

## 2015 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Report

### Introduction

This report provides an overview of the results of the SAS PRES 2015 survey of current research students, held between 17 March and 14 May 2015. The 2015 survey, held biennially, is the second time that SAS has participated in the PRES since it held its first PRES survey in 2013. The next PRES will be held in spring 2017.

The report shows responses by institute where possible, while retaining respondent anonymity. The Institute of Latin American Studies received only one student response and therefore its results have not been included in any comparative analysis (with the exception of the overall experience scale) to protect anonymity and to avoid skewing the results for the institute.

The PRES questionnaire was redesigned in 2013, making it shorter, more focused and to bring it more in line with Vitae's Researcher Developer Framework. It covers seven core areas of postgraduate research experience: supervision, resources, research culture, progress and assessment, responsibilities, research skills, and professional development.

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.** 82 respondents completed the survey representing a 61% response rate, which means that the results represent the majority of the School's research student population. The national response rate was 41% (53,348 students from 123 HEIs).
- **Responses were received from students of all institutes, relative to the cohorts in each.** As would be expected, IALS, IHR and ICWS reported the highest number of respondents. ILAS received only one student response, which skews the results, and so will not be included in any comparative analysis with the exception of the overall experience scale.
- **UK-domiciled students represented the largest group of respondents:** 50% UK, 22% other EU and 28% overseas.
- **While the majority of respondents hold full-time study status (76%), over half (58%) are in paid employment and, of these, 44% are working more than 21 hours a week while studying.** Different levels of support and flexible study arrangements are important to working students, a growing trend among postgraduate students, especially in the humanities.
- **The national results reflect a high level of general satisfaction among students with their research degree programme (82% overall).** Comparing the national 2015 results with those of 2013 shows that all scale mean scores improved slightly. The biggest improvements were in supervision, resources and professional development.
- **The overall level of satisfaction experienced by SAS students is slightly lower (by 4%) than the national average, with 78% of respondents stating that their expectations have either been met or**

**exceeded.** This level of satisfaction remains consistent with, albeit slightly lower than, the 81% reported in 2013.

- **Areas where markedly lower levels of satisfaction have been experienced are research culture, teaching, and professional development.** It is strongly recommended that the reasons for this dissatisfaction and opportunities for improvement are explored more fully in discussion with research students.
- **Part-time students in SAS report much lower levels of satisfaction with their experience than their full-time counterparts in a number of areas.** These included resources, research culture, responsibilities, research skills, professional development and – most notably – their overall experience. Part-time students are especially vulnerable when it comes to making the most of their studies. The reasons for this dissatisfaction and opportunities for improvement should be explored more fully in discussion with part-time students.

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

Overall experience and satisfaction by area:	SAS 2015 response	PRES 2015 response	SAS comparison with national average	SAS 2013 response	PRES 2013 response
Overall satisfaction	78%	82%	 - 4%	81%	82%
Supervision	90%	86%	 + 4%	89%	84%
Resources	82%	79%	 + 3%	74%	78%
Research culture	60%	66%	 - 6%	59%	64%
Progress and assessment	80%	79%	 + 1%	80%	78%
Responsibilities	80%	79%	 + 1%	76%	78%
Research skills	88%	86%	 + 2%	80%	85%
Professional development	74%	78%	 - 4%	66%	76%
Teaching	63%	60%	 + 3%	38%	57%

## Profile and representativeness of respondents

The profile of respondents by age across SAS is older than the national response profile. While the largest group of respondents are aged 26-30 years (23%), in keeping with the national survey (24%), the next two largest groups are those aged 31-35 years (21%) and those aged 56 years and older (16%). Whereas, the national survey's next largest groups are 25 years old and younger (24%), an age group represented by only 10% of SAS respondents, and those aged between 31 and 35 (17%).

Table 2 (below) details the demographic profile of SAS respondents by institute (excluding ILAS). There is very little difference between the SAS and PTES 2015 profiles in the balance of students by gender, disability and fee status. The proportion of Other EU domiciled students is slightly 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>45.7%</b>	<b>48.1%</b>	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>92.6%</b>	<b>50.0%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>28.0%</b>	<b>75.6%</b>	<b>24.4%</b>
<b>PRES 2015</b>	<b>49.3%</b>	<b>50.6%</b>	<b>7%*</b>	<b>92.0%</b>	<b>55.8%</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>29.8%</b>	<b>80.5%</b>	<b>19.5%</b>
Institute of Advanced Legal Studies	25.7%	62.9%	8.6%	91.4%	45.7%	14.3%	40.0%	82.9%	17.1%
Institute of Commonwealth Studies	75.0%	25.0%	8.3%	91.7%	41.7%	33.3%	25.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Institute of English Studies	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	100.0%	40.0%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	60.0%
Institute of Modern Language Research	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Institute of Historical Research	52.9%	41.2%	5.9%	94.1%	76.5%	5.9%	17.6%	58.8%	41.2%
Warburg Institute	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%	88.9%	22.2%	55.5%	22.2%	100.0%	0.0%

Note: A number of respondents selected the option 'prefer not to say' or chose not to answer.

