



SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

Post-Graduate Taught Student Survey 2021

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY RESULTS

OCT 2021 |

2020-21 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (2021 PTES) Report

Table of Contents

Executive summary.....	2
1. Profile of respondents.....	3
2. Overall Satisfaction.....	5
3. Trends in experience	7
Conclusion	12

Executive summary

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is the largest sector-wide survey annually collecting feedback from taught-postgraduate students across the Higher Education sector about their learning and teaching experiences.

Whilst the first national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic led to lower participation and promotion, over 69,000 students responded in 2021, which presents a significant increase from the last survey (over 40,000 responded). As such, it provides vital benchmarking for participating HEIs. The School however saw a smaller number of participants compared to the 2020PTES survey as with only 34% managed to respond (compared to 55% in 2020).

At the time of producing this report, the AdvancedHE report has not been published. As such, the comparative data included here remains confidential. This report is therefore not to be circulated outside the School.

The School report provides a detailed analysis of the SAS results of the 2021PTES survey which was held between 10 May and 17 June. The analysis is benchmarked against past survey results as well as 2021 local and national results. Where student numbers are small, analysis has been adjusted to preserve anonymity. The analysis does not include feedback on ICS classes undertaken as part of the inter-collegiate agreement or the programmes managed in conjunction with UoLWorldwide. The appendix provides details of trends per area of experience.

Many respondents accepted that the lockdown was something outside of the institution's control, although their understanding of that fact at times was not always reflected in the results, which have noted an overall decline. The School's flexibility in the face of this external factor was valued as well as expected. The continuous impact of the various lockdowns was significant and although it eased by April 2021, changes in governmental approaches did continue to affect the Student experience.

The School has maintained a high satisfaction rate across the board, generally higher than the local or national rates. It shows robustness of programmes and that the pandemic has not affected the quality of the teaching, project supervision or approach to assessment and feedback, contrary to results at national and local levels. The pandemic however highlighted issues that were already known by the School as areas of potential concern, such as skills development and resources. It also

impacted naturally on the engagement area of experience, despite strenuous efforts to bring School activities online.

This Survey focused in depth on the support provided to students and how it was perceived, trying to establish a balance between learning, well-being, and career development within a pandemic context. The ability of the School and staff to use technology was central to the success of this transition, but it could not compare to the on-campus engagement activities and the contribution to research culture. Access to resources continued to be a critical issue during lockdown. For all the challenges of this period, it is clear that for some, it was a pause or time which offered greater flexibility, while for others it presented challenges and disappointments that were difficult to manage.

Approval rate and improvements are highlighted in **dark red**; while lower satisfaction results and areas of concern are highlighted in **dark purple**.

1. Profile of respondents

32 out of 94 SAS PGT students responded to the Student Survey (compared to 55 out of 112 SAS in 2020). This represents 34% of the 2020-21 student cohort (compared to 66% of the 2019-20).

Responses were received from students of all institutes offering postgraduate taught degrees, except the IMLR. Some programmes received a very small number of responses. The highest response rate was from students belonging to the WI.

The profile of SAS respondents remains overall older than the national average, overwhelmingly female, with a higher proportion than recorded nationally. SAS respondents continued to be predominantly white, reflecting the national trend. The proportion of part-time and full-time students is fairly evenly balanced, still predominantly UK-domiciled. 66% were self-funded (including family or other contributions or loans), 17% were funding their studies through their own savings or employment, while 19% had a postgraduate loan.

