



SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

Postgraduate Research Student Survey 2021

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY'S RESULTS

OCTOBER 2021

School of Advanced Study

2020-21 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (2021PRES) Report

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Executive Summary

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) collects feedback from postgraduate research students (PGRs) across the Higher Education sector about their experiences. PRES is the only UK HE sector-wide survey to gain insight from PGRs about their learning and supervision experience.

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 this survey are extremely important, with potentially far-reaching implications beyond their own institution.

At the time of producing this report, the AdvancedHE 2021 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 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 2021PRES was undertaken between 10 May to 17 June 2021. As a global survey, in 2021, 40,000 respondents and 89 institutions were involved.

The School report aims to provide an in-depth analysis of SAS students' experience, while retaining respondent anonymity. The survey has focused on the level of support expected to be provided within a UK institution. This includes questions related to how the institution has managed the unprecedented circumstances around Covid-19 and mitigated them. Respondents were conscious of the pandemic's impact on their studies, on staff and institutions.

Overall satisfaction with the School and across the Sector remains high. Research Culture continues to be the area in which PGRs are least satisfied. 2021 was more challenging than 2020, particularly in relation to restrictions on freedom, making it difficult to undertake fieldwork, or other expected research activities. There is evidence that support provided by the School helped to create a positive experience despite the challenges faced. Students faced different difficulties depending on their year of study and personal circumstances, but for some, these challenges were turned into

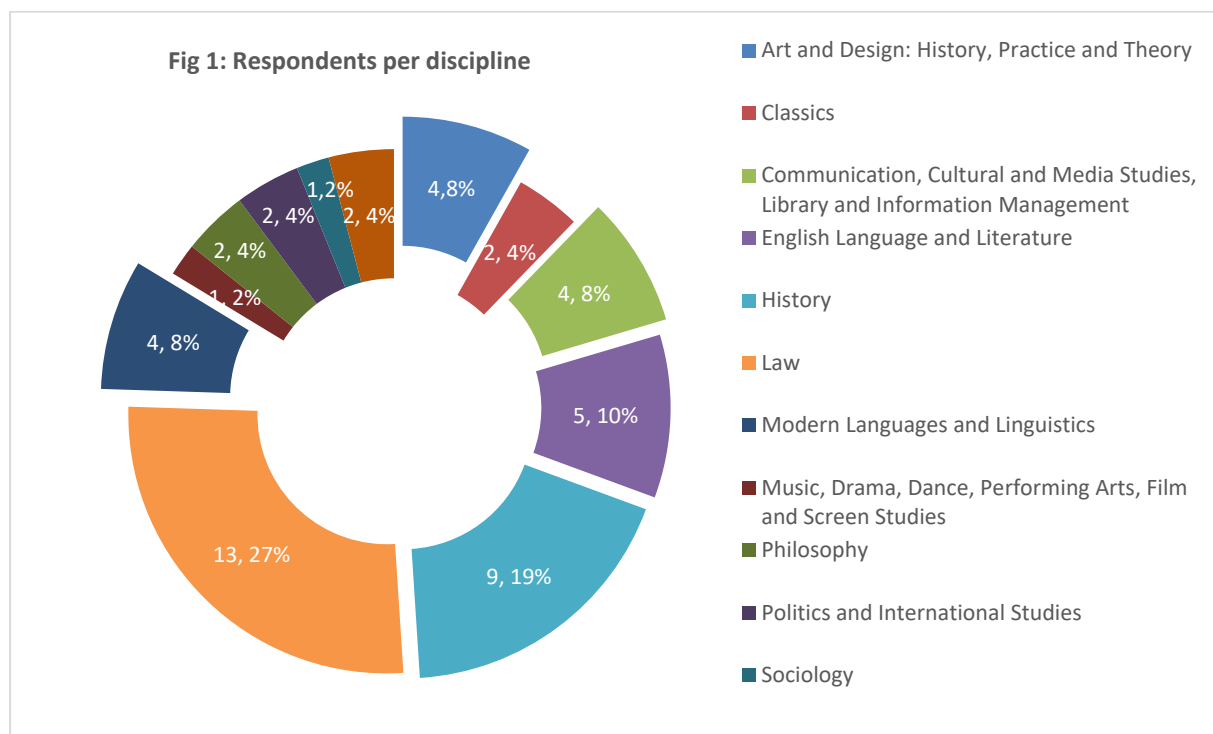
learning opportunities, including how to develop their skills as an independent researcher. However, the most challenging aspect of the 2020-21 academic year was the feeling of isolation, added to the struggle to expand and create scholarly networks which is important for all young researchers' career.