\* The exact percentage has not been disclosed by the HEA.

Half of respondents are registered as doing a PhD (50%), closely followed by MPhil (48%), with the remaining 2% registered as doing an MPhil. SAS students were uncertain as to the status of their doctoral research training programme. Only 12% of students (compared to 20% nationally) stated that their programme was provided through a doctoral training centre or partnership while 32% stated that it was not provided in this way and 44% (compared to 34% nationally) that they did not know. The largest group of respondents (28%) are in their first year, followed by third year (27%), second year (18%) and fourth year (15%). The majority of students are planning or doing their research (51%, much less than the national response of 67%) and a further 40% are writing up (compared to 24% nationally). 39% of respondents receive some sort of funding, with the most common sources of funding being a research council (12%), overseas organisations (11%) and SAS (10%). This compares unfavourably with the national picture of funding depicted through the 2015 PRES, where 74% of respondents receive funding with the most popular sources being their own HEI (26%) and a research council (21%). However, funding

availability varies between discipline and subject area. 42% of respondents are in paid employment (slightly higher than the 40% nationally), and, of these, 27% work more than 30 hours per week (much less than the 40% nationally) and 35% (compared to 32% nationally) work up to 10 hours a week.

SAS students report very high levels of English fluency – 96% consider themselves fluent in English compared to 90% nationally – and a high 88% have received appropriate support for their English language needs (compared to 87% nationally).

### **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 SAS and institute level. A small number of respondents were not satisfied with these areas.

While 44% of respondents felt that the staff student committee in their institute was an effective forum at which to raise issues or concerns, only six students (7%) felt that it was not (two at IALS, two at ICWS and two at the IHR). The rest (48%) indicated that the question was not applicable to them. Over half (58%) of respondents indicated that their student representative was available when they needed them. Four students (5%), three at the IHR and one at the ICWS, felt that their student representative was not available when they needed them.

Overall, 43% of respondents felt that issues of concern are dealt with effectively at institute or School level. However, as many as one in five students (20%, 16 respondents) felt that they were not. Over a third of these (six) were IALS students, four were from the IHR, three from WI, two from ICWS, and one from the IMLR.

### **Tuition fee payment**

Students were asked about tuition fee payments. The largest group of students paid their fees via instalments (43%), 21% made their payment in full, 18% were paid by their sponsor on their behalf and 17% were paid via AHRC/SAS funding. 37% of students made their payment by a recurring card e-payment, and 37% paid by bank transfer. While the majority experienced no problems whilst paying their tuition fees, one in 6 students (15%) did experience problems. Problems described include: delays with finalising payment before payment could be made; a sponsor did not pay in time thereby requiring the student to contact the sponsor; paying with another card led to duplicate payments; payment could not be traced by the University so payment was requested again; the instalment plan does not fit with January entry.

