

## 2015 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) Report

### Introduction

This report provides an overview of the results of the SAS PTES 2015 survey of current postgraduate taught students, held between 10 March and 19 June 2015. The PTES is held annually each spring and 2015 is the fourth survey that SAS has participated in.

The report shows responses by course where possible, while retaining respondent anonymity. Due to low response rates and in order to protect the identity of respondents, the results for the MA and MRes in the History of the Book have been combined, as have the responses for the MA and MRes in Historical Research. Latin America pathway respondents have also been combined with the MA in Understanding and Securing Human Rights.

The PTES questionnaire was redesigned in 2014 to reflect the sector's increasing focus on student engagement, information provision and widening participation. PTES 2014, therefore, sets a new baseline for the sector, which should be considered when comparing results to surveys held prior to 2014.










This report has been compiled independently by Red Kite Marketing Insight, a market research and insight company specialising in higher education.

### Executive summary

- **The School continues to receive a much higher response rate than the national average.** 63 respondents completed the survey representing a 57% response rate. The national response rate was 29% (72,297 students from 100 HEIs – the highest number since the survey began).
- **Responses were received from students of all five institutes offering postgraduate taught degrees.** IALS (32.8%) and the IHR (27.9%) reported the highest response rates. IES (9.8%) and the Warburg (13.1%) reported the lowest.
- **The majority of respondents are UK-domiciled:** 54.8% UK, 17.7% other EU and 27.4% overseas.
- **Just over half of respondents hold full-time status (54%), and almost half of respondents (46%) are in paid employment. Of those working, almost half are working more than 30 hours a week in paid employment while studying (48.3%).** Different levels of support and flexible study arrangements are important to working students, a growing trend among postgraduate students, especially in the humanities.
- **The overall level of satisfaction experienced by respondents is much lower than in previous years, with 78% of respondents reporting that they were satisfied with their course compared to 90% in 2014. Overall satisfaction levels were also below the national average of 82%.** SAS scored a higher than the national average satisfaction rate in the quality of teaching and learning. However, lower than national satisfaction rates were reported in all other student experience areas.
- **The lowest levels of satisfaction reported were with skills development, assessment and feedback and organisation and management.** Satisfaction levels were substantially lower than in 2014 and the reasons for this drop and the opportunities for improvement should be investigated. Areas where the biggest falls in satisfaction levels were experienced were in overall experience, the quality

of teaching and learning, and engagement. Most notably, students reported an 11% lower satisfaction level with resources and services than the national average.

**Table 1: SAS satisfaction rates compared to national response rates**

Overall experience and satisfaction by area:	SAS 2015 response	PTES 2015 response	How does SAS compare against the national average?	SAS 2014 response	SAS 2013 response	SAS 2012 response
<b>Overall experience</b>	77.8%	82.5%	 - 4.7%	90%	81%	78%
<b>Quality of teaching and learning</b>	82.9%	81.8%	 + 1.1%	93%	79%	76%
<b>Engagement</b> (new for 2014)	75.1%	78.3%	 - 3.2%	86%	N/A	N/A
<b>Assessment and feedback</b>	69.0%	72.2%	 - 3.2%	67%	64%	64%
<b>Dissertation or major project</b> (new for 2014)	74.7%	77.6%	 - 2.9%	67%	N/A	N/A
<b>Organisation and management</b>	69.3%	73.3%	 - 4.0%	69%	67%	64%
<b>Information</b>	79.6%	77.4%	 + 2.2%	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Resources and services</b> (updated in 2014 to include support services)	71.8%	82.9%	 - 11.1%	78%	81%	79%
<b>Skills development</b> (updated in 2014 to combine skills and career development)	67.9%	77.4%	 - 9.5%	73%	N/A (see below)	N/A (see below)
<b>Career and professional development</b> (combined with skills development in 2014)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	69%	60%
<b>Skills and personal development</b> (combined with skills development in 2014)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	79%	71%

## Survey Results

### Profile and representativeness of respondents

The profile of respondents by age across SAS is older than the national response profile. Almost one in four SAS respondents (23%) are aged 56 years or older, substantially higher than the national survey response rate of 2%. The profile of respondents by age differs substantially by course, often reflecting the student profile as a whole.

Table 2 (below) details the demographic profile of SAS respondents by course. There is very little difference in the balance of respondents that reported a disability and the fee status of respondents between the SAS and PTES 2015 profiles. The proportion of female, part-time and UK and Other EU domiciled students is noticeably higher in SAS respondents than nationally.

**Table 2: Profile of respondents by gender, disability, domicile and mode of study**

	Gender		Disability		Fee status			Study status	
	Female	Male	Yes	No	UK	Other EU	Non-EU	Full-time	Part-time
<b>SAS 2015</b>	<b>80.6%</b>	<b>19.4%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>95.2%</b>	<b>54.8%</b>	<b>17.7%</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>54.0%</b>	<b>46.0%</b>
<b>PTES 2015</b>	<b>57.6%</b>	<b>41.3%</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>90.2%</b>	<b>50.4%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>	<b>36.7%</b>	<b>65.9%</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
LLM Advanced Legislative Studies (incl Distance)	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%	100.0%	20.0%	0.0%	80.0%	50.0%	50.0%
LLM International Corporate...	40.0%	60.0%	0.0%	100.0%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	100.0%	0.0%
MA Art History	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
MA Cultural and Intellectual History	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%	0.0%
MA Garden... History	81.8%	18.2%	10.0%	90.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	45.5%	54.5%
MA/MRes Historical Research	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	60.0%
MA/MRes History of the Book	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%	50.0%	50.0%
MA Taxation	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	100.0%	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	20.0%	80.0%
MA Understanding ... Human Rights (incl LA Pathway)	91.6%	8.4%	8.3%	91.7%	83.3%	8.3%	8.3%	33.3%	66.6%