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

1. Profile of respondents

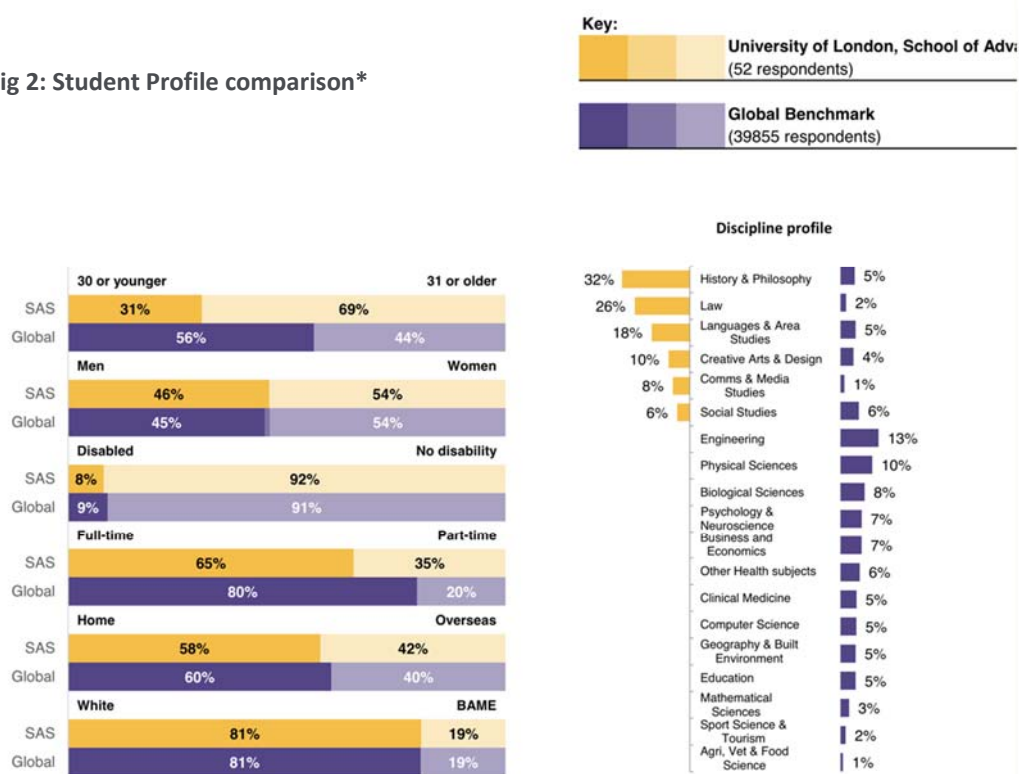
49 students (compared to 58 in 2019PRES) responded to the Survey, representing 39% of this year's cohort (126 PGRs) (compared to 54% in the last survey). This is the **lower than** what was recorded in the 2019 and 2017PRES. The respondents were at different stages of their studies, as follows:

- 2% were MPhil students
- 51% were MPhil students with transfer to PhD
- 47% were PhD (including DPhil)



The profile of SAS respondents was again predominantly white, overwhelmingly female, and above 30 years old. The respondents were mainly UK-domiciled.

