# **Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2021 results**

This report is based on the institutional and departmental data, as benchmarking data is not yet available from Advance HE. As well with as the sector as a whole, benchmarking is carried out with several smaller groups:

* **the Russell Group:** 32 research-intensive universities who tend to score highly in university performance rankings, including REF;
* **GW4:** is a research partnership of the Universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter;
* **KPI HEIs:** universities which the University of Bath selects to use as comparators because of their performance and similarity to the University of Bath.

Please note: on a department level, some responses may be too low to be statistically significant.

## Themes for consideration

* **Overall satisfaction:** with research programme almost unchanged since PRES 2019 and PRES 2018.
* **Considering leaving:** this year’s PRES showed high proportion (29.8%) of respondents who are considering leaving the University. Coronavirus will inevitably have played a factor, but 2019 numbers were also worryingly high. More than a third (38.1%) of those who considered leaving gave mental health as the reason.
* **Research culture:** was seriously affected across the **Faculty of Engineering & Design**, as well as the **Department of Physics**. Coronavirus was a major factor, but already low research culture scores in PRES 2019 suggest new initiatives are needed.
* **Access to specialist resources:** an issue in almost all departments, especially **Biology & Biochemistry, Chemical Engineering**, **POLIS, Social & Policy Sciences** and **Education.**

## Overall satisfaction

Overall PGR satisfaction was only down slightly on PRES 2019 and PRES 2018, but the proportion of doctoral students who would recommend the University had dropped almost 30% since PRES 2018.

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|  | PRES 2021 | PRES 2019 | PRES 2018 |
| Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the research programme | 80% (N=383) | 82% (N=405) | 83% (N=506) |
| Would recommend the University to a friend or relative | 62% (N=287) | N/A | 90% (N=532) |

## Mental health (and considering leaving)

*‘It would be nice to have someone to talk to about issues not necessarily pertaining to research or work. Someone removed from your work/project to talk about things like mental health issues, personal issues and imposter syndrome. Even just knowing that a person like that was there if you needed them would be very beneficial.’*

**Dept of Mechanical Engineering PRES 2021 respondent**

29.8% of respondents answered yes to ‘Have you considered, for any reason, leaving your postgraduate research degree?’. Although Coronavirus seems likely to play a part, the figure is only slightly higher than the University’s 2019 score for the same question (27.4%, N=135). It also broadly correlates with the number of suspensions in 2021 to the end of May, suggesting a link to at least a break in study.

In PRES 2021, the options for reasons now include ‘my mental/emotional health’ with by far the most respondents (38.1%, N=53) at the University giving this reason. Mental/emotional health was consistently the most common reason in PRES 2021 across departments.

### **3.1 PRES 2019 comparison: considering leaving**

In PRES 2019, respondents who gave ‘family, health or personal problems’ (which mental health might be most likely to fall into, without a distinct option in PRES 2019) as the reason gave the most consistently negative responses in all areas (4th quartile in all Russell Group and global quartiles except Research Culture), and only 29% for wellbeing, well below responses for Russell Group, global and KPI HEIs.

*‘The mental health and wellbeing provision at Bath was superb especially during the lockdowns’*

**Dept. of Architecture & Civil Engineering PRES 2021 respondent**

*‘I have used the mental health counselling facilities, but it always took a long time to set up a meeting and I've come to use it only as a last resort. I don't feel enough was done to prevent MH issues for PGRs in the past years, but I have seen signs of change more recently.’*

**Dept. of Electrical Engineering PRES 2021 respondent**

### **3.1 Departmental variation: considering leaving**

PGRs in the Faculties of Science and E&D were more likely to have considered leaving, and the highest proportion in the Department of Chemical Engineering (52.6%, N=10) and Department of Biology & Biochemistry (45.2%, N=14). Although the PRES 2019 institutional average was low, the lowest scoring departments in PRES 2021 made significant drops from 2019. POLIS has shifted from the highest in PRES 2019 to the lowest in PRES 2021, but POLIS response was extremely low for the question (1 is PRES 2021).

The ‘no’ response was also shown, as PRES 2021 also included a ‘prefer not to say’ option.