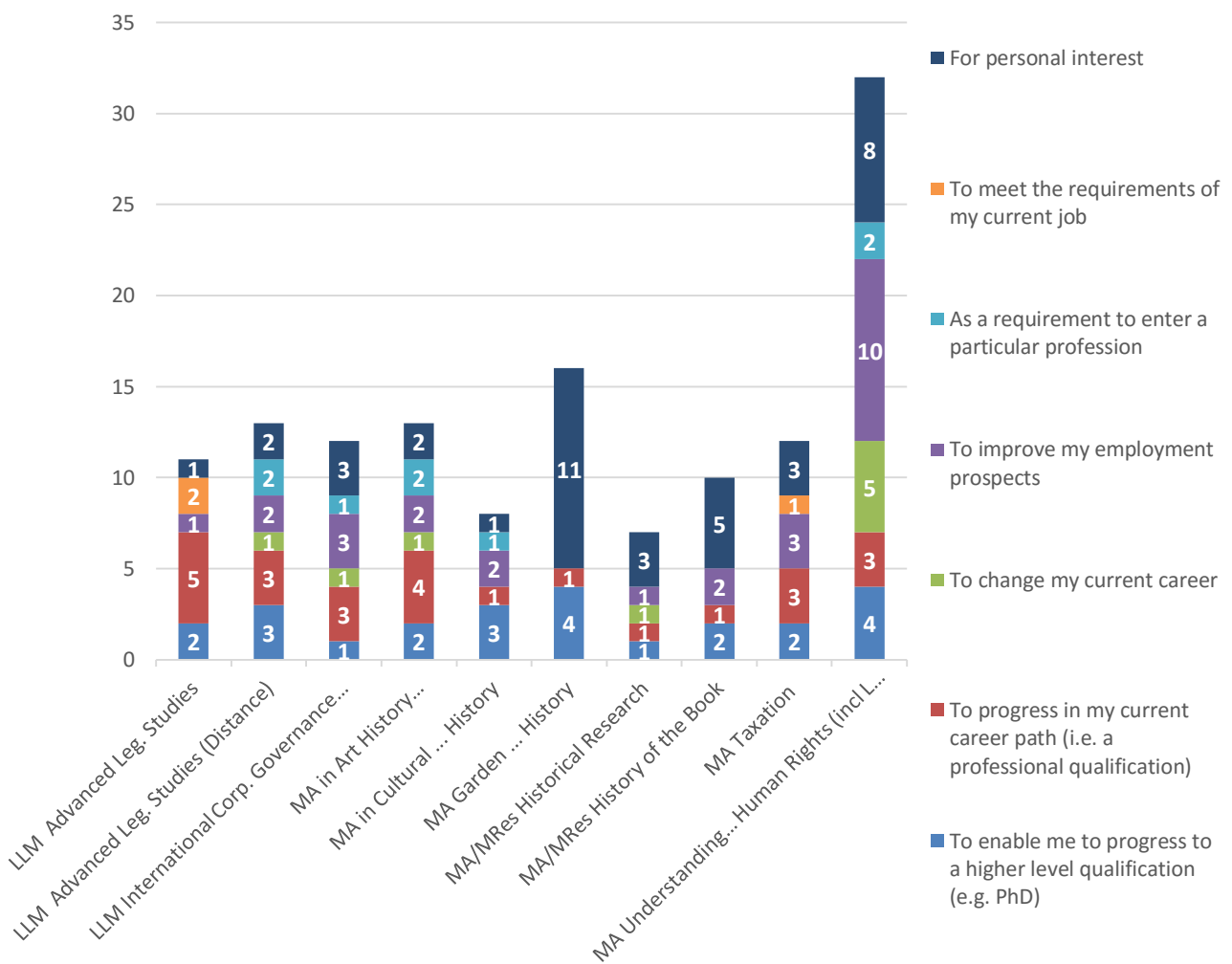
## Study motivations and aspirations

### Motivations for taking this course

Students were asked to reflect on their motivations for study and reasons for picking their particular course. The PTES results show that motivations are complex and often combine apparently contrasting reasons, which means postgraduate courses will often have to meet multiple needs. Across SAS, students placed more importance on personal interest (29% of students cited this as a main factor in their decision), to improve employment prospects (20%) and to progress in their current career path (19%).

UK students (36%) were significantly more motivated by personal interest than either other EU (25%) or non-EU (18%) students. Non-EU students (30%) were significantly more motivated to progress in their current careers path than their British (13%) and other EU (16%) counterparts, indicating the importance of this course component for these students. Part-time students were more likely to be motivated by personal interest (36%) than full-time students (24%). The motivations for choosing a particular qualification vary greatly between courses, which is indicated in figure 1 below.

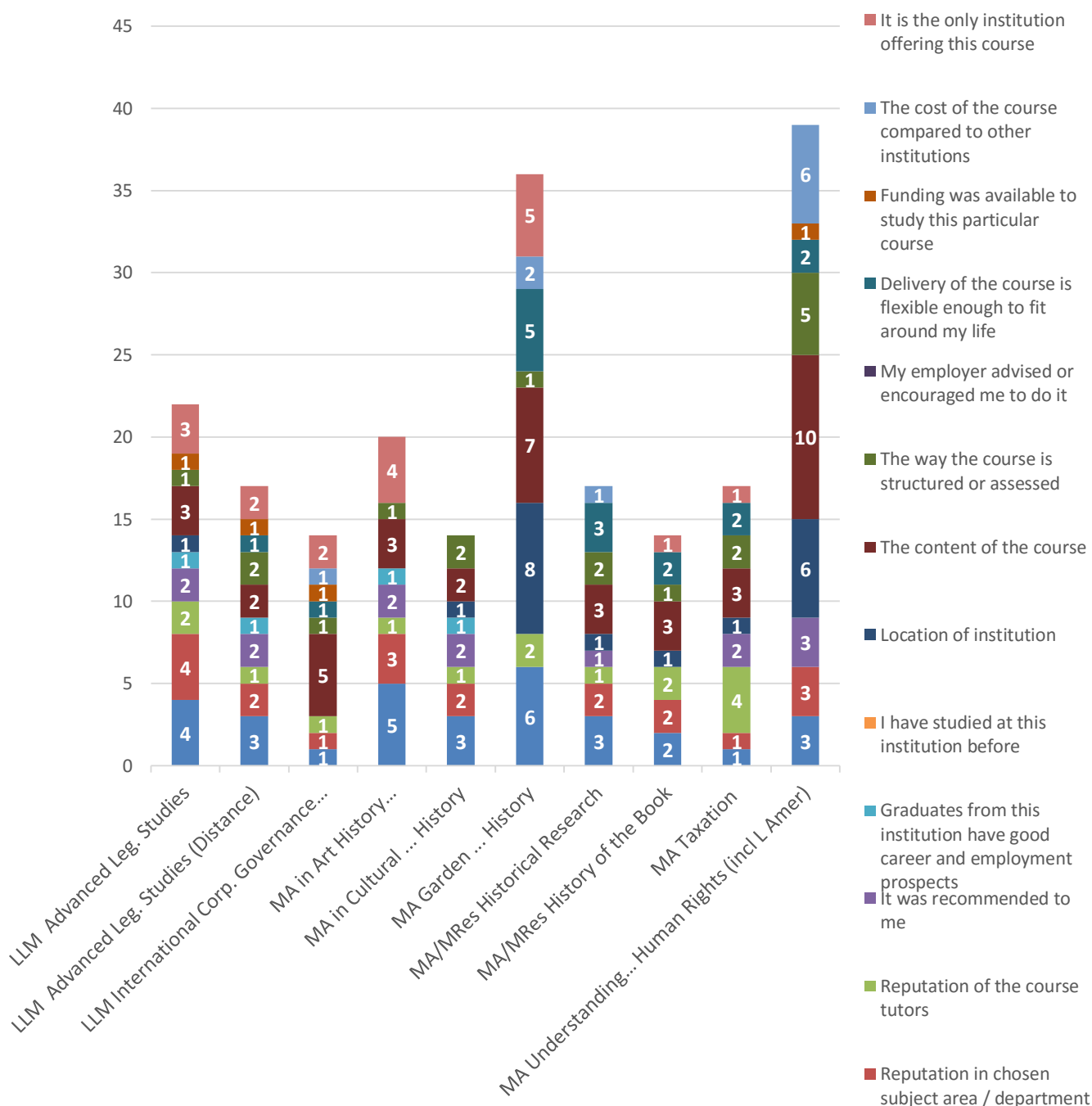
**Figure 1** Motivations for taking this course by degree



