Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017

Experiences and personal outlook of postgraduate researchers

Dr Claire Slight

Contents

Foreword

It is extremely encouraging to read that 82% of postgraduate research students (PGRs) are satisfied with their programmes. It is a very clear message of confidence in the UK postgraduate research offer overall, and a strong endorsement for prospective PGRs of the positive experience they are likely to enjoy.

PGRs are a vital group: they are key contributors to research activity and its impact, and they are significant players in the knowledge economy. This means insights and feedback about their experience and wellbeing recorded in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) are extremely important, with potentially far-reaching implications beyond their own institution.

New questions in the survey about well-being serve to highlight an important finding: that those PGRs with clear personal development plans (PDRs) are more likely to have a better personal outlook and be less likely to consider leaving than PGRs without such a plan. This form of relatively 'resource-light' engagement would appear to offer a disproportionately positive return on investment.

Participating in PRES helps institutions make evidence-informed improvements to the PGR experience. The number of institutions participating in the survey this year – once again well over 100 - highlights the sector's commitment and appetite to improve and finesse their offer. The quest for improvement does not have an end-state; it is both restless and relentless. And so to help paint an even richer picture, we have decided to bring this survey into line with our other surveys and run it on an annual basis, starting next year.

Professor Stephanie Marshall

Chief Executive

Executive summary

- The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2017 was undertaken between 1 February and 18 May 2017, with institutions able to choose their own survey window within this period for the first time. One hundred and seventeen institutions ran the survey, and received 57,689 responses, resulting in a response rate of 46%. This represents around 53% of the UK's postgraduate research (PGR) student population (see p. 6).

- Postgraduate research students continue to have positive experiences, with 82% of respondents agreeing that they are satisfied with their programme overall. This has remained steady across the past three survey cycles.

- All the aggregate scores across the main survey scales reveal a relationship with overall satisfaction and confidence to finish on time, showing the ways in which improvement within any of the scales is likely to positively impact upon overall satisfaction.

- As in past survey cycles, postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are most positive about the supervision they receive and research skills developed.

- PGRs are least positive about the research culture. However, this has improved over the past three survey cycles, particularly for the lowest scored item: "I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department".

- PGRs across all disciplines highlight an issue around getting involved in the wider research community. This is particularly challenging for part-time students.

- Students' experience of resources and research culture differs across disciplines highlighting variances between culture and practices between subject areas. Creative Arts and Design struggle with low scores for having suitable working spaces, discussing research with other research students and research ambience stimulating work, while Biological Sciences score in the three highest discipline areas for each of the same items.

  Recommendation: in looking to enhance the PGR experience, institutions may need to explore more discipline-specific approaches in order to attempt to ensure PGRs have equal access to appropriate resources and a motivating research culture.

- PGRs who are planning careers within higher education are most satisfied with their overall experience and the perceived value of their research degree programme.

- PGRs' satisfaction with specific aspects of their experience including research ambience, institutions valuing feedback and work–life balance decreases over time. However, respondents are more positive about their skills development as they progress through their years of study.

    Recommendation: further exploration is needed into the reasons why perceptions of certain aspects of the programmes are less likely to be scored positively as PGRs progress through their years of study.

- Those PGRs who have a development plan and those who have received training to develop research skills are less likely to have considered leaving or suspending their courses than those who have not agreed a plan or received training. Those who had taken part in these opportunities also had a more positive personal outlook than those who had not.

    Recommendation: institutions who work to champion their PGRs to develop autonomy, skills, communities and realistic goals will be well placed to promote positive postgraduate research experiences.

- Generally, there was little relationship seen between demographics and their student experience, a positive finding which suggests an inclusive culture in which students can be fully engaged.

- The new personal outlook section within the survey shows:

    o high numbers of PGRs feel their programme is worthwhile (85%), and that they are satisfied with their life nowadays (74%);

    o lower numbers of PGRs report a positive work–life balance (61%). Those with a more positive work–life balance are more likely to be satisfied with their programme and confident to finish on time;

    o with regards to personal outlook, there are some vulnerable groups, in particular those who state they have:

        ▪ a mental health condition are less likely to have a positive personal outlook;

        ▪ a specific learning difficulty are less likely to be satisfied with their work–life balance;

- a disability are more likely to be considering leaving or suspending their course.

Recommendation: there is a need to explore current widening participation procedures and processes for PGRs both before and during their programme to ensure they feel supported to manage their studies and to promote positive personal outlooks throughout.

Recommendation: in looking to enhance the PGR experience, supporting communities, signposting pastoral support, and encouraging a healthy work–life balance and culture may all promote positive changes.

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy's (HEA's) Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is now in its tenth year, having initially piloted in 2007. The survey has grown in terms of participants since its initial launch and is now well-embedded within the UK as a key method for exploring postgraduate research students' experiences within the context of the sector.

PRES has been designed to aid and support enhancement, through providing key information to support strategic decisions and target areas for improvement. Each participating institution receives their own institutional-level results, which are confidential and not used in league tables. In this way, the PRES results provide institutions with a key starting point for exploring where and how the postgraduate research experience may be improved, and can be used alongside other sources of data in order to gain a fuller picture. Each participating institution is able to compare their own results against benchmarking groups in order to see how their results compare. In 2017, the benchmarking groups were: Sector, Million+, Russell Group, Universities Alliance, Cathedrals Group, Guild HE, Small and Specialist, Pre-92, Post-92, Scottish, Welsh, and London.

The survey was redesigned in 2013 in order to streamline and align it more closely with Vitae's Researcher Development Framework (RDF). For 2017 the HEA consulted on the future of PRES,[1] including on the survey window, developing a module more specifically related to experiences of doctoral training and relevance to career, developing a module to understand engagement, improved relevance for PGRs studying at multiple institutions and publication of data. Through this consultation the following recommendations from stakeholders were adopted for 2017:

- group averages and quartiles are now able to be published, while individual institutional results remain confidential;

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[1] More details of the PRES consultation are available at:
https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/pres_consultation_2017_and_beyond_-_consultation_results_final.pdf

- institutions can now open and close PRES within a flexible survey window between 1 February and mid-May;

- PRES will now be available to be run by institutions on an annual basis.

In addition to these changes, some further developments were made to the survey itself, with an aim to ensure its continued relevance to the sector:

- simplified data protection statements and added signposting to appropriate pastoral support;

- a new optional personal outlook section was added to investigate issues related to well-being;

- the wording of certain demographic questions was changed to better reflect professional doctorates.

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

- supervision;
- responsibilities;
- resources;
- research skills;
- research culture;
- professional development;
- progress and assessment.

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

In 2017, the survey window opened from 1 February to 18 May. Institutions were able to choose when they wished to run the survey within this window, as long as the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.[2]

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[2] For a full copy of the 2017 PRES questions please contact: surveys@heacademy.ac.uk

Participation

In PRES 2017, 57,689 respondents took part from across 117 institutions. Of those who were invited to participate, **46%** responded, the highest response rate to PRES since its inception in 2007 (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: PRES Participation and respondents
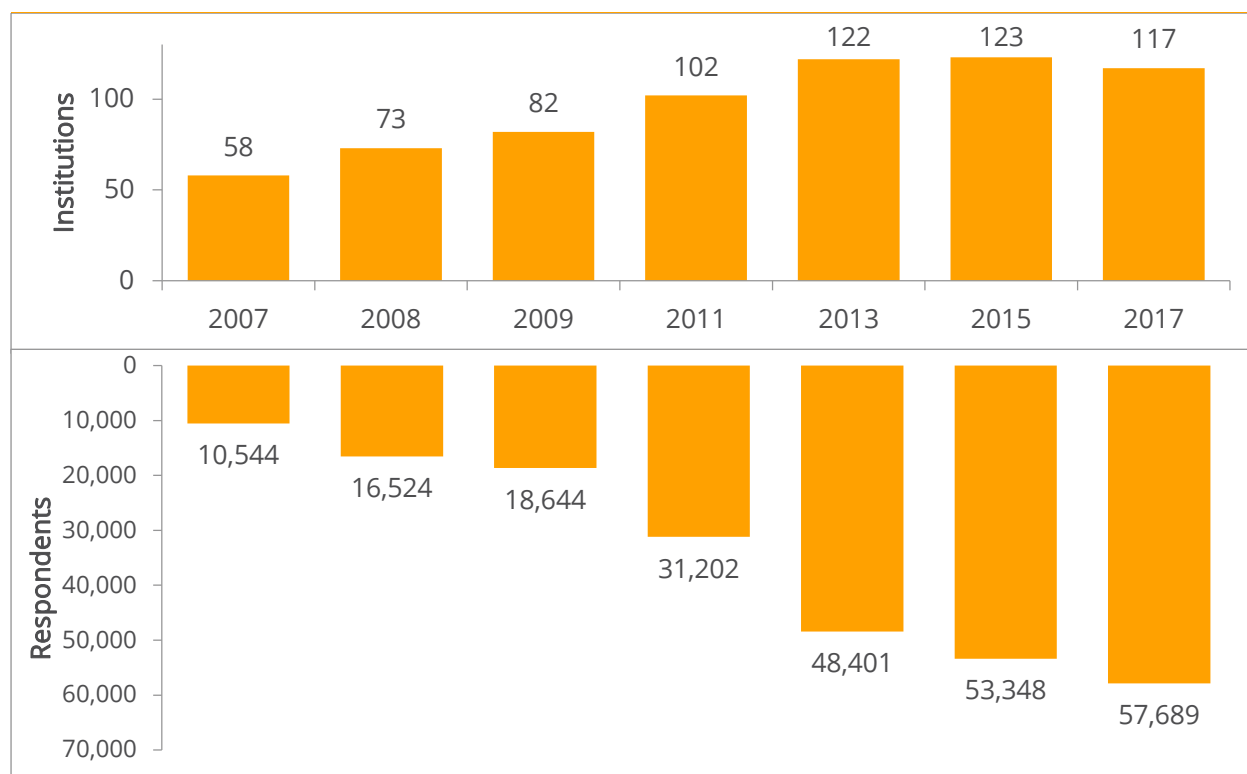
Demographics

Institutions volunteer to take part in the survey, and then ask their PGRs to take part. A key potential disadvantage of such a sampling method is the potential for bias caused by the sample not representing the overall population.

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[3] HESA 2015-16 student record Table C: Postgraduate students by level of study, mode of study, sex and domicile at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/detailed-statistics.

Therefore, where possible, the demographic spread of respondents from PRES 2017 has been compared to the latest HESA 2015-16 statistics on postgraduate research students.[4] This comparison enables an exploration of the extent to which the survey sample is representative of the overall postgraduate research population. Differences of more than 3% are highlighted in bold.

Table 1: PRES 2017 cohort and HESA 2015-16 data

	PRES 2017	HESA 2015-16
Gender		
Male	**47.3%**	**52.2%**
Female	49.5%	47.8%
Other (prefer not to say)	**3.2%[5]**	0.0%
Full-time or part-time		
Full-time	**80.6%**	**74.8%**
Part-time	**19.4%**	**25.2%**
Residence		
UK	**64.9%**	**57.1%**
Other EU	**8.6%**	**13.3%**
Non-EU	**26.5%**	**29.6%**
Disability		
Yes	7.7%	7.6%
No	89.7%	92.4%
Prefer not to say	2.6%	-
Disability breakdown		
A long-standing illness or health condition	1.4%	1.1%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	0.6%	0.4%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	0.2%	0.2%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	0.3%	0.2%
Mental health condition	3.3%	1.2%
Social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder	0.5%	0.2%
Specific learning difficulty	2.8%	2.7%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	0.9%	0.9%
Ethnicity detailed – UK domiciled only		
White	**83.5%**	**80.3%**
Black	2.6%	3.4%
Asian (including Chinese)	7.5%	7.7%

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[4] HESA Student Record [2015-16]. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information obtained from Heidi Plus.

5 This figure includes 2.9% of respondents who states they would prefer not to say.

Other (including mixed)	6.4%	5.2%
Type of institution		
Post-92 total	18.4%	20.5%
Pre-92 member	79.4%	79.0%
Russell Group	**58.0%**	**54.5%**
Guild HE	0.8%	0.9%
Million Plus	2.5%	4.9%
Universities Alliance	9.1%	9.7%

Generally, the PRES sample is broadly representative of the overall postgraduate researcher population. However, there are some differences, including a lower proportion of males and part-time students as has been seen in previous survey cycles.

Headline results

Throughout the report, unless otherwise stated, "% agree" is a sum of the percentage who selected "mostly agree" or "definitely agree" and "% disagree" is a sum of the percentage who selected "mostly disagree" or "definitely disagree". Where both agree and disagree are shown, percentages may not add up to 100% in graphs, as "prefer not to say" responses are not included. Further, where correlations and cross tabulations are discussed, these represent a relationship between factors rather than necessarily causation.