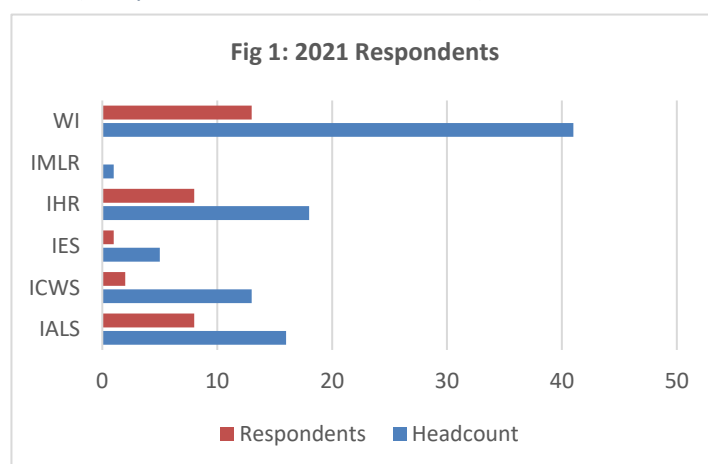
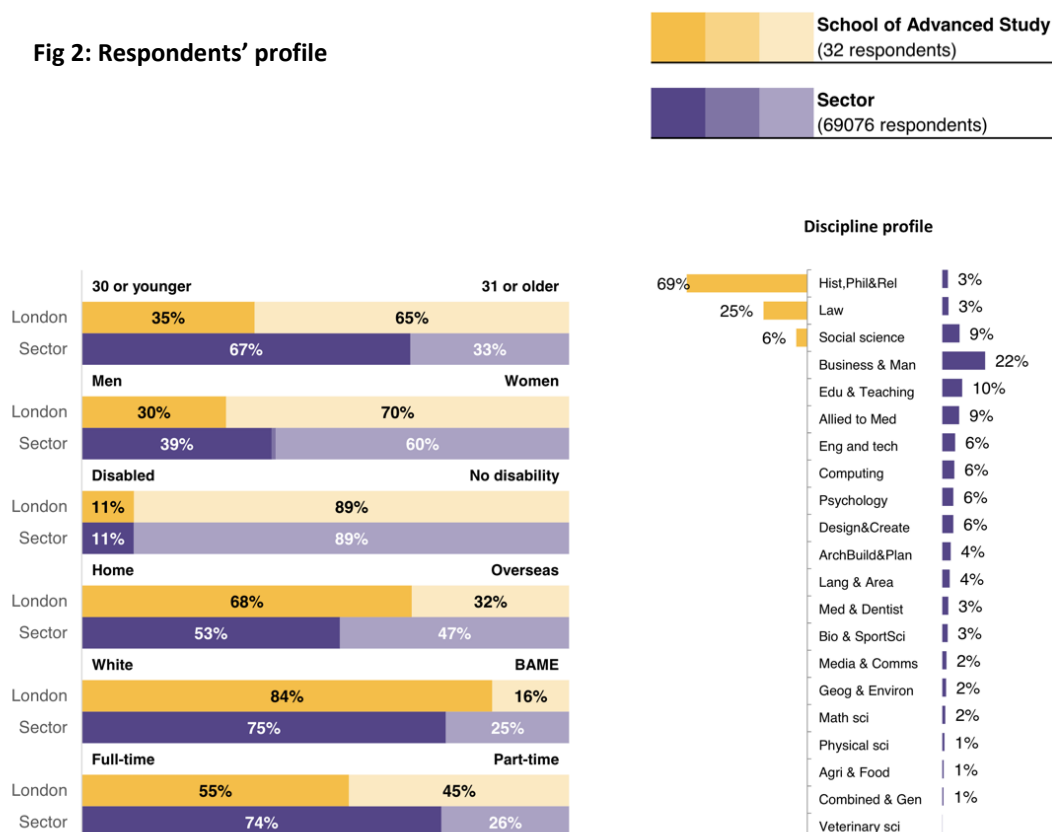
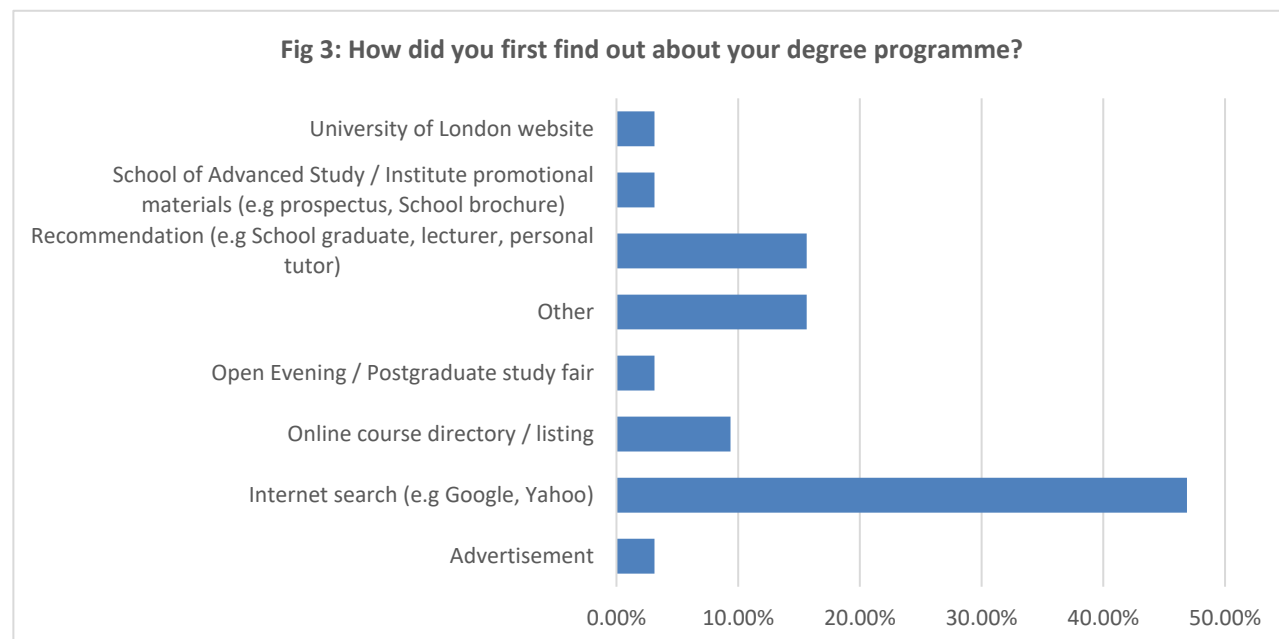