### Motivations for studying at SAS

PTES asks students why they chose to study for this qualification at this particular institution, and the results are summarised below by degree. The content of the course (64%), the overall reputation of the institution (46%), and its reputation in the subject area (33%) were the top reasons for students to choose the course they were studying. UK students were significantly more motivated by the content of the course (35%) than other EU (11%) and non-EU (18%). Motivations did not vary between full-time and part-time students, which is in stark contrast to the national results where flexibility of delivery is the primary motivation for almost half of part-time students. This may indicate that SAS is missing out on this segment of the market, essentially shutting out almost half the part-time market and around a quarter of the overall postgraduate market for those courses that do not offer flexible delivery.

Figure 2 Motivations for studying at SAS



## Responses to SAS-specific questions

PTES provides institutions with the opportunity to include a number of institution-specific questions and the results of these are below. Comparisons are given with the previous years' surveys, in 2014 and 2013, for benchmarking purposes. Overall, the levels of satisfaction with student representation were comparable to the results of the 2014 survey, and higher than in 2013. Satisfaction levels with student support services were substantially higher than the previous year and the reasons for this improvement should be understood in order to ensure continuous improvement.

### Student representation

Students were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the staff student committee in their institute, the availability of their student representative and how effectively their issues and concerns were dealt with at institute or school level. Overall, respondents were satisfied with these areas. However, there was a significantly higher level of dissatisfaction from respondents at the IES, IHR and the Warburg.

Just over half of respondents (52%) felt that the staff student committee in their institute was an effective forum at which to raise issues or concerns. A continued increase since the 2014 and 2013 surveys, where 49% and 20% of respondents respectively agreed that it was an effective forum. However, a relatively high number of students, nine (14%), felt that it was not (a slightly lower percentage than respondents to the 2014 survey, when eight students [16%] expressed dissatisfaction). The majority of these students were based at the IHR (44%), the IES (22%) and the Warburg (22%).

Almost three quarters of students (70%) indicated that their student representative was available when they needed them, lower than the 78% in the 2014 survey but much higher than the 37% indicated in 2013. Two students (both based at the IES) felt that their student representative was not available when they needed them. Almost a third of respondents (30%) indicated that the question was not applicable to them or that they didn't know.

Almost half, 48%, of respondents felt that issues of concern are dealt with effectively at institute or school level (a continued increase on the 2014 survey, of 41%, and the 2013 survey at 40%). However, 19% (twelve respondents) felt that they were not. The majority of these students were based at the IHR (67%), with others based at IALS (17%), ICWS (8%), and IES (8%).

### Student support services

Students were asked to comment on the induction programme provided and ongoing student support and advice. 62% of students agreed that they had been provided with a good induction programme; significantly higher than the 28% in 2014 and comparable with 2013's 65%. 13% of respondents disagreed (much lower than the 51% in 2014), with the majority of these being based at ICWS (38%) and the IHR (38%). Just over half (57%) felt that their initial questions about the programme were answered during their first weeks at SAS, compared to one in three students (31%) in 2014 and three quarters (74%) in 2013. Only five students (8%) disagreed (a very positive comparison to the 47% in 2014), 80% of these were based at the IHR, representing 25% of respondents from the Institute.

Students reported similar levels of increased satisfaction with study support and advice received. The majority of respondents (68%) felt that they received sufficient advice and support with study skills, much higher than the 28% the previous year and comparable to the 2013 result of 70%. 14% of respondents felt that they did not receive effective support, substantially lower than the 46% and 76% reported in the 2014 and 2013 surveys, respectively. The greatest levels of dissatisfaction with study advice and support were reported by students enrolled on the MA in Garden and Landscape History (more than a third, or 36%, of respondents) and felt that they did not receive effective study skills support. The majority of students (67%) felt that they received good advice when they needed to make option choices. Only five students (8%) reported that they did not; three of these were enrolled at the IHR, one at the ICWS and one at the IES.

Greater levels of dissatisfaction were reported with the provision of careers support, with only 38% agreeing that the level is appropriate to their needs and 11% disagreeing; 32% of respondents indicated that the question was not applicable to them. This was an improvement on the 2014 survey which reported 20% agreement and 33% disagreement respectively.