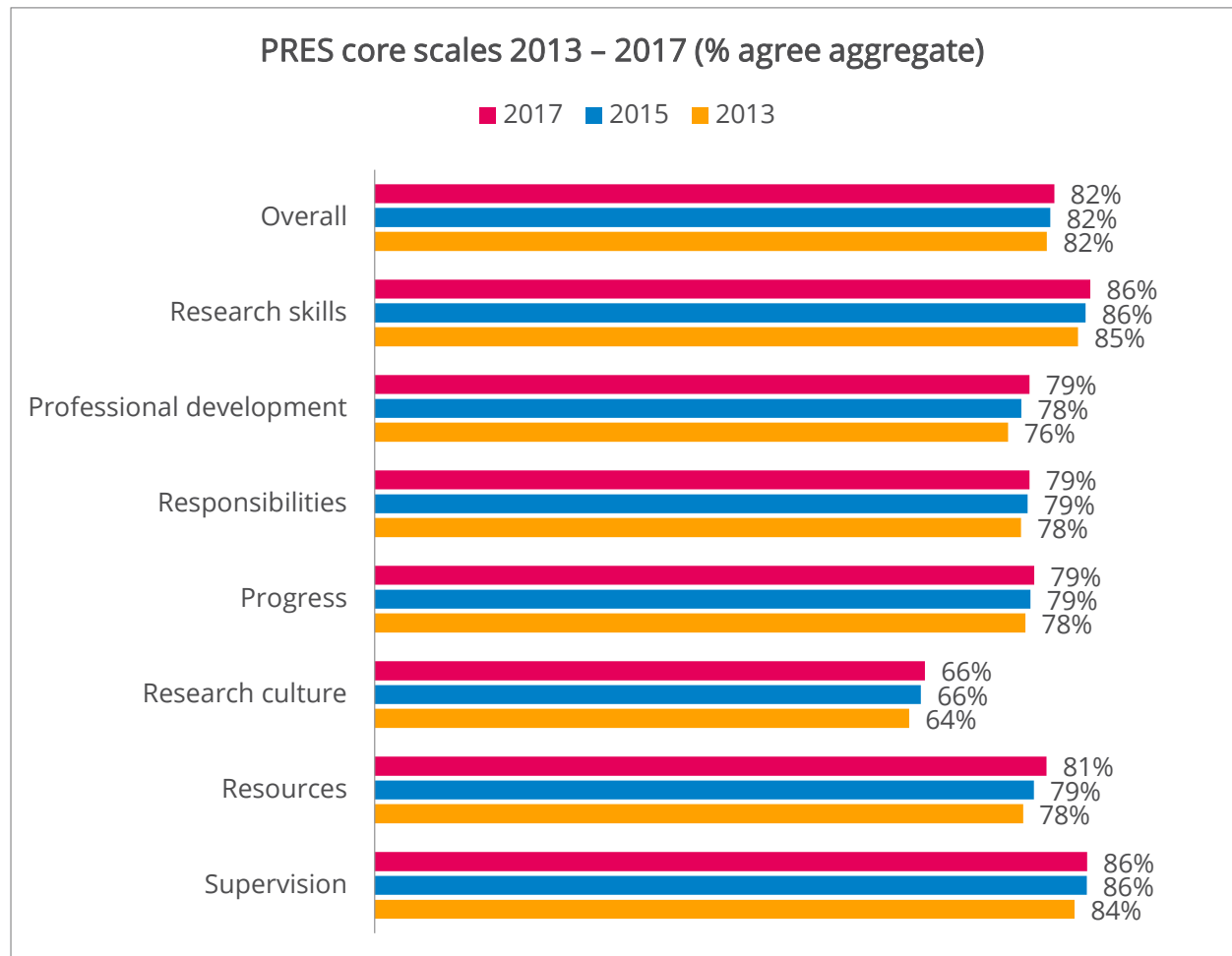**Figure 2: Aggregate scores across main PRES scales**
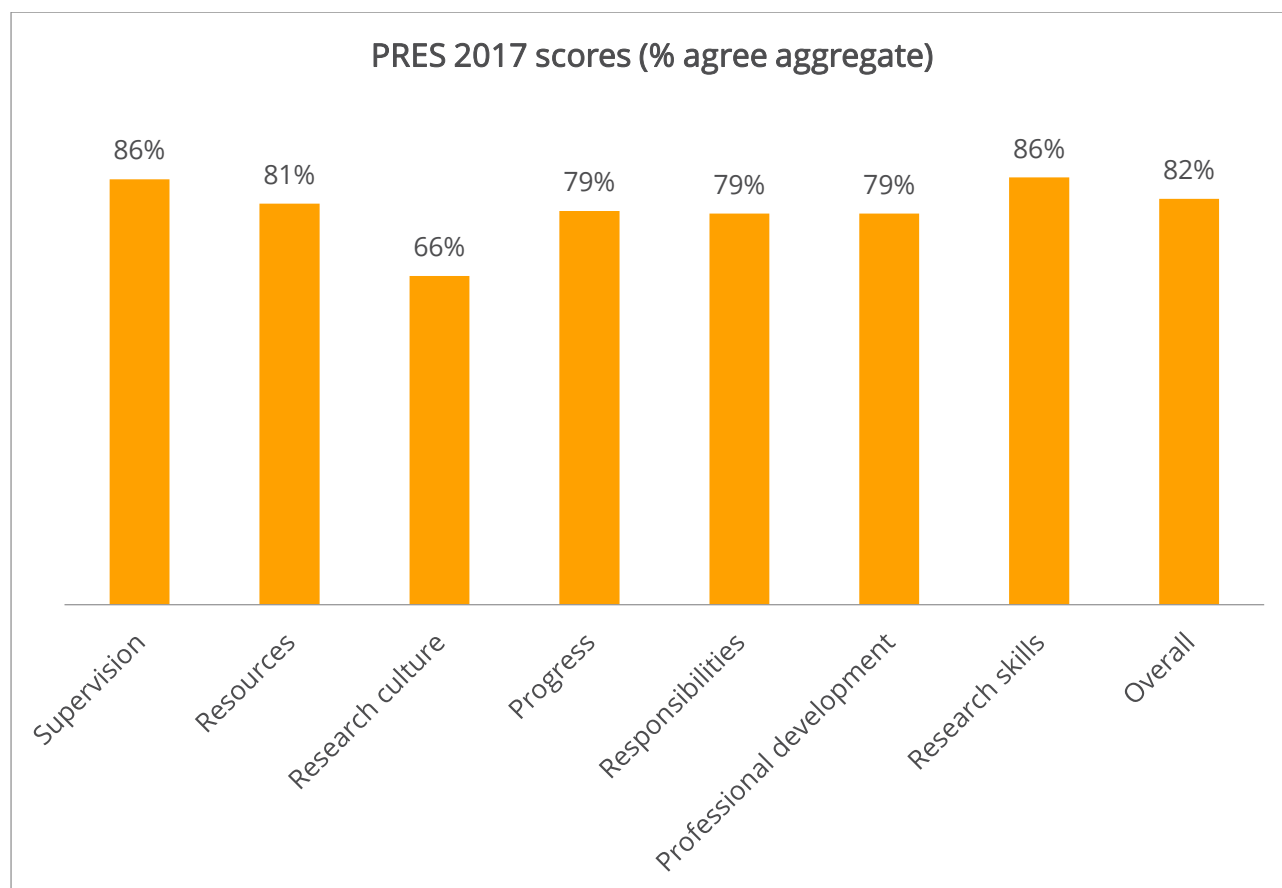
n = 57,187–57,689. Percentages show summed average of those who "definitely agree" and "mostly agree" with each item within each core scale.

The aggregate scores for each of the core scales across PRES show a positive picture, with just over eight in ten students agreeing that they are satisfied with their overall experience of the programme (Fig. 2).

The aggregate scores show a similar pattern to previous years with supervision and research skills being rated most positively (with an average of 86% of respondents being satisfied across the items within this scale), and research culture being scored the lowest (with an average of 66% of respondents being satisfied across the items within this scale).

Figure 3: PRES trends

PRES core scales 2013 – 2017 (% agree aggregate)

Legend: 2017 2015 2013

Scale	2017	2015	2013
Overall	82%	82%	82%
Research skills	86%	86%	85%
Professional development	79%	78%	76%
Responsibilities	79%	79%	78%
Progress	79%	79%	78%
Research culture	66%	66%	64%
Resources	81%	79%	78%
Supervision	86%	86%	84%

n = 47,264–57,689. Percentages show summed average of those who "definitely agree" and "mostly agree" with each item within each core scale.

The scores over the last three survey cycles (Fig. 3) show that the general picture of the postgraduate research experience has remained relatively stable and consistent over time, but where there have been movements then these have all been positive and incremental.

Supervision has been consistently the highest scored scale since 2013; a positive finding when according to Cowling's (2017) report supervision is most strongly related to happiness for PGR students. There is variation in the scores within the supervision questions (Fig. 4), with students being most satisfied with their supervisor/s skills and subject knowledge.
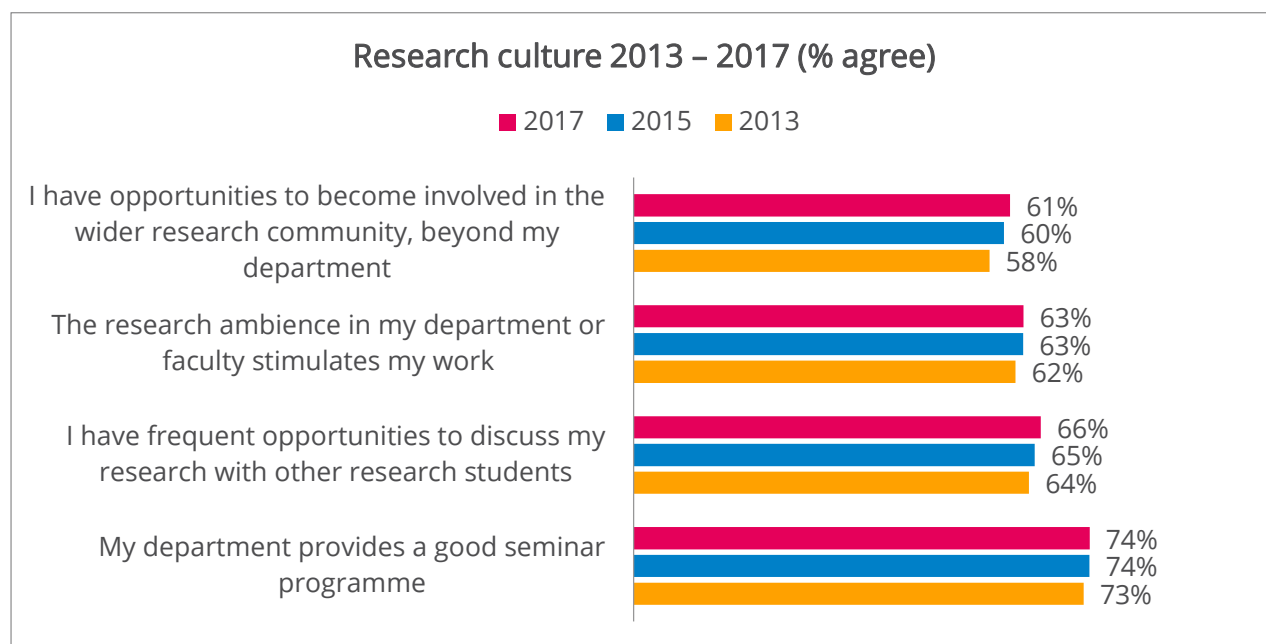
Figure 4: Supervision

n = 56,944–57,378.

Contrastingly, respondents are least satisfied that their supervisor/s have helped them to identify their own training and development needs as a researcher. Therefore, while respondents feel that their supervisors are able to support them as a researcher, they are less likely to have supported them in identifying their individual training and development needs.

Meanwhile, research culture is consistently rated the lowest across the last three survey cycles, but still within this there are some positive findings with 74% of respondents feeling their department provides a good seminar programme (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Research culture trends

Research culture 2013 – 2017 (% agree)

■ 2017   ■ 2015   ■ 2013

Statement	2017	2015	2013
I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department	61%	60%	58%
The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work	63%	63%	62%
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students	66%	65%	64%
My department provides a good seminar programme	74%	74%	73%

n = 47,264–55,966.

There is less satisfaction regarding opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, with only 61% agreeing with this statement. However, there is a positive picture when we look at the trends over the last three years, as there has been an increase in scores on this item year on year.

The PGR student experience

This section investigates ways in which the PGR experience varies between different types of respondents. Results differ across disciplines, highlighting potential differences in culture and practices across subject areas. The largest differences across discipline clusters are seen within resources, in particular having a suitable working space, computing resources and facilities, and library facilities. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Health and Social Care respondents are most likely to be satisfied across all these resources items, while those in the Social Sciences are slightly less satisfied, and Arts and Humanities PGRs are the least satisfied. The largest difference can be seen for having a suitable working space (Fig. 6), with 63% of Arts and Humanities respondents agreeing they have a suitable working space (and 30% disagreeing with the statement), compared to 84% of STEM respondents agreeing (and 9% disagreeing).
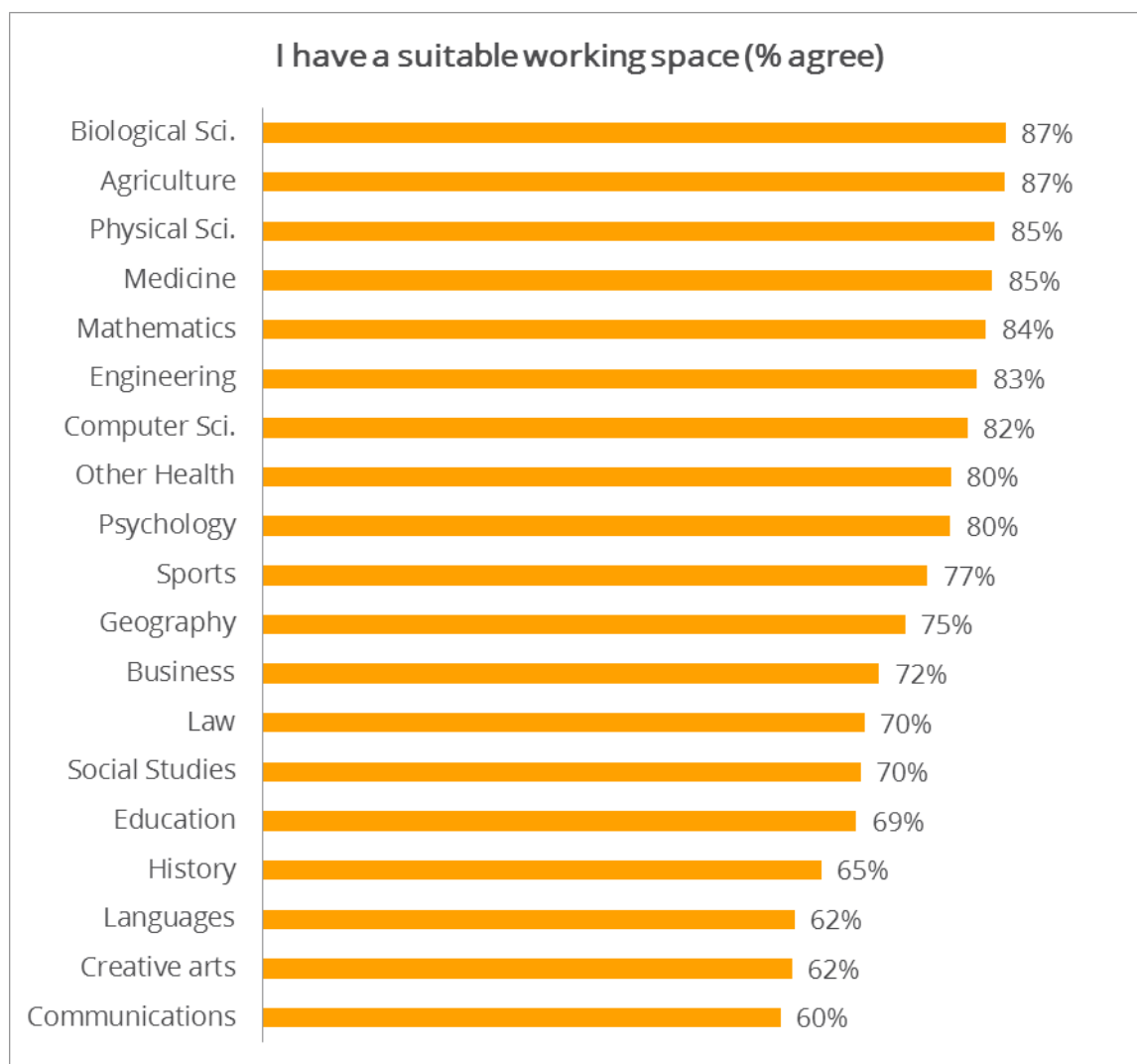
Figure 6: working space by discipline area

I have a suitable working space (% agree)

