2021
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

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AdvanceHE

POSTGRADUATE
RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
SURVEY

Contents

1. Executive Summary

This report examines the key findings from a dataset which includes the views of almost 40,000 postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from 94 institutions.

Overall satisfaction across the sector has fallen slightly, from 80% in 2020 to 79% in 2021. Although this figure represents a high level of overall satisfaction with the research degree experience across the sector, it is the first time since PRES (Postgraduate Research Experience Survey) began in 2007 that the overall satisfaction score has fallen below 80%.

The area with the largest decrease in satisfaction this year is professional development, driven in part by fewer PGRs feeling they developed contacts or professional networks during their programme. To help them to manage their professional development, PGRs called for more support from supervisors, and more tailored careers support for post-PhD careers.

In 2021, consultations were held with the institutions participating in PRES to ensure the content of the survey would continue to meet the sector's needs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a number of changes were made to the questionnaire as a result. A section on the theme of support was added to gain understanding of whether PGRs feel they receive sufficient support for academic skills, using IT and accessing resources, and for their health and wellbeing. Satisfaction with support for these different elements was mixed; while it is encouraging that over 8 in 10 PGRs felt adequately supported in using IT and accessing resources, particularly during the pandemic when this has had to be done remotely, it is concerning that fewer than two thirds of PGRs agreed that their institution's support for their health and wellbeing met their needs. Improving support in this area could be one of the keys to improving overall satisfaction, as it is one of the elements with strong correlation with overall satisfaction.

2021, like 2020, continued to bring Covid-19-related challenges to the higher education sector, and an optional new section focusing on how PGRs felt their institution has responded to the pandemic was added. While we currently live and work with relatively few restrictions, it is important to consider that stricter restrictions were still in place during the PRES fieldwork period. Satisfaction with clarity and appropriateness of communications related to Covid-19 was high, at 78%, however only two thirds of PGRs were satisfied they had received the support they needed in relation to the pandemic, or that their institutions had worked to ensure the quality of their academic experience. These latter two elements are also strongly correlated with overall satisfaction, so improvements in these areas as we continue to live with Covid-19 are key. Comments reveal that PGRs would have liked more information about funding, extensions and access to facilities.

Last year, while the challenging impacts of the lockdown were clearly felt, there were improvements in satisfaction with certain areas of the postgraduate research experience, including responsibilities and supervision. Unfortunately, not all of these improvements have been maintained in 2021. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic's negative impact on PGRs' confidence to complete their programme within their institution's expected timescale has been maintained during 2021, demonstrating the importance of putting support in place for those whose timescales are impacted.

Although overall satisfaction has fallen in 2021, there has been a reassuring drop in the proportion of PGRs who had considered leaving their postgraduate research degree programme, following an increase in 2020. That mental or emotional health problems are the most common reason for considering leaving a postgraduate research degree again highlights the need to improve health and wellbeing support for PGRs.

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 research 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.

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

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey design

In 2021, PRES comprised 40 questions, including 11 batteries of closed 5-point Likert scale questions and 11 optional open text questions. Questions are grouped into 8 core themes:

+ Supervision

+ Resources

+ Research Culture

+ Progress and Assessment

+ Responsibilities

+ Support

+ Research Skills

+ Professional Development

Data was collected via an online survey method using Jisc Online Surveys[2] software. Surveys were distributed by participating institutions directly to their PGR population. In 2021, data was collected between 1 February and 17 May 2021. 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.

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[2] Jisc Online Surveys (2020) *About online surveys*. Available online: 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 2020, the discipline question was changed to reflect the 2021 REF categories.

In 2021, consultations were held with the institutions participating in PRES to ensure the content of the survey would continue to meet the sector's needs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following these consultations and independent cognitive testing carried out by QA Research,[3] several updates were made to the questionnaire:

+ Throughout the survey 'face-to-face' was changed to 'in-person'.

+ The Resources section was amended significantly to differentiate between experiences accessing resources on campus and remotely.

+ There were two slight text changes in the Research Culture section following cognitive testing.

+ A Support section was added to gain understanding of whether PGRs feel they receive sufficient support for academic skills, using IT and accessing resources, and for their health and wellbeing.

+ The opportunities question was amended slightly to clarify that it includes virtual and in-person opportunities. Coaching and/or mentoring was also added as an option.

+ An optional Covid-19 section was added to gain understanding of how PGRs feel their institution responded to the pandemic.

+ A question about how PGRs usually had contact with staff has been added to gain understanding of whether interactions were mainly virtual or in-person.

+ Voluntary pre-population of how the programme was intended to be delivered (in-person or online) was included in place of the question about mode of teaching.

+ The question on why students had considered leaving was included again after being removed in 2020, following feedback that it was useful and with additional answer options following cognitive testing.

+ The section on Wellbeing was removed to reduce survey length.

+ Questions on motivation for pursuing the programme, whether the training programme is provided through a Doctoral Training Partnership, language fluency, participation in paid

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[3] QA Research (2021). Available online: www.qaresearch.co.uk

employment, how tuition fees are funded and living situation were removed to reduce survey length.

3.2 Sample size

In 2021, PRES had 39,855 individual respondents from 94 participating institutions. 93 of these institutions are in the UK and 1 institution is based in the Gambia. Figure 1 shows sample sizes for 2011–2021. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on some institutions being able to run the survey in 2020.

Figure 1: PRES participation: institutions and responses (2011–2021)

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Institutions	102	122	123	117	66	107	45	94
Responses	31,202	48,401	53,348	57,689	16,817	50,600	8,432	39,855

3.3 Benchmark groups

In 2021, the following benchmark groups were produced for the comparison of PRES results.

+ Global

+ MillionPlus Group

+ University Alliance

+ Russell Group

+ Guild HE

+ Cathedrals Group

+ Small and Specialist

+ Pre-92

+ Post-92

+ Scottish

+ Welsh

+ London

4. Overall Satisfaction

4.1 Understanding overall satisfaction

In 2021, just under 8 in 10 (79%) of PGRs agreed that they were satisfied with their overall postgraduate research experience.

Figure 2: I agree that I was satisfied with my experience
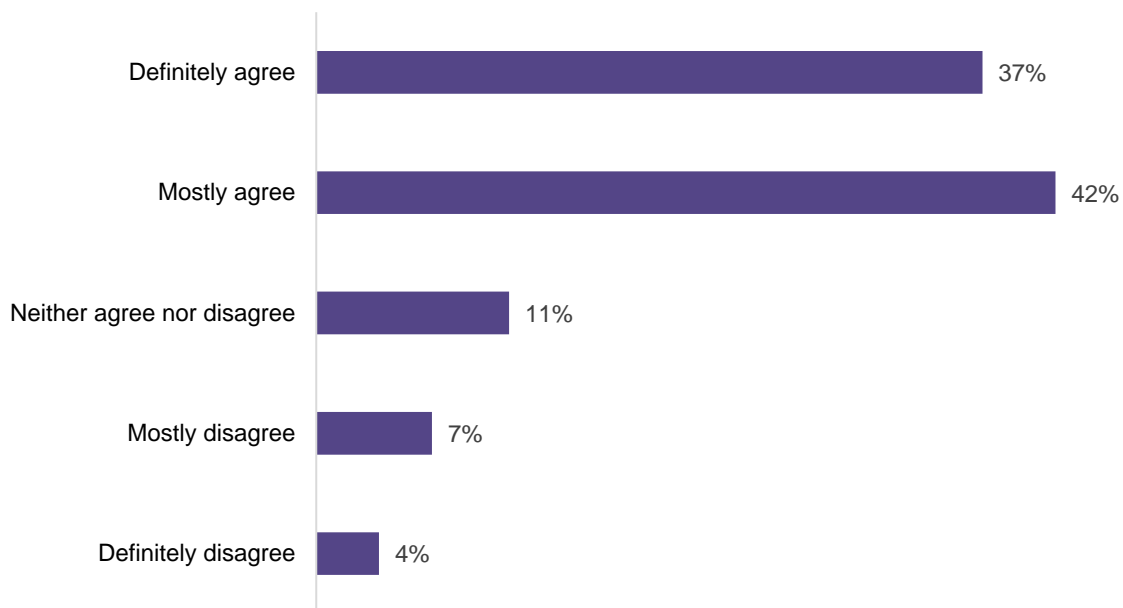
While this figure demonstrates a high level of satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience and is only 1 percentage point lower than the 2020 score (80%), 79% overall satisfaction is the lowest score observed since PRES began in 2007. The longitudinal perspective illustrated in Figure 3 below demonstrates that, while overall satisfaction remains consistently high, since 2019 there has been a slight year-by-year decline.

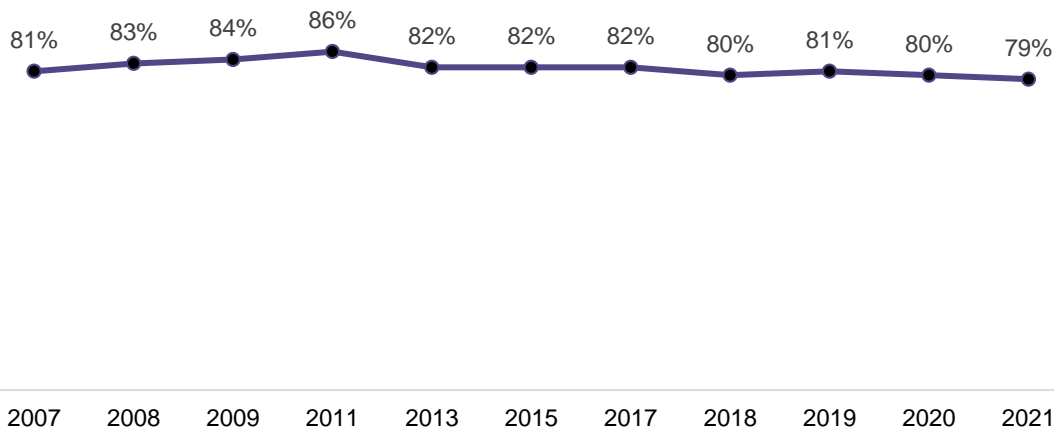**Figure 3: Satisfaction over time (2007–2021)**

Figure 4 provides a more detailed perspective as to how overall satisfaction has changed over the last three years. In 2020, the dip in overall satisfaction was driven by a slight shift from the proportion saying they mostly agreed that they were satisfied to neither agreeing nor disagreeing with this statement. In 2021, there has been a 3 percentage point reduction since 2020 in the proportion who said they definitely agree that they were satisfied, however the proportion of those who mostly agreed increased by two percentage points. The remainder moved to neither agreeing or disagreeing, or mostly disagreeing, that they were satisfied with their PGR experience, contributing to the dip in the overall satisfaction score.

