

Subject: Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2020/21 Report

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1. Introduction

The Advance HE Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) launched on Monday 12 April and closed on Monday 17 May 2021. The survey was hosted by JISC Surveys, responses and results were confidential and anonymised. 85 students participated (compared with 75 in 2019/20), providing a wider range of feedback and bringing the percentage response up from 26% to 33%.

2. Age, Gender and Ethnicity of participants

The following tables detail age, gender, disability, and ethnicity of PRES participants in comparison with the overall London Met postgraduate research student (PGR) population that was eligible to participate in the survey. Please note that the categories for ethnicity are not very differentiated. This is to allow comparison between PRES answers and our own data. The comparison shows that participants roughly match the overall population.

The most notable deviations are that more young students participated (23% were 30 years old or younger vs. 16% in the overall population), that fewer students with a declared disability participated (12% vs. 18% in the overall population) and that fewer Black, Asian and Arab students participated than their proportion in the overall population.

However, 19% of participants did not declare their ethnicity vs. 0.03% in the overall population, making the last comparison inconclusive.

Age of participants in comparison with eligible PGR		
<i>Age range</i>	<i>PRES</i>	<i>Eligible PGR</i>
25 and younger	2%	2%
26-30	21%	14%
31-35	19%	18%

36-40	12%	13%
41-45	7%	11%
46-50	8%	16%
51-55	11%	11%
56 and older	13%	15%
No answer	7%	N/A

Gender of participants in comparison with eligible PGR		
<i>Gender</i>	<i>PRES</i>	<i>Eligible PGR</i>
Female	62%	65%
Male	31%	35%
Other / Information not disclosed	7%	0%

Disability of participants in comparison with eligible PGR		
<i>Disclosure of disability</i>	<i>PRES</i>	<i>Eligible PGR</i>
Disability disclosed	12%	18%
No disability disclosed	88%	82%

Ethnicity of participants in comparison with eligible PGR		
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>PRES</i>	<i>Eligible PGR</i>
White	52%	50%
Black	11%	21%
Asian	7%	16%
Arab	1%	3%
Mixed	7%	7%
Any other ethnic	4%	3%
Information not disclosed	19%	0%

3. Analysis

This analysis concentrates on the changes from last year's survey. For its purpose, 'strongly agree' and 'agree' have been merged into one 'agree' category, and 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' was merged into one 'disagree' category.

The background for last year's research student experience is the Covid-19 pandemic; the results have to be seen in this context.

4. Overall experience

There is clear improvement in overall student experience (70% vs. 63.5% in 2019/20). Also, overall dissatisfaction is down to 22% from 24.4% in 2019/20). More students feel confident that they will complete their degree on time (72% vs. 69.3% in 2019/20) and 75% feel better prepared for their future career as a result of their degree programme with only 10% disagreeing (new question).

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21			% -points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	% -points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
Overall Experience							
Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme	63.5	24.4	70	22		6.5	-2.4
I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale	69.3	9.3	72	18		2.7	8.7
As a result of my research degree programme I feel better prepared for my future career	N/A	N/A	75	10		N/A	N/A

4a. Supervision

The percentage of contented students remains virtually the same while dissatisfaction with supervisory contact (19% vs. 9.3% in 2019/20) and supervisory feedback (14% vs. 6.7% in 2019/20) has increased. While responses about supervision will have been affected by the pandemic, this remains an area of attention.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21			% -points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	% -points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
Supervision							
My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research	84	9.4	85	10		1	0.6
I have regular contact with my supervisor/s, appropriate for my needs	74	9.3	76	19		2	9.7
My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	80	6.7	78	14		-2	7.3
My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development	67	16	67	22		0	6

needs as a researcher							
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4b. Resources

There are five new questions about resources in the 2020/21 PRES, three about remote working. Several answers will have been influenced by the closure of University buildings: only 44% think that they have a suitable working space on campus (minus 28% from 2019/20), only 49% judge the provision of computing resources and facilities as adequate (minus 15% from 2019/20) and only 38% judge as adequate the access to the specialist resources necessary for their research while on Campus (new question).

More positive are answers about remote working: 77% report that they have a suitable working space at home (new question), 62% that there is adequate provision of online library facilities (new question) and also 62% that they have adequate access to specialist resources while researching remotely (new question).