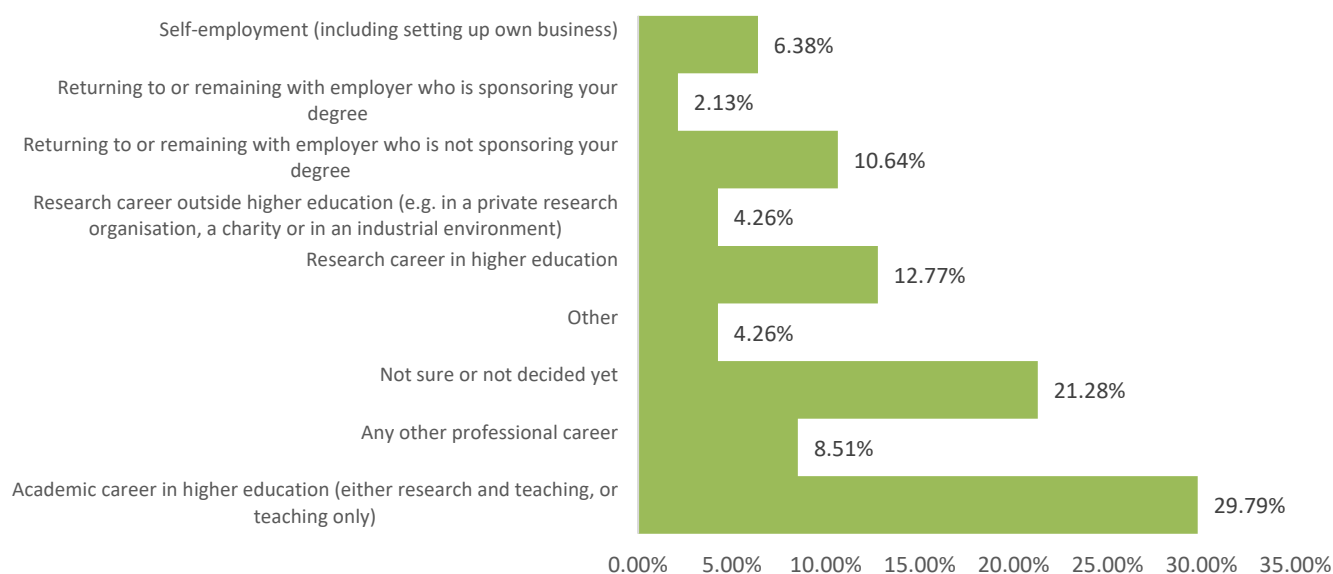
Fig 2: Student Profile comparison*



*The PRES exercise included Heythrop students; their data therefore appear in the AdvanceHE summary here. However, the report focuses on SAS students only and the data has been adjusted accordingly.

While the majority of respondents hold full-time study status, 90% attended the classes mostly or completely **online**. Only 2% attended the courses mostly or completely in **person**, and 8% had a **mixture** of online and virtual courses. Self-funded students represented 69% of the respondents. 34% of the respondents (compared to 37% in the 2019PRES) thought that they would pursue a career in higher education, after completing their research degree.

Fig 3: Q23. What type of career do you have in mind for when you complete your research degree?