Figure 4: I agree that I was satisfied with my experience (2019–2021)
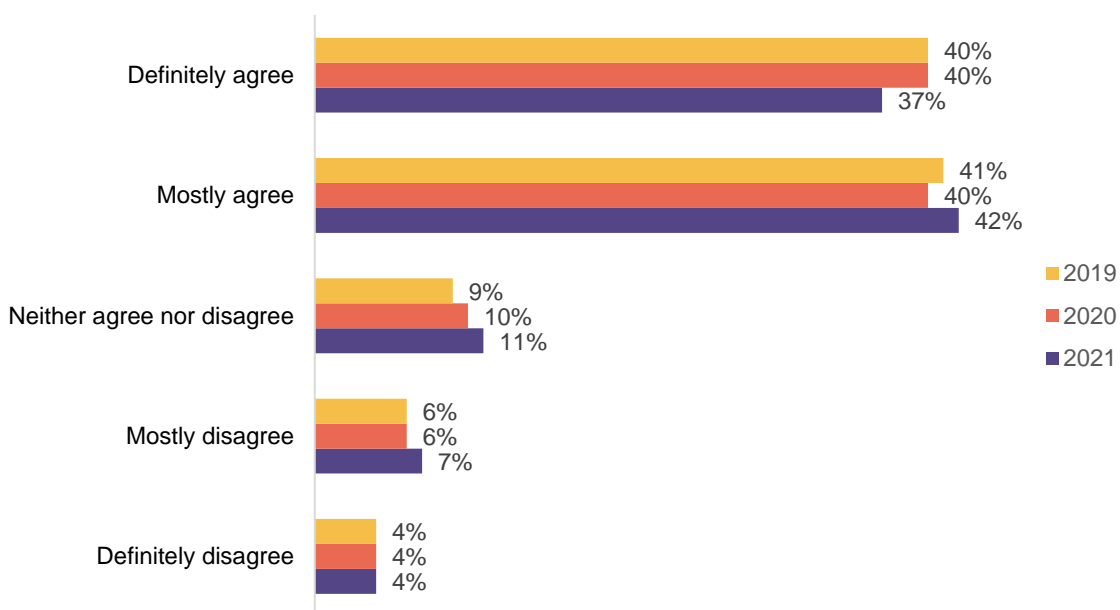
4.2 Overall satisfaction among institutions participating in PRES in both 2020 and 2021

There are nuances in the numbers of institutions which participate in PRES each year, and particularly in 2020 when a number of institutions were unable to participate in PRES due to the Covid-19 situation. To remove the impact of institutional differences on overall satisfaction scores, we can consider overall satisfaction among only the institutions which participated in PRES in both 2020 and 2021. 31 institutions participated in PRES in both years.

Figure 5: Overall satisfaction among the 31 institutions participating in PRES in both 2020 and 2021

Figure 5 shows that overall satisfaction has dipped in 2021 among those 31 institutions which participated both this year and last year. The 2021 score of 79% for those institutions is in line with the score for all institutions.

4.3   Overall satisfaction and domicile

When we consider the profile of PGRs participating in PRES in 2021 and compare it with those participating in previous recent years (see Appendix 1), we observe that higher proportions of non-EU PGRs have participated in PRES this year compared with in 2020 and 2019.

Figure 6: Overall satisfaction and domicile
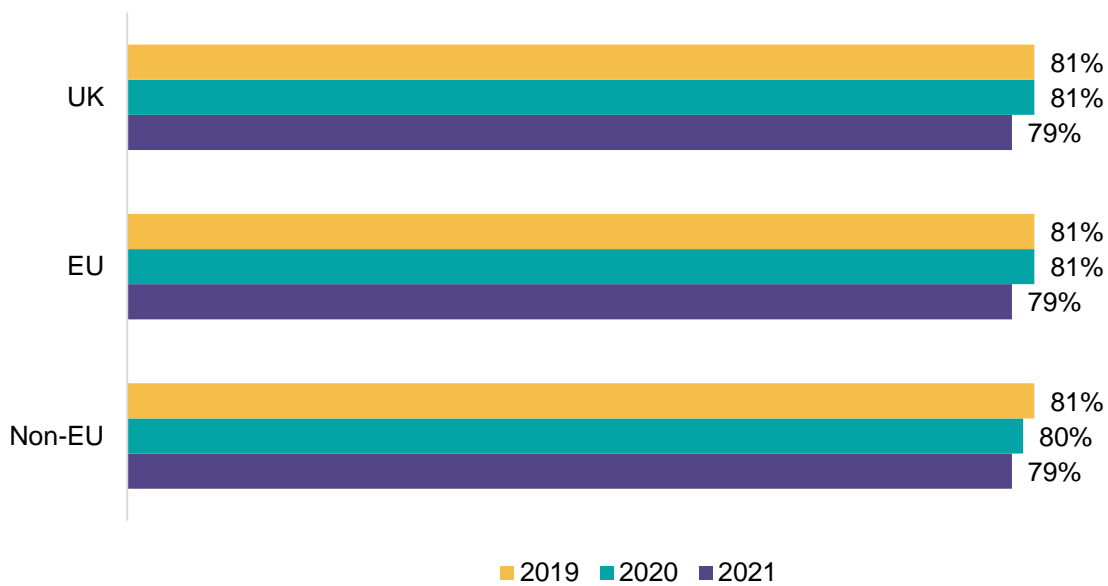
A sensible hypothesis is therefore that this difference in PGRs' domiciles may be linked to the slight dip in overall satisfaction this year. However, Figure 6 shows that overall satisfaction was consistent across the domicile groupings, as it has been over the last three years, so we can reasonably conclude that this is not the case.

4.4   Overall satisfaction and contact with staff

In 2021, a question about how PGRs usually had contact with staff during the term in which they completed PRES was added, to enable us to understand whether interactions were mainly virtual or in-person.

Figure 7: Usual contact with staff during the current term
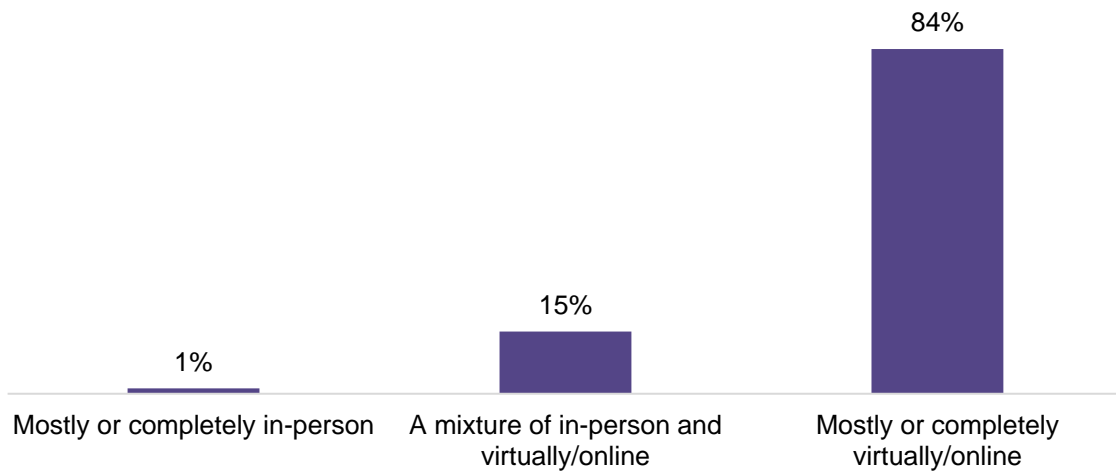
Unsurprisingly, given the social-distancing guidance and restrictions in place during the PRES fieldwork period, the majority (84%) of PGRs said their contact with staff was mostly or completely virtual. A further 15% said they interacted with staff via a mixture of in-person and virtual contact.

Figure 8: Overall satisfaction by usual contact with staff during the current term
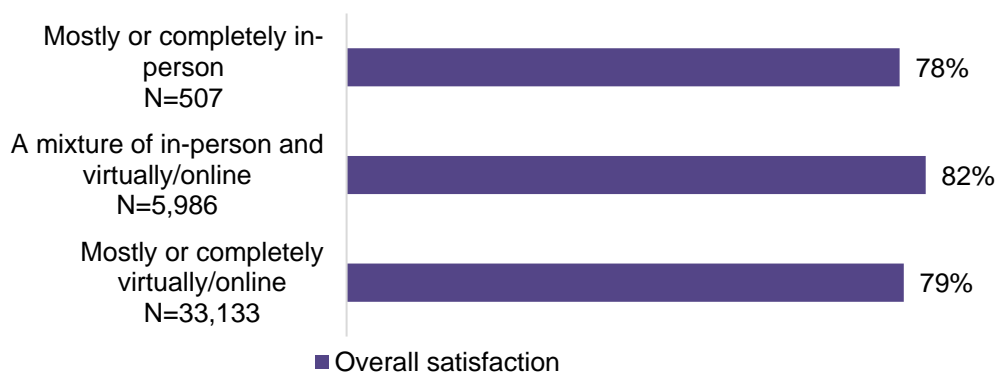
Overall satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience was highest (82%) among those who had a mixture of in-person and virtual/online contact with staff during the term in which they responded to PRES. Given the independent nature of a postgraduate research degree, it is possible that PGRs have found benefits to a blended approach to contact with staff, such as reduced commuting, while still enjoying the social benefits of some in-person contact. As many institutions will be offering a blended approach of contact between staff, students and researchers during the coming academic year, this is a potentially encouraging finding.

A somewhat surprising finding is that overall satisfaction was lowest among the relatively low numbers whose contact with staff was mostly or completely in-person. While there may be many reasons driving this, a suggestion is that as their contact with staff was still mostly in-person, these PGRs may be those on programmes which are less suited to being executed virtually and have therefore been particularly impacted by the pandemic in terms of being able to carry out their programme.

In 2021, institutions were invited to pre-populate how PGRs' programmes were intended to be undertaken (in-person or online). This pre-population was voluntary, and 45 institutions chose to provide this pre-population, for 22,697 PGRs.