Fig 2: Respondents' profile



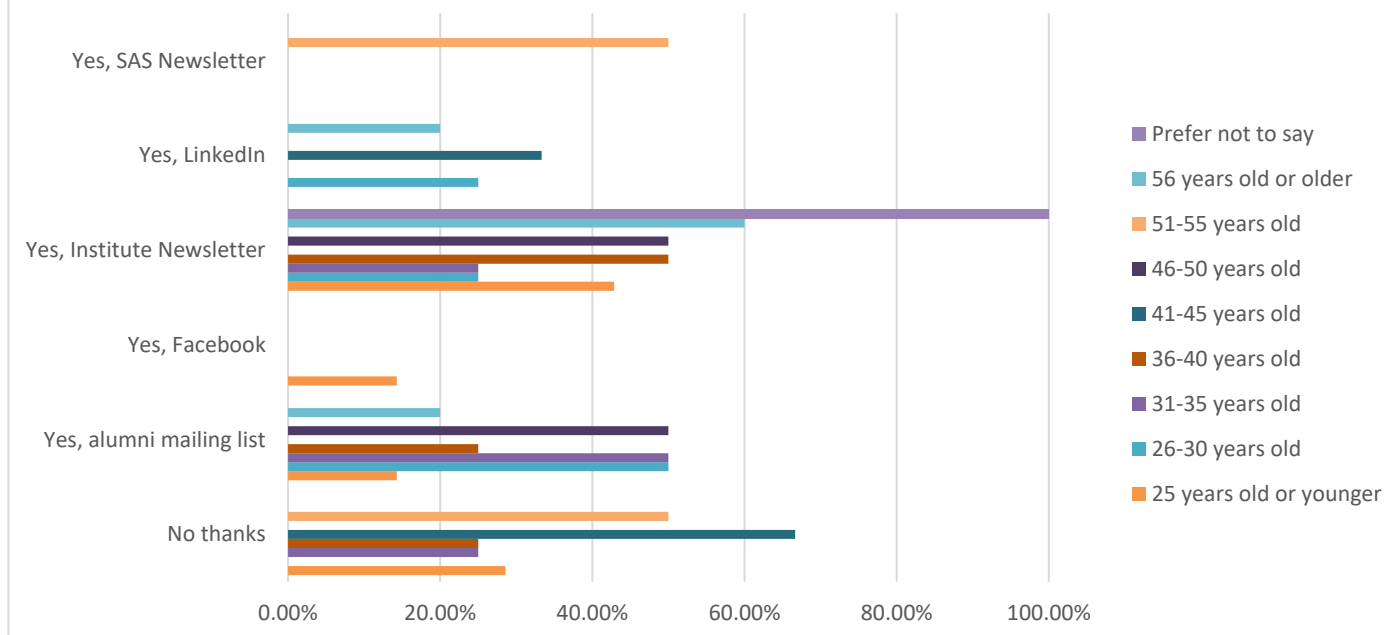
When asked how they found out about their degree programme, most respondents indicated that they used the internet search engines.

Fig 3: How did you first find out about your degree programme?



Respondents were overwhelmingly keen on staying in touch with the School, preferably via the institute newsletter.

Fig 4: Would you be interested in staying in touch with your institute/the School?