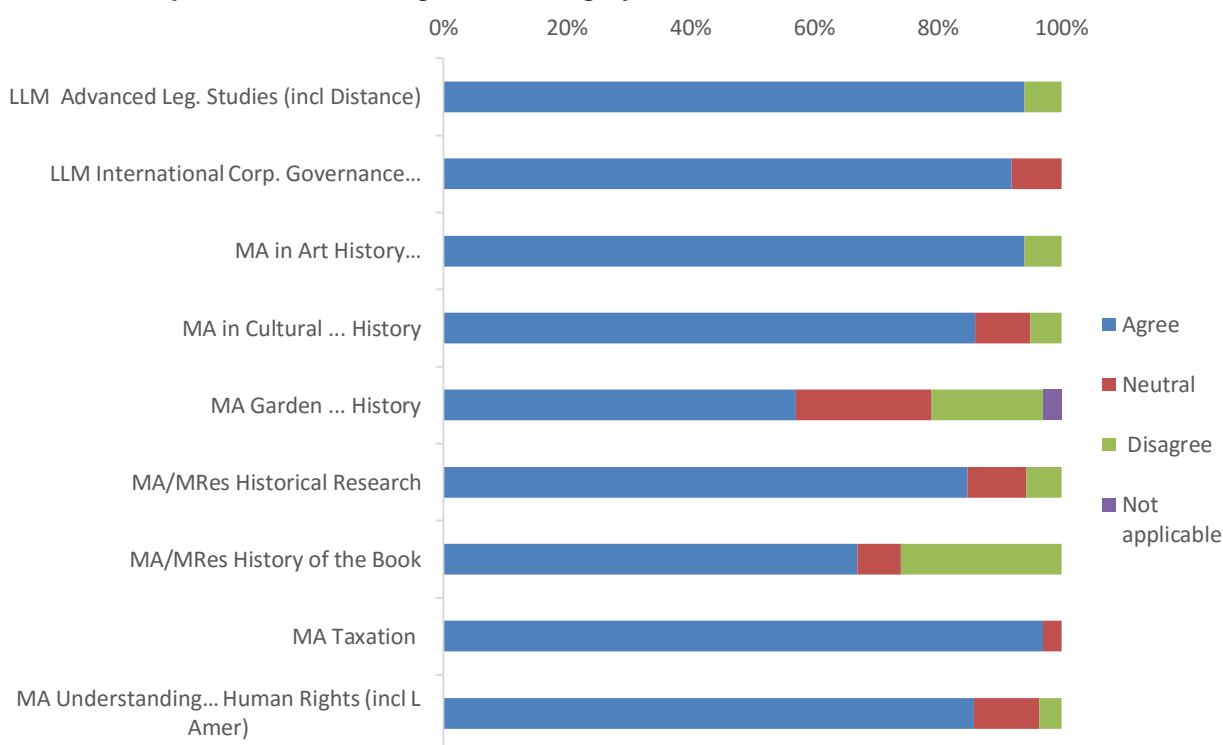
### Survey Results: Experience in detail

Following the redesign of the questionnaire in 2014, there was an increased level of positivity both nationally and institutionally, compared with the 2013 survey and prior surveys. The 2014 scale scores should, therefore, be treated as new baselines for comparison purposes. The 2015 survey reports the lowest levels of satisfaction for SAS students since the school participated in PTES. Teaching and learning was the highest rated area of experience for SAS students, and the only area where the school results are higher than the national average. Skills development (an area that was updated in 2014 to combine skills and personal development with career and professional development) was the lowest rated area, closely followed by assessment and feedback, and organisation and management.

**Quality of teaching and learning and staff:** The majority of SAS respondents, 83%, responded positively to questions concerning their teaching and learning experience. This is marginally higher than the national average of 82%, but reflects a marked fall from the 2014 survey result for SAS of 93%. Students agreed that their course is intellectually stimulating (90%), that staff are good at explaining things (89%), that staff were enthusiastic about what they are teaching (87%) and that the course has enhanced their academic ability (86%). However, only 73% of respondents were happy with the support received for learning from staff (slightly lower than the national average of 75%). And only 73% of respondents found that there was sufficient contact time (face to face and/or virtual/online) between them and staff members to support effective learning (higher than the national average of 68% and the 70% reported by SAS students in 2014).

Figure 3 below provides an overview of responses to those questions in the survey related to experience of teaching and learning by course.

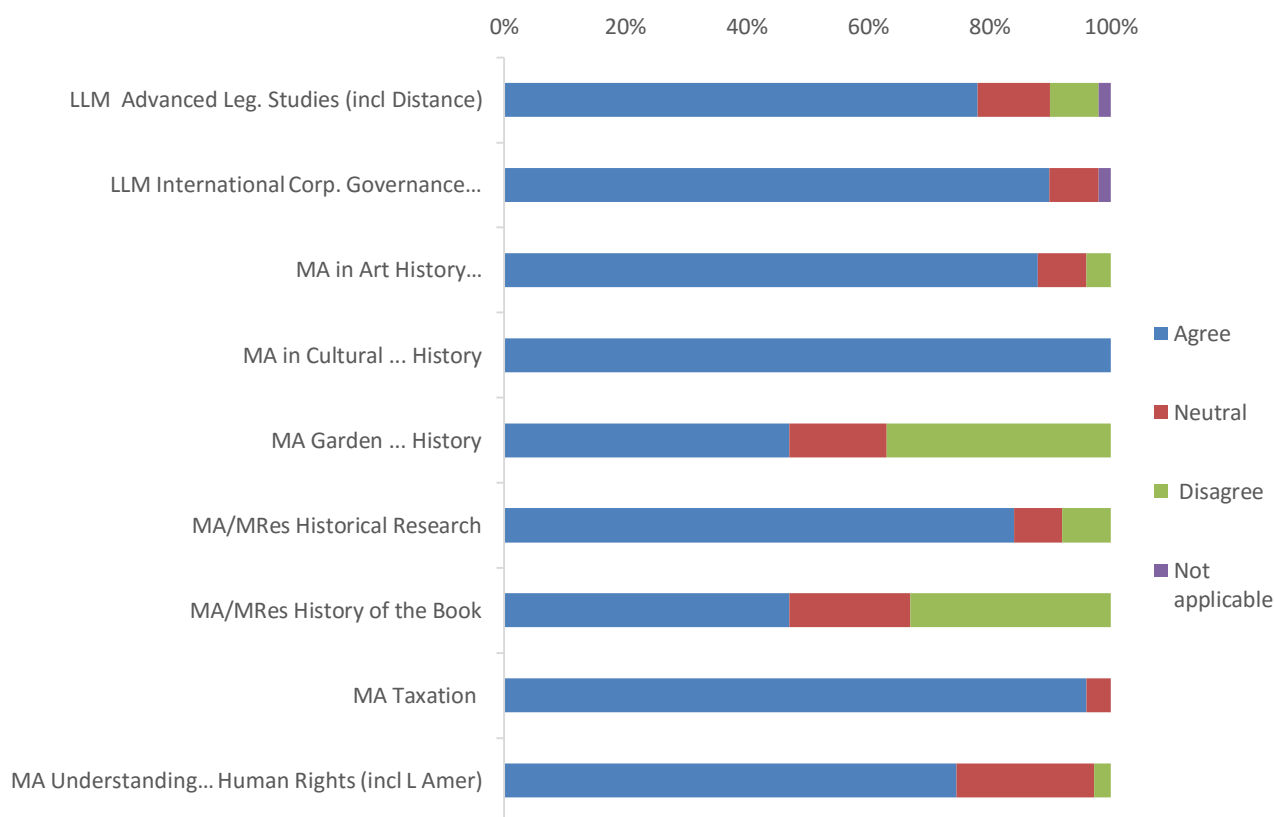
**Figure 3** Experience of teaching and learning by course