### **Student recruitment**

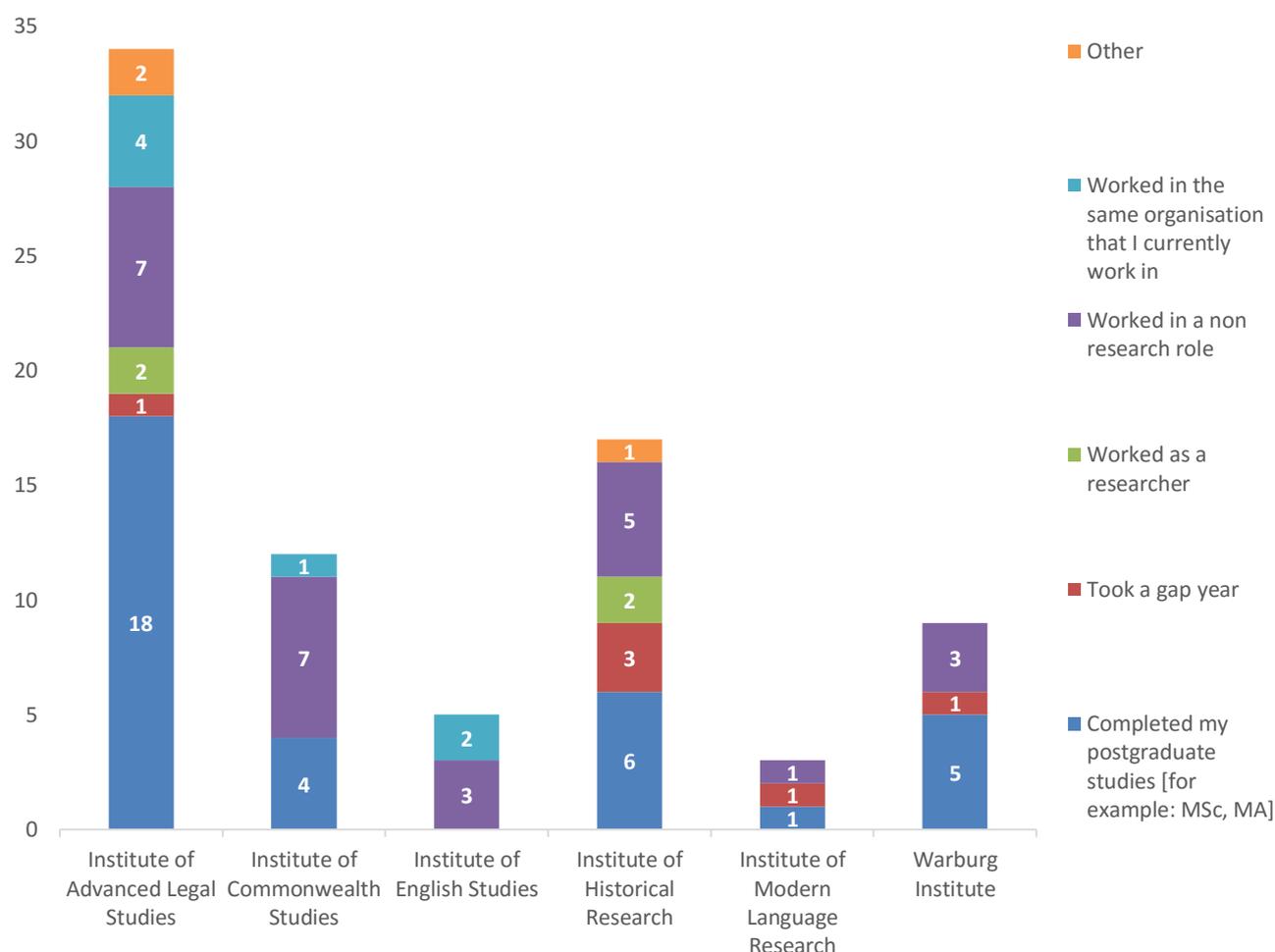
While the vast majority of students (81%) did not apply to any other institutions, around one in five students did so. A high number, 79%, were already aware of SAS and/or their institute before deciding to embark on their research degree, whereas over one in five knew nothing about SAS or their institute before making this decision. A large number of students first found out about their degree programme through recommendation (42%), followed by 18% via the Institute/School/University websites, and 12% through internet search.

## The start of the research student journey

### Prior to starting their research degree programme

Students were asked what they were doing in the year immediately prior to starting their research degree programme. The largest group of students (42%) came to do a PhD directly from their postgraduate degree, such as Masters, followed by 32% that were working in a non-research role. Figure 1, below, shows what students were doing prior to their research degree by institute.

**Figure 1: In the year before starting my research degree programme I:**



### Motivation for PhD study

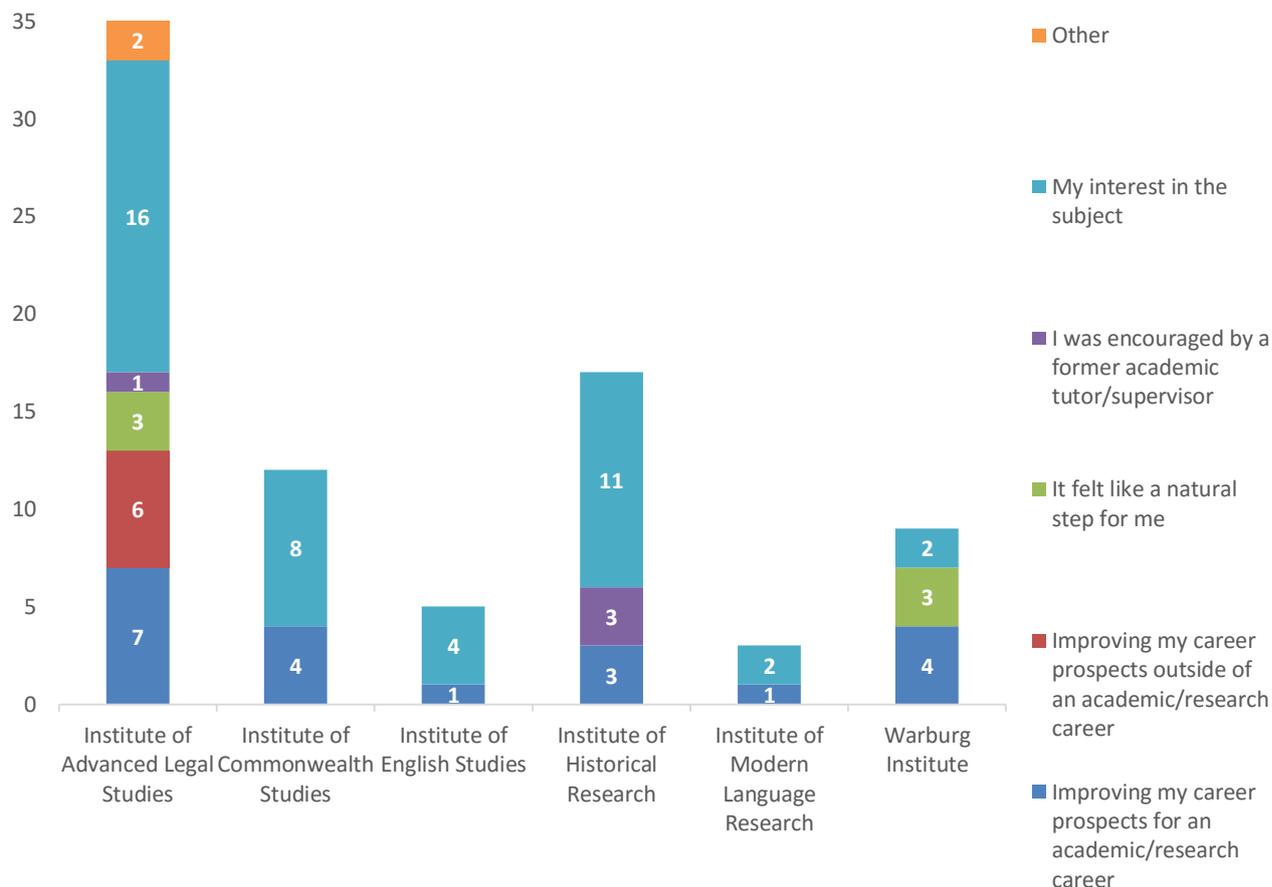
Students were asked to reflect on their main motivation for pursuing a research degree programme. Across SAS, students placed most importance on personal interest in the subject (54% of students cited this as a main factor in their decision), and to improve their career prospects for an academic/research career (24%). Other key motivations indicated are to improve career prospects outside of an academic/research career (7%), that it felt like a natural step (7%) and that they were encouraged by a former academic tutor/supervisor (5%). This is comparable to the national response, where the most common reasons cited are interest in the subject (38%), to improve academic/research career prospects (29%), that it felt like a natural step (13%), to improve career prospects outside of an academic/research career (8%), and that they were encouraged by a former academic tutor/supervisor (4%).

