feedback from research degree students is one of the aspects which has strongest connection to overall satisfaction⁷. Learning from, and sustaining, measures to capture and act upon the PGR student voice in response to the Covid-19 situation could therefore be the key to improving overall satisfaction levels in the long term.

6.3 The impact of Covid-19 on teaching opportunities

Although PGRs who responded to PRES during the lockdown period gave generally slightly more positive scores than their peers who responded before lockdown, there are some other areas in which the pandemic appears to have had a negative impact on scores. One such area is receiving formal training for teaching.

⁷ Neves, J. The 2018 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. p.20. Advance HE.

Figure 18: Agreement with statements relating to teaching opportunities among PGRs responding before and during lockdown



While pre- and during- lockdown agreement levels vary very little in terms of whether PGRs had taught or demonstrated during their programme, and whether those who had taught were given appropriate support for their teaching (whether this be because they were considering their experiences before lockdown or because they were able to undertake these roles online), considerably fewer PGRs who responded during lockdown had been given formal training for their teaching.

Providing formal training for teaching was of course made more difficult given the circumstances surrounding Covid-19. PGRs who have taught during their programme of study make a range of suggestions as to what kind of training they would like to have received, including providing reading lists and official courses, which could be delivered remotely.

What type of formal training would PGRs like?

“With teaching, no training was provided. Even a ‘to get you started’ reading list and a single seminar/workshop would have been tremendously helpful.”

“Recognised official training for graduate teaching (e.g. PGCert for undergrad demonstrators).”

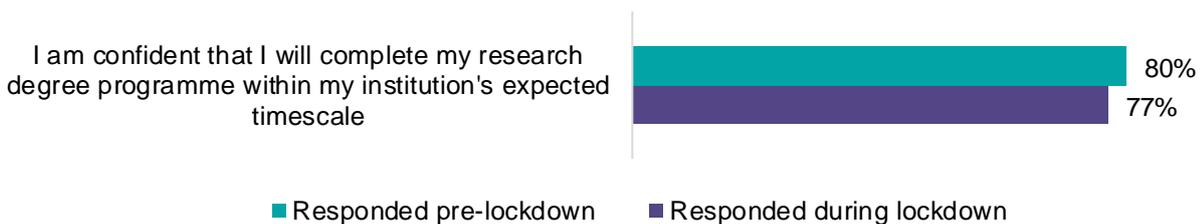
“More practical training for leading seminars (the introduction to teaching training was great and module convenors have been supportive, but in the seminar room you are on your own and it would be great to have a more systematic programme of observations/skills development).”

- All comments from PGRs who have taught during their course

6.4 The impact of Covid-19 on timings

Another area in which responses received during lockdown are less positive than those received on or before 16 March is PGRs' likelihood to complete their research degree programme within their institutions' expected timescale. 80% of PGRs responding before lockdown expected to finish their studies within their institution's expected timescale, compared with 77% of those completing during the lockdown period. This is perhaps a smaller difference than we might expect; a suggestion is that restrictions on other parts of PGRs' lives, such as paid work, seeing family and friends, etc. may have given them more time to focus on their research.

Figure 19: Confidence to complete programme on time among PGRs responding before and during lockdown



Perhaps unsurprisingly, PGRs in the later years of their courses (Year 3 and beyond) who responded during lockdown were less likely to be confident that they would finish their programme on time than those who responded before the lockdown. This is likely due to these PGRs having less time to make up for any time lost, but is also linked to programme stage.

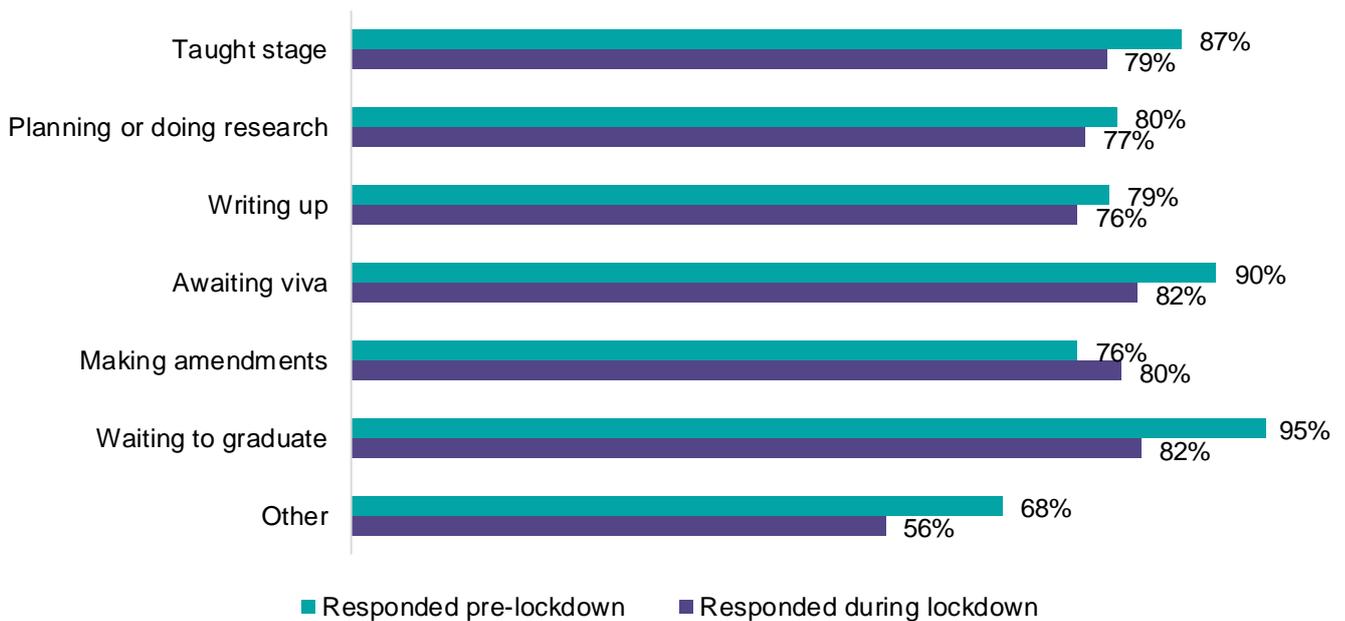
Figure 20: Confidence to complete programme on time among PGRs responding before and during lockdown, by year of study



Only PGRs working on amendments were more confident they would complete their course on time if they completed the survey during lockdown, compared with those who completed the survey on or before 16 March. This seems logical – amendments can be made at a distance and the reduction in other activities during lockdown may mean that these PGRs had more time to focus on them.