The considerable efforts of the Library and of ICT as well as hardware provision by the University show in the answers, but up to one fifth of students report that they did not have the facilities for successful remote researching.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21		%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
Resources	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree		
I have a suitable working space on campus	72	16	44	11	-28	-5
I have a suitable working space when I am studying remotely	N/A	N/A	77	11	N/A	N/A
There is adequate provision of	64	12	49	9	-15	-3

There is appropriate access to physical library resources and facilities	N/A	N/A	42	14		N/A	N/A
There is adequate provision of online library facilities	N/A	N/A	62	17		N/A	N/A
I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research while on Campus	N/A	N/A	38	14		N/A	N/A
I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research while studying remotely	N/A	N/A	62	20		N/A	N/A

4c. Research Culture

The change in answers in this category is very encouraging indeed: 63% agree that they have access to a good seminar programme in their research area (13.7% more than in 2019/20), 56% report that they have frequent opportunities to discuss their research with fellow researchers (14.6% more than in 2019/20) and the number of those who disagree has decreased as well.

The improved answers must be attributed to the investment of the University into the PGR culture and the efforts by the Graduate School, the Research and Postgraduate Office and the individual Academic Schools. While the direction of travel is right, the figures leave ample room for further improvement.

Themes / Questions	19/20	20/21	%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
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Research culture	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
I have access to a good seminar programme in my research area	49.3	22.6	63	17		13.7	-5.6
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students	41.4	22.7	56	21		14.6	-1.7
The research community in my research area stimulates my work	38.7	26.7	43	23		4.3	-3.7
I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department	62.7	24	59	22		-3.7	-2

4d. Progress and achievement

This category shows improved figures as well; several high figures are to be noted: 79% of students confirm that they understand the required standard for their thesis

(5.7% more than in 2019/20), 80% that they understand the requirements and deadlines for formal progress monitoring (unchanged). 68% agree that they received an appropriate induction (5.4% more than in 2019/20). Also, the percentages of those who disagree have decreased.

The reasons for the improvements are the same as those reported for research culture.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21			%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
Progress and achievement							
I received an appropriate induction to my research degree programme	62.6	22.6	68	21		5.4	-1.6
I understand the requirements and deadlines for formal monitoring of my progress	80	13.4	80	11		0	-2.4
I understand the required standard for my thesis	73.3	20	79	11		5.7	-9
The final assessment procedures for my degree are clear to me	70.7	17.3	69	17		-1.7	-0.3

4e. Responsibilities

Again, there is overall improvement and some high figures are to be noted: 87% state that they understand their responsibilities, 82% are aware of their supervisors' responsibilities.

At odds with the general trend is the decrease in students who feel that the University values and responds to their feedback (only 54%, 8.7% fewer than in 2019/20). The answer is most likely informed by the pandemic where it was not always possible to accede to student demands.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21		%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
Responsibilities	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree		
My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students	62.7	16	54	22	-8.7	6
I understand my responsibilities as a research degree student	85.4	8	87	6	1.6	-2
I am aware of my supervisors' responsibilities towards me as a research degree student	74.7	16	82	12	7.3	-4

Other than my supervisor/s, I know who to approach if I am concerned about any aspect of my degree programme	66	22.6	67	21		1	-1.6
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4f. Research Skills

Students feel more confident about their research skills: 84% state that applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques has developed during their programme (up by 1.3% compared to 2019/20), 82% that their skills in critical analysis and evaluation of findings have improved (up 4.7% from 2019/20) and 81% report a better understanding of research integrity (up 2.3% from 2019/20).

The slightly improved results, showing comparatively high figures, can be attributed to supervisors' work as well as the research student training programme that was expanded during the pandemic with higher remote participation rates than in situ sessions.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21			%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
Research skills	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
My skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques have developed during my programme	82.7	8	84	8		1.3	0

My skills in critically analysing and evaluating findings and results have developed during my programme	77.3	8	82	9		4.7	1
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme	72	12	72	16		0	4
My understanding of 'research integrity' (e.g. rigour, ethics, transparency, attributing the contribution of others) has developed during my programme	78.7	6.7	81	8		2.3	1.3

4g. Professional development

The answers about professional development are not much changed from 2019/20. 74% say that they can manage projects better, 73% that their ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during their programme (unchanged, although 5% more disagree). Not surprisingly, more students state that they have not developed contacts or professional networks (23%, up 16% from 2019/20).