**Engagement:** PTES 2014 included a new scale examining how well students are encouraged to engage in their learning, for example, by asking questions and contributing in taught sessions, by being challenged and through opportunities for discussion with other students. The national survey results reveal a strong correlation between engagement and teaching and learning.

SAS respondents to the 2015 survey reported a significant drop in satisfaction (75%) with this area from the 2014 survey (86%), and satisfaction levels fell below the national average of 78%. The majority of students agreed with most statements in this area of experience. Most notably 86% of respondents agreed that the course had challenged them to produce their best work (compared with 81% nationally). However, more than one in five students (21%) did not agree that they had appropriate opportunities to give feedback, and almost one in five (18%) did not feel that the course created sufficient opportunities to discuss their work with other students.

**Figure 4 Experience of engagement by course**

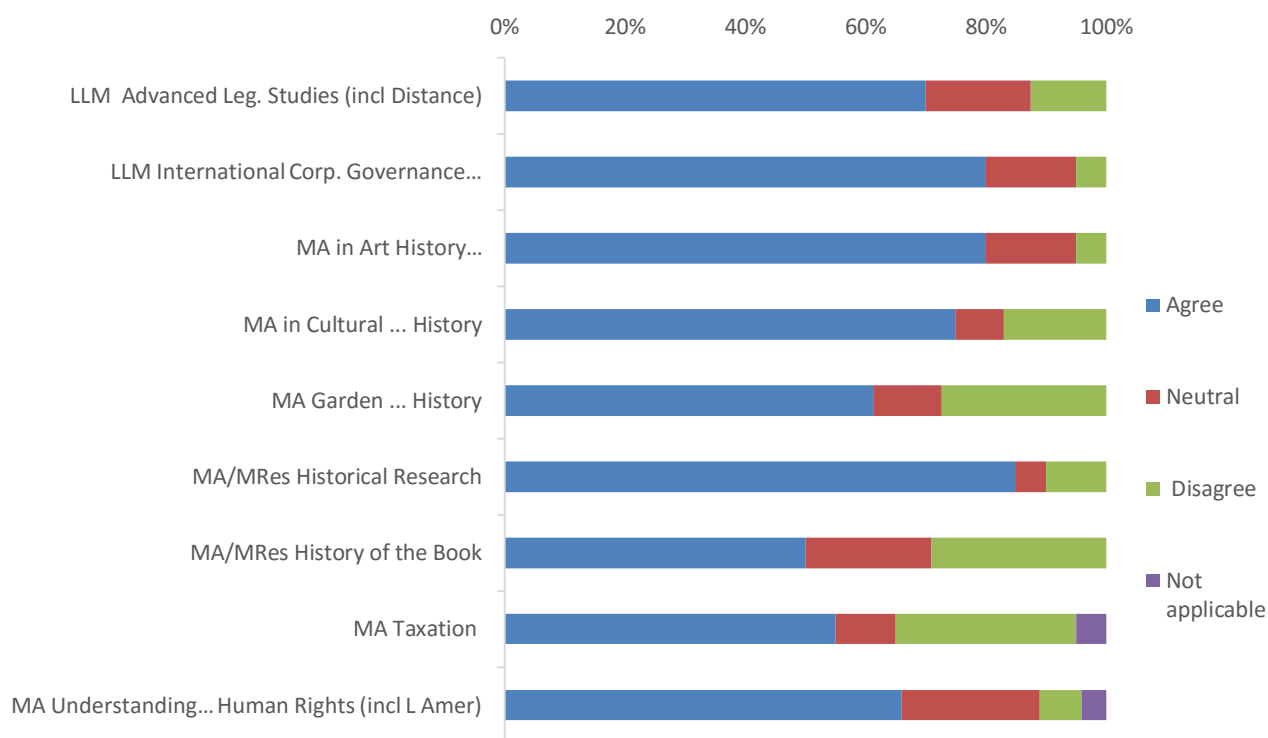


**Assessment and feedback:** This remains one of the weakest performing scales, both in SAS and nationally, with only 69% of school students and 67% of students nationally rating their experience positively. Around one in five SAS students reported disagreement with criteria used in marking being made clear in advance (21%) and the usefulness of feedback (18%). Trends in the national survey have found strong discipline effects for assessment and feedback, with the strongest scale scores for education, languages, and historical and philosophical studies. Law tends to report a mid-scale score, while STEM subjects report lower scores.

Satisfaction levels vary by course, as shown in the figure below.