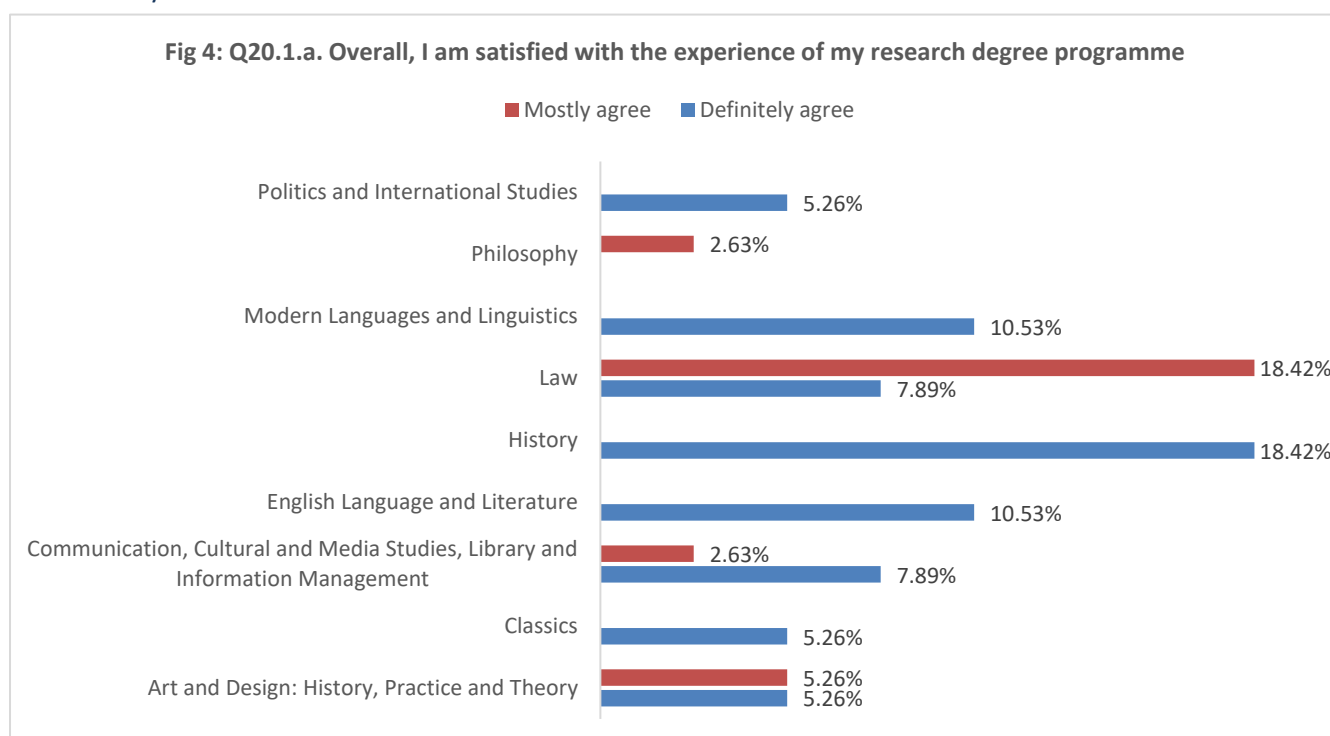


2. Overall Student Satisfaction

80% of SAS respondents were overall satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme, while 85% were confident that they would complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale This overall satisfaction rate is therefore 83%, 2% lower than the one recorded in the previous report. Despite a **6% decrease** noted in Q20_1 (from the 2019PRES), the School's satisfaction rate continues to be **higher** than the results over the last four surveys, or those recorded at local or national levels.

Table 1: Comparison of Overall and Completion		
	Q20_1_a Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme	Q20_2_a I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale
SASPRES 2021	↓ 80%	85%
SASPRES 2019	86%	84%
Comparison	-6%	1%
PRES 2017	77%	73%
PRES 2015	78%	88%
Global results	79%	77%
Russell Group	78%	76%
London	79%	80%

The discipline that recorded the most positive overall experience was Law, followed closely by History.



Respondents were asked to comment on two particular points to supplement their overall satisfaction feedback: the *one thing that they enjoyed the most* out of the programme so far and the *one thing that merited improvement*. While the individual responses can be seen in the appendix, respondents mentioned in particular supervisor's support, which included mentoring,

coaching as well as pastoral care, the training programme, the seminars which allowed for networking opportunities, and flexibility in terms of resources access and remote learning.