Figure 9: Intended mode of contact with staff and actual mode of contact with staff
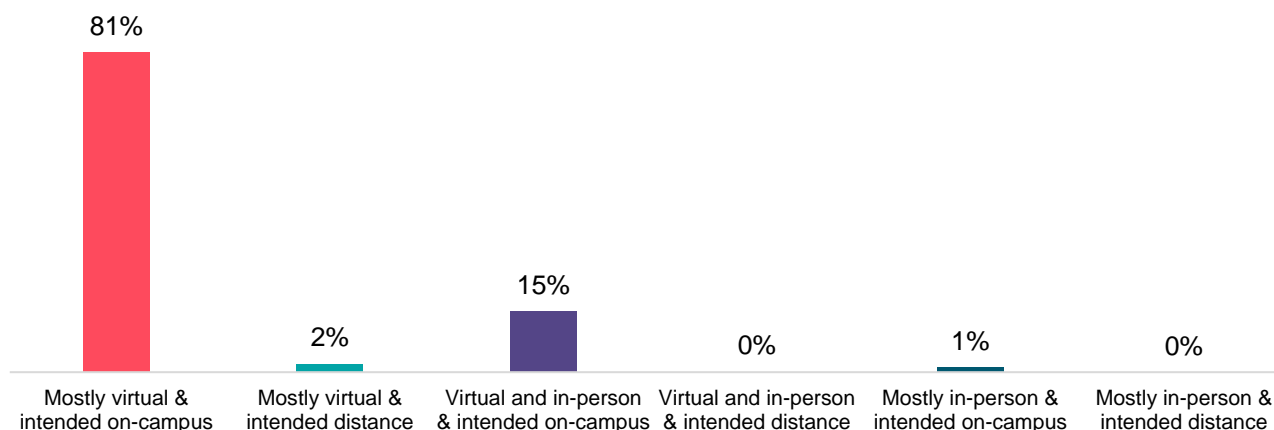
This pre-population of intended mode of contact, and the new question on actual mode of contact with staff during the term during which PRES was in field, enables us to explore the proportions of respondents whose experiences differed from their expectations. Figure 9 shows that over 8 in 10 (81%) PGRs who responded to PRES were intended to have most or all of their contact with staff on campus but received most of their contact virtually. Only 2% of PGRs were intended to be distance learners and received their contact virtually as expected, and just 1% of PGRs were intended to have their contact with staff on campus and did so.

Figure 10: Overall satisfaction by intended mode of contact with staff and actual mode of contact with staff

	Overall satisfaction
Mostly virtual & intended on-campus N= 18,296	78%
Mostly virtual & intended distance N=467	85%
Virtual and in-person & intended on-campus N= 3,496	81%
Mostly in-person & intended on-campus N=290	76%

■ Overall satisfaction
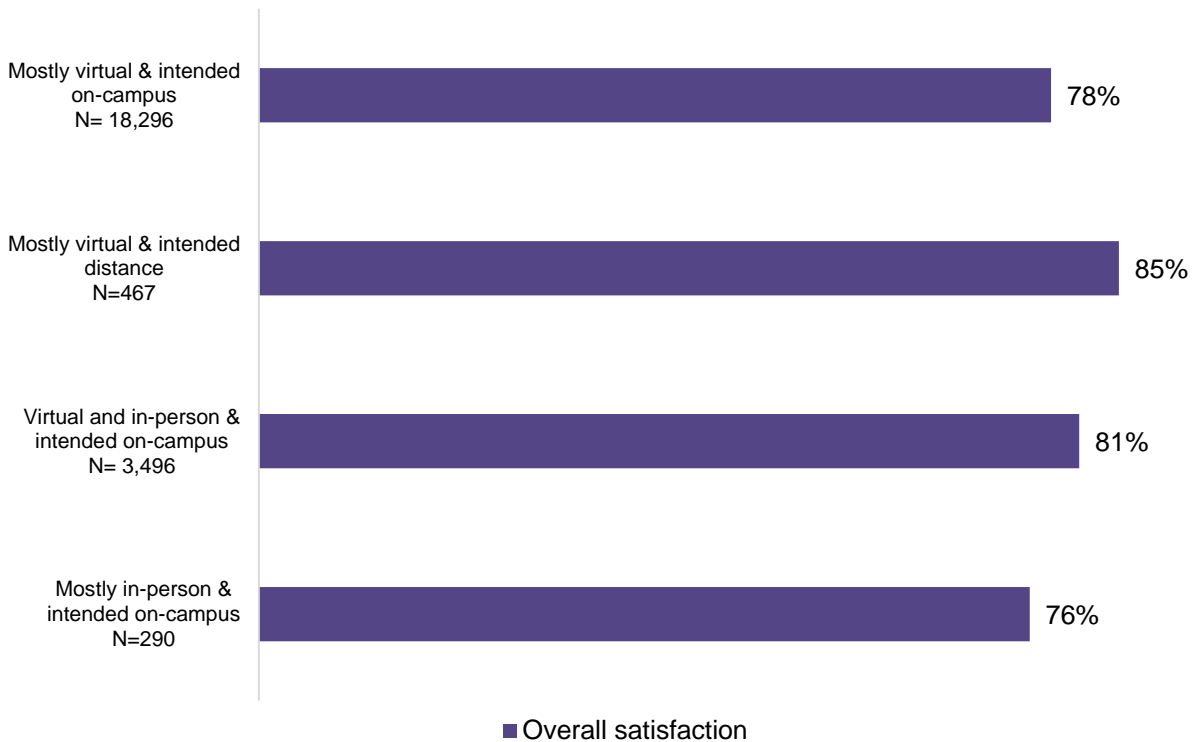
Note: Virtual and in-person and intended distance and Mostly in-person and intended distance are not charted due to low base sizes

Figure 10 demonstrates that overall satisfaction was highest (85%) among the small number who were intended to have their contact remotely and did so. Due to the pandemic, many more PGRs studied remotely during the semester in which they responded to PRES than were intended to be distance learners, and institutions put measures into place to ensure PGRs could continue their programmes online and try to make the PGR experience as positive as possible at this time. A suggestion is therefore that these measures meant that the experience exceeded the expectations of those who were always intended to have only virtual or online contact with their institution.

Conversely, the least satisfied group overall were PGRs who were intended to access their programme on-campus, and did so during the term in which they responded to PRES. Again, this may be because PGRs may be those on programmes which could not be carried out at a distance and received a worse than expected postgraduate experience due to the restrictions in place.

5. Satisfaction with areas of the student experience

5.1 Elements of the student experience

The PRES survey measures satisfaction across 9 different themes. Each topic is formed of between 3 and 7 questions and the average satisfaction with these questions is calculated to be the overall score for that theme. In 2021, following consultations with participating institutions, a battery of three statements on the theme of support was included to gain understanding of whether PGRs felt they received sufficient support for academic skills, using IT and accessing resources, and for their health and wellbeing. A more in depth analysis of the Support theme is in section 5.3. The Covid-19 section was also newly included in 2021, and detailed analysis of how PGRs felt their institution responded to the pandemic can be found in section 6.1. The questions in the Resources section were amended this year to ensure they were appropriate in the context of the pandemic; therefore no trend data is shown for this theme in Figure 11.

Figure 11 compares satisfaction with the different areas of the student experience over the past 3 years. Unfortunately for several areas, including research culture and professional development, the trend over the past three years is of a slight decline in PGR satisfaction. More positively, satisfaction with the other themes for which trend data is available remains broadly consistent and high, with around 8 in 10 PGRs satisfied with each.

Figure 11: Satisfaction with areas of the research degree experience
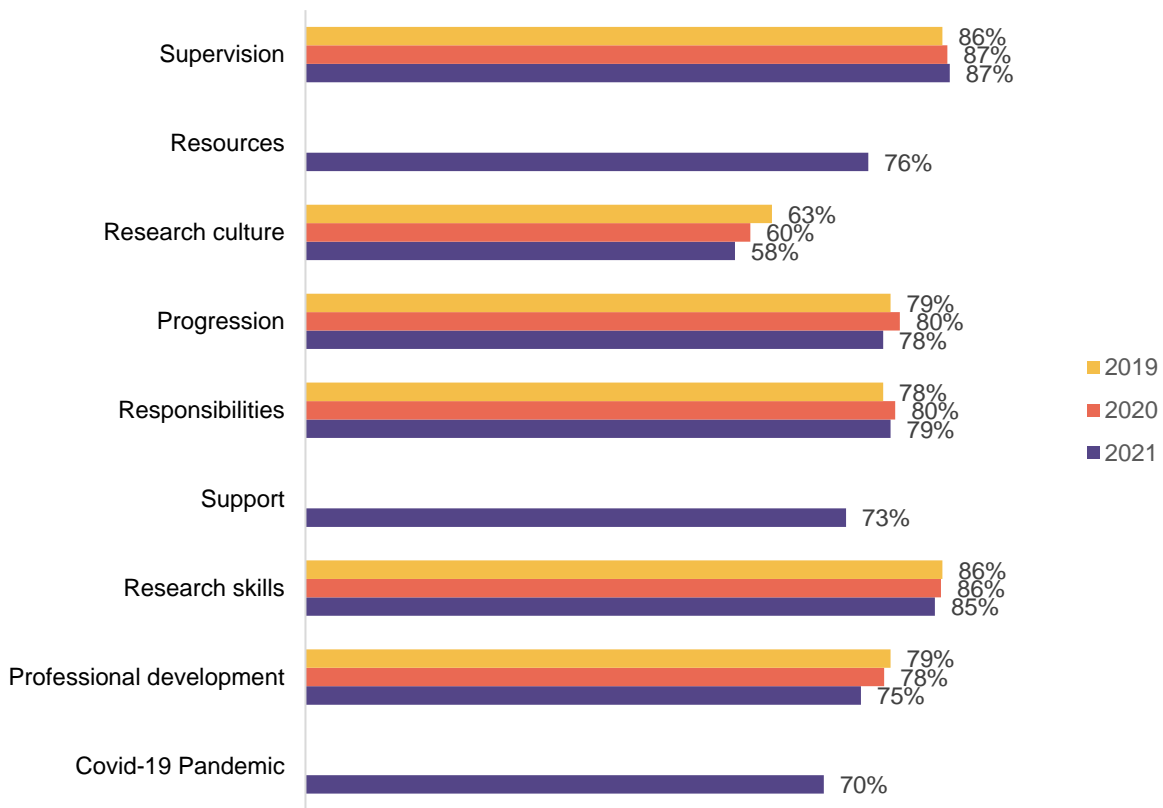
Note: For 'Resources', only 2021 data are shown due to changes to the questions within this element

5.2   Satisfaction with professional development

The area with the largest decrease in satisfaction this year (3 percentage points) is professional development. There has been lower satisfaction with each element of professional development in 2021 compared with 2020. The largest decrease is in the proportion of PGRs who felt they have developed contacts or professional networks during their programme (65% in 2021 compared with 70% in 2020), indicating the need to put in place measures to enable PGRs to connect with other PGRs and industry contacts despite social distancing and other pandemic-related restrictions.