More mature students were more likely to cite personal interest in the subject area than younger students. 75% of students aged 51 years and older stated that personal interest was their main motivation, compared to 47% of students aged 26-35 years. Interestingly, 63% of students aged 25 years and younger also cited

personal interest as their primary motivation, the majority of which (63%) began their research degree programme in the year immediately following completion of their postgraduate studies and 25% following a gap year.

The motivations for choosing a particular qualification vary greatly between courses, which is indicated in figure 1 below.

**Figure 2: Motivations for taking this course by degree**



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

The majority of students (55%) are thinking about pursuing an academic career in higher education when they complete their research degree. One in ten students (10%) are considering a research career outside of higher education, such as in a private research organisation or a charity, and a further one in ten (10%) are considering another professional career outside of academia, research or teaching.

## Experience in detail

### Supervision

On average, 90% of students are positive about their experience of supervision, making this one of the most positive scales in the survey. It also compares favourably with the average 86% satisfaction result of the national survey. The aspects of supervision that students are most positive about are the skills and subject knowledge of their supervisor(s) (93%, slightly higher than the national response of 92%), and the provision of feedback received from their supervisor(s) to help direct their research (91%, again higher than the national survey response of 88%). High levels of agreement were also experienced with the level of regular contact with their supervisor(s) (89%) and the help provided by their supervisor(s) to identify training and development needs, which at 85% satisfaction is much higher than the national average of 75%. Levels of satisfaction were high across each of the institutes.

### Resources

Students reported a substantial increase in satisfaction with the resources available to them, from 74% in 2013 to 82% in 2015, making this area the third most positive scale for SAS. The vast majority of students (91%) felt that there are adequate library facilities (both physical and online), which compares very favourably with the national response of 84%. A further 84% of students agree that they have access to the specialist resources necessary for their research, again higher than the 78% national average. Slightly lower levels of satisfaction were expressed for suitable working space (78%, in line with the 77% nationally) and the adequate provision of computing resources and facilities (77%), which was slightly lower than the 79% national average.

A more detailed look at the responses by institute shows that students of IES and IMLR report the highest levels of satisfaction, with 0% disagreement, along with students of the Warburg with 3% average disagreement overall. The highest levels of dissatisfaction (16%) were experienced with the provision of computing resources and facilities: 27% of IHR students, 15% of IALS students, 12.5% of WI students, and 10% of ICWS students. The provision of suitable working space was also an area of complaint, with over one in seven students (14%) expressing dissatisfaction. Very high levels of dissatisfaction with working space were felt by students of the IHR (44%), as well as 22% of ICWS students and 7% of IALS students.

