



**Postgraduate Research
Experience Survey 2008
(PRES)**

Results

Introduction

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey is a service made available to all HE institutions across the UK which have postgraduate research students.

The purpose of PRES is to help institutions enhance the quality of postgraduate research degree provision by collecting feedback from current research students in a systematic and user-friendly way.

The first survey took place between mid March and mid May 2007. The University of Worcester took part in this survey and the results are published on the web site at: <http://www2.worc.ac.uk/graduateschool/>

The University took the decision to participate in the 2008 survey which was run from 3/3/08-31/5/08. There were 36 respondents out of an expected 106. This is a response rate of 34% which is above the national average response rate and is sufficient to provide a significant set of data. That the response rate is below that of last academic year (by 3%) is to be expected, given that the survey has not changed significantly in content and many students were reluctant to participate for a second time.

The responses to each question are available on the Graduate Research School Website <http://www2.worc.ac.uk/graduateschool/>. The mean, median and standard deviation are shown in red.

Survey sections

PRES consists of groupings of related items that can be added together to form scales. The purpose of using scales rather than individual items is that they are more robust and reliable indicators of the different aspects of the postgraduate research student experience. The PRES consists of six scales:

- ☐ Supervision
- ☐ Skill development
- ☐ Infrastructure
- ☐ Intellectual climate
- ☐ Thesis examination
- ☐ Goals and standards

PRES also has some stand alone items included to provide indicators of QAA Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Students precepts that were not fully covered by the above scales. These comprise:

- ☐ Progress and review arrangements
- ☐ Student representations, complaints and appeals
- ☐ Feedback mechanisms

Data Analysis

The following analysis will compare data collected from both the 2007 and the 2008 surveys. The national results are not yet available for comparison. The raw data is available on the Graduate Research School website.

As the number of respondents is low, it is difficult to make comparisons across Departments or subject disciplines. For this reason, I have mainly focussed on the complete data set.

1.) Supervision scale

In both 2007 and 2008, supervision was the area considered to be the most important factor in terms of successfully completing a research degree. 91.7% (2007) and 97.2% (2008) of students rated supervision as important.

Overall, 85.3% (2008) responded that their experience of supervisory support and guidance had met with or exceeded their expectations. Notably, this is considerably higher than the national average of 77.3% for the 2007 survey, and in fact, higher than last years score for Worcester of 77.8%, suggesting that supervisory support given to students at Worcester is above average and improving.

The satisfaction rate of full timers was slightly higher (86%) when compared to part timers (80%). This is consistent with findings in 2007 and appears to be a direct result of full time students being on site and having more direct access to their internal supervisors. Interestingly, students from all academic departments rated supervision equally with no significant variation in response across the disciplines.

As the number of respondents is low and 70% of those that responded were in year 1-3 of their research degree it is difficult to asses whether the perception of supervision changes as a student progresses through their programme. There was no difference in perception of supervision by registered status (MPhil, MPhil/PhD or PhD).

Most (75% 2008) of respondents agreed that their supervisors have the necessary skills and subject knowledge to adequately support their research. Only 2 respondents felt that their supervisors did not posses the required skills.

2. Skills Development

In line with the 2007 results, skills development was rated highly by respondents and 94% (2008) of those that responded felt that their expectations had met or exceeded their expectations to develop a range of research skills. Significantly, no one felt that it had failed to meet their expectations. A slightly lower percentage, 73%, indicated that opportunities to develop a range of transferable skills had met or exceeded their expectations. In both cases, the experience of full timers and part timers was the same. Results were consistent across the full time and part time student experience and were not affected by age, gender or whether the student was funded or self funded.

Interestingly, opportunities to develop transferable skills was rated more highly last yr with 85.7% feeling that their expectations had been addressed. When the training needs analysis is introduced in September 2008, it is hoped that training needs will be addressed more consistently and reviewed throughout the research degree programme, to ensure that students are given an opportunity to develop an appropriate range of research and transferable skills.

On the whole, most respondents felt that there was a marked or significant improvement in their analytical skills, communication skills and their ability to learn independently.

Experience of teaching opportunities is mixed. Only 30% of respondents strongly agreed that they had adequate opportunity to gain experience of teaching and only 26.4% agreed that they had been given sufficient support to teach. Interestingly, the opportunities to teach appear to have improved since last year (14.7% strongly agreeing they were given adequate opportunity to teach in 2007) but the numbers are too low to make these results statistically significant.

It should be noted that the survey does not ask the students whether they want to gain teaching experience and unless a student wishes to move into a teaching career, this opportunity is not always appropriate. The fact that the majority of our students are part time also means that offering teaching opportunities can be problematic. Our part time student entitlement document states: 'A PT Research Degree student may be given the opportunity to undertake teaching or other academic or research support duties on behalf of their DoS' but in practice, these opportunities are not readily available and need to be addressed.

Teaching support is available through a SEDA module, however, students are only required to take this if 'significant teaching duties are required'. The Research Degrees Board have discussed this statement and agree that it should remain, as supervisors were of the opinion that as part time teaching staff are not required to hold a formal teaching qualification then students, carrying out small amounts of teaching, should also not be required to take the module. The feeling was that students are already required to take a number of modules connected with research training, and another module would compromise their research activity.

The response to questions about career and personal development were quite poor. Only 30% of respondents agreed that they were required to reflect on their career development needs and only 39% agreed that they were encouraged to think about their professional development needs.