- *For me this is a dead heat between the incredible coaching and mentoring I received while applying for my permanent lectureship, as well as the networking opportunities*
- *Being in an international environment and engaging in conversation with experts from different parts of the globe. Experiencing multidisciplinary*
- *The online research tools provided by my institution such as digital resources from the Senate House Library and online training sessions that touch on multiple academic disciplines.*

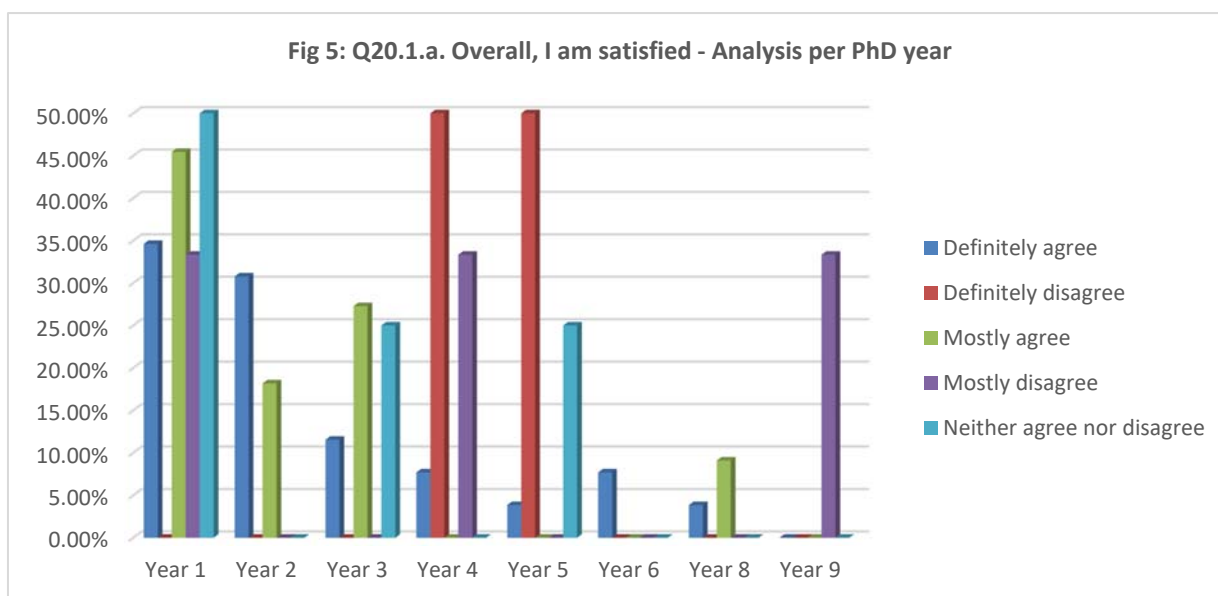
Appreciation for staff trying to deal with the challenges of the pandemic to allow the students to keep carrying on with their research was felt across the board.

- *I was anxious to start a research degree programme during the pandemic but the school and my institute have many measures in place to make me feel safe, offer opportunities to meet people virtually. Also, the supervision meetings have been very productive and constructive.*
- *The staff [sic] had made and keep making an incredible effort in these challenging circumstances to enable students in carrying on with their research.*

Responses did vary depending on the original mode of study. Distance learning students felt that they were gaining more out of the experience as more was available online than before, while face-to-face students felt the opposite. This can be seen in the answers given towards the improvement areas mentioned by the respondents. While most did highlight the need for more interaction with fellow students and researchers to feel part of the scholarly community, others focused on the need for more training and more teaching opportunities. It was interesting to note that proactive promotion of the School and institutes' work, which include students' research was added to the list.

- *More opportunities to meet and network 'live' with scholars in the same field - again, pandemic restrictions have greatly limited these possibilities. Zoom is better than nothing, but cannot replace mutual discussions involving the actual source material.*
- *I would have liked to receive more support at the beginning of my programme on Research Methodologies*
- *I think my institute can do better with advertising and having a system where their students can find teaching opportunities which we lack in house.*

Responses may have been influenced by the number of years students had been into their PhD, as shown in figure 5.