Figure 12: Satisfaction with elements of the research degree experience related to Professional Development
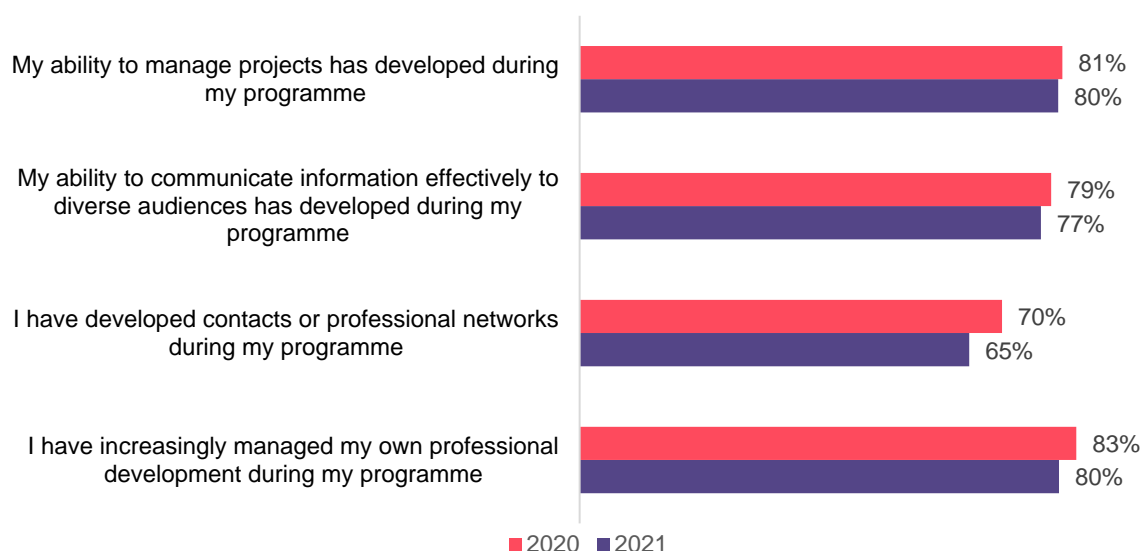
PGRs would like more support from supervisors and more tailored careers support for post-PhD careers

"I would have liked more support in terms of career progression, but in supervision the focus was always on my current work/writing/analyses etc., and any discussions about careers that I raised weren't explored much."

"Professional development does not seem to be a focus of my supervision, my development is very academic career focused which is disappointing."

"I have not been able to do anything to further my professional development. The general offerings from the Careers centre have not been useful. Target and Prospectus are also not useful for my field of research/career goals"

"Regarding professional development, [my institution] seems to focus almost entirely on students at an early stage of their careers. I entirely agree that emphasis should be placed on young students, but it would be nice if old-timers were thrown the occasional bone."

"Professional development is lacking when it comes to career progression post PhD. Lecturing is an essential skill that a lot of PGRs need; but the university barely offers any lecturing opportunities to PGRs."

"Whilst I have managed my own professional development, I think there should be an emphasis on the university helping with this too and better preparation for post-PhD (whether that's post-doc research or getting a non-academic job)."

5.3   Satisfaction with support

In 2021, a new theme of support was included, to assess how institutions' support for academic skills, IT and resource access and health and wellbeing met PGRs' needs.

Figure 13 shows mixed scores across the different areas of support. Given that there are concerns about how tech-savvy all students are,[4] it is reassuring that a high proportion (81%) of PGRs have felt supported in using IT and accessing resources, especially as most PGRs have had to do so away from campus this year. However, while it is encouraging that over 8 in 10 PGRs felt supported in using IT and accessing resources, it is concerning that fewer than two thirds felt the support for their health and wellbeing meets their needs.

Figure 13: Satisfaction with elements of the research degree experience related to Resources

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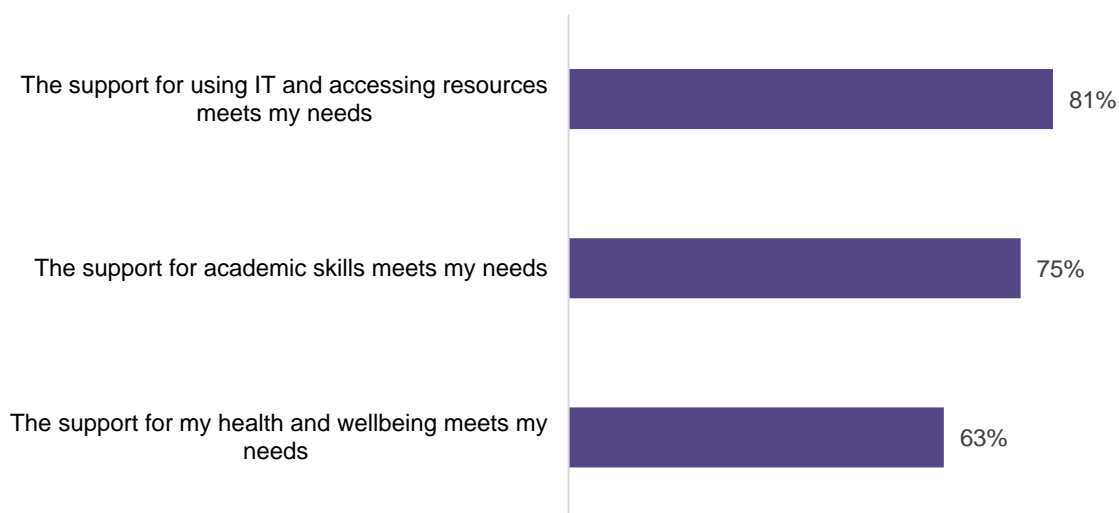
[4] Elizabeth Losh (2021) *Universities must stop presuming that all students are tech-savvy.* Available online: www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/universities-must-stop-presuming-all-students-are-tech-savvy

PGRs call for more proactive offering of counselling and other forms of mental health support to researchers, and for a culture of expecting and accepting that researchers should be stressed to be changed

"It would be better if the department can offer some mental health counselling for Ph.D. students regularly. As far as I know, it is quite common for anxiety of postgraduates."

"I think that there could be more proactive support of health and wellbeing of PhD students. Most resources are for undergraduates and based around those timetable and semesters. Mental health of PhD students is an issue worldwide, and I think it's because they can often feel forgotten about."

"There are too many post grad students who have adopted the mentality that being depressed, stressed and anxious is a normality for researchers."

"The university claims mental health and well-being is a priority whilst not doing enough to correct the culture amongst academics and PhD students – supervisors often expect too much from their PhD students and put too much pressure on them."

"There is still somewhat of a stigma around mental health (or at least it feels this way) made apparent via statements from staff like 'a PhD is supposed to be hard' with the expectation that students are supposed to suffer a little. This sort of culture needs to be eradicated and replaced with proper support and signposting towards the right services."

One of the principles of the University Mental Health Charter is that universities ensure that support services are equally accessible to all students, but notes concerns that some institutions' mental health services may not understand the needs of postgraduate students.[5] As well as the above suggestions from PGRs, Vitae has a range of recommendations as to how institutions can support PGRs with their wellbeing. They include investing in resources targeted to specific research career stages, integrating wellbeing and mental health support into researcher development, and providing mental health literacy training.[6]

Section 7.2 explores mental/emotional health problems among PGRs in the context of them considering leaving their postgraduate research degree programme.

5.4   Keys to improving the overall postgraduate experience

We can identify the aspects of the PGR experience covered by the survey which have the strongest connection with overall satisfaction by conducting correlation analysis. Similar correlation analysis was presented in the 2018 report,[7] but as three years have passed and the questionnaire has evolved, it is timely to conduct this analysis in 2021. The below table shows the statements which have a strong correlation with overall satisfaction, and all correlations are significant at 99%. A correlation of 0.501 or higher is generally recognised as a strong correlation, meaning that the results of the two items in question are strongly linked.

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[5] University Mental Health Charter (2021) *The framework: Support services.* Available online: universitymentalhealthcharter.org.uk/theme/support-services/

[6] Vitae (2021) *Wellbeing and mental health.* Available online: www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health

[7] Neves (2018) Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, Advance HE, p 20.

Measure	Theme	Pearson correlation value	Satisfaction with measure
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme	Research skills	.568	77%
I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale	Overall and completion	.568	77%
My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students	Responsibilities	.563	60%
My institution has worked to ensure the quality of my academic experience during the Covid-19 pandemic	Covid-19	.554	67%
The support for academic skills meets my needs (for example, support for your writing, language, subject-specific skills)	Support	.552	75%
The support for my health and wellbeing meets my needs (for example, personal tutor, student support and counselling services)	Support	.549	63%
My skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques have developed during my programme	Research skills	.530	89%
My skills in critically analysing and evaluating findings and results have developed during my programme	Research skills	.523	88%
My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher	Supervision	.522	78%
I have received the support I need from my institution in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic	Covid-19	.525	66%
My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	Supervision	.506	89%

One of the statements with the highest correlation with overall satisfaction is 'My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme'. This statement sits within the theme of research skills. Two other items from the research skills theme are also closely correlated with overall satisfaction however their scores are relatively high, whereas there is certainly room to improve satisfaction with confidence to be creative or innovative. Improving PGRs' confidence to be creative or innovative could therefore be key to improving overall satisfaction with the postgraduate experience across the sector.

Measures which have strong correlation with overall satisfaction but which received the lowest satisfaction scores are valuing and responding to PGR feedback, and providing support for health and wellbeing. These measures present the opportunity for institutions to improve scores in these areas, and any improvement in satisfaction with these statements will likely be linked to an improvement in overall satisfaction as a result. Improving PGR wellbeing is a clear priority for the sector – the previous section of this report demonstrated that PGRs call for mental health support to be offered proactively, and for institutions to work to change a culture of expecting and accepting that researchers should be stressed. Mental and emotional health problems among PGRs in the context of them considering leaving their postgraduate research degree programme are discussed in section 7.2.

In addition, two statements within the Covid-19 theme received relatively low scores, but have strong correlation with overall satisfaction. These are institutions working to ensure the quality of the academic experience during the pandemic, and providing the support PGRs needed in relation to Covid-19 pandemic. Although we currently have relatively few restrictions in relation to the pandemic in the UK, we don't yet know what the winter will bring and as we continue to live with Covid-19, key to improving overall satisfaction could be institutions supporting PGRs with any pandemic-related issues and to make PGRs aware of how they are working to ensure the quality of their academic experience. The following section of this report (section 6) will explore Covid-19 and the PGR student experience in more detail.

6. Covid-19 and the PGR Student Experience

6.1 Satisfaction with institutions' responses to the pandemic

An optional Covid-19 section comprising of three statements was added to gain understanding of how PGRs felt their institution has responded to the pandemic. It was decided that the section would be optional as some institutions mentioned during the consultations that they were collecting feedback on how they had responded to the pandemic via other mechanisms, however others felt that it would be useful to benchmark their performance against others across the sector. The large majority – 82 institutions – opted to include the Covid-19 section in PRES.