- Arts and Humanities: 63%
- Social Sciences: 71%
- Health and Social Care: 82%
- STEM: 84%
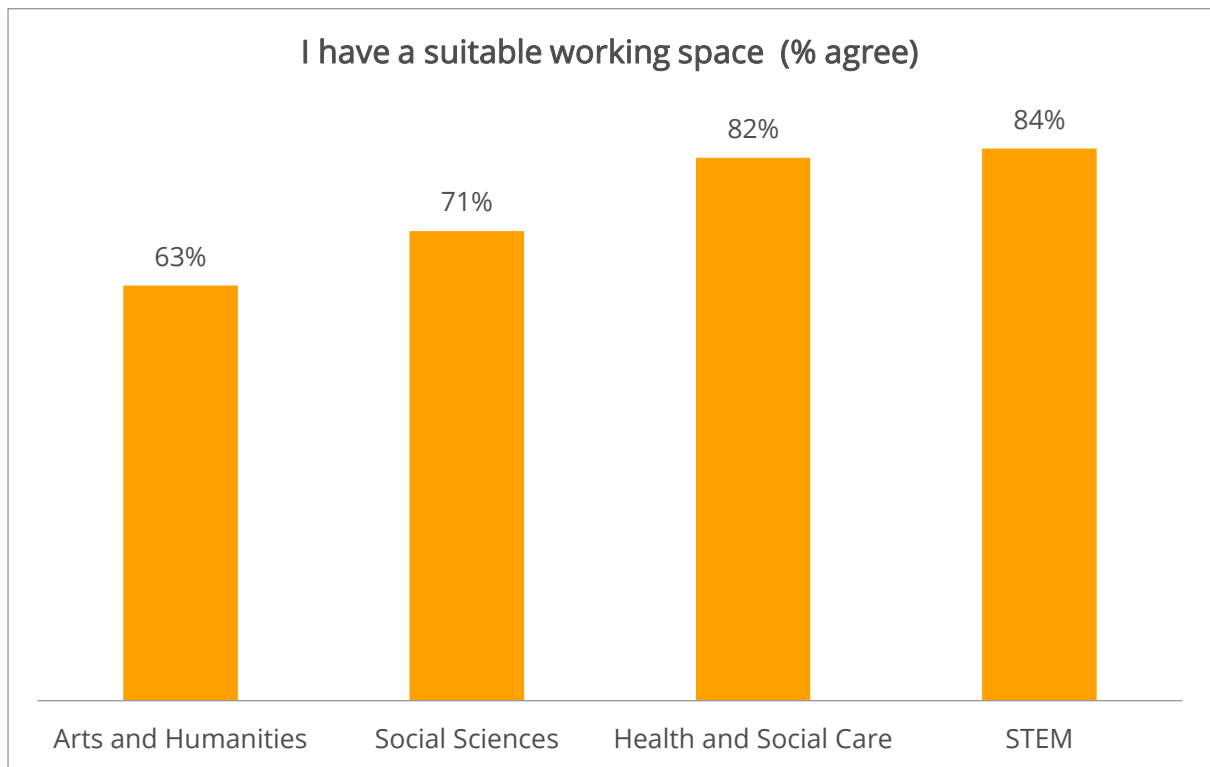
n = 6,082–30,019.

When we look in more detail across the discipline breakdowns (Fig. 7) within the survey we see that Biological Sciences, and Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science are most positive about having a suitable working space, with 87% of respondents in these disciplines agreeing with the statement. This contrasts with Communication and Media Studies (60%) and Creative Arts and Design (62%). A possible reason for this may be due to differences in the type of funding different departments are likely to attract and varied provision of office space for postgraduate researchers.

Figure 7: working space by discipline breakdown

I have a suitable working space (% agree)

Discipline	% agree
Biological Sci.	87%
Agriculture	87%
Physical Sci.	85%
Medicine	85%
Mathematics	84%
Engineering	83%
Computer Sci.	82%
Other Health	80%
Psychology	80%
Sports	77%
Geography	75%
Business	72%
Law	70%
Social Studies	70%
Education	69%
History	65%
Languages	62%
Creative arts	62%
Communications	60%

n = all responses in each discipline area (581–6,420).[6]

While the research culture overall is the lowest scoring scale within PRES 2017, as it has been in previous survey cycles, there are differences between disciplines with positive scoring in certain areas that is worth pointing out. In terms of providing a good seminar programme, those in the Mathematical Sciences (85%) and Biological Sciences (81%) are most satisfied. These scores contrast with Creative Arts and Design (68%) and Engineering (68%).

Despite this item being the most positively scored within the research culture scale there remains a range of experiences of research culture which appear

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[6] A full list of abbreviations used here for disciplines can be found in Appendix 2

related to discipline area. Creative Arts and Design struggles across the majority of the research culture items, being the discipline in which respondents are least likely to be satisfied with having frequent opportunities to discuss research with other research students (57%) and the research ambience stimulating work (55%). In contrast, respondents in the Biological Sciences are most satisfied with each of these items.

Interestingly, the lowest scored item within the research culture scale, "I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department" does not show as great a range between the disciplines (either aggregated into discipline clusters or broken down). It therefore appears that becoming involved in the wider research community is a challenge for postgraduate researchers across the disciplines.

Figure 8: Opportunities to discuss research by mode of study
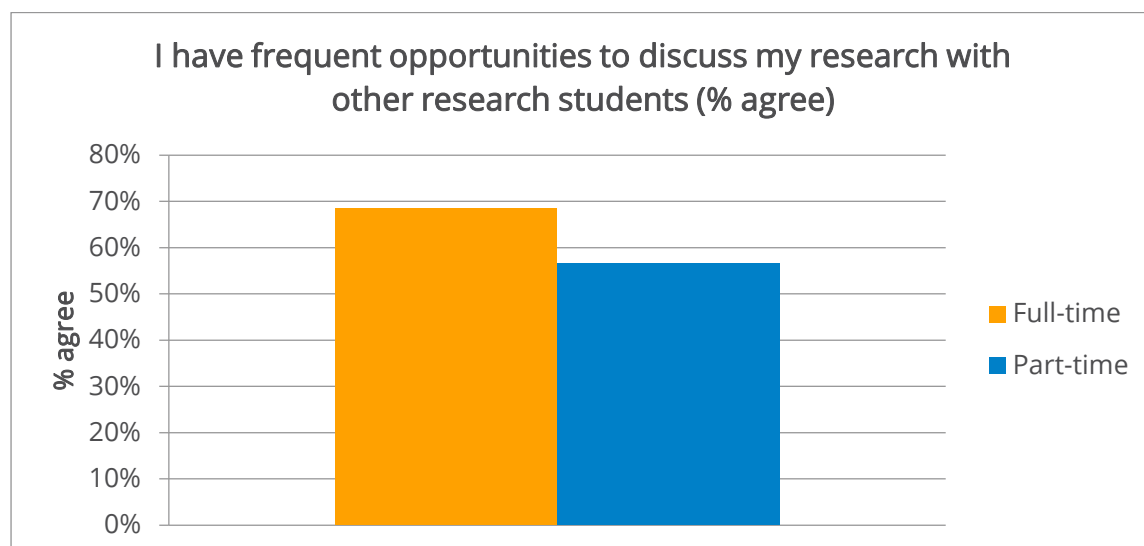
n = 55,817 (full-time = 45,710; part-time = 10,107).

Little meaningful difference was found between full-time and part-time modes of study on any of the main survey scales except for part-time respondents being less likely to agree that they have frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students (with 56% of part-time PGRs agreeing with the statement compared to 68% full-time PGRs) (see Fig. 8). This could suggest that there may be fewer opportunities for part-time respondents to get involved with other research students, or that other commitments may restrict their ability to engage with such activities. Further exploration needs to be conducted to explore the ways in which such communities and opportunities

can be made more accessible for all PGRs. A lack of potential to discuss research with peers may lead to disadvantages for part-time PGRs if these communication skills are not developed.

However, the general lack of meaningful differences between full-time and part-time experiences appears to be a positive finding, suggesting that part-time respondents are generally feeling as satisfied as their full-time peers with their postgraduate research experience. A similar effect can be seen between face-to-face learners and distance learners, where the same statement is the only one to show a meaningful difference, with face-to-face learners (69%) being more likely to agree than their distance learning peers (55%).

Figure 9: institution values and responds to feedback by permanent residency

My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students (% agree)

Asia	78%
Africa	72%
Middle East	67%
Other EU incl. Cyprus	64%
Other EEA countries	63%
Other Europe	63%
Australasia	62%
North America	61%
South America	61%
UK incl. Channel Islands	58%
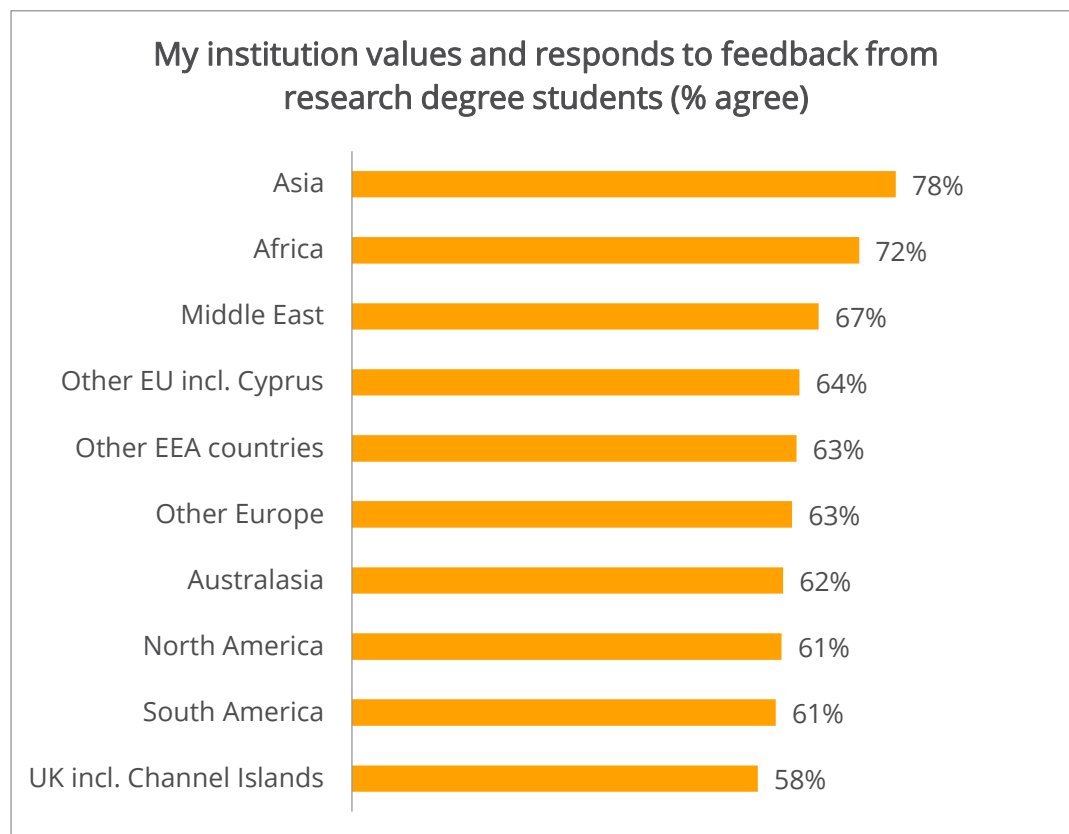
n = all respondents from each residency (63–33,321).

There appears to be little relationship between permanent residency and satisfaction across the key survey scales, except for the statement "My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students" (Fig. 9) which respondents from non-EU permanent residences score more highly, at 71%, compared to only 58% of UK-residence respondents agreeing. Those from Asia are most likely to agree with the statement (78%). Such differences may be

down to variances in expectations and prior experiences of education. With less than two-thirds of those from the UK feeling their feedback is valued and responded to, institutions may benefit from managing expectations and closing the feedback loop to ensure PGRs are aware of the ways in which (and extent that) their comments are fed into practice and enhancement.

PGR motivations and career plans

The results show the ways in which the PGRs change and develop throughout their student journey. The heterogeneity of the student journey is highlighted by the ways in which the motivations and career plans of PGRs are related to their experiences. The main motivations for pursuing the research degree are an interest in the subject and improving career prospects for an academic/research career (Fig. 10). There are also a relatively large number of students who feel that their programme is a natural step for them.

Figure 10: Motivations

The main motivation for me pursuing a research degree programme was:

- Interest in the subject — 35%
- Career prospects for an academic/research career — 27%
- Natural step for me — 13%
- Career prospects outside of an academic/research career — 9%
- Professional development or training — 6%
- Encouraged by a former academic tutor/supervisor — 4%
- Funding was available — 3%
- Other — 2%
- Inspired to work with a particular academic — 2%

n = 57,579.

A relationship can also be seen between motivation and age of participant, with interest in the subject being most likely to be a driver for the youngest and oldest age groups (Fig. 11).
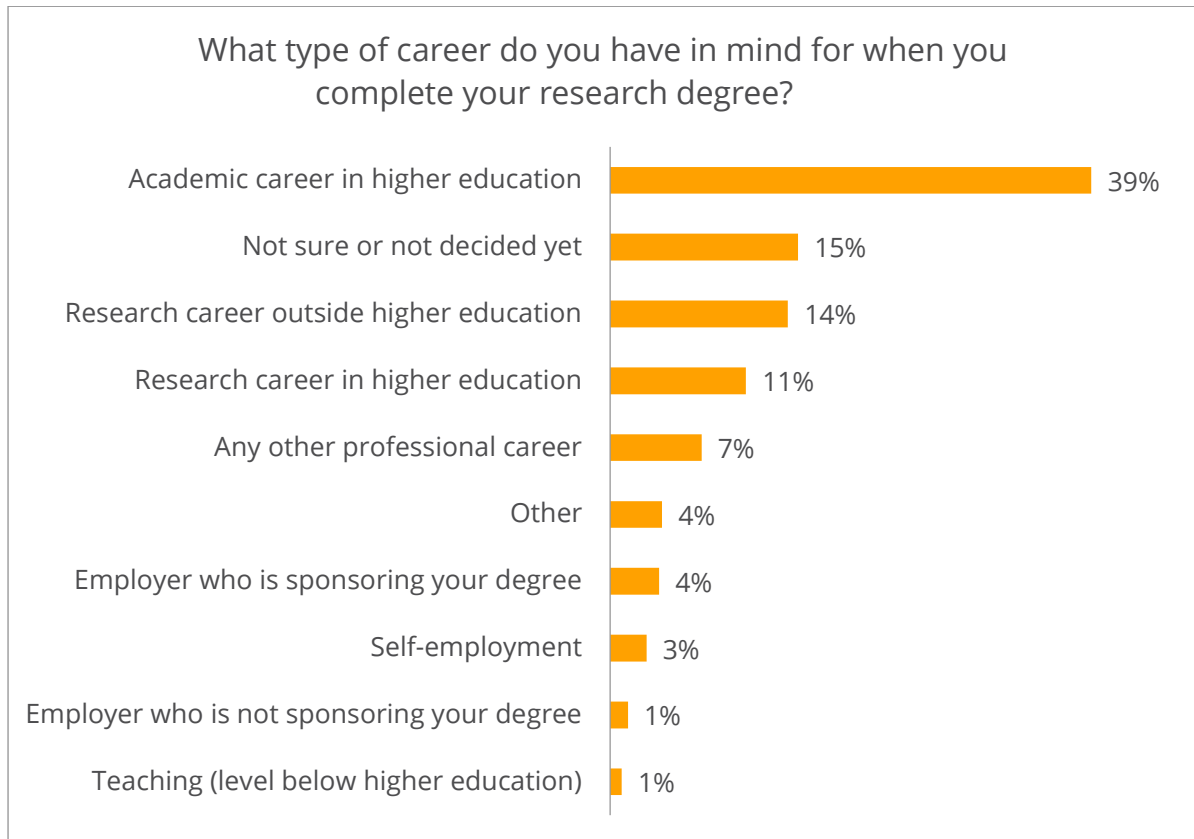
Figure 11: Motivations by age