2. Overall Satisfaction

- Q21.1.a. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

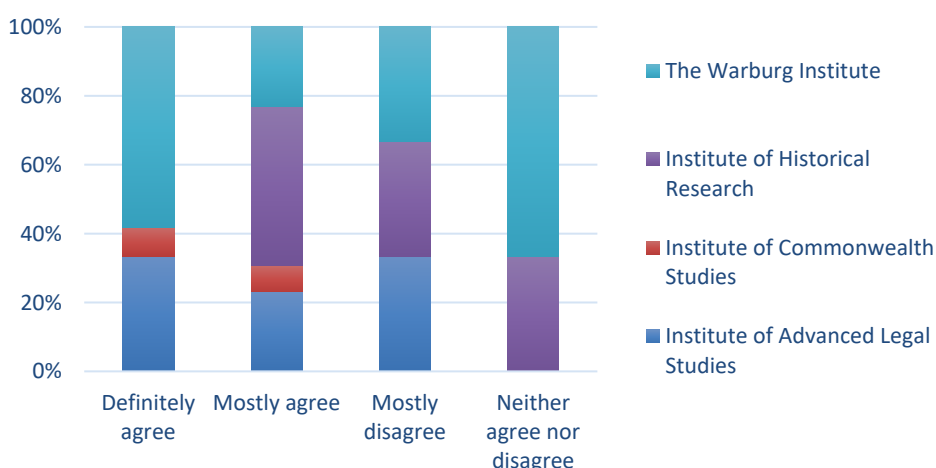
81% (compared to 84% in 2019-20) of SAS respondents were satisfied overall with the quality of the course. This represents a **3% decrease**.

The positive score is made of 38% of respondents who *definitely agree* and 44% who *mostly agree* (the opposite to 2020 results). 3 institutes recorded disagreement (compared to 1 in the previous survey). The IHR and the WI also recorded neutral scores on this question (*neither agree nor disagree*).

Table 1: SAS Overall Satisfaction Rate over the years

Year	Satisfaction Rate
2021	81%
2020	84%
Comparison	-3%
2018	84%
2017	93%
2016	74%
2015	78%
2014	90%
2013	81%

Fig 5: Q21.1.a. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course



The School's results are **higher than the ones** recorded nationally or locally:

Table 2: Comparison with national and local results		
PTES 2021	Survey sample	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course
SAS	32	81%
Sector	69076	78%
Russell Group	18572	76%
London	21986	77%
Pre-92	32646	78%

Respondents were asked to comment on two particular points in reference to their overall satisfaction of the course: the one thing that they enjoyed the most and the one thing that merited improvements. While the individual responses can be seen in the appendix, results indicate that respondents were in particular happy with the course content, the quality of the teaching (material and staff) and how personable staff have been.

- *It has been a pleasure to study on a course that values an interdisciplinary approach to the past, with likeminded people who are interested in the classical tradition, religion, philosophy, art, literature and the culture of Italy. The quality of teaching and the level of individual support and guidance from tutors is of the highest standard.*
- *I enjoyed the quality of the program: discussions with professors, quality of the reading materials, and diversity among my fellow students.*

It is interesting to note that while in this question, respondents highlighted their appreciation to the type of engagement they have had with their peers *such as exercise sessions, group discussions and brainstorming on different ways to solve a problem*, when reviewing in detail (under the Engagement area of experience), the results are not as positive.

Respondents did have more to say on the one thing that would have improved the most their experience of the course. This included wanting more details on module assignments, more face-to-face contact (teaching, discussion, fieldtrip, lectures, visits), which would have proved difficult under a lockdown. However, some of the requests are worth noting for the future.

- *Being given more information about what the module teaching would be like. I would not have chosen one of my modules if it had been effectively communicated to us that we were going to get a hugely different teaching experience (and one that was quite disappointing) in comparison to last year.*

Lack of online access to resources, to internal as well as external libraries such as JSTOR continues to be an area in needs of improvement, while others highlighted again the need to review or update some of the materials used. The students did feel that they were missing out on quite a few things as a result of the pandemic.

- *Just being in a classroom situation! We have missed all the site visits to archives, libraries, museums, and engaged in no fieldwork or practical activity within specialist sites. This is*

*required to support and promote the understanding gained in the theory zoom sessions.
Therefore a very major part of the course has just not been possible.*