Figure 14: Agreement with statements related to Covid-19
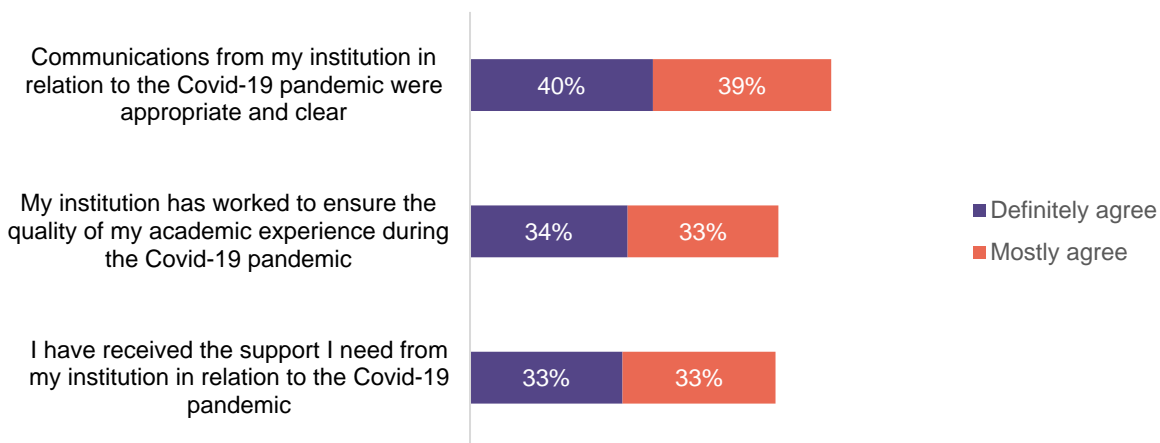
Figure 14 illustrates that while satisfaction with the appropriateness and clarity of communications about Covid-19 was high at almost 8 in 10, just two thirds of PGRs agreed that their institution has worked to ensure the quality of their academic experience (67%) and a slightly lower proportion agreed that they had received the support they needed from their institution during the pandemic. These latter two measures have strong correlation with overall satisfaction but receive relatively low scores, so as we continue to live with Covid-19, further efforts to support PGRs with any pandemic-related issues and to make PGRs aware of how they are working to ensure the quality of their academic experience could be key to improving PGR satisfaction overall.

PGR comments highlight that they would have liked more clear information about funding, extensions and access to facilities

"We get tons of confusing messages, while it would be better to get a single message with all the relevant information."

"University level communication to PGR students has been lacking. As ever the response and communication has been targeted at undergraduates."

"Sadly there was poor communication with PGRs throughout, which demonstrates the devaluing of PGRs as an integral part of the research community."

"Massive concern over funding and extensions, confusion about access."
"The financial support office have been particularly difficult to talk to during the pandemic."

"The School has given extensions for completion and yet this hasn't translated into compassionate progress assessments."

"There is very little support for PhD students in the pandemic, any extensions will mean we will not be paid"

"Not a lot of information was given in terms of attempting to gain lab access and was made difficult to gain access to continue work."

6.2 Development opportunities during the pandemic

One of the areas of the postgraduate research experience we might expect to be impacted by the pandemic is development opportunities. Figure 15 demonstrates the proportion of respondents who responded before and during the lockdown in 2020[8] and who responded in 2021, and who said they had each opportunity as part of their programme.

Figure 15: Agreement with statements related to development opportunities
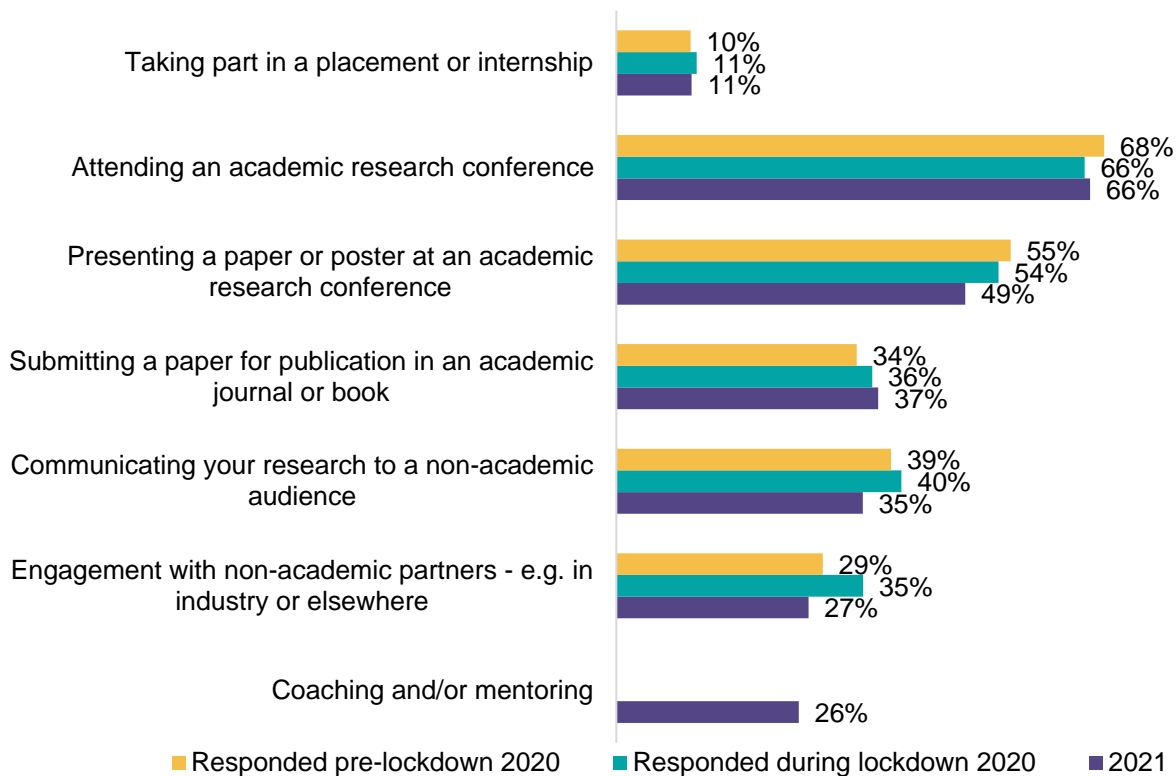
It is interesting to see that there are only slight differences in the proportions who have been able to take up some of the development opportunities, such as taking part in a placement or internship. This remains the development opportunity among PGRs with the lowest uptake (11% in 2021). As PGRs were asked which opportunities they had during their research degree, it is possible that participants who are later into their programme were answering based on the placement opportunities they had prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Another possibility is that respondents have been able to participate in placements or internships remotely.

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[8] Responses received on or before 16 March 2020 are considered 'pre-lockdown' responses and those received after 16 March 2020 are 'during lockdown' responses.

The proportion of PGRs who have attended academic research conferences is only slightly lower during lockdown in 2020 and in 2021, likely thanks to many conferences being able to be delivered remotely. However, the proportions of PGRs who said they had presented a paper or poster at an academic research conference was lower during lockdown 2020 than prior to it (54% vs 55%) and lower still in 2021 (49%). It seems that while some research conferences have been moved online and PGRs have been able to attend, there have been fewer opportunities to present in them, perhaps due to more limited schedules.

Conversely, the proportions of PGRs who have submitted a paper for publication in a journal or book increased slightly both during lockdown in 2020 (from 34% prior to lockdown in 2020 to 36%) and then again in 2021 (37%). Perhaps a lack of opportunities to communicate their research verbally has led PGRs to seek out more opportunities to communicate their research in a written format.

Following an increase in the proportion of PGRs who have engaged with non-academic partners during the lockdown last year (from 29% prior to lockdown in 2020 to 35%), the proportion fell to 27% in 2021. This indicates that attempts to connect PGRs with non-academic colleagues during the 2020 lockdown have not been sustained and that the increase in the proportion of PGRs who had developed networks and contacts between 2020 and 2021 (see section 5.2) is not driven by engagement with non-academic partners.

Coaching and/or mentoring is a new development opportunity included in PRES in 2021, following the consultations with our surveys network. Just over a quarter (26%) of PGRs have had the opportunity to do so, indicating that there is opportunity for institutions to involve more PGRs. Offering coaching and mentoring programmes to PGRs is a simple and cost-effective development opportunity for both the PGR and mentee, and often one which can be undertaken either in-person or virtually.

Comments reveal a desire for more mentoring and coaching opportunities, and that those who have had the opportunity to mentor found it rewarding

"I would like to get involved with teaching/mentoring."

"I feel my mentoring opportunities have been unclear or lacking. A mentoring scheme for PhD students may be beneficial."

"Mentoring and reverse mentoring would be helpful."

"I think a PhD mentor would be a good idea, so older PhD students mentoring new students in their first year."

"I would like to take on teaching/mentoring opportunities, specifically, assisting undergraduate and masters project students with their research projects."
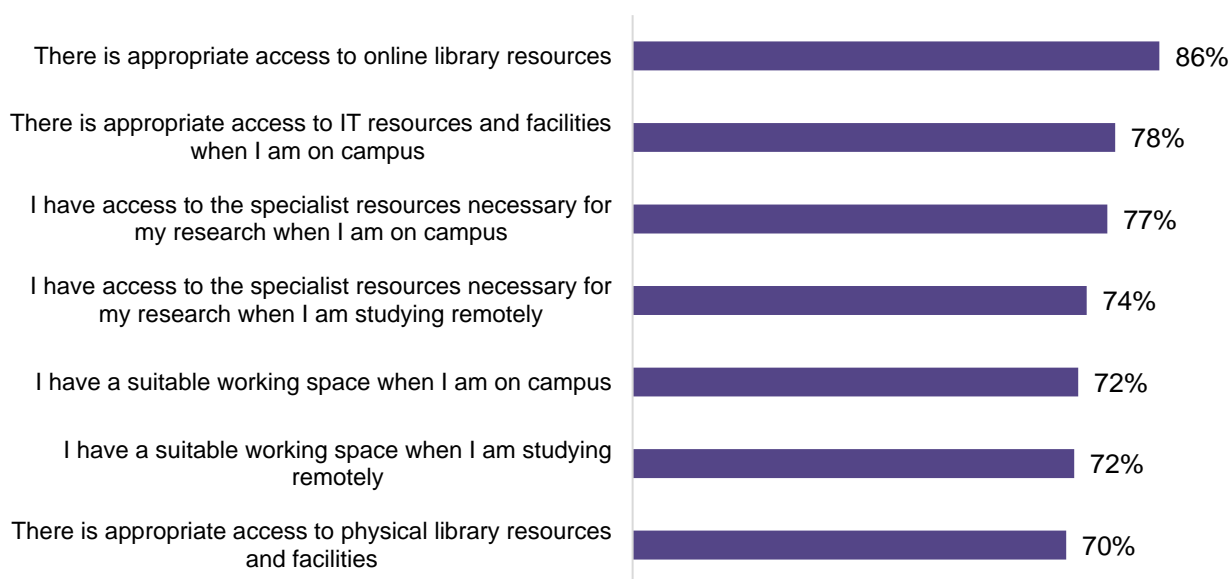
"The most rewarding thing has been mentoring more junior scientists and watching them develop into experts."