The main motivation for me pursuing a research degree programme was:
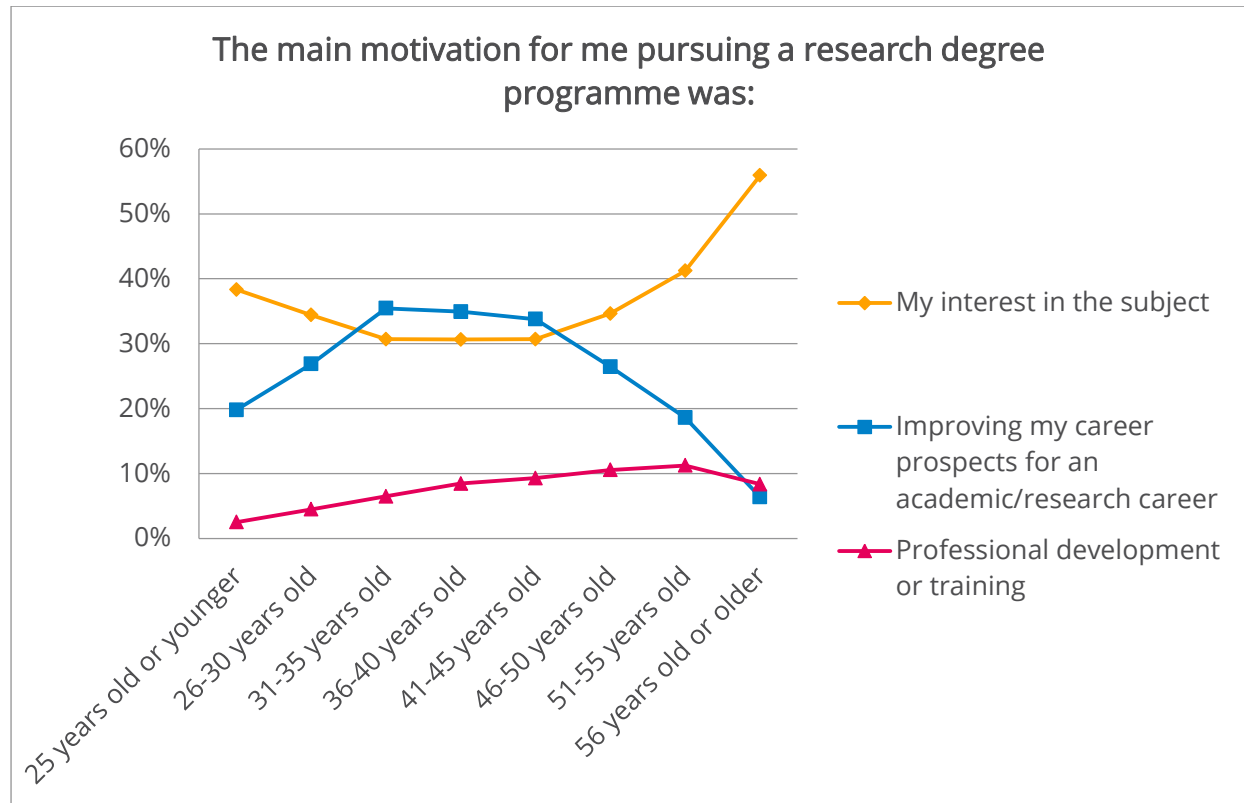
n = 57,544.

For those aged between 26 and 45, interest is less of an important motivator, while improving career prospects for an academic/research career is more important. This finding is likely to reflect changes across the life cycle with respondents between 26 and 41 being focused on developing careers, potentially having families and making life-long commitments such as buying homes, whereas those at younger ages and older ages may have more freedom to focus on studying for interest. Those at the older end of the spectrum may be looking forward towards retirement and exploring interests, with less of a focus on career development.

The data show less of a relationship between year of study and motivation, therefore suggesting that differences in motivation may be more related to demographic factors than progression through the postgraduate programmes.

Respondents have a broad range of career plans for when they complete their degree (Fig. 12). The 2017 PRES included some new answer options in order to cover the most common free-text comments from previous survey cycles: "Returning to or remaining with employer who is not sponsoring your degree" and "Not sure or not decided yet".

Figure 12: Career plans

What type of career do you have in mind for when you complete your research degree?

Category	%
Academic career in higher education	39%
Not sure or not decided yet	15%
Research career outside higher education	14%
Research career in higher education	11%
Any other professional career	7%
Other	4%
Employer who is sponsoring your degree	4%
Self-employment	3%
Employer who is not sponsoring your degree	1%
Teaching (level below higher education)	1%

n = 57,435.

The results show that being "Not sure or not decided yet" is the second most frequently selected option, showing a large percentage of postgraduate researchers are unclear on their next steps. Uncertainty could be a sign of respondents being open to development and exploration of opportunities as they progress.

However, the level of uncertainty would be expected to decrease over time and there does appear to be a relationship between being unsure of career plans and stage of the programme (Fig. 13).

Figure 13: Uncertain career plans by stage of programme

Career plan: not sure or not decided yet
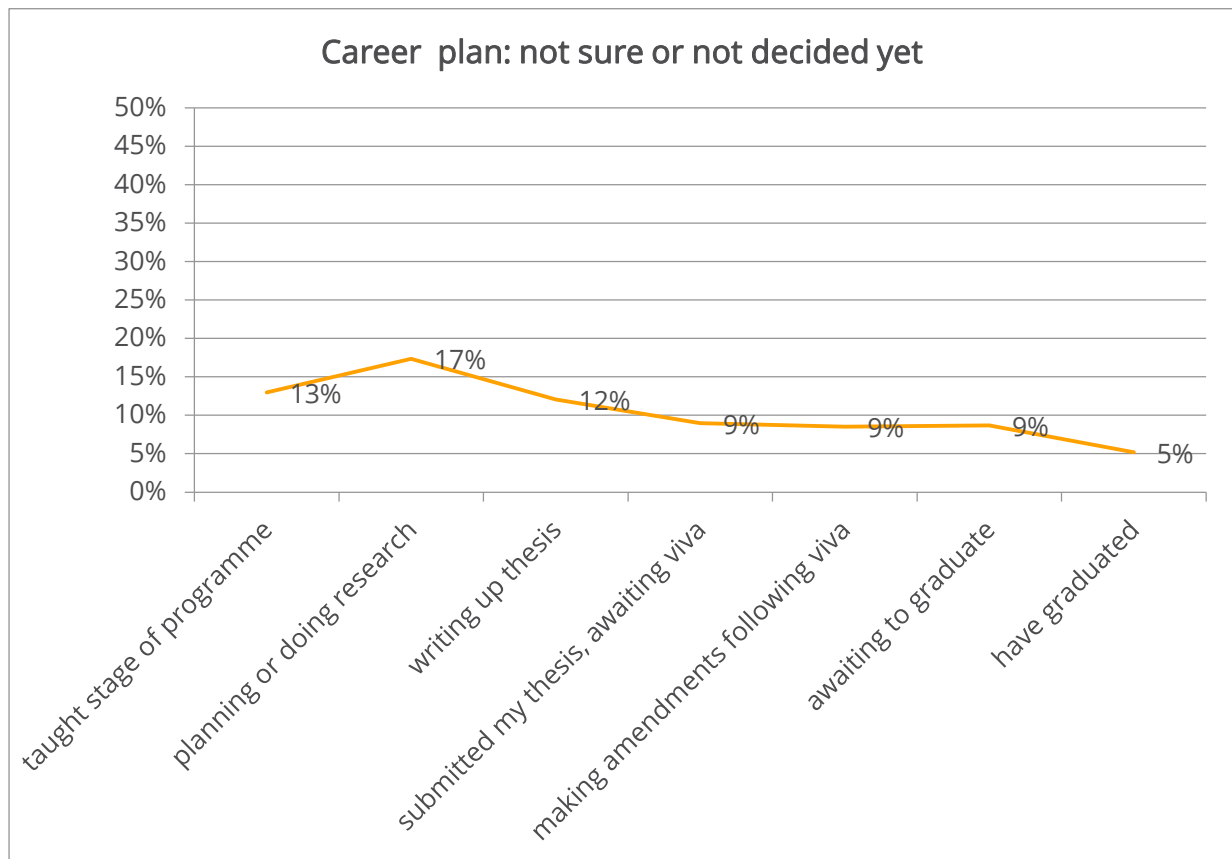
n = 57,213.

Those in the planning stage of their research are most likely to be unclear or undecided, and reassuringly as respondents progress throughout their programme they are less likely to be undecided. However, there are still relatively high numbers remaining unsure even as they wait to graduate, a finding which perhaps needs more exploration. Understanding PGRs' career plans is important, not least because there appears to be a relationship between career plans and overall satisfaction.

Figure 14: Overall satisfaction and confidence by career plans

Overall satisfaction (%agree) and confidence to finish on time (% agree) by career plans

■ Confidence to finish on time ■ Overall satisfaction

Career plan	Confidence to finish on time	Overall satisfaction
Other	81%	79%
Not sure or not decided yet	77%	80%
Employer who is not sponsoring degree	81%	80%
Employer who is sponsoring degree	82%	84%
Self-employment	79%	77%
Any other professional career	76%	73%
Teaching (level below higher education)	74%	75%
Research career outside higher education	80%	80%
Research career in higher education	85%	86%
Academic career in higher education	85%	85%

n = all responses for each question (overall satisfaction = 57,220; confidence to finish on time = 56,721).

In particular, those planning careers within higher education are most likely to be satisfied with their experience and confident that they will finish on time, while those planning on any other professional career or teaching at a level below higher education are least likely to be satisfied and confident to finish on time (Fig. 14).

Experiences by year of study

Looking in more detail at respondents' experiences during their postgraduate research programme shows experiences differing by year of study. For many areas this difference is positive, with respondents in later years of their programmes being more likely to agree with the survey items. A positive difference was particularly seen with skills and professional development

questions, showing a positive and reassuring picture of the PGRs developing over time (Fig. 15).

Figure 15: Positive differences by year of study
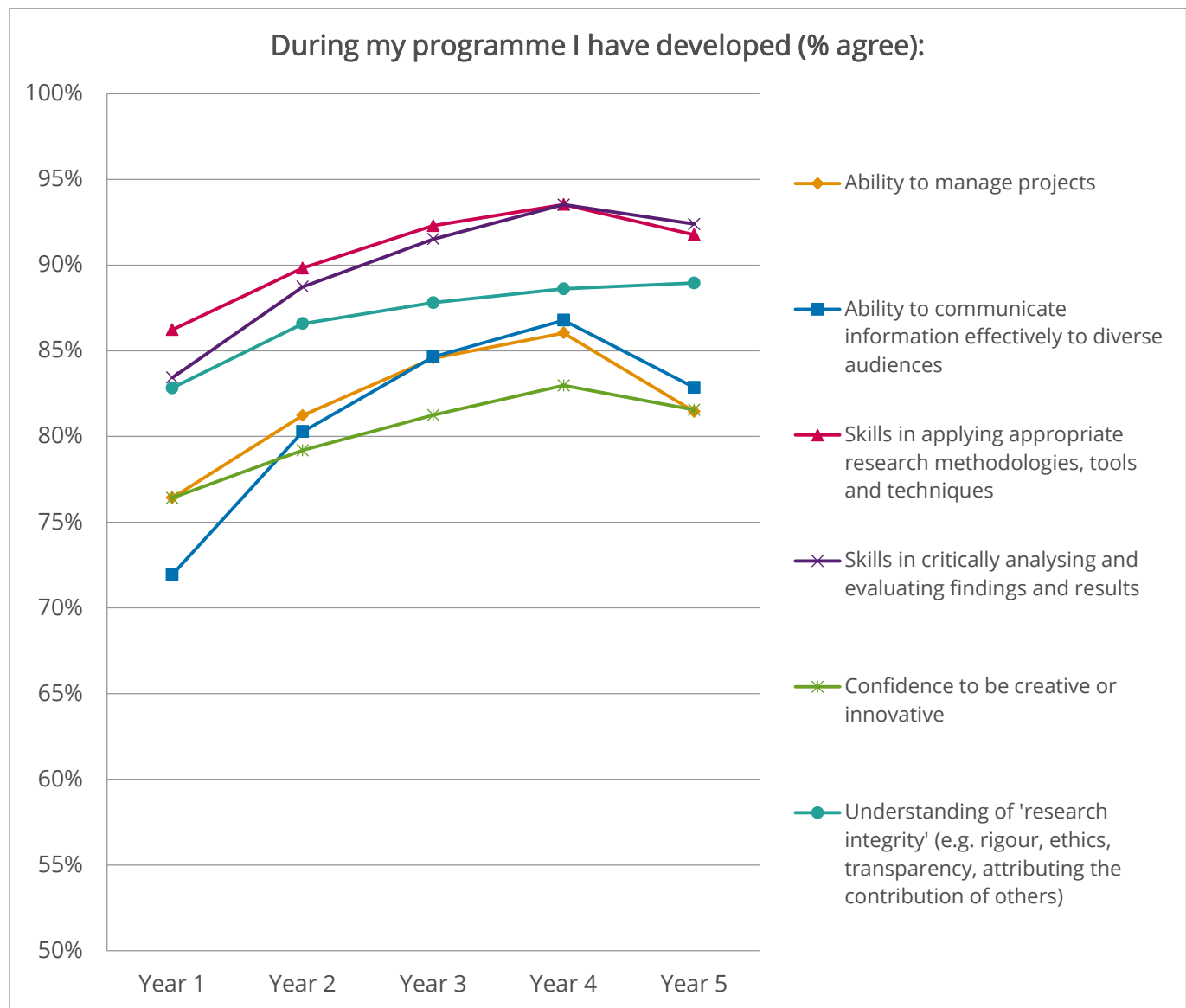
n = 55,645–56,351.

The majority of these positively rated items appear to relate to intrinsic aspects of the student experience and a sense of personal development.

However, between year four and year five fewer respondents are satisfied with these items. Further exploration is needed to understand why this might be occurring. After year four full-time respondents may be reaching the time-limit at which they can successfully complete their programme, while part-time

students may be seeing their full-time peers complete and begin comparing their own progression against these.

Some of the survey items showed year-on-year decreases in terms of satisfaction throughout (Fig. 16).