3. Trends in experience

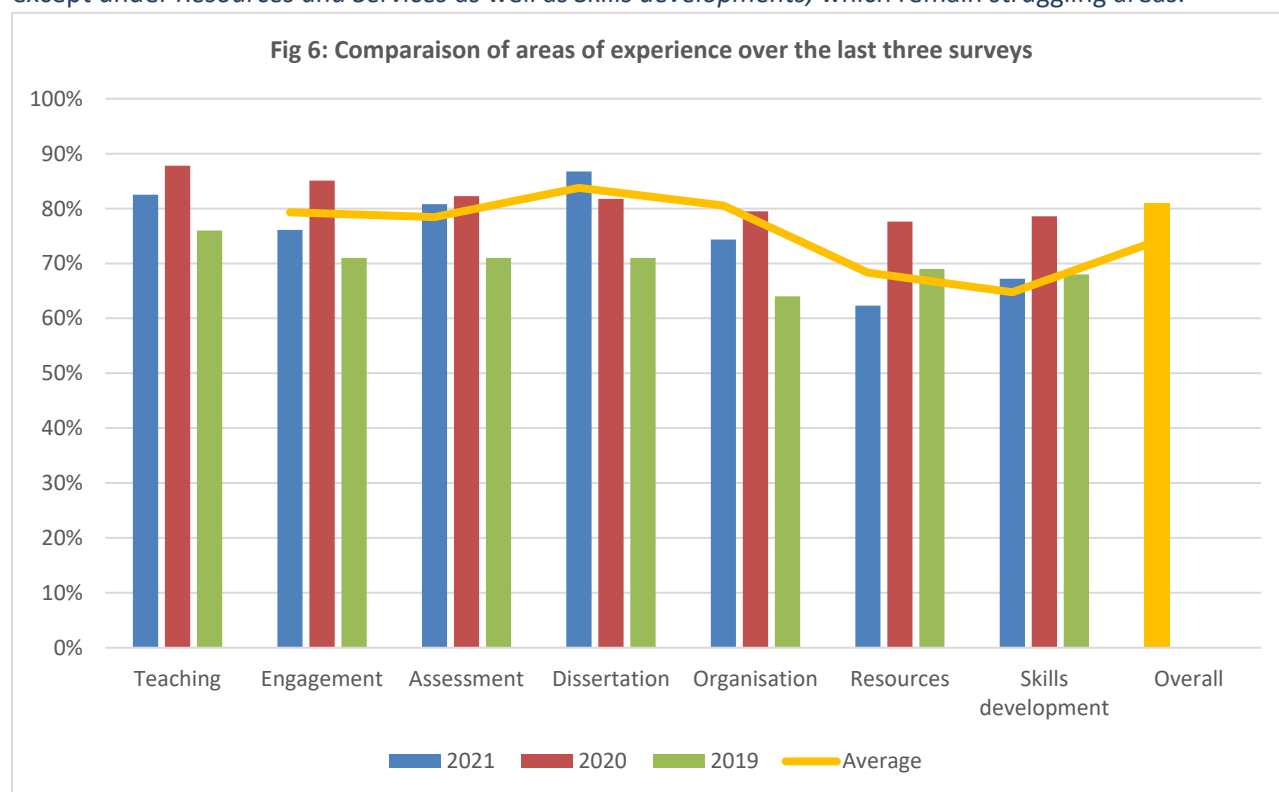
The PTES survey organises questions around eight different areas of experience: Quality of teaching and learning, Engagement, Assessment and feedback, Dissertation or major project, Organisation and management, Resources and services, Skills development, and Support [new – replacing Information]. This year, the survey also focused on the student's experience in the context of a pandemic, the organisational support and the organisation's response to students.

The combined satisfaction rate (based on the average score of all areas of experience put together) is showing a **7% decrease** across the board (from 82% in 2020 to 75% in 2021). This is due in particular to *Engagement, Resources and Skills development*, the last two having recorded the lowest satisfaction averages to date.

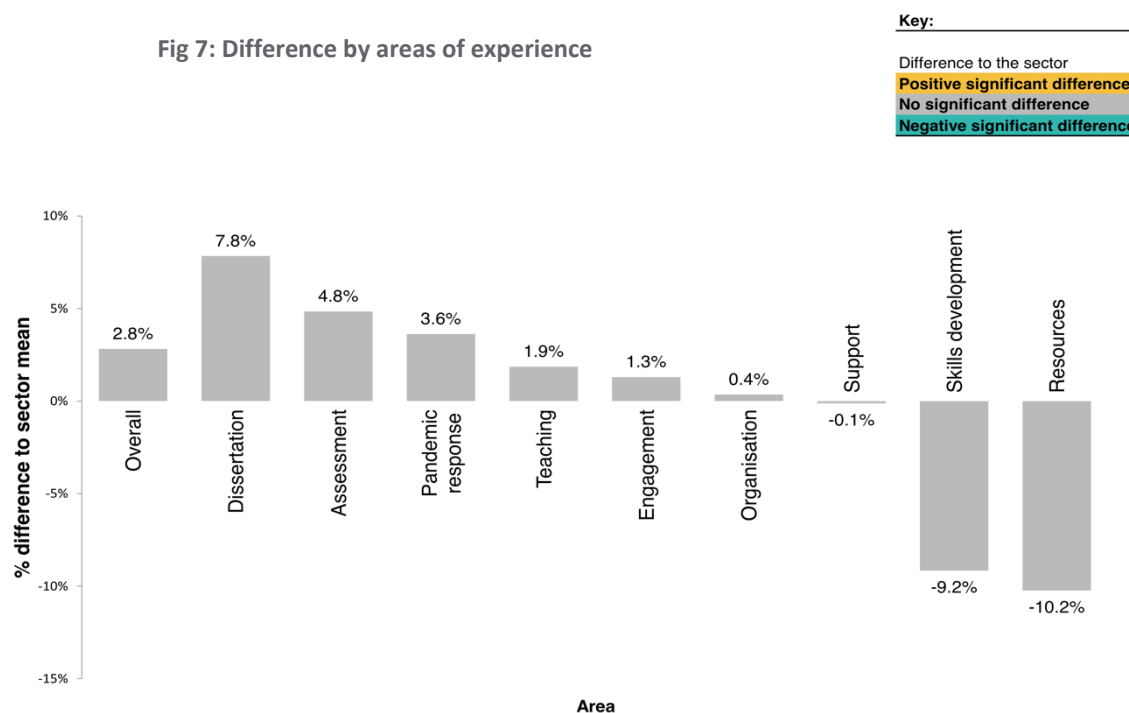
Table 4: Comparison of SAS satisfaction averages per area of experience