"I am pleased that I've been able to give back to the university by providing coaching and advice to students who are applying for jobs for the first time."

6.3   Access to resources during the pandemic

The resources section of PRES was amended this year to ensure it remained appropriate in the context of the pandemic, hence only 2021 data is shown in Figure 16. The new statements enable to us to distinguish between PGRs access to resources when studying on campus and when studying remotely.

Figure 16: Agreement with statements related to resources

Statement	Agreement
There is appropriate access to online library resources	86%
There is appropriate access to IT resources and facilities when I am on campus	78%
I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research when I am on campus	77%
I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research when I am studying remotely	74%
I have a suitable working space when I am on campus	72%
I have a suitable working space when I am studying remotely	72%
There is appropriate access to physical library resources and facilities	70%

A positive finding is that equal proportions of PGRs had suitable working spaces on campus and remotely, but 72% represents just under three quarters of PGRs and is therefore a score which leaves room for improvement. Institutions are limited in what they can do to provide PGRs with suitable working spaces when they are working remotely, but this data suggests that more can be done to help provide PGRs with suitable work spaces when they are on campus.

Comments highlight an issue with waiting to be allocated a permanent space. PGRs tend to prefer individual offices where possible to reduce noise and distractions. A suggestion is to make available academics' offices not in use

"I think office space is really a big issue I encounter. I had been waiting to be allocated to an office for more than a year."

"It took quite a while of moving around desks/rooms until I was found a suitable permanent space."

"Not having any office space assigned this year has had a notable impact on the amount of work I get done and limits the effectiveness of my work on campus."

"Many academics' offices are left empty when they could be used by PGRs who cannot work from home due to mental health reasons or do not have access to home offices."

"Large, open plan spaces are not suitable for research environments – they are noisy and distracting. Smaller, private spaces and office rooms would be preferable to one large, open plan space."

"It would be helpful to stress that office spaces are only for work rather than socialisation as some students may be easily distracted/disturbed by the noise."

PGRs reported higher satisfaction with access to online library resources (86%) than access to physical library resources and facilities (70%), which is unsurprising given that most PGRs, like much of society, were working remotely during the PRES fieldwork period. That satisfaction with access to online library resources is so high is encouraging and a testament to how well participating institutions and indeed the sector has adapted to make resources available online during the pandemic.

Conversely, access to specialist resources was better on campus (77%) than remotely (74%). This is not an entirely surprising finding, as there may be limits to what can be made accessible remotely – for example, in the case of lab equipment or performing studios. However, this data reminds us of the importance of making as much as possible available online/remotely or ensuring that PGRs can access them safely on campus.

Comments reveal that some PGRs are unaware of the resources available to them, and that some have to pay for specialist resources not available via their institution

"While working remotely, not much has been said about resources available. I feel left in the dark."

"Regarding resources, access to physical equipment is not the easiest. To start with, there is no updated list of existing equipment on campus, and even if there is, it is not easy for someone to get access to it."

"There are not many digital resources available in my area of research, so it is not possible for me to access primary resources at the moment due to the Covid restrictions."

"Access to the physical library obviously reduced due to Covid. More online books on research methodology would be good."

"Very few resources that I need are held by the library and I have to request everything that I need individually. Often I pay for my own access to resources. Many times my requests have been turned down because there is insufficient awareness of my study area."

"Not being able to access qualitative and quantitative research software on University computers because studying remotely means needing to buy it, and to have hardware capable of running it. I know this has meant an extra cost to pay for me and others on my course."

6.4 Responsibilities

Last year, responsibilities was the area with the largest difference in satisfaction among PGRs who responded prior to, and during, the lockdown – 4% more were satisfied with it during the lockdown compared with earlier respondents.

Figure 17: Agreement with each element within the theme of Responsibilities
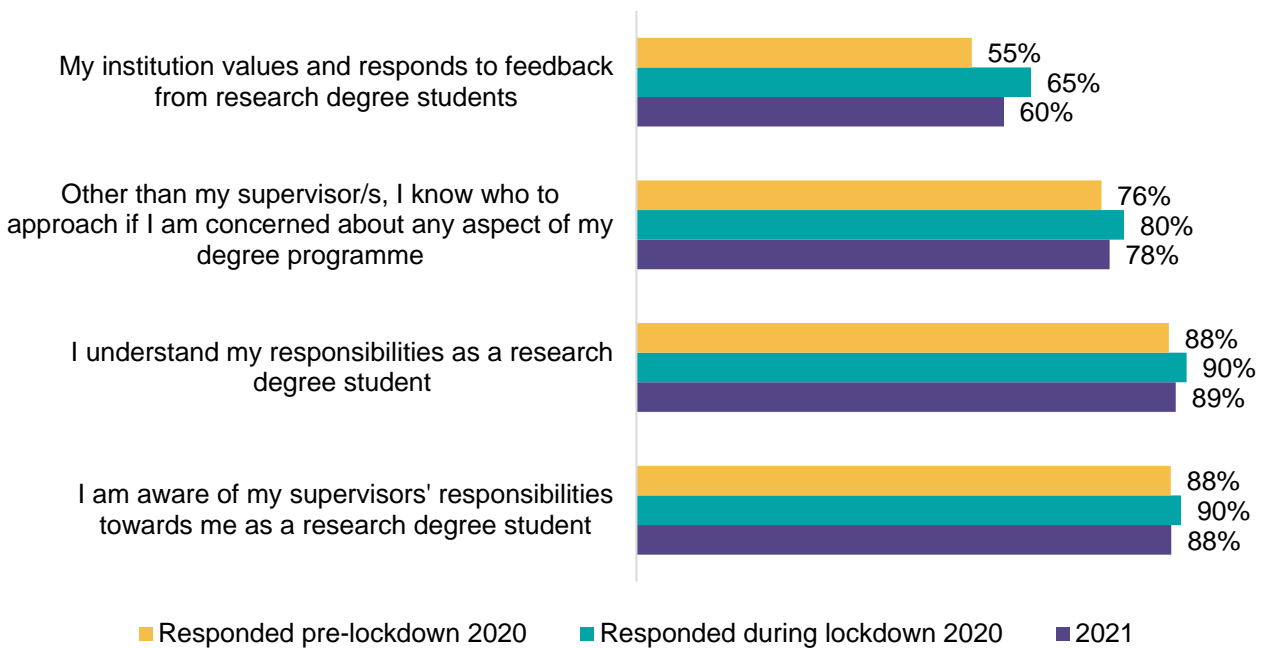
The scores received in 2021 for each element within the responsibilities theme fall between the score received prior to lockdown in 2020 and the higher score received during the 2020 lockdown, with the exception of awareness of supervisors' responsibilities towards PGRs which is in line with the pre-lockdown score (both 88%).

The element which saw the largest improvement in the scores received by PGRs responding during the lockdown in 2020 and those responding prior to it was institutions valuing and responding to feedback from research degree students, and it was hoped that this improvement could be maintained, especially as this statement is typically one of the lowest-scoring statements but is closely correlated with overall satisfaction. Unfortunately, this is not the case – the 2021 score of 60% is exactly in between the score received prior to the 2020 lockdown (55%) and during it (65%). However, this should not be altogether too discouraging, as this 2021 score is in line with the 2018 score and slightly higher than the one received in 2019 (59%).

Figure 18: Agreement that institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students, over time
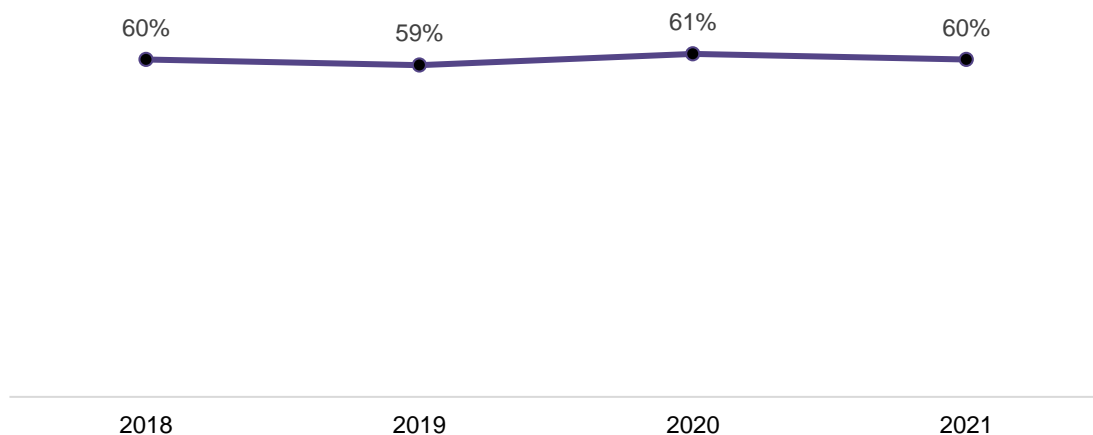
A possibility is that the higher score last year can be attributed to the pulse surveys and other attempts to gather feedback on how PGRs were feeling during the pandemic early after the lockdown, which have not been maintained as we have established and settled into the new ways of working. That PGRs appreciated these feedback opportunities was reflected in the scores during lockdown 2020, and institutions can look to replicate these to continue to show PGRs that they are keen to hear and learn from their feedback.

6.5 Supervision

In 2020, satisfaction with the area of supervision was higher among those who responded during the lockdown compared to those who responded prior to it (88% vs 85%).