Figure 16: Negative differences by year of study

During my programme (% agree):
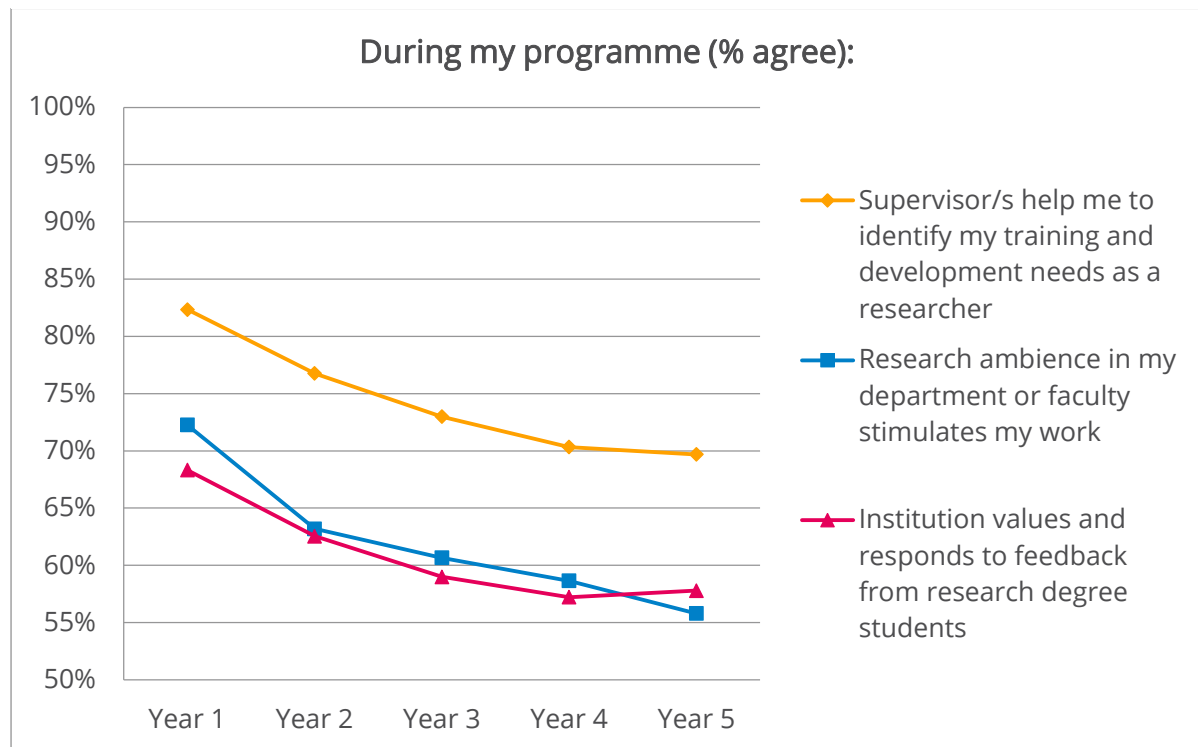
n = all responses for each question (54,618–56,264).

These items in figure 16 appear to be related to more extrinsic factors, aspects of the postgraduate researcher experience that are beyond the control of the respondent. Perhaps as respondents develop their skills and confidence through the programme they become more demanding or more self-aware of areas in which provision is not meeting their needs.

Similar findings can be seen for overall satisfaction and confidence as respondents progress during their programmes, with fewer respondents being satisfied in each progressive year of study (Fig. 17).

Figure 17: Overall satisfaction by year of study
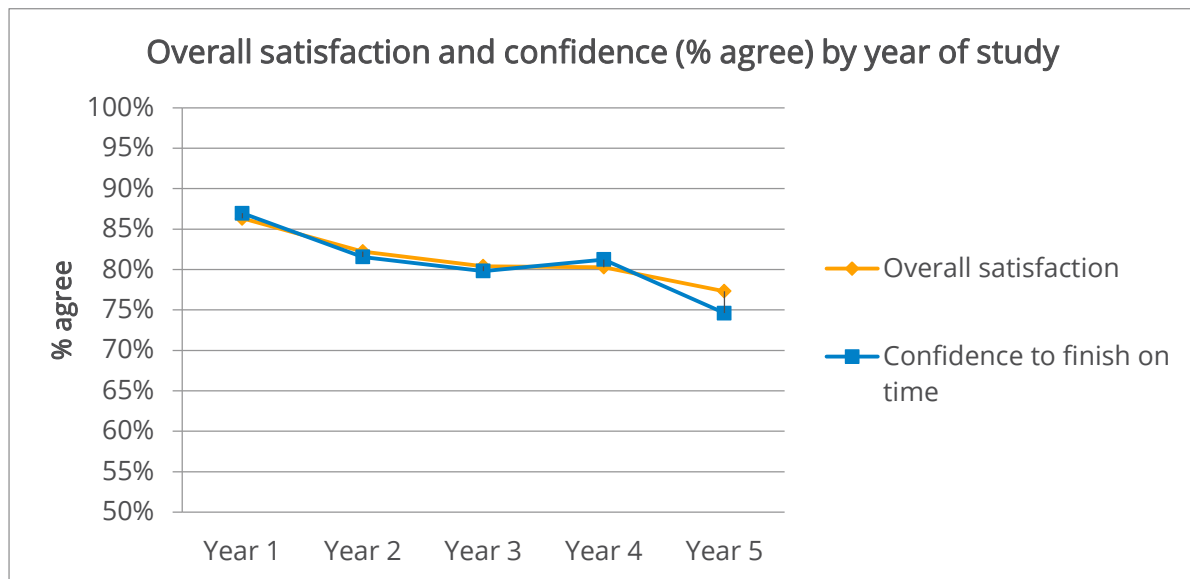
n = 56,278–56,769.

Upon further exploration this relationship appears more prominent for full-time PGRs than for their part-time colleagues, suggesting that a decrease in satisfaction and confidence may be related to students reaching the time limit for successfully completing their programme.

Personal outlook

A range of current research is being conducted across the sector within the area of well-being.[7] Some factors being highlighted by research on well-being in the sector were not currently covered by the PRES, despite the core scales covering some topics that relate to issues of well-being, including relationship with supervisor(s), involvement within the research community, and confidence to finish on time. Due to the keen interest in well-being across the sector and the need for a greater understanding of the issues PGRs face regarding their well-

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[7] Well-being can be defined as "when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa" (Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders 2012, p. 230).

being, a new personal outlook scale was added to the survey for 2017. More information on the new section can be found in Appendix 1.

Fifty-five of the 117 participating institutions chose to run the personal outlook section in 2017. Just under half of the total number of respondents to PRES answered each of the personal outlook questions ($n = 28{,}205$–$28{,}704$).

Looking at the scores across each of these scales shows a relatively positive picture of the personal outlook of the postgraduate researchers (Fig. 18).

Figure 18: Personal outlook scores
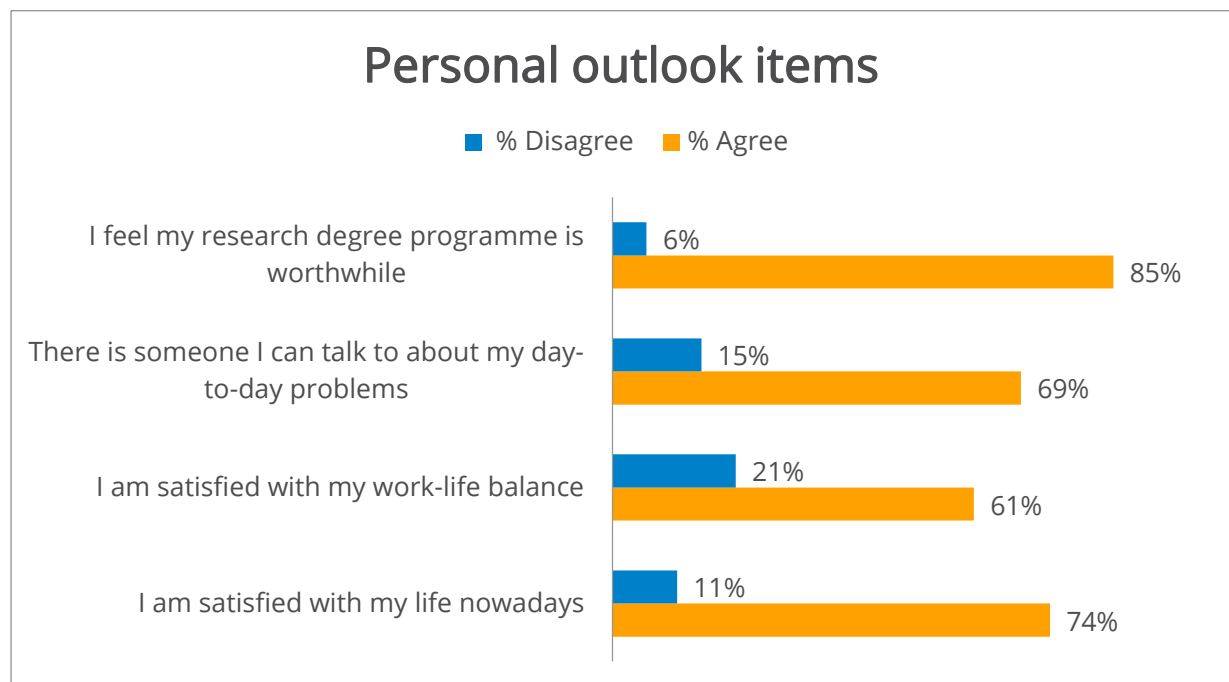
n = all responses for each question (27,870–28,353).

Respondents are most positive about their research degree programme being worthwhile, with 85% agreeing with this statement, exceeding the 82% who feel satisfied overall with their degree. This suggests that the vast majority of respondents feel that their programme is worthwhile, even if they are not satisfied with their experience of it. Additionally, just under three-quarters of respondents agree that they are satisfied with their life nowadays.

The other two personal outlook questions show a less positive picture, especially with just over six out of ten respondents stating that they are satisfied with their work–life balance, and two of ten disagreeing with the statement. Exploring the relationship between work–life balance and overall satisfaction and confidence

shows that those who are happy with their work–life balance are also more likely to be satisfied with their overall experience (and less likely to be unsatisfied), and confident that they will finish their programme on time (Fig. 19).

Figure 19: Work–life balance by overall satisfaction

Positive/negative work–life balance by overall satisfaction

(chart)
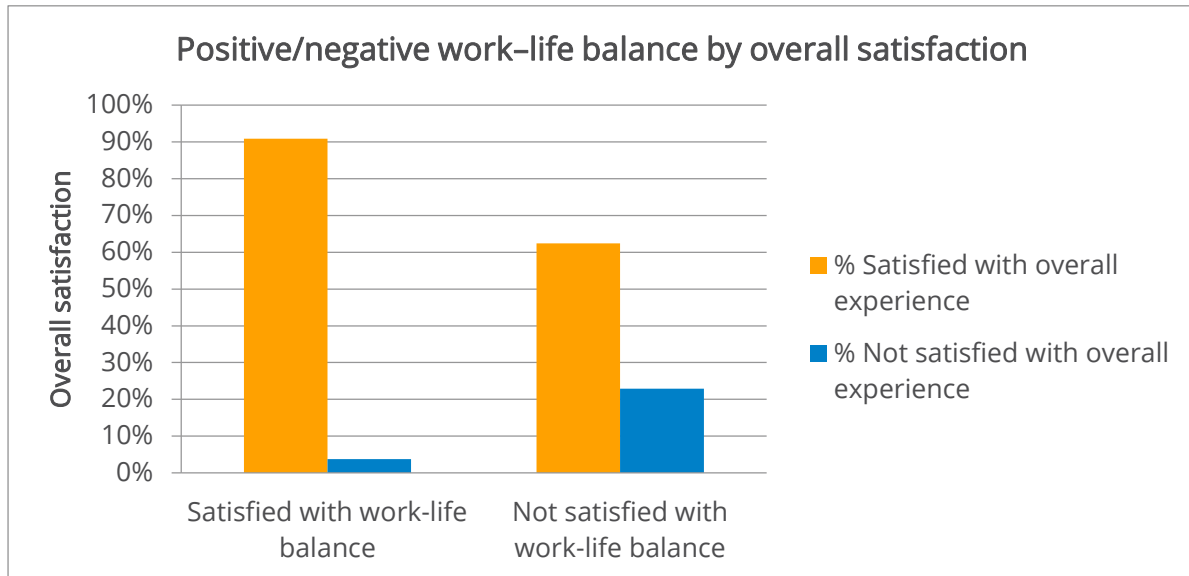
n = 28,087.

The graph shows that of those who stated they were satisfied with their work–life balance, 91% were satisfied with their overall experience, and only 4% were not satisfied with their overall experience. While of those who were not satisfied with their work–life balance, only 62% were satisfied with their overall experience, and 23% were dissatisfied with their overall experience.

Figure 20: Work–life balance by confidence
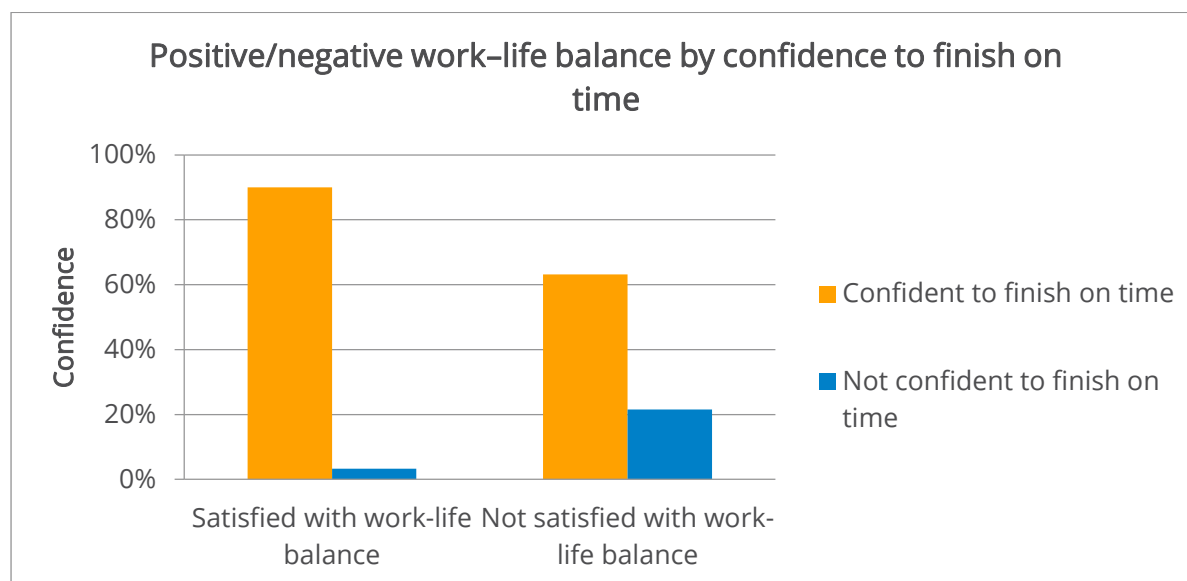
*n =*27,853*.*

Figure 20 shows that of those who stated they were satisfied with their work–life balance, 90% were confident that they would finish on time (and only 3% were not confident). While of those who were not satisfied with their work–life balance, only 63% were confident that they would finish on time (and 22% were unconfident).