Comparing those responding pre-lockdown and those responding during, the stages in which there were the largest differences in confidence to complete programmes on time include waiting to graduate (13%), awaiting viva (8%) and the taught stage (8%). In all these cases, higher proportions of PGRs completing the survey prior to lockdown expected to finish their course on time. Given that graduation ceremonies and vivas had to be postponed, and taught sessions postponed, it is logical to see how the circumstances brought about by Covid-19 may have impacted these PGRs' confidence to complete their courses on time.

Figure 21: Confidence to complete programme on time among PGRs responding before and during lockdown, by course stage



Covid-19 has impacted PGRs' timelines in a variety of ways

Comments reveal the different individual circumstances PGRs experience and, therefore, how the reasons for reduced confidence in finishing on time vary from researcher to researcher. There are examples of PGRs working in healthcare roles outside of their studies, whose workloads have increased and degree course timelines have suffered as a result. There are also students who were unable to complete elements of their research during the lockdown, and others whose supervisors were unavailable.

“Covid19 means that my workload has doubled. Therefore I may be delayed in finishing.”

“Unfortunately my research is on hold due to Covid-19. I am unable to collect data and have to wait till my stakeholder groups return, which may not be until late 2020.”

“Covid-19 has detracted from my time (full-time NHS role) and the availability of my supervisors.”

“Because of the Covid-19 lockdown, the first part of this growing season has been lost so an extension may be requested at the end of the project.”

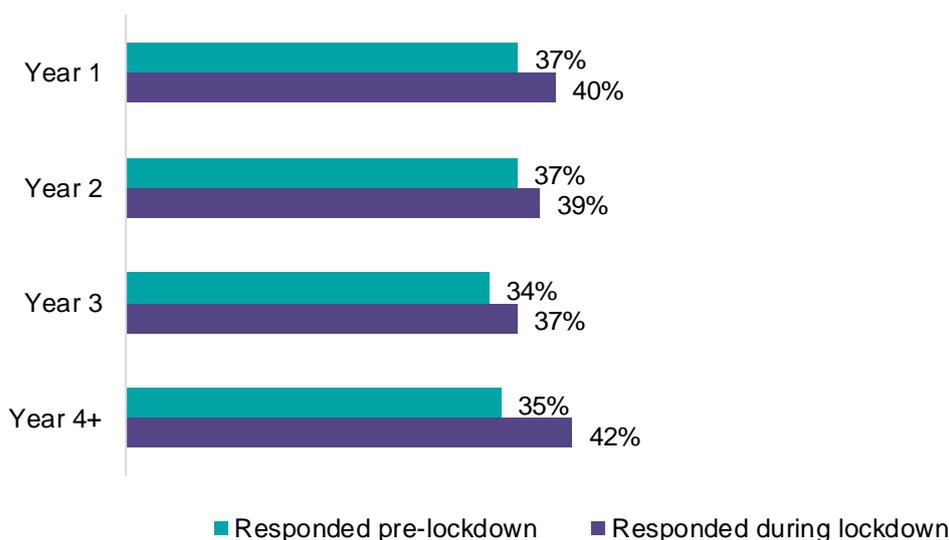
- All comments from PGRs who responded during lockdown

6.5 The impact of Covid-19 on PGRs' future plans

An interesting consideration, given the pressures that the circumstances surrounding Covid-19 have put on the economy and job market, is how PGRs' career plans have been impacted. We see only slight differences (of between 0 and 2%) in the proportions of PGRs responding pre- and during the pandemic who were planning for the majority of career paths.

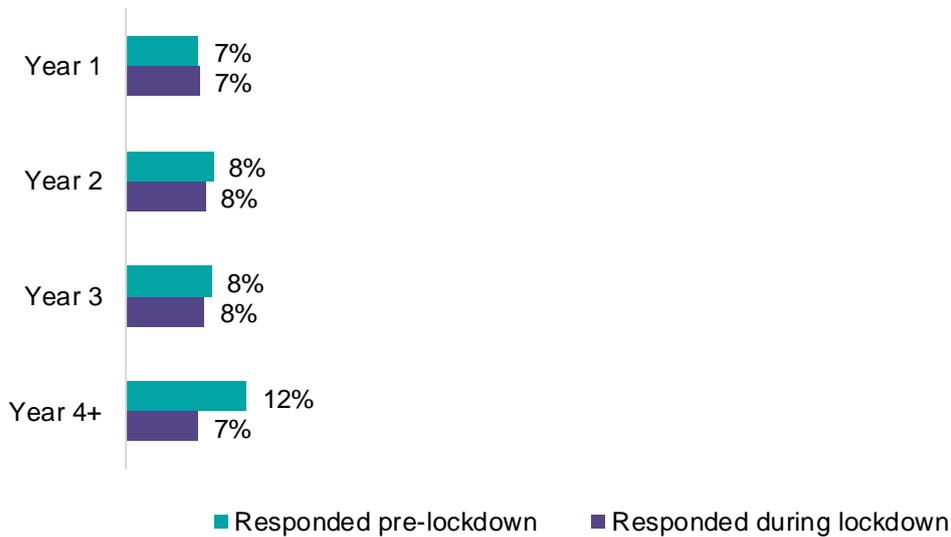
One career pathway which stands out as an exception is an academic career in HE, illustrated in Figure 22 below. PGRs responding during lockdown are more likely to say they were planning on such a career, compared with those responding before lockdown. The difference is particularly pronounced among PGRs in the later years of their studies who are closer to finishing their studies and looking for a job, with those in their 4th year and beyond 7% more likely to say they were considering an academic career in HE if they responded after 16 March. Whereas academic jobs in HE have been incredibly competitive in recent years, perhaps the reduction in available jobs outside of academia makes an academic career all the more appealing.