**Figure 5 Experience of assessment and feedback by course**



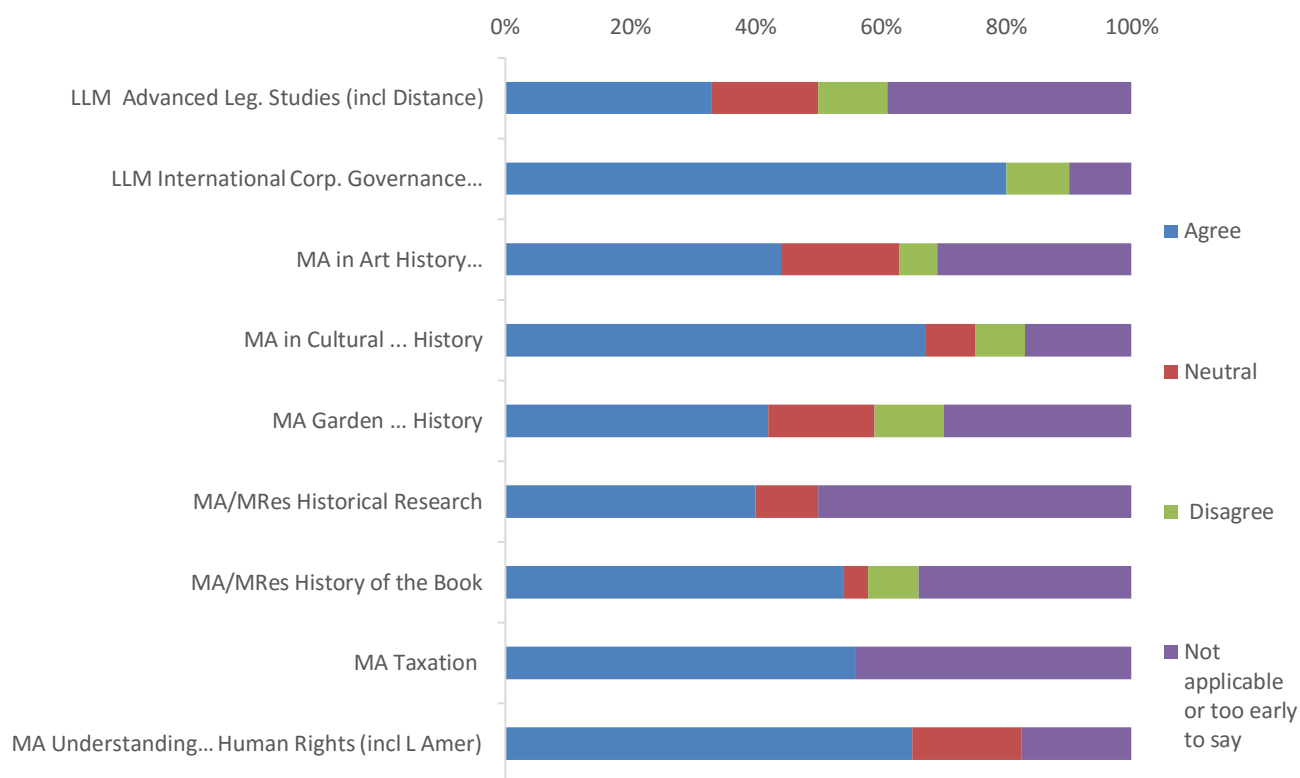
**Dissertation or major project:** The vast majority of students (89%) said that they were planning, undertaking or had completed a dissertation or major project. Of those, 64% confirmed that they were in the planning phase and 21% that they were currently working on their dissertation.

These students were asked about their understanding of the required standards for their dissertation, whether they are happy with the planning support received, whether their supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to provide adequate support, and whether their supervisor provides helpful feedback.

Students were extremely positive about the skills and knowledge of their supervisor (92% agreement) and the helpfulness of the feedback received on their progress (77% agreement). However, almost one in five students (18%) were unhappy with the support received for planning their dissertation – the weakest area for SAS in this section – and almost one in six students (14%) did not feel that they understood the required standards for the dissertation. Indeed, while students of SAS reported lower levels of agreement (75%) for this scale than the national average (78%) – making this area one of potential concern – SAS students also reported lower than average disagreement at 8%. This is mainly due to a large number of SAS students responding that it was too early to comment on their experience or not applicable.

The experiences of those students who said they were planning or undertaking a dissertation are shown by course below.

**Figure 6 Experience of dissertation or major project by course**



**Organisation and management:** Effective course organisation and management can be particularly important for postgraduate students juggling multiple commitments. The new scale was introduced in 2014 and includes an item covering support for transition into the programme and asks about the extent to which students are involved in decisions about how the course is run. Against the pattern of improvement that SAS had experienced since 2012, the 2014 and 2015 surveys saw a downward trend in satisfaction levels. Both 2014 and 2015 surveys reported a satisfaction rate among respondents of 69%, below the national level of 73% in both years.

A high number of students (84%) agreed that the timetable fitted well with their other commitments and 82% agreed that course or teaching changes were communicated effectively (both higher than the national averages of 77% and 78% respectively). However, only 57% felt that they were encouraged to be involved in decisions about how their course is run, and 59% agreed that they had been given appropriate advice and support when they started their course. Significantly, while 65% agreed that their course is well organised and running smoothly, almost one in four students (24%) disagreed (an increase on the 2014 survey which reported 18% disagreement). Most notably, 82% of students enrolled on the MA in Garden History disagreed that their course is well organised and running smoothly. UK-domiciled and part-time students were particularly negative about the organisation and management of their course, against the national trend which shows consistency in satisfaction levels among these groups. Only 60% of UK students expressed satisfaction with this area, compared to 73% other EU and 83% non-EU. While 73% of full-time students expressed satisfaction with the organisation of their course, this was the case for only 64% of part-time students.

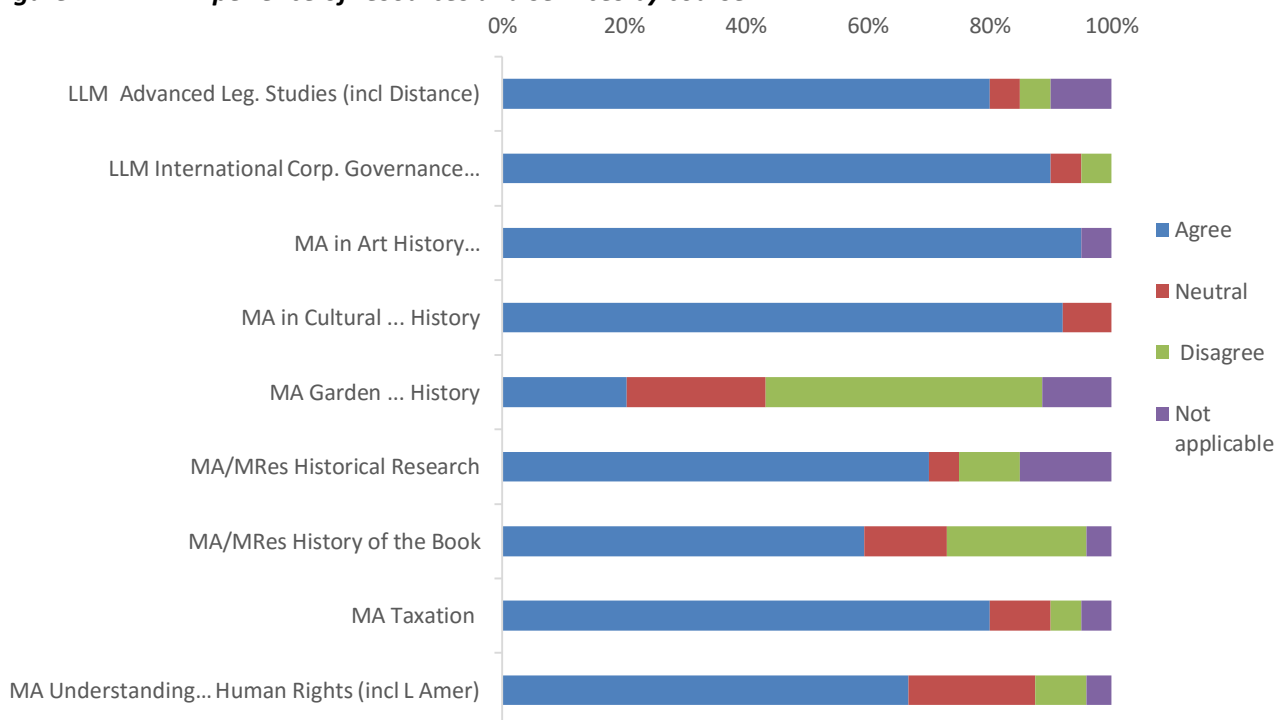
**Information:** Along with teaching and learning, this was rated by students as one of the most positive areas of their experience. Overall, 80% of students were satisfied with the information that they received, higher than the 77% reported nationally. 85% of students agreed that information was easy to find and 83% agreed that it was useful, with only 3.2% disagreeing in each case. The response to the accuracy of information was less positive, with only 71% of respondents agreeing that the information provided was accurate and one in