**Table 3: Accessibility and usability of the SAS libraries and Senate House Library**

Library	Opening hours are sufficient for my study needs		I have access to help and advice when I need it		It is easy to find my way around		I can always find what I'm looking for		I have access to the electronic resource that I need	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Yes	No
IALS	50%	13%	59%	9%	59%	8%	51%	9%	89%	11%
ICLS	23%	7%	27%	3%	26%	3%	22%	5%	81%	19%
ICWS	32%	6%	34%	4%	32%	6%	28%	9%	71%	29%
IGS	16%	2%	14%	0%	14%	2%	11%	9%	80%	20%
IHR	38%	4%	35%	7%	35%	7%	33%	5%	76%	24%
LAS	12%	5%	12%	2%	12%	5%	13%	5%	77%	23%
WI	24%	7%	26%	4%	26%	4%	24%	4%	81%	19%
SHL	66%	11%	66%	7%	57%	14%	54%	18%	84%	16%

Students were asked SAS-specific questions about opening hours, access to help and advice, ease of finding their way around and the items required, and access to electronic resources of each of the SAS libraries and Senate House Library. The results are detailed in the table above; high levels of disagreement (more than 25% disagreement as a proportion of agreement) are flagged up in red. Opening hours, in particular, were deemed insufficient at most of the libraries. Agreement levels tend to be low, due to the understandably high number of not applicable responses. It should be noted that the question about accessibility of

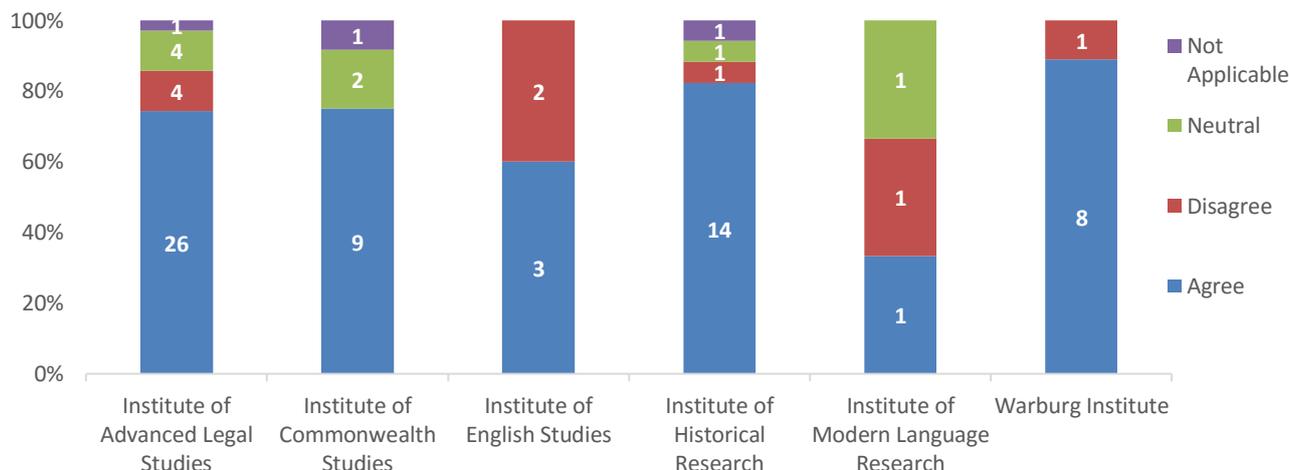
electronic resources did not offer neutral and not applicable options, hence the comparatively high levels of agreement and disagreement. It is recommended that these options are included in the 2017 survey.

### Research culture

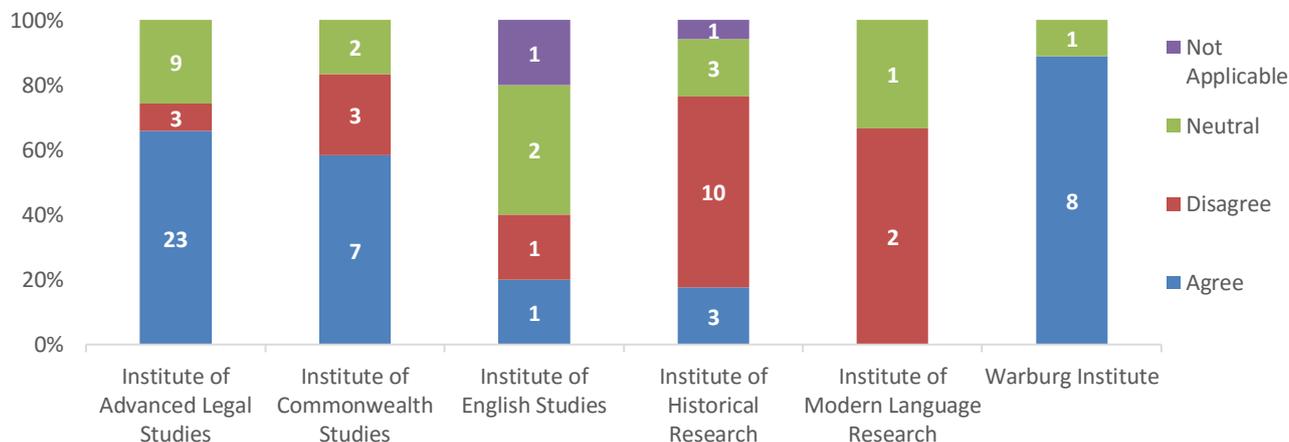
The continued high level of dissatisfaction with this aspect of the research degree programme experience is a particular concern, especially given the School’s mission and activities. Agreement with statements about the research culture of SAS was the lowest of all of the experience scales, and the lowest in comparison with the national average at 60% (the national average was 66%). This scale was also by far the least positive scale in the 2013 survey, where respondents reported 59% agreement. Part-time students, in particular, rated this area very negatively, with only 39% agreement compared to 66% of full-time students. The reasons for this high level of dissatisfaction and opportunities for improvement should be explored more fully in discussion with research students.