Figure 22: Planning an academic career in HE: PGRs responding before and during lockdown



In further support of this suggestion is that higher proportions of PGRs who responded before lockdown said they were considering a professional career other than an academic, teaching or research (whether inside or outside of the higher education sector) career. Figure 23 shows that while there were very few differences in the proportions of PGRs in years 1 to 3 of their studies planning on this career pathway, 5% more PGRs in year 4 and beyond who responded before 16 March were planning on a professional career outside of teaching or research.

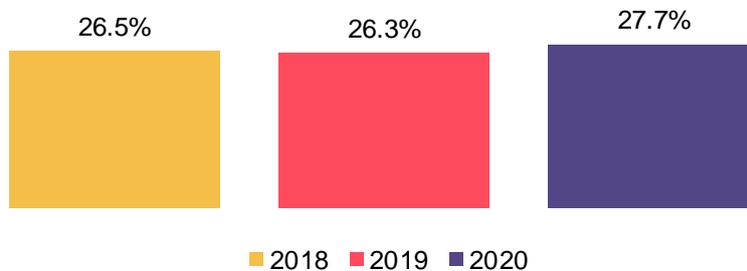
Figure 23: Planning another professional career: PGRs responding before and during lockdown



6.6 Covid-19 and retention

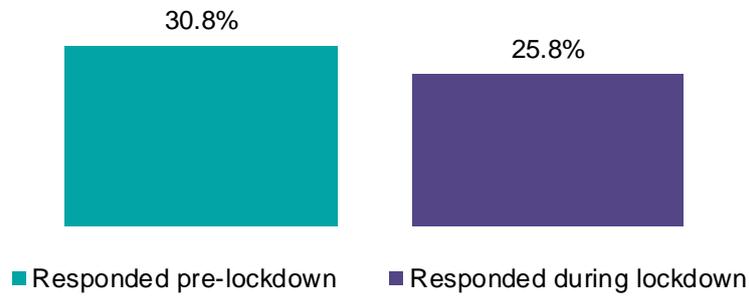
In 2020, a slightly higher proportion (27.7%) of PGRs reported that they have considered leaving their postgraduate course compared with previous years.

Figure 24: Proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course (2018–2020)



An initial hypothesis was that this slight increase might be linked to lockdown and the pressures imposed by Covid-19. However, Figure 25 demonstrates that this does not appear to be the case. 31% of those who responded before the lockdown had considered leaving their course, 5% more than those who responded during lockdown. This supports the finding from section 6.2 that those who responded during lockdown were slightly more satisfied with all research degree themes.

Figure 25: Proportion of PGRs responding pre- and during-lockdown who considered leaving their course