Figures 19 and 20 highlight the difference between those with positive and negative work–life balances and the extent to which they are satisfied and confident, confirming the ways in which issues of well-being and personal outlook are important for the student experience. While the direction of causality cannot be stated it could reasonably be expected that a better work–life balance may positively impact upon the overall PGR experience.

Interrogation of the data shows very little difference in terms of personal outlook explained by demographic factors, although there are some differences shown by age of respondent and disability. Therefore, while demographic factors will be explored where relevant, this section will focus predominantly upon the ways in which personal outlook and the PGR experience appear interrelated.

Generally, those who have taken part in opportunities, especially opportunities related to skills development and training, are more likely to be positive about other aspects of their experience (Fig. 21).

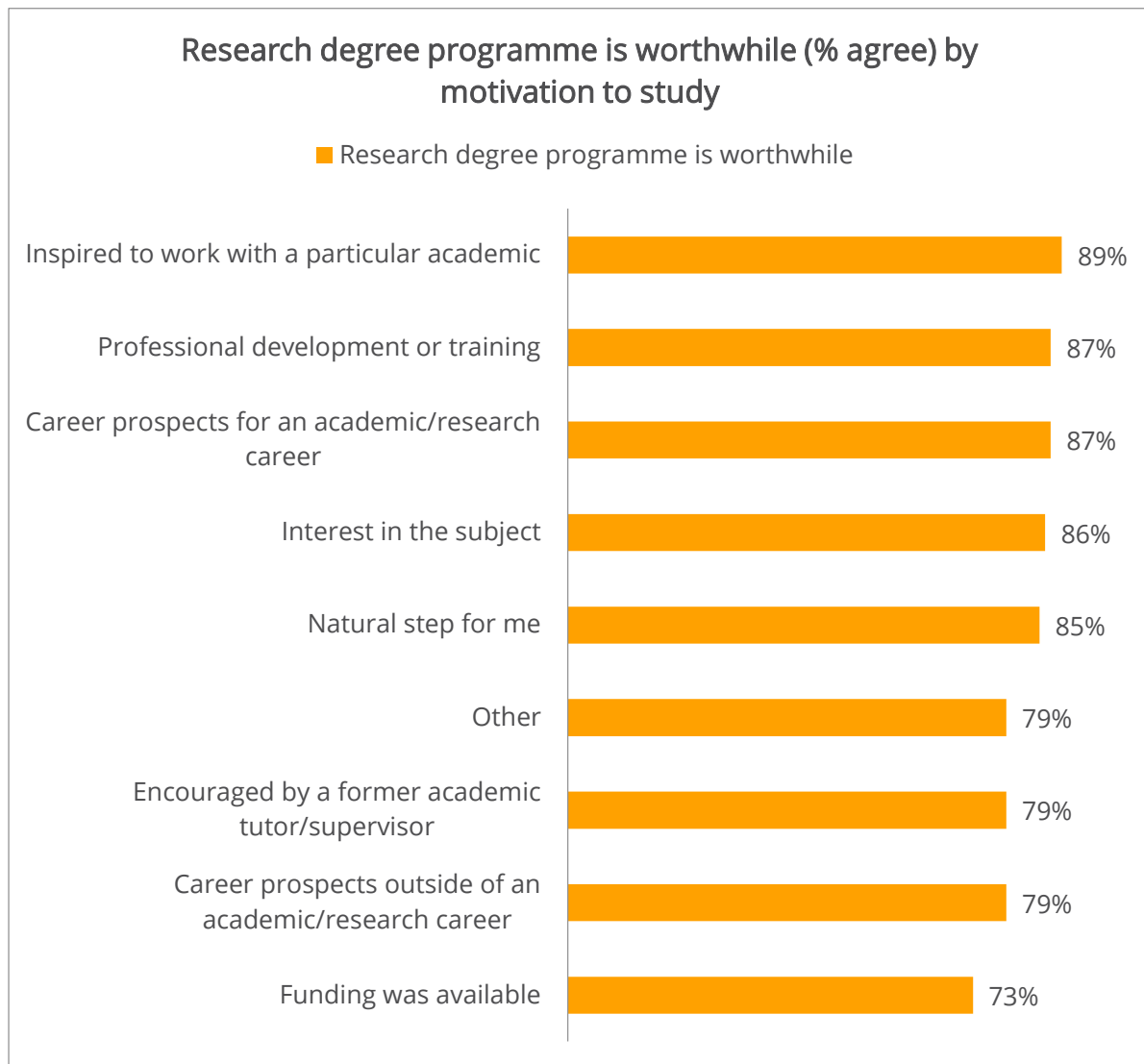Figure 21: Opportunities by personal outlook

Opportunities taken up by personal outlook items (% agree)

Legend:
- I feel my research degree programme is worthwhile
- I am satisfied with my life nowadays
- I am satisfied with my work-life balance

Receiving training to develop my research skills:
- Yes: 88%, 77%, 64%
- No: 75%, 65%, 53%

Agreeing a personal training or development plan:
- Yes: 89%, 78%, 66%
- No: 81%, 71%, 57%
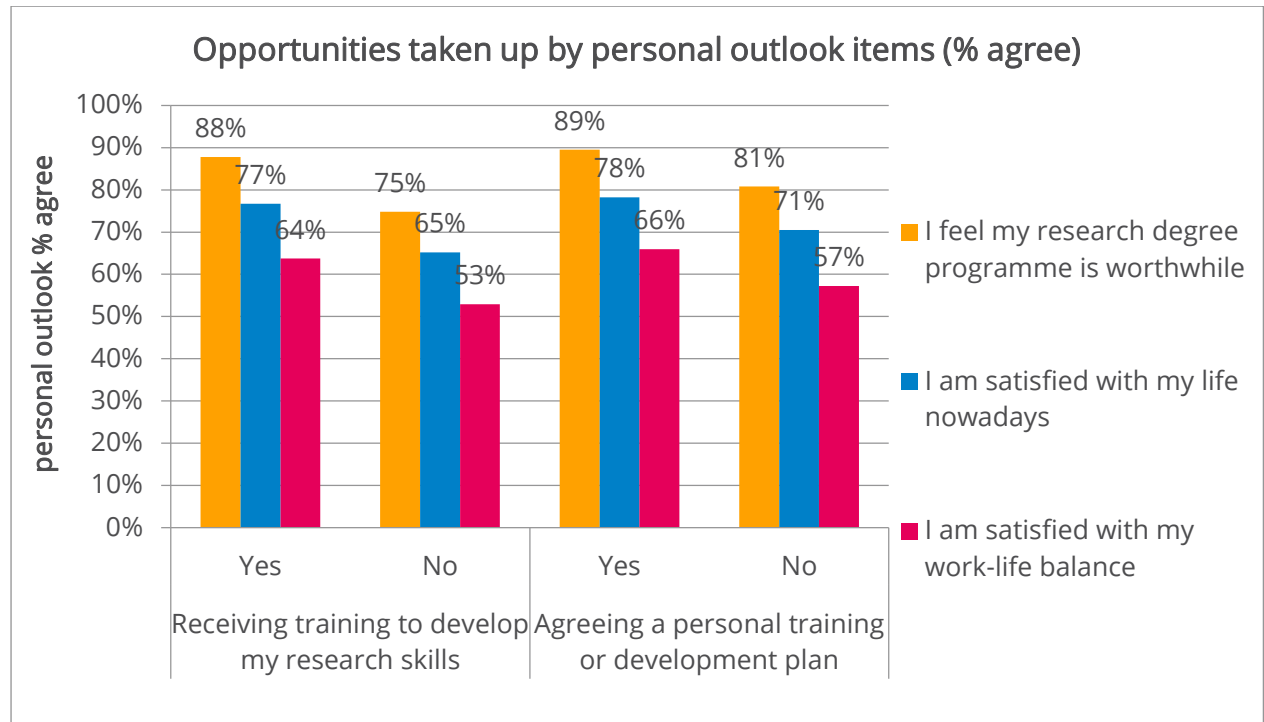
n = all responses to each question (28,181–28,353).

In terms of personal outlook, those who have agreed a personal training or development plan and those who have received training to develop research skills are more likely to agree that their programme is worthwhile, more likely to feel satisfied with their life nowadays, and more likely to be satisfied with their work–life balance.

Personal goals are related to the PGR's outlook, again highlighting the heterogeneity of the respondents' experiences.

Figure 22: Research degree programme is worthwhile by motivation

Research degree programme is worthwhile (% agree) by motivation to study

■ Research degree programme is worthwhile

Motivation	% agree
Inspired to work with a particular academic	89%
Professional development or training	87%
Career prospects for an academic/research career	87%
Interest in the subject	86%
Natural step for me	85%
Other	79%
Encouraged by a former academic tutor/supervisor	79%
Career prospects outside of an academic/research career	79%
Funding was available	73%

n = 28,328.

Those who were motivated by the availability of funding are less likely to feel that the programme is worthwhile (Fig. 22), compared to those who have been inspired to work with a particular academic. Perhaps encouraging applicants to consider and question their motivations before starting their programme would help enthuse and support positive experiences during the period of study.

Career plans are also related to the extent to which the research degree programme is felt to be worthwhile, with those aiming for any other professional career being less likely to feel their programme is worthwhile. This contrasts with those who are planning either academic or research careers in higher education, who are the most positive about the value of their research programme. It appears that the programme may be less likely to be perceived as

worthwhile when an individual does not require it for normal career progression within their planned career. However, overall, a high number of respondents feel that their research degree programme is worthwhile, and this should be celebrated.

Those with a disability are less likely to be satisfied across all aspects of personal outlook. In particular, those who state they have a mental health condition are the least positive across each of the personal outlook statements, showing a concerning pattern (Fig. 23).

Figure 23: Personal outlook by mental health status
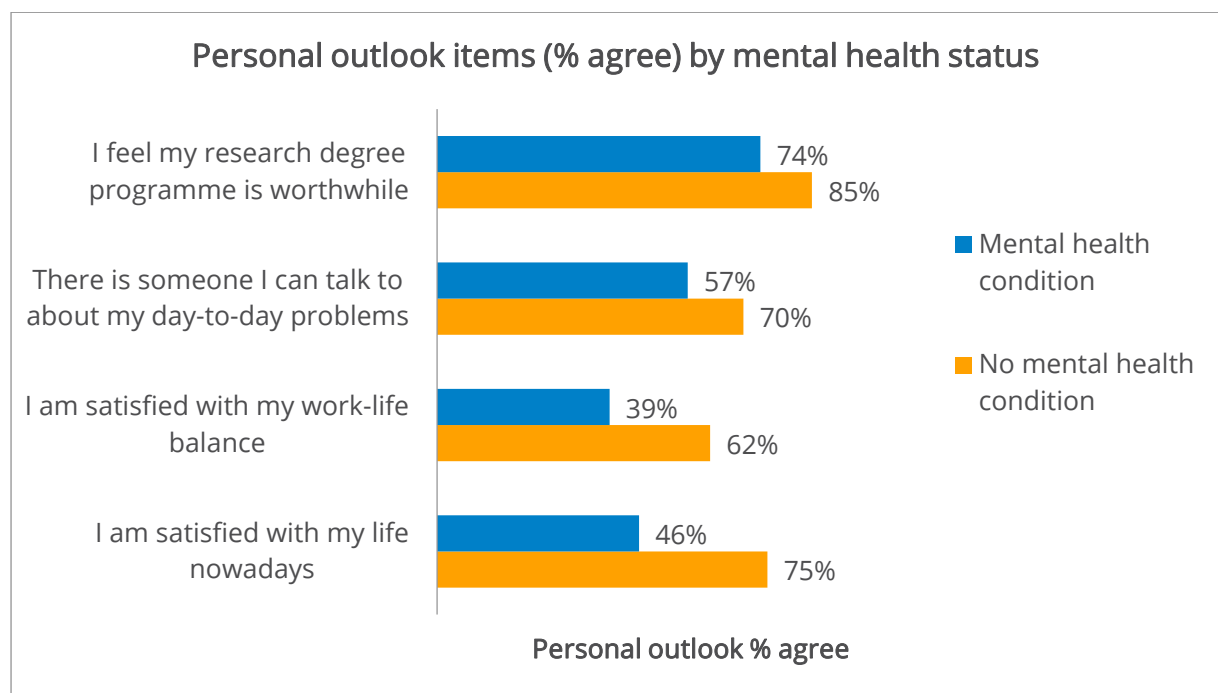
n = all responses for each question (27,870–28,353).

The results highlight the ways in which mental health relates to general well-being and satisfaction with the programme. These findings may be particularly concerning as fewer of those who state they have a mental health condition agree that they have someone to talk to about their day-to-day problems. In this sense, those who have a mental health condition may have a generally less positive personal outlook and feel less sure who to talk to about this. Additionally, a higher percentage of PRES respondents self-identify as having mental health conditions than are shown in the official HESA statistics, therefore these challenges may be impacting upon larger numbers of PGRs than currently recorded.

Within the disability breakdown, the only other category which shows a meaningful difference on an aspect of personal outlook is having a specific learning difficulty, which is negatively related to work–life balance (Fig. 24).

Figure 24: Work–life balance by specific learning difficulty
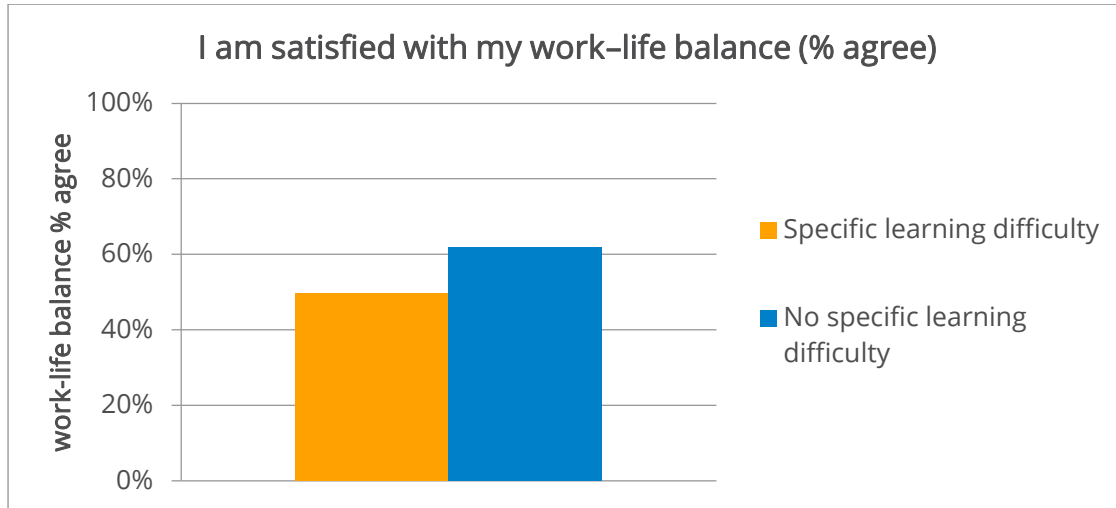
n = 28,181.

Those with a specific learning difficulty are less likely to be satisfied with their work–life balance, perhaps highlighting a need for further support for this group of students during their programmes.