Although satisfaction with the seminar programme provided (78%, an increase on the 74% reported in 2013) was higher than the national average (74%, also an increase from the 73% response in 2013), all other aspects were significantly lower than the national response. A mere 53% agreed they have frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students, a much lower response than the national survey’s average of 65%. Similarly, only 55% feel that they have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond their department, compared to 60% of respondents nationally. And only 56% agreed that the research ambience in their department or faculty stimulates their work, lower than the 63% reported nationally. The responses to each question about research culture are detailed in the figures below by institute.

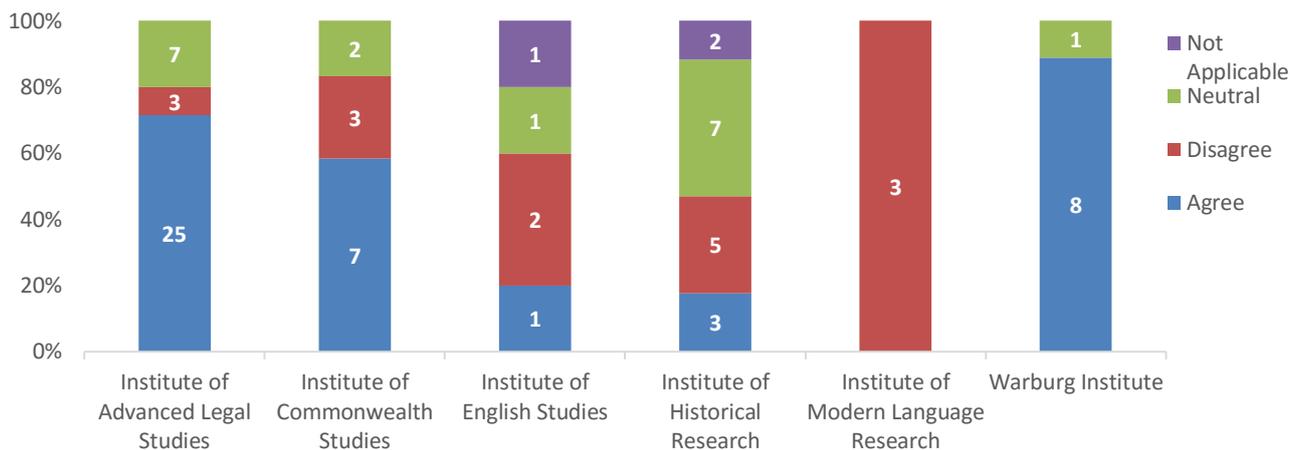
**Figure 3: My department provides a good seminar programme**



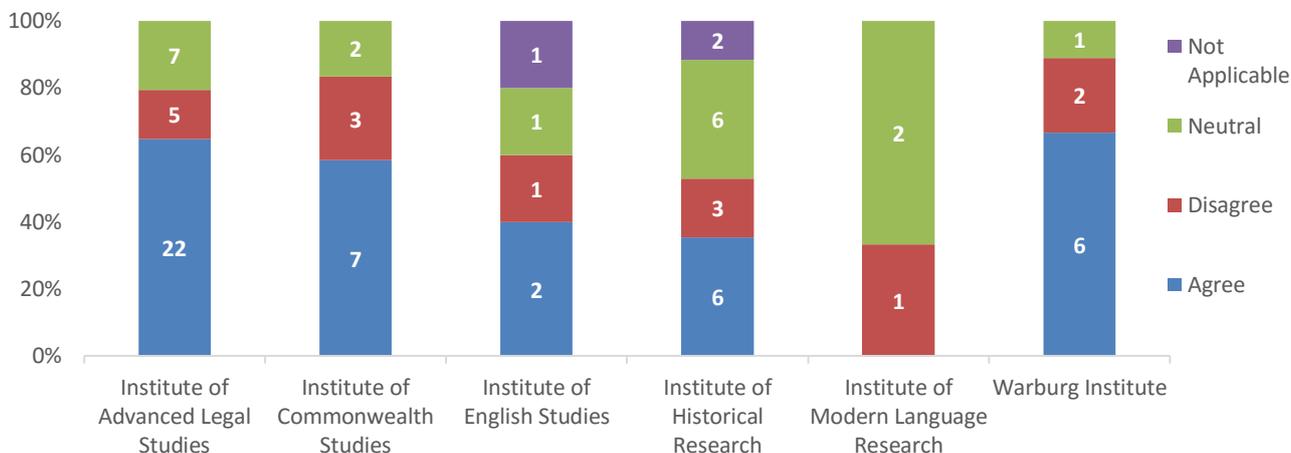
**Figure 4: I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students**