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| *Have you considered, for any reason, leaving your postgraduate research degree?*  |
|  | Yes (PRES 2021) | No (PRES 2021)  | Yes (PRES 2019) |
| Architecture & Civil Engineering | 24% (N=10) | 68% (N=28) | 24% (N=12) |
| Chemical Engineering | 53% (N=10) | 42% (N=8) | 20% (N=4) |
| Electronic & Electrical Engineering | 22% (N=6) | 67% (N=18) | 17% (N=6) |
| Mechanical Engineering | 41% (N=13) | 53% (N=17) | 32% (N=17) |
| Biology & Biochemistry | 45% (N=14) | 48% (N=15) | 27% (N=9) |
| Chemistry | 27% (N=13) | 71% (N=34)  | 28% (N=18) |
| Computer Science | 19% (N=4) | 76% (N=16) | 36% (N=4) |
| Maths | 30% (N=22) | 64% (N=47) | 30% (N=13) |
| Pharmacy & Pharmacology | 33% (N=13) | 63% (N=25) | 25% (N=7) |
| Physics | 44% (N=7) | 50% (N=8) | 21% (N=6) |
| School of Management | 13% (N=4) | 74% (N=23) | 33% (N=10) |
| Economics | 11% (N=1)  | 89% (N=8) | 13% (N=2)  |
| Education | 33% (N=5) | 60% (N=9) | 27% (N=4) |
| Health | 39% (N=7) | 61% (N=11) | 29% (N=5) |
| POLIS | 11% (N=1)  | 67% (N=6) | 63% (N=5) |
| Psychology | 27% (N=7) | 73% (N=19) | 33% (N=6) |
| Social & Policy Sciences | 25% (N=2) | 75% (N=6) | 35% (N=7) |
| University of Bath AVERAGE | 30% (N=139) | 65% (N=298) | 27% (N=135) |

Note: ‘Yes’ scores above 40% and 2019 equivalents are highlighted in orange.

## **Supervision**

Supervision had been one of the key areas in need of improvement in PRES 2019, but all supervision questions in PRES 2021 showed an improvement. Supervisory contact may be easier with remote meetings, but the different way supervision has had to work is presumably only part of the reason. The proportion of PRES respondents who were happy that their supervisor had appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support their research rose by 3%.

The aggregate scores of supervision question do not directly convey doctoral satisfaction with supervision (for example, training development is not seen by all PGRs as important or a supervisor’s role) but the number of positive comments about supervisors is notable in PRES 2021.

The coordination of supervisory teams were mentioned as an issue for some.

*‘I have four supervisors, but since starting in October I have only had contact with 2 of them. I'm not actually sure the other two know who I am or that they are actually listed.’*

**Department of Biology & Biochemistry PRES 2021 open comment**

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| **Supervision** | % Agree 2021(N=467)  | Difference with % agree 2019 (N=496) |
| My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research | 92.1 | +3.0 |
| I have regular contact with my supervisor/s, appropriate for my needs | 90.5 | +1.2 |
| My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities | 88.3 | +3.5 |
| My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher | 74.3 | +2.8 |

## Research culture

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| **Research culture**  | % Agree 2021(N=467) | Difference with % agree 2019 (N=496) |
| I have access to a good range of seminars in my research area | 70.9 | +4.8 |
| I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students | 50.7 | -13.4 |
| The research community in my research area influences my work | 50.6 | -4.3 |
| I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department | 54.6 | -7.7 |

The benefits of the wider research community on research development, including the sharing of ideas and experiences in different forms, will inevitably have been impacted by lack of contact with peers and academic staff, despite online meetings and events.

*‘This [research culture] has been highly impacted by the pandemic, as it is much harder to connect with other researchers when you are only attending seminars via zoom, rather than in-person.’*

 **Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering PRES 2021 open comment**

Figures have declined overall and in most departments, but some departments have managed to reverse this trend, most significantly **Computer Science, Pharmacy & Pharmacology, POLIS, Social & Policy Sciences** and **Economics**. In the Faculty of Engineering & Design it dropped consistently: the PRES 2019 faculty average was the same as the PRES 2019 University average (56%) but for PRES 2021 had dropped to 36%.