Figure 19: Agreement with statements relating to teaching opportunities among PGRs responding before and during lockdown
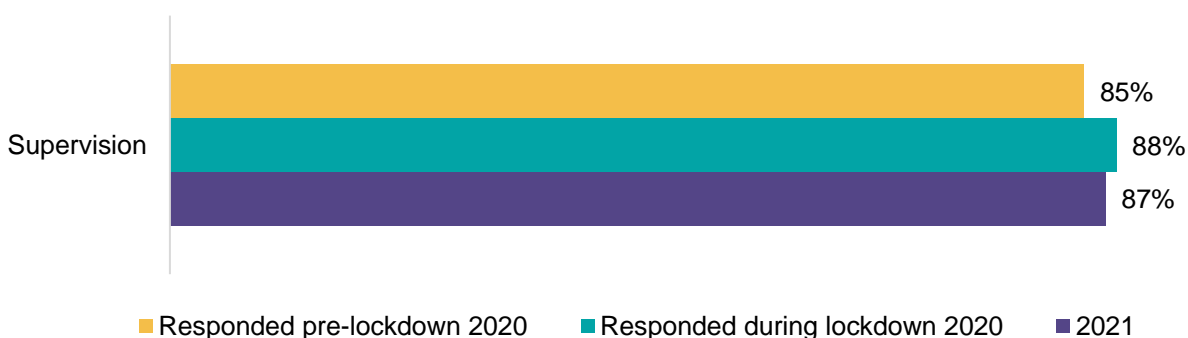
Encouragingly, the 2021 score of 87% is close to the higher score received during the 2020 lockdown. Confidence in supervisors' skills and subject knowledge has continued to increase slightly, 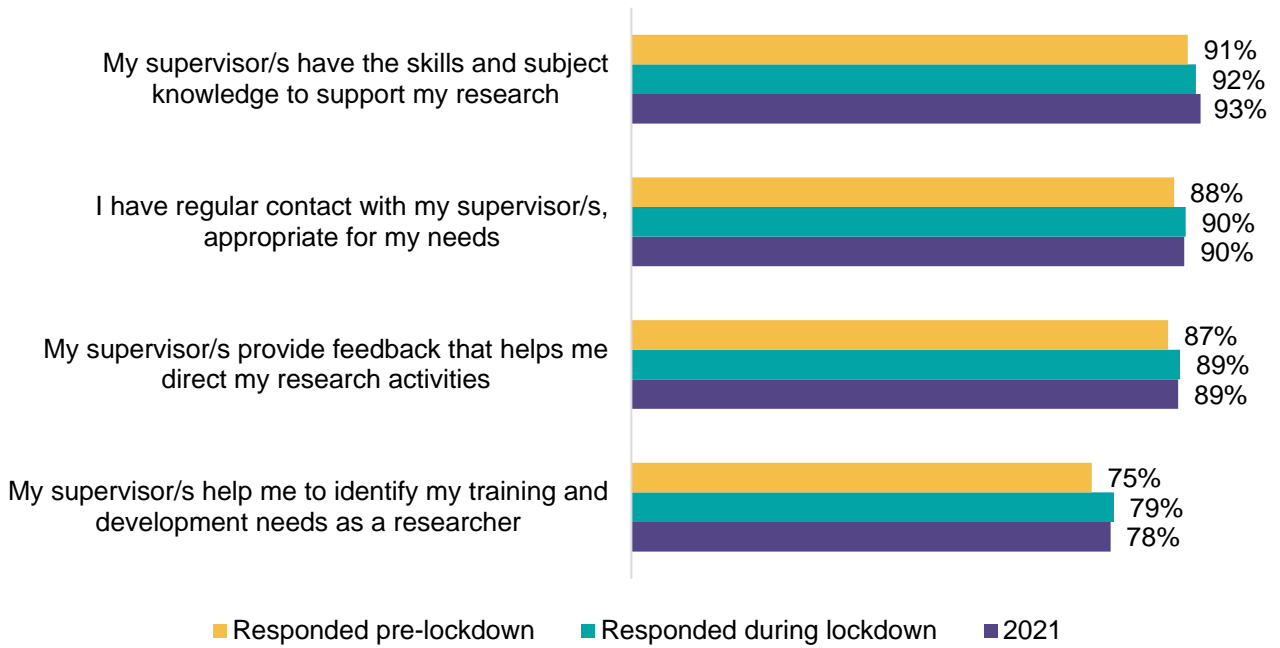however the scores for all other statements in 2021 fall in line with, or in between those received during the 2020 lockdown and those received prior to it in 2020.

Figure 20: Satisfaction with each element within the theme of Supervision

Bar chart showing satisfaction scores:

Statement	Responded pre-lockdown	Responded during lockdown	2021
My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research	91%	92%	93%
I have regular contact with my supervisor/s, appropriate for my needs	88%	90%	90%
My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	87%	89%	89%
My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher	75%	79%	78%

Comments indicate mixed experiences with supervisors. While many are very supportive, others are less communicative

"My supervisor has been wonderful throughout this whole DPhil process, but never more so than in the last year. She has made extra time for regular contact and support."

"I have excellent supervisors who go the extra mile to supporting me. They are established professionals and scholars who share my passion and interest."

"My supervisor is not interested in my professional development and progress through my PhD."

"My current supervisor is great, but I did have to change supervisors due to my old supervisor being extremely unsupportive."
"Regular contact has been harder given the current circumstances with home schooling etc."

"The frequency of [sic] supervision meetings has dropped significantly since the start of the pandemic. For example, I have only managed two meetings this term."

"They are not very aware of the tasks I need to complete at a University level (such as registering, getting building access and deadlines for things) which is often annoying but they are very supportive."

"Even good PhD supervisors can't make up for missing day-to-day supervision from postdocs in the lab. If the lab has numerous PhDs, but only one or two postdocs, what could be a normal level of supervision from the actual supervisor just isn't enough."

These comments about support from supervisors echo findings by the QAA (The Quality Assurance Agency), which recognise that the upsurge in student anxiety during and due to the pandemic has brought a pastoral element to the role of supervisors, and that some supervisors have adapted to this better than others.[9] It recommends new and refresher training to ensure supervisors are familiar with the pastoral elements of their role.

6.6   Impact on confidence to complete programme on time

An area in which PGRs who responded during the 2020 lockdown were less positive than those who responded during the lockdown was confidence to complete the programme within the institution's expected timescale.

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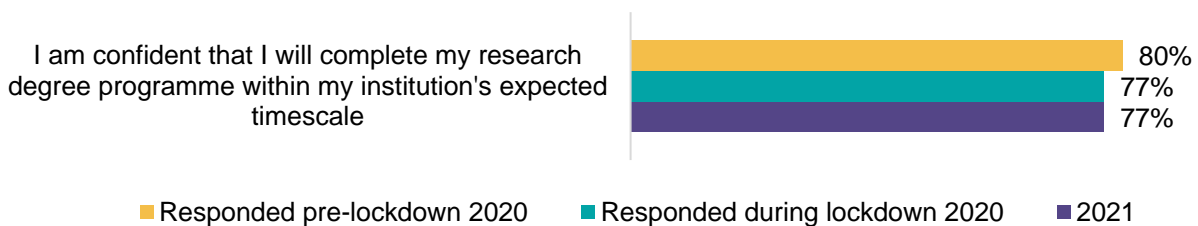

Figure 21 shows that 2020 respondents were less likely to expect to complete their programme on time (77%) than those who responded prior to the lockdown (80%). This difference was smaller than we might have expected, perhaps because restrictions on other parts of PGRs' lives, such as paid work and seeing family and friends, may have given them more time to focus on their research.

In 2021, the proportion of those who felt confident that they will complete their research degree programme within their institution's expected time frame was in line with that. This isn't surprising, as the pandemic has continued to impact PGRs' studies in 2021. It is promising that the proportion of PGRs concerned about completing their programme on time has not been impacted further, however this data does highlight the importance of putting support in place for those whose timescales are impacted.

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[9] QAA (2021) *Learning from the experience of postgraduate research students and their supervisors during COVID-19.* Available online: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/learning-from-the-experience-of-postgraduate-research-students-and-their-supervisors-during-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=a72ed781_4

Many PGRs have been able to negotiate extensions, however these frequently do not equate to the amount of time lost, and are often not fully funded

"I do not think that a 12 week paid extension is justified given that I have experienced over a year of disruption."

"I had to insist regarding an extension despite missing over 6 months of lab work. This not only set back my project but lead to previous work having to be discarded due to working with living biological samples. I managed to get a 6 week extension, which I do not feel addresses the time lost."

"I received only a 3 month extension – I am grateful for it but I feel that I lost more than 3 months of time."

"Institution was kind enough to provide deadline extension due to Covid-19 but was not able to extend funding for the same period (only extended funding for a portion of the extended deadline). This is causing additional financial stress due to the need to support dependents."

"We've been told 20 different things about extensions from 20 different people, and the process has been deliberately designed to ensure we do not get the money."

"Ambiguity around funded extensions has been very stressful and anxiety provoking."

7. Retention

7.1 Reasons for considering leaving

Following an increase in the proportion of PGRs who had considered leaving their postgraduate research degree programme in 2020, there was a reassuring drop in this figure in 2021, with 25.8% reporting that they have considered leaving.

Figure 22: Proportion of PGRs who considered leaving their course (2019–2021)
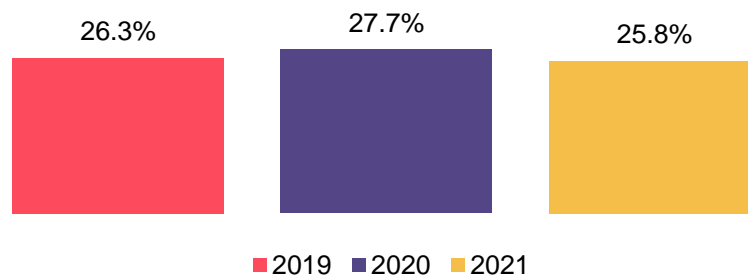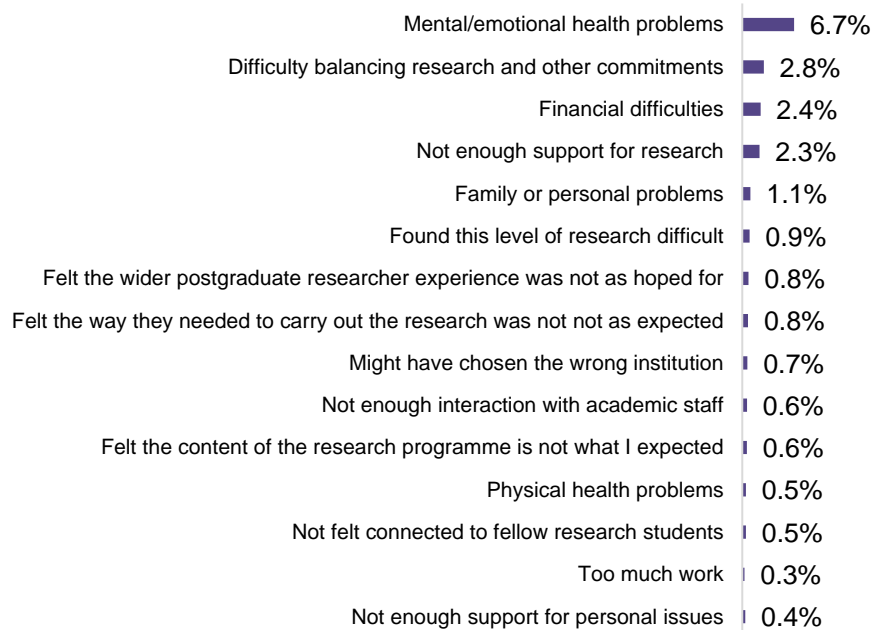

It is interesting that in 2020, lower proportions of PGRs who responded during the lockdown had considered leaving compared with those who responded prior to it (25.8% vs 30.8%). The 2021 proportion of 25.8% is in line with that among those who responded during lockdown in 2020, indicating a connection between the restrictions and a lower proportion of PGRs considering leaving. The need to study from home may have eased issues with other commitments such as caring responsibilities, reduced costs such as money spent on commuting, and helped to prevent other problems which may have caused PGRs to consider leaving their programme.