ten disagreeing. More than one in four students (27%) on the MA in Garden History disagreed that information about the course was accurate. Similarly low levels of disappointment were expressed about accuracy by 20% of students on the MA in Taxation, 17% of students on the MA/MRes History of the Book, and 8% of students on the MA Human Rights course. A number of comments were made that detailed specific areas of disappointment: the level of support provided to find an internship on the MA in Human Rights in comparison to that suggested in the course materials; that the academic level and rigour of the MA Garden History is lower/less than advertised; also, for the MA in Garden History, that less lectures were given than advertised in promotional materials and instead the emphasis was much more focused on how to research garden history than was expected; that the MA in Taxation materials suggest that evening classes will support part-time students but in fact classes were arranged in blocks (requiring time off work) and at weekends; that basic questions about the MA Cultural and Intellectual programme prior to enrolment were never answered.

**Resources and services:** This area was updated in 2014 to include support services. In 2015, SAS students reported a substantially lower level of satisfaction with resources and services (72%) than the national average (83%), making this an area of concern. SAS also saw a drop in satisfaction from the previous survey in 2014, which reported a 78% satisfaction rate. Higher levels of satisfaction were experienced with library resources and services (82%) and with accessibility to subject specific resources necessary for their studies (76%), with only around one in eight students expressing dissatisfaction in each case. Slightly higher levels of dissatisfaction were felt in relation to the accessibility of general IT resources (76%), with around one in six students expressing dissatisfaction. Much lower levels of satisfaction were reported with awareness of how to access support services (such as health, finance, careers, accommodation). Less than half of respondents (48%) were aware how to access support services and more than one in five (22%) stated that they did not know how to access these services.

UK-domiciled, part-time and older students reported an especially negative experience with resources and services. Only 45% of students aged 56 years and older were satisfied with this aspect of their course, compared to 78% nationally. 59% of UK students expressed satisfaction overall compared to the 82% national average for UK students. 66% of part-time SAS students were satisfied, compared to 77% of full-time students.

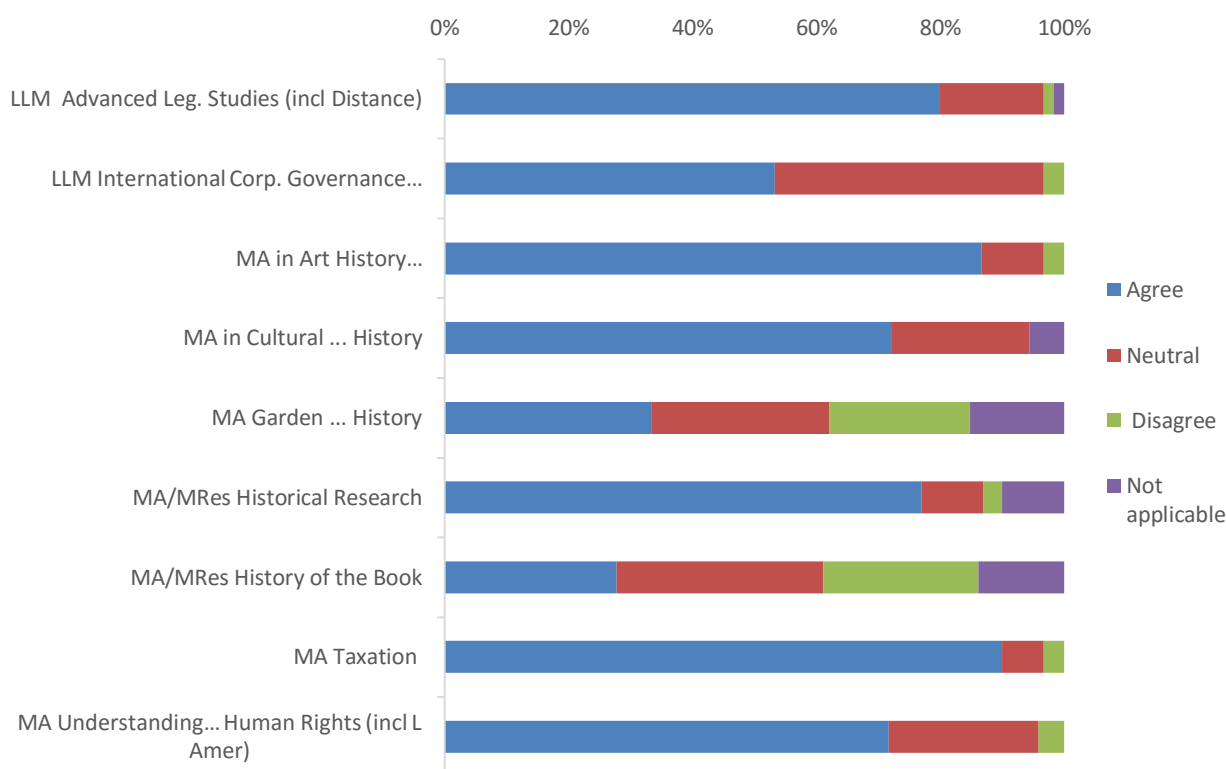
**Figure 7 Experience of resources and services by course**



**Skills development:** This area of student experience has replaced assessment and feedback as the weakest performing scale with only 68% of SAS students rating their experience positively, compared to 77% of students nationally. However, this area also saw the highest levels of neutrality from respondents, an average of 22%. The greatest agreement reported by students was with the development of their research skills during the course (84%) and slightly higher than the national average of 82%, although this area also saw a significant drop from the SAS 2014 agreement rate of 94%. The area where students reported the lowest level of agreement was with the encouragement they received to think about what skills were needed for career development. Only 55% of students felt that they had been encouraged, compared to 75% nationally, and 17% felt that they had not been encouraged.