Credit for the relatively good answers in the circumstances again must go to supervisors and the research student training programme. Encouraging our students to integrate into professional networks remains a concern.

Themes / Questions	19/20	20/21		%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
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Professional Development	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
My ability to manage projects has developed during my programme	76	8	74	10		-2	2
My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my programme	73	8	73	13		0	5
I have developed contacts or professional networks during my programme	57.3	16	59	23		1.7	7
I have increasingly managed my own professional development during my programme	81	5.4	82	7		1	1.6

4h. Opportunities

The responses in this category demonstrate the comparative lack of teaching opportunities for our PGR students: only 18% indicate that they have carried out paid teaching at the University (new question). However, of those, 80% agree that they have been given appropriate support and guidance (up by 30% from 2019/20) but not formal training for teaching (only 26%, a drop of 16.8% from 2019/20).

It is one of our priorities to bring the University more in line with other providers by increasing teaching opportunities for our research students, of course in cooperation with Academic Schools. The new VC postgraduate research studentships feature assured teaching hours.

We are also determined to increase the small number of PGR students who can take up our offer of studying for a PGCert in Learning and Teaching in HE. Every suitable PGR student who would like to do the PGCert should have the opportunity to gain the required teaching experience (paid or unpaid).

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21			%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
Opportunities	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree			
Please indicate whether you have undertaken paid (or equivalent) teaching work at your institution during your research degree programme (e.g. as a Graduate Teaching Assistant or Graduate Demonstrator)	N/A	N/A	18	81		N/A	N/A

To what extent do you agree that you have been given appropriate support and guidance for your teaching?	50	28.6	80	13		30	-15.6
Did you receive formal training for your teaching? (e.g. teacher/lecturer training schemes or staff development classes run by your institutions; a PGCert course)	42.8	50	26	66		-16.8	16

4i. COVID-19

The response in this category is good: 80% believe that they have received appropriate and clear communication from the University about Covid 19, only 9% disagree. 60% state that they have received the support they need, with 19% disagreeing. 67% agree that the academic quality of their experience was preserved, with 16% disagreeing. We see these comparatively good figures as a result of the Covid-19 response of the University at all levels and the work of the Graduate School and the Research & Postgraduate Office in particular.

Themes / Questions	19/20		20/21		%-points difference (Agree) from 19/20 to 20/21	%-points difference (Disagree) from 19/20 to 20/21
COVID-19	%Agree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Disagree		

Communications from my institution in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic were appropriate and clear	N/A	N/A	80	9		N/A	N/A
I have received the support I need from my institution in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic	N/A	N/A	60	19		N/A	N/A
My institution has worked to ensure the quality of my academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic	N/A	N/A	67	16		N/A	N/A

5. Key observations and action points

PRES 2021 shows that our initiatives to improve the University research culture are bearing results. The trend has continued despite the pandemic.

We should continue our efforts, paying particular attention to the areas of supervision, PGR student training, service provision, PGR teaching opportunities and communication:

- Disseminate effective supervisory techniques through staff development (Academic Schools, Head of Researcher Development)
- Develop PGR Training Programme further to address the concerns voiced in the survey: include sessions on developing contacts and professional networking, on mindfulness and personal effectivity. Drive greater attendance (Head of Graduate School and Academic Schools)
- Encourage and support PGR students' participation in internal and external research events (Supervisors, Academic Schools)
- Liaise with relevant service areas about PGR student requests and complaints to ensure that there is swift resolution and that effective measures are put in place (Head of Graduate School, Heads of Departments and Research & Postgraduate Office)
- Ensure that vivas take place within 6 months of submission (Supervisors, Research & Postgraduate Office)
- Expand PGR student teaching opportunities (Academic Schools) and prepare for more PGR students taking PGCert in Learning and Teaching in HE (CPED)
- Ensure PGR webpages are relevant, up to date and informative (Head of Graduate School and Research & Postgraduate Office)

07 October 2021