*‘There is absolutely nothing in my research area that I am aware of. I have nobody to talk to about my research. I have a 1.5 hour supervision every two weeks. I feel completely disconnected from researchers in my discipline. I have no informal conversations about my research or opportunities for feedback from my peers. This is having a detrimental impact on my research.’*

**Department of Chemistry PRES 2021 open comment**

However, notably the starting point for research culture was already low in PRES 2019 in which the University Bath scored lower than KPI HEIs, Russell Group and GW4. Doctoral students looking for an interdisciplinary perspective, particularly those whose research already spanned different disciplines, reported challenges. This is something encountered in earlier PRES surveys including PRES 2019, including not being informed of seminars and events outside of the department where they are registered.

*‘My research field is very cross-disciplin[ary] but I have limited access to event information from other departments. For example, I study within the Architecture and Civil Engineering but my project is also based in another department and I would love to hear about the events that are happening there but it isn't possible for me to be added to the mailing list. I wish that there was an easy way to find out about different seminars and research events from different disciplines so that multi-department work could be more inclusive.’*

***Architecture & Civil Engineering open comment***

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| *The research community in my research area stimulates (PRES 2019)/influences (PRES 2021) my work – definitely or mostly agree* |
|  | 2021 response | 2019 response |
| Architecture & Civil Engineering | 32% (N=13) | 48% (N=24) |
| Chemical Engineering | 42% (N=8) | 65% (N=13) |
| Electronic & Electrical Engineering | 44% (N=12) | 55% (N=21) |
| Mechanical Engineering | 25% (N=8) | 56% (N=30) |
| Biology & Biochemistry | 42% (N=13) | 68% (N=23) |
| Chemistry | 71% (N=8) | 59% (N=38) |
| Computer Science | 71% (N=15) | 36% (N=4) |
| Maths | 49% (N=36) | 63% (N=27) |
| Pharmacy & Pharmacology | 63% (N=10) | 39% (N=7) |
| Physics | 44% (N=18) | 72% (N=21) |
| School of Management | 55% (N=13) | 43% (N=23) |
| Economics | 78% (N=7) | 47% (N=11) |
| Education | 50% (N=7) | 56% (N=8) |
| Health | 72% (N=13) | 71% (N=12) |
| POLIS | 89% (N=8) | 50% (N=4) |
| Psychology | 58% (N=15) | 61% (N=11) |
| Social & Policy Sciences | 75% (N=6) | 43% (N=9) |
| University of Bath AVERAGE | 50.6% (N=236) | 56%  |

Note: ‘Definitely or mostly agree’ scores below 50% and 2019 equivalents are highlighted in orange.

## Resources

In PRES 2019, resources was the only category that the University of Bath did not score below the sector average and comparator universities. Limited access to campus, increased home working and the challenges of ensuring equipment could be used at home have inevitably had an effect. All resource questions with comparable equivalents in 2019 dropped significantly, with those agreeing that they had the access they needed to physical library resources and facilities dropping by 15.8%.

*‘Some of the remote software resources (e.g. Aspen Plus) appear to be under-resourced, and don't work well when there is undergraduate teaching going on at the same time.’*

**Department of Chemical Engineering PRES 2021 open comment**

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| **Resources** | % agree 2021(N=467)  | Difference with % agree 2019 (N=496) |
| I have a suitable working space when I am on campus | 70.9 | -3.5 |
| I have a suitable working space when I am studying remotely | 68.9 | NA |
| There is appropriate access to physical library resources and facilities | 69.7 | -15.8 |
| There is appropriate access to online library resources | 90.2 | NA |
| There is appropriate access to IT resources and facilities when I am on campus | 72.5 | -4.0 |
| I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research when I am on campus | 68.7 | -9.5 |
| I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research when I am studying remotely | 71.2 | NA |

*‘Equipment is entirely outdated in some instances. Now require frequent repairs of equipment and out-dated software to progress after computer died of old age.’*

**Department of Biology & Biochemistry PRES 2021 open comment**

### **6.1 Departmental variation: specialist resources**

The number of PGRs agreeing that they had access to the specialist resources they needed dropped in almost every department, with **Biology & Biochemistry, Chemical Engineering**, **POLIS, Social & Policy Sciences** and **Education** particularly affected. There has also been criticism that the University and departments have not always responded quickly enough, and some longer-term issues such as doctoral office space are unresolved.