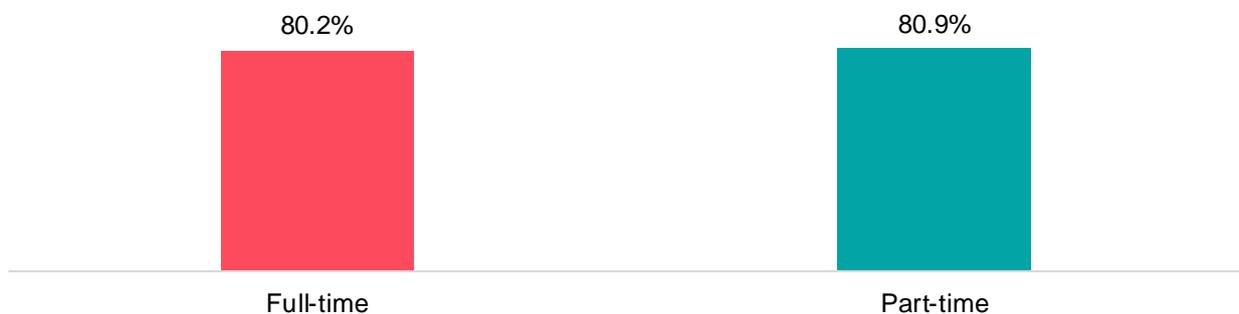


7. Full- and Part-time Student Experience

7.1 Research culture

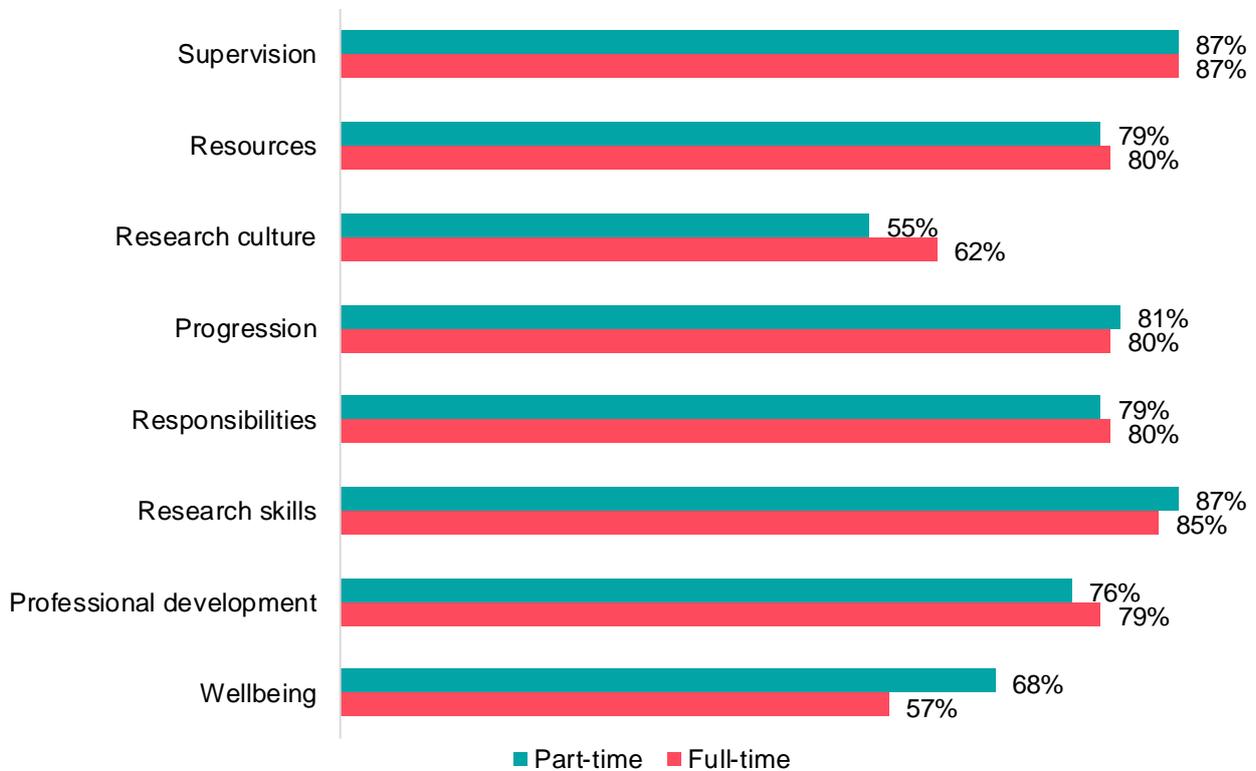
Overall, full-time and part-time PGRs are similarly satisfied with their postgraduate experience (80% and 81% respectively), which bodes well for the recruitment of both full- and part-time research degree students in the future.

Figure 26: Overall satisfaction with research degree among PGRs studying on a full- and part-time basis.



For the most part, there are also only slight distinctions in satisfaction with each degree theme, outlined in Figure 27 below. One exception to this is the theme of Research Culture, with 62% of full-time PGRs satisfied with this area, compared with just 55% of part-time research degree students.

Figure 27: Satisfaction with research degree themes among PGRs studying on a full- or part-time basis



Within the Research Culture theme, part-time PGRs report lower satisfaction (57%) with access to a good seminar programme in their research area compared with full-time PGRs (63%). They also report lower satisfaction with opportunities to discuss their research with other researchers (54% vs 65%), and with the research community stimulating their work (50% vs 59%). There is, however, very little difference in awareness of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community (both 59%). This indicates that suitability or timing of opportunities are more likely to be an issue for part-time PGRs than awareness of them. This idea is supported by the comments below.

Figure 28: Satisfaction with elements of research culture among PGRs studying on a full- or part-time basis



Part-time students suggest holding evening and weekend events to boost their opportunities to be involved in the research community

Part-time students comment that opportunities to discuss and network with other PGRs and the wider research community often take place when they have other commitments outside of their studies, including work and childcare. These PGRs suggest holding events at times outside of normal working hours, such as evenings or weekends, to enable them to take part in these events.

“There are lots of options to be more involved with the research community, however I have not been using these - mostly due to lack of time (other commitments: work, parenting).”

“The limitations to opportunities are because of working full-time and having other caring responsibilities.”

“It would be nice to have more seminar opportunities at weekends for those who work and are studying part-time.”

“Have not been able to attend extra sessions with fellow students due to busy working programme. Evening sessions might be better for me.”

“I think the Doctoral College does lots of good work in this area, there are lots of events that would help me feel part of a research community. It is my own personal circumstances that are a barrier to my engagement.”

- All comments from PGRs studying on a part-time basis

7.2 Wellbeing

The other theme (see Figure 25 in section 7.1) in which there is a large distinction in responses from full- and part-time PGRs is Wellbeing, however in this case, those studying on a part-time basis report experiencing significantly higher wellbeing than full-time PGRs.

We see that part-time PGRs experience higher levels of wellbeing across all component measures of the theme. The largest differences relate to happiness, with 12% fewer full-time PGRs saying that they felt happy the day before completing the survey, and a sense of life being worthwhile (12% of full-time PGRs also agreed with this statement).

Figure 29: Wellbeing among PGRs studying on a full- or part-time basis



It is difficult to pinpoint a single area in which institutions could look to better support full-time research degree students with their wellbeing, as comments mention a wide variety of issues affecting their wellbeing and make a range of suggestions as to the kinds of support which would be beneficial. There are many mentions of resources such as counselling being provided, however in some cases PGRs were not able to access it in their time of need due to it being booked up, indicating a need to increase the amount and availability of this resource.

Frequent mentions of worries about money were made by PGRs, as were concerns about future prospects. While PGRs tend to appreciate that these issues are difficult for institutions to support with, they make suggestions such as funding by programme of research rather than by time-period to alleviate time-pressure and provide reassurance about funding, and provide tailored careers advice for PGRs.

There are also less formalised ways in which institutions can offer their PGRs wellbeing support. Full-time PGRs mention feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation from both other researchers and the wider university, which they suggest could be combatted by building a sense of community through, for example, organising social events. which is perhaps not experienced to such an extent by part-time research students due to them being more likely to also spend time engaging in society outside of higher education. Comments also suggest that institutions should try to incite cultural change to build a more collaborative and supportive working environment and dissuade PGRs from developing traits which can be detrimental to their wellbeing, such as competitiveness and working excessive hours.

What kind of wellbeing support do postgraduate researchers need?

“When I tried to get counselling it was all booked up, which tells me that you need to get more counsellors.”

“I think it would be useful to be able to have a department that deals with postgraduate wellbeing only. I have in the past attempted to see a counsellor at the university and was not able to get an appointment.”