With such a high satisfaction rate across the board, and despite Covid-19, it is not surprising that only 17% of the respondents considered leaving the School, compared to 26% nationally. The main reasons cited for considering leaving were:

- Difficulty balancing research and other commitments 38%
- Financial difficulties 25%
- Family or personal problems 13%
- Physical health problems 23%
- Mental/emotional health problems 13%
- Not enough support for personal issues 13%

3. Trends in Experience

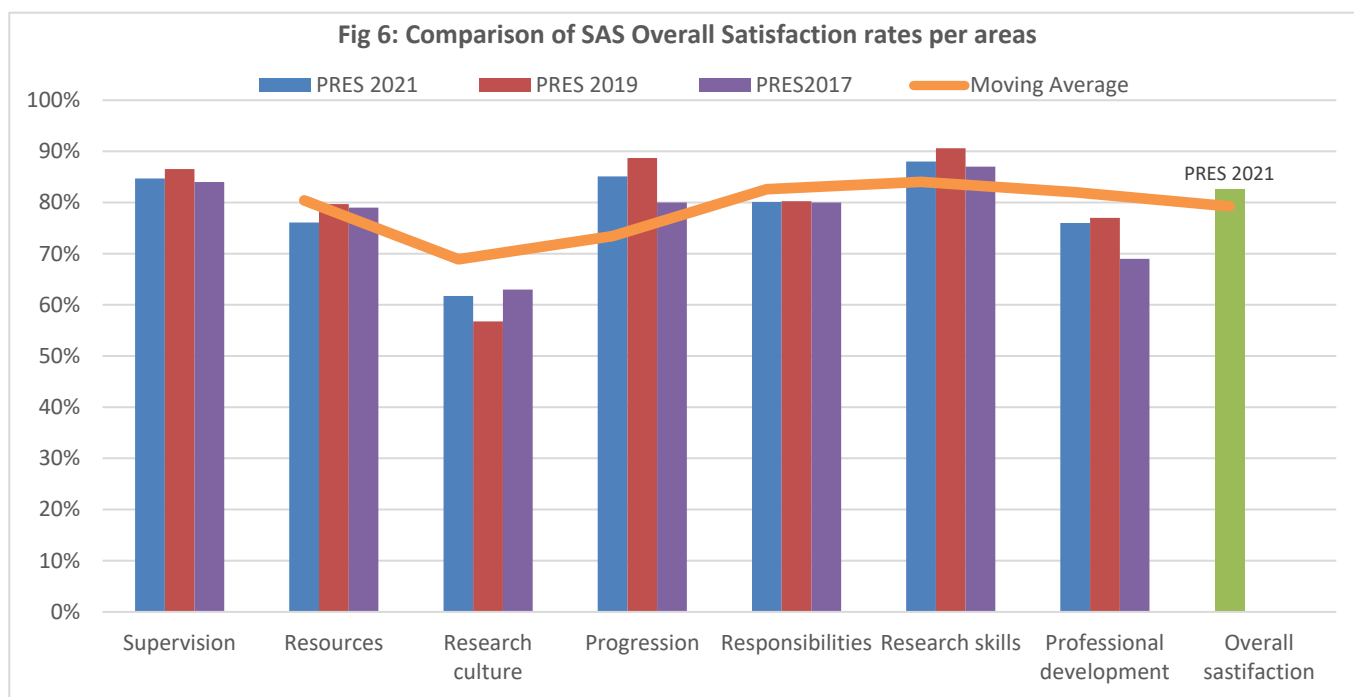
The PRES questionnaire covers 7 core areas of postgraduate research experience: supervision, resources, research culture, progress and assessment, responsibilities, research skills, and professional development. Each area of experience is formed of 3 to 6 questions, of which the average provides the overall satisfaction rate noted below. Two additional areas of experience were added, focusing on overall support structure and the institutional response to Covid-19.

While the **Overall Satisfaction rate** as noted above is recorded at **80%**, the combined satisfaction rate (based on the average score of all areas of experience put together) has been recorded at 79% (similar to the previous survey result, which recorded 80%). Some small movements across the areas can be noted since the last survey, varying between -4% to +5% only, which demonstrates a fairly even and positive experience across the board.