7.2 Reasons for considering leaving

The question on why PGRs had considered leaving was included again in 2021, after being removed in 2020, following feedback that it was useful and with additional answer options following cognitive testing. The new answer options are family or personal problems, physical health problems and mental/emotional health problems. They replace the formerly offered answer option of family, health or personal problems.

Figure 23: Main (or most recent) reason for considering leaving

Reason	Percentage
Mental/emotional health problems	6.7%
Difficulty balancing research and other commitments	2.8%
Financial difficulties	2.4%
Not enough support for research	2.3%
Family or personal problems	1.1%
Found this level of research difficult	0.9%
Felt the wider postgraduate researcher experience was not as hoped for	0.8%
Felt the way they needed to carry out the research was not not as expected	0.8%
Might have chosen the wrong institution	0.7%
Not enough interaction with academic staff	0.6%
Felt the content of the research programme is not what I expected	0.6%
Physical health problems	0.5%
Not felt connected to fellow research students	0.5%
Too much work	0.3%
Not enough support for personal issues	0.4%

Note that while this question was only asked of those who said they had considered leaving, the percentages shown in Figure 23 were calculated using all PGRs as a base, in order to not overstate the issues highlighted.

Mental or emotional health problems were the most frequently given reason for considering leaving a postgraduate research degree, cited by 6.7% of PGRs (27.4% of those who had considered leaving). This finding mirrors that from the Student Academic Engagement Survey, which found that mental health issues are the most common reason for undergraduate students to consider leaving their degrees.[10]

This is particularly concerning as in section 5.3, analysis of the new statements related to support revealed that health and wellbeing support was the area in which PGRs felt least supported by their institution, with fewer than two thirds agreeing that the support for their health and wellbeing meets their needs.

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[10] Neves, J and Hewitt,R (2021), *Student Academic Experience Survey 2021,* p 24. Available at: s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Adv_SAES_2021_FINAL_1624460313.pdf

Figure 24: Proportion considered leaving by level of agreement that support for health and wellbeing meets their needs

Definitely agree — 14.6%
Mostly agree — 22.2%
Neither agree nor disagree — 30.2%
Mostly disagree — 48.1%
Definitely disagree — 60.4%

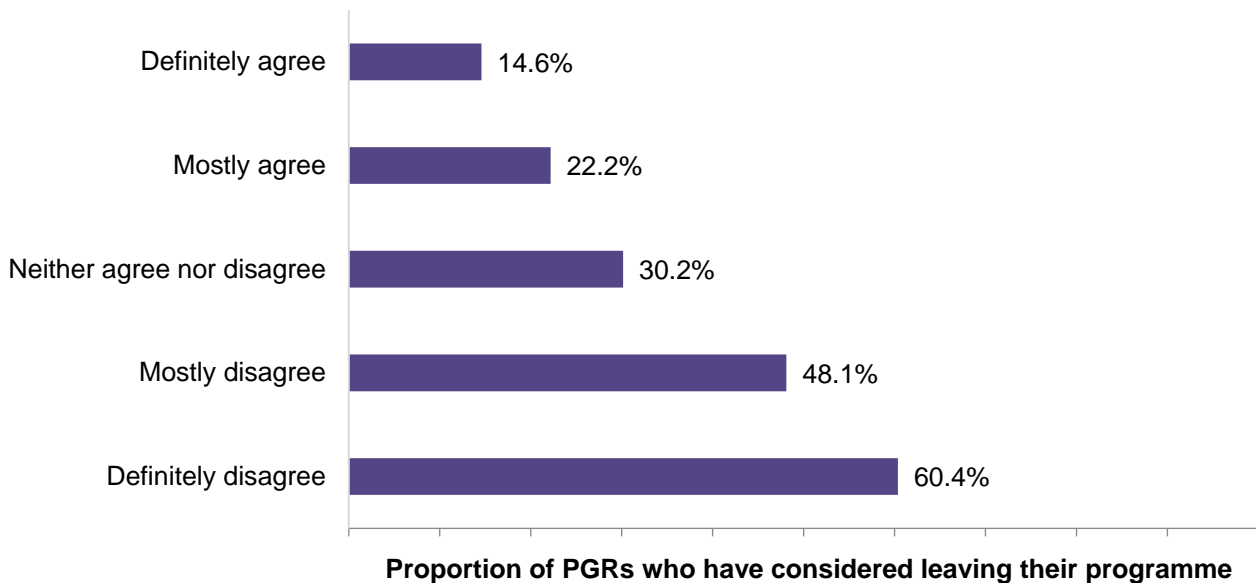**Proportion of PGRs who have considered leaving their programme**

Figure 24 shows that the more satisfied a PGR is with the level of support for their health and wellbeing, the less likely they are to have considered leaving their research degree programme. Of the PGRs who definitely agreed that their institution's support for their health and wellbeing meets their needs, only 14.6% had considered leaving. At the other end of the scale, 60.4% of PGRs who definitely disagreed with this statement had considered leaving their programme. Improving support for health and wellbeing, for example by offering more personal tutor and student support and better access to counselling services, could therefore be key to improving PGR wellbeing and retention, as well as a range of other improvements in the PGR experience.

8. Conclusions

This report has highlighted that overall satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience has fallen slightly in 2021 to 79%, the lowest level since PRES began. That being said, this is a fall of only 1% since 2020, and that almost 8 in 10 PGRs are satisfied represents a high level of overall satisfaction across the sector.

Professional development is the element of the postgraduate research experience which has seen the largest decrease in satisfaction this year. In particular, fewer PGRs have felt able to develop contacts or professional networks or to manage their own professional development, and call for more support from supervisors and more tailored careers support for post PhD careers in order to enable them to do so.

Due to pandemic-related restrictions in place during the PRES fieldwork period, many PGRs were studying remotely, so it is encouraging that over 8 in 10 PGRs have felt adequately supported in using IT and accessing resources. However, fewer (75%) PGRs felt that their institution's support for academic skills meets their needs, and only 63% agreed that the support for health and wellbeing meets their needs.

Support for mental health and wellbeing is a clear priority for the sector, as it has strong correlation with overall satisfaction and is also closely linked to considering leaving. While it is encouraging that the proportion of PGRs who have considered leaving has fallen this year, the top reason for considering leaving was mental health problems, and those who agreed their institution's support for their health and wellbeing met their needs were less likely to have considered leaving than those who disagreed. Improving support for PGR wellbeing could therefore be the key to improving overall satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience and helping the sector to see a reduction in those leaving their programmes. Vitae has a range of recommendations as to how institutions can support PGRs with their wellbeing, including investing in resources targeted to specific research career stages, and integrating wellbeing and mental health support into researcher development.

The Covid-19 pandemic has continued to have an impact on the postgraduate research experience in 2021, and section 6 has explored the impact it has had. Satisfaction with the appropriateness and clarity of communications around Covid-19 was high at almost 8 in 10, but only two thirds of PGRs agreed that they received the support they needed from their institution during the pandemic, or that their institution had worked to ensure the quality of their academic experience. These latter two measures are strongly correlated with overall satisfaction, so as we continue to live with Covid-19, improving support for pandemic-related issues and making PGRs aware of how their institutions are working to ensure the quality of their academic experience could have a positive impact on their satisfaction with the postgraduate research experience.

In 2020, there were higher levels of satisfaction with certain areas of the postgraduate research experience among PGRs who responded during the lockdown, compared with those who responded prior to it, however many of these improvements have unfortunately not been maintained in 2021. Feeling that their institution values and responds to their feedback is one of the areas which typically receives the lowest scores from PGRs, but has strong correlation with overall satisfaction. PGRs who responded during the lockdown last year gave much improved scores for this element, however this improvement was not upheld in 2021. Learning from, and sustaining, the measures institutions put in place to capture and act upon the PGR student voice immediately after the beginning of the pandemic could be key to improving overall satisfaction levels.

As we might expect, the pandemic's negative impact on PGRs' confidence to complete their programme on time has been maintained during 2021, highlighting the importance of putting support in place for those whose timescales are impacted.

8.1   Appendix 1: Respondent profile

Category	PRES 2019	PRES 2020	PRES 2021
Gender			
Women	53%	54%	54%
Men	47%	45%	45%
In another way (answer options added in 2020)		1%	1%
Age			
30 and under	59%	53%	56%
31 and over	41%	47%	43%
Disability			
Reported disability	8%	9%	9%
No reported disability	88%	87%	87%
Prefer not to say	4%	4%	4%
Ethnicity			
White	82%	85%	81%
Black	3%	3%	4%
Asian (including Chinese)	8%	6%	8%
Mixed and Other	7%	6%	7%
Domicile			
UK	63%	62%	60%
EU	9%	10%	4%
Non-EU	28%	28%	36%
Mode			
Full time	82%	77%	80%
Part time	18%	23%	20%

Note: Differences of +/-3% or more versus 2020 are bold in the 2021 sample

8.2 Appendix 2: Participating institutions

Aston University	The Open University
Bangor University	The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Birkbeck, University of London	Ulster University
Bournemouth University	University College London
Buckinghamshire New University	University of Bath
Canterbury Christ Church University	University of Birmingham
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Bolton
Cardiff University	University of Brighton
City, University of London	University of Bristol
Coventry University	University of Buckingham
Cranfield University	University of Chester
De Montfort University	University of Cumbria
Durham University	University of Dundee
Edinburgh Napier University	University of East Anglia
Falmouth University	University of East London
Goldsmiths, University of London	University of Edinburgh
Harper Adams University	University of Exeter
Heriot-Watt University	University of Greenwich
Imperial College London	University of Hertfordshire
Institute of Cancer Research	University of Huddersfield
Keele University	University of Hull
King's College London	University of Leeds/ Leeds Business School
Kingston University	University of Lincoln
Lancaster University	University of Liverpool
Leeds Beckett University	University of London (School of Advanced Study)
Leeds Trinity University	University of Manchester
Liverpool John Moores University	University of Nottingham
London Metropolitan University	University of Oxford
London School of Economics	University of Plymouth
London South Bank University	University of Portsmouth
Loughborough University	University of Roehampton
Manchester Metropolitan University	University of South Wales
Middlesex University	University of St Andrews
MRC Unit Gambia	University of Stirling
Newcastle University	University of Strathclyde
Nottingham Trent University	University of Surrey
Oxford Brookes University	University of Sussex

Queen Mary, University of London	University of the Arts, London
Royal College of Art	University of the West of England
Royal Holloway, University of London	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Royal Northern College of Music	University of Warwick
Royal Veterinary College	University of West London
Sheffield Hallam University	University of Westminster
SOAS, University of London	University of Wolverhampton
St George's, University of London	University of Worcester
St Mary's University, Twickenham	University of York
Staffordshire University	York St John University

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