“I think the biggest issues are precarious contracts, lack of money, high expectations of teaching roles, lack of hope for futures within academia. It is very difficult to support PGRs with this.”

“Offer specialist support to PhD researchers to help with isolation from the rest of the university.”

“Perhaps some more fun, non-academic casual events to be organised to get everyone together and talking. Even if it’s just a games evening or a lunch gathering, something funded by the university to entice everyone to regularly meet each other in a casual context.”

“More sense of community as mentioned in the previous sections would help postgraduate research student wellbeing, as without a sense of community you feel isolated which has a negative effect on your wellbeing.”

“Wellbeing should not only be conceived as “struggling -> seeking for help”. Rather, it would perhaps be better to frame it as “creating a collaborative, stimulating, supportive working environment, and then help if needed”.”

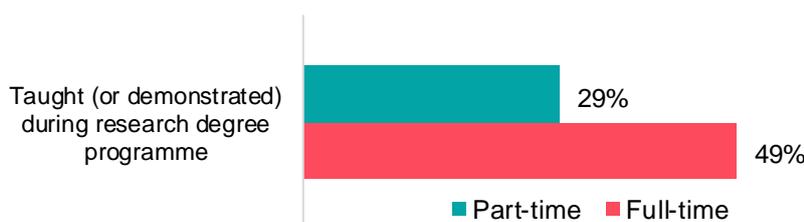
“There needs to be a shift in the culture away from competition, publish or perish and excessive work hours to collaboration, reproducibility and work life balance.”

- All comments from PGRs studying on a full-time basis

7.3 Teaching

Another area of the student experience which differs significantly between full- and part-time PGRs is teaching or demonstrating during the research degree programme. Almost half (49%) of full-time PGRs have taught or demonstrated whilst on their programme, compared with just 29% of those studying on a part-time basis.

Figure 30: Teaching opportunities among PGRs studying on a full- or part-time basis



Comments from PGRs who have not taught or demonstrated during their programme highlight a clear desire for more opportunities to teach. When asked about the single area in which the research experience could be improved, many PGRs indicated that they would have liked to have been involved in teaching, whether that be to utilise skills they already have or to build experience to boost future career prospects.

There is demand for more teaching opportunities among part-time PGRs

“I am a qualified teacher with over 30 years’ experience, have undertaken the required teaching module at my college, have repeatedly requested teaching experience but have only been offered a place on occasional panel discussions.”

“Support from appropriate courses within the university for opportunities to be involved with teaching or tutoring.”

“I think an opportunity to teach would be very useful as many institutions require some experience in this area as a prerequisite.”

“I have continually asked for teaching experience and been continually told that I will get it... I do not see how it is fair that some PhD students are given teaching experience whilst others are not.”

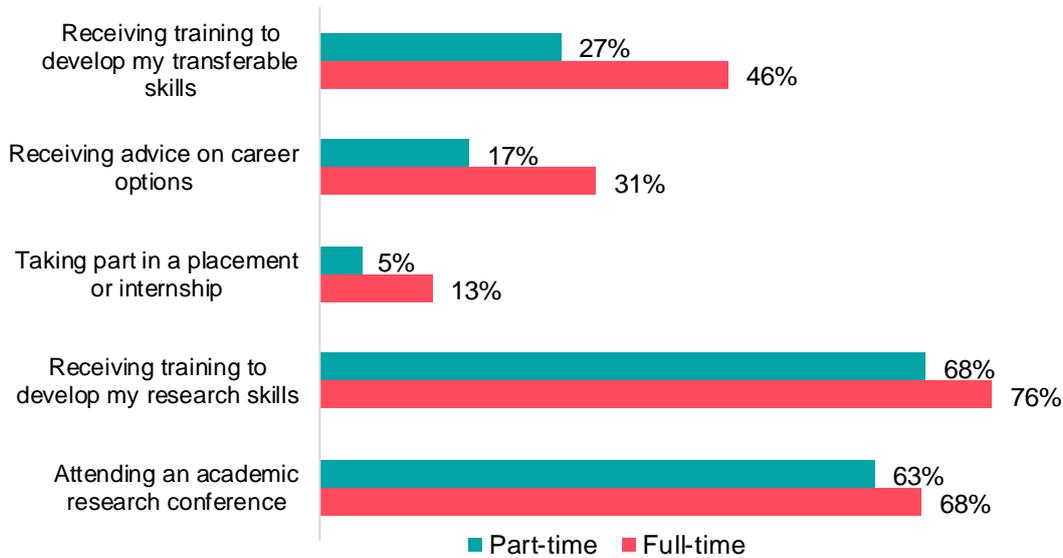
- All comments from PGRs studying on a part-time basis who have not taught/demonstrated

7.4 Skills, training and development opportunities

In addition to teaching opportunities, fewer part-time PGRs have taken part in key skills, training and development opportunities, compared with their full-time counterparts.

Question 16 asked PGRs if they had attended skills and training sessions, conferences, work experience and careers advice sessions and across all opportunities, higher proportions of full-time PGRs agreed. Those with the largest differences in proportions of full- and part-time PGRs attending are illustrated below in Figure 31. The three areas with the largest differences are receiving training to develop transferable skills (19% fewer part-time PGRs have done so), receiving advice on career options (14%) and taking part in a placement or internship (8%) – all related to career planning and development, raising a concern around part-time PGR career preparation.