Personal outlook is not static, and shows a relationship with age (Fig. 25).

Personal outlook items (% agree) by age

Figure legend:
- Satisfied with life nowadays
- Satisfied with work-life balance
- Someone I can talk to about day-to-day problems
- Research degree programme is worthwhile

X-axis categories: 25 years old or younger, 26-30 years old, 31-35 years old, 36-40 years old, 41-45 years old, 46-50 years old, 51-55 years old, 56 years old or older
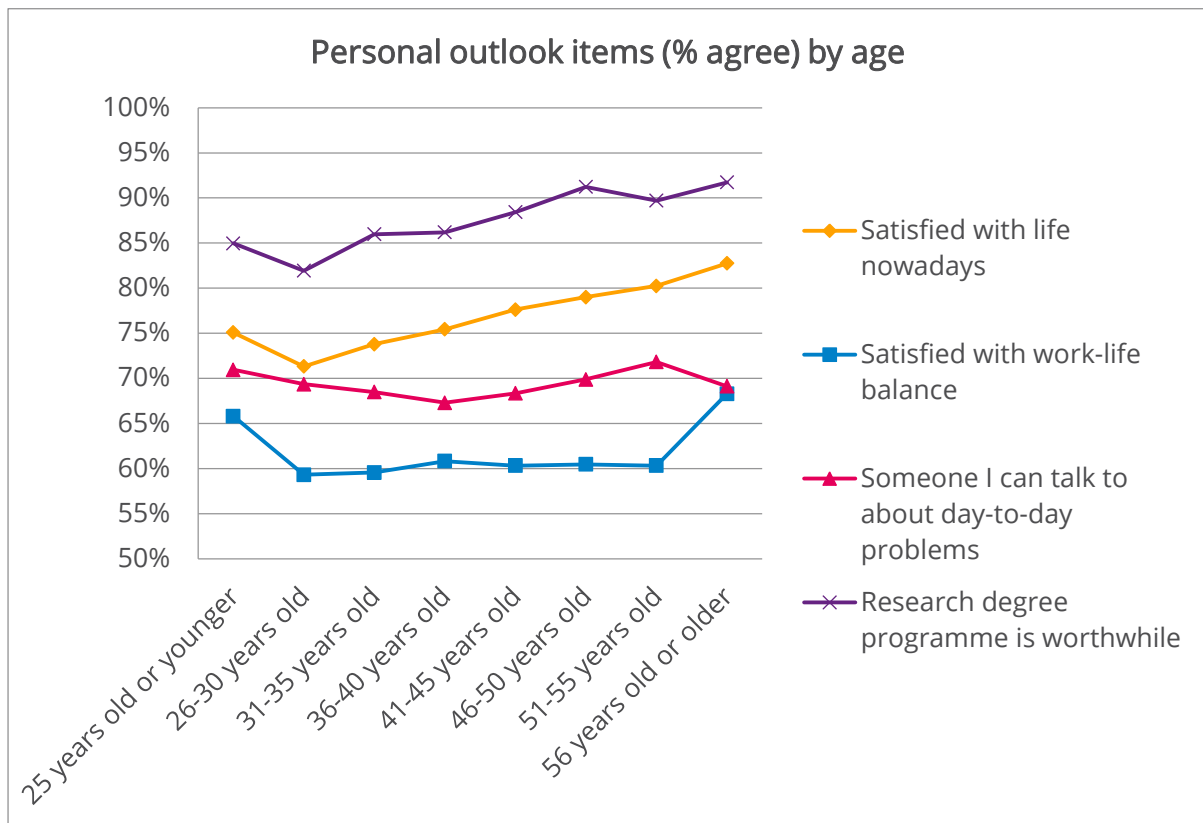
n = all responses for each item (27,856–28,337).

Those who are in the older age brackets are more likely to feel that their programme is worthwhile, and that they are satisfied with their life. An interesting pattern can be seen in terms of work–life balance, with this dipping during the middle age ranges, and being more positive for those aged 25 years or younger, or 56 years or older.

Meanwhile, as respondents progress through their years of study, they become less likely to feel that their programme is worthwhile and less satisfied with their work–life balance (Fig. 26). This mirrors findings shown in figure 17, whereby overall satisfaction and confidence to finish on time appear to drop year on year.

Figure 26: Personal outlook by year of study

Personal outlook (% agree) by year of study
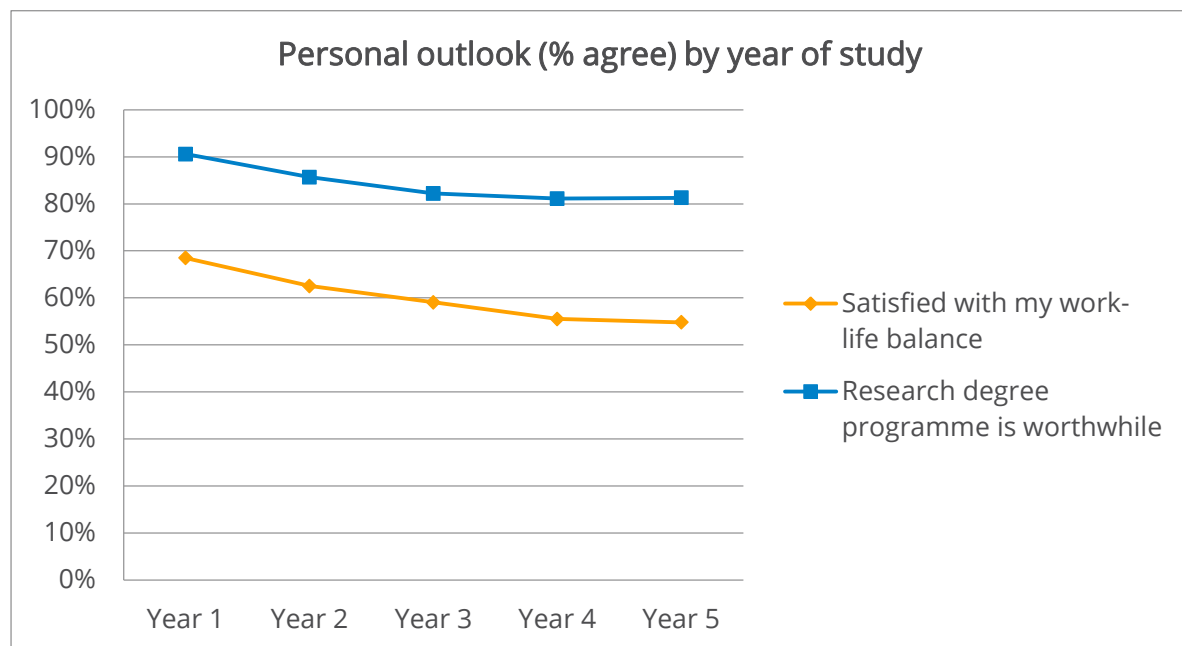
n = all responses for each item (satisfied with work–life balance = 27,850; research degree programme is worthwhile = 28,021).

A similar pattern is seen for both full-time and part-time respondents for research degree programme is worthwhile, however, there is less of a relationship between work-life balance and year of study for part-time respondents. The data, therefore, suggest that personal outlook relates to a number of other factors, and should be explored in the context within which the PGR operates.

Leaving or suspending your postgraduate course

As might be expected, personal outlook and retention appear related, with those who have considered leaving or suspending their course being less satisfied with each of the personal outlook sections (Fig. 27). In particular, the largest effect sizes[8] are seen for satisfaction with life nowadays (ϕ = 0.351, p < .05) and work–

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[8] Due to large sample sizes within this report, phi (Ø) has been used to understand whether differences seen are meaningful. An effect size of 0.3Ø or above is considered to be a medium effect size, meaning the independent variable has a medium-sized effect upon the dependent variable.

life balance (ϕ = 0.327, p < .05), highlighting the ways in which personal outlook and well-being are linked to feeling able to continue with postgraduate study. It is likely, therefore, that promoting a positive personal outlook will support better retention and progression within institutions.

Figure 27: Personal outlook by retention
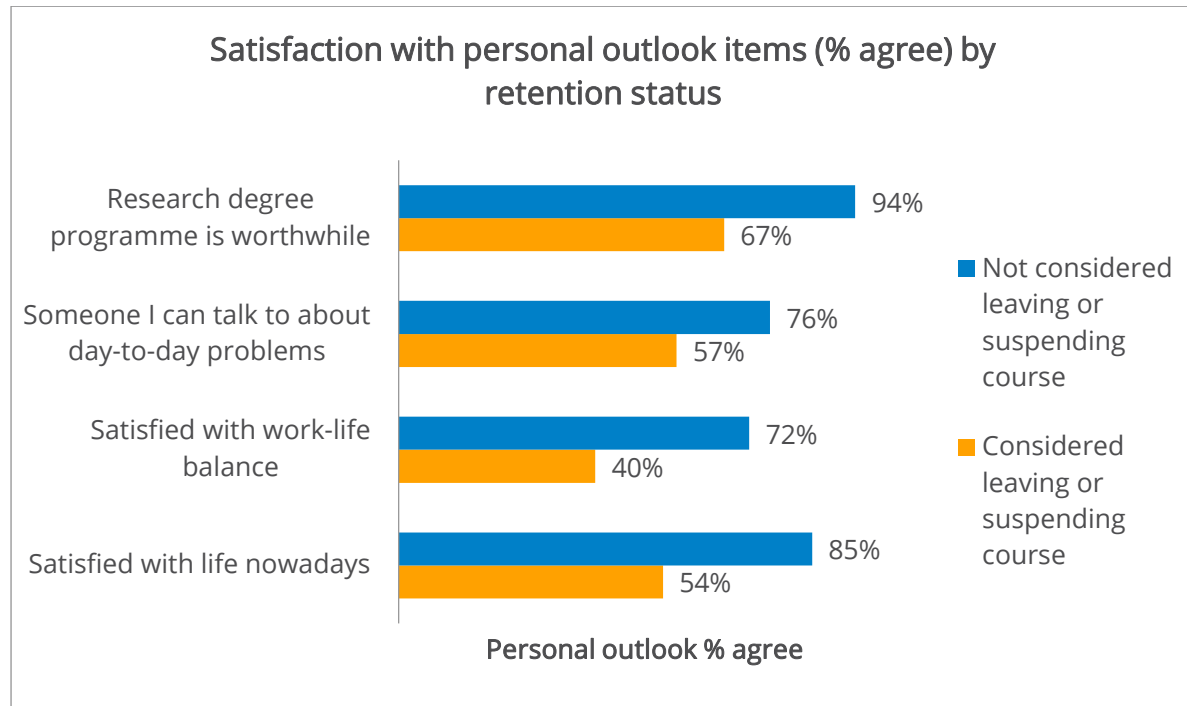
n = all responses for each item (27,629–28,103).

Those who have considered leaving or suspending their course are less likely to be satisfied with each of the personal outlook items than those who have not considered leaving or suspending their course.

The majority of demographic questions do not appear to show a meaningful relationship with the retention question, however, there is a relationship between disability status, gender and mode of study.

Figure 28: Retention by disability status

Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your postgraduate course?
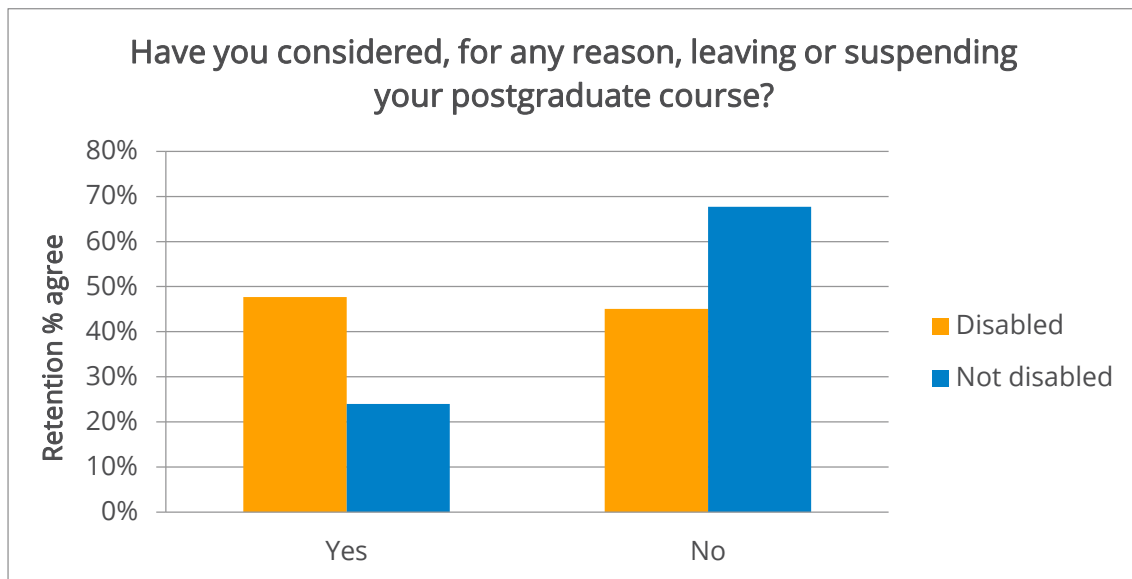
n = 28,165.

Those who state they have a disability appear to be one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of retention, being more likely to have considered leaving or suspending, and less likely to not have considered leaving or suspending, than those who state they do not have a disability (Fig. 28). Forty-eight percent of those with a disability have considered leaving or suspending their course, compared to only 24% of those without a disability.

When we delve into this relationship further in terms of type of disability, the strongest relationship is found for those who state they have a mental health condition with 60% of those self-reporting a mental health condition stating that they have considered leaving or suspending their course, compared to only 25% of those with no mental health condition (Fig. 29).

Figure 29: Retention by mental health condition (% selected)

Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your postgraduate course?
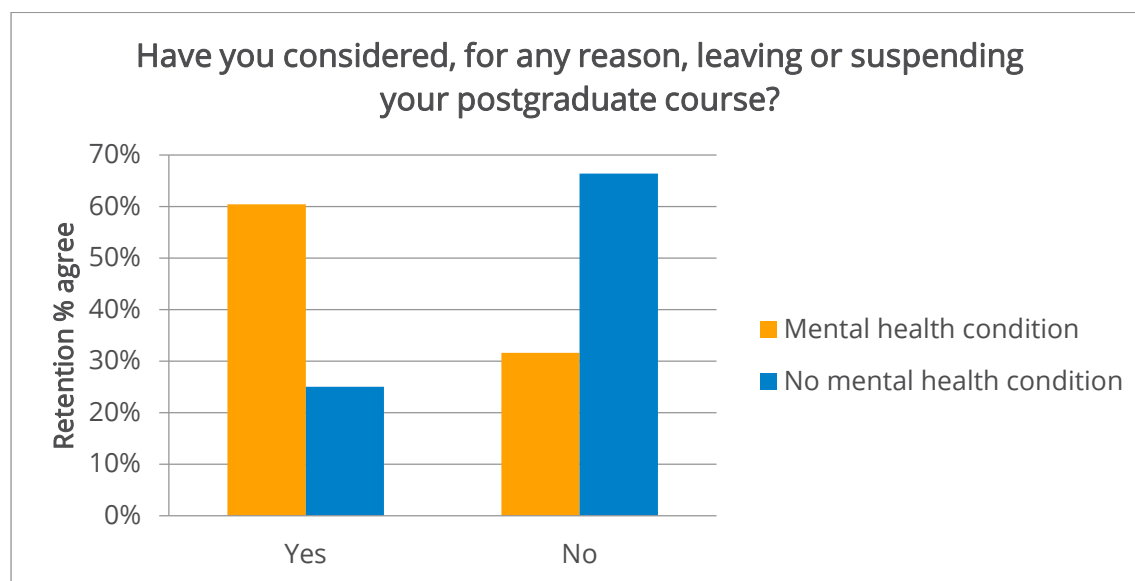
n = 28,289.