**Figure 5: The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work**



**Figure 6: I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department**



**Progress and assessment**

Average agreement for this scale is 80%, slightly higher than the national average agreement of 79% and the same as the 2013 response. Average responses were consistent across each area, with slightly higher agreement with the statements ‘I understand the requirements and deadlines for formal monitoring of my progress’ (84%, lower than the national average of 85%) and ‘I understand the required standard for my thesis’ (81%, higher than the national average of 79%). While slightly lower agreement was expressed with statements regarding the clarity of final assessment procedures (77%) and the provision of an appropriate induction (78%), both were higher than the national averages of 75% and 76% respectively.

A deeper analysis of responses reveals that second and third year students tend to be more negative in their experience of progress and assessment than those in their first year, fourth year and beyond. Levels of satisfaction were comparative across the institutes.

**Responsibilities**

While average agreement with statements concerning student and supervisor responsibilities is relatively high at 80%, there is great variation between the different aspects of this area. This pattern reflects the trend in the national survey, where agreement was slightly lower at 79% overall. Significantly high levels of agreement are reported by students in respect of their understanding of their own responsibilities (90%, slightly higher than the national average of 89%) and their awareness of their supervisors’ responsibilities to them (90%, higher the 87% reported nationally). However, only 68% of respondents agree that their institution values and responds to feedback from research students, albeit higher than the national average

of 61%. Part-time students report the lowest levels of agreement with this aspect at 50%, compared to 74% agreement among full-time students. This also tends to be the case for second and third year students at 15% and 13% below average agreement respectively. Similarly, only 71% of respondents know who to approach with concerns about any aspect of their programme, apart from their supervisor(s), lower than the national average of 77%. The lowest levels of agreement for this aspect are reported by second and third year students at 11% and 12% below average agreement respectively.

Levels of dissatisfaction are broadly comparative across the institutes. However, notably high levels of disagreement are reported by students of the IHR in respect of knowing who to approach with concerns other than their supervisor(s). Almost one in four IHR students (24%) do not know who else to approach.

### **Research skills**

The 2015 survey saw a significant increase in student satisfaction with this area compared to the 2013 survey, making this scale the second highest in terms of satisfaction levels. Overall agreement with this scale is 88%, 8% higher than the 80% reported in 2013 and slightly higher than the 86% reported nationally. The pattern of satisfaction among SAS students with the different aspects of this scale correlates with that of the national survey. The highest level of agreement (93%, comparable with the national average of 92%) is expressed with the development of skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques during their programme. 91% of students agree that their skills in critically analysing and evaluating findings and results have developed during their programme, again higher than the 88% expressed nationally. Slightly less agreement is reported among students with the development of their understanding of 'research integrity', e.g. rigour, ethics, transparency, attributing the contribution of others, (86%) and the development of their confidence to be creative or innovative (83%). Again agreement levels are comparative with, albeit slightly higher than, the national averages of 85% and 79% respectively. The high levels of agreement are paralleled across the institutes.

### **Professional development**

On average, only 74% of students are positive about their professional development, making this one of the least positive scales in the survey. The national average is slightly higher at 78%. However, this area has also seen a significant improvement since the 2013 survey, when only 66% of SAS students reported positivity with their experience. It is particularly encouraging to see that most SAS students (84%) have increasingly managed their own professional development during their programme, slightly higher than the national average of 82%. Whereas only 69% of respondents have developed their ability to manage projects (much lower than the 80% nationally), only 70% have developed contacts or professional networks (comparable to the national response of 71%), and 71% have developed their ability to communicate effectively with diverse audiences (much lower than the national average of 79%). Agreement levels are broadly comparative across the institutes.

Part-time students, in particular, reported very low levels of agreement with statements concerning professional development. Less than half of part-time students (42%) feel that their ability to manage projects has improved, compared to 77% of full-time students. Exactly half (50%) agree that their ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed, compared to 77% of full-time students. And only 60% agree that they have developed contacts and professional networks, compared to 74% of full full-time students.

### **Development opportunities**

Students were asked about their experience of professional development opportunities during the course of their studies. Whereas high numbers of students at SAS (80%) and nationally (77%) have received research skills development training, very low numbers of students have received other skills training and advice. Less than a third of SAS students (30%) have received either transferable skills development training or career options advice, and only 38% have agreed a personal training or development plan. These numbers drop dramatically for part-time students. A mere 15% have agreed a personal training or development plan,

compared to 45% of full-time students. And only one in five part-time students (20%) have received transferable skills training or career options advice, compared to more than a third of full-time students (34%). The national survey reports that arts and humanities students are the least likely to develop their research and transferable skills.