Figure 31: Opportunities among PGRs studying on a full- or part-time basis

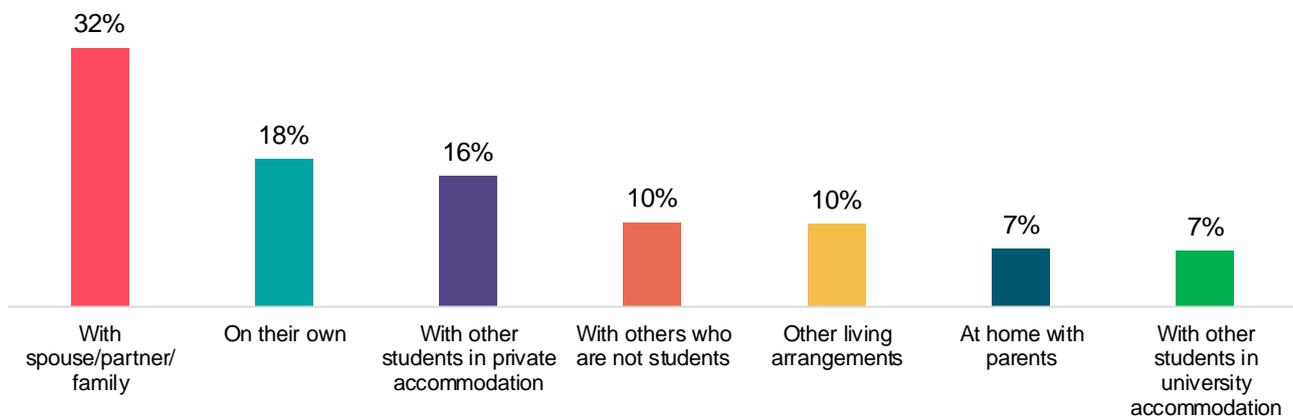


8. PGR living situations

8.1 Living arrangements

In 2020, a new question asking PGRs about their living arrangements was included in PRES as an aid to analysis. The most common living situation is with a spouse, partner and/or family, which is the experience of almost a third (32%) of PGRs. A further 18% live alone, and 16% live with other PGRs in private accommodation. The least common living situations are with other students in university accommodation and with parents (both 7%). This equates to 23% of PGRs living with other students, and 77% not doing so.

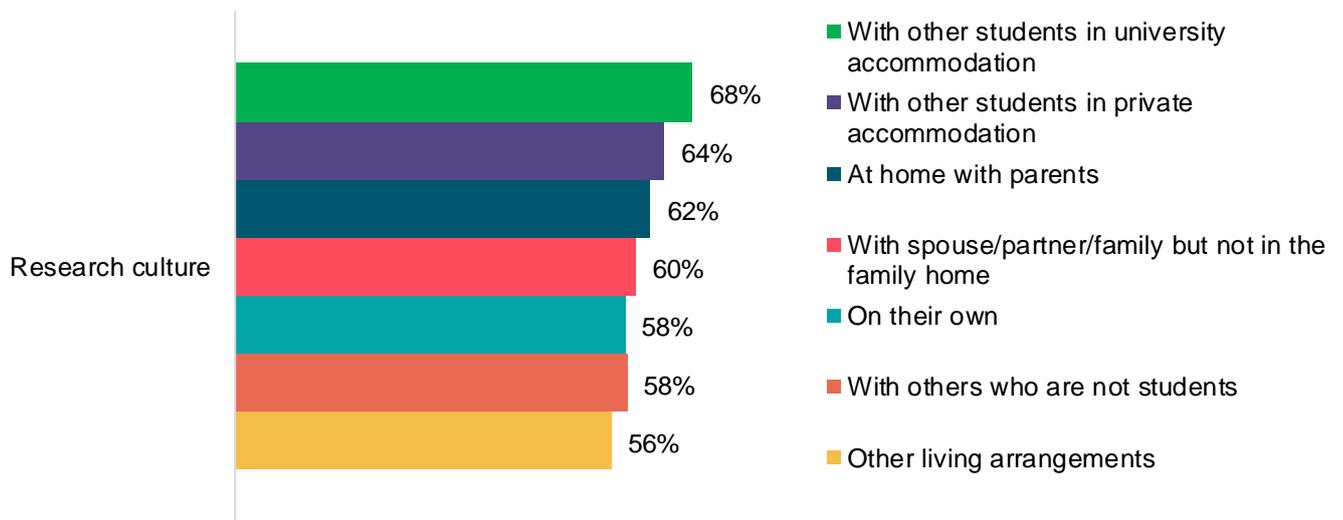
Figure 32: Living arrangements among PGRs



8.3 Research culture and living situation

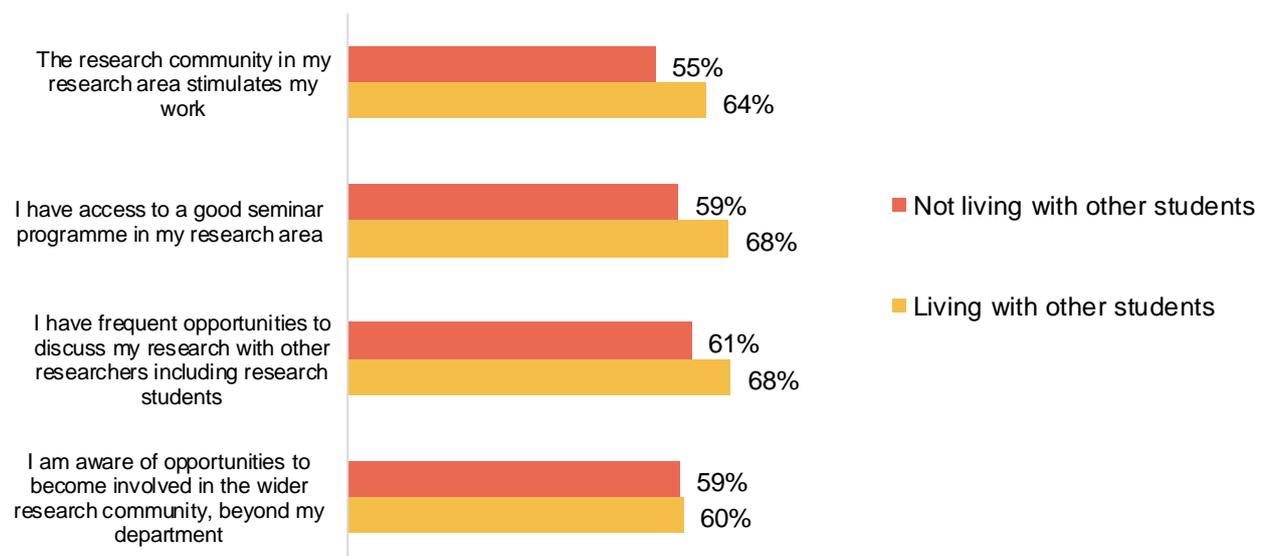
The theme in which the largest differences in satisfaction are observed among PGRs with different living situations is Research Culture. PGRs who live with other students, both in university and private accommodation, tend to have higher levels of satisfaction with this area of the student experience than those who do not live with other students (65% vs 59%).