The latter has already been addressed with the introduction of a Training Needs Analysis at the start of the research degree programme which will then be reviewed annually for every student. As the Research Training Programme is re-worked in 2008/09 more emphasis will also be placed on Personal Development Planning and the use of Progress Files.

Members of the Careers Service team are planning to investigate the needs of research students in terms of their development of employability and study skills. The Head of Careers is attending an event at Aston Business School concerning how to address graduate employment challenges.

3. Infrastructure

Overall, and as in the 2007 survey, infrastructure is rated highly at Worcester and 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the facilities provided met their expectations. 72% of respondents agreed that they had adequate access to equipment necessary for their research. 77% of respondents agreed that they had suitable working space and 70% agreed that they had adequate provision of computing resources and facilities. Not surprisingly, and as last year, only 45% agreed that there was appropriate financial support for research activities. This is a common issue across the sector.

At present the GRS are only able to offer an expenses budget to full time students on a bursary. All self funded students are eligible to apply to the small grants scheme for up to £500/year to pay for costs associated with conference attendance, travel for their research etc. This fund is now well publicised to all students. Responses were fairly consistent across academic departments. As most respondents are in years 1-3 of their research degree, it is not possible to see whether perceptions about infrastructure vary as students near the end of their research degree.

Comments from students suggest that facilities are better for full time than part time students but this is expected, given the significant difference between the full time and part time fees. Other well known issues surrounding Library resources also arose. These are ongoing issues that are regularly reviewed by ILS and Academic Departments.

4. Intellectual Climate

Although 88.6% of respondents regarded the research environment to be important for successful completion of a research degree, only 49% felt that the research environment at Worcester met their expectations. This is significantly lower than last year when 71.8% of respondents felt that the research environment did meet their expectations.

In both years, the response to direct questions about intellectual climate shows that this is an area for development. Overall, only 41% (2008) and 53% (2007) of respondents felt integrated in their Department's community, and only 40% (2008 – question not asked 2007) felt that the ambience in their Department stimulated their work. Full time students were more critical of the intellectual climate than part time students. This is perhaps because the full time students have higher expectations of their involvement in the Department, being largely based within the University and often carrying out duties for the Department such as teaching, demonstrating work etc. Respondents, however, praised the Graduate Research School, feeling that this built a sense of research community,

Clearly, however, more work needs to be done to integrate students in their Department. One way of doing this would be to include students in the Departmental Seminar Series, something the students think is important but currently feel is insufficient in many cases. As the student community grows there is also merit in putting students from the same subject areas in to contact with one another. Only 58.3% of respondents agreed that their Department provided them with contact with other research students and although full time students from the same subject areas are, where possible, given shared office space etc, we might explore ways of improving communication between part time students from the same subject discipline.

In conclusion, given the importance of research students' perceptions of intellectual climate, these results would suggest there is room for some development in this area.

5. Goals and Standards

Overall, 73.5% (2008) and 72.3% (2007) of respondents indicated that their expectations in respect of goals and standards had been met by or exceeded their expectations. Additional comments suggested that support given by the Graduate Research School was 'excellent' and information in handbooks was readily available.

Problems seem to be centred around the standard of the work required and the standard of the thesis. Worryingly, 30.6% of respondents felt that they did not really know the standard of work required and 36% did not know the standard of the thesis required. Not surprisingly, students further on in their research degree (and presumably having completed RDB1,

although this is not shown in the survey) were more confident about the standard of work required.

These results suggest that more focus could be given to these areas through RTP401. The module is currently being re-worked and will reflect this. The GRS have also introduced a seminar/workshop series which will include workshops on writing the thesis and examination.

6. Thesis Examination

Only 6% of respondents (2 individuals) had had their viva (in 2007 only one student had been examined). All students completely agreed that the examination was fair and had been completed in a reasonable time scale. All also felt that they had been given sufficient support before the viva but one was less positive about the support given post viva to complete their amendments. As there were only 3 respondents in total, it is not possible to draw assumptions from this data.

7. Personal Factors

As in 2007, all respondents were very positive, with 83% agreeing that their friends and family were supportive of their research degree programme. In 2008, 48.6% of respondents are not employed but of those that are, half feel supported by their employer and half do not. Interestingly, exactly the same percentage of respondents (25.7%) agree and disagree respectively that the financing of their research degree places a strain on their personal finances. The remaining respondents have said that this is question is not relevant to them.

8. Confidence for completing on schedule

Just under two thirds of the respondents (in both years) had confidence that they would complete their research degree on schedule.

9. QAA Code of Practice Indicators

The response to questions about career and personal development are addressed above (Section 2).

Students were more positive about feedback, feeling that on the whole the University values their feedback and most students knew who to approach if they are dissatisfied with their programme. The latter is clearly laid out in the student handbook and is also discussed at induction. Well over two thirds of all respondents understood their responsibilities as a student and the institutions responsibilities to them. This will become even clearer with the publication of the new Code of Practice which clearly outlines responsibilities and entitlements. Contracts are also now issued to all new students, clearly outlining the above.

Almost all respondents (91.4%) generally agreed that they understood the formal review process, a reflection of the usefulness of the RDB9 – annual monitoring report and annual progress interview.

Actions from the review:

- 1.) To improve students' opportunities to consider/reflect on career and personal development through the training needs analysis and seminars and workshops delivered in conjunction with the BDO.
- 2.) To integrate students in their Department more effectively. This issue needs to be discussed in more detail with Heads.
- 3.) To put more focus on the standard of work required for an MPhil and PhD thesis in the Research Training Programme.