



Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

2011 results

Executive summary

Dr Laura Hodsdon

and

Dr Alex Buckley

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Executive summary

This report provides national results from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) for 2011. PRES is a UK-wide survey that collects the views of current postgraduate researchers in order to target, design and evaluate work to enhance the learning experiences of postgraduate students on research programmes.

This was the fourth time the survey was run (previous surveys ran in 2007, 2008 and 2009). One hundred and two UK institutions took part in PRES 2011. With 31,202 students completing the survey, there was a national response rate of 32%. These figures mark a substantial increase in engagement with the survey from 2009, when 82 institutions took part and 18,644 students responded: a national response rate of 28.6%. PRES will run again in 2013, giving HEIs the space in 2011-12 to analyse, interpret and act upon their results.

Key findings

The trend of increasing positivity seen in PRES results each year continues with the 2011 results, with 86% of respondents stating that the overall experience of their research programme met or exceeded their expectations, compared with 81% in 2007, 83% in 2008 and 84% in 2009.

Supervision

As with previous years, Supervision was the scale that was rated as most important by respondents, as well as the area about which they were most positive. Of all the items in this scale, respondents were least positive about guidance about literature searches, but even that showed a substantial improvement from 2009, increasing from 65% to 70%¹.

Skills Development

The Skills Development scale was the third most positive area of PRES 2011. As with previous years, the lowest scoring item in this scale concerned opportunities to develop transferable skills, although that item did show the largest change from 2009, increasing from 65% to 72%. It was also rated by respondents as being markedly less important than other areas. Conversely, the development of research skills was rated as one of the most important issues. Despite these differences between transferable and research skills development, they were the two areas where respondents most felt that their expectations had been met or exceeded (87% for transferable skills, 88% for research skills).

Infrastructure

This was one of the least positive scales. Within this scale respondents were least positive, by some margin, about the availability of financial support, at only 57%. They were most positive about library, IT facilities and other equipment, and the availability of a working space. Satisfaction with technical support increased notably from 2009, from 64% to 71%.

Intellectual Climate

This was the second least positive scale for respondents. Ratings were particularly low for the extent to which respondents felt integrated into their department's community, at only 54%. The highest rated items, both at 65%,

¹ This, and the other results cited in this summary (unless otherwise stated), is the percentage of respondents who selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in response to a positive statement.

concerned the opportunities for social contact with other research students, and the departmental seminar programme.

Goals and Standards

This was a scale that had relatively little importance to respondents. They were most positive about understanding the standard of work expected (79%), while they expressed most concern about understanding the requirements of the thesis examination (67%).

Thesis Examination

Only students who had sat their final viva voce examination responded to these items: less than one respondent in 20. Those that did respond were very positive about the fairness of the examination process, and this positivity was a clear improvement on 2009, an increase from 78% to 84%. They were least positive about support for preparation in advance of the viva voce, but again this was an increase from 2009, from 62% to 71%. The item in the survey that received the greatest increase in positivity compared with 2009 was in this area: positivity about the support received for post-viva voce thesis corrections increased from 67% to 77%.

Professional Development and Career

Since it was introduced in 2008 this has been the least positive scale of the survey. Respondents were considerably more positive about encouragement to think about career opportunities than in 2009, an increase from 37% to 44%, but that was still the issue about which they expressed most concern.

Roles and Responsibilities

Respondents felt clear about their responsibilities as postgraduate researchers (80%), but they were unconvinced that their institution values and responds to student feedback (57%).

Teaching Opportunities

While not very many respondents felt they had adequate opportunities to gain teaching experience (although the proportion increased from 49% in 2009 to 58% in 2011), those that had had the opportunity generally felt it was worthwhile (71%). There was a marked lack of positivity, however, about the support and guidance they had received (51%).

Personal Factors

Within this diverse group of items, most positivity was expressed about support from friends and family: this received the most agreement of all the items on the survey, at 89%.

Motivations

As with previous years of PRES, the two most common motivations to pursue a research degree programme were an interest in the subject (37%), and improving academic or research career prospects (31%).

Anticipated Career

Nearly half of respondents anticipated a career in higher education consisting of either teaching alone, or research and teaching (44%). 13% of respondents anticipated a research-only career in HE, and 43% anticipated a career outside HE.

Disability

Respondents who identified themselves as having a disability were less positive across all areas of the survey, with a particularly large difference for the overall experience of their programme (78% felt that their overall experience had

met or exceeded their expectations, compared with 87% for those respondents without a disability). For most areas of the survey, those with two or more impairments and/or disabling mental conditions, and those with a mental health condition, were least positive.

Domicile

Students from Africa and Asia were in general most positive about their experience, while those from the UK, North America and the Middle East were less positive. Areas of notable difference included skills development, which students from Africa rated more positively, and provision of guidance on standards and expectations, for which Non EU students were much more likely to state that their expectations had been met or exceeded.

Skills and Professional Development

More detailed analysis was carried out on the relevant items in this area, against selected demographic variables.

- By discipline

Respondents from Arts & Humanities were more motivated by an interest in the subject than respondents from other discipline groups, while Health respondents were most likely to be motivated by career prospects. Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences respondents were most interested in an academic career. Health and STEM respondents were most positive about skills development opportunities. Health students were also most convinced about the importance of skills development, and were most likely to feel they had been encouraged to reflect on their professional and career development needs.

- By gender

Female respondents were more convinced about the importance of transferable skills than men, although they were no more or less positive about the opportunities available to them. Women were in general less positive about the encouragement they had received to reflect on their professional and career development.

- By age

Younger and older students were most motivated by an interest in the subject, while those in the middle age ranges were most motivated by improving career prospects in HE. Younger respondents were more positive about their skills development, while those in the middle age ranges were most likely to feel that transferable skills development was important. Those in the middle range were most positive about professional and career development.

- Source of funding

Students funded by Research Councils UK – who have been required in recent years to undertake a certain amount of skills training – were, unsurprisingly, more positive about the provision of opportunities to develop research and transferable skills. However, what is striking is that RCUK-funded respondents seem to be markedly less positive than non-RCUK-funded students about the encouragement they had received to reflect on their professional and career development.

The full report is available from:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/postgraduate/pres-reports>