Areas	PTES 2021	Comparison with 2020	PTES 2020	PTES 2019	PTES 2018	PTES 2017	PTES 2016	PTES 2015	PTES 2014
Quality of teaching and learning	83%	-5%	88%	76%	81%	91%	80%	83%	93%
Engagement	76%	-9%	85%	71%	78%	87%	77%	75%	86%
Assessment and feedback	81%	-1%	82%	71%	76%	81%	68%	69%	67%
Dissertation or major project	87%	5%	82%	71%	85%	89%	76%	75%	67%
Organisation and management	74%	-5%	79%	64%	71%	80%	73%	69%	69%
Resources and services	62%	-15%	78%	69%	70%	79%	66%	72%	78%
Skills development	67%	-11%	79%	68%	73%	80%	73%	68%	73%
Support [New]	74%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The Student experience profile shows that School has lost on the gains reported in the last survey, except under *Resources and Services* as well as *Skills developments*, which remain struggling areas.



In comparison with the global or local benchmarks, the School is exhibiting a more positive experience across the areas, except for *Resources and Services* and Skills development.

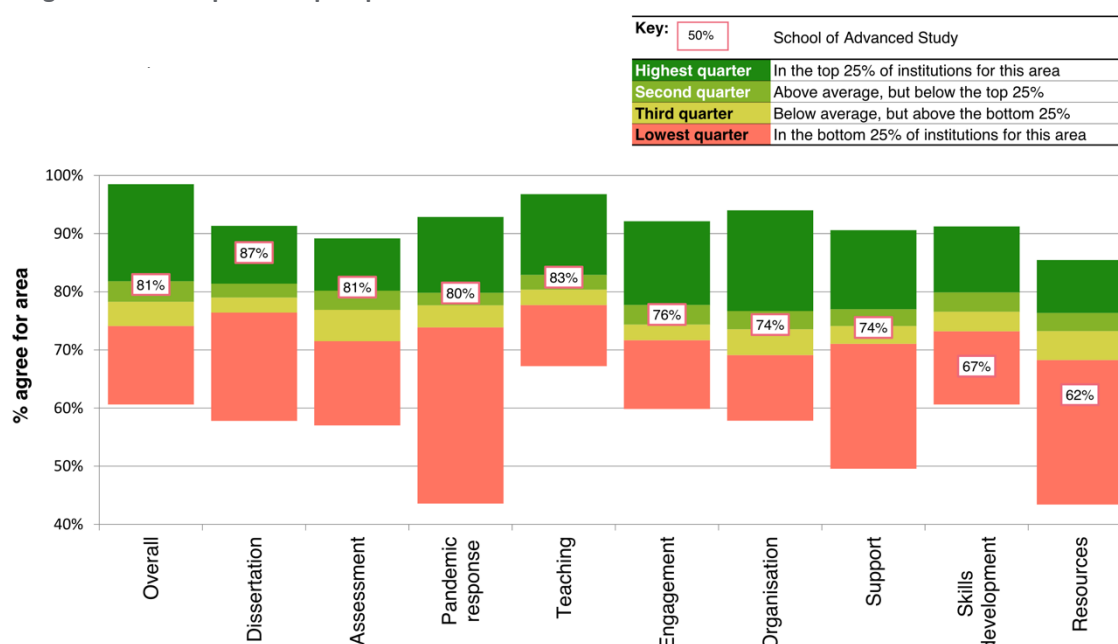


When compared with national and local benchmarks, the School's results are overall simply representative of its infrastructure and unique offer.