The results also show that full-time respondents are less likely to have considered leaving or suspending their course than those studying part-time (Fig. 30).

Figure 30: Retention by mode of study

Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your postgraduate course?
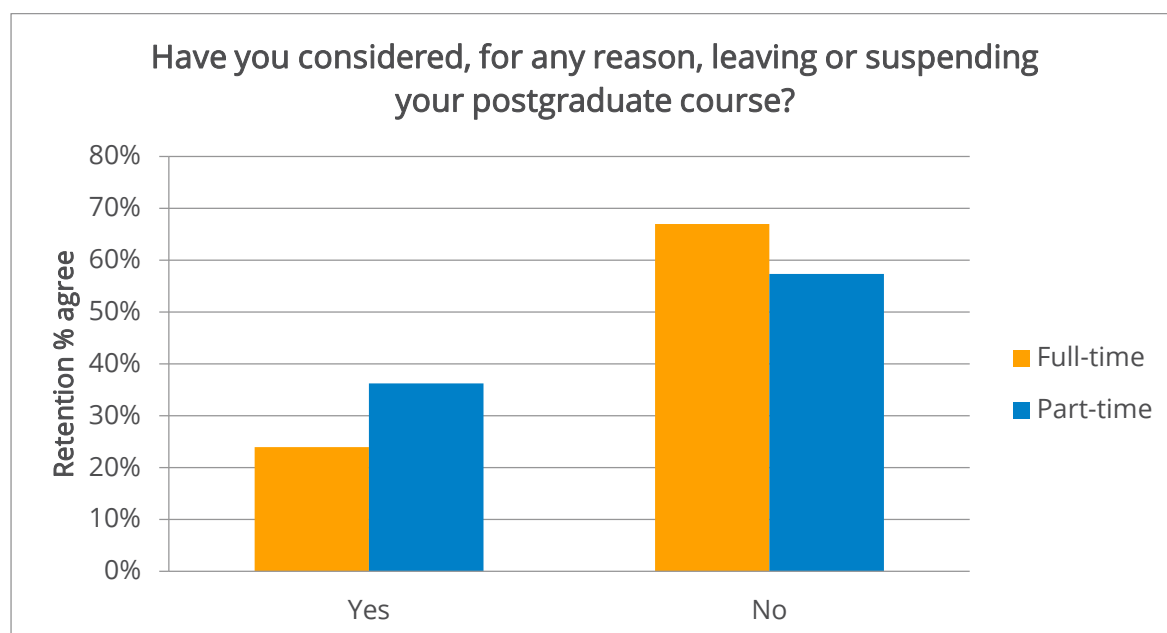
n = 28,192.

Of those studying full-time, 24% had considered leaving or suspending their course, compared to 36% of those who were studying part-time.

While female respondents are also more likely to have considered leaving or suspending than their male counterparts (29% of females responding "yes" to this statement compared to 23% of males responding "yes"), and those who state their gender as "other" are even more likely to have considered leaving or suspending (Fig. 31).

Figure 31: Retention by gender
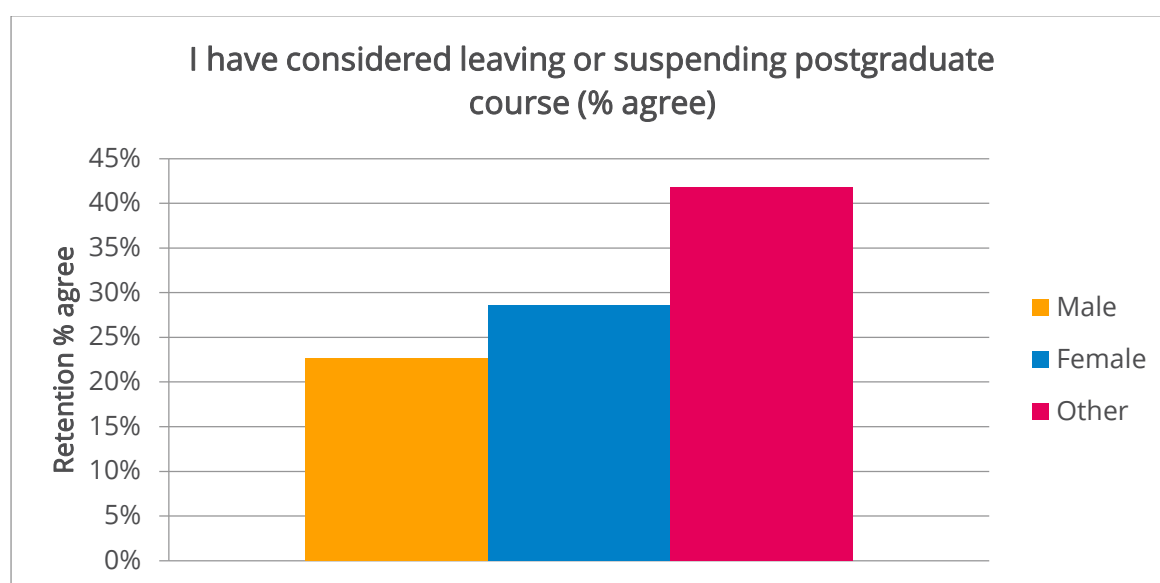
n = 28,181. Note: "Other" represented 0.3% (*n* = 79) of the respondents to this question.

These findings begin to shed some light on some potentially vulnerable groups for retention within institutions. However, it should be noted that due to the wording of the question the extent to which these groups of students have considered leaving may vary greatly. Follow-up research needs to be conducted in order to further explore the extent to which (and why) PGRs are considering leaving, and whether they are considering stopping completely or suspending their programme.

In a more positive light, the results showed a relationship between some of the opportunities and retention.

Figure 32: Opportunities taken up by retention

Relationship between training and development opportunities and considering leaving/suspending course
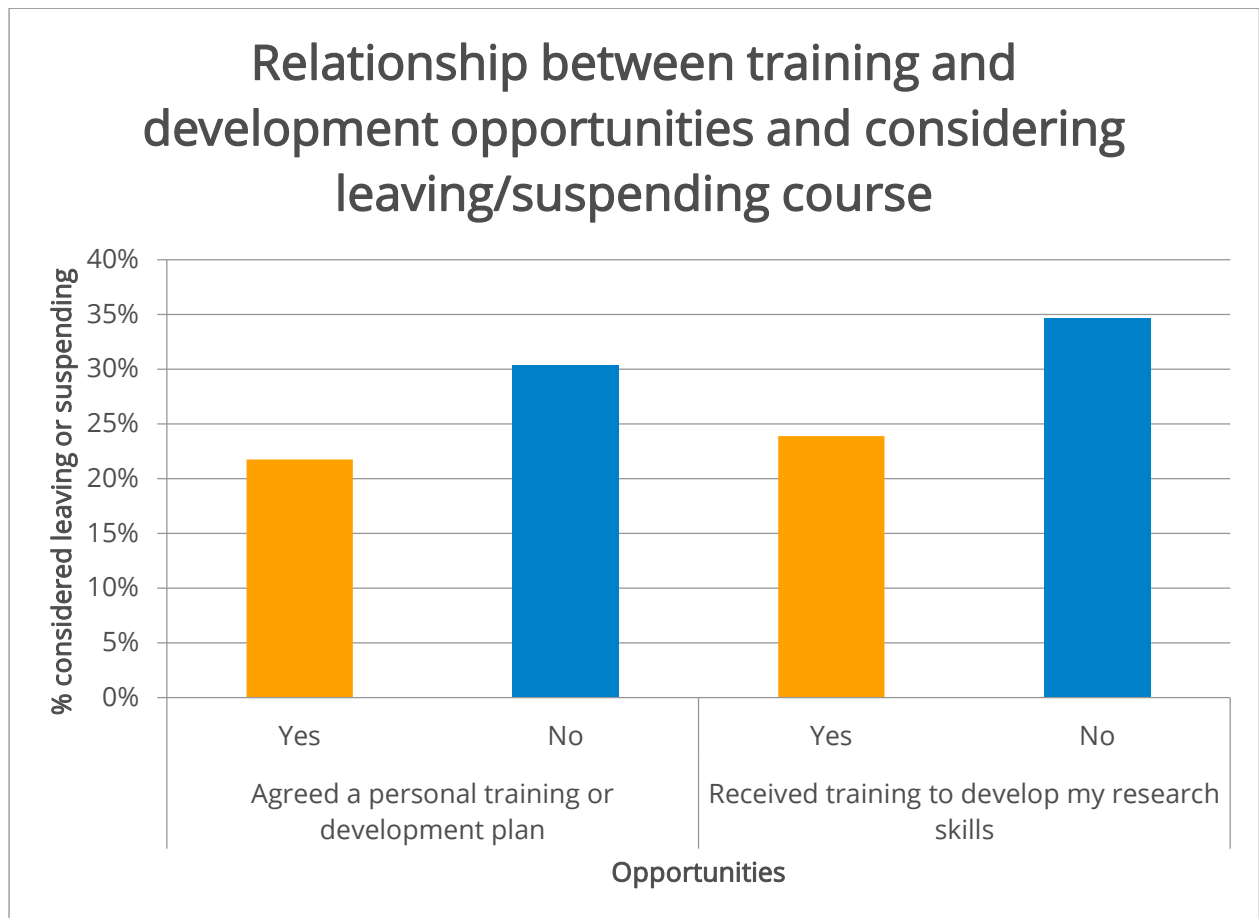
n = 28,289.

In particular, those who have agreed a plan or received training are less likely to have considered leaving or suspending their courses than those who have not agreed a plan or received training (22% of those who have a personal training or development plan have considered leaving or suspending their course compared to 30% of those who haven't developed a plan; 24% of those who have received training to develop research skills have considered leaving or suspending compared to 35% of those who haven't received such training) (Fig. 32).

Conclusions and implications

PRES 2017 provides a positive picture of the postgraduate research experience across the sector with the large majority of respondents being satisfied and confident about finishing on time. Additionally, in terms of trends over the past three survey cycles, the movement that we have seen has been positive. However, there is still room for improvement to be seen within many areas.

The results highlight the individual nature of the PGR experience, and the intertwining nature of factors which relate to satisfaction and confidence throughout the programme. There was little relationship seen between key demographics (including age, gender, mode of study and place of permanent residence) and the student experience, a positive finding, which suggests an inclusive culture in which students are generally able to fully engage. However, those with a disability appear to be a vulnerable group in terms of personal outlook and retention, especially those who have stated they have a mental health condition. There is a need to explore current widening participation procedures and processes for PGRs both before and during their programme to ensure they feel supported to manage their studies and to promote personal outlook throughout.

There are differences between disciplines in terms of resources and research culture, which may be a reflection of differences in culture or funding between different subject areas. In looking to enhance the PGR experience, institutions may need to explore more discipline-specific approaches in order to attempt to provide equal access to appropriate resources and a motivating research culture for all.

PGRs' career plans relate to overall satisfaction and the extent to which the programme is felt to be worthwhile, while motivations also show a relationship with the latter. These findings highlight the ways in which the PGRs' personal goals and aims impact upon their perception of their programme, and the heterogeneous nature of the student journey.

While the respondents develop research skills, as would be hoped during their study period, further exploration is needed into the reasons why overall satisfaction, confidence and perceptions of certain aspects of the programmes are less likely to be scored positively as PGRs' progress through their years of study.

The addition of the personal outlook section within PRES 2017 provides a positive view of PGRs' satisfaction with their life nowadays and feeling their programme is worthwhile. However, there is less satisfaction with work–life balance and having someone to talk to about day-to-day problems. In looking to enhance the PGR experience, then, supporting communities, signposting pastoral support, and encouraging a healthy work–life balance and culture may all promote positive changes.

Overall, the results highlight the individual nature of the PGR experience and the ways in which personal development, aims and goals relate to the student journey. In looking towards enhancement, those institutions who work to champion their PGRs to develop autonomy, skills, communities and realistic goals will be well placed to promote positive postgraduate research experiences.

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Appendix 1: Personal outlook section content

For 2017 an additional optional section on personal outlook was included in PRES. This appendix explores the questions included within this section, and the origin of these questions. This new "personal outlook" scale was optional for participating institutions. The scale aimed to explore respondents' general views and attitude (outlook) on their life. As the scale was not designed as a discrete measure of well-being, but rather developed as exploratory research aimed to explore issues relating to this across the sector.

The new personal outlook section asks respondents to what extent they agree or disagree that, overall:

> "I am satisfied with my life nowadays"
> "I feel my research degree programme is worthwhile"

Both these statements are based upon the ONS personal well-being questions (ONS 2015), however, the aim was to ensure that they fit with the rest of the survey format. Therefore the answer options consist of a five-point Likert scale from "definitely disagree" to "definitely agree" in the same manner as the other main survey questions.

> "I am satisfied with my work–life balance"

The work–life balance statement is taken from the Vitae Careers in Research Online Survey (Vitae 2013).

> "There is someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems"

The statement was based on research that has been conducted by the Exeter Guild.[9]

> "Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your postgraduate course?"

Respondents also had the opportunity to raise comments within a free-text box at the end of the personal outlook section. The personal outlook section will be reviewed over time in order to ensure it remains relevant in the context of other well-being research undertaken in the sector.

As part of the addition of this new scale the opening and exit statements for the survey were updated to include a sentence allowing participating institutions to signpost towards appropriate pastoral support.

For more information on the questions used within the survey please contact surveys@heacademy.ac.uk

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[9] More information on Exeter Guild's research can be found at: https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/show-and-tell-supporting-the-mental-health-wellbeing-of-postgrads

Appendix 2: Discipline abbreviations

Discipline	Abbreviation
Clinical Medicine	Medicine
Other Health subjects	Other Health
Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	Psychology
Biological Sciences	Biological Sci.
Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science	Agriculture
Physical Sciences	Physical Sci.
Mathematical Sciences	Mathematics
Computer Science	Computer Sci.
Engineering	Engineering
Geography, Archaeology and Built Environment	Geography
Business and Economics	Business
Law	Law
Social Studies	Social Studies
Education	Education
Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism	Sports
Languages and Area Studies	Languages
History and Philosophical Studies	History
Creative Arts and Design	Creative Arts
Communication and Media Studies	Communications

Contact us

+44 (0)1904 717500   enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR
Twitter: @HEAcademy   www.heacademy.ac.uk