While most students (72%) confirm that they have received the opportunity to attend an academic research conference, only 8% have had an opportunity to participate in a placement or internship. It is concerning to see that only 68% of respondents in their fourth year or beyond have had the opportunity to present a paper or poster at an academic research conference, compared to the national average of 80% of students at this point in their programme. This is especially the case since the national results reveal that arts and humanities students are most likely to attend or present at a conference. More in keeping with national averages, around only half of students in their fourth year and beyond have received the opportunity to submit a paper for publication in an academic journal or book (50%) and a minority of such students (36%) have had the opportunity to communicate their research to a non-academic audience (72%). Part-time students, again, are less likely to receive these opportunities than full-time students. It should be noted that respondents were not given the option to state whether or not these opportunities are applicable to their needs or motivations in pursuing a research degree, given that less than a quarter (24%) of students were mainly motivated by improving their academic/research career prospects.

### **Teaching**

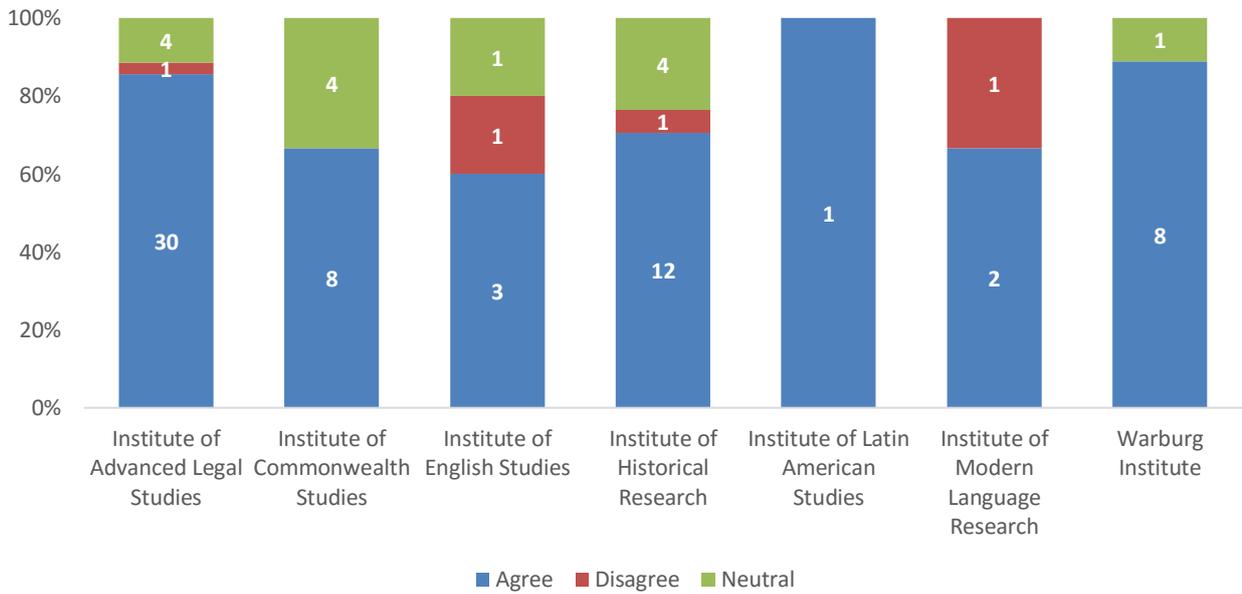
Despite the dramatic improvement since the 2013 survey, this remains one of the least positive scales in the survey, second only to research culture. Less than one in four students (23%) have taught or demonstrated at SAS during their research degree programme, much less than the national average of 51%. Of those who have experienced teaching or demonstrating, only one in six students (15%) have received formal teaching training (compared to the national average of 64%). Encouragingly, a substantial increase in the proportion of these students – from 38% in 2013 to 63% in 2015 – agreed they had received appropriate support and guidance for teaching, slightly higher than the national average of 60%. The national PRES survey results indicate that teaching and demonstrating experience is an important factor affecting the professional development of research students, and especially improves communications skills.

### **Overall satisfaction levels**

SAS students report relatively high levels of satisfaction overall. The vast majority of students (88%) are confident that they will complete their research degree programme within their institution's expected timescale; a more confident response than that reported nationally (81%). 78% of students are satisfied with their research degree experience, slightly lower than the national average of 82%. Part-time students express lower levels of dissatisfaction than their full-time counterparts. Only 65% of part-time students are satisfied with their research degree experience, as opposed to 82% of full-time students. Satisfaction levels also tend to fall as students progress through their degree; from a peak of 83% among all first year students to a low of 73% among fourth year students and beyond.

Overall satisfaction levels are detailed by institute in the figures below.

**Figure 7: Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme:**



**Figure 8: I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale:**