Areas	SASPRES 2021	SASPRES 2019	Comparison	SASPRES 2017
Supervision	85%	87%	-2%	84%
Resources	76%	80%	-4%	79%
Research culture	62%	57%	+5%	63%
Progression	85%	89%	-4%	80%
Responsibilities	80%	80%	-	80%
Research skills	88%	91%	-3%	87%

Professional development	76%	77%	-1%	69%
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The **Research culture area** is the area that has recovered the most from its previous loss (measured two years ago), which is an achievement in itself considering the challenges the pandemic has given to higher education and research institutions. Research Seminars and events access are a very important part of the researcher’s studies and development as a scholar. Discussions among peers within the same disciplines were longed for and welcomed when organised.



When compared with the other institutions, the School’s average is generally slightly **higher**, except for the Progression area of experience, which is showing a **7% to 9% positive difference** from national and local results.

Table 3: Comparison of SAS Overall Satisfaction results PRES 2021

Areas	SAS	London HEIs	Russell Gp	Global	Comparison SAS vs Global
Supervision	85%	86%	87%	87%	-2%
Resources	76%	75%	76%	76%	-
Research culture	62%	61%	59%	58%	+4%
Progression	85%	77%	76%	78%	+7%
Responsibilities	80%	78%	78%	79%	+1%
Research skills	88%	85%	85%	85%	+3%
Professional development	76%	75%	75%	75%	+1%

While the School would like to see a higher satisfaction rate as regards to Research culture, the score is better than those attained nationally or locally. The results shown in the Research skills, Responsibility and Progression areas confirm a robust management of the School’s research degree programmes.

- *I would perhaps point out the opportunity I have had to expand my professional network at SAS has been incredible.*

- *Things improved for me when a second supervisor was added. Together the two of them provided the balance between subject knowledge and basic approachability.*
- *Appreciate the SAS PGR meetings as well as the institute meetings to check in with each other and discuss issues.*
- *The induction and research seminars at IALS are a real highlight. [sic] As to deadlines, monitoring etc., my understanding has been very unclear. It has since come to my attention that my supervisors were not working to SAS guidelines, and as a result were giving incorrect information. I know this is being remedied but has caused significant misunderstandings during my studies.*

Isolation was a common theme, while switching online, and using hybrid solutions when possible were welcomed.

- *Everything being moved online definitely made it possible to attend more seminars and conferences this year but also made networking harder as it is difficult to talk to people over zoom rather than just chat with them after an event. But I'm excited to attend in person events soon.*
- *I sometimes find there are so many seminars and workshops I have to limit myself - but better to have to choose than not have enough. Increased online access has opened up seminar access even wider*
- *Due to Covid I found networking very hard but I am sure this will improve. The school has provided good platforms but I personally struggle to engage online in the same way I would at in person events*
- *The shift to online training and seminars has allowed me to participate more in the institution activities, since I am a DL student.*

The answers have varied depending on the year of study. Perspectives as such do change and are reflected in the comments in particular, which this time were affected by the personal and professional challenges raised by Covid-19.

- *I received a lot of information at my induction and I think some of the sessions were recorded but not all. This would be a useful resource to go back to. I would have liked the opportunity of speaking to students already working at the university. I would be happy to do this for others.*
- *I have answered this from the perspective of my first two years as a PhD student. This is because, during my 3rd year, I became a full time lecturer at a leading Russell Group law school and, therefore, had greater access to symposia and research groups. I am also doing this to discount the effect of coronavirus.*

The **Resources** area of experience is expectedly showing a lower satisfaction rate, as access to these resources have been challenging. Access to libraries was limited, when it was possible for them to be open, and not everything, in particular specialist resources, was accessible online. However, it was recognised that efforts were being made around working space, whether on campus or remotely. The national benchmarks show the same overall understanding of the situation.