Table 5: Comparison of SAS average satisfaction rates vs national and local results

Areas	PTES2021	PTES2021 National Scores	How does SAS compare?	PTES2021 – Russell Gp	How does SAS compare?	PTES2021 – London	How does SAS compare?
Quality of teaching and learning	83%	81%	2%	80%	3%	80%	3%
Engagement	76%	75%	1%	72%	6%	73%	3%
Assessment and feedback	81%	76%	5%	71%	10%	73%	10%
Dissertation or major project	87%	79%	8%	79%	8%	78%	9%
Organisation and management	74%	74%	5%	73%	2%	73%	7%
Resources and services	62%	73%	-6%	71%	-6%	67%	-5%
Skills development	67%	76%	-9%	74%	4%	74%	5%
Support [new]	74%	74%	-	73%	1%	71%	3%

Fig 8: Areas of experience per quarters



High scores, 80% and above, are present in nearly almost all the areas of experience, with the exception of *Resources and Services* and *Support*. (see appendix for details). The high scores were representative of the quality of the teaching, course content and quality of supervision. However, students' positive experience was not entirely consistent, and low scores (60% and below) were also recorded across the areas of experience.

- *It has been a pleasure to study on a course that values an interdisciplinary approach to the past, with likeminded people [sic]. The quality of teaching and the level of individual support and guidance from tutors is of the highest standard. The three aspects of the MA - cultural, intellectual and visual - have proven to be so intertwined that I cannot imagine studying or teaching history in any other way.*

- *Not all lecturers are able to make best use of online sessions. Opportunities for interaction between students was sadly minimal, devaluing the tutorial based experience that students from previous years had enjoyed so much.*

The respondents' different home situations, whether they were distance learners or on campus, as well as their mode of study provided different perspectives and expectations from the School taught programmes. All had an effect on the students' experience, particularly on the feeling of isolation during this period, although respondents did recognise that staff were doing their best to mitigate the effects.

- *Due to the pandemic, I did not have sufficient opportunities to discuss my work with other students. It is hard to organize a discussion with my classmates because we are in different time zones.*
- *I thought this was a difficult time for all concerned. I felt that our course director did their best to 'add in' lectures and/or find alternatives to work 'in the field'. Didn't always work but they did try.*

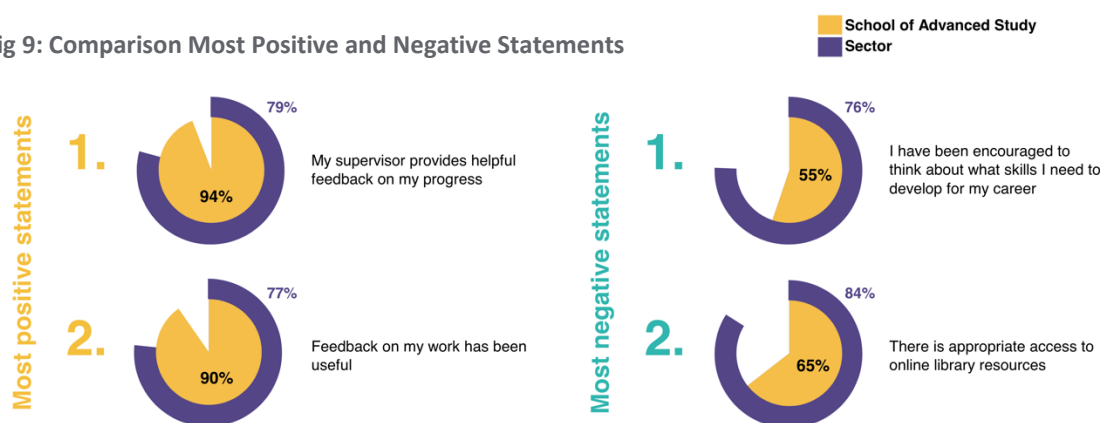
The opportunity to discuss student's work or to receive face to face feedback with the supervisors or other students was mentioned throughout the survey and the results are reflective of the impact of the pandemic on the organisation as well as on its people. The lack of consistency across the institutes is worthy of note as ratings varied from 'excellent, terrific' to 'not useful, below standard'.

- *Feedback for written assessments has varied depending on lecturers in terms of depth, but either way it has been constructive.*

It is clear from the responses that not everyone was confident in using online facilities, and course information may not have been updated as quickly as one would have hoped. This is in particular reflected in the scores noted under the **Organisation and Management** area. Concerns were raised related to information (either about the course, workload, or changes made) which does not seem to have provided for the respondents enough insight on what to expect. Communication in relation to the closure of programme(s) or institute(s) was mentioned as having been difficult to understand and as such was an additional factor that affected their studies.