*‘During COVID I've had to adapt my bedroom to become my office, and having very little space for my work and my life has negatively affected my mental health and PhD motivation. I had to pay for a new screen, desk and chair out of my own pocket. I would have liked the support for PhD students setting up home working spaces to be more proactive, and for departments to check that every student has what they need, and if not help them to get it. I felt left behind compared to the provision for staff members.’*

***Department of Politics, Languages & International Studies PRES 2021 open comment***

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| *I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research (for example, course materials, software, virtual learning environment) when I am on campus (campus specified in 2021 only) – definitely or mostly agree*  | *…when studying remotely (2021 only) – definitely or mostly agree* |
|  | 2021 response | 2019 response | 2021 response (remote) |
| Architecture & Civil Engineering | 66% (N=27) | 66% (N=33) | 76% (N=31) |
| Chemical Engineering | 63% (N=12) | 90% (N=18) | 47% (N=9) |
| Electronic & Electrical Engineering | 78% (N=21) | 82% (N=31) | 70% (N=19) |
| Mechanical Engineering | 66% (N=21) | 77% (N=41) | 63% (N=20) |
| Biology & Biochemistry | 51% (N=16) | 82% (N=28) | 55% (N=17) |
| Chemistry | 94% (N=45) | 81% (N=52) | 90% (N=43) |
| Computer Science | 62% (N=13)  | 73% (N=8) | 67% (N=14) |
| Maths | 60% (N=44) | 77% (N=39) | 60% (N=44) |
| Pharmacy & Pharmacology | 76% (N=31) | 89% (N=25) | 78% (N=32) |
| Physics | 69% (N=11) | 86% (N=25) | 63% (N=9) |
| School of Management | 61% (N=19) | 63% (N=19) | 77% (N=24) |
| Economics | 67% (N=6)  | 87% (N=13) | 67% (N=6) |
| Education | 47% (N=7) | 81% (N=13) | 57% (N=8)  |
| Health | 89% (N=16) | 65% (N=11) | 83% (N=15) |
| POLIS | 56% (N=5)  | 79% (N=6) | 77% (N=20) |
| Psychology | 89% (N=23) | 89% (N=16) | 73% (N=20) |
| Social & Policy Sciences | 56% (N=5) | 72% (N=15) | 75% (N=6) |
| University of Bath AVERAGE | 69% (N=321) | 78% (N=387) | 71% (N=232) |

Note: ‘Definitely or mostly agree’ scores below 60% and 2019 equivalents are highlighted in orange.

## **Professional development**

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| **Professional Development**  | % agree 2021(N=467)  | Difference with % agree 2019 (N=496) |
| My ability to manage projects has developed during my programme | 79.4 | -3.2 |
| My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my programme  | 75.5 | -2.0 |
| I have developed contacts or professional networks during my programme | 61.7 | -8.1 |
| I have increasingly managed my own professional development during my programme  | 80.5 | +3.9 |

*‘More support could be provided for developing contacts or professional networks during the programme’*

**Department of Psychology PRES 2021 open comment**

The professional development has predictably been significantly affected this year. Some acknowledged the role Coronavirus has had in this, and regarded it as something beyond the University’s control. Alternative channels for developing networks have been made available, but their limits were noted.

‘With the switch online of activities/seminars/conferences, developing my professional network has become more challenging. While its outreach has been to some extent amplified, networking opportunities are more superficial and less incisive.’

**School of Management PRES 2021 open comment**

## **Support**

This is a new section, for the first time asks about how suitable health and wellbeing support is for doctoral students. This has a clear link with mental health and would presumably be the largest element, although is tied in with more general health needs. Satisfaction is only 63%, the lowest scoring question in this section.

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| **Support**  | % agree 2021(N=467) | Difference with % agree 2019 (N=496) |
| The support for academic skills meets my needs   | 77.5  | NA  |
| The support for using IT and accessing resources meets my needs  | 84.3  | NA  |
| The support for my health and wellbeing meets my needs  | 63.0  | NA  |