Figure 33: Living arrangements and satisfaction with Research Culture



The areas in which PGRs not living with other students are least satisfied relative to those living with other students relate to feeling that the research community stimulates their work, access to a good seminar programme in their research area, and having frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students. This indicates that interaction with other students at home is strongly connected with perceptions of positive research culture, and that PGRs who don't live with other students could benefit from more interaction with other PGRs to improve scores in this area.

Figure 34: Living arrangements and satisfaction with elements of research culture



PGRs who do not live with other students highlight issues preventing them from participating more in the research community and suggest ways to enable more interaction

“I am aware of opportunities to connect with other researchers but having kids, husband working from home and other commitments doesn't allow me to focus on other aspects of my research.”

“I have no contact at all with other PhD students, and no opportunity to meet up with them, which does make life very difficult sometimes. I don't feel part of the research community at all.”

“Small group seminars would be great. Spending directed time with other students (a small group of the closest or most relevant ones to my study) - we don't get together often and it gets lonely.”

“I would like more of a coherent PhD student community and more interaction with other postgraduate students/courses.”

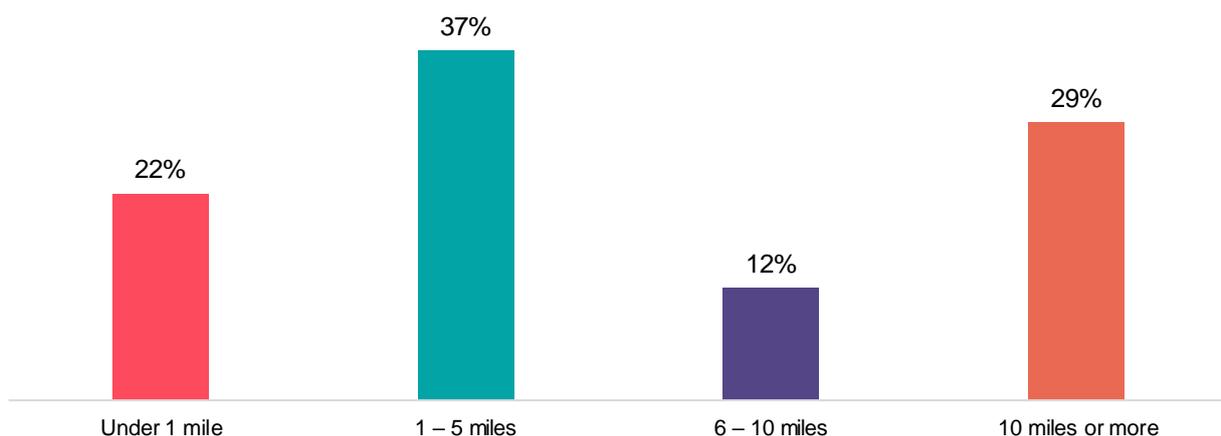
- All comments from PGRs not living with other students

9. Distance to campus

9.1 Journey distance

Another question new to PRES in 2020 was the distance PGRs travel to campus from where they live during term time. Results are divided with a slight majority (59%) travelling less than 5 miles to campus. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) travel over 10 miles or more, and relatively few (12%) have a journey in between these distances.