Support is demonstrated at many levels, from formal to informal practices, from pastoral care to formal organisational support programme and infrastructure. Students' responses regarding the various levels of support show a wide range of opinions, as a strong and robust training programme does not seem to equal other sorts of support such as career advice provision or developments of

transferrable skills. However, the School’s results do seem to follow quite closely experiences reported across the country.

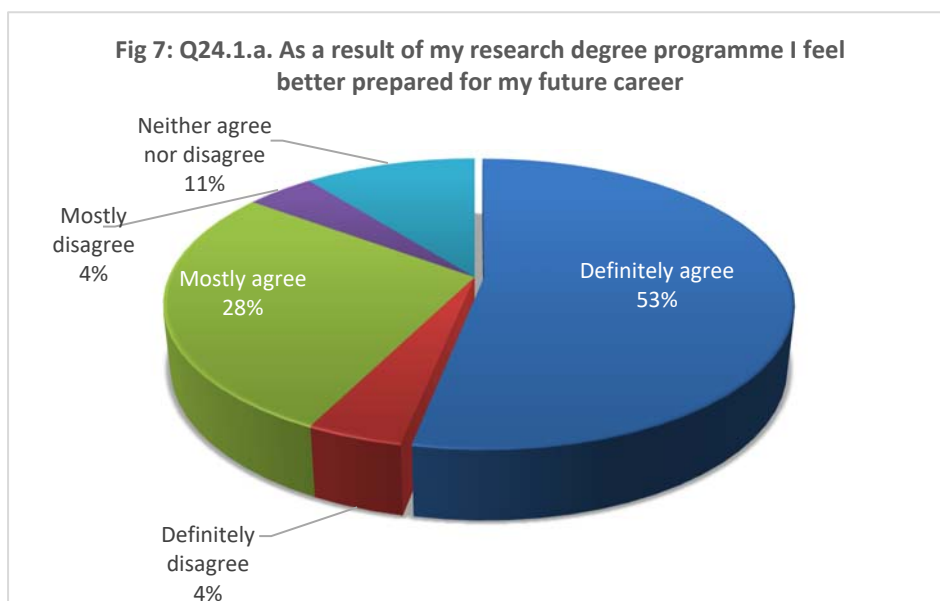
- *Quite simply, the skills and pastoral support at IALS is amazing. One point I would note is that I was trying to contact the mental health service at SAS in order to arrange a talk for PGRs on the importance of good mental health during study. Unfortunately my attempts (several months apart) were both met with no responses. Perhaps looking into this provision may be an idea.*
- *The provision of PhD training at SAS is satisfactory. In my case, such training is complemented by training and development opportunities provided by the LAHP scholarship scheme. I have been receiving support for my health and wellbeing (in informal chats) from my supervisor, but I am aware that I can also ask for further assistance from the university student support and counselling services.*

Student support was provided in many ways, including having the presence of a student representative body. The respondents were in general (61%) content with their student representatives and found them effective as a group or as individuals, bringing issues of concerns effectively to the School’s management. This year’s satisfaction rate on the School provision for career advice and guidance with the respondents’ studies continues to average between 50% to 60% too.

Covid-19 has impacted on PGRs’ timelines in a variety of ways. Comments reveal different individual circumstances and experiences but the School’s respondents (85%, compared to 77% nationally) seem to have benefitted from an environment that would allow them to feel confident that they will be finishing their research project on time. This may be due to the fact that 69% of the respondents were self-funded.

- *COVID has been very difficult, but I have been impressed by the additional online library resources, and the ease with which seminars/research training were moved online.*
- *Response was slow to begin with but has significantly improved. It is acknowledged that this was a challenging time for staff as well as students.*

When asked whether the respondents felt ready for their career, 81% felt positive that they were, illustrative again of the School’s robust research programme and infrastructure support.



Conclusion

This report has highlighted that overall satisfaction with the research degree experience remains high and relatively stable despite having gone through a global pandemic.

References

HESA, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey data 21 (Report not out yet)
HESA, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2020 Report
SAS PRES Report 2020
SAS PRES Report 2017
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