- *I don't think the preliminary information is clear enough about the workload. it doesn't say that there will be pieces of work that have to be presented in addition to the marked assignments. I feel I have only been able to do justice to this commitment because I have been furloughed for large periods of time and was effectively studying full time. Once back at work (part-time) the pressure was quite intense, luckily most of the taught element had been delivered by the time I resumed work.*

Fig 9: Comparison Most Positive and Negative Statements



Not all the variances in the results were representative of a negative experience, but an experience clearly affected by events outside the organisation's control. In this case, a lot of respondents chose to provide a neutral answer (neither agree nor disagree). This is in particular true to the **Skills development** area of experience, which recorded the highest number of neutral responses, but with the most devastating effect. For post-graduate students, their courses are meant to help them build their confidence as researchers and potentially follow an academic career. Even if they felt isolated during the 20-21 academic year, 94% of the respondents were positive that they had developed their research skills. However, when questioned further, these respondents felt that their creative thinking or their ability to address audiences had not developed in the same way and did eventually admit that they did not feel necessarily adequately prepared for their future career.

- *It has been a case of very independent learning this year! I cannot say that I am super confident with my creative or research skills now and this is no doubt due to no face-to-face interaction. So my skill set has not developed as much as hoped.*
- *I am not confident I will 'stand out in the crowd' or even be eligible for funding.*

The area which shows the highest negative experience is **Resources and Services**. The lack of access to library resources, materials, modules, or online journals was enhanced with the pandemic. Although adjustments were made to reading lists, the lack of access to online journals was hard to deal with. Some students had to resort to other resources to support their studies, which contributed to the less positive satisfaction rate in this area, as some students felt that this affected their career development.

- *Access to resources has been difficult during the pandemic. I can't really comment on on-campus facilities/library as I have as yet never set foot on campus. I have been able to access a number of very good on-line resources. I have bought a lot of second hand books (costly!) and already had a reasonable library of relevant books of my own but I know other students struggled with this. We had the option to cite references we were unable to consult in our assignments but there was always the uneasy feeling there might be significant texts out there we just didn't know about. It is also quite unsatisfactory to not be able to read something relevant.*

For students on distance learning courses, the increased focus on remote support and teaching improved their experience across the year, providing valuable insight of good practice that could benefit them after lockdown. For those in need of suitable working study space, which could not be

secured at home, the lack of library facilities for part of the academic year did exacerbate their frustration, in addition to the loss of access to resources, even if additional study space had been made available.

While students may have understood the unprecedented circumstances in which they were undertaking their studies, their perceptions of staff and the organisational support they received were split.

- *I thought the virtual learning set up was good for academic skills & IT skills. We were not offered personal tutors. I think the lockdown & furloughed experience has just been off for everyone.*
- *The counselling services are not enough for the stress put upon students, especially during COVID.*
- *[staff were] fully supportive and flexible when it comes to handing in assessments and adapting to the needs of the student*

When it comes to the organisation and its support to students in direct relation to Covid19, it seems to have developed as different lockdowns took effect. Students were content with the way they had started their course, with sufficient advice and support. But as the year went on, responses related to specific advice or support, such as study skills (avoiding plagiarism, or being able to make choices), were less positive. While general communication was clear and support from staff was evident as shown in the responses, the same opinion does not seem to extend to particular aspects such as the No Detriment Policy or the hardship fund (as shown in the last section of this report). It is however good to see that student representatives were mentioned as an available support structure and half of the respondents did think that they were being supported by their representatives and that their concerns were being listened to.

Considering how difficult this year has been for staff and students, it is not surprising that a higher

Table 6: Comparison of SAS results on Retention	
Institution/ mean average	Q37 -Considered leaving or suspending course [No]
SAS 2021PTES	69%
SAS 2020PTES	79%
Comparison	-10%
SAS 2019PTES	67%
SAS 2018PTES	72%
SAS 2017PTES	79%
Sector	77%

number of students considered leaving their course.

31% (10% more than in 2020) had considered leaving or suspending their course. Students explained that they had considered leaving because of difficulties balancing study and other commitments (40%), family or personal problems (10%), they felt the content of the course was not

what they expected (20%) and because they felt the way the course was delivered was not what they expected (30%), which does confirm the conclusions noted above. In actual terms, the School lost very few students as they opted instead for the generous provisions outlined in the No Detriment policy such as fee-free terms, fully supported interruptions, and deferrals.

Conclusion

The overall student experience has decreased since 2020, but the results are clearly linked to the pandemic and the consequences of national lockdowns. The School's scores remained however in general higher than with the national and local benchmarks.

Reference

HESA, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey Data 2021 (Report not out yet)

HESA, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2020 Report

SAS PTES Reports 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015