The experiences of respondents with skills development are shown by course below in figure 8.

**Figure 8** Experience of skills development by course



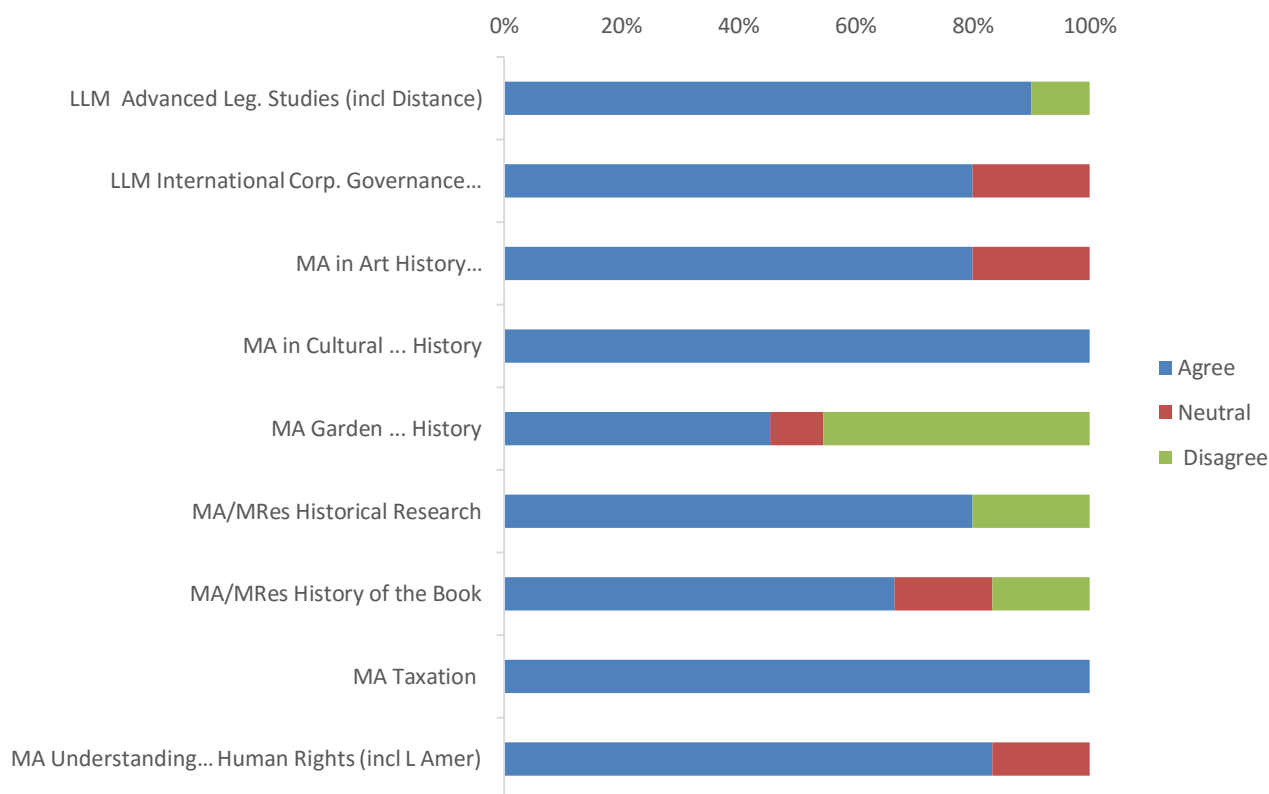
### Survey results: overall satisfaction

The national survey report recommends that student views on overall experience from 2014 onwards should not be compared with surveys held previously because of major changes to the questionnaire. In 2014, new wording (asking students the extent to which they felt satisfied overall with the quality of their course) and the standard five-point 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree' scale was introduced, whereas in 2013 and previously, students were asked to rate their overall experience relative to their expectations on a seven-point scale.

The PTES surveys have revealed strong associations between teaching and learning and engagement and between teaching and overall satisfaction. The teaching and learning scale was found to have the biggest causal influence on overall satisfaction, with skills development and organisation and management also important factors. The SAS survey similarly shows a correlation between teaching and learning and engagement with overall satisfaction levels; indeed, the three areas received the highest satisfaction rates (along with information).

As shown in figure 9 below, SAS students reported good levels of overall satisfaction with the quality of their course (78%), albeit lower than the national average of 83%. However, 13% of respondents reported dissatisfaction. Older students reported especially low satisfaction with their overall experience. Only 57% of students aged 56 years or older expressed satisfaction, compared to 87% nationally.

**Figure 9 Overall satisfaction with the quality of the course**



## Conclusion

The satisfaction levels of postgraduate taught students at SAS have fallen substantially since 2014, and the majority of student experience areas report lower satisfaction levels than the national average. Only satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning and information provided were higher than the national averages and, even then, only 1% and 3% difference respectively.

Of particular concern is the drop in satisfaction experienced across all areas since last year's survey, with the exception of assessment and feedback, which saw a small increase in respondent satisfaction from 67% in 2014 to 69% in 2015, and organisation and management, which was maintained at 69%. All other areas saw both a fall below the national average and a drop since the 2014 survey of SAS students. These areas of concern are highlighted in red in table 1 on page 2. The areas where the lowest levels of satisfaction have been reported are skills development (68%), assessment and feedback (69%), organisation and management (69%) and resources and services (72%).

If SAS is committed to offering postgraduate taught courses, then it should prioritise further work to understand more fully the reasons for the low satisfaction levels and investigate opportunities for improvement in discussion with students. In particular, there should be an emphasis on understanding and meeting the needs of students with different requirements and study motivations.