Figure 35: Distance from campus

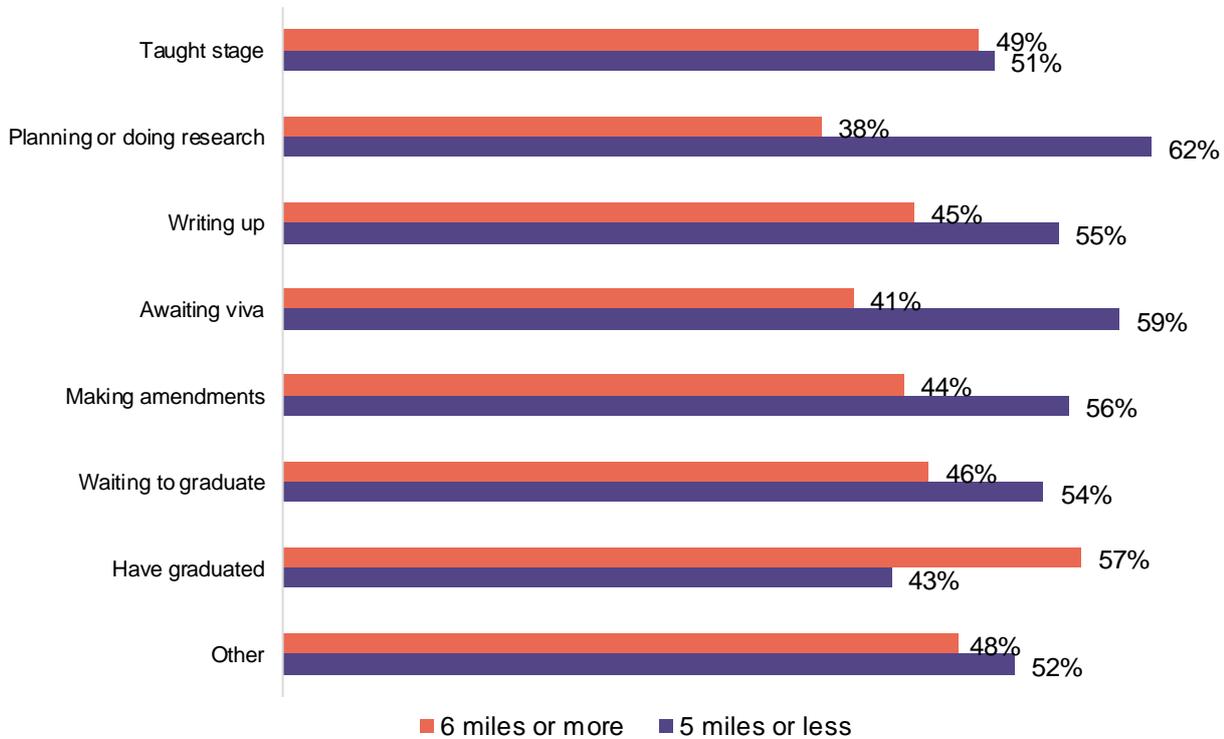


9.2 Distance travelled and course stage

Analysis of distance travelled by PGRs at different stages of their degree programme reveals significant distinctions in the distances travelled during different phases of research. The stages in which the highest proportions of PGRs live within 5 miles of campus are when planning or doing research (62%), and when awaiting viva (59%). This supports the notion postulated in the previous

section that the need to travel to campus frequently, due to contact with supervisors and other staff members at these stages, is potentially connected to PGRs choosing to live closer to campus.

Figure 36: Distance from campus and course stage



A perhaps surprising finding, therefore, is that the stage in which there is the smallest difference in distance travelled is the taught stage, although this is likely to be one of the stages in which there is the most contact with university staff.

The only stage in which a higher proportion of PGRs live 6 or more miles to campus is post-graduation, with almost 6 in 10 (57%) of graduates living over 6 miles from campus. This seems intuitive, as many will have moved away from campus to move on to their career or other next stage in life.

9.3 Distance travelled and satisfaction

PGRs living over 10 miles or more away from campus were slightly more satisfied with their overall postgraduate research student experience than students living closer, among whom there were very little differences in satisfaction. While this is perhaps surprising, it appears that ease and speed of travelling to campus does not have a large impact on the experience, perhaps due to the independent nature of a postgraduate research degree. Interestingly, this contrasts with findings from the Student Academic Engagement Survey (SAES) 2019, which found that undergraduates living further away from campus had a less positive experience and were less satisfied with their value for money.⁸ Figure 38 indicates that this is not the case for PGRs.

⁸ Neves, J. and Hillman, N., Student Academic Engagement Survey 2019, p. 31

Figure 38: Distance from campus and overall satisfaction



10. Conclusions

This report has highlighted that overall satisfaction with the research degree experience remains high, and relatively stable over the past 3 years, with 4 in 10 PGRs agreeing that they were satisfied. That being said, the overall satisfaction levels are among the lowest received during the history of PRES, highlighting that there is room for improvement.

The area with the lowest scores – and thus arguably the largest scope for improvement – is Research Culture, with just 6 in 10 agreeing on average that they are satisfied with the elements of the experience related to this area. PGRs who do not live with other students during term-time report lower satisfaction in this area compared with those who do, driven by fewer interactions with the research community. Part-time PGRs also report lower levels of satisfaction in this area (55%), compared with 62% of full-time PGRs. Among both groups, opportunities to network with other researchers and discuss their work contribute to the lower satisfaction, indicating the need for organised events to connect the research community, preferably outside typical working hours.

Section 6 has demonstrated that, despite the devastating impacts of Covid-19 on those directly affected by it, the circumstances pertaining to the virus do not appear to have impacted the postgraduate research student experience in a negative way. Satisfaction with each aspect of the research degree experience, as well as at an overall level, is higher among PGRs who responded during lockdown. Institutions can look to continue and build upon some of the successes in engaging with PGRs during lockdown, such as demonstrating the value of the student voice, to maintain these higher satisfaction levels.

That being said, those responding after 16 March were less likely to have received formal training for their teaching, indicating a need to adapt teaching training to the 'new normal' circumstances under which we work and study, such as by providing training online. PGRs responding during lockdown were also less confident that they will complete their research degree programme within their institutions' expected timescale, indicating a need for support and advice around extensions.

Comparison of the experience among PGRs studying on a full- and part-time basis shows that, as well as differences in satisfaction with elements of their programme related to research culture, there are also large distinctions in level of wellbeing. It is full-time PGRs who report lower levels of wellbeing, and these PGRs suggest that better access to counselling (which is often fully booked) as well as preventative measures such as organised social activities and efforts to promote a healthy working culture could all help to improve wellbeing. Despite their higher levels of Wellbeing, part-time PGRs are less likely to have had opportunities related to teaching, skills, training and development than full-time PGRs, although comments demonstrate a desire for these. In particular, part-time PGRs are less likely to take part in activities related to career planning and development, raising a concern around part-time PGR career preparation. A greater focus on providing opportunities online, and asynchronously, in response to Covid-19 may have the added benefit of enabling more part-time PGRs to participate in them.

10.1 Appendix 1: Respondent profile

Category	PRES 2018	PRES 2019	PRES 2020
Gender			
Women	55%	53%	54%
Men	45%	47%	45%
In another way (answer options added in 2020)			1%
Age			
30 and under	49%	59%	53%
31 and over	51%	41%	47%
Disability			
Reported disability	9%	8%	9%
No reported disability	91%	92%	87%
Prefer not to say	-	4%	4%
Ethnicity (UK Domicile)			
White	86%	82%	85%
Black	3%	3%	3%
Asian (including Chinese)	6%	8%	6%
Mixed and Other	5%	7%	6%
Domicile			
UK	63%	63%	62%
Other EU	8%	9%	10%
Non-EU	29%	28%	28%
Study			
Full time	74%	82%	77%
Part time	26%	18%	23%
Learning			
Face to face	82%	88%	85%
Distance learner	18%